



Applying future-focused leadership competencies to transform higher education institutions in South Africa

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Abstract

This research critically examines employees' perceptions of how and to what extent senior managers at a specific higher education institution (HEI) employ future-focused leadership skills to transform the institution and ensure sustainability. Since HEIs primarily aim to prepare current and future generations for the world they live and work in, they must lead this change to meet the needs of a constantly changing world influenced by technology, climate change, and societal shifts. For HEIs to be forward-thinking and sustainable, they must recognise the importance of effective future-oriented leadership within the organisation to thrive in this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. This study used a qualitative case study approach based on future-focused leadership theories. The target group for this research consisted of academic staff from the selected HEI, chosen through purposive sampling. Eight junior and eight middle management staff from various departments were included. Data were gathered via semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and analysed through content analysis. The key findings revealed that a hierarchical culture maintained by the institution hinders middle management's ability to act courageously and influence change, which limits their capacity to drive transformational change and promote sustainability in HEIs. Therefore, HEI leadership should adopt future-focused leadership skills and engage in reflective practice to help HEIs progress in line with the current VUCA environment.

Keywords: VUCA environment; sustainability; digitization; succeeding generations; societal shifts

1. Introduction

In a world faced with unprecedented social and environmental changes, characterised by disruptive rapid technological advancements and digitisation, the way organisations operate

and deliver services must adapt accordingly. Since higher education institutions (HEIs) primarily aim to prepare current and future generations for the world they live in and will work in, it is crucial for HEIs to lead this change to meet the expectations of a dynamic landscape. However, for HEIs to be forward-thinking and sustainable, they must recognise the need for effective organisational leadership to thrive in this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. Bawany (2018) argues that although traditional leadership skills—such as creating and communicating a clear vision, motivating, and empowering others—remain vital in this digital age, future-focused leadership competencies like lifelong learning, digital leadership, multiple intelligences, collaboration and conflict management skills, empathy, and agility are essential for transforming HEIs to address economic, social, environmental, and existential challenges.

Effective leadership in higher education requires diverse, future-focused competencies, including strong communication, strategic thinking, and the ability to promote a collaborative and inclusive environment. Additionally, leaders must be skilled in change management, problem-solving, and data analysis. Emotional intelligence, empathy, and a commitment to ethical practices are also vital for leading in higher education. We need emotionally intelligent leaders who can model and support cooperative working styles—leaders who coach rather than command, guided by empathy rather than ego (Schwab, 2016; Academic Search, 2024; APC, 2024; Joubert, 2020). Future-focused leadership competencies are essential for sustaining and transforming HEIs, ensuring they have comprehensive institutional credibility, demonstrate high accountability to society, operate efficiently, produce qualified graduates, and maintain transparent internal management that meets established standards (Kurniady, Nurlatifah & Komariah, 2019).

This research aims to critically analyse employees' perceptions of how and to what extent senior managers in the identified HEI utilise future-focused leadership competencies to transform the HEI and secure its sustainability. The fundamental research question is: How are senior managers applying future-focused leadership competencies to change the culture and climate of HEIs to align with the current VUCA environment?

2. Literature Review

HEIs are vital in guiding the societal changes needed to adapt to the current VUCA environment. However, today's HEIs were initially designed to respond to past industrial revolutions focused on electricity-driven mass production. These structures no longer suffice for the automation economy (Gleason, 2018). The current generation of higher education students faces significant global challenges, including demographics, population shifts, global health, literacy, inequality, and climate change. This VUCA environment demands very different skills from students compared to previous cohorts. In an era dominated by artificial intelligence (AI) and pervasive technology, HEIs must work to improve graduates' ability to achieve academically and retain knowledge, ensuring they are prepared for productive lives (Gleason, 2018).

