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Influential factors impacting leadership effectiveness: A case study at a public university

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Orientation: As a result of increased globalisation and rapid changes in the technological, social, economic and political spheres, the environment in which businesses and organisations function has become increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). This has created a unique set of challenges for the leaders of these organisations, including higher education (HE) in South Africa.

Research purpose: This study aimed to identify potential influential factors that have impact on leader effectiveness in a HE VUCA environment.

Motivation for the study: Leadership effectiveness under VUCA conditions within the South African higher education sector no longer only depends on professional leadership training. A thorough understanding of crucial influential factors moderating leader effectiveness and a sober strategy to overcome potential negative impact is pivotal. This study seeks to contribute to this understanding and to leadership theory and practice.

Research design, approach and method: A qualitative research approach was adopted to test research participants' perceptions regarding the significance of influential factors impacting leadership effectiveness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 employees in leadership positions at a single public university. A rigorous 16-stepwise method was used to analyse the qualitative data that employed a directed qualitative content analysis.

Main findings: The major findings of the study include theoretical and empirical support for four influential factors impacting leadership effectiveness, that is, organisational culture, the role of women in leadership, and the role of millennials in leadership and diversity.

Practical/managerial implications: Recommendations for university leaders to create an enabling environment for effective leadership to navigate VUCA are provided.

Contribution/value-add: The significance of this study lies in the potential contribution to leadership theory and insights for leaders in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to be effective in the face of VUCA.

Keywords: influential factors; leader effectiveness; higher education; volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity (VUCA); contemporary leadership styles.

Introduction

Owing to the increased globalisation and rapid changes in the technological, social, economic and political spheres, the environment in which businesses and organisations function has become increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) (Arda, Aslan & Alpkan 2016; Saleh & Watson 2017). This has created a unique set of challenges for the leaders of these organisations. The traditional models for effective leadership that dominate the current organisational landscape are premised on fairly stable market and environmental conditions, in which prior experience equips leaders with the knowledge they need to navigate business strategy and executive decision-making (Saleh & Watson 2017). However, these previously tested and proven methods of leading organisations no longer guarantee high performance. The dynamic business environment and uncertain economic conditions of the present time are challenging leaders to find new ways to be successful. In order to further complicate matters, the speed, frequency and intensity with which the organisational environment is changing are ascending in nature (Bryman 2007; Saleh & Watson 2017). The field of higher education (HE) in South Africa clearly demonstrates the challenges that VUCA impose on organisational leadership.

In the 21st century, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are expected to play a pivotal role in the development of a knowledge-based economy. Globally, HE is subjected to a host of forces

that are, dually, drivers of development and challenges to the *status quo*: new university business models, changes in social attitudes, economic crises, competition in the HE market, internationalisation and rapid technological advancements (Szelągowska-Rudzka 2018). Furthermore, universities are increasingly adapting their strategies to align with more expansive frameworks of change, such as the United Nations Sustainable Developmental Goals (World Bank 2016). In South Africa, the National Developmental Plan (National Planning Commission 2012) sets forth the locally relevant educational targets. Crucial challenges include eradicating poverty and inequality, and achieving the objectives set out in the constitution. These initiatives do not only have unequivocal merit but they will also shape the form and function of the future university profoundly (Frantz 2020; Hill, Walkington & France 2016; Holtzhausen 2012; Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre 2018). However, institutional leaders in South Africa are being called to execute such changes within the context of complex systemic barriers, which were clearly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Frantz 2020).

However, there is limited research on leadership behaviour that leads to this kind of transformation in HE in South Africa or elsewhere. There seems to be a gap in current management theory with regard to understanding contemporary leadership behaviour in HE. Research by Dopson et al. (2019) supported the notion that there is a gap in current management theory and found that:

> [L]iterature is small-scale, fragmented and often theoretically weak, with many different and coexisting models, approaches and methods, and little consensus on what may be suitable and effective in the Higher Education context. (p. 218)

Wang (2014) alluded to a further shortcoming that gaps exist between leadership theories and practice. Bryman (2007) and Siddique, Aslam and Khan (2011) postulated that there is a good deal of anecdotal reflection on the educational leader but remarkably little systematic research on what aspects enable leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, the literature on leadership effectiveness or best management practices under VUCA conditions is scarce, with some of the literature only providing generalised and informal evidence (Mathebula 2017; Saleh & Watson 2017).

