
Employee skills, leadership, and organisational transformation: A mixed-methods case study of a South African Higher Education Institution

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Abstract: This case study examines how employee skills and leadership styles interact with organisational culture during institutional transformation at a South African Higher Education Institution, contributing empirical evidence to the resource-based view of strategic human resource management in the higher education context. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed, collecting quantitative survey data from 272 employees across academic and professional services, followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews with four purposively selected participants. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic coding of open-ended responses, while qualitative data underwent systematic thematic analysis using NVivo 12. Quantitative analysis revealed that 78% of respondents (n = 212) perceived an alignment between employee skills and institutional culture, although significant variations emerged across job categories. Qualitative findings identified three key mechanisms supporting transformation: institutional culture alignment with managerial systems, capacity-building infrastructure enabling skill deployment, and leadership styles facilitating knowledge transfer. However, findings also revealed critical gaps in HR efficiency, particularly concerning perceived partiality in employee treatment, which may undermine transformation efforts. This study advances RBV theory in HEI contexts by demonstrating how contextual factors such as institutional culture, leadership approaches, and perceived fairness moderate the relationship between human resource capabilities and transformation outcomes.

Keywords: employee skills; leadership; organisational transformation; resource-based view

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) globally face unprecedented pressure to transform their operations, cultures, and outcomes in response to technological disruption, demographic shifts, funding constraints, and evolving societal expectations (Altbach et al., 2019). In South Africa, these pressures are compounded by the imperative to address historical inequities while maintaining academic excellence and financial sustainability (Jansen, 2017). Understanding how HEIs successfully navigate such transformations, particularly the role of

employee capabilities and leadership, has significant implications for institutional strategy and national higher education policy.

The resource-based view (RBV) of the firm posits that sustained competitive advantage derives from unique, valuable, and difficult-to-imitate organisational resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2012). Within this framework, human resources, particularly the skills, knowledge, and competencies of employees, coupled with leadership capacity to orchestrate these resources, represent critical strategic assets (Wright et al., 2001). However, as Collins and Kehoe (2017) note, RBV-based HR research has insufficiently addressed the question of *when* and *under what conditions* employee-based resources translate into superior organisational performance.

This gap is particularly salient in HEI contexts, where organisational transformation involves not merely implementing new processes but fundamentally reshaping academic cultures, power structures, and professional identities (Kezar, 2018). While research demonstrates positive associations between employee engagement, leadership styles, and organisational outcomes (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Shuck & Herd, 2012), most studies adopt large-scale quantitative designs that may obscure the contextual mechanisms through which these relationships operate in specific institutional settings.

This paper presents an in-depth case study of one South African HEI undergoing significant organisational transformation, examining how employee skills and leadership styles interact with organisational culture to support or hinder change efforts. Rather than claiming broad generalizability, the paper positions this as an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) that provides rich, contextualized insights into the mechanisms linking human resource capabilities to transformation outcomes, contributing to theory refinement while offering practical guidance for HEI leaders navigating similar challenges.

Research questions

This study addresses two interrelated research questions:

1. How do employees and leaders at HEI perceive the alignment between employee skills, leadership styles, and institutional culture during organisational transformation?
2. What contextual factors moderate the relationship between human resource capabilities and transformation outcomes in this HEI context?

Case context

The institution under study is a comprehensive South African HEI with over 5,000 employees, serving a diverse student population across multiple campuses. At the time of data collection (February 2022), the institution was in the third year of a five-year strategic transformation agenda focused on research excellence, teaching innovation, operational efficiency, and equity advancement. This transformation involved significant restructuring of academic departments, new performance management systems, substantial investments in professional development, and cultural change initiatives. The institution operates in a resource-constrained environment typical of South African public HEIs, where transformation aspirations must be balanced against fiscal realities. This context makes the institution an appropriate case for studying the role of employee skills and leadership in transformation, as it represents a setting where human resource capabilities are crucial to achieving ambitious goals despite material constraints, a challenge faced by many HEIs in developing and emerging economies.

Theoretical framework and literature review

The resource-based view and human resource strategy

The resource-based view (RBV) directs attention to internal organisational resources as sources of competitive advantage, particularly those that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). Wright et al. (2001) extended RBV to human resource management, arguing that while individual employees are not inimitable resources (they can leave or be hired away), the collective human capital pool and the organisational systems that develop and deploy this capital can constitute sustainable competitive advantage.

However, Szymaniec-Mlicka (2014) notes that RBV theory often lacks specificity about how resources translate into performance, particularly in public sector and non-profit organisations where “competitive advantage” differs from private sector conceptualizations. In HEI contexts, competitive advantage might be understood as

enhanced research output, teaching quality, graduate employability, or social impact rather than market share or profitability.

Hitt et al. (2011) emphasize the concept of “organisational fit”; firms achieve sustained advantage only when they can put potentially valuable resources to productive use. This suggests that possessing skilled employees is necessary but insufficient; institutions must also have leadership capability, organisational culture, and management systems that enable effective skill deployment. The paper case study explores precisely these enabling conditions.

Leadership in organisational transformation

Leadership plays a pivotal role in organisational transformation by setting direction, mobilizing resources, and shaping the cultural conditions under which change occurs (Kotter, 1996; Schein, 2017). Transformational leadership theory suggests that effective change leaders inspire followers through vision articulation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and modeling desired behaviours (Avolio et al., 2004). However, leadership is not monolithic. Different change phases and organisational contexts may require different leadership approaches (Bamford & Daniel, 2005). Bambale et al. (2017) argue that leaders must serve as custodians of change actively championing, protecting, and nurturing transformation initiatives through inevitable resistance and setbacks. Pollack and Pollack (2015) emphasize trust-building between leaders and employees as foundational to successful change, as transformation requires employees to embrace uncertainty and modify established behaviours.

