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## **Executive Summary**

The project sought to explore how 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 how their gender and social location impact this.

Universities face the challenge of meeting the imperative to contribute 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 both 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 members 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, reflecting historical legacies and contemporary issues and identity, worked to influence mid-level managers' agency for transformation.

## Introduction

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, campus 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 and social factors - including the individual’s religion, race, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc. An individual’s influence and authority when executing their role, are thus impacted by their social location, with intersecting characteristics further weighted in post-conflict contexts (Idahosa, 2020).

This study draws from two contexts, Northern Ireland (NI) and South Africa (SA). Almost 25 years after ‘The Troubles’ (in Northern Ireland) and ‘Apartheid’ (in South Africa), with a hung parliament in NI and increasing student and civil unrest in SA, this study’s novel comparative approach focuses on 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. 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 to effect change within the two post-conflict contexts. This offers a rich terrain for comparison of the roles played by HE mid-management in enabling transformation and valuable insights into practices that contribute to the university’s role in eradicating injustices and equality. As such, this comparative study will contribute 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. 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 (one in the Global South and another in the Global North), where the social location of such individuals intersects with the reception of their gender and other structural/social positions.

Drawing on a structure/agency framework and employing a hermeneutic phenomenology approach, the research 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. Thus, the study complements the contributions of previous projects undertaken by the researcher. The project’s central objectives were:

1. Distinguishing the aspirational discourses, institutional and social factors that impact 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 equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in HE.

The study drew on 15 in-depth interviews conducted between September 2019 and February 2020 with mid-level management academic staff members in Universities in South Africa and Northern Ireland. Preliminary findings indicated that an intersection of managers' perception of transformation, tensions, and clashes of ideas that reflected historical legacies in each study contexts and contemporary issues and identity worked to influence mid-level managers' agency for transformation.

Below, I discuss the historical context transformation in both countries. Next, I discuss the methodology and framework employed in undertaking the research. This is followed by a discussion of the preliminary findings and conclusion.

## **The Historical Context of HE Transformation in SA and NI**

### South Africa

Apartheid was a system of legislation that upheld segregationist policies against non-white citizens of South Africa from 1948 to 1993 (Mphambukeli, 2019). The period was marked by racial stratification policies, for example, in 1950 the Population Registration Act racially classified all South Africans as White, Black (African) or Coloured (Clark and Worger, 2016). It enforced discrimination against Blacks, Coloured and Indians, based on skin colour. Although a majority of South Africans were Black, the White minority passed a series of Acts which resulted in blacks being marginalised (Christie, 2000). As a result, divisions were put in place to ensure the non-interaction between blacks and whites. For example, interracial marriages and interracial sexual relationships were prohibited and non-compliance with the race laws was dealt with harshly (Mphambukeli, 2019). Blacks became aliens and second-class citizens, treated as inferiors in society (Mhlauli, Salani and Mokotedi, 2015).

Like any other societal institution in apartheid South Africa, education was segregated along racial lines and marked with inequality (Mzangwa, 2019). Education was used as an oppressive tool by Whites to foster Black's subjugation and formal education for Black people was discouraged as (Mhlauli, Salani and Mokotedi 2015). Higher education institutions were positioned to serve the goals and strategies of the apartheid regime (Cloete et al., 2006). Higher education was thus skewed in a way that entrenched the power and privilege of the ruling Whites (Cloete, Maassen, Fehnel, Moja, Gibbon and Perold 2006). Black universities were under the control of the national government and they ensured that it remained poor and underfunded while that of White counterparts was free, well-funded and in line with the market demands (Mhlauli, Salani and Mokotedi 2015).

The apartheid regime was overthrown in 1994 and the educational sector, including institutions of higher learning, underwent transformations to dismantle the apartheid order and structures (Mzangwa, 2019). Nonetheless, racial segregation and discrimination left a significant imprint on South African institutions of higher learning that persist today (Mekoa, 2018). Consequently, discussions and debates about the transformation of higher education in South Africa are not new but came about with the new order of South Africa's democracy being instituted. Post-1994 studies examined how institutions of higher learning were transforming to address racial marginalisation and how state policy impacted transformation (Harvey and Knight, 1996; Waghid, 2002; van der Westhuizen, 2007). New policies included those put in place to redress past injustices and transform higher education to meet the national needs and respond to new realities (van der Westhuizen, 2007; Mekoa, 2018; Mzangwa, 2019). In this vein, a Policy Framework for Education and Training was established in 1994 as a vision for

