

ShiftXchange 2025

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ShiftXchange 2025: Conference Proceedings

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Foreword:

This volume brings together a selected body of research presented at the 2025 SHIFTXchange conference: Leading with Purpose: Sustainable Practices for a Resilient Future, held at Middlesex University, Mauritius, 1 – 2 September 2025. The Conference positioned itself as a scholarly and professional forum for interrogating the interplay between resilience, sustainability, governance, and purposeful leadership across diverse sectors and contexts.

Three thematic strands structured the proceedings: **Resilient Enterprises – leading for long-term success**, **Expanding the frontiers of progress**, and **Governance for global progress**. The breadth of Chapters within these strands reflects the multidimensional nature of resilience and sustainable practice, encompassing perspectives from organisational strategy, educational transformation, technological innovation, environmental stewardship, and socio-economic development.

Within the first theme (**Resilient Enterprises – leading for long-term success**), contributions examined how organisations can embed purpose-driven leadership and ESG considerations into strategic decision-making. The Chapter on sustainable transformation in finance demonstrated how ethical leadership can guide financial institutions towards resilience, with particular relevance to small island economies such as Mauritius. A systematic literature review on collaborative leadership in healthcare non-profit organisations examined how hierarchical structures impede productivity and performance management, and proposed theoretically grounded frameworks to overcome these barriers. Rounding out this theme, a historical and comparative study drew on the leadership of Captain Kenau Hasselaer during the Siege of Haarlem and Public Protector Thuli Madonsela in post-apartheid South Africa to illuminate enduring principles of moral courage, resilience, and servant leadership. A companion piece offered a focused historiographical analysis of Kenau’s narrative, applying contemporary leadership theories as interpretive lenses to derive lessons for leaders operating in crisis and social contestation.

The second theme, **Expanding the frontiers of progress**, showcased research advancing conceptual and applied frontiers in education and technology. A Chapter on human-centred AI literacy proposed a framework for embedding ethical, decolonial, and experiential approaches to AI education in South African higher education, drawing on ubuntu philosophy and critical pedagogy to position learners as agents rather than consumers of digital futures. A study conducted at Middlesex University’s London and Mauritius campuses examined how Education for Sustainable Development can be embedded within transnational education frameworks, demonstrating through curriculum mapping and student focus groups that whole-institution approaches foster both collaborative innovation and a sense of belonging across diverse campus contexts. A conceptual study on the purpose of higher education in South Africa interrogated the tension between employability and holistic development, proposing a refined framework in which these are understood as complementary rather than competing objectives, enriched by the emerging imperatives of artificial intelligence and lifelong learning.

The third theme, **Governance for global progress**, addressed governance as a lever for transformative progress. A systematic literature review on natural resource management within forestry land reform projects in rural KwaZulu-Natal examined the complexities of integrating best-practice resource stewardship with community business aspirations, highlighting the critical role of co-management, indigenous knowledge systems, and multi-stakeholder collaboration in achieving sustainable rural livelihoods. A conceptual study on celebrity endorsements in private higher education explored how credibility, authenticity, and endorser-brand congruence shape student trust and institutional brand perception, with practical implications for marketing strategy and academic integrity in the South African context. Collectively, these works illustrated that governance in the twenty-first century must be adaptive, participatory, and globally attuned.

Taken together, the research in this volume reinforces the proposition that resilient futures are forged through a synthesis of purposeful leadership, ethical governance, and innovation grounded in equity and sustainability. The conference and this publication invite continued inquiry into how diverse contexts can contribute to a shared agenda of sustainable transformation.

Dr Truida Oosthuizen

Acknowledgements

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We thank the authors for their scholarly contributions, their willingness to engage with the peer review process, and their commitment to advancing knowledge across the themes of this conference. Their work reflects the breadth and rigour that the SHIFTXchange community continues to demonstrate.

Our appreciation extends to the reviewers whose careful and constructive feedback strengthened the quality of the Chapters presented here.

We acknowledge Middlesex University, Mauritius, for hosting the 2025 SHIFTXchange conference and providing the intellectual environment in which these ideas were first shared and debated.

We also recognise the support of STADIO Higher Education, whose institutional commitment to research and postgraduate scholarship underpins publications of this kind.

Finally, we thank the conference delegates, whose engagement and questions gave life to the conversations that this volume seeks to sustain.

Professor F. Schutte, Professor M. E. Herselman, and Professor A. Botha (Editors)

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THEME 1 : RESILIENT ENTERPRISES

The Chapters in this section examine leadership as a force for resilience across vastly different contexts and centuries. Two historical studies draw on the narratives of Captain Kenau Hasselaer and Public Protector Thuli Madonsela to show that moral courage, servant leadership, and the willingness to challenge entrenched power are not products of their time but enduring necessities. These insights find contemporary expression in the remaining two Chapters: one interrogating how purpose-driven leadership can guide financial institutions towards sustainable, ESG-aligned transformation, and another proposing a collaborative leadership framework to overcome the hierarchical barriers that limit productivity and performance management in healthcare non-profit organisations. Together, these contributions affirm that resilient enterprises are built not on structure alone, but on the values and convictions of those who lead them.

Chapter 1: Courage Across Centuries: Leadership Parallels between Captain Kenau of Haarlem and Public Protector Madonsela of South Africa

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Abstract

This article explored the leadership similarities between two remarkable women: Captain Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer, a Dutch citizen-soldier during the Siege of Haarlem (1572–1573), and Professor Thuli Madonsela, the former Public Protector of South Africa and a constitutional advocate. Despite being separated by centuries, cultures, and political systems, both women exemplify qualities such as moral courage, resilience, and servant leadership during times of institutional crisis. Using a qualitative comparative method, the study identified core leadership principles embodied by both figures, demonstrating that value-driven leadership endures across eras, contexts, and challenges.

1.1 Introduction

Brave leadership stories throughout history are often told through male-focused perspectives, leading to the neglect and underrepresentation of women's contributions (Van Vugt & von Rueden, 2021; Liddington, 1993). Despite this, some women have risen to powerful positions, faced significant challenges, and demonstrated qualities that go beyond their immediate circumstances, which cannot be overlooked. Captain Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer gained fame during the 16th-century Dutch Revolt, especially as a leader of women fighting against the Spanish invasion during the Siege of Haarlem. She organised a female strike team to defend Haarlem, even though women were mostly limited to domestic roles rather than military ones at that time (Boonstra, 2010). A few centuries later, Public Protector Thuli Madonsela worked within the legal and institutional systems of post-apartheid South Africa, using her role to investigate political corruption and uphold constitutional governance. Despite being separated by over four centuries and coming from different continents, these women share notable similarities in their leadership styles. Both Hasselaer and Madonsela challenged traditional ideas of male conquest, emphasising feminist leadership, moral bravery, resilience, servant leadership, and a strong commitment to justice during times of institutional crisis (Madonsela, 2016a). This article explored the similarities between Hasselaer's and Madonsela's lives, highlighting their leadership roles in challenging oppressive systems and serving as symbols of resistance and justice. The goal of this research was not to create detailed biographies of both women but to interpret the leadership approaches from which modern leaders can learn.

The leadership qualities demonstrated by Captain Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer and Public Protector Thuli Madonsela offer valuable insights for contemporary leaders.

1.2 Literature Review and Contextual Background

1.2.1 Captain Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer: A Figurehead of the Dutch Revolt

Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer (1526–1588), a widow and shipbuilder, gained fame for her leadership during the Siege of Haarlem in the Dutch War of Independence against Spanish forces from 1572 to 1573 (Meijer Drees, 2013). Although some accounts might be partly mythologised, historical evidence confirms that she led and inspired a female strike team supporting Haarlem's defence efforts (Boonstra, 2010). Captain Kenau's leadership was crucial for Haarlem's initial ability to repel the Spanish invaders. The women under her command fought, built defences, and helped hold off the siege for a long time (Schama, 1977). Her involvement in the war challenged traditional social norms that kept women in domestic roles, making her an icon of resistance (Van der Heijden, 2015). Historical accounts often struggle to convey the truth about figures like Kenau. Ekama (1876) was one of the first sceptics to question Kenau's story and her status as a war hero, arguing that Haarlem's accounts might have exaggerated her role. Modern historian Fergus O'Sullivan (2021) suggests that although Kenau played a crucial role during the Haarlem Siege, the dramatic tales of her leading a female strike team in battle may be more myth than fact. This scepticism reflects broader issues of how women's contributions have often been overlooked in history (Kloek, 2001). However, the phrase "Res Ipsa Loquitur" means "the facts speak for themselves" (Swart, 2024). Historical records provide clear evidence of Kenau's existence as a warrior. Van Meteren (1599) called Kenau a brave "manly" woman who led a women's strike team to defend Haarlem, mentioning her skills with spear, gun, and sword. Johannes Arcerius (1588) documented Kenau's fierce efforts during the siege, highlighting her resistance against the Spanish. Much of Haarlem's history relies on eyewitness accounts from German mercenaries fighting for the Spanish army during the siege, who said that the women of Haarlem acted as bravely as the men (Hooft, 1642). One Dutch scholar, Boxhorn (1641), even called Kenau a woman with a man's heart! Even though Haarlem eventually surrendered, Captain Kenau's legacy left a lasting mark on Dutch cultural memory. She became celebrated as a symbol of national pride, embodying the resilient spirit of resistance that defined the Dutch Revolt (Meijer Drees, 2013). Hasselaer's leadership was remarkable for her time, as she challenged strict gender roles and supported grassroots efforts and community defence (Van der Steen, 2014).