Gleason (2018) further argues that HEIs must recognise the necessity of rapidly adapting and scaling up these new forms of education to ensure the sustainability of our environment and economy, while maintaining the relevance of higher education as a responsive and vital component of society. These new forms of education will prepare students and faculty for leadership roles in a rapidly changing world, offering a curriculum that develops technical

mastery alongside a deep awareness of ethical responsibility towards the human condition (Gleason, 2018). Facing a myriad of complex challenges in this era of globalisation, leaders in higher education must apply competency skills to adapt to the new VUCA landscape. HEI leaders must develop practical competencies and skills to enhance growth in this 21st-century global economy driven by knowledge and information. For example, HEI leaders must be better listeners and adept agents of change who can present persuasive reasons for gaining followers to support their agenda (Kurniady, Nurlatifah & Komariah, 2019). Furthermore, HEI leaders must be effective team players and relationship builders, creating a motivated working environment to boost employee productivity. In this age of digital prevalence, leaders must also be proficient in packaging and innovating information technology (Kurniady, Nurlatifah & Komariah, 2019).

Kurniady, Nurlatifah and Komariah (2019) argue that 21st-century leadership requires individuals who can plan for change, have a clear vision and mission, exert strong influence to achieve shared goals, and are skilled at motivating colleagues in higher education institutions (HEIs). Leadership and education in 21st-century organisations demand a “21st-century education programme.” This need calls for educational leaders at all management levels to develop the competencies and skills necessary to guide all stakeholders in embracing 21st-century learning, as well as to implement teaching methods that empower students amid a dynamic landscape filled with economic, social, and environmental challenges (Kurniady, Nurlatifah & Komariah, 2019).

Leadership in higher education has become increasingly complex in the 21st century and is often described as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). Some challenges faced by higher education institutions include increased public scrutiny, changes in funding models, managing ongoing transitions, weaknesses in administrative processes, and the retention and recruitment of high-quality staff (Du Plessis, Frantz & Marais, 2022). What constitutes effective leadership in higher education is especially relevant in this VUCA environment. Effective leaders in higher education need more than just a combination of disciplinary expertise and sector knowledge. In recent years, terms such as transformation, collaboration, strategy, and inspiring excellence have been used to describe leadership (Du Plessis, Frantz & Marais, 2022).

Leading and managing within South African universities is quite complex and, in many cases, unique due to the country’s colonial and apartheid history, as well as the inherent institutional segregation. In response to South Africa's developmental, economic, and societal needs, the higher education sector has undergone extensive and comprehensive changes to promote economic growth, development, societal equity, and consolidation (Du Plessis, Frantz & Marais, 2022). While the South African policy framework for higher education may not differ significantly from other systems worldwide, the historical context and current socioeconomic imbalances have resulted in a distinct set of challenges confronting South African higher education. If these issues are not addressed, they can and often do lead to chaos and disorder, which are typically perceived as threats to the university (Du Plessis, Frantz & Marais, 2022). Du Plessis, Frantz, and Marais (2022) argue that, from a complexity perspective, chaos and disorder are unavoidable conditions that create opportunities for successful leadership. Recognising complexity as vital within the university environment allows leaders to move beyond bureaucracy, fostering complex, interactive, and dynamic leadership, through which adaptation can be achieved (Du Plessis, Frantz & Marais, 2022). The evolving demand for higher education challenges traditional assumptions regarding the nature, purpose, and role of higher education in society and the

most suitable management and leadership systems that ought to operate within educational institutions (Kasalak et al., 2022).

Leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs) influence the academic world directly or indirectly by drawing on their unique experiences, teaching, and research skills. One key factor impacting the academic environment is job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is employees' emotional responses to their jobs and perceptions of their organisations. It is associated with improved employee behaviour, motivation, and productivity (Kasalak et al., 2022). Through their knowledge and abilities, leaders affect employee job satisfaction by their capacity to rally people towards specific goals and motivate them to reach these objectives, as well as their skill in communicating their feelings and thoughts to employees with empathy (Kasalak et al., 2022). Leading HEIs within this complex VUCA environment requires the application of future-oriented leadership competencies.

