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Executive Summary

The project sought to explore the ways in which university middle-management, who are in key positions to engender social change within the higher education sector in Northern Ireland and South Africa, can be better empowered to enact their agency; and in what ways this is impacted by their gender and social location.

Universities face the challenge of meeting the imperative of contributing to societal development in terms of equality, inclusion, and diversity, by producing ethical individuals capable of adapting to uncertain futures. In post-conflict contexts grappling with reconciliation, oppressive legacies and inter-generational trauma, such challenges to 'transform' are of utmost importance to universities' role in shaping fragile democracies. Furthermore, mid-management within such institutions have key leadership roles in negotiating national and institutional policy aspirations, building an inclusive institutional culture and ensuring an increasingly more diverse academic and staff profile.

The study drew on 15 in-depth interviews conducted between September 2019 and February 2020, with mid-level management academic staff member in four Universities in South Africa and Northern Ireland. The interviews sought to understand mid-level management staff experiences of having the agency to contribute to transformation, and their experience of the enabling and limiting conditions within their institutions. Preliminary findings indicated that an intersection of managers' perceptions of transformation, tensions and clashes of ideas – which reflected historical legacies and contemporary issues, and identity, worked to influence mid-level managers agency for transformation.

Introduction

Higher education (HE) is undergoing rapid change globally as it redefines its roles, position and responsibilities to knowledge(s), enterprise and social purpose(s). The United Nations' (UN) Education 2030 framework for action positions higher education institutions as key drivers for achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (Gender Equality), by aligning research, teaching, pedagogy, campus culture and practice. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are therefore facing the challenge of 'transformation' from within, as aspiring microcosms of what society ought to be in terms of equality, inclusion and diversity and producing ethical individuals capable of adapting to uncertain futures in real-world contexts.

Mid-management within such institutions have key leadership roles in negotiating such top-down aspirational policies; meso-level institutional cultures, responsibilities and fiscal constraints; and the concerns of an increasingly more diverse academic and staff profile. While middle managers may have access to structural power and the needed resources to effect change, both their access to such power and the reception of their enactment of that role, is affected by a myriad of contextual and social factors - including the individual's religion, race, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity etc. An individual's influence and authority are thus impacted their social location, with intersecting characteristics further weighted in post-conflict contexts (see Idahosa 2020).

While top-tier leadership, policy and change is well theorized as a field in educational change, few studies have critically focused on the role of individual agency in the transformation process on the part of middle management. Mid-management within such institutions have key leadership roles in negotiating such top-down aspirational policies; meso-level institutional cultures, responsibilities and fiscal constraints; and the concerns of an increasingly more diverse academic and staff profile. This is further complicated in post-conflict contexts grappling with reconciliation and intergenerational trauma.

There have been no empirical comparative studies on higher education's role for the social good in the post-conflict contexts of Northern Ireland and South Africa. As such, the comparative study will contribute an evidence-base which addresses a gap in the field of higher education by examining how social change is understood, and the role and responsibility of higher education to their local communities within these two post-conflict contexts. By considering the structural position and power of managers to enact their agency, the study will significantly contribute comparative transnational findings regarding the challenges and possibilities for change within two post-conflict contexts, where the social location of such individuals intersects with the reception of their gender and other structural/social positions.

This study draws from two contexts, Northern Ireland and South Africa. Almost 25 years after 'The Troubles' and 'Apartheid', with a hung parliament in NI and increasing student and civil unrest in SA, this study's novel comparative focus will focus on the agency of well-placed individuals to champion change, exploring how their efforts are received, and identifying how the efficacy of their efforts can have a wider impact. Mirroring this concern is the explicit research objective to examine similarities/differences, successes/failures of the structures, cultures and practices that impact reproduction and transformation within those contexts and identify contextually relevant pathways effect change with the two post-conflict contexts. The countries experience of past conflicts, variations in the nature of their divided societies, geopolitics and approaches to transforming legacy issues, differs in many respects. Thus, offering a rich terrain for comparison of the roles played by HE mid-management in enabling

transformation and insights into practices which contribute to the university's role in eradicating injustices and equality.