1.2.2 Public Protector Thuli Madonsela: A Contemporary Warrior for Justice

The new democracy in post-apartheid South Africa relied heavily on a group of principled public servants who reinforced institutional integrity during political crises (Mbeki, 2019). Among these individuals, Professor Thuli Madonsela stands out for her unwavering dedication to the Constitution, transparency, and social justice (Mokhwe, 2020). Her legal education coincided with South Africa's turbulent transition from apartheid to democracy, positioning her as a key figure in the country's democratic development (Chaskalson, 2018). As one of the eleven technical experts who helped draft South Africa's 1996 Constitution, she played a crucial role in laying the legal foundation of the new democracy (Stellenbosch University,

2021). Thuli Madonsela, born in Soweto in 1962, served as South Africa's Public Protector from 2009 to 2016. She took ownership of the position and fought corruption while upholding constitutional values in post-apartheid South Africa. The Public Protector has become a symbol of integrity and justice for a nation still grappling with the legacy of apartheid, corruption, and social inequality (Calland, 2017). Appointed by President Jacob Zuma, Madonsela quickly gained recognition for her independence and courage in investigating corruption at the highest levels of government, including the Nkandla scandal, where she held the sitting president accountable (Madonsela, 2016b). The Public Protector found that President Jacob Zuma had improperly used over R200 million in public funds to upgrade his private homestead in Nkandla (Madonsela, 2014). Amid political opposition, the Constitutional Court ruled in 2016 that her findings were binding, reaffirming the supremacy of constitutional accountability (Constitutional Court of South Africa, 2016). Her final report, *State of Capture* (2016), documented improper relationships between government officials and the Gupta family, exposing a network of patronage and elite capture. This report laid the groundwork for the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, which is one of the most comprehensive anti-corruption investigations in South African history (Madonsela, 2016b). Her investigations into government misconduct showcased her commitment to accountability, regardless of the political power and threats she faced. Madonsela's leadership demonstrated constitutional fidelity, ethical governance, and the use of public office to advance justice. After her tenure, she has continued to lead as a public intellectual and advocate for social justice (Madonsela, 2020). Madonsela's leadership has earned her extensive international recognition. In 2014, she was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by TIME magazine. She also received the Transparency International Integrity Award (2014), the German Africa Prize (2016), and was named Person of the Year by Forbes in 2016. (TIME, 2014; UNESCO, 2023). Her honorary doctorates from various South African universities reflect her academic and civic contributions. Thuli Madonsela's journey from Soweto to the Constitutional Court and global platforms exemplifies the transformative potential of principled leadership in a democratic society (Matshaba, 2019). Through her work in legal reform, public accountability, and social justice, she has made significant contributions to the development of South African democracy and has elevated the standards of global governance (Sibanda, 2020). Her legacy serves as both a benchmark and a guiding light, reminding citizens and leaders alike of the power of law, conscience, and courage in the pursuit of justice (Ndlovu, 2021). Madonsela's integrity and pursuit of fairness have inspired many to advocate for change, emphasising that everyone can contribute to the democratic process and uphold the principles of justice and equality (Pillay, 2018). Her influence extends beyond South Africa's borders, shaping global discussions on human rights and governance, and emphasising the importance of vigilance and dedication in facing adversity (Chikane, 2022).

1.2.3 Differences in context, but comparable leadership approaches

Although Hasselaer and Madonsela came from very different times and settings, they demonstrated similar leadership styles. The connection between the leadership qualities of Captain Kenau Hasselaer and those of Public Protector Thuli Madonsela is outlined below, emphasising their shared traits despite their vastly different historical backgrounds.

Table 1-1: Leadership Qualities

Aspect		Captain Kenau	Public Protector Madonsela
Era of conflict		16th Century	21st Century
Context		Spanish Siege of Haarlem	Democratic Erosion/ Constitutional Siege
Tools		Physical Defence (Spear, gun, and Sword)	Legal Framework (Constitution)
Sources		Blended history/ myth	Public, evidence-based records
Risks		Personal risk	Personal risk
Resistance		Patriarchal system	Patriarchal system

Hasselaer's leadership occurred in the 16th century during the Spanish Siege of Haarlem. She organised a female strike team to physically defend Haarlem. Sources about Kenau rely on both history and myth. Madonsela played the role of a warrior, but her battlefield was the legal system, where the law and the Constitution served as her tools. Like Hasselaer, Madonsela faced strong opposition. Her investigations into prominent political leaders put her at odds with some of the most powerful figures in South African politics. She faced threats, personal attacks, and immense pressure; yet she refused to abandon her responsibilities (Southall, 2016). Madonsela's bravery overall reflected the boldness and moral principles shown by Hasselaer centuries earlier. Both Hasselaer and Madonsela exhibited similar leadership qualities, including courage, resilience, the ability to inspire, and a willingness to challenge the status quo. Both have become symbols of integrity and resistance in their respective historical contexts (Hart, 2012; Mzileni, 2018; Van Dorp, 2003).

1.2.4 Why their leadership resonates

Both Hasselaer and Madonsela challenged the status quo as women in patriarchal systems and as outsiders. Hasselaer's defiance transformed women's roles in Dutch society, while Madonsela's audits uncovered systemic corruption and strengthened constitutional accountability. Their legacies demonstrate that leadership rooted in justice and community solidarity can change national stories. Stanley (2003) argues that authentic leadership is not about authority but about having the courage to speak and act when others stay silent. This idea links two women across different centuries, showing that moral clarity can endure empires and transform nations.

1.2.5 Leadership theories

Various leadership theories were examined during the research on the narratives of Hasselaer and Madonsela to identify their leadership approaches, offering insights for modern leadership. Feminist leadership, as described by Batliwala (2011), seeks to transform power dynamics by fostering inclusivity, collaboration, and social justice. This framework challenges traditional hierarchies and supports fairness in leadership practices. Visionary leadership involves communicating an inspiring vision of the future that unites and motivates followers, thereby fostering a shared sense of purpose (Stam et al., 2014). According to Harland et al. (2005),

resilient leadership means responding effectively to challenges with determination and emotional strength during difficult times. Service leadership, or servant leadership, as defined by Liden et al. (2018), emphasises meeting others' needs, empowering followers, and fostering a culture built on trust, humility, and ethics. Finally, cooperation and empowerment involve processes that enhance individuals' confidence in their abilities (Zimmerman, 2000) and foster collective action (Castro & Martins, 2010), promoting shared leadership and mutual support within teams.

1.3 Research Methodology

1.3.1 Approach

This study used an interpretive-historical approach, including a comparative analysis of leadership. It explored the leadership traits and themes of two notable figures, providing insights into their contributions from a specific perspective. The focus was on Captain Kenau Hasselaer, who played a key role in the Haarlem siege, and on Thuli Madonsela, known for her tenure as South Africa's Public Protector.

1.3.2 Data gathering

To gather relevant information, the study utilised multiple sources. First, it included secondary historical accounts that highlight Kenau Hasselaer's role in the Dutch Revolt. A key part of this analysis was distinguishing between myths about her legacy and the verified historical facts presented by scholars such as Schama (1977) and Van der Steen (2014), who carefully documented her contributions and the context in which she operated. In addition to the historical account of Hasselaer, the study also examined publicly available documents, speeches, and academic articles written by or about Thuli Madonsela during and after her time in office. Madonsela (2016, 2020) and Nicol (2017) provide detailed insights into her leadership style and the impact of her actions on South African society. These sources highlight the principles of justice, accountability, and ethical governance that Madonsela promoted throughout her career.

1.3.3 Thematic coding

The research utilised a thematic coding method to identify and analyse the leadership qualities demonstrated by both figures. This approach aims to discover common themes that reflect Hasselaer and Madonsela's values and leadership styles. Notably, the goal of this study was not to create a biographical account of either leader but to interpret the main leadership themes and traits they embody from a feminist, values-based leadership perspective. This view provides a deeper understanding of how social, cultural, and historical contexts shape their leadership, underscoring the significance of their contributions. In conclusion, this qualitative comparative analysis underscores the leadership qualities shared by Hasselaer and Madonsela and illustrates the lasting impact of their legacies. By examining these two figures through an interpretive-historical lens, the study contributes to a broader discussion of leadership. It highlights the significance of feminist perspectives in comprehending leadership dynamics across various settings.

1.3.4 Comparative Leadership Analysis

Both Hasselaer and Madonsela demonstrated similar leadership attributes despite operating in vastly different eras and contexts:

Table 1-2: Leadership Attributes

Trait	Captain Kenau	Advocate Madonsela
Moral Courage	Took up arms in defiance of gender norms and imperial power	Investigated elite political misconduct despite personal risk
Resilience	Remained steadfast during the brutal siege of Haarlem	Withstood political pressure and national scrutiny
Transgressing gender norms	Actively defending Haarlem via the leadership of a female strike team	Actively defending the Constitution in a primarily patriarchal political sphere
Justice Orientation	Resisted injustice and fought for civic survival	Promoted accountability and constitutional rule
Servant Leadership	Acted in defence of her city, not for personal gain. Empowered women to enlist in the military	Served the public interest with humility and clarity. Empowered young professionals to champion public advocacy
Legacy and influence	Mythic proportions Symbol of Dutch Resistance	International recognition Living icon of democratic integrity

Their leadership can be understood within the broader context of feminist leadership, which emphasises empowerment, equity, and ethical responsibility (Van der Steen, 2014; Madonsela, 2020).