A leader's role is to identify performance drivers and oversee a sequence of activities at the process level. Leaders are categorised as autocratic, democratic, transactional, transformational, charismatic, and strategic. The change leadership style seems to be the most appealing, as it reflects leaders' attitudes towards change and effectiveness in various situations. Leaders act as coaches, champions, visionaries, drivers, executors, facilitators, and adapters when guiding organisational change (Alade & Windapo, 2019). Based on extensive research, Alade & Windapo (2019) developed the leadership effectiveness framework, which was created from studies showing that leadership—particularly during times of uncertainty and change—transcends a mere position or title; it is a process of influencing others to understand and agree on what needs to be done and how, while facilitating collective efforts to achieve shared goals. This implies that a leader's job is to anticipate the future, swiftly identify performance drivers, and manage the flow of activities at the process level (Alade & Windapo, 2019). The framework associates effective leadership with ten types of intelligence, four leadership traits, and change leadership styles. The ten leadership intelligence attributes—contextual intelligence, emotional intelligence, inspired intelligence, physical intelligence, entrepreneurial intelligence, strategic intelligence, transdisciplinary intelligence, ecosystem intelligence, Socratic intelligence, and ethical intelligence—require leaders to develop broadly across these areas to thrive in this VUCA landscape. Disruption, preparedness, agility, talent development focus, and collaboration are vital leadership traits (Alade & Windapo, 2019).

The paradox of leadership lies in staying focused on the present while visualising the future and creating a roadmap to reach it. Innovation is essential for staying immune to creative destruction and disruptions. Leaders must drive innovation and experimentation, continually evolving to meet changing needs (Dubey, 2019). Research by Deloitte showed that leaders navigating the complex areas of society, strategy, technology, and talent exhibit four primary personas: social supers, data-driven “decisives,” disruption drivers, and talent champions (Renjen, 2019). Confident leaders are characterised by their ability to succeed by doing “good.” These “Social Supers” see social initiatives as core to their businesses, and their optimism about creating societal impact shapes their outlook in various ways. They are more likely to say their workforce is prepared for digital transformation and more willing to train their employees. Companies led by “Social Supers” are also experiencing greater growth than those that have not successfully balanced doing “good” with making a profit (Renjen, 2019).

Some executives are overcoming challenges by adopting methodical, data-focused approaches to strategic decision-making. These Data-Driven “Decisives” are nearly twice as likely to say they are prepared to capitalise on opportunities, and their organisations are already reaping the economic benefits (Renjen, 2019). Disruption drivers are leaders who understand that investments in disruptive innovations distinguish their organisations from competitors. They are confident, which gives them an advantage when navigating the uncertainties of a new landscape, as more assured organisations will be better poised to implement disruptive technologies. Disruption Drivers’ organisations typically have more defined decision-making processes and are more inclined to make data-driven decisions with input from diverse stakeholders (Renjen, 2019). Talent Champions are leaders who are preparing employees for digital transformation. They are more likely than others to invest in employee retraining for the future of work. While doing so, the Talent Champions are also dedicated to societal impact and witness early returns from their progressive efforts (Renjen, 2019).

An essential part of freeing humans from purely execution roles is the opportunity to unleash human creativity in critical fields such as problem-solving and decision-making. Since all future jobs are likely to be collaborative, a vital skill is the ability to innovate or co-create. The modern concept of leadership is closely associated with a greater appreciation of each human contribution as unique, original, and impactful. In a collaborative setting with team goals, individuals’ fulfilment and engagement can only be achieved by aligning personal purpose with the collective purpose (Lozza, 2017). HEI leaders must demonstrate excellent tolerance for ambiguity, enabling them to identify opportunities, set appropriate priorities, and make decisions in a dynamic environment, with an aptitude for “Ubuntu”, an ancient African word meaning ‘humanity to others’. By emphasising the importance of emotional intelligence, EQ competencies assist us in making behavioural changes that enhance our resilience and agility, bridge “know-do” gaps, and sustain change and value over time (Mdluli & Makhupe, 2017).