This study therefore seeks to enrich academic knowledge and professional management practice for leaders in South African HEIs.

Capitalising on the opportunities of a rapidly changing world, therefore, requires a thorough understanding of the VUCA phenomenon, better management tools and, ultimately, the sheer will of leaders to deal with its increasing complexity (Bennett & Lemoine 2014). This study therefore aims to identify the influential factors impacting effective leadership in a VUCA environment. The environmental factors impacting leadership effectiveness within one specific South African HEI are investigated in order to establish guidelines for improvement under VUCA conditions.

This study aims to answer the research question of identifying *which environmental factors influence effective leadership behaviours*. These findings address the research objective *to understand the crucial factors that influence leadership effectiveness in a public university.*

Research methods and design

A qualitative research approach was employed to investigate influential factors impacting leadership effectiveness within a South African HEI.

The results of an analysis of contemporary leadership literature are presented to establish a conceptual theoretical framework that highlights the influential factors impacting effective leadership. These influential factors serve as inputs for the directed content analysis that follows and forms the deductive portion of the analysis. Next, an inductive analysis of the empirical data from the semi-structured interviews with university leaders is presented and corroborated for each influential factor.

A public university in the province of the Western Cape, South Africa, was selected as the research setting. The unit of analysis in this study is the individuals who hold formal leadership positions at an HEI. The inclusion criteria for the sample participants were their availability and willingness to participate, their ability to communicate effectively, and their knowledge and experience regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, a purposive, non-probability quota sampling technique was employed to select participants who met the inclusion criteria and could provide rich qualitative data. The sample size was further constrained by the guideline of Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) that the research sample should be large enough to achieve data saturation, yet small enough to achieve rich qualitative data. In addition, Magilvy and Thomas (2009) provided a rule of thumb to guide the sample size. According to Magilvy and Thomas (2009), 'A typical sample size for a qualitative descriptive study may be as few as 3 to 5 persons, ranging up to about 20 participants'. This study's final sample consisted of 24 participants in leadership positions at a public university. The demographic characteristics of the participants included 2 executives, 11 senior managers and 11 middle managers. The sample included 13 females and 11 males.

A semi-structured interview consisting of a combination of unstructured and semi-structured questions was employed as the data collection tool. In line with the recurring inductive–deductive hybrid analytical strategy, the questions were designed to reflect the themes extracted from the literature on contemporary leadership theories. The leadership themes uncovered in the literature review *a priori* research, which provide the basis for the deductive categorisation matrix are organisational culture, the role of women in leadership, the role of millennials in leadership and diversity. These proposed factors are by no means an exhaustive list, but do represent the most significant

influential factors identified from contemporary leadership literature that occur across all five leadership theories, that is, transformational, authentic, servant, adaptive and team leadership.

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts to reveal meanings, relationships and insights related to the research questions. Qualitative content analysis is a research technique that employs language characteristics to explore the content or contextual meaning of research data in the written text format within a naturalistic paradigm (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). The aim of this process is to abstract descriptive knowledge of the phenomena under study. This information is systematically coded, categorised, themed and evaluated for patterns (Assarroudi et al. 2018; Hsieh & Shannon 2005).

As the aim of the study is to seek support or non-support for the contextual themes identified from existing theory, a directed qualitative content analysis approach has been adopted. Examining the data descriptively allows for similarities and differences to appear within the various levels of abstraction: meaning units, codes, categories and themes (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz 2017). Under the directed approach, the codes generated from the manifest data are allocated to the theoretical themes determined a priori or the coding agenda. Assarroudi et al. (2018) explained that directed content analysis is an approach to extend or validate a theory or a theoretical framework conceptually. They provide one of the most comprehensive, transparent and reliable methods for directed qualitative content analysis, which was employed in this study. Their rigorous 16-stepwise method, which includes three analytical phases: preparation, organisation and reporting was used to analyse the qualitative data within a directed qualitative content analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of the Western Cape Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee, reference number: HS19/6/45. Also, permission to conduct this study was requested from the Office of the Registrar for the participating university.