1.4 Results and Findings

The leadership qualities shown by Hasselaer and Madonsela provide valuable lessons for modern leaders. Both Bravehearts demonstrated courage, resilience, integrity, and a dedication to justice—traits that today's leaders should aim to emulate.

1.4.1 Leadership during Crisis: Moral Courage and Resilience

Hasselaer and Madonsela demonstrated admirable leadership during challenging times in their respective histories. Hasselaer faced the brutal Spanish Siege of Haarlem, while Madonsela confronted an institutional crisis characterised by government corruption and the decline of democratic ideals (Northouse, 2022). Both women exhibited similar leadership qualities, particularly their bravery and moral strength. For Hasselaer, her courage included both physical bravery and symbolic significance. Leading a female strike team in a rebellion against a seasoned Spanish army was an act of defiance against both an external oppressor and the gender norms of her era (Van der Heijden, 2015). Similarly, Madonsela's bravery is reflected in her willingness to challenge deeply rooted power structures in her environment. Her struggle was rooted not in combat but within a deeply flawed political system. Like Hasselaer, she was guided by a strong moral sense through a dangerous environment, enabling her to stay true to her core principles (Calland, 2017). Both stories highlight, among other things, the importance of leading by example and leveraging collective strength during tough times. Modern leaders can learn from both women by demonstrating courage in their decisions and encouraging teamwork among team members, regardless of gender or social class. When facing difficult

times, leaders should motivate and empower their teams to solve problems rather than give in to fear (Bryman, 2016).

Furthermore, Hasselaer's and Madonsela's stories emphasise the value of perseverance. Hasselaer showed that leadership often requires resilience in the face of challenges (Heemskerk, 2020). Similarly, Madonsela demonstrated resilience in her fight against corrupt practices. Resilience is a key trait for today's leaders operating in a rapidly changing and uncertain world (Cameron, 2018). By building resilience within themselves and their organisations, leaders can better adapt to change and serve as examples of perseverance. Both women highlight the importance of fighting for justice. Hasselaer's leadership embodies the fight for freedom and community survival, while Madonsela's work represents the battle for justice and accountability in governance (Ziyad, 2021).

1.4.2 Transgressing Gender Norms and Contesting Authority

Both Hasselaer and Madonsela went beyond traditional gender roles. In 16th-century Europe, women's roles were primarily confined to the home, limiting their opportunities to engage in political or military activities (Jacobs, 2014). Hasselaer challenged these norms by defending her city and actively fighting as a combatant (Meijer Drees, 2013). Her role as a leader of a female strike in Haarlem was groundbreaking at the time. Hasselaer showed that women could hold important positions in resistance and assume leadership roles in ways never before seen (Jacobs, 2014). Madonsela challenged the barriers set by South Africa's male-dominated political system. As Public Protector, Madonsela held one of the country's most important roles, and her success in this primarily male environment proved her strength and determination (Southall, 2016). Madonsela's fight against deeply rooted patriarchal power structures is evident in her fearless pursuit of justice and unwavering resolve, even in the face of significant political challenges. By breaking down gender barriers, both women opened new opportunities for female leadership. Hasselaer's example inspired future generations of Dutch women, while Madonsela's legacy continues to influence women's leadership in South Africa and beyond (Calland, 2017). Contemporary leaders can learn from both Hasselaer and Madonsela that showing courage, moral clarity, and commitment to the common good are essential qualities for those who dare to challenge powerful institutions. Hasselaer and Madonsela remind contemporary leaders that challenging authority is not just an act of rebellion, but also a vital part of servant leadership focused on protecting the vulnerable, restoring justice, and maintaining community trust (Greenleaf, 1977).

1.4.3 Resistance against Oppression: The Struggle for Justice

Hasselaer and Madonsela were dedicated to pursuing justice. Hasselaer's resistance was against foreign dominance and Spanish oppression over Dutch lands. The Eighty Years' War was a struggle for independence, and Hasselaer's leadership during the Siege of Haarlem exemplified a broader effort to liberate the Netherlands from tyranny (Schama, 1977). A strong sense of justice motivated her actions as she aimed to protect her city and its people from the brutality of Spanish Catholic rule. Although in a different context, Madonsela's struggle also focused on upholding justice. As Public Protector, her commitment was to uphold the rule of law in South Africa and hold government officials accountable (Madonsela, 2017). Her

investigation into state capture uncovered widespread corruption and theft of public resources, marking a crucial step in fighting systemic suppression of South Africa's democratic institutions. Both leaders' leadership was rooted in a deep passion for justice, shown through both physical and moral resistance to oppression. They did not fight for personal gain but to improve the welfare of their nations and communities. As a result, they became lasting symbols of resistance and justice. Modern leaders can learn important lessons from Hasselaer and Madonsela in their shared fight for justice, despite operating in very different historical and social contexts. Both women, through their unique approaches, exemplify leadership that remains committed to justice even under tremendous pressure. They show that pursuing justice goes beyond legal or institutional goals; it represents a genuine dedication to fairness, truth, and the well-being of the community. As Harland et al. (2005) state, resilient leaders persevere through obstacles and are motivated by a strong sense of purpose. Hasselaer and Madonsela demonstrated resilience during difficult times, proving that justice-driven leadership requires not only strong beliefs but also the courage to challenge deeply rooted power structures in support of what is right.

1.4.4 Legacy and Influence: From Historical Icon to Modern Role Model

The legacies of both Bravehearts are profound and extend far beyond their eras. Hasselaer became a symbolic figure in Dutch history, representing the country's fight for independence and highlighting the importance of ordinary citizens, especially women, in that effort (Meijer Drees, 2013). Her story has been retold in various forms of literature, art, and popular culture, sometimes reaching mythic proportions, yet always celebrated as an icon of resistance. Despite her legacy, Madonsela has firmly secured her place in South African and world history. Her tenure as Public Protector had a significant impact on South Africa's political landscape and set a standard for fighting corruption in emerging democracies (Calland, 2017). She also became a role model for women in leadership and a symbol of strength rooted in integrity and justice. Both women greatly influenced their societies, showing that authentic leadership is defined not by gender but by courage, conviction, and a strong commitment to justice. Hasselaer has become a symbol of Dutch resistance and female bravery. Although historians debate her role, her symbolic power remains deeply embedded in cultural memory (Boonstra, 2010). Madonsela, on the other hand, remains a symbol of democratic integrity in South Africa. Her work not only transformed the Public Protector's office but also restored trust in constitutionalism and public accountability (Nicol, 2017). Hasselaer and Madonsela serve as lasting examples for leaders on how principled action and moral courage can shape public memory and inspire future generations. Both women's stories symbolise female heroism in the face of overwhelming odds (De Vries, 1999). Leaders understand that authentic leadership is judged not only by immediate results but also by the lasting influence of one's values, actions, and example. Enduring legacies and impact stem from consistency in purpose and moral clarity, even in the face of opposition.

1.4.5 Servant Leadership in Action

Servant leadership inspires others through empowerment, humility, and a vision that reaches beyond personal goals (Liden et al., 2018). Hasselaer's story exemplifies an early form of resistance leadership that challenges traditional ideas of female passivity (Jacobs, 2014). Her

visibility and bravery represented a form of empowerment within a strongly patriarchal society (Kloek, 2004). Similarly, Madonsela's leadership style combined empathy, clarity, and courage—qualities often undervalued in political discourse but essential for strengthening democracy (Madonsela, 2016a). Both women exemplify a values-driven leadership approach that prioritises the community. Kenau's leadership focused on protecting and supporting her fellow residents during the Spanish attack. While Kenau relied on physical tools—walls, weapons, and will—Madonsela relied on constitutional law, truth, and process. Both demonstrated resilience and drove change through their actions. Madonsela's fight against corruption reflects a service-oriented mindset (Mokhanya, 2017). Both leaders demonstrated a strong dedication to their communities. Modern leaders can learn from this by practising empathy, understanding their followers' needs, and inspiring dedication—key elements for success (Kelley, 2014). They must recognise that a service-oriented mindset is crucial to achieving success (Mokhanya, 2017). Servant leadership is active, courageous, and transformative (Greenleaf, 1977). Authentic servant leaders empower others, confront injustice, and leave a legacy rooted in integrity and compassion.

1.4.6 Final observation

Although separated by centuries and living in very different historical periods, Hasselaer and Madonsela share a legacy of women who rose to leadership during major crises. Despite their vastly different contexts, they exhibited similar leadership qualities that modern leaders can learn from. Their stories show that leadership is not just about holding an official title; it is about standing up against oppression, fighting for justice, and inspiring others to do the same. Their leadership traits are essential for addressing today's challenges, as brave, resilient, and community-focused leaders help build trust and promote positive change. Hasselaer's and Madonsela's legacies serve as inspiring examples for those who want to lead effectively and ethically in a constantly changing world. Both became influential voices during times when their societies faced serious threats: Hasselaer during foreign occupation and Madonsela during challenges to South Africa's evolving democracy. Their leadership proves that courage is timeless. It is shaped by context and ethics and is often driven by individuals committed to serving their communities.

