

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0261

Tue 07 Dec 2021

15:00 - 15:20

Mid-Level Managers Agency for Transformation in Higher Education: A case study of South Africa and Northern Ireland

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**Research Domain:** Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

### **Abstract:**

Universities face the challenge of meeting the imperative to contribute to societal development in terms of equality, inclusion, and diversity. In contexts grappling with reconciliation, oppressive legacies, and inter-generational trauma, the agency of mid-level management staff to promote transformation are of utmost importance given universities' role in shaping fragile democracies. This paper examines how university middle-management, who are in key positions to engender social change within the HE sector in Northern Ireland and South Africa, construct having the power to enact their agency and how their gender and social location impact this. A thematic analysis of 15 in-depth interviews with mid-level management at four Universities in South Africa and Northern Ireland, revealed that intersecting factors, (i.e., discourses, institutional, social, and identity) work in tandem to influence agency and the degree of enablements and constraints experienced by the manager in deploying agency for change, influence participants agency to promote transformation.

### **Paper:**

The United Nations (UN) 2030 Education framework for action positions higher education institutions as critical drivers for achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (Gender Equality) by aligning research, teaching, pedagogy, culture, and practice. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are, therefore, facing the challenge of 'transformation' from within. 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, social and identity factors (Idahosa, 2020).

This paper draws on two contexts, Northern Ireland (NI) and South Africa (SA) in understanding the agency of well-placed individuals to champion change, exploring how their efforts are received, and identifying how the efficacy of their actions can have a broader impact. Employing a

structure/agency framework and employing a hermeneutic phenomenology approach, the paper explores how 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 their gender and social location impact this. A thematic analysis of 15 in-depth interviews with mid-level management academic staff members in Universities in South Africa and Northern Ireland found that an intersection of managers' perception of transformation, tensions, and clashes of ideas that reflected historical legacies in each study context and contemporary issues and identity worked to influence mid-level managers' agency for transformation.

Participants' narratives of their understanding of transformation and agency revealed two main perspectives: an instrumental perspective and transformation as a personal and political project. This understanding and approach to transformation influenced the manager's perception of having the agency to contribute to transformation and the managers' perception of their ability and choice to lead rather than manage transformation.

Participants further noted that implementing change to some ideas is more complex than others. Intersecting factors, i.e., discourses, institutional and social, work in tandem to influence agency and the degree of enablements and constraints experienced by the manager. Tied to the contextual conditions being enabling and limiting is the agent's identity and social position. 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 and the challenges associated with promoting change. With participants often having to deploy various strategies to achieve their goals. As a result, for participants, deploying agency towards change meant 'bring different things to bear.' This often meant operating on a continuum or negotiating and balancing different structural, cultural, and individual factors.

Owing to the challenges of transformation, the tensions inherent in transformation discourses, and a disjuncture in social and institutional policies and practices, managers also narrated ways in which patriarchal, racist, and sexist structures and structures – which are inextricably linked to historical legacies and conflicts in the two contexts – work to enable and limit their agency. Managers from marginalized groups narrated feeling and being silenced, stifled, exhausted, invisible, systematically misrecognized, and fighting to have a voice. Several scholars 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 this revealed that identity intersects at different levels to either enable or constrain the agent. In terms of constraints and resistance, the data revealed the challenging nature of identity as it does not map neatly onto one issue, often operating on a continuum such that assumptions, presuppositions, and biases about identity traits intersect when dealing with issues relating to

discrimination, resistance, and agency. 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 distinguish between those included, legitimized, and enabled/constrained. While these identity markers may seem much more subtle in NI than SA (for the outsider), they are embedded with assumptions that may enable or limit change agent. The individual's identity and social positions thus work to determine the level of access the agent has and the range of power and resources available to the agent (Idahosa, 2020).

By considering the structural position and power of managers to enact their agency, the paper offers valuable insights into practices that contribute to the university's role in eradicating injustices and equality. It contributes an evidence-base that 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.

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