Results

Following from the inductive–deductive hybrid approach to data analysis, the themes identified in the deductive, a priori classification framework must be validated against the themes derived inductively from the empirical evidence. Comparing the participants' answers to the unstructured questions to the semi-structured questions, which were based on the a priori themes, not only provides an overall sense or high-level summary but also corroborates the trustworthiness of the research data. Table 1 presents the four influential factors and their respective coding units. This provides the reader with a holistic overview of the depth and richness of the data.

The definitions and significance of the identified influential factors are presented here and establish the coding rules of the main categories or themes in the categorisation matrix for the directed content analysis (Mayring 2000).

Organisational culture

Schein (1985:2) wrote, '[t]he only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture'. An organisation's culture emerges from many sources and is developed over time. It provides people in the organisation with a sense of identity and reflects organisational goals, assumptions, vision and leadership. Through interactive leader–follower relationships, the organisational characteristics, employee perceptions and behaviours are manifested in organisational culture (George, Sleeth & Siders 1999; Mosley & Patrick 2011). Organisational culture is part of a reciprocal process whereby culture reinforces particular leadership behaviours and simultaneously, a leader's style affects organisational culture. The result is that organisational

TABLE 1: Four influential factors and their respective coding units impacting leadership effectiveness.

Organisational culture	Role of women in leadership	Role of millennials in leadership	Diversity
• Culture shift, too slow	• Women tend to bring a different sensitivity to leadership	• Millennials' contribution	• Elements of diversity
• VUCA stimuli underestimated	• Stereotypes	• Way of working with millennials	• Historical context
• Not ready to deal with quick decision making	• Examples of leadership success	• Wrong millennial behaviour	• Scares skills
• Culture eats strategy for breakfast	• Empowered women	• Change initiatives	• Culture and customs
• Ineffective strategy	• Examples of leadership failure	• Legacy of struggle against apartheid vs a new perspective	• Diversity
• Nuanced score	• Diversity	• Obligation to provide management and leadership training	• Challenges
• University ethos, left wing	• Gender balance	• Innovation	• Benefits
• Difficult to change organisational culture	• Different perspectives	• Initiatives	• Disengaged
• Very rigid risk averse	• Balance	• Youngification	• Hearing all the voices
• Not a shared culture		• Motto: work smarter not harder	• VUCA conditions
• Not clear what the university stands for VUCA		• Bridge between students and leadership	• Actively seeking different voices
• Traditions, the carrying of the past		• Millennials' needs	• Execution
• Wrong organisational culture		• Lack of contribution	• Xenophobia
• Values		• University SRC politicised	• Stereotypes
• Resistance to change		• Executive impact	• Organisational culture Recruitment
• Executive impact		• A millennial versus an engagement issue	
• Policy and procedures		• Potential conflict	
• Rewards and recognition		• Growing by working in different environments	
• Risk adverse culture			
• Effective strategy			
• Business continuity plans			
• Culture survey			
• New staff induction			

VUCA, volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous; SRC, student representative council.

culture influences leadership effectiveness (Mosley & Patrick 2011; Sun 2009).

The ambitions of the transformational leader are reflected in the organisation's culture (George et al. 1999; Mosley & Patrick 2011). In traditional business environments, where conditions are more stable and rigid, consistent organisational cultures are needed. Under more dynamic conditions, a flexible culture is more advantageous. In order to develop cultures that are more adaptable and responsive to the demands of a VUCA environment, Mosley and Patrick (2011) suggested a combination of the structure of the transactional leadership style and the flexibility of the transformational leadership style. These organisational cultures should result in a higher level of job satisfaction and employee commitment and organisational performance (Mosley & Patrick 2011; Sun 2009).

