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Academic leadership and leadership styles in strategic plans: a study of five top-ranked public universities in South Africa

Nathalie Hyde-Clarke^{1*}

Abstract: Public universities play a pivotal role in society as they offer access to higher education to a broader range of the population. This has greater impetus for institutions in societies that have histories of political oppression or large economic disparities, such as South Africa. How these organizations define “leadership” and the organizations’ roles as “leaders”, and how that is portrayed to the public is therefore of great importance. This study conducts a textual analysis approach, using qualitative content analysis, of a purposeful (non-random) sample of the five top-ranked universities in South Africa to determine the leadership styles, definitions and narratives employed in their strategic plans to better understand how these universities position themselves in this regard. The research shows that while the strategic plans share similar core values such as a desire to be inclusive and foster transformation in society, the use of the two key research concepts differs as to how they are defined and to whom they refer. Better discussion and explanation of the responsibilities that university leaders have in achieving strategic goals, and the leadership role these organizations could and wish to play, could facilitate greater understanding and impact in the public sphere.

Subjects: Organizational Communication; Higher Education; School Leadership, Management & Administration

Keywords: Communication; higher education; leadership; strategic plan; South Africa; university

1. Introduction

There is a need for knowledge and insights into leadership issues and practices in public top-ranked universities, and how these are conveyed to the public, as they are often emulated or benchmarked by other institutions in the higher education sector. This study analyzes and

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compares how two key research concepts “leadership” and “leader” are defined, discussed, and portrayed in the strategic plans of five top ranked universities. These public documents:

... serve many people and purposes, including to promote and market the university, signal general directions for a defined period, and inspire staff, students and other stakeholders outside as well as inside the university (Sutphen et al., 2019, p. 1402).

While the strategic plan is not the only document whereby the university communicates its goals and aspirations with its community and greater public, it is certainly one that bears closer examination. There is a wide array of traditional and digital media available to all organisations today. It is not surprising that actors in the higher education sector are present on multiple social media platforms and also publish their own newsletters to be able to reach the widest readership possible. In many countries, researchers and professors contribute to debate columns in mainstream media and disseminate their research through a variety of academic and non-academic publications. These missives are often time sensitive and linked directly to specific events or phenomena. The strategic plan is positioned differently as it acts as the foundation and main source of information about the long-term values and objectives that underpin and support those events, the research conducted, courses offered and other everyday operations for the university to evolve, develop and flourish in the contemporary system. That plan of growth is directly linked to the role the university plays in society, how it interacts with its community (students, staff, and sectors) and how it wishes to distinguish itself in the future. It is also used as a means of garnering external funding by highlighting what has been achieved thus far and what could be achieved with the necessary resources. Previous research into the content analysis of universities’ strategic plans showed that the discourse employed in those documents revealed intent, priorities, identity, and alignment to national contexts (Hall & Lulich, 2021; Sutphen et al., 2019). The strategic plan may thus be seen as a mandate for university leaders to assess and put aspirations and plans into action. They may include key performance indicators (KPIs) for goal setting purposes, although how these will be measured may not be as explicit. It is for these reasons, that a careful analysis of how top-ranked universities’ strategic plans introduce and contextualise leadership is relevant and of great interest.

Since strategic plans are in a specific discursive space across the world, it is not unusual to find a similar aspiration shared by many. For example, in a recent study of African university strategic plans, 84% aspired to become a “leading institution in Africa” (Bekele & Ofoyuru, 2021). Similarly, as with many other organizations in the commercial sector, universities cite sustainability, transformation, and innovation as priority themes. However, it is important to note that universities in the same country may not share the exact same perspectives and ambitions due to differing socio-cultural, economic, and political needs, as well as investment and internal governance challenges (Bekele & Ofoyuru, 2021). South Africa is of specific interest to this study since the political system and educational sectors have undergone important changes in the new millennium, which have had a noticeable impact on higher education leadership and strategic plans.

In terms of assessing leadership, it is important to acknowledge that two types of leadership may be reflected in these documents. The first is the role of those in university management and leadership positions responsible for advancing the interests of the organization through internal collective effort; and the second is the role of the organization itself in society in advancing knowledge competencies. The first may be complicated as those responsible for creating the plans are not necessarily the ones responsible for implementing them. In many universities, the Vice-Chancellor or Rector may have overall accountability for ensuring the goals are met, but it falls to the rest of the staff to implement the change and ensure goals are met. Thus, while the strategic plan is a public document that expresses how key university figures (leaders, students and staff) are expected to contribute to future development (Sutphen et al., 2019), if the strategic plan is perceived to be solely the vision or responsibility of the executive management level, there may be a disconnect between what is happening “on the ground” and what appears in the

document (Hall & Lulich, 2021). This makes it interesting to note the narrative and discourse used to express leadership aspirations and how they envisage those goals may be met.