1.5 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

Captain Kenau Hasselaer and Public Protector Thuli Madonsela embodied leadership marked by moral courage and resilience, a strong commitment to justice, and a refusal to remain silent in the face of adversity and injustice. Their deep civic dedication demonstrates how ethical bravery, especially among women, can transform societies. Hasselaer and Madonsela had a significant influence on their communities. Their stories inspire future leaders, especially women, to act for justice and face challenges head-on. Their histories are not just relics but living evidence of the lasting power of women's leadership. These stories show how women across different eras have emerged to defend their communities against threats to freedom and justice. Both courageous women have exemplified bravery throughout history. All academic work has limitations, and every method has its constraints that prevent research from being perfect (Hofstee, 2006). Historical research aims to accurately reconstruct past events. All

sources must be carefully assessed for reliability, authenticity, and context. Biases and incomplete records can influence historical studies, so objectivity is crucial. It is also important to consider modern values, cultural contexts, and personal biases, as these factors can shape interpretations (Kragh, 1987). Despite these limitations, this research was a sincere effort to connect Hasselaer and Madonsela's histories and analyse the leadership lessons from these notable figures. Future studies on female leaders across cultures that offer comparative insights could advance contemporary leadership discussions.

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Chapter 2: Leadership Lessons from Captain Kenau of Haarlem: A Historical Perspective

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Relevancy

Abstract

This study examines Captain Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer's leadership during the Spanish Siege of Haarlem (1572–1573). Historical accounts suggest that Kenau organised and led a female strike team that contributed to Haarlem's resistance, including logistical support for the defences and, in some narratives, direct combat. The study aims to assess the reliability of claims about Kenau's actions and influence during the siege, given scholarly debate regarding the extent to which her contributions have been overstated through later myth-making. A qualitative historiographical review of purposively selected primary and secondary sources was conducted to evaluate how Kenau's role has been recorded, interpreted, and contested over time. Contemporary leadership theories were then applied as interpretive lenses to identify leadership qualities associated with Kenau's narrative, including courage, vision, empowerment, dedication, resilience, and service-oriented leadership. While acknowledging limitations in applying modern leadership frameworks to an early modern historical figure, the analysis suggests that Kenau's narrative—whether understood as literal history, symbolic memory, or a combination—offers leadership lessons that remain relevant for leaders operating under conditions of crisis, uncertainty, and social contestation.

2.1 Introduction

Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer is widely remembered in Dutch historical memory as a prominent female figure associated with Haarlem's resistance during the Dutch Revolt against Spanish rule in the sixteenth century. Her reported actions during the Siege of Haarlem (1572–1573) have been interpreted as emblematic of female bravery and civic mobilisation in a period characterised by political, religious, and social upheaval.

This article does not aim to provide a complete biographical reconstruction of Kenau's life. Instead, it offers a critical, historiographical analysis of Kenau's siege-related narrative and examines leadership themes inferred from the historical record and subsequent interpretations. To strengthen analytical focus, the article is guided by the following objectives:

- To evaluate the reliability of claims regarding Kenau's actions and influence during the Siege of Haarlem.
- To examine how Kenau's narrative has been interpreted and contested across historical and modern sources.

- To identify leadership qualities associated with Kenau's narrative using contemporary leadership theories as interpretive lenses.

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 2.1 Background of Kenau

Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer (hereafter Kenau) was born in 1526 in Haarlem, Netherlands, to Simon Gerrits and Guerte Koen Hasselaer (Lahtinen, 2018). In 1544, Kenau married the shipbuilder Nanning Gerbrandszoon Borst, with whom she had four children before his death in 1562 (Koppenrade, 2024). Following her husband's death, Kenau took over his business and operated as a widowed entrepreneur in Haarlem and nearby towns. Her activities included shipbuilding, grain trade in the Baltic Sea region, and importing wood from Norway, demonstrating resilience and business acumen (Kloek, 2001; Kurtz, 1956).

2.2.2 The Dutch Revolt and the Siege of Haarlem

Since 1562, the Netherlands formed part of the Spanish branch of the Habsburg Empire and was known as the Habsburg Netherlands (Parker, 1977). The Dutch Revolt began in 1566 and developed into the Eighty Years' War against Spanish rule (1568–1648). The revolt was fuelled by political, economic, and religious tensions, including the Protestant Reformation and resistance to King Philip II's Catholic policies (Israel, 1995). By 1572, Haarlem had become strategically significant because of its location between rebel-controlled areas and the Spanish-loyalist city of Amsterdam. Haarlem's city council sided with the revolt on 4 July 1572. Following Spanish Fury attacks on nearby Protestant cities (notably Zutphen and Naarden) in November 1572, the siege of Haarlem commenced on 3 December 1572 (Parker, 1977). Spanish forces, led by Don Fadrique Álvarez de Toledo, surrounded Haarlem, isolating the city and aiming to force surrender through starvation and bombardment (Motley, 1883).

2.2.3 Kenau in Haarlem During the Siege

Kenau endured the severe hardships of the siege, which lasted approximately seven months (December 1572 to July 1573). Both defenders and invaders used innovative tactics. Haarlem's defenders flooded surrounding areas to hinder Spanish advances, while Spanish forces constructed extensive siegeworks and maintained sustained bombardment (Masten, 2021). Hooft (1642) documented a brave woman in *Nederlandsche historiën*, describing Kenau's active role, including organising a force of women reported to have assisted in rebuilding defences and, in some narratives, engaging in combat (Junius, 1588). Accounts also describe women's participation in defensive actions, including the use of boiling substances against attackers and resistance shaped by awareness of atrocities committed elsewhere (Kloek, 2001). Haarlem ultimately fell to Spanish forces on 13 July 1573 (Koppenrade, 2024). Although Spanish reprisals followed, Haarlem's resistance helped sustain the Dutch independence movement (Parker, 1977).

2.2.4 The History and Death of Kenau After the Siege

After the siege, the historical record becomes fragmentary. Rumours suggest that Kenau may have been on a mission to Prince Willem van Orange during the capitulation, though direct

evidence is limited. Records indicate that she may have been appointed to a position in Arnemuiden and remained in Leiden during 1577 (Kurtz, 1956). From 1579, her name appears again in Haarlem records. Kenau later clashed with the Haarlem city council over payment for wood delivered during the siege to build galleys. The dispute escalated to the highest court in the Netherlands, which ultimately ordered payment to her daughters in 1593 (Kloek, 2001). Kenau was declared dead in 1588 after her daughters filed a court request. She reportedly disappeared during a voyage to Norway to procure wood and may have been killed by pirates (Kloek, 2001).

2.2.5 Doubts: Myth or Legend?

Historical narratives often grapple with the truth of figures like Kenau. Ekama (1876) questioned her status as a war heroine, arguing that contemporary accounts may have exaggerated her role. O'Sullivan (2021) likewise suggests that dramatic accounts of Kenau leading women in battle may have been amplified over time. Such scepticism also reflects wider historiographical challenges, including the historical marginalisation of women's contributions to public and military life (Kloek, 2001).

2.2.6 Res Ipsa Loquitur

The phrase *res ipsa loquitur* translates as “the facts speak for themselves” (Garner, 2014). The historical record provides mixed evidence regarding Kenau as a warrior-leader, but several early sources refer to women's active participation in Haarlem's defence. Van Meteren (1599) described Kenau as a brave woman who led a women's strike team and attributed to her combat skills with weapons. Arcerius (1588) likewise recorded women's resistance during the siege. Other accounts draw on eyewitness testimony from mercenaries and chroniclers describing women fighting “as bravely as men” (Hooft, 1642). Boxhorn (1641) referred to Kenau as a woman “with a man's heart.” Such narratives, alongside later legal records noting women disguising themselves as men to fight in wars (Peacock, 1999), complicate any simple dismissal of women's wartime participation. At the same time, Kurtz (1985) cautions that the romanticised narrative surrounding Kenau complicates the distinction between fact and later embellishment. Kloek (2004) argues that women's accounts in Haarlem deserve serious consideration in light of patriarchal biases in historical record-keeping.

2.2.7 Conclusion on Kenau's Narrative

Interpreting the actions of historical figures such as Kenau is complicated by uneven documentation, ideological framing, and subsequent myth-making. Nevertheless, multiple accounts converge on the broader point that women participated meaningfully in Haarlem's defence. Kenau's narrative, therefore, warrants analysis not only for what it reveals historically but also for what it symbolises regarding female agency, civic resistance, and leadership under crisis conditions.

2.2.8 Leadership Theories

This study uses contemporary leadership theories as interpretive lenses. Feminist leadership seeks to transform power structures through inclusivity, collaboration, and social justice (Batliwala, 2011). Visionary leadership involves communicating an inspiring future that

mobilises collective effort (Stam et al., 2014). Resilient leadership refers to positive adaptation in the face of adversity, persistence, and emotional competence (Harland et al., 2005). Service-oriented (servant) leadership emphasises serving others, empowering followers, and upholding moral integrity (Liden et al., 2014). Finally, empowerment and teamwork highlight collective efficacy, shared responsibility, and participatory collaboration (Zimmerman, 2000; Castro & Martins, 2010).