From an empirical perspective, a research participant explains the need for an organisational culture where leaders under VUCA conditions have the authority to make decisions:

'I think that in the climate [*VUCA*] that you're referring to, there are fears and concerns around a climate where there's uncertainty and ambiguity and often times, a response that is a clamping down, you know, to tighter control things. And I do understand it, … and that there should be clear guidelines for processes and procedures. But it cannot be performed to such an extent that people who are in leadership roles cannot function with the responsibility and the autonomy that's required in that leadership role.' (Participant 15, female, white, senior management)

Another participant cautions that from a poor organisational performance point of view, poor accountability is imminent:

'… [*W*]hereby accountability is somehow missing somewhere… So, there's an arm of structures whereby people are held accountable in terms of governance structures, but I think what's the missing part is the performance of people, of individuals who are occupying positions. …because you find that the university invest a lot in terms of training and all those kinds of things, …but there's no yardstick, …is there any return on investment on all these investments that you're making, because you need to be able to measure yourself whether you are … successful or not.' (Participant 25, male, black, middle management)

Another participant expresses frustration, almost bordering on anger and pleads for an organisational culture change to support improved research outputs:

'At [*the university*], … the system fails the research process. So, what happens is, is that you've got a large cohort of the university that's not publishing, that's not interested in publishing. Because I believe the leadership has not performed enough. There are pockets of people, so for example you find one faculty doing better than another faculty. But it could be and we had that experience in (faculty name) where a few people are driving the idea [*improved research outputs*] and getting the people on board. That's not happening across the university, right? …every single process that you've come to in the research support process, you find barriers. Now, it's a system, but I always say it's people in the system. And those people in the system, become your gatekeepers. So, because I don't like you, because you got a big

mouth and you saying things, and bla-bla-bla…. I'm going to let your stuff take longer, or the signatures are not right, it's sent back so you have to start the process all over again.' (Participant 11, female, coloured, senior management)

In conclusion, a participant comes across as being highly agitated regarding the university's current organisational culture:

'I am battling sometimes with the super rigid structures that we are dealing with, because it makes the pace of execution so slow that it starts bordering sometimes on irrelevance. You know, by the time you're getting to implement the solution that you've designed that solution is out of date.' (Participant 22, male, white, middle management)

Role of women in leadership positions

Since the early 19th century and for many decades thereafter, leadership was associated with male qualities. The strong adult men demanded obedience from others through his inquisitive, instinctive and controlling behaviour. The definition for leadership only started to shift away from the characteristics of men in positions of authority in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the styles of women leaders started to transform the very nature of leadership (Vecchiotti 2018). Today, the characteristics of women leaders and their contributions to contemporary business success include increased collaboration, mentoring, a strong focus on employees and their development, a nurturing style and a willingness to look at the short- and long-term factors to achieve business results. Leadership as a people process began with women, that is, trust between good leaders and implementers with an attitude of vulnerability, willing to sometimes say, 'I don't know the answer' (Day 2001; Vecchiotti 2018). Bleijenbergh, Engen and Vinkenburg (2013) argue that the 'ideal academic' is constituted in terms of masculinity and outside work responsibilities including care giving, does not significantly burden the male academic. This explains the neoliberal capitalist functioning of the modern university where masculinity is inherently embedded, and therefore, mainly neglect the needs of women.

Furthermore, according to Chin (2011), research supports the notion that women leaders exhibit democratic leadership styles, exploiting collaboration and cooperation, as opposed to men who are more autocratic, directive and competitive. He proposes that these differences could be contributed to the differences in personality and social interpersonal skills between women and men. Chin (2011) closed with the point of view that contemporary leadership theory increasingly advocates for collaboration and strong people skills to succeed in modern times.

Referencing the present study, there seems to be much agreement amongst the research participants that women make a unique contribution towards leadership effectiveness. They cite a broad range of examples, mostly focusing on strong soft skills and the resultant positive outcomes.

A participant explains the positive contribution women in leadership positions make. The participant argues that women bring a different sensitivity to leadership, an approach that men do not normally demonstrate, that is:

> 'One example I want to give at [*the university*] is that the Registrar is a female, DVC academic, and DVC research and DVC student development and support, are females, all brought in rewards and recognition evenings in our different sectors.' (Participant 1, female, coloured, executive management)

The participant explains that some of these positions have been in existence for a long time, yet only with the appointment of women in these positions, has there been formal recognition for performance and excellence.