It is therefore possible to use strategic plans to identify and assess public expressions of leadership styles and practices to conduct a meaningful comparison of university strategies in this regard. However, this research is conducted in the knowledge that strategic plans are limited in what they reveal. It is also important to state that these priorities can change if leadership or internal governance changes (Hall & Lulich, 2021).

2. Tertiary education in South Africa

South Africa offers an interesting glimpse into the role of university leadership in a country that has been under tremendous pressure, both internally and externally, to transform over the past two decades. While apartheid ended in 1994, the effects thereof continue to affect society in fundamental ways and South African public higher education institutions have experienced significant levels of unrest since 2015. Two noteworthy student protest movements, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (2015–2016), garnered national and international attention placing pressure on university leadership to respond to requests for a decolonized, free education. All university education is fee-based, and many students drop out after their first year due to insufficient financial support. Several universities had to suspend academic activities during the protests due to student riots on campus and occasional confrontations with police and private security (Tjønneland, 2017). University leaders admitted that they “were unprepared for intense and sustained protests” in 2015, and “lacked the skills to address the complex crisis” (Walters, 2020b, p. 1). This tumultuous time was shortly followed by the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (2020–2021).

There are currently 26 public universities in South Africa that are divided into three groups based on the type of tuition offered: traditional academic with a focus on theoretical work (11); universities of technology with a focus on practical work (9); and comprehensive which combine the two (6). Despite a 70% growth in black South African enrolment), the South African Council on Higher Education reported that the profile of academic staff was not representative of the demographics of the population where only 19% of professors were black (CHE, 2016). There have also been concerns about equity and equality regarding the limited number and role of women in senior academic leadership positions despite the steady increase of female enrolments in tertiary education institutions (Moody and Toni 2017a, 2017b). In 2016, of the 26 vice-chancellors in South Africa, only four were female—a total of 15% (Moody and Toni, 2017a)—and women held 30% of the professorial positions.

Transformation is therefore a core strategic goal in all university mission statements and applies to all levels within the university itself, as well as within society. The South African government has called on education to be restructured on principles of equity, human rights, democracy and sustainable development (Ramdass 2015). Recent studies showed a similar typology in leadership styles when comparing historically white universities with historically black universities (Walters, 2020a), and a strong correlation between transformational leadership style and employee organizational commitment (Wiza and Hlanganipai 2014). All South African academic leadership puts emphasis on open dialogue in public forums. The balance is in finding the space between those forums and meaningful change in a system that is characterized by a strong hierarchy in decision-making. It is therefore not unexpected that Ngcamu (2017) found that while their study’s participants felt that the university was good in creating platforms for open debate, only 40% felt that the university promoted independent thinking and freedom of speech as decision-making was largely centralized. This was perceived as resulting in unproductive change interventions.

The South African Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and the Reporting Regulations for Higher Education Institutions outline the parties responsible for designing and implementing the plan, and the general requirements for the universities’ five-year strategic plans.

3. Literature review and theoretical underpinnings

Scholars have long pondered on the organizational characteristics and qualities of higher education institutions. Whether they are universities or colleges, public or private, they are complex, dynamic organizations that are continuously in a state of transformation (Walters, 2020a, p. 2) despite ever dwindling resources (Seale & Cross, 2016, p. 1515). In the past, few studies have explored the link between academic leadership and strategy in public universities (as argued by Seale & Cross, 2016), however there is a growing interest (see Hall & Lulich, 2021; Stensaker et al., 2021; Sutphen et al., 2019) as there is no doubt that there is a close relationship between the leadership and the development of strategy.

As with many terms in social sciences, “leadership” is both complex and contested (see Gaus et al., 2022). At its most basic, it is understood by many to refer to the ability to influence or persuade followers¹ towards accomplishing a collective goal or objective (Northouse, 2019). This may be achieved through value creation, inspiration and stimulation of the group (Carvalho et al. 2022). Effective leadership builds trust and resilience (Forss & Hyde-Clarke, 2020). Given the need for transformation in many higher education institutions in South Africa, leadership is therefore of greater interest as it has the capacity to mobilize others although more emphasis is likely to be placed on the need for collective action rather than a top-down approach often associated with the oppressive past. For this reason, while there are many leadership styles, two have the potential to be more prevalent in strategic plans: servant leadership; and transformation leadership. They are possibly the most relevant to the national and international context in which the universities operate. Recent studies have identified servant leadership as particularly important for all levels of education (Jeyaraj & Gandolfi, 2019) and transformational leadership as particularly relevant for tertiary education (Carvalho et al., 2022; Al-Husseini et al., 2021; Owusu-Agyeman, 2021).