2.3 Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative historiographical approach, focusing on structured source analysis and thematic interpretation, to examine the leadership legacy of Captain Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer during the Spanish siege of Haarlem (1572–1573). Methodological rigour was enhanced through systematic source selection, triangulation, historiographical critique, and the use of modern leadership theory.

2.3.1 Source Selection and Classification

Relevant sources were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: 1) Direct relevance to Kenau's role during the siege of Haarlem. 2) Engagement with historiographical debates about her military status or symbolic legacy. 3) Analytical relevance to exploring leadership traits in historical figures. The sources were categorised as either primary (e.g., Arcerius, 1588; Boxhorn, 1641; Hooft, 1642) or secondary (e.g., Kloek, 2001; Kurtz, 1956; O'Sullivan, 2021). Primary sources included contemporaneous chronicles or eyewitness accounts, while secondary sources consisted of scholarly interpretations and critical historiography. To ensure transparency, each source was evaluated using a credibility matrix considering: 1) Authorial intent and potential bias. 2) Temporal proximity to the events. 3) Consistency or divergence with other accounts. 4) Historiographical framing (e.g., romantic nationalist, feminist, revisionist).

2.3.2 Historiographical Analysis:

A historiographical approach was used to analyse the evolution of Kenau's portrayal over time. The analysis critically compared different historical accounts of her actions, from heroic myth to scholarly scepticism, emphasising ideological shifts in perceptions of female agency in warfare (Ekama, 1876; Kloek, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2021). Triangulation was employed to resolve inconsistencies and verify key elements across various narratives. The focus was on the socio-political context, religious tensions during the Dutch Revolt, and the mechanisms of myth-making in early modern Europe (Parker, 1977; Motley, 1883).

2.3.3 Theoretical Framework and Deductive Thematic Analysis

Deductive thematic analysis was conducted using leadership theories as interpretive lenses. The following frameworks guided the development of thematic codes: Feminist leadership (Batliwala, 2011); Visionary leadership (Stam et al., 2014); Resilient leadership (Harland et al., 2005); Service-oriented leadership (Liden et al., 2018); and Empowerment and teamwork (Zimmerman, 2000; Castro & Martins, 2010). Thematic codes were predefined, including courage, resilience, service, vision, and empowerment. These codes were applied to historical

episodes such as Kenau's organisation of a women's strike force, her logistical support to Haarlem's defences, and her post-siege legal activism.

2.3.4 Interpretative Procedure

The interpretive process involved four stages: 1) Gathering primary and secondary sources from archival collections, digitised university repositories, and peer-reviewed literature. 2) Coding historical narratives thematically using leadership constructs. 3) Cross-comparing and triangulating evidence from various sources to assess consistency and reliability. 4) Synthesising interpretations by aligning Kenau's actions with theoretical leadership dimensions to determine relevance to the 21st century. Selected quotations were used to illustrate thematic alignment, and divergent historical perspectives were contextualised within broader historiographical debates. The author acknowledges prior engagement with Kenau's narrative, beginning in 1981 in literary studies. A reflexive approach was used to minimise potential interpretive bias. Informed by feminist theory and current leadership models, the analysis aimed to maintain historical objectivity by presenting evidence-based conclusions and critically evaluating the reliability of sources (Tosh, 2015; Cohen et al., 2017).

2.4 Results and Findings

Several leadership lessons emerge from Kenau's narrative that are relevant to contemporary leadership challenges. Where possible, each theme is grounded first in historical accounts and then interpreted through the lens of leadership theory.

2.4.1 Courage in the Face of Adversity

Early narratives describe women's active participation in Haarlem's defence, with Kenau frequently positioned as an organiser and exemplar of bravery (Hooft, 1642; Van Meteren, 1599). Courage involves mental and moral strength to face danger and uncertainty (Masten, 2021). In leadership terms, moral courage entails calculated risk-taking, complex decision-making, and resistance to unethical practices despite potential personal cost (Hannah et al., 2011). Kenau's narrative—especially the organisation of sustained civic resistance under siege—aligns with leadership in which ethical resolve and perseverance are central (Brown, 2019).

2.4.2 Visionary Leadership

Several accounts attribute to Kenau the capacity to mobilise women towards a shared defensive purpose, including organised labour in support of fortifications and logistics (Hooft, 1642; Junius, 1588). Visionary leadership communicates a compelling future and mobilises collective action (Stam et al., 2014). In this interpretation, Kenau's reported ability to recruit and motivate a women's strike team reflects vision communication and strategic mobilisation. Such narrative elements highlight the continuing relevance of purposeful leadership and adaptive problem-solving under constraint (Smith & Roberts, 2021).

2.4.3 Resilience and Perseverance

Haarlem's prolonged resistance and the persistence of civic actors under famine, disease, and bombardment provide the broader context for claims of resilience (Parker, 1977). Kenau's post-

siege legal dispute with the Haarlem council is also presented as a form of perseverance (Kloek, 2001). Resilient leadership refers to adaptive recovery, sustained direction under pressure, and modelling constructive responses to adversity (Harland et al., 2005). Through this lens, Kenau's narrative illustrates persistence both during the siege and in the subsequent pursuit of redress, reinforcing the contemporary importance of resilience in complex leadership environments (Van der Veen, 2018).

2.4.4 Empowerment and Teamwork

The organisation of women into coordinated defence-related work is a recurring motif in sources referencing Kenau (Hooft, 1642; Van Meteren, 1599). Empowerment strengthens individual and collective capacity to achieve desired outcomes (Zimmerman, 2000). Effective teamwork involves participation, shared responsibility, and commitment to collective goals (Castro & Martins, 2010). Kenau's narrative highlights the leadership value of building solidarity and mobilising a shared purpose—both central to inclusive and participatory leadership models (Jansen, 2020; Bregman, 2018).

2.4.5 Service-Oriented Leadership

Accounts of Kenau supplying wood and contributing to fortification efforts foreground service to the community and practical contributions to the common defence (Kloek, 2001). Service-oriented leadership prioritises the needs of others, ethical behaviour, community building, and follower development (Liden et al., 2014). Kenau's portrayal as acting for communal protection rather than personal gain aligns with servant leadership grounded in moral integrity (Klein & Hager, 2022).

2.4.6 The Nuance of Feminist Leadership

The consistent presence of women in accounts of Haarlem's defence challenges the notion that women were only passive wartime victims (De Vries, 1999; Kloek, 2004). Feminist leadership challenges oppressive power structures and promotes equity, collaboration, and redistribution of power (Batliwala, 2011). Interpreted through this lens, Kenau's narrative—whether historically literal or partly symbolic—functions as a counter-narrative to patriarchal assumptions and provides an early example of leadership that disrupts gendered expectations through action.

2.4.7 Legacy and Impact

Kenau's legacy persists in cultural memory and historical discourse, even where aspects of her narrative remain contested (Kloek, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2021). Legacy reflects the enduring impact of an individual's contributions and symbolic meaning over time (Ready & Conger, 2023). Kenau's narrative illustrates how leadership can endure through both documented action and cultural representation. Her story also resonates with transformational dynamics in which moral example becomes a catalyst for collective identity and sustained civic memory (Jansen, 2020).

2.4.8 Integrative Synthesis: An Early Feminist Leadership Model

The leadership traits discussed above should not be treated as discrete attributes. Read together, Kenau's narrative suggests an integrated leadership model characterised by: (1) moral courage under existential threat, (2) vision-driven mobilisation, (3) resilience under prolonged adversity, (4) empowerment through collective teamwork, and (5) service grounded in civic responsibility. Interpreted through feminist leadership theory, these elements collectively construct an early form of feminist leadership in which legitimacy is generated through ethical conviction, communal action, and resistance to oppressive power—while acknowledging that modern theoretical constructs cannot be mapped onto early modern contexts without careful qualification.

2.5 Framework of Kenau's Leadership Abilities

The framework of Kenau's leadership abilities, as outcomes of this research, is summarised in Table 2-1.

Table 2-1: Framework of Kenau's Leadership Abilities

Construct (AIC)	Leadership ability	Explanation and theoretical support
Courage in the face of adversity	Moral and physical bravery under siege	Kenau is repeatedly portrayed as a figure of exceptional bravery during Haarlem's siege, symbolising moral courage in defence of civic freedom and collective identity (De Vries, 1999; Hannah et al., 2011).
Visionary leadership	Strategic foresight and community mobilisation	Kenau's narrative positions her as mobilising collective resistance and rallying women towards a shared purpose, aligning with visionary leadership that inspires proactive collective action (Stam et al., 2014).
Resilience and perseverance	Sustained leadership under duress	Under prolonged violence and uncertainty, Kenau's narrative reflects perseverance during and after crisis, modelling resilience as adaptive persistence in turbulent contexts (Harland et al., 2005; Van der Veen, 2018).
Collective empowerment and teamwork	Building collective efficacy through shared responsibility	Kenau is said to have organised women's coordinated participation in defence efforts, reflecting empowerment-centred leadership and participatory teamwork (Zimmerman, 2000; Castro & Martins, 2010).
Service-oriented leadership	Acting in service of the common good	Kenau's leadership is portrayed as oriented toward communal protection and moral service, consistent with servant-leadership principles (Liden et al., 2014).
Feminist leadership	Challenging patriarchal assumptions through action	Kenau's narrative disrupts gendered assumptions about women's roles in warfare and civic life, illustrating leadership aligned with feminist values of equity and resistance to oppressive systems (Batliwala, 2011; Kloek, 2004).
Legacy and impact	Symbol of Dutch female resistance and national memory	Kenau's mythologised and contested legacy continues to shape discourse on gender, courage, and historical memory (Ready & Conger, 2023; O'Sullivan, 2021).