In HEI settings, leadership challenges are compounded by shared governance structures, strong professional identities, and academic autonomy norms that can create resistance to top-down change initiatives (Kezar, 2018). Effective HEI transformation may therefore require distributed leadership approaches that engage faculty and staff as change agents rather than merely change recipients.

Employee behaviour and transformation outcomes

Organisational transformation ultimately depends on changes in employee behaviour how people perform their roles, interact with colleagues, solve problems, and allocate attention (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Amarantou et al. (2017) and Choi et al. (2017) demonstrate positive relationships between employee attitudes, behaviours, and transformation outcomes. However, Oreg et al. (2018) note that employee responses to change are complex and affectively charged, influenced by perceptions of change necessity, fairness, efficacy, and personal impact.

Advani (2015) argues that transformation requires employees to develop positive attitudes and adjust behaviour, but Cummings and Worley (2014) emphasize that such behavioural change cannot be mandated; it emerges from employees’ cost-benefit assessments of how changes affect their interests and identities. This suggests that transformation success depends partly on leaders’ capacity to shape employee sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995) and create conditions where employees perceive change as legitimate and beneficial.

The concept of “organisational readiness for change” (Wandersman, 2016) encompasses both employees’ belief that change is necessary and their confidence that the organization has the capacity to implement it successfully. This readiness is influenced by prior change experiences, trust in leadership, resource availability, and perceptions of organisational justice. factors explored in the case analysis.

Learning, development, and skill enhancement

Skills and knowledge must be continually updated to remain relevant in dynamic environments (Pralhad & Hamel, 2006). Organizations can enhance employee capabilities through various mechanisms: formal training programs, mentoring and coaching, job rotations, action learning projects, and technology-enabled learning platforms (Brown & Charlier, 2013).

Lau and Ngo (2004) found that highly innovative organizations invest more heavily in employee learning and development, recognizing that all employees contribute to innovation. However, training investments must be strategically aligned with organisational objectives and embedded within supportive HR systems (performance management, career development, reward systems) to translate into performance improvements (Lawler & Mohrman, 2003).

In HEI contexts, professional development faces particular challenges: academic staff may prioritize discipline-specific development over institutional skill needs; professional service staff may have limited access to development opportunities; and resource constraints may restrict training investments despite rhetorical commitment to staff development (Whitchurch, 2008).

African HEI transformation, decolonisation, post-apartheid change

Within the African higher education context, institutional transformation has been shaped by historically embedded inequalities, post-apartheid restructuring imperatives, and ongoing debates around decolonisation, institutional culture, and academic identity. South African scholarship highlights that transformation in public universities extends beyond structural reform to encompass contested questions of legitimacy, belonging, and epistemic justice (Ntshoe, 2004; Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2013). Studies of post-apartheid higher education institutions further emphasise that transformation is experienced unevenly across staff groups, often producing ambivalence, resistance, and reform fatigue when institutional promises are perceived as inconsistently realised (Badat, 2010; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014). Despite this rich body of work, much of the African higher education transformation literature remains descriptive or policy-focused, offering limited theorisation of the organisational mechanisms through which transformation is enacted at the employee level. This study responds to this gap by integrating insights from RBV, leadership, and organisational change theory with African higher education scholarship, thereby providing a mechanism-oriented explanation of how employee skills and leadership capabilities are activated or constrained during transformation in a South African public university.

Conceptual model

Drawing on this literature, the paper proposes a conceptual model (Figure 1) positioning employee skills and leadership as key resources that, when effectively aligned with institutional culture and supported by appropriate HR systems, enable organisational transformation. However, this relationship is moderated by contextual factors including resource availability, trust and organisational justice perceptions, change history, and external pressures. The conceptual model of employee capabilities and organisational transformation is shown in Figure 1.