Drawing on a structure/agency framework and employing a hermeneutic phenomenology approach, the research explores the ways in which university middle-management, who are in key positions to engender transformation within the higher education sector in Northern Ireland (NI) and South Africa (SA), can be better empowered to enact their agency; and in what ways this is impacted by their gender and social location. This study draws from two such contexts, NI and SA, which have both experienced recent disruptions. Due to variations in the nature of their divided societies, past conflicts and geopolitics, approaches to legacy issues in these contexts differs in many respects. This offer rich terrain for extant comparison of the roles played by HE mid-management, and cross-fertilization of ideas and practices. It also offers the possibility of examining how agency interrelates with institutional structures, societal legacies, and gendered concerns to produce reproduction/transformation. Thus, the study complements the contributions of previous projects undertaken by the applicant.

This project's central objectives were:

1. Distinguishing the aspirational discourses, institutional and social factors that impact on mid-managers' agency to effect transformation within higher education in NI and SA.
2. Understanding the role of identity, social locations/positions and gender within the reproduction/transformation process.
3. Developing recommendations on the measures that can be put in place to create conditions conducive to transformation.
4. Composing contextually relevant pathways to impact for equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in HE.

The study incorporates three cross-cutting themes as outlined below:

Gender: The analytical process will purposefully examine how contextual factors impact participants narratives based on their gender and other factors for instance how resistance is enacted based on the gender, race, class and religion of the individual.

Interdisciplinary: The research draws on the intersection between the fields of feminist and gender studies, higher education research and structure, agency and social transformation studies.

Historical conflicts and current inequalities: The research consider the impact of historical conflicts and current socio-economic asymmetries in each context, through an analysis of the role played by historical structures and cultures on individual agency and the empirical data of participants' lived experiences.

The study drew on 15 in-depth interviews conducted between September 2019 and February 2020, with mid-level management academic staff member in Universities in South Africa and Northern Ireland. The interviews sought to understand mid-level management staff experiences of having the agency to contribute to transformation and their experience of the enabling and limiting conditions within their institutions. Preliminary findings indicated that an intersection of managers perception of transformation, tensions and clashes of ideas which reflected historical legacies and contemporary issues and identity worked to influence mid-level managers agency for transformation.

Below, I discuss the methodology and framework employed in undertaking the research. This is followed by a discussion of the preliminary findings.

Methodology

The study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological (HP) approach which conceptualises human experiences as integrally linked to context, social and structural relations (see van Manen 1997). A conceptual framework of ‘agency, structure and transformation’ was also employed to provide a lens through which the data was analysed (Giddens, 1979; Archer, 1995, 2014; Callinicos, 2004).

Initial recruitment invited participation of all mid-level management staff at four HEIs, two in Northern Ireland and two South Africa, who were informed of the study aims, objectives and processes. The study drew on two phases of data collection to generate quantitative (online questionnaire) and qualitative data (in-depth interviews)¹. For both phases, a purposive sampling method was employed to identify and invite key informants in each institution to participate in completing the online questioner². Invited participants were informed of the study's aims, objectives and processes via an information sheet. The initial stage involved sending out a quantitative survey to those in leadership positions as indicated on their university's web pages. From the pool of those who completed the survey, a few of those who indicated their interest in participating further were invited to participate in in-depth interviews. The purposive selection processes ensured representativity of the various identity groups. By selecting interviewees based on the following inclusion criteria, as deduced from their survey responses:

- Their constructions of transformation which relate to legacies of conflict, including discrimination.
- Constructions of agency as constrained and/or enabled
- Indications of the effect of transformation at systemic levels.

The interviews were conducted between September 2019 and February 2020. Initial invitation to recruit mid-level management staff was sent to four universities, two in Northern Ireland and two in South Africa. The interviews lasted between 1 hour and 2 hours. Participants were invited to narrate their experiences of having the agency to contribute to transformation within their institutions, their experience of the enabling and limiting conditions and recommendations for change from their experience. The narratives provided an evidence-base for identifying the process of reproduction and transformation within these post-conflict contexts. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed using NVivo computer-aided qualitative analysis software. The analysis process involved coding, categorizing and finding patterns in the data. Specifically, pattern coding, value coding and emotion coding were applied to the data (Saldana 2009).

¹ Due to the concise nature of the report, this report is focused on the latter.