2.6 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

The story of Captain Kenau remains compelling and relevant today. The insights from this study can motivate modern leaders to be courageous visionaries who inspire teams by demonstrating resilience, perseverance, and acts of service that empower others. By exploring

Kenau's leadership journey, we honour her memory and deepen our understanding of leadership as a powerful force for positive global change. All academic work has limitations, and every method has constraints that prevent research from being perfect (Hofstee, 2006). Historical research aims to accurately reconstruct past events. All sources must be carefully assessed for reliability, authenticity, and context. Historical studies may be biased and incomplete. Remaining objective is essential. It is also important to consider modern values, cultural contexts, and personal biases, as these can influence interpretations (Kragh, 1987). Despite these limitations, this research was a genuine effort to reconstruct Kenau's history and analyse the leadership lessons from this iconic figure. Future studies on female leaders across different cultures that provide comparative insights could enrich modern leadership discussions.

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Chapter 3: Purpose-Driven Leadership and Sustainable Transformation in Finance: Building Resilient Institutions for the Future

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Keywords

Purpose-driven leadership; sustainable finance; ESG; financial resilience; stakeholder capitalism, TCFD; EU Taxonomy; SDGs

Abstract

Since the 1970s, ethical and sustainable investing has steadily shaped the finance industry, moving beyond profit maximisation to include social and environmental responsibility (Friede et al., 2015; Naidoo, 2020). By the 1990s, socially responsible and environmental funds gained traction, reflecting increased public awareness (O'Rourke, 2003; Weber, 2005). Banks, given their central role in capital allocation, were soon recognised as key players in promoting sustainable development (Jeucken, 2001). Terms such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainable and responsible investing (SRI), and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles are now embedded in mainstream financial discourse (Waddock & Graves, 1997). Global initiatives such as the UN Principles for Responsible Investment (UN PRI) and the TCFD now reinforce finance's role in driving sustainable transformation.

This Chapter adopts a **conceptual, desk-based approach, drawing on global and African case studies**, to assess how purpose-driven leadership can guide financial institutions toward sustainability and resilience. Findings suggest that institutions that integrate ESG into decision-making frameworks demonstrate greater resilience but still face challenges, such as greenwashing and regulatory inconsistencies (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). A conceptual framework is proposed linking leadership, ESG strategy, and organisational resilience, with a special focus on **small island economies such as Mauritius**. Ultimately, ethical leadership remains central to sustainable transformation and long-term financial stability.

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Background

The financial sector plays a pivotal role in advancing the global sustainability agenda. As ESG priorities reshape economic expectations, financial institutions must navigate the dual challenge of maintaining profitability while creating long-term societal value (Friede et al., 2015; Naidoo, 2020). This role has become increasingly critical amid climate-related risks, geopolitical uncertainty, and widening social inequality (GRI, 2023; WEF, 2023).

Over the past five decades, finance has undergone a major evolution, from a narrow focus on short-term returns to a broader emphasis on long-term value creation aligned with sustainability outcomes (Friede, Busch & Bassen, 2015). What began as ethical investing in the 1970s has

matured into an integrated sustainable finance ecosystem shaped by regulatory frameworks, global standards, and investor expectations (Sparkes, 2002; GRI, 2023).

Leadership has therefore emerged as the differentiating factor between institutions that view ESG as a branding tool and those that embed it into strategic decision-making and risk management. Purpose-driven leaders recognise sustainability not as a compliance obligation but as a foundation of competitive advantage and societal legitimacy (Schoenmaker & Schramade, 2019). This Chapter asks: *How can purpose-driven leadership accelerate sustainable transformation while sustaining risk-adjusted returns and strengthening institutional resilience?*

3.1.2 Problem Statement

Despite growing global recognition of the importance of sustainable finance, the financial sector continues to grapple with balancing profitability with long-term environmental and social responsibility. Over the past five decades, finance has evolved from a focus on short-term returns to the integration of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations. Yet, many financial institutions still struggle to move beyond symbolic ESG commitments toward meaningful strategic transformation (Friede et al., 2015; Waddock & Graves, 1997; GRI, 2023). The sector faces mounting pressures from climate change, social inequality, and geopolitical volatility—factors that increasingly expose the inadequacy of traditional risk-return models (WEF, 2023; Eccles & Klimenko, 2019).

Leadership has emerged as the critical differentiator in driving genuine sustainability integration. However, there remains a limited understanding of how purpose-driven leadership can operationalise sustainability within financial institutions, align ESG objectives with risk-adjusted returns, and enhance organisational resilience. This knowledge gap underscores the need to explore leadership's role in embedding sustainability into decision-making, culture, and capital-allocation frameworks. Addressing this problem is vital to designing a finance system that supports long-term societal value while maintaining competitive, resilient financial performance.

3.1.3 Research objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine how **purpose-driven leadership** within financial institutions can accelerate the transition toward sustainable finance while maintaining profitability, competitiveness, and resilience. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- **Assess** the extent to which environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles are integrated into the strategic, operational, and cultural frameworks of financial institutions.
- **Evaluate** how purpose-driven leadership influences the adoption and implementation of sustainable finance practices, including responsible investment, risk management, and ethical governance.
- **Identify** the leadership attributes, values, and decision-making behaviours that contribute to embedding sustainability into financial strategies and long-term value creation.

- **Analyse** the role of international frameworks—such as the UN Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI), the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), and the EU Taxonomy—in shaping institutional sustainability agendas.
- **Develop** a conceptual framework linking purpose-driven leadership, ESG integration, and organisational resilience in the financial sector.

Through these objectives, the research aims to generate actionable insights for policymakers, investors, and financial leaders to strengthen the sector’s contribution to global sustainability and long-term societal well-being.

3.2 Literature Review

The genealogy of sustainable finance traces to ethical investment movements in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasising values-based screening (Sparkes, 2002). By the 1990s, Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) products proliferated, increasingly incorporating both exclusionary and inclusionary criteria (O’Rourke, 2003; Sparkes & Cowton, 2004). Beyond screening, the 2000s saw a focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR), stakeholder engagement, and accountability, with banks and insurers reassessed as agents capable of steering economic development towards sustainability (Jeucken, 2001; Scholtens, 2006).

The 2010s–2020s were an era of ESG integration, in which investors and lenders sought financially material sustainability information to inform pricing, risk assessment, and portfolio construction (Friede, Busch & Bassen, 2015; Eccles & Klimenko, 2019). Large asset managers and banks have committed to net-zero targets and expanded active ownership programs, while regulators have tightened disclosure requirements (BlackRock, 2022; HSBC, 2023; TCFD, 2021). This institutionalisation of ESG is mirrored by policy advances, such as the EU Taxonomy and voluntary codes, such as the UN PRI (European Commission, 2020; UN PRI, 2023).

A major push for mainstreaming ESG has been driven by accumulating evidence that sustainability and financial performance are compatible and often complementary. Meta-analyses and cross-sectional studies report neutral-to-positive relationships between ESG quality and returns, as well as improved risk-adjusted performance and lower cost of capital (Friede, Busch & Bassen, 2015; Waddock & Graves, 1997; Eccles, Ioannou & Serafeim, 2020). The mechanisms include operational efficiencies, innovation, human capital advantages, and reputational resilience (Eccles, Ioannou & Serafeim, 2020).

Despite progress, concerns about greenwashing—misleading claims about environmental or social performance—persist. Delmas and Burbano (2011) identify organisational and institutional drivers of greenwashing, including incentive misalignments, information asymmetries, and the strategic use of symbolic actions. Voluntary disclosure can be insufficient without standardisation and verification (GRI, 2023; TCFD, 2021). Regulators and standard setters have responded with taxonomies, assurance requirements, and anti-greenwashing rules (European Commission, 2020). Furthermore, the UK governance code of 2018 increases the need for businesses to have a proper set of strategies in place for sustainability reporting.

Sustainable debt instruments—green bonds, social bonds, and sustainability-linked loans—have scaled rapidly, providing a mechanism to finance climate mitigation and adaptation, as well as social objectives, while embedding use-of-proceeds or performance-based covenants (ICMA, 2023). Market integrity depends on credible frameworks, third-party verification, and transparent impact reporting. Yield curve dynamics and investor clientele effects influence pricing and liquidity, suggesting a role for term-structure models to interpret adoption and valuation patterns (see Section 3).

3.3 Research Methodology

3.3.1 Theoretical Framework

Purpose-driven leadership frames the *raison d'être* of financial institutions as the creation of long-term value for a broad set of stakeholders—clients, employees, communities, regulators, and the environment—rather than solely maximising shareholder wealth (Schoenmaker, 2017; Schoenmaker & Schramade, 2019). This approach aligns closely with Stakeholder Theory, which argues that organisational success depends on balancing the interests of all parties affected by corporate actions (Freeman, 1984). In this context, purpose-driven leaders embed environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations into strategy, performance incentives, risk management, and product innovation to ensure both legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

From a Legitimacy Theory perspective, financial institutions pursue ESG integration to maintain societal approval and demonstrate alignment with evolving norms around sustainability and ethical responsibility (Suchman, 1995). Simultaneously, Signalling Theory suggests that transparent ESG practices—such as sustainability reporting and adherence to frameworks like the TCFD—serve as credible signals of a firm's integrity and forward-looking risk management (Spence, 1973).