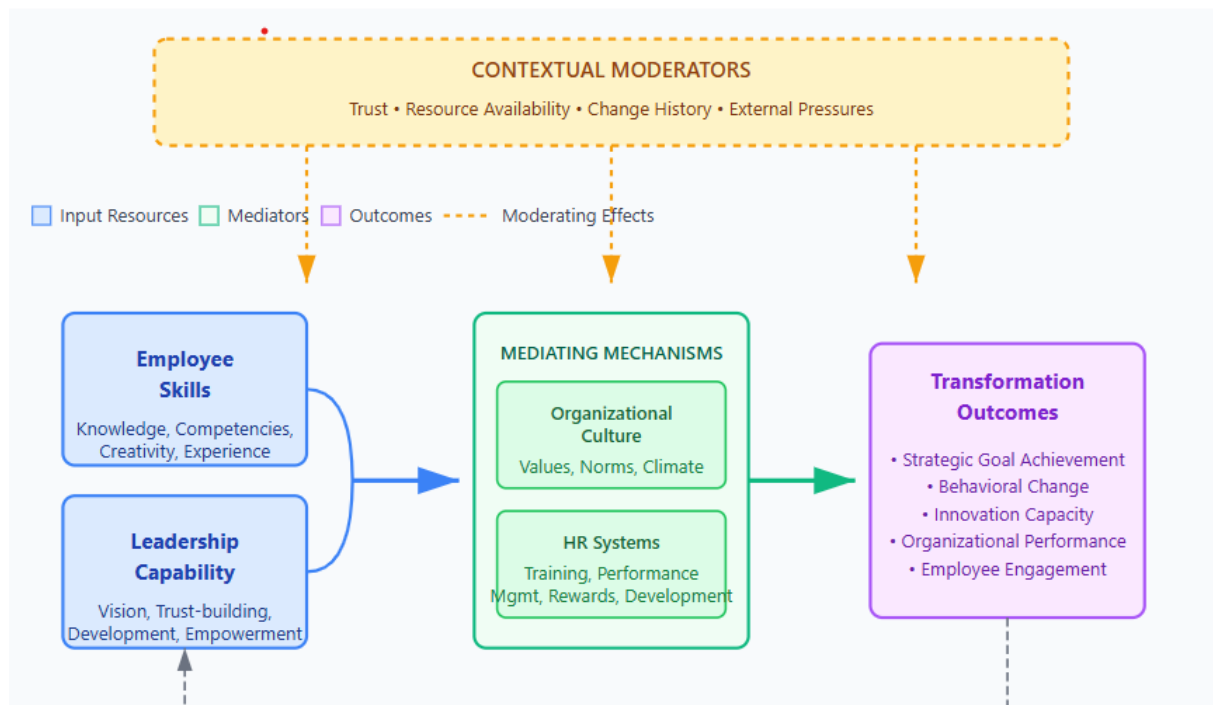


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Employee Capabilities and Organisational Transformation.
 Source: Own compilation based on RBV framework (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2012) and HR-transformation literature

This model guides the study’s empirical investigation, with particular attention to understanding the mechanisms by which capabilities translate into outcomes and the contextual factors that shape transformation success in this HEI case, as well as the conditions under which these factors are effective.

Methodology

Research design and philosophical positioning

This study employs a pragmatic, sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) within an instrumental case study frame (Stake, 1995). The paper treats the institution as a case that can illuminate broader theoretical questions about the role of human resource capabilities in organisational transformation, while acknowledging the contextual specificity that limits direct generalization. The sequential explanatory design involved two phases:

Phase 1 (Quantitative): Broad survey of employees to establish the prevalence of perceptions regarding skill-culture alignment, identify patterns across demographic groups, and generate initial themes through open-ended questions.

Phase 2 (Qualitative): In-depth interviews with purposively selected participants to explore mechanisms, contextual factors, and nuanced understandings that explain quantitative patterns.

This sequence allows quantitative findings to inform qualitative sampling and questioning, while qualitative depth enriches interpretation of quantitative patterns, achieving complementarity (Greene et al., 1989) where each method compensates for the other’s limitations.

The pragmatic philosophical stance (Morgan, 2007) prioritizes research questions over paradigmatic purity, using multiple methods to develop actionable insights for HEI transformation practice while contributing to theoretical refinement.

Research setting and sampling

Quantitative Phase

From a population of 5,022 employees, the study sought responses from a stratified random sample of 500 employees (10% of the population), with proportional representation across.

- Employment category (academic vs. professional services)
- Seniority level (executive, senior management, middle management, junior staff)
- Campus location (main campus, satellite campuses)
- Gender

The survey link was distributed via institutional email, accompanied by three reminder messages over a four-week period. 272 usable responses were received (54.4% response rate), comprising the following, as shown in Table 1:

Gender distribution: 127 male (46.7%), 145 female (53.3%)

Non-response analysis compared respondent demographics with population parameters on available characteristics (gender, employment category, seniority level), revealing no significant differences (χ^2 tests, $p > .05$), suggesting reasonable representativeness despite a modest response rate.

Table 1. The response rate

Academic Services (n = 97)	Professional Services (n = 175)
Lecturers: 31	Executive Senior Management: 3
Senior Lecturers: 51	Directors and Senior Managers: 11
Deans and Heads of Schools: 7	Line Managers: 95
Academic Administrators: 6	Junior Managers: 49
Deputy Vice Chancellors: 2	Junior Staff and Administrators: 17

Qualitative phase

Following preliminary analysis of survey data, the study used maximum variation purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to select four interview participants who:

- Represented both academic and professional services 2 from each.
- Varied in seniority (1 executive, 1 senior manager, 2 middle managers)
- Had institutional tenure exceeding 10 years (ensuring experience with transformation history)
- Had direct involvement in transformation initiatives (as leaders or participants)
- Represented different perspectives in survey responses (from highly positive to moderately critical)

This sampling strategy prioritises depth and diversity of perspectives over representativeness, appropriate for the qualitative phase's exploratory aims. A relatively small number of interviews was a deliberate design choice aligned with the explanatory function of the qualitative strand in a sequential mixed methods design. Maximum variation sampling was employed, and thematic saturation was reached, as no substantively new themes emerged across the final interviews.

Data collection instruments

Quantitative survey

The survey instrument comprised three sections:

Section A: Demographics (employment category, seniority, tenure, gender, age range)

Section B: Structured items (40 Likert-scale questions measuring perceptions of):

- Institutional culture and values alignment (8 items, $\alpha = 0.84$)
- Leadership effectiveness (10 items, $\alpha = 0.89$)
- Skill development opportunities (8 items, $\alpha = 0.87$)
- Organisational support for change (8 items, $\alpha = 0.82$)
- Transformation outcomes (6 items, $\alpha = 0.79$)

Items were adapted from validated scales (Organisational Culture Assessment Instrument - Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire - Avolio & Bass, 2004; Learning Organization Dimensions Questionnaire - Yang et al., 2004) and contextualized for HEI transformation.