² Owing to conditions beyond the researcher's control, I was only able to get participants in three of the four universities. Due to time constraints, academics in the fourth university who showed interest in participating, indicated they will only be able to participate fully in the new year (2020) but the Covid-19 pandemic made this impossible.

Preliminary Findings

The findings detailed below focuses on addressing the objectives set out in the proposed project. These initial findings will be developed further and published later on.

Constructions of Agency for transformation: Discourse, Institutional and Social Factors

Participants narratives on their understanding of transformation and agency revealed two main perspectives: an instrumental perspective and a personal and political project. These understanding and approach to transformation influenced the manager's perception of having agency to contribute to transformation, as well as the managers perception of their ability and choice to lead, rather than manage, transformation. In South Africa, transformation is understood broadly as demographic inclusion changing institutional culture and changing the curriculum. In Northern Ireland, transformation is understood in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion. These approaches determined the national policy context and the trajectory of transformation within the two contexts.

Participants spoke about being able to implement their ideas of transformation but, noted that implementing change to some ideas are more difficult than others. Intersecting factors, i.e. discourses, institutional and social, work in tandem to influence agency as well as the degree of enablements and constraints experienced by the manager. As a result, for participants to deploy agency towards change is to 'bring different things to bear'. This often meant operating on a continuum, negotiating and balancing different structural, cultural and individual factors.

Instrumental approach to transformation

Participants who held this view saw transformation from an institutional perspective – as implementing national and institutional policy on transformation. For these managers transformation meant demographic (inclusion of previously disadvantaged and excluded groups) and institutional change. This approach focuses on providing access to marginalized groups. The problem with this approach is that the process becomes a box-ticking exercise which has an unintended consequence of preventing the individual from succeeding because they are included without considering the economic and social conditions affect their ability to integrate and the development of a sense of belonging. This approach also highlights one issue with the politics of representation where the focus is on numbers and not nuance, thus creating a false sense of inclusion and transformation.

The instrumental approach which signals a lack of personal commitment to the change process, in turn, affects the individual's perception of agency. For these group of participants who understood transformation as implementing policies, their agency was tied to institutional functioning and being able to deploy structures to get things done. For these managers, deploying agency to contribute to transformation was not much of a choice³.

Transformation understood as a personal and political project

This means personalizing transformation commitments and having a personal motivation for engaging in transformation. Participants noted that the experience of oppression often created the condition for the individual to contribute to change. Those who understood transformation

³Further analysis would explore how this is tied to the individuals social and administrative position.

as a personal endeavour tied agency to having a voice and being able to speak out against an oppressive structure and culture. It meant being able to point out the problems inherent in the practices of the organization, as well as acknowledging, recognizing, and empathizing with the way other people experience the world. The participants spoke about deploying strategies like finding like-minded individuals and creative spaces from which to promote change.

Leading VS Managing Transformation

Participants distinguished between leading and managing transformation. The perceptions of leading or managing transformation, which is tied to the instrumental or personal notion of transformation, also had an impact on conceptions of agency.

Managing transformation was defined in instrumental terms as policy implementation. For these participants, leading transformation also meant managing upward (those in senior management) and downward (staff managers and student). Whereas leading transformation was understood as a more qualitative approach and, meant having people feel included – which is more difficult to enact. Linked to leading transformation was the importance of having a vision and a strategic goal that one wants to achieve, rather than being reactive which is indicative of a managerial approach to transformation.

Participants highlighted three levels of leading transformation and the importance of ensuring these are in sync:

- Managerial and operational: Putting out fires and dealing with polices
- Strategic: Having a goal and a vision. Tied to this is knowing how to enact one's goals.
- Personal: Listening to all the mundane problems of staff and student and, in so doing, enabling their agency to contribute to change.

To ensure sustainability, engaging and leading transformation needs to be personalized, and academics, and students alike, need to have the 'cross-cutting issues related to transformation embedded in their everyday functioning'. Precisely because of the difficulty in changing people mindsets and biases, transformation needs to be embedded in the everyday functioning of both the institution and those within the institution.

In the next section, I discuss some of the factors that influence mid-level managers agency to contribute to transformation. In particular, I discuss the challenges and tension that arise in the transformation process, and its effect on the agent.