Another participant believes women complement the university leadership with improved soft skills:

> 'The emotional intelligence, the caring, they bring a dimension to decision-making that's less robust, or less brutal in a sense. They require people to listen….' (Participant 2, male, coloured, executive management)

The participant also alluded to the benefits women add towards managing risks and heightened levels of awareness:

> 'It's also in a context where there is so much stereotypes, in a context where patriarchy, in a context of gender-based violence, automatically the nature of the discourse is changing. By having women, who at least alerts you to the sensitivities, alerts an organisation to the kinds of things that ought to be considered….' (Participant 2, male, coloured, executive management)

The participant concluded by calling for inclusivity:

> 'So, but it's [*about*] much more than women. It's about diversity. It's actually about understanding multiple perspectives, multiple voices, across race, across culture, across religions, which we [university] do have, which is very fortunate.' (Participant 2, male, coloured, executive management)

There is, however, a different viewpoint held by a few participants. Some participants believe that gender balance is imperative for leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, some suggest that the presence of women in leadership roles also has potential negative implications. A participant defends the premise that men in leadership roles provide an equilibrium for effective leadership:

> 'But as with anything in life, I think balance is key. Obviously there needs to be like a masculine aspect that balances that, that's looking at the whole Yin and Yang, and the balance of things, that women leadership also have a negative aspect. So, one must not lose track of that. But I think women can be very much competitive with each other and sometimes a little bit jealous as well. I think that's a very feminine aspect.' (Participant 24, female, white, middle management)

Finally, another participant holds the view that it is not gender but leadership style that determines leadership effectiveness. The participant explains:

> 'Because you could have either gender coming in and not have any change, negative change, positive energy. So, I don't like

assigning anything negative or positive to [*a*] particular gender. I assign it more to leadership style. I don't think it is gender specific. It's 'vrot' [*rotten*] leadership specific.' (Participant 4, male, coloured, senior management)

Role of millennial cohort and generation Y in leadership positions

Vecchiotti (2018) stated that social learning, transformational and servant leadership are the three prominent leadership styles adopted by most millennial leaders. Furthermore, he highlights that servant leadership seems to be the most effective style placing much emphasis on followers. Millennial leaders add two contemporary skills: much verbal dialogue and a consensus-seeking approach, often through social media. They empower followers by sharing information and resources. Teamwork, collaboration, continuous feedback, a high level of emotional intelligence, visionary thinkers, creating a productive gender blend and fun workplace are serious considerations for the millennium cohort of leaders. They are technically well-informed, agile and adaptable to change near to real-time. They encourage employee participation and self-managing teams (Sarkar 2016; Vecchiotti 2018).

Casey (2014) advocated for the contribution millennials can make to organisations, especially within a VUCA environment. He discusses a number of millennial attributes that support leadership effectiveness under VUCA conditions. Technology, information, teamwork and collaboration, multitasking and the ability to work autonomously are important criteria and align well with contemporary leadership theory.

Research participants display a deep understanding that millennials have a different work–life perspective, and propose that the university should seize the moment to transform this into a new competitive advantage. They think that the university has a limited window of opportunity to embrace the millennial cohort and the unique value they can contribute to leadership effectiveness.

A participant proposes two interventions for the interplay between the millennial cohort and the university leadership:

> 'Firstly, we need to understand that 21st century graduates, come with different expectations, and [*they*] need to be skilled differently, to what we used to do when we were students. That the graduate attributes, the kinds of skills, the networking skills, the ways of learning, the pedagogical approach, etc., all need to change. Secondly, as a change initiative, they come in tech savvy. They come in with different technological skills or assumed technological skills, ways of engaging, in frequency, in reading shorter texts, etc. because for the university to survive in that environment, there has to be change on the digital front. And so, the digital changes required to, how do you prepare a university in the digital age?' (Participant 2, male, coloured, executive management)

Furthermore, Participant 2 (male, coloured, executive management) advocates that change initiatives need to be expedited, millennials must be engaged effectively by

rethinking the university's content management strategy and the way the university communicates. The platforms used, the website and virtual and immersive environments to optimise technology in order to effectively engage with millennials need to be changed. This narrative is supported by a number of other participants who cited additional evidence for the value millennials add. These include innovation in teaching and learning, exploiting online and blended modes of delivery, employing social media and the critical role millennials play with innovative projects, incubators, science and technology.