Section C: Open-ended questions. The following 5 questions were asked:

1. How do employee skills and leadership styles support or hinder the institutional culture? which is the primary focus of this paper.
2. What capacity-building initiatives have been most effective in supporting transformation?
3. What barriers exist to deploying employee skills effectively?
4. How has leadership facilitated or impeded transformation efforts?
5. What recommendations would you make to strengthen transformation outcomes?

The survey was pilot-tested with 12 employees and was not included in the final sample. It was refined based on feedback regarding clarity and relevance.

Qualitative interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasting 45–65 min each (extended from the initially planned 10–15 min based on data richness). An interview guide addressed:

- Personal transformation experiences and role
- Perceptions of skill-culture alignment and mechanisms
- Leadership approaches observed and their effectiveness
- Capacity-building experiences and impacts
- Barriers to skill deployment
- Contextual factors influencing transformation

- Reflections on survey findings (member checking)

Interviews were recorded with informed consent, professionally transcribed, and verified against recordings for accuracy.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis

Structured items: Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions) were calculated for all Likert-scale items. Scale reliabilities were assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Comparative analyses, such as independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA, were used to examine differences across demographic groups. While the sample size could support inferential statistics, the study emphasizes descriptive findings given the case study frame and exploratory aims.

Open-ended questions: Open-ended survey responses were analysed using a systematic content analysis approach. An initial coding scheme was developed inductively, followed by a second coder's independent review of a subset of responses to assess coding consistency; discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, thereby enhancing analytic credibility. Responses underwent systematic content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), and the following stages were employed:

1. **Data preparation:** All 272 questionnaires were assigned identification numbers (Q001-Q272). Of these, 186 respondents (68.4%) provided substantive responses to open-ended questions defined as responses exceeding 20 words.
2. **Initial coding:** All responses were reviewed, identifying meaning units, phrases, or sentences expressing distinct ideas and assigning descriptive codes. Initial coding generated 127 codes.
3. **Code refinement:** Discrepancies were consolidated into coherent categories, reducing to 34 codes organized under provisional themes.
4. **Theme development:** Codes were grouped into broader themes through iterative discussion and reference to the conceptual framework. This process yielded three primary themes and 11 sub-themes, which are detailed in the results section.
5. **Frequency analysis:** For each theme and sub-theme, the study calculated the number of respondents whose comments reflected that theme, enabling assessment of prevalence alongside depth.

Qualitative analysis

Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, using NVivo 12 to facilitate systematic coding:

Phase 1 - Familiarization: All transcripts were read multiple times by both researchers, with initial analytical notes recorded

Phase 2 - Initial coding: Systematic line-by-line coding identified interesting features across the entire dataset. This generated 214 initial codes.

Phase 3 - Theme searching: Codes were collated into potential themes, with visual mapping (mind maps) used to explore relationships between codes.

Phase 4 - Theme review: Themes were refined through checking coded extracts for internal coherence and reviewing the entire dataset to ensure themes adequately capture data meanings. Some themes were split, others combined.

Phase 5 - Theme definition: Each theme was precisely defined, with clear boundaries and focus. Relationships between themes were articulated.

Phase 6 - Report writing: Vivid exemplar extracts were selected for each theme, analysed in depth, and connected to research questions and the theoretical framework.

To enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- **Credibility:** Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings with interview participants for feedback; triangulation compared survey and interview data sources.
- **Dependability:** Detailed audit trail documented all analytical decisions; inter-coder reliability checks were conducted at multiple stages.
- **Confirmability:** Researchers maintained reflexive journals noting assumptions and potential biases; disconfirming evidence was actively sought and reported.
- **Transferability:** A Thick description of context enables readers to assess relevance to their situations.

Mixed methods integration

Integration occurred at three points (Fetters et al., 2013):

1. **Design integration:** Quantitative findings, particularly patterns in open-ended responses, informed qualitative interview guide development.
2. **Methods integration:** During analysis, quantitative and qualitative findings were compared to identify convergence, divergence, and complementarity.
3. **Interpretation integration:** In discussion, the study synthesizes findings from both strands to develop meta-inferences about the case, considering how quantitative prevalence and qualitative mechanisms jointly inform understanding.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethics approval from the institution’s Research Ethics Committee (Reference: HSSREC/00000758/2019). Participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and could withdraw without consequence. Data were stored securely with access restricted to the research team. Institutional identification is withheld to protect participant anonymity. Given the potentially sensitive nature of perceptions regarding leadership and organisational practices, particular care was taken to de-identify quotes and avoid attributing comments to specific individuals or units.

Results

The study presents results organised by research question, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings to provide a comprehensive case understanding.

RQ1: Perceptions of skill-culture-leadership alignment

Quantitative Findings: Overall Perceptions are shown in Table 2

These findings indicate moderately positive perceptions of alignment, with notable variance. Approximately two-thirds of respondents perceived their skills as aligned with institutional culture and supported by leadership, but one-third expressed ambivalence or disagreement, a substantial minority that warrants attention. The demographic variations in perceptions are shown in Table 3.