Clash of Ideas: Challenges and tensions impacting the agency to lead transformation

One recurring theme is the tensions that exist in deploying agency for transformation – what one manager called a 'clash of ideas – where such clashes are both discursive and material. Participants' narratives reveal challenges associated with the personal, and often conflicting, nature of changing oppressive structures and cultures. Some of the challenges to agency and tension inherent in the transformation process highlighted by participants include; not knowing what resources to draw on which intersects with positionality and identity; the disjuncture between policy and practice; the disconnect between the espoused policies, interpretation of

the policies and institutional practices; tensions in the politics of black excellence; tensions in the internationalization and transformation imperative; and the tension between leadership and management. Rather than discuss tensions at the three levels (discourses, institutional and social), I discuss them about each other. Below I briefly discuss five main tensions highlighted in the data.

Policy vs Practice

Managers emphasized the disjuncture between policy and practice. Participants noted that while their universities' policies on promoting transformation, equality, diversity and inclusion were comprehensive, the broad focus on the transformation agenda allowed things to easily slip through the cracks. Linked to this is the tendency for universities to make student pass-rates a part of the policy and a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) value. Participants noted that using pass rates at a KPI value is often in tension with the key goal of higher education – teaching critical thinking, building socially aware citizens and producing citizens capable of adapting to uncertain futures (see Cloete and Moja, 2005; Badat, 2010).

Another policy/practice tension lies in the disconnect between the espoused policies and the interpretation of policies, which often work together to enable or limit agency. The data revealed that when there is an alignment between senior management, middle management and staff, in the interpretation of policies, the conditions for change become enabling, while a disconnect leads to constraining conditions for the mid-level manager who then has to balance differing interests, personalities, ideologies and ideas.

Closely related to the tension in the practices, managers in the South African university noted the creation of separate entities (called transformation committees and task teams) as an impediment to both institutional change and individual agency. The problem with this approach is that these committees and task-teams are overwhelmingly represented by members from marginalized groups and those that have a personal commitment to change, in essence, the converted. This approach thus shifts the responsibility and burden of transformation from the institution and every member of the institution to those who occupy marginalized positions. A further problem with these committees is that they are not as effective because on the one hand they are not given the power to effect the necessary change and on the other hand, they become a dumping ground for issues that the university management and other staff members do not want to deal with.

The politics of black excellence

Linked to the problem associated with creating task-teams is the tension in the politics of black excellence which has a negative impact on those meant to occupy those roles. In the South African context, the notion of excellence often does not co-exist with diversity even though they feed into each other. Scholars (see, for instance, Booï, Vincent and Liccardo 2017) have argued that this discursive practice of a commitment to equity but not diversity is maintained by the politics of excellence. This discursive aspiration is always in tension with practices and does have an impact on the agency of individuals in such contexts⁴. There is also a distortion here – in terms of the administrative expectations – where marginalized groups are included (which is celebrated) but are then made to take on administrative roles only.

⁴ I discuss the intersections of discourses, practices and identity in the next section.

Academic needs vs Economic needs

This refers to the tension between students' academic needs and economic needs, particularly for first-generation students. Managers highlighted how the social and economic condition of learners – who are unable to do well because of lack of access to resources and the needs for daily living (food, clothes etc.) – is often ignored in the policymaking and institutional planning process, and later becomes a constraint in terms of promoting transformation. One manager in South Africa noted that he became aware of this tension after conducting a study to understand the reason for the failures of students in his faculty. This constraint is also directly tied to the material and historical conditions within the South African contexts.

Internationalization vs Transformation

Also, the tension between internationalization and transformation brings a unique dimension to the challenges experienced, both by managers who have to balance these tensions and foreign academic staff members and students who noted that they feel uncomfortable within the space (this experience was highlighted more in SA than NI). The tension between internationalization and transformation is tied to the neo-liberal effect of globalization and marketisation of higher education which signalled a shift from a knowledge society to a knowledge economy (Williams 2016). Positioning knowledge in terms of the economy shifts the purpose of higher education to benefit private interests, economic rationality and standardization (Sit 2010; Singh 2014). This provides one explanation for the impetus to internationalize, but in South Africa particularly, the commitment to attain transformation by including previously marginalized group. Linked to this is the preference for degrees from outside south Africa in selecting who is included.