Servant leadership emerged in the 1970’s and is based on a foundational belief that the leader is there to support and develop others in their teams, as well as the broader community (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). It emphasizes that leaders should be “attentive to the concerns of their followers, empathize with them and nurture them” (Northouse, 2019, p. 226). Studies have identified as many as 43 behavioral components or dimensions (Anderson & Sun, 2017, p. 81) but for the purposes of this research, attention is drawn to the following: valuing and developing people; building and creating value for the community; authenticity; and accountability. The aim is to achieve shared goals that benefit all those involved and affected. It is a leadership theory that highlights that the well-being and empowerment of people in the organization are the priority (Jeyaraj & Gandolfi, 2022) and that they should be allowed to develop their competencies to their full potential (Northouse, 2019). It is therefore not surprising that some higher education institutions refer to this leadership style as they are one of the main contributors to socio-cultural and developmental needs of their respective communities and can affect economic growth due to increased intellectual capital in a given group. In South Africa, this style may also have more appeal as it may be interpreted as a connection between the university strategy and the African philosophy of *Ubuntuism* that emphasizes the relationships between individuals and collective responsibility. However, it should be noted that Smith et al. (2004, p. 87) argued that servant leadership is most likely to be effective in stable external environments that allow for slow and evolutionary change processes.

Transformational leadership emerged in the 1980s and may be understood to refer to how a leader is able to modify follower’s beliefs and behaviors through a process of change (Northouse, 2019) by focusing on organizational results (Moynihan et al., 2012). Anderson and Sun (2017) found it to be the most cited style in research for the period 2000–2014. It has four behavioral components or dimensions: idealized influence or charisma; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation; and individualized consideration (Anderson & Sun, 2017: 78; Smith et al., 2004, p. 81;). It is strongly related to followers’ job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and team and organizational performance (Anderson & Sun, 2017, p. 78). In other words, it is important that university staff both contribute to the decision-making, and understand the

decisions taken by management especially as they relate to strategic goals, so they can work towards accomplishing them. It is more likely to be effective when organizations operate in environments that are “dynamic and challenging, thus requiring quick decisions and correct reactions . . . where revolutionary change is necessary for survival” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 87). This is therefore understandably more likely to be chosen by public universities undergoing a period of change with intense public scrutiny.

At this juncture, it is important to point out that there is some overlap between the two styles, and that this has been the subject of several studies in leadership literature (see Anderson & Sun, 2017; Smith et al., 2004; Van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Both are universal theories that can be applied across all situations (Smith et al., 2004), and share qualities such as the focus on individual needs, development, motivation, innovation and team performance. The difference is that transformation leadership focusses on organizational goals, whereas servant leadership emphasizes individual potential (Van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Participation and collaboration are key to the success of both these leadership styles and should therefore be reflected in the planning processes and in the future goals of strategic plans themselves.

4. Methods

This study employs a purposeful (non-random) sample of the five top-ranked universities in South Africa according to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2022. These are: the University of Cape Town (UCT) (ranked 183); Stellenbosch University (SU) (ranked 251–300); University of Witwatersrand (Wits) (ranked 251–300); University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) (ranked 351–400); and the Durban University of Technology (DUT) (ranked 401–500). This study chose to use this ranking system as it relies on a broader range of metrics and a higher number of universities compared with other systems (1,600 in the 2022 ranking). While university ranking has long been a contested issue as there is a concern that they give a distorted impression of academic quality (Komotar, 2020; Moed, 2017; Piro & Sivertsen, 2016; Vernon et al., 2018; Fauzi et al, 2020), and are disputed by many academics—as demonstrated by leading law schools in the United States of America who have chosen to remove themselves from rankings (Sloan, 2022)—advocates of rankings see them as a necessary and useful marketing, funding and recruitment tool which is also voluntary and inexpensive. Despite reservations, in a competitive international environment, rankings raise the profile of the university and are therefore used as for selection purposes in this study.

Mission statements/current strategies can be studied in various ways. This research adopts a textual analysis approach, using qualitative content analysis, defined as “a way to study the social interactions of humans in naturally occurring situations . . . by gathering data and making sense of or interpreting the phenomena that are observed and revealed” (Likert 2017:12). According to Hall and Lulich (2021, p. 266), “content analysis offers insight into university intent as stated in the plan, through word usage, and how words are contextualized”. In this study, the use of the terms “leadership” and “leader” are particularly relevant in understanding the style and approach the university wishes to adopt and communicate in the strategy. The research considers when the terms are used, how they are defined and to whom or what they refer. To determine whether the identified leadership style is compatible with the communication of the plan, attention will also be placed on how the reader is addressed in the document in relation to the university as author.

The mission statements and current strategy plans are publicly available and have been accessed from the institutional websites. The analysis of the plans is presented according to ranking. The strategic plans chosen for analysis in this study span slightly different periods. Two universities were in the process of creating the next version and so their plans available on their websites at the time of this study ended in 2022 (Wits and UKZN). The other three plans ended in 2030 (DUT and UCT) and 2040 (SU).