Demographic variations in perceptions

Qualitative depth: Mechanisms of alignment

Open-ended survey responses (n = 186 substantive responses) and interviews elaborated three primary mechanisms through which skills, leadership, and culture interact:

Table 2. Perceptions of Skill-Culture Alignment (N=272)

Item	Mean (SD)	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
My skills align well with the institutional culture	3.82 (0.94)	68.4%
Leadership style supports my professional development	3.64 (1.08)	62.1%
The institution values and utilizes my unique capabilities	3.47 (1.12)	57.4%
Organisational culture enables me to apply my skills effectively	3.71 (1.01)	65.8%
Leadership approaches facilitate knowledge sharing	3.58 (1.06)	60.3%
Composite Alignment Scale	3.64 (0.89)	62.8%

Note: 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)

Table 3. Alignment Perceptions by Employment Category and Seniority

Group	N	Mean Alignment Score (SD)	ANOVA/t-test
Employment Category:			
Academic Services	97	3.52 (0.94)	t(270) = 2.18,
Professional Services	175	3.71 (0.86)	p = 0.030*
Seniority Level:			
Executive/Senior Management	23	4.21 (0.67)	F(3,268) = 8.94,
Middle Management	144	3.68 (0.83)	p < 0.001***
Junior Management	49	3.54 (0.91)	
Junior Staff	56	3.32 (1.02)	
*Significant at: *p<.05, **p<.001			
Professional services staff perceived stronger alignment than academic staff (a statistically significant though modest difference), possibly reflecting different professional cultures or transformation impacts. More striking is the seniority gradient: executive/senior management perceived substantially stronger alignment than junior staff. This pattern may reflect positional advantages in accessing development opportunities, greater influence over how transformation affects one's work, or potentially more favourable perceptions among those leading change versus experiencing it.			

Theme 1: Institutional culture as enabling infrastructure (71 open-ended respondents, 38.2%)

Respondents described institutional culture when functioning effectively as providing the infrastructure for skill deployment through aligned strategies, supportive systems, and clear expectations.

"The institutional culture has evolved to support the strategic objectives. Management has implemented systems that allow staff to understand what is expected and how their skills contribute to achieving transformation goals. There is alignment between what the institution says it values and what it actually rewards." (Q047, Senior Lecturer)

"Our divisional culture encourages innovation and risk-taking. When I propose new approaches, my manager supports experimentation. This culture allows me to use my creative problem-solving skills, which would be stifled in a more bureaucratic environment." (Q128, Line Manager, Professional Services)

However, 29 respondents (15.6%) noted misalignment, particularly where rhetoric exceeded reality:

"The institution claims to value employee development, but when budget cuts come, training is the first thing eliminated. There's a disconnect between stated values and resource allocation decisions." (Q089, Junior Manager)

Interview participants elaborated that effective cultural infrastructure required three elements: (1) explicit articulation of how individual skills connect to institutional goals; (2) resource allocation demonstrating commitment to stated values; and (3) consistent messaging from leadership across organisational levels.

Theme 2: Leadership as catalyst and facilitator (94 respondents, 50.5%)

Leadership emerged as critical in activating the potential of employee skills, either catalyzing their effective deployment or creating barriers.

Sub-theme 2a: Trust-building and change custodianship (58 respondents, 31.2%)

Respondents emphasized that effective transformation leadership required establishing trust and serving as visible champions of change:

"Our DVC has been transparent about transformation challenges and honest about what she doesn't know. This vulnerability builds trust. When she asks us to embrace change, we believe she's acting in the institution's best interests, not just managing us." (Q156, Senior Manager)

"The Dean personally participates in every workshop he asks faculty to attend. He's not just directing change from above; he's learning alongside us. This 'walking the talk' makes a huge difference in buy-in." (Q073, Lecturer)

Conversely, 22 respondents (11.8%) described leadership failures that undermined skill deployment:

"Leadership says they want our input, but decisions are already made. 'Consultation' is performative. Why would I invest creative energy when my contributions are ignored?" (Q201, Administrator)

Sub-theme 2b: Developmental leadership (52 respondents, 28.0%)

Many respondents valued leaders who prioritized employee development through mentoring, stretch assignments, and growth opportunities:

"My manager identifies development opportunities aligned with my career goals. She's invested in my growth, not just my productivity. This motivates me to develop skills that benefit both me and the institution." (Q112, Junior Manager)

Interview Participant 2 (Senior Manager, Professional Services) articulated this perspective:

"Leadership is not just about directing; it's about developing. I see my role as building my team's capacity, identifying each person's potential, and creating opportunities for them to grow. When I invest in their development, they invest discretionary effort in transformation initiatives. It's reciprocal."

Sub-theme 2c: Distributed leadership and empowerment (41 respondents, 22.0%)

Some respondents noted the importance of distributed leadership models that empowered employees as change agents rather than mere change recipients:

"The transformation steering committee includes representatives from every level and function. This isn't token representation; we genuinely influence decisions. Having a voice creates ownership." (Q178, Line Manager)

Interview Participant 3 (Head of School, Academic Services) reflected:

"Academics resist top-down mandates. Successful academic change requires intellectual persuasion, not administrative directive. We've shifted toward distributed leadership where faculty lead transformation in their domains. This aligns with academic culture and produces better outcomes."

Theme 3: Capacity-building as skill actualization (67 respondents, 36.0%)

The third mechanism involved systematic capacity-building efforts that translated latent skills into actualized capabilities:

"The institution has invested significantly in professional development over the past two years. I've attended training on project management, leadership, and change management. These weren't just check-box exercises; they were substantive programs that enhanced my competencies. I now apply these skills daily." (Q134, Line Manager)

Interview Participant 4 (Director, Professional Services) provided an institutional perspective:

"We've deliberately shifted from ad hoc training to strategic capacity-building aligned with transformation objectives. We identified competency gaps through skills audits, designed targeted interventions, and tracked participation and application. Approximately 68% of staff have participated in at least one substantial development program over the past two years. This investment signals that we're serious about equipping people for transformation, not just demanding they change."