Furthermore, HEI leaders must actively drive innovation and be role models when trying, testing, and using new technologies. HEI leaders should act as socio-cultural architects who shape institutional culture. They must understand that achievements fade, progress inspires, and learning endures; therefore, they must continually “grow, morph and develop” to stay relevant in a fast-paced environment marked by accelerating change and rapid evolution. Thus, to be a world-class HEI leader in this VUCA environment, one must have an insatiable desire to learn, unlearn, and relearn, outpacing others (Mdluli & Makhupe, 2017).

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study research strategy. It aimed to understand the meaning of human action by describing the inherent or essential characteristics of human experience through a critical analysis of participants’ responses regarding applying future-focused leadership competencies to transform HEIs. The qualitative approach was fitting because I analysed views and explored participants’ expectations using a humanistic, interpretative method informed by the conceptual framework of future-focused leadership competencies to gather detailed descriptive data. A descriptive-analytical research design laid the foundation for this study. I started with a theoretical idea and aimed to deepen my understanding through descriptive presentation and critical analysis of empirical data collected from the participants selected for this study (Kowalczyk, 2021). The research paradigm was examined through the lens of future-focused leadership theories, focusing on

the epistemological aspects of these theories. This intuitive and authoritative epistemological approach allowed me to deeply understand the research field by gathering data based on participants' beliefs, intuition, and expertise as leaders in their fields (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

The target population for this study consisted of employees from various institutional faculties, selected through purposive sampling. A total of eight junior and eight middle management employees were chosen. These participants were selected to gather diverse perspectives on how senior management applies future-focused leadership competencies to transform HEIs. Data for this study were collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Open-ended questions and probing sub-questions, aligned with the research questions and adapted from the definitions of leadership attributes formulated by Daud et al (2021), were used to obtain more detailed responses. Both face-to-face and online interviews were recorded and transcribed before data analysis.

I employed content analysis to identify patterns in how concepts are communicated, understand the intentions of an individual, group, or institution, detect propaganda and bias in communication, reveal differences in communication across various contexts, and analyse the consequences of communication content, such as the flow of information or the participants' responses (Luo, 2019). Both inductive and deductive content analyses were utilised to define the codes and categories of analysis. In the inductive process, codes used to label the data were developed during the coding process based on the actual content of the data set. Conversely, “content categories” were linked to the questions I posed to the participants. This type of analysis is a deductive process as it is based on the conceptual framework. These “content categories” comprise broad ideas or concepts within which several more specific content codes have been organised. The units of meaning were coded by recording the frequency of individual words and phrases. The set of categories was derived from conceptual information obtained from the interviews. Once the coding and categorisation were complete, data interpretation—synthesising and connecting the categories to create a narrative—ensued (Vears & Gillam, 2022).

4. Findings and Discussions

The seven main content categories that emerged from the data analysis, based on the interviews regarding the application of future-focused leadership competencies to transform HEIs, were: creating a culture of shared vision and collaboration; motivating employees by fostering innovation, intellectual stimulation, and entrepreneurship; building trust through displays of courage and influence, enabling employees to shape societies; demonstrating emotional and cultural intelligence; acting as agents of change to enhance individuals' capacity; applying strategic and critical thinking to resolve problems and adapt to new situations; and providing recognition and rewards. These content categories were linked to the interview questions. What follows is a presentation of the findings and a discussion of each emergent content category. For this study, sixteen participants are labelled P1 to P16.