A research participant who is a millennial in a middle management position and makes two important observations. Firstly, the participant believes millennials are better equipped to manage change:

'But I do think that they might be a little bit more resilient to the VUCA conditions, because they might just be adaptable and used to those conditions having grown up in [a] kind of the beginning phase of VUCA almost.' (Participant 24, female, white, middle management)

The participant also believes millennials could assist leadership with student engagement:

'The link or a bridge between the older generations and the students. I think there's a little bit of a communication barrier sometimes, between older people in leadership positions and young students that are walking on campus, and what they want to hear and how they want to process information, and how they want to receive information.' (Participant 24, female, white, middle management)

Finally, a participant cautions against millennials sometimes showing entitlement and disrespect. The participant explained:

'There is sometimes a sense of entitlement, of just wanting and not realising that we actually worked very hard to get where we are. But instead of just being a top-down approach with them, I feel that I win them over when we engage. … So, for me, I've always learnt, being taught from childhood that I must respect elderly people or people in authority, you don't have to agree but you need to respect. So, I find that these young people who just feel that they can call you on your name or whatever and speak to you the way they want to.' (Participant 1, female, coloured, executive management)

Diversity

Green et al. (2019) proposed, '[d]iversity can be defined as acknowledging, understanding, accepting and valuing differences among people with respect to age, class, race, ethnicity, gender, disabilities, etc'.

In turbulent conditions, effective leaders require skillsets not only to champion and manage diversity but also to exploit diversity to the benefit of the entire organisation (Hall & Rowland 2016; Sarkar 2016). Increased competitiveness and performance are possible if leaders can successfully blend different values, knowledge and backgrounds to achieve organisational goals (Hall & Rowland 2016). The increasing number of knowledge workers implies the growth of a highly skilled and well-educated work force that wishes to contribute more fully than many have in the past. Employing diversity to maximum effect creates the opportunity for organisations to be stronger (Hall & Rowland 2016).

Green et al. (2019) explained that increasing globalisation demands effective interaction between people from diverse backgrounds. People can no longer work in an isolated environment and for organisations to be competitive, they need to embrace inclusivity and diversity. The benefits of diversity include improved value creation, a competitive advantage and increased work productivity. Inclusivity through diversity is pivotal to sustain successful participation in the worldwide economy. Changing markets in a VUCA environment require flexibility and creativity to enhance leader effectiveness.

The research participants demonstrated a good understanding of the nature and benefits diversity contributes to the university. However, they highlighted the interconnectedness between diversity and culture and the need to manage this relationship carefully. Furthermore, they described how the historical context is important to understand the sensitivities around diversity and how the university has developed over time.

A participant defines diversity in its broadest sense, emphasising the value different people add:

'Diversity for me is across the board. It's across gender, it's across race, it's across age, it's, you know, it's experience. That's diversity, because everybody brings a different dynamic.' (Participant 1, female, coloured, executive management)

Another participant provided some historic context, arguing that since its inception the university has demonstrated diversity as a strength:

'The fact that the institution in the 80s opened its doors from what it was designated to be to a broader societal open university, is the first open contact institution and that it changed its language policy – It was a courageous decision at the time, but for purposes of appreciating a diverse population, the fact that it opened its doors to compatriots, to an international community and welcomed those voices on this campus, bears testimony to the fact that we [were] one of the first institutions to have at senior executive level, gender equity in the 80s, that we've democratised our leadership structure'. (Participant 2, male, coloured, executive management)

Discussion
Organisational culture

Contrasting theory with the empirical findings amplifies the challenges posed by the current organisational culture. It is significant that based on participants' feedback, organisational culture impacts all levels of leadership. It demonstrates the fundamental principle that even skilled and experienced leaders' effectiveness is moderated by the prevailing organisational culture. An inhibiting organisational culture obliterates leader initiative, creativity and renders the leader paralysed (Bernstein, Cooper & Maxwell 2014).