However, 31 respondents (16.7%) noted inequitable access to development opportunities:

"Training opportunities go to the same people repeatedly, those already well-connected or in favoured positions. Many of us never get nominated for development programs despite expressing interest." (Q208, Junior Staff)

This perception of inequity connects to concerns about HR partiality discussed subsequently.

Integration: Quantitative-qualitative synthesis

The moderately positive quantitative perceptions are substantively enriched by qualitative mechanisms. Skills-culture-leadership alignment is not automatic but actively constructed through institutional infrastructure, leadership behaviours, and capacity-building investments. The seniority gradient in perceptions suggests these enabling conditions may function differently across organisational levels, either because junior staff have less access to development and empowerment or because they perceive organisational realities more critically than senior leadership.

Rq2: Contextual factors moderating HR capability-transformation relationships

Transformation history and change readiness

Interview participants reflected on how the institution's change history shaped the current transformation:

Participant 1 (Deputy vice chancellor):

"This institution has experienced multiple restructurings over 15 years, mergers, financial crises, and leadership changes. This history creates both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, people have changed experience and resilience. On the other hand, there's scepticism: 'We've seen initiatives come and go; will this one actually stick?' Building change readiness requires acknowledging this history and demonstrating that current transformation is substantive, not cosmetic."

Participant 4 (Director, professional services):

"Previous change efforts were often reactive, crisis-driven, rather than strategic. This transformation is different in being proactive and comprehensive, but we must convince people it's truly different. Trust is earned through consistent follow-through, not just initial enthusiasm."

Survey data revealed moderate change readiness (Mean = 3.41, SD = 1.07), with 56.2% agreeing "The institution is capable of successfully implementing transformation." This modest confidence suggests that while outright resistance is limited, neither is there widespread enthusiasm, a "wait and see" posture that may reflect historical experience.

Resource environment and fiscal constraints

The resource-constrained context emerged repeatedly as shaping what's feasible:

Participant 2 (senior manager, professional services):

"We operate in an environment of fiscal austerity. Government funding has declined in real terms while enrolment pressures increase. Every transformation decision involves trade-offs: if we invest here, we can't invest there. This constraints-driven decision-making differs from resourced transformation, where investment can precede return. We must transform within constraints, which is arguably harder but perhaps more sustainable; we're not building on unsustainable resource infusions."

This context influences the HR capability-transformation relationship: skills and leadership matter more when resources are limited, as transformation depends heavily on how effectively constrained resources are orchestrated rather than simply on resource volume.

Institutional culture and academic-administrative tensions

South African HEI culture, shaped by historical legacies and academic traditions, moderates transformation processes:

Participant 3 (Head of school, academic services):

"Academic culture values autonomy, collegial decision-making, and intellectual debate. Administrative culture values efficiency, accountability, and hierarchical clarity. Transformation requires bridging these cultures. When initiatives are perceived as administrative impositions on academic domains, resistance follows. Successful transformation respects disciplinary autonomy while achieving institutional coherence, a delicate balance."

Survey data revealed cultural differences: academic staff showed lower transformation support (Mean = 3.38) than professional services staff (Mean = 3.69, $t(270)=2.64$, $p = 0.009$), suggesting that transformation approaches may resonate differently across these cultures.

External pressures and accountability demands

Participants noted external drivers shaping transformation imperatives:

Participant 1:

"We don't transform in a vacuum. The government expects demonstrable progress on equity, research output, and graduation rates. Professional bodies hold us accountable for graduate competencies. Student activism demands responsiveness. These external pressures create urgency but also constraints; we must transform in ways that satisfy multiple stakeholders with sometimes competing expectations."

These external pressures moderate the HR capability-transformation relationship by establishing boundary conditions: not all transformation pathways are viable regardless of internal capabilities, as external legitimacy requirements constrain strategic choices.

Trust and psychological safety

Trust emerged as a critical moderating variable. When present, it enables risk-taking and innovation; when absent, it generates defensiveness:

Participant 2:

"Transformation requires people to try new approaches, which involves a risk of failure. Psychological safety, knowing you won't be punished for good-faith mistakes, is essential. In high-trust environments, people experiment and learn. In low-trust environments, they play it safe and resist change. Building trust takes time and consistency."

Survey items measuring trust in leadership showed moderate levels (Mean = 3.52, SD = 1.11), with 59.6% agreeing "I trust senior leadership to make decisions in the institution's best interests." However, the substantial minority expressing scepticism suggests trust is not universal.

Statistical analysis revealed trust as a moderating variable: among respondents with high trust in leadership (top quartile), the correlation between perceived skill-culture alignment and transformation support was $r = 0.68$ ($p < 0.001$); among those with low trust (bottom quartile), this correlation dropped to $r = 0.31$ ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that even when skills, leadership, and culture align, transformation support depends on underlying trust.

Overall, quantitative and qualitative findings converged in highlighting the central role of trust, leadership credibility, and organisational culture in shaping transformation support. However, partial divergences emerged

in the interpretation of alignment, particularly across hierarchical levels and staff categories. Rather than indicating inconsistency, these divergences illuminate how transformation is experienced unevenly across organisational locations, underscoring the importance of positionality in shaping sense-making processes.