higher education to counteract the apartheid legacies (Mekoa, 2018). In 1997, the Higher Education Act was put in place to transform institutions of higher learning by dismantling the apartheid order and ensuring equal access to higher education. A non-racial system emerged, with some universities being merged, reducing the number of universities from thirty-six to twenty-three, for example, the University of KwaZulu Natal was created from a merger between a historically white University of Natal and the Indian nearby University of Durban-Westville, the University of Johannesburg is also a merger of the Rand Afrikaans University with the technikon of Witwatersrand and two campuses of Vista University (Portnoi, 2015). In 1998 the Council on Higher Education was created as an advisory board on education quality assurance and promotion (Department of Education, 2001).

To transform racial and gender demographics in appointments and promotions, the Employment Equity Act of 1998 and affirmative action were put in place (Moletsane and Reddy, 2011). Nonetheless, after more than 25 years of democracy, institutions continue to face challenges like lack of academic freedom, racism and gender disparities despite legislative attempts to transform higher education (Mekoa, 2018; Idahosa, 2020). Knowledge producers remain mostly male and White, especially in historically white universities and women remain underrepresented especially as they move up the academic ladder (Mekoa, 2018; Idahosa, 2020). Though new legislation has increased access, it is neither at all levels nor all disciplines and has not improved institutional relations. Idahosa (2020) has problematised the top-down approach in transforming higher education institutions as it limits staff and students' agency. Staff and students' demographics diagrammatically presented below are evidence that some institutions of higher learning are living the legacy of apartheid as they are still marked by racial and gender imbalances.

### Northern Ireland

Cultural diversity was needed in Northern Ireland society following 30 years of protracted conflict (Moodie, 2010), particularly within the education system, with universities globally positioned as drivers of transformation, they had a role to play to improve relationships between Catholics and Protestants. Like many societal services and economic sectors, education was also segregated along religious lines. Besides being drivers of change in society, universities also had to be transformed as they were predominantly a preserve of the upper-middle class, a small, privileged elite until the 1960s (Moodie, 2010). University entry became determined by means rather than merit and the introduction of free second-level education in 1972 increased university enrolments, and higher education was transformed from elite to mass education (Walsh, 2018). To deconstruct the segregationist set up, education emphasized equity and moved from segregated to integrated schools (Walsh, 2018).

Several initiatives emerged during and after the Northern Ireland troubles to improve relations between the Catholic and Protestant communities. Policies were put in place to reformed the curriculum and increase contact between pupils from the two communities (Smith, 1999). At the university level, institutional policies encouraged equality of opportunities and good relations where no student or staff member felt intimidated because of religious beliefs, gender, political opinion, disability, race, age, and ethnic group (Walsh, 2018). The Belfast Agreement is one of the policy measures that were put in place to resolve the troubles. Following the national peace agreement, the Fair Employment and Treatment Order were put in place in 1998 to guide workforce composition and employment practices (Queen's University Belfast, 2018). In 2006 the Disability Discrimination Act was also passed to promote positive attitudes towards the disabled and encourage their participation. In accordance with the Act, the Disability

Action Plan 2012-2018 was put in place and has been effective in several ways, including the participation of disabled people (Queen's University Belfast, 2018). For example, the number of disabled applicants at Ulster University rose from 3.2% in 2012 to 4.7% in 2018 and the number of employees from 3.9% to 5% in 2018 (Ulster University, 2018). In terms of diversity promotion, the Diversity Inclusion Unit encouraged international students and staff to participate in events to ensure their integration (Ulster University, 2018).

The signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 was a new dawn in Northern Ireland as it 'ended' the conflicts by stipulating a fair and just society based on respect for human rights and embracing diversity (Moodie, 2010). The study by Moodie (2010) and other subsequent studies (Queen's University Belfast, 2018; Bagley, 2019) indicates that the end of conflicts in Northern Ireland, especially in terms of religious divides in education, has been more theoretical than practical. More than 20 years after the Belfast Agreement, most institutions of higher learning in Northern Ireland remain divided along social, cultural, and religious lines (Bagley, 2019). The study examined four higher education institutions' transformation and noted that segregated denominational schooling persists, with St Mary's University and Stranmillis University being Catholic and Protestant-dominated respectively. Though the colleges do not discriminate against students and staff's selection and recruitment, the divides remain.