4.1 Creating a culture of shared visions and collaboration

Inspired visions aligned with individuals' goals, mutually beneficial relationships, and shared ideas emerged as subcategories. Most participants believed the institution had a vision, but this vision was not communicated clearly to staff. P9 confirmed this: “I cannot say that we have a clear vision in the institution.” P5 argued: “We as individuals have our own goals,

and the institution has its own goals. I am not sure whether this will ever align.” P7 alluded to contrived collaboration instead of genuine or spontaneous collaboration by asserting, “Yes, we are encouraged to share and collaborate. Lots of meetings and committees are set up to collaborate. Sometimes, I feel that this is so forced.”

The HEI’s vision is poorly communicated. Employees lack a clear platform to share their vision for the institution. Most participants indicated that the institutional vision does not align with their own. Collaboration feels forced rather than natural. These sentiments expressed by employees suggest that, in this dynamic VUCA educational landscape, HEI leaders are not effectively demonstrating transformational leadership abilities. According to Bass and Riggio (2006), “Transformational leaders transform the personal values of followers to support the vision and goals of the organisation by fostering an environment where relationships can be formed and by establishing a climate of trust in which visions can be shared.” Future-focused HEI leaders develop a compelling shared vision with their teams, inspiring and influencing team members to implement it and drive positive institutional change (Verlinden, 2025). Creating a collaborative and inclusive environment promotes a strong and effective institution. This involves building solid relationships, encouraging diverse perspectives, and supporting cross-functional teamwork (Academic Search, 2024).

4.2 Motivating employees by promoting innovation, intellectual stimulation, and entrepreneurship

Motivating employees through promoting innovation, intellectual stimulation, and entrepreneurship has resulted in several subcategories: inspiring creativity, fostering digital innovation, managing risks, seeking new opportunities, and handling dynamic environments. While many participants, including junior staff and middle management, believed that the organisation supported innovation, there was a widespread perception that such innovation mainly benefited the organisation rather than the individual. Creativity is not sparked for the individual's benefit but is instead directed towards the organisation's success. Entrepreneurial thinking is encouraged to advance the organisation's interests rather than to motivate individuals to pursue entrepreneurship outside the organisation. These sentiments are reflected in the responses below.

“We are an innovative organisation and want to stay current, especially regarding technology. However, I do not think that, as individuals, you are given so much freedom to experiment. Sometimes, you must stay in your lane and do things as you have been told. If it serves the organisation, staff are pushed to take risks and take advantage of opportunities.”

Most participants believed that the institution promoted digital innovation and stimulated intellectual creativity. However, the mundane tasks that must be performed daily stifle creativity. Employees also indicated that being forced to use the technologies provided by the organisation feels more bureaucratic than innovative. Entrepreneurship is encouraged when it serves the institution rather than the individual. These beliefs do not align with future-focused leadership, which supports the idea that collaboration and interpersonal relationships must shift from top-down to adult-to-adult, with trust replacing control and team performance taking precedence over individual goals (Lozza, 2017). Innovation cannot be effectively nurtured in a bureaucratic environment. HEI leaders must be innovative leaders and possess an entrepreneurial mindset. These competencies will motivate employees to be creative, fostering a collaborative work environment that views mistakes

and failures as precursors to innovative success. Effective HEI leaders consistently seek new entrepreneurial opportunities for employees and employ their strategic skills to take calculated risks to meet and exceed institutional objectives (Verlinden, 2025).

4.3 Building trust through the display of courage and influence, and enabling employees to shape societies

From the above theme, the following subcategories emerged: acting fearlessly on what they believe is right, demonstrating courage, influencing organisational change, and addressing inequality and social tensions. Most participants believed the institution remained hierarchical rather than evolving into a more organic structure, and senior management did not show sufficient courage. This results in a decline of trust between line managers and staff. Responses also indicated that staff felt uncomfortable addressing inequality and social tensions, as senior managers do not provide an open platform for this kind of sharing. This hampers employees' ability to shape societies. The responses below confirm the analysis above.