Discussion

Theoretical contributions based on findings

This case study advances understanding of how employee-based resources translate into organisational transformation outcomes in HEI contexts, addressing Collins and Kehoe's (2017) call for research on *when* HR capabilities lead to superior performance.

Refining RBV in public sector contexts

While RBV emphasizes resource value, rarity, inimitability, and non-substitutability (Barney, 1991), the study findings suggest that in resource-constrained public sector settings, resource orchestration capabilities may matter more than resource possession. The HEI possessed skilled employees and committed leaders, yet transformation progress was uneven due to barriers in effectively deploying these capabilities. This aligns with Teece's (2012) dynamic capabilities perspective, which emphasizes sensing opportunities, seizing them through resource reconfiguration, and transforming organisational processes. In constrained environments, dynamic capabilities and the ability to continuously reconfigure resource deployments in response to barriers and opportunities may be the most critical meta-capability. The findings also validate Hitt et al.'s (2011) emphasis on "organisational fit": possessing valuable HR resources is insufficient without complementary organisational systems (culture, processes, leadership practices) that enable productive resource deployment. The case reveals that fit is not static but must be actively maintained through ongoing alignment efforts, particularly during transformation when established patterns are disrupted.

Contextual moderation of HR-performance relationships

The findings empirically demonstrate several contextual moderators, which are the following:

Trust as amplifier or dampener

Trust magnified the positive relationship between skill-culture alignment and transformation support, while distrust attenuated it. This suggests that HR interventions, such as skill development and leadership training, may have a limited impact in low-trust environments, as trust-building may be a necessary precondition for other HR investments to yield returns.

This finding provides empirical support for Pollack and Pollack's (2015) assertion that trust between employees and leaders constitutes the foundation of the change process and motivates buy-in from employees. The data quantify this relationship: among high-trust respondents, the skill-culture alignment correlation with transformation support ($r = 0.68$) was more than double that observed among low-trust respondents ($r = 0.31$). This pattern aligns with Bambale et al.'s (2017) argument that leaders must serve as custodians of change, as the findings suggest custodianship operates primarily through trust-building mechanisms.

Resource constraints as double-edged

Constraints increased the importance of effective capability deployment, necessitating creativity and efficiency, while simultaneously limiting deployment options by reducing autonomy and innovation capacity. This paradox suggests that optimal transformation pathways differ between resourced and constrained environments. This finding engages directly with the resource-based view's (RBV) core propositions. While Barney (1991) and Teece (2012) emphasize that competitive advantage derives from unique resources and capabilities, the case study suggests that in constrained contexts, the ability to orchestrate limited resources effectively may constitute a more critical capability than resource possession itself. This aligns with Collins and Kehoe's (2017) observation that RBV research inadequately addresses when employee-based resources translate into performance. This finding also extends Szymaniec-Mlicka's (2014) critique that RBV theory lacks specificity about how resources translate into performance in public sector contexts. The study demonstrates that in resource-constrained HEIs, transformation success depends less on possessing valuable human resources than on developing organisa-

tional systems and leadership practices that enable productive deployment of constrained resources, a dynamic capability (Teece, 2012) distinct from static resource endowments.

The double-edged nature of constraints is further illuminated by Brown and Charlier's (2013) work on e-learning platforms as cost-effective development mechanisms. While the HEI leveraged such approaches to achieve 68% staff participation in development programs despite fiscal limitations, these investments could not fully compensate for the resource barriers limiting application of newly acquired skills, demonstrating that skill development and skill deployment face different constraint dynamics.

Change history as lens

Prior change experiences shaped the interpretation of current transformation efforts, creating both resilience and scepticism. This temporal dimension is often neglected in cross-sectional research, but it proved central to understanding employee responses. This finding substantively extends Cummings and Worley's (2014) hypothesis that employee behaviour affected by transformation extends beyond behaviours observed during transformation programmes. The study reveals that this extension operates temporally as well as behaviourally: past transformation experiences create interpretive schemas that shape responses to current initiatives. Employees' cost-benefit analysis of transformation, which Amarantou et al. (2017) identify as shaping change attitudes, incorporates historical evidence about whether previous institutional promises were fulfilled. Moreover, this finding also connects to Advani 2015 emphasis on developing positive employee attitudes during transformation. The study findings suggest that attitude development is not a blank-slate process but occurs within the context of accumulated change experiences. Schein's (2017) observation that leadership is essential to shaping organisational goals must therefore account for leadership's role in reframing historical narratives, helping employees understand how current transformation differs from past efforts and why previous limitations have been addressed.

Practical implications for HEI transformation

This case study offers actionable insights for higher education leaders navigating similar transformation journeys. Rather than prescriptive formulas, these implications emerge from the tensions, successes, and challenges revealed through employee experiences at the institution.

Addressing organisational justice perceptions proactively

Perhaps the most consequential finding from this study is that over one-third of open-ended respondents raised concerns about partiality in HR processes. This represents more than a human resources issue; it constitutes a fundamental threat to the success of transformation. Addressing these perceptions requires organisational leaders to move beyond assumptions that existing processes are fair and instead actively investigate whether patterns of bias exist. This means conducting systematic reviews of promotion decisions, development opportunity allocations, and recognition practices to identify disparities that may indicate unintentional bias.