## **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 I analysed the data (Giddens, 1979; Archer, 1995, 2014; Callinicos, 2004).

Initial recruitment invited all mid-level management staff at four HEIs, two in Northern Ireland and two in South Africa, to participate in the study. Participants were informed of the study aims, objectives, and processes. The study drew on two data collection phases to generate quantitative (online questionnaire) and qualitative data (in-depth interviews). For both phases, I employed a purposive sampling method to identify and invite key informants in each institution. Invited participants were informed of the study's aims, objectives, and processes via an information sheet. The initial stage involved sending out a survey to those in leadership positions as indicated on their university's web pages. Participants from the survey who indicated their interest in further participation were invited for in-depth interviews. The purposive selection processes ensured the 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 related to legacies of conflict, including discrimination.
- Constructions of agency as constrained and 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).

## **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. 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. 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 having the agency to implement their ideas of transformation but 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. 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.

### 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 that has an unintended consequence of preventing the individual from succeeding because they are included without considering the economic and social conditions that affect their ability to integrate and develop 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 this 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 choice<sup>1</sup>.

### 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 as a personal endeavor tied agency to having a voice and speaking out against an oppressive

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<sup>1</sup>Further analysis would explore how this is tied to the individuals social and administrative position.

structure and culture. It meant being able to point out the problems inherent in the organization's practices and 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 impacted 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 students). In contrast, leading transformation was understood as a more qualitative approach and meant having people feel included – which is more challenging 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 indicates 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 students 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's mindsets and biases, transformation needs to be embedded in the institution's everyday functioning.

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 in deploying agency for transformation – what one manager called a 'clash of ideas' – where such clashes are discursive and material. Participants' narratives reveal challenges associated with the personal and often conflicting nature of changing oppressive structures and cultures. Some of the obstacles 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 slip through the cracks easily. 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 critical 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, where 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, Booij, Vincent and Liccardo 2017) have argued that the politics of excellence maintain this discursive practice of a commitment to equity but not diversity. This discursive aspiration is in tension with practices and does have an impact on the agency of individuals in such contexts<sup>2</sup>. 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.

### 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

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss the intersections of discourses, practices and identity in the next section.

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 context<sup>3</sup>.

#### 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 signaled 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 groups. 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 of taking on managerial positions, 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 levels to influence the manager’s agency 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 clashes of ideas intersect with identity to de/legitimize and de/value agents.

### **The politics of identity: signifiers, unconscious bias, and outside/inside**

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 limit their agency. Managers from marginalized groups narrated feeling and being silenced, stifled, exhausted, invisible, systematically misrecognized, and fighting 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).

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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 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 resistance, discrimination, and agency. 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).

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. These signifiers have assumptions and presuppositions underlying them, which operate at the subconscious level 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 assumptions and biases that may enable or limit change agent.

Managers also spoke about the tacit forms of oppression that impact agency and raise 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 impact having a sense of belonging and having the agency contribute to transformation as they determine who has access to resources, who is legitimised, 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 their ability to deploy their agency to effect change. Hence, the need to question these blind spots (for instance, the assumptions 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**

Leaders' strategies 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 small symbolic steps as employing this subtle strategy goes a long way in promoting transformation and ensuring that their transformation vision and strategy are successful. Employing this strategy also enables the manager to balance the different interests and preferences as intermediaries between top-level management, academic staff, and students. Their administrative position (mid-level management) puts them in a unique space to promote necessary changes at a subtle level as the subtle nature of biases' requires using nuanced 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 South Africa and Northern Ireland managers 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 complex and sensitive issues. 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 and the others previously discussed, deployed by participants, can be said to emphasize the domino effect of employing subtle and small strategies.

The following section discusses some 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 are not limited to, staffing and financial resources needed to promote change and '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 roles, 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 having an efficient structure 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. In the South African context, ensuring efficiency was linked to resolving the tension in black excellence and demographic approach to transformation, which positions marginalised groups, often Black and female staff, in junior positions.

## **Conclusion**

This report summarizes 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 context mentioned above, 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. T

he perception and practice that were adopted, 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 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.

## **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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