“In an organisation with so much hierarchy, the immediate line managers sometimes do not want to go against the grain, maybe for fear of victimisation. If staff think their managers are just doing what they are told to, even if it is not right, trust is lost. I do not think they even allow us that space to have those kinds of conversations because they know how sensitive it is.”

A hierarchical culture maintained by the institution prevents middle management from acting with courage and influence, and from doing what is right without fear, creating an environment that hampers trust. The organisational culture and climate do not allow employees to discuss inequalities and social tensions freely. HEI leaders often need to make decisions, some of which can be difficult and require taking calculated risks that demand courage. Effective leaders bravely foster an inclusive work environment where everyone feels welcome. This environment ensures that employees are treated equally and respectfully, have the same opportunities and resources, and can participate and thrive. Building trust begins with practising active listening during employee interactions to understand their perspectives. HEI leaders should participate in various social situations to broaden their understanding of social cues and dynamics (Verlinden, 2025).

4.4 Demonstrating emotional and cultural intelligence

Emerging subcategories within the theme of demonstrating emotional and cultural intelligence examine understanding diverse cultures, recognising one's emotions, and interpreting others' behaviours while acting with wisdom and compassion. Most participants believe that emotional and cultural intelligence focus on the individual and often lean towards individualistic traits or a lack of development in emotional intelligence (EQ) and cultural intelligence (CQ).

“They do not realise their human resource, and I do not think there is enough support. I have seen that at times, in especially stressful situations, leaders lack emotional or cultural intelligence and can react without compassion and do not think wisely before speaking.”

Cultural and emotional intelligence (CQ and EQ) are individual traits. Some leaders demonstrate these qualities effectively, while others lack CQ and EQ. Such shortcomings conflict with the future-focused leadership effectiveness framework, which states that leadership goes beyond a position or title; it influences and inspires individuals while supporting their personal and collective efforts to achieve shared goals (Alade & Windapo, 2019). As HEIs become more global and diverse, leaders must be culturally competent and

inclusive. Understanding and managing emotions is vital for building strong relationships and creating a positive environment. Empathy plays a crucial role in building trust and promoting collaboration, especially during times of crisis, change, and diversity. Leaders with high EQ are skilled at managing stress and resolving conflicts, which helps foster a positive team culture. (Jonkers, 2024; Academic Search, 2024; Verlinden, 2025).

4.5 Agents of change to enable the capacity of individuals

Exploring agents of change highlights subcategories such as being receptive to change, embracing change, being committed to change, and influencing change that empower individuals. Responses indicate that although most staff are “quite receptive to change and embrace change,” change management is inadequate. Staff are not sufficiently prepared for the change, which leads to resentment when the change is implemented. The responses below emphasise this analysis.

“Not to be funny, but I think like a do-or-die mentality. More like this change is coming, so be prepared. The people I work with are receptive and embracing change, but it is demotivating when they see that this change does not benefit them. Many changes are not a process and are forced on employees.”

Line managers implement changes as directed by senior managers. However, employees are not given enough time and opportunities to adapt to change, sometimes leading to resentment. Senior leaders act ineffectively as agents of change. Bureaucratic change, imposed by senior managers and enforced by line managers, can be seen as a lack of investment in human capital and, therefore, cannot be regarded as talent champions preparing employees for the transformation needed in this VUCA landscape. Navigating and driving change are essential skills for future-oriented leadership. HEI leaders must recognise the need for change, implement change management processes, handle periods of uncertainty and disruption, and ensure stability and continuity for the institution. HEIs are constantly evolving. Therefore, HEI leaders must be well-prepared to equip their teams for changes and to guide and support them through these transitions. This requires strong communication skills and the simplification of complexities (Renjen, 2019; Verlinden, 2025).