5. Findings and analysis of ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ in strategic plans

The strategic plans for the selected South African universities tend to be lengthy documents of between 18 to 32 pages, with a “glossy magazine” format. The only one that does not follow this format is DUT’s plan: a two-page infographic. The reason for the longer brochures can be found in the intended audience and purpose. These documents are generally aimed at the public, donor community, and more specifically, the international investor. As such, the normal format tends to be an introductory section where both the university and national context is outlined, followed by the mission statement, and then the strategic plan demonstrating the potential and impact of the university in the future. There is little discussion of internal governance, and no indication of how university leaders are appointed. This is largely due to the standard format of recruitment adopted across all universities at the Vice Chancellor and Chancellor levels, as outlined by the South African Higher Education Act 101 of 1997. These are appointed, contract positions with fixed terms of five years that can be extended for one additional term.

Each plan will now be examined individually, and instances of “leader” and “leadership” discussed to be able to draw general observations and trends in the following section.

The University of Cape Town (UCT) was founded in 1829 making it the oldest university in the country. In 2019, it had 29,272 students and 4,928 staff. Its strategic plan has a clearly articulated vision with core values. Notably, the 16-page plan refers to “Afrika” and “our dream” throughout, positioning itself in a post-colonial, aspiration space (University of Cape Town, 2022). UCT was the first campus to be affected by the #Rhodesmustfall student protests and so it is understandable that they choose this frame from which to position themselves. Transformation is one of their key themes, along with Excellence and Sustainability. These are broken into 14 cultural traits for implementation purposes. Implementation is to be overseen by task teams and working groups. However, there are no clear KPIs by which to measure change or impact. The plan states that approximately 100 staff have contributed to the initial development of the document in the Foreword (although it does not state who they were), and that the responsibility for driving the process rests with the Vice-Chancellor’s office (in association with other senior university positions). In the Foreword, it is also noted that the strategic plan is written as a response to the Vice Chancellor’s challenge to the university: to shape and lead change (p.1). This is confirmed in the Vice Chancellor’s address where it is stated that the responsibility lies with the staff: “I trust in the capacity of the broader UCT community to do this” (p.3). The role of the senior leadership position in this strategic plan is that of a facilitator and enabler, therefore “making it real” (p.6) is designated to the faculty and departmental level. UCT’s central task team comprises of deans and directors with representatives from staff and the student body.

Transformative leadership is mentioned in the first sentence of the document on page 2, “*Vision 2030 is the result of inclusive and transformative leadership at UCT*”. The term “leadership” then only appears two more times and is more often used to refer to the university’s position in society as opposed to its internal governance or management: *UCT will distinguish itself by providing thought leadership on social justice (p.10); and We will also bring an Afrikan perspective to concepts brought in from the global stage ... while ensuring local relevance and thought leadership. (p.14).*

The use of “thought leadership” is worth discussing in a bit more detail as it is largely associated with business discourse, particularly in marketing and public relations. Defined as being influential and capable of changing the opinions of others, in terms of knowledge management, this style of leadership relies on encouraging engagement and collaboration through research and development, and in the ability to apply knowledge beyond a single context (see Harvey et al., 2021, p. 5). Thought leaders are perceived as being experts in their fields. As it also relies on change, innovation, and enterprise, it is aligned with transformation leadership and therefore continues to develop that approach. This choice of style and suggestion is echoed in how the term “leader” appears (twice), although interestingly it is limited to refer exclusively to the future role of students, and not staff or the university: *nurture the capabilities of the younger generation for*

them to become leaders in different spheres of life... (p.7); and development of the next generation of researchers, scholars and beneficial leaders for the country and for the rest of the Afrikan continent. (p.15)

The document is written predominantly in the first person or utilizes “UCT” to suggest a collective leadership model with shared responsibility. The mission statement speaks of “our world”, “our dream” and what “we” aim to do. Interestingly, there is some distance to those who will be educated as in several sections there is a distinction between “we” and “the student” or “them”. This could be linked to the incorporation of the term “thought leadership” as it denotes that there is one who leads or is deemed the expert and therefore by extension, even if the intent is to highlight a willingness to be inclusive, there must be one who follows or is influenced to react.

Stellenbosch University (SU) started in 1918, and in June 2021 had 32,255 students and over 3,000 staff across five campuses. The university presents both its Vision 2040 and the 2019–2024 strategic framework in the same 31-page document. Notably, while the mission statement and core themes appear on the first page, before the table of contents, the values only appear on page 16 (University of Stellenbosch, 2022). This is due to the presentation of a clear and detailed description of the development of the plan that started in 2017. This section demonstrates how different levels of management have been involved in the formulation of the strategy. While it names the Rectorate, deans and task groups under the Executive Planning Forum, the drafting of the document has been supervised by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. In this case, the senior leadership is actively involved at all levels in its formulation, and therefore it is no surprise that good governance is noted as an enabler. It is not immediately evident though to what extent senior leadership positions are responsible for the actual implementation of the plan aside from a brief reference to faculties and departments requiring “the ability to ‘break down’” management indicators in order to support university management on page 26.