Organisational resilience, in this setting, reflects the institution's dynamic capabilities—its ability to sense, seize, and reconfigure resources in response to environmental shocks. Embedding ESG not only strengthens adaptive capacity but also enhances legitimacy, builds stakeholder trust, and fosters innovation by opening new markets such as green finance and renewable infrastructure (TCFD, 2021; WEF, 2023).

3.4 Methodology

A quantitative and interpretive methodology is adopted to answer the research question. The study proceeds through: (1) a critical review of peer-reviewed literature and policy frameworks; (2) desk-based case analysis of leading financial institutions and energy-system initiatives; and (3) triangulation of insights from the framework in lived practice and regional realities of MENA–EU interconnections and North African renewable energy. Data sources include academic articles and sustainability reports, global standards (GRI, TCFD), and the EU Taxonomy (GRI, 2023; TCFD, 2021; European Commission, 2020; HSBC, 2023).

No primary data was collected. Instead, findings were derived through:

- Thematic review of peer-reviewed academic and policy sources

- Case-study synthesis of ESG implementation strategies
- Cross-case comparison to identify leadership patterns
- Triangulation of policy frameworks and institutional practice

This approach enables theoretical generalisation and highlights the role of leadership in shaping sustainable finance. Future studies may employ quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to empirically validate the framework, particularly within **SIDS and African financial systems**.

Given the study's explanatory aims, the 'why' and 'how' of leadership-enabled sustainability, quantitative synthesis is appropriate. Theoretical generalisation is prioritised over statistical inference, with validity supported by source triangulation, transparency in assumptions, and explicit linkage to established frameworks (UN PRI, 2023; ICMA, 2023).

3.5 Context and Case Evidence

This study outlines a timeline from the 1970s emergence of ethical investing to the 1990s launch of ESG funds, the post-2010 rise of global ESG regulation, and the 2020s recognition that climate risk is financial risk. This chronology resonates with published histories of the field (Sparkes, 2002; Sparkes & Cowton, 2004) and the policy shift toward climate-related financial disclosure (TCFD, 2021).

Four micro-level levers highlighted in the presentation—tax rebates, public procurement, behavioural 'nudges,' and community energy. This illustrates how policy can change relative prices, reduce adoption frictions and build local resilience. For instance, rebates for rooftop solar change payback periods, while Chapterless banking is the default and harnesses choice architecture to normalise low-carbon behaviour (Naidoo, 2020).

One of the main studies used in the presentation was about the DESERTEC vision, which posits leveraging abundant solar resources across North Africa and the Middle East to supply clean power domestically and export it to Europe via high-voltage interconnections (see Figure 3-1 below). Morocco's Noor complex, with concentrated solar power (CSP) and photovoltaic (PV) capacity, and the planned Spain–Morocco interconnection exemplify cross-border infrastructure that requires sophisticated financing, hedging, and governance structures (ICMA, 2023). The presentation references bold generation estimates and highlights the technical challenge of DC-to-AC conversion, underscoring the role of smart grid integration and system planning.

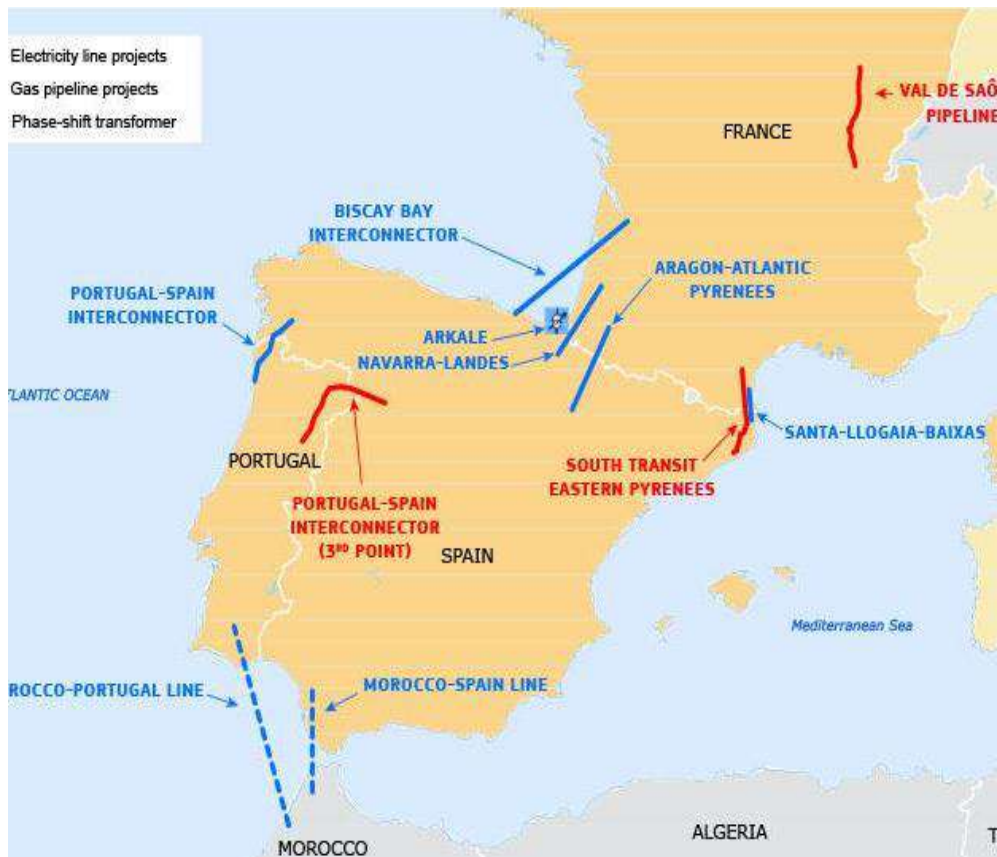


Figure 3-1: Illustration of the interconnected power line of North Africa and Europe through Spain (Lauf & Zimmermann, 2023)

The DESERTEC initiative highlights the global potential of renewable energy, with projections of generating 50–70 TWh per day—enough to power the world. Morocco’s Noor CSP project and Spain–Morocco interconnections showcase regional leadership in green energy finance (ICMA, 2023).

However, challenges such as converting DC to AC energy and grid stability remain. The 2022 Odessa grid event in Texas is cited to illustrate the vulnerability of traditional grids to extreme conditions and the need for digital control, storage, and demand response. While details vary by system, the general insight holds: decarbonised power systems must pair variable renewables with flexibility resources and AI-assisted controls to maintain stability and quality of supply. Financial structuring that recognises system value (e.g., capacity, flexibility, inertia) is necessary to crowd in private capital at scale (OECD, 2022).

At the institutional level, leading banks and asset managers have published net-zero transition plans, embedded ESG risks into credit processes, and ramped up impact reporting (HSBC, 2023; BlackRock, 2022). These actions are not merely reputational; they affect capital budgeting, client selection, and portfolio construction. Purpose-driven leadership provides the mandate for such transformations and the accountability needed to endure short-term trade-offs (Eccles & Klimenko, 2019; Schoenmaker & Schramade, 2019).

3.6 Findings

With strong leadership willpower, there is a clear link to the theory of value, which integrates financial and sustainability objectives and aligns executive incentives, risk appetite, and disclosure with long-term outcomes (Schoenmaker, 2017). Organisational coherence across product risk and operations, enabling consistent execution of ESG strategy (Eccles, Ioannou & Serafeim, 2020). Finally, a clear financial instrument for green initiatives legitimises investments in capabilities such as climate scenario analysis, data architecture for ESG metrics, and engagement programs with clients and regulators (TCFD, 2021).

Institutions that proactively adopt sustainability practices report operational cost savings (e.g., energy efficiency), reputational advantages in recruitment, and improved access to ESG-linked funding at attractive terms (Eccles, Ioannou & Serafeim, 2020; ICMA, 2023). Over time, such advantages can lower the weighted average cost of capital and strengthen resilience to shocks, thereby amplifying investor confidence (Friede, Busch & Bassen, 2015).

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) further adds to the analysis, suggesting that green investment multipliers can range from roughly 1.5 to 2.0, exceeding those of fossil-intensive sectors. While estimates depend on context and methodology, the directional implication is clear: well-governed green investment programs can catalyse employment, productivity and innovation while accelerating decarbonisation (OECD, 2022).

Institutions demonstrating strong leadership and ESG integration report operational efficiencies, improved access to sustainable funding, stronger brand reputation, and enhanced resilience to systemic shocks. Evidence suggests that purpose-driven leadership improves:

Table 3-1: Leadership Role

ESG Area	Leadership Role	Resilience Effect
Capital Allocation	ESG-linked lending & investment	Reduced risk exposure
Governance	Anti-greenwashing safeguards	Regulatory trust
Culture & Incentives	ESG-based performance metrics	Ethical behaviour
Innovation	AI, green bonds, data architecture	Competitive advantage

These trends are especially relevant for small island economies, where climate exposure, economic vulnerability, and capital constraints require leadership-driven financial reform.