4.6 Apply strategic and critical thinking to solve problems and adapt to new situations

Applying strategic and critical thinking to problem-solving and adapting to new situations involves subcategories such as effective planning, adopting a new vision, analysing and responding to evolving circumstances, and providing optimal solutions to challenges. Responses suggested that senior leadership must explore ways to stay relevant in a changing landscape. New visions must be embraced to accommodate a dynamic environment. Although most believed that immediate line managers exhibited strong critical thinking and problem-solving skills, leadership at the upper levels does not always possess solutions to department-specific issues. This results in staff losing confidence in senior management's leadership.

“Sometimes the organisation gets stuck on the current way of doing things and does not realise that we may need a new vision. Leaders in the organisation have shown good critical thinking and problem-solving skills, especially in crisis management. However, sometimes senior leaders have no definite solutions to problems experienced by individual departments and campuses and line managers or middle management are expected to resolve these problems.”

Line managers can think critically and act decisively to solve problems. However, sometimes the decisions do not benefit the individuals in the institution. New visions are rarely

explored, as senior leaders often hesitate to change their strategic focus. HEI leaders who are critical thinkers can balance departmental or team issues with broader organisational concerns and embrace a greater responsibility for the institution's success. This keen sense of accountability enables them to act decisively while positively fulfilling their obligations to influence the future (Rezak, 2023). Leadership in higher education should be strategic and capable of guiding the institution towards its long-term goals. This strategic thinking involves assessing the current situation, imagining future opportunities, and devising plans to bridge the gap. In a rapidly changing VUCA landscape, leaders must possess the ability to envisage the future and establish a strategic course that leverages institutional aims. This requires forward-thinking and the capacity to identify new employee opportunities and adapt business models to remain competitive. Strategic vision also involves making informed decisions about where and how to invest human capital (APC, 2024; Jonkers, 2024).

4.7 Giving recognition and rewards

Recognising and rewarding efforts involve feedback along with financial, material, or psychological incentives. Responses in this category mainly focus on the principle of fairness. Most responses mention receiving monetary incentives; however, many also believe these incentives are not distributed fairly. Psychological incentives are also not awarded equitably and are sometimes seen as nepotistic.

"We get monetary incentives when we reach certain targets, but I believe these are not done equitably. Sometimes junior workers do most of the work and receive the least."

Rewards and incentives are not distributed equitably. Participants highlighted the presence of nepotism in allocating incentives and rewards. According to CIPD (2022), incentives and recognition are valuable tools for effective people management. However, HEI leaders must consider factors that maximise the impact of incentives or recognition and avoid adopting a "one size fits all" approach. Different types of rewards, incentives, and recognition must be explored. Managers should not hesitate to introduce financial incentives due to concerns that they might undermine intrinsic motivation. Incentives or recognition will likely motivate only if seen as fair rather than exploitative (CIPD, 2022).

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

HEI leadership must adopt future-focused leadership skills and engage in reflective practice to transform HEIs, aligning with the current 4IR and the upcoming 5IR landscape to ensure the institution's sustainability. Hamill (2022) supports applying future-focused leadership skills by claiming that to seize the opportunities and fully address the threats, we need to rethink leadership thinking and behaviour. A fundamental reevaluation of legacy business models, processes, systems, and leadership and management approaches is necessary; shifting from a linear, command-and-control leadership mindset to a more decentralised, autonomous, agile, innovative, and open approach that is better prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities of 5IR (Hamill, 2022).

Leadership competencies in HEIs, along with the ranks and roles within HEIs, are essential. It is crucial that Human Resources understands the unique leadership competencies necessary for success in each role to make better decisions regarding hiring, developing, and promoting leaders. It is equally important that employees believe their organisation prioritises their development and provides the structure needed for them to advance successfully in the business and perform well in their roles (Verlinden, 2025). Navigating the challenges of VUCA leadership requires a strategic and adaptive approach. By understanding the concept of VUCA, developing essential management skills, and

implementing effective strategies, leaders can position themselves and their organisations for success in today's ever-changing HEI landscape. (Verlinden, 2025; EPAM SolutionsHub, 2023).

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