This is the only strategic plan that includes an academic-style context, in that it includes a reference list and in-text citations, as demonstrated when “leadership” is defined on page 10:

Responsible leadership in the 21st century entails five important aspects, namely (i) being able to make informed ethical judgments about existing norms and rules, (ii) displaying moral courage and aspiring to positive change, (iii) engaging in long-term thinking and perspective taking, (iv) communicating effectively with stakeholders, and (v) participating in collective problem-solving (Vogtlin, 2017).

The plan includes attributes and enforcers (capabilities, forces, and resources) for implementation purposes. These are said to be linked to KPIs and full-time equivalents (FTEs) to measure growth, but notably no target percentages are mentioned. The plan claims to be based on the Australian university model that has been adapted for South Africa purposes and makes explicit reference to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa.

In this plan, the term leadership appears a total of nine times. It appears in the definition above and then, despite there being no references to “leader”, refers almost exclusively to university staff and staff competency development. Examples include: ... *under the competent leadership of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor ... (p.1); ... the development of talent and leadership throughout the career cycle of each SU employee ... (p.23); and Number of enrolments for staff development courses, i.e. leadership development ... (p.29)*

This document is written in the first person and adopts a slightly less formal tone than the others (except for DUT). It clearly suggests shared responsibility and a collective leadership model. It also places the individual within the university framework, often preferring to use “we at SU” rather than just “SU”.

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) was established in 1922. It has more than 41,000 students and 6,000 employees (of whom 1,500 are academics - see Wits 2022). The 37-page strategic plan stands out in that it begins by stating that their goal is to “aggressively” build on their reputation as “a leading research institution” (page 6). This gives the document a more active discourse than the others, and it adopts a competitive tone. The mission and core values appear as bullet points. Although clear, they do tend to present a vast overview rather than specific aims usually associated with this format of presentation. Statistics are provided for intended growth. There is a short discussion of management implications during times of change, but nothing specific to roles and positions. Notably, this strategic plan is not accompanied by an address or foreword by the Vice Chancellor nor any other senior leadership spokesperson. The terms “vice chancellor”, “rector” and “dean” do not appear in the document. While this may position the document as being more clearly from a collective, it does raise questions as to who was and is responsible for its formulation and implementation.

The term leadership appears fourteen times (with one on the cover “social leadership” and three in the table of contents) and “leader” six times. The first term is used to refer to different roles and responsibilities, as well as functions. It starts with a note about university governance, *Without visionary and determined leadership, pragmatic implementation plans, and robust monitoring and evaluation systems, strategic planning becomes a meaningless exercise* (p.3), and goes on to state after outlining its main objectives that, *to achieve the above will require visionary, determined and practical leadership to ensure that by 2022 Wits will have attained top-100 status* (p.5).

This is reiterated later in two more places to emphasize the difference between leadership and management, for example:

Academic scholarship and intellectual leadership skills are no longer the sole requirements for running higher education institutions. Efficient management, political networking and fundraising skills are equally, if not more important. (p.15)

It is the only strategic plan in this sample to make this distinction between leadership and management. It is then possible for the plan to use “leadership” and “leader” to refer specifically to the status and influence of the university in society: *... a leader in research, teaching and innovation internationally in a number of key priority fields of global importance, but without negating our strategic role as leader in a local and regional context* (p.5); *... Wits’ professional disciplines remain leaders in the country ...* (p.22); *... a world leader in several niche areas and strengths ...* (p.23); and *... sustain the leadership position it currently occupies in a number of these fields. (p.28, repeated on p.29)*. Lastly, the term “leader” appears when referring to those who already occupy that position or are already recognised as exceptional and their relationship to the university: *pursue intellectual elitism as an approach that will nurture world leaders in their respective fields of engagement* (p.5); and *attract and retain distinguished scholars and prize-winning leaders in niche and strategic fields. (p.9)*

This document is written predominantly in the third person—where the University is the entity. The collective “we” appears sparingly and tends to be limited to the introduction phrases at the start of each section. This narrative could create a distance between the University, the staff and the students in terms of responsibility for implementing the plan.

The University of KwaZulu Natal’s (UKZN) opened on 1 January 2004 after a merger between the University of Natal (established in 1910) and University of Durban-Westville (established in 1972). The five campuses cater to over 46,000 students and over 1,300 academics (UKZN, 2022). The 32-page plan available online at the time of this study was for 2017–2021. It clearly states that this and the next plan will continue to build on work already underway. It also includes enablers for implementation, referring to conditions that allow for change. There is a strong emphasis on the need to work across five campuses and bring them closer in terms of culture. The values and mission statement only appear on page 13 and are directly related to the strategy

through the combined use of written argumentation and infographics. KPIs appear both as current percentages and as targets—although both numbers are not in the same section. This can make it difficult to know how change will be measured. There are several mentions to “stakeholders” (referring to industry, academia, and students), and the document notes the Centre for World University Rankings and its position in that ranking.