Organisational culture has been a regular theme throughout this study and supports the premise that an enabling

organisational culture has the potential to magnify leaders' effectiveness. This is relevant especially for the executive leaders who have more power and independence to take decisions and experience much less red tape.

On the contrary, participants report that change to improve the current organisational culture is too slow and manifests in negative emotions, that is, fear of and resistance to change. It is astounding that even executive and senior leaders testified to the negative impact the current organisational culture has on leadership effectiveness. Pivotal is leaders' inability to execute strategy effectively, especially by underestimating the impact of VUCA. The university's current philosophy of 'putting people first', which demonstrates respect and tolerance, is unfortunately being abused by many staff members. There are little consequences for complacency, poor work performance and abuse of university benefits such as vacation and sick leave. Poorly implemented industrial relations and a system of performance development, as opposed to a performance management system, render leaders ineffective. Emotional reactions of frustration and anger, as a consequence of disempowerment, prevail in many departments throughout the university.

The role of women in leadership

There is a strong perception amongst the research participants that the university is on the right track with women appointed broadly throughout the organisational structure, especially in executive and senior leadership positions. The empirical evidence supports the notion that women fulfil a pivotal role to advance effective leadership (Offermann & Foley 2020). Their inclination to nurture, care and develop staff is refreshing. Similarly, their soft skills counter confrontational egos and create a more tolerant and people-focused organisational culture (Kemp, Madsen & Davis 2015; Vecchiotti 2018).

In contrast, some participants advocated for an improved gender balance citing examples for the benefits of gender diversity. This viewpoint is supported by evidence of professional jealousy, backstabbing and infighting amongst female leaders. Some of the current female leaders have even suggested a stronger gender balance and accentuated the value of gender diversity. The appeal to support mixed gender structures includes hearing a multitude of voices and to collaborate with leaders and stakeholders on all levels. This should provide a sound foundation to advance leadership effectiveness in the university.

The role of millennials in leadership

Comparing and contrasting literature with empirical evidence from the present study highlights the opportunity for the executive and senior leaders to engage and actively prepare for another 'new normal' in the future. Progressively, millennial leaders will impact the university. The challenge is to embrace the value they add and to influence their contribution through active leadership development and mentorship. Under VUCA conditions, millennials' resilience and natural inclination to

deal with change, position them well to make an important contribution to effective leadership. The present study demonstrates that millennials have a significant and increasing influence on leadership effectiveness. As more and more current leaders retire over time, millennials gradually fill these vacancies. Research participants testify that these appointments impact leadership effectiveness by contributing their preferred leadership characteristics, permeating leadership practise and adopting new leadership skills and styles. The leadership focus is progressively shifting to servant and team leadership styles, with an aggregate of leadership skills comprising employee participation, self-managing teams, collaboration, consensus seeking, networking, real-time communication often through technology such as social media, high emotional intelligence, technological savvy, agility and adaptability, a sound gender mix, a balanced work and life approach and a fun-filled workplace.

Diversity

In comparison with the literature, this study demonstrates the benefits and value that diversity contributes to the university. The research participants agree that diversity is a critical enabler to facilitate effective leadership. Comparing theory with the empirical results highlights the university's accomplishments with achieving diversity appointments in terms of race and gender successfully on every level. In contrast, the concern expressed by the participants is that many of these appointees are not effectively contributing to the university and making their voices heard. They argue for inclusive skills, experience and knowledge from a broad range of differing perspectives, proposing that it is a powerful leadership mechanism to overcome complex challenges and deliver exceptional results, especially under dynamic VUCA conditions. They cite examples of the same people sitting on committees and making decisions. They argue that executive and senior leadership are not successful to elicit different perspectives sufficiently. Active participation in all structures and processes for the university is pivotal. Only when the aggregate of different, diverse voices is effectively heard and employed, will diversity enhance leadership effectiveness.