Investing strategically in capacity-building

The finding that 68% of staff participated in development programs over a two-year period represents a substantial institutional commitment that appears to have generated positive perceptions among many employees. Effective capacity-building requires deliberate attention to equitable access, ensuring that nomination and selection processes for development programs reach beyond established networks to identify high-potential employees across all units and levels. This may require quota systems, rotational nomination processes, or active outreach to historically underrepresented groups. Beyond access, alignment matters: development investments should flow from systematic competency gap analyses that identify the specific capabilities required for transformation success rather than generic programming that may not address institutional priorities.

Developing multi-level leadership coherence

The findings reveal that transformational leadership operates at multiple organisational levels, each with distinct functions and challenges. Executive leaders articulate vision, allocate resources, and manage external legitimacy. Middle managers translate strategic intent into operational reality while building trust through proximal relationships with employees. Multi-level reality suggests several priorities for organisational leaders. First, middle management development deserves greater attention than it typically receives. Middle managers

occupy critical positions as translation and trust-building nodes, yet development investments often concentrate on executive leadership or individual contributor skills. Equipping middle managers with change leadership capabilities, communication skills, and emotional intelligence to navigate the tensions inherent in their bridging roles can substantially enhance transformation outcomes.

Building trust systematically

Celebrating progress serves both motivational and trust-building functions. Recognition of transformation milestones, however modest, demonstrates that efforts matter and creates momentum for continued engagement. Such celebrations need not be elaborate; acknowledgment of contributions, visibility for successful initiatives, and honest assessment of progress can reinforce that the institution notices and values employee investment in transformation. Trust-building is neither quick nor simple, but the study findings suggest it may be the most fundamental enabler of transformation success, the foundation upon which other HR investments yield their returns.

Policy implications for national higher education systems

The findings have important implications for national higher education policy, particularly in resource-constrained systems. The study suggests that transformation outcomes are shaped less by the mere presence of skilled personnel or formal leadership structures than by institutions' capacity to orchestrate and align existing capabilities under conditions of constraint. For government funding agencies, this implies that transformation-oriented funding should move beyond infrastructure and compliance metrics to explicitly support leadership development, organisational learning, and capability-building processes that enable institutions to deploy existing human resources more effectively.

Limitations of the study

As a single-institution case study, findings reflect contextual particularities that limit direct generalization. This South African HEI's specific history, culture, resource position, and transformation agenda create boundary conditions around findings. We cannot assume identical patterns would emerge in well-resourced HEIs where fiscal constraints are less pressing. Moreover, longitudinal designs would better reveal how perceptions evolve as transformation progresses, whether early scepticism converts to support (or vice versa), and whether identified mechanisms sustain or shift over time. The cross-sectional snapshot cannot establish causality; the study cannot definitively determine whether trust enables transformation or whether successful transformation builds trust.

Future research directions

Multiple-case designs comparing HEIs with varying characteristics, such as resourced vs. constrained; different national contexts; and distinct transformation approaches, would enable cross-case pattern analysis, identifying which findings are context-specific versus broadly applicable. Particularly valuable would be comparisons between successful and struggling transformations to identify success factors. Also, future research should follow institutions through complete transformation cycles (pre-transformation, mid-transformation, post-transformation), which would reveal temporal dynamics of how employee perceptions, leadership approaches, and organisational conditions evolve; which interventions have immediate versus delayed effects; and whether transformation produces sustained change or regression over time.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods case study of a South African HEI undergoing transformation reveals that employee skills and leadership capabilities constitute valuable but insufficient resources for organisational change. While the institution possessed skilled employees, committed leaders, and strategic transformation intent, capability deployment was mediated by organisational culture and HR systems, and moderated by contextual factors including trust, resource constraints, change history, and perceptions of organisational justice. The finding that approximately one-third of respondents raised concerns about HR partiality represents a critical challenge requiring proactive attention, as perceived injustice directly undermines the voluntary commitment transformation requires. Similarly, resource constraints and change fatigue created barriers limiting capability deployment despite skill development investments. For the resource-based view, this study demonstrates that in resource-constrained public sector contexts, organisational fit and dynamic orchestration capabilities may matter more than

raw resource possession. The ability to continuously align capabilities with transformation needs, building trust and addressing barriers as they emerge, constitutes a meta-capability crucial for transformation success.

For HEI leaders, this study suggests that successful transformation requires an integrated focus on both technical and cultural dimensions. Technical interventions must be coupled with trust-building, justice-oriented HR practices, and leadership approaches that empower rather than merely direct. Transformation is not simply implemented but co-created through ongoing negotiation between institutional intent and employee agency. This single-case study cannot establish universal principles, but it offers theoretical and practical insights grounded in a thick description of one institution's transformation journey. The mechanisms, moderators, and tensions revealed here provide hypotheses for testing in other contexts and actionable guidance for leaders navigating the complex challenge of HEI transformation in resource-constrained, culturally diverse settings. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that organisational transformation is fundamentally a human endeavour: while strategies, structures, and systems are important, transformation succeeds or fails based on whether employees choose to commit their discretionary energy, creativity, and skills to the change efforts. Creating conditions where such commitment emerges through trust, justice, development, and empowering leadership remains the central challenge and opportunity for HEI transformation leadership.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study offers significant interdisciplinary contributions at the intersection of organizational psychology, strategic management, higher education studies, and human resource development within the African context. By examining the complex interplay between employee capabilities, leadership dynamics, and institutional culture during transformation, the research bridges theoretical frameworks from the resource-based view with the empirical realities faced by African higher education institutions navigating post-apartheid restructuring and global competitiveness pressures.

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