Leadership vs Management

The data revealed the tension between academic and managerial roles. Participants noted that while academics are trained to be experts in their fields and receive recognition (namely being appointed into leadership roles) because of their expertise, the expectation to take on managerial roles, which they have not been trained for, and succeed, often acts as a constraint. This one size fits all approach to transformation, as taken by universities, becomes a constraining condition for the manager/leader.

Furthermore, these tensions often intersect at the discursive, institutional and social level to influence the agency of the manager to promote change. Managers noted that balancing these tensions, while at the same time pushing and struggling for transformation, creates limiting conditions for them.

In the next section, I discuss how these tensions and clash of ideas intersect with identity to de/legitimize and de/value agents.

The politics of identity: signifiers, unconscious bias, and belonging

As a result of the challenges of transformation, the tensions inherent in transformation discourses, and a disjuncture in social and institutional policies and practices, managers narrated ways in which patriarchal, racist and sexist structures and structures – which are inextricably linked to historical legacies and conflicts in the two context – work to enable and

⁵ While participants in Northern Ireland did not highlight this issue. It may as well be the case for Northern Ireland, but one cannot make this claim outside an examining of student experiences in Northern Ireland.

limit their agency. Managers from marginalized groups narrated feeling, and being, silenced, stifled, exhausted, invisible, systematically misrecognized, and having to fight to have a voice. A plethora of feminist and Black scholars and literature have highlighted this as a central and recurring issue in higher education institutions (Idahosa and Vincent, 2015; Vincent, Idahosa and Msomi, 2017; Skelton, 2005; Luke 1994).

The data showed that identity intersects at different levels to either enable or constrain the agent. In terms of constraints and resistance, the data revealed the tricky and difficult nature of identity as it does not map neatly unto one issue, often operating on a continuum such that assumptions, presuppositions and biases about identity traits intersect when dealing with issues relating to resistance, discrimination, and agency. The individual's identity and social positions, thus work to determine the level of access the agent has, as well as the range of power and resources available to the agent (Idahosa, 2020).

In both contexts, overt and subtle distinctions like names, clothes, signs, symbols, accent, schooling, location, hair type and skin colour were indicated as *signifiers* used to make the distinction between who is included, legitimized and enabled/constrained. These signifiers have assumptions and presuppositions underlying them, which operate at the level of the subconscious and play out in individuals' actions as *unconscious biases*. While these identity markers may seem much more subtle in NI than SA (for the outsider), they are embedded with assumption and biases that may enable or limit the agent of change.

Managers also spoke about the tacit forms of oppression that both impacts agency and opens up issues of *belonging*. For instance, in South Africa, the nationally directed imperative for transformation, post-1994, meant that overt forms of racism, xenophobia and sexism were no longer allowed. However, while there are formal laws and policies against such forms of discrimination, participants noted the subtle nature of these forms of oppression still existed. An example is how comments like 'the rise of international students at the postgraduate level' – as a discursive strategy is employed in expressing xenophobic sentiments. Participants also noted how the distinction between 'international other' and 'international Africa', fuel these forms of discrimination.

These discourses do have an impact on having a sense of belonging and having the agency to contribute to transformation as they determine who has access to resources, who is legitimized and who is considered in the policymaking processes. The politics of identity positions individuals as powerful/less depending on the configurations of power within that context and influences the individual's ability to deploy their agency to effect change. Hence, the need to question these blind spots (for instance the assumptions that are built into the recruitment process) is necessary.

In the next section, I discuss some of the strategies deployed by participants to deal with the clashes, tensions, identity and belonging issues that arise from engaging change.

Strategies deployed to effect change

The strategies deployed by leaders to promote change include, but are not limited to, taking symbolic steps, choosing battles and employing parenting strategies.

Symbolic steps

Managers in both contexts highlighted the powerful effects of taking *symbolic small steps* as employing this subtle strategy goes a long way in promoting transformation and ensuring that their transformation vision and strategies are successful. Employing this strategy also enables the manager to balance the different interests and preferences in their role as intermediaries between those above them in the management chain and those below them. Their administrative position (mid-level management) puts them in a unique space to promote necessary changes slowly and subtly as the subtle nature of the biases requires using subtle approaches. An example is organising bystander intervention training on bullying and harassment in the workplace, to make people aware of unconscious bias and provide them with strategies and steps that can be taken to address these biases.