The plan starts with a foreword from the Vice Chancellor who indicates that the plan was written by a task team, and states that the executive team will now work with that task team “to pursue our collective ambitions” and appeals to the UKZN community to take “collective responsibility to oversee and monitor” implementation (p.1). In this way, the senior leadership is placed in a core position in terms of both vision and action. However, it is less clear as to who exactly will be responsible for what when the KPIs are addressed as the plan adopts “UKZN” as the entity responsible for implementation and monitoring.

While other universities may infer or refer to it, this is the only plan to make explicit mention of “servant leadership”. It first appears on page 5:

As part of advancing scholarship and knowledge, UKZN advances mutual understanding, social cohesion, and peace. Therefore, the leadership has embraced the ideal of servant leadership, where moral consciousness is appreciated and accessed through ways that inspire trust, pride, and mutual confidence.

As the above demonstrates, in this plan, “leadership” is used to refer both to management structures as well as the ability to influence for change. It appears fourteen times in the plan and “leader” appears five times. In five instances, leadership refers predominantly to governance and management, and is recognized as an enabler to achieve strategic goals: *UKZN leadership looks forward to working with all stakeholders ... (p.4); The challenge for University leadership is to provide an engaged, open, and connected form of leadership ... (p.7); ... how it goes about its business as a university with an aspiration towards servant leadership ... (p.14); Enabler 3: ensure effective leadership, governance and management ... (p.26)*

The notion of service underpins much of the discussion.

As with other plans, the terms are also used to distinguish the university in the field and in society: *UKZN is a global leader in some areas of ... (p.11); ... undertakes to display quality, leadership and energy in all that it does (p.13); Acknowledged as a leader in embedding sustainability and good governance ... (p.19)* Lastly it is used to highlight competence development in staff and students: *to develop them to their full potential to become globally aware professionals, leaders and citizens (p.21); and pursue high staff morale through servant leadership. (p.25).*

While not referring to the university nor its constituents, the term “leader” appears one more time in the document as an important political and cultural marker:

While South Africa has a remarkable constitution, which entrenches equality and opportunity for all, and there has been an incredible transition of reconciliation and development, led by our iconic leader, Nelson R. Mandela, there remains a legacy of unequal access to resources, or inequality in opportunity for personal or community development (p.10).

It is worth observing that although UKZN highlights “servant leadership” in its opening section, the document is predominantly written in the third person where UKZN is the main entity. Additional distance to the reader and university community is created using “its” instead of “our” in most places. It is also worth mentioning that this is a short-term strategic plan of four

years, yet it refers almost exclusively to a leadership style that is argued to be better suited for long term application (Smith et al., 2004). It would therefore be of interest for future research as to whether this style is continued into later plans to demonstrate understanding of its longitudinal impact.

Durban University of Technology (DUT) was established in 2002 after a merger between Technikon Natal (established in 1907) and ML Sultan Technikon (established in 1941). It has approximately 33,000 students and 841 staff across seven campuses. It presents its strategic plan, *Envision 2030*, as a two-page graphic (Durban University of Technology, 2022).

There is a “Strategy Map Interpretation Guide” before the graphics are presented, however it is not clear who has written this introduction as no author is listed. There is therefore no foreword by the Vice Chancellor, nor any mention of this nor any other senior leadership position in the document. It is therefore not possible to determine the role played or envisaged for those occupying those positions. It also makes it difficult to determine who will be responsible for oversight and implementation. This is confirmed on page 1 where the document states: “at this stage there are no action or implementation plans attached to the Map”.

The core values are in a helix diagram where the mission statement appears as statements of intent above the graphic. The graphic depicts clear links between categories deemed important to the strategic plan, such as innovation, adaptive graduates, etc. The plan adopts an aspirational discourse and does not present any statistics or KPIs for measurement purposes. There is no mention of partnerships or relationship to other sectors. The plan simply refers to Society (with a capital S throughout). There is no mention of “leadership” or “leader” anywhere in the document. Instead, there is reference to “stewardship” and emphasis is placed on collective responsibility in terms of governance. Stewardship is defined by DUT as: *A values- and principles-based collective responsibility and accountability, as custodians, for all that is ours: our people, our infrastructure, resources and the environment* (p. 1). While this does move the narrative away from the pitfalls of having leaders and followers, the term “custodians” can be read both in a protective, nurturing way, but also in an ownership paradigm as it lists assets as “ours”.

While limited to one page, the text accompanying the graphic is written in an informal, conversational style. This makes it possibly the most inclusive narrative of the documents analyzed as the reader is addressed in such a way that they are immediately seen as part of the process.