Limitations applicable to this study

This study was limited to only one public university in the Western Cape province, South Africa. Also, this study's research sample only included leaders from executive, senior and middle management level, and excluded the perceptions of the operational staff and the recipients of the leadership. Finally, in the context of the unique university under investigation, the findings of the present study should be interpreted with caution. Care should be exercised when generalisations of the results are considered for other contexts.

Recommendations

Initiate an intervention for creating a conducive leadership environment by sensitising leaders to the crucial factors that influence leadership effectiveness. The four vital goals of this recommendation are:

An organisational culture improvement intervention to address *bureaucracy*, that is, red tape, process improvements and upgrading existing systems with new technology; enhanced *empowerment*, that is, eliminate unproductive gatekeepers, abolish processes which hold employees accountable without the required authority, correct a misaligned organogram, improve poor industrial relations' support, and address the exploitation of the 'putting people first' policy; improve *trust*, that is, build a high trust working environment, ensure executive and senior leaders 'walk the talk' and lead by example from the front, exhibit strong emotional intelligence and build strong relationships with the university community, staff and students. Groysberg et al. (2018) postulated that culture and leadership are inextricably linked. They amplify the fact that mindsets, unspoken behaviours and social patterns are anchored in organisational culture and leaders need to consciously influence and shape desired outcomes. Different leadership styles have a different impact on organisational culture. Consequently, effective leaders have a keen awareness of multiple cultures and employ the following change management processes to steer improvement initiatives:

1. continue to employ high performing women in leadership roles and build on the value they contribute to the organisation,
2. evaluate and amend current work practises by capitalising on the improved business outcomes as a proven result of women leadership and
3. reinforce best practise through this intervention to the benefit of the entire university.

Some scholars (Offermann & Foley 2020) advocated that women have a natural inclination for soft people skills in the modern workplace. This is especially useful, as the traditional 'command-and-control' leadership models dwindle and there is an increased demand for contemporary models focusing on teamwork and collaboration.

Simultaneously, the aim should be to establish and retain a sound gender balance:

1. strive to maximise inclusivity and encourage diverse discourse
2. hear a multitude of voices and seek synergistic solutions to pursue optimal leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes.

Employ the millennial cohort contribution to leader effectiveness through professional development and active succession planning. Active engagement, coaching and mentoring could prepare millennials to understand and contribute to the university's goals and strategy. At the same time their unique skill set and competence could improve the university operations: a win–win approach. Folarin (2021) postulated that millennials have unique leadership traits, which could benefit organisations. They are great multitaskers, flexible, innovative, embrace diversity and are prepared to work extra hours to accomplish success. Employing these competencies whilst exposing the future millennial leader

with the organisation's goals and vision are imperatives to successfully develop this new generation of leaders.

Exploit diversity and inclusivity by hearing and employing a multitude of different voices. Leadership oversight and accountability are imperative to ensure that the impact of diversity is real. Encouraging diverse contribution is effective to the benefit of the entire university. According to Van Knippenberg, Nishii and Dwertmann (2020), diversity leads to synergy. Improved problem-solving, decision-making, innovation and creativity are some of the most crucial benefits of employing a multiple perspectives approach to leadership. Furthermore, there is empirical evidence for improved organisational performance where diversity has been successfully implemented.

Conclusion
Literature conclusions

Four factors impact leadership effectiveness under VUCA conditions: organisational culture, the role of women in leadership positions, the role of millennials in leadership positions and diversity. Although these factors are highlighted by the literature, they are by no means exhaustive.

Empirical conclusions

Organisational culture represents a priority with respect to its impact on leadership effectiveness. The voluminousness and seriousness of the evidence provided by the research participants represent a common theme throughout this study. The participants' testimonies were emotionally loaded, ranging from disappointment, frustration, anger and even to aggression, indicating the urgency to address these issues. Further empirical evidence supports the need to sustain the positive impact of women in leadership positions, proactively engage and employ the millennial cohort, and improve the positive impact of diversity.

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Authors' contributions

C.D.J.v.V. conceived, designed, collected the data and wrote the study. K.V. and M.d.P. co-authored and contributed to the conceptualisation process, critical reading, coherence and editing of the article.

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Data availability

The deidentified raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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