Building relationships is another strategy that provides an enabling environment for the manager to promote transformation. Managers note that people are more receptive when there is a shared understanding and vision. Also, both managers in South Africa and Northern Ireland note this strategy as essential to dealing with the inherent problems with assumptions and bias linked to their identities.

Choosing Battles

Participants highlighted the importance of *choosing one's battles*, knowing when to fight and knowing when to pick up the brick.

Parenting

One participant indicated that she used some of her parenting techniques when dealing with issues that are difficult and sensitive. While this may be viewed as paternalistic, the participant, aware of the attending problems, noted that she employed this strategy when dealing with resistance to change which she realised stems from fear of being excluded or losing one's job. This strategy, as well as the others previously discussed, deployed by participants, can be said to emphasize the domino effect of employing subtle and small strategies.

The next section discusses some of the recommendations for promoting transformation and providing enabling conditions for managers to lead transformation.

Recommendations: Creating conducive conditions for transformation

Below, I highlight some of the recommendations for creating conducive conditions for both managers and those involved in the transformation project, as suggested by the study participants.

Resources

Agency theory highlights the concept of resources as central to deploying agency and promoting change (see, for instance, Giddens, 1979; Bhaskar, 1998; Callinicos, 2004; Archer, 2014). Managers in both contexts noted the provision of necessary resources as central to deploying their agency to promote change. These resources include, but is not limited to,

staffing and financial resources needed to promote change and to '*bring the university into a new place*' (participant *UDDI*).

Engineering the next generation of academics and leaders

Linked to the provision of resources is the express need to build the next generation of leaders, and a commitment to sustained involvement in transformation. Participants in both contexts highlighted the intergenerational tensions (linked to historical legacies) that arise within the context of transformation and pursuing equality, diversity, and inclusion. Consequently, building the next generation – by providing mentorship and equipping them to take on the responsibilities of promoting transformation – is imperative to provide the conditions for balancing intergenerational differences.

Also, in ameliorating the tension between academic work and managerial/leadership role, participants noted the need to provide leadership and management training for those who have been chosen to lead because of their research profile but do not necessarily have the management skills to do so effectively. This is expressly linked to ensuring sustainability, both of the transformation goals (dealing with the legacy of the past), and of Higher Education as a whole.

Efficiency, open and clear communication

Participants also noted the importance of have an efficient structure which is tied to open and clear communication and efficiency and open communication provides the enabling conditions for leaders, managers, staff and students to deploy their agency to promote change in their various spheres. Also, in the South African context ensuring efficiency was linked to resolving the tension in the notion of black excellence and demographic approach to transformation, which works to position marginalised groups, often Black and female staff in junior positions.

Conclusion

This report provides a summary of the findings of the SRHE funded research on the experiences of mid-level management staff in higher education institutions in South Africa and Northern Ireland. Based on interviews with 15 academics at three universities in the aforementioned context, the report reveals how mid-managers' understanding and assumptions about transformation influenced: 1.) their perception of having the agency to contribute to transformation and 2.) adopting a managerial or leadership approach to promoting transformation issues. The perception and approach taken, in-turn influences the range of power and resources available to the agent to deploy in promoting transformation and determines whether the conditions are enabling or limiting. Also tied to the contextual conditions and being enabling and limiting is the identity and social position of the actor. Individuals are often positioned differently depending on the configurations of power within a specific context which renders actors powerful/less, de/legitimizes them, bringing to the fore the politics of un/belonging. Some of the underlying tensions that impact agency is then discussed, and some of the strategies employed by participants in the study to ameliorate the effect of engaging in transformation strategies, as well as recommendations for the creation of conducive environments as noted by the participants, are highlighted.

Project Outcomes and Output: Summary of Next steps

- The findings of this study will be presented at the next SRHE Newer Researcher Conference.
- The findings of this study will also be presented in a seminar organised by the Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg.
- One reflection article will be submitted to *The Conversation*.
- Within 12 months of the final report, two journal articles will be submitted for publication in leading journals.

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