6. Leadership: styles and trends

Overall, the five top-ranked universities in South Africa are similar in terms of clarity in expressing mission statements and core values in line with what is expected and requested from regulating bodies. Transformation, innovation, trust, and inclusion are shared values linked to the political history of the country.

The terms “leader” and “leadership”, however, have slightly more variation in how they are used in the different strategic plans. It is noteworthy that the majority choose to start with defining the term and how they believe it should be applied in their context. It is interesting that there is also a different treatment of senior leadership positions in the universities’ documents. In three cases, the Vice Chancellor writes the foreword and locates their role and responsibility in the process. In two cases (UCT and Stellenbosch), the Vice Chancellor indicates that they have final oversight and will act as facilitators or enablers to allow others to action the plan. In the UKZN document, the Vice Chancellor makes it clear that there is the expectation that everyone, including them, will be involved in the implementation phase. However, Wits and DUT make no mention of the Vice Chancellor or any senior leadership positions at all. The first could be understood due to the decision to separate management and leadership in the document, whereas the other may be attributed to the lack of an implementation plan. In the latter two, this may raise questions as to who is responsible for ensuring that the goals are met, although in fairness, the other plans rarely go into more precise detail than to state “faculties

and departments”. It is important to note that this analysis is based purely on the wording in the documents. Intention or actual engagement of senior leadership in real terms cannot be determined and there is a possibility that this is quite different from what is stated. It can however be surmised that all five choose to emphasise the importance of collective responsibility.

Do the strategic plans reflect the two dominant leadership styles in the field? As mentioned in the literature review, for elements of transformational leadership, there should be references to commitment to reward innovation and creativity, staff motivation, training and development, and a commitment to improve (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). There should be signs of employee-driven activities linked to common goals. In contrast, servant leadership requires greater cognizance of the need to support and develop followers, as well as members of related communities, so that they too may adopt a leadership role in the future. However, it is important to acknowledge that it is not always possible to differentiate the two styles precisely as there are many overlapping traits and characteristics (see Anderson & Sun, 2017; Smith et al., 2004; Van Dierendonck et al., 2014).

As demonstrated in the Findings, UCT and UKZN are the most explicit in terms of referring to the two dominant leadership styles. UCT links transformative to being inclusive to address historical and political concerns by demonstrating an awareness that the transformative style of leadership can be influenced largely by the person occupying the leadership position and therefore should be countered or supplemented with a more collective approach for the South African context. The notion of “thought leadership” forms the main point of reference thereafter, although it is not defined. UKZN refers directly only to servant leadership and chooses not to add any additional approaches or terms. SU chooses to define “responsible leadership”. This is not presented as a style per se but rather as a descriptor, although for the purposes of this paper, it could be argued that it is defined in a manner closely aligned to transformation leadership as it highlights positive change and moral/ethical decision-making and collective problem solving. DUT defines stewardship instead of leadership. It also refers to collective responsibility. Wits is more of an outlier in that it does not present leadership in an academic manner—as a clear concept with a definition. Instead, there are references to how leadership should be portrayed or communicated. In the opening pages, it is described as: visionary; determined; and practical. Despite the differences in presentation, there are implicit references to the transformational leadership model throughout four of the plans, which is consistent with previous research, and interplays well with expressed core values.

However, these styles do not necessarily limit how the term is applied in the text. The first note is that most of the plans use the terms “leadership” and “leader” to refer to aspirations regarding global ranking or how the university’s role and impact is perceived in society. Often, “leadership” in these cases refers to “academic excellence” and is linked to performance in research, innovation and to a lesser extent, teaching, and to be a “leader” means to be at the forefront of the field. There are some who prefer to refer to research in general, but in two cases (Wits and UKZN), reference is made to specific academic disciplines and fields highlighting intended areas of expertise.

The second note is that leadership is sometimes used interchangeably with management (as in the case of SU and UKZN), but it is also used to clearly differentiate the two (as in Wits). In light of recent events, it seems important for universities to note the type of management. SU indicates that “competent” leadership is preferable when using it to refer to management. UKZN tends to combine the two in relevant sentences referring to governance, “university leadership and management”, and elects to use “effective” as a descriptor. A stark contrast is in the Wits plan where academic leadership is signaled as needing to be supplemented with “efficient management”. This points to the recognition that a different skillset and range of competencies are required for day-to-day operations. It is an important departure from previous approaches to university leadership where the most distinguished professors were nominated into managerial roles based on research rather than human resource ability.

Implicit references to the two dominant leadership styles can also be assessed by considering the stance of the person-narrative employed. That is how the narrator (the university) is located in relationship to the reader/stakeholder, how they are located within the narrative, and how the implementation of the plan is presented and explained. Despite claims to aim to be or being more inclusive at the leadership level, it is significant that almost half of the strategic plans are written in the third-person singular focusing on the institution and not the person or group as narrator. To reiterate an earlier observation, this is further confirmed in most of the plans where there is mention of the Vice Chancellor as having oversight of the entire process. Only a couple assign responsibility further by indicating who is responsible for operationalizing the plan, and thus how these goals will be reached in measurable ways. Even if a larger group of people or measurements are identified, there is a tendency to present these in general terms, such as “teams” or “working groups” without identifying specific roles and responsibilities of the members. The use of the third person or organization is thus not compatible with the collective leadership inferred in many of the documents, although it may be a better representation of the process itself.

The use of “the university” or “name” as a pronoun may create distance between the narrator and the reader/stakeholder. It may be seen more as a branding mechanism than a call for solidarity. This may be counter-productive if the aim is to motivate for an academic environment that is inclusive and based on collective effort. As such, any references to transformational or servant leadership are to some extent undermined through the adoption of this type of narrative style.

In those plans that do adopt the first-person narrative, as shown in the findings, there is some nuance as to whether the “we” includes students or not. Arguably, most of the documents instead tend to return to the more traditional formal leadership style of presentation where the leader or leadership groups decide on the common goals and influence or attempt to exert influence on individuals to work towards these. It is more indicative of a hierarchical structure typically associated with the traditional university, or any other large entity in public administration. This is at odds with public opinion and expectations, and this study could anticipate that in these instances the strategic plan is perceived to be a “document from above” with little relevance or applicability for those further down the hierarchy. In these cases, there is likely to be a disconnect between the leadership level and operational realities.

7. Conclusion

The strategic plans of the five top-ranked universities in South Africa appear similar in terms of clarity in expressing mission statements and core values. Transformation, innovation, trust, and inclusion are shared core values. A content analysis shows that a clear majority contain explicit and implicit references to transformational or servant leadership styles, that are all coupled with a collective approach to decision making which are consistent with and interplay with the respective core values. Interestingly, considering these approaches, the senior leadership roles are not emphasized as having more responsibility than any other role for realizing the strategic goals. Tension between who is thought to be responsible, who is indicated in the plans as having responsibility and whether the community feels as though they too are responsible all have a part to play.

Implicit references to leadership emerge through descriptors, and the stance of the narrator in the text. How the narrator is presented in relationship to the reader/stakeholder, and how the implementation of the plan is described is a good indicator of whether the chosen leadership style is reiterated throughout the strategic plan. In most cases, a first-person collective narrative is adopted. This is possibly to create a stronger relationship or association between the university and the community it serves. Although, it is important to recognize that the meaning is not consistent as “we” can sometimes refer to university staff, or it can sometimes refer to students, or both staff and greater society. While university names are also used to indicate the collective, this creates a definite difference in how membership of that community is understood and can create a separation from broader society. Those that continue to employ third-person academic discourse, that often adopts a passive and formal tone, may only serve to create more distance

with the new generation of readers who tend to embrace a less formal, inclusive tone that lends itself to action.

Leadership and how it is understood and portrayed is also influenced by the economic realities in which the universities operate. Strategies of the examined South African universities tend to include metrics, in the form of statistics or KPIs. This suggests a strong business model in South Africa, with a clear market orientation to attract (foreign) investors and donors. This is understandable given diminishing state resources where public universities are expected to compete with better financed private institutions. It is also a clear indication of the shift in expectations of academic leaders who are increasingly expected to play a more economic role. In a few instances, the plans clearly indicate that this role will fall to managers, people with the necessary operational skills, as opposed to scholars who are expected to be at the forefront of teaching and research initiatives.

Going forward, public universities could be encouraged to better explain internal governance and leadership styles as part of the strategic plan. As indicated, senior management roles or leadership figures, such as the Vice Chancellor or Deans, are not necessarily named as those responsible for implementing the strategy in a concrete manner. Most plans are presented on a more normative level, where the entire community is expected to be involved. This has direct implications for implementation, accountability and for building and maintaining trust during times of uncertainty. By providing a more concrete understanding of who is responsible in the university structure, how they have been chosen, and how the internal governance structure functions, the public may be better informed and aware of the challenges involved in meeting shared goals, as well as the milestones achieved. It also makes it clearer why some processes may take longer than others, due to the layers of the organization that need to be involved for the transformation to occur. It would make it easier to discern where the university is in that process, and how each stakeholder is included, or could participate, in the relevant activities and change. This is particularly important when servant leadership is identified as the preferred style. Given the elite status of these top-ranked universities, it is possible that other institutions of higher education will either try to emulate them or differentiate themselves, making how leadership is presented and demonstrated in strategic plans of key interest and importance.

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Note

1. While this article uses “followers” to reflect the terminology used by academics in the field, it should be noted that it is contested as it clearly delineates between those who lead and those who are led. In groups that adopt collaborative decision-making, this role is not as clear and therefore the term may be misleading.

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