3.6.1 Sustainable Finance in Small Island Developing States (SIDS): The Case of Mauritius

Embedding ESG in enterprise risk management requires expanding risk taxonomies, integrating climate-related stress testing, and aligning capital structures with sustainability objectives (TCFD, 2021). However, sustainability cannot succeed through compliance alone; it requires cultural transformation, ethical leadership, and stakeholder engagement.

Mauritius, as an SIDS, presents a unique case. The country faces financial fragility due to climate risk, reliance on imported energy, and limited diversification. Nevertheless, it has taken leadership steps through its Sustainable Finance Framework (2023) and Green Bonds

Guidelines. With targeted leadership and ESG alignment, Mauritius could position itself as a regional sustainable finance hub for Africa and the Indian Ocean.

As a future finance leader, the researcher sees sustainable transformation not as an obligation but as an opportunity to redefine the purpose of finance, moving from profit-led systems to purpose-driven financial architecture.

3.7 Discussion

Embedding ESG into enterprise risk management requires expanding risk taxonomies (physical, transition, liability), enhancing data governance, and aligning risk appetite with climate objectives (TCFD, 2021). Capital planning should consider scenario-conditioned losses, collateral revaluations, and regulatory capital implications. Pricing models in lending and investment must incorporate emissions trajectories and adaptation costs while avoiding simplistic box-ticking that invites greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Culture and incentives determine whether sustainability is durable or performative. Practical safeguards include: (i) tying variable compensation to verified impact metrics; (ii) independent second-party opinions and assurance for sustainable instruments; (iii) standardised taxonomies and disclosures; and (iv) internal audit of ESG claims (European Commission, 2020; GRI, 2023; ICMA, 2023).

Data gaps hinder consistent ESG measurement. Investments in data architecture, AI/ML for anomaly detection, and digital twins for stress testing can improve precision and timeliness. In the power sector, AI-assisted grid control and storage coordination enhance reliability in high-renewables systems—reinforcing the financing case for flexibility assets (OECD, 2022).

For emerging markets, sustainable finance must reconcile development imperatives with decarbonisation. Blended finance structures, local-currency solutions and capacity building are critical. The DESERTEC-style vision and North African renewables demonstrate how regional integration, domestic benefits and export revenues can coexist if governance is robust and social value is prioritised (UN, 2015).

3.7.1 Policy and Practice Implications

Leadership plays a central role in embedding sustainability within financial institutions. Purpose-driven leaders align capital allocation with ESG metrics, foster transparency, and encourage systemic resilience. Case studies from institutions such as HSBC (2023) and BlackRock (2022) reveal that embedding ESG into risk management enhances adaptability to systemic shocks. Ethical leadership also helps address greenwashing and fosters stakeholder trust (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Regulators should continue harmonising disclosure standards (TCFD), taxonomies (EU), and anti-greenwashing rules to reduce fragmentation and increase comparability (TCFD, 2021; European Commission, 2020). Future authorities and those in power can support scenario analysis and clarify supervisory expectations for climate risk. Public finance should be used to de-risk frontier technologies and catalyse private capital via guarantees and first-loss tranches (OECD, 2022). Governments across the European Union and richer economies must act now.

Financial institutions should institutionalise purpose at the board level; embed ESG KPIs into strategy, risk, and remuneration; and develop product suites (e.g., sustainability-linked loans) aligned with clients' transition pathways (ICMA, 2023; UN PRI, 2023). Infrastructure investors should adopt system-value metrics (capacity, flexibility, resilience) to guide procurement and tariff setting in the power sector, thereby improving the bankability of hybrid projects that combine generation, storage, and grid intelligence.

For policymakers in MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa, micro-level levers—rebates, public procurement standards, behavioural nudges, and community energy models—can accelerate adoption while protecting vulnerable consumers (Naidoo, 2020; UN, 2015).

3.7.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study relies on quantitative synthesis and illustrative cases; it does not estimate causal effects or conduct econometric analysis. Future research could: (i) quantify yield-curve signals associated with green bond market deepening; (ii) test the relationship between ESG integration maturity and cost of capital across jurisdictions; and (iii) model system-value pricing for flexibility assets under different regulation and market designs (Nelson & Siegel, 1987; ICMA, 2023). Primary data from institutional leaders would further illuminate how purpose translates into operating models and client outcomes.

3.8 Conclusion

Finance can fuel crises or power solutions. The difference is leadership. Purpose-driven leadership aligns strategy, risk management, culture and innovation with sustainability goals, transforming ESG from a reporting exercise into a governance philosophy. The momentum toward sustainability is accelerating, and institutions that internalise purpose as a strategic asset will lead the future of finance. (Friede, Busch, & Bassen, 2015; Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2020).

Therefore, sustainable finance is no longer a niche but a mainstream imperative. ESG integration and innovation in financial products are reshaping the sector. While challenges such as greenwashing and regulatory inconsistencies persist, the momentum is clear. Finance, when aligned with purpose, can shift from fuelling crises to powering global solutions. The findings accentuate the importance of ethical leadership, system-wide accountability, and inclusive practices in shaping a resilient financial future.

As future financial leaders, the responsibility extends beyond managing portfolios to redesigning financial systems that serve society, the climate, and long-term economic stability. Leadership must therefore shift from profit optimisation to purpose institutionalisation, ensuring that finance becomes an enabler of transformation rather than a spectator of crisis.

In the future, small economies like Mauritius have the potential to become laboratories of sustainable innovation, demonstrating how finance can be reimagined to promote resilience, inclusivity, and long-term societal benefits. Leadership, not regulation alone, will determine whether financial systems evolve toward stability or remain vulnerable to the next systemic crisis.

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Chapter 4: Developing a Collaborative Leadership Framework to Overcome Hierarchical Barriers and Improve Productivity in Healthcare NPOs: A Systematic Literature Review

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Keywords

collaborative leadership, organisational productivity, performance management, healthcare management, non-profit organisation

Abstract

This Chapter examines entrenched hierarchical structures as a critical barrier to collaborative leadership in healthcare management non-profit organisations (NPOs), and analyses how this barrier impacts organisational productivity and performance management. Drawing on Collaborative Governance Theory and Complexity Leadership Theory, a qualitative systematic literature review was conducted, guided by Creswell and Creswell (2022) and PRISMA protocols. Thirty peer-reviewed and grey literature sources (2020–2024) were synthesised. The findings reveal that rigid hierarchies concentrate decision-making authority, excluding frontline perspectives, fragment communication, and reduce adaptability. These dynamics slow operational responses, weaken cross-functional coordination and undermine performance accountability. Practical recommendations include flattening organisational structures, decentralising authority with clear accountability metrics and embedding performance indicators into collaborative processes. This Chapter contributes a theoretically grounded framework for addressing structural barriers in resource-constrained contexts.

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 Background

Healthcare NPOs in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including South Africa, operate in highly complex environments characterised by chronic resource constraints, rising healthcare demands, evolving policy landscapes, and shifting donor priorities (Hoogsteen, 2022; Huebner & Flessa, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed structural weaknesses, revealing that many governance models lacked the agility required for rapid adaptation.

Collaborative leadership, being the intentional sharing of power, decision-making, and accountability across organisational boundaries, has been widely promoted as a leadership approach capable of improving adaptability, service quality, and operational efficiency in such contexts (Ang’ana & Ongeti, 2023; Singh et al., 2023). Despite their appeal, healthcare NPOs often fail to realise the benefits of collaborative leadership due to deeply embedded hierarchical

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structures. These hierarchies centralise authority, limit stakeholder engagement, and perpetuate siloed communication.

In healthcare management non-profits, which deal with significant change and high risk, leadership has changed significantly in the last few decades. To address multi-stakeholder involvement, limited resources, and new service delivery models, people had to work together. LoveLife, a large non-profit in South Africa that manages healthcare, had to deal with resource constraints, unequal healthcare, and client needs. Frameworks for joint leadership were needed for success and productivity. Ang'ana and Kilika (2022) state that joint leadership involves combining roles deeply, making decisions together, and systematically distributing power. Berardo, Fischer, and Hamilton (2020) also state that network-based healthcare governance problems were often caused by divided leadership and differing operational practices. This shows that organisations need to work together to get better results.

South African healthcare non-profits like LoveLife needed new ways of leading to navigate fundamental problems and uncertainty. Bednarz, Borkowska-Bierć, and Matejun (2021) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic required flexible, team-based management plans to address new crises. The research they did showed that groups with joint leadership were stronger and more adaptable than those with formal leadership. According to Hoogsteen (2020), to improve group effectiveness in healthcare service delivery, we need medical, psychological, and executive leadership models. Working together as a leadership team helped these areas meet strategy goals and the needs of beneficiaries.

LoveLife, a South African NGO that was among the first to focus on teen health and HIV prevention, had to navigate changes in funding, community involvement, and expectations regarding the organisation's impact. The group was able to meet donors' needs and ensure programme results aligned with national public health goals, under collaborative leadership.

Ang'ana and Chiroma (2021) state that for cross-functional partnerships to succeed, leaders must build trust, foster open communication, and allow team members to use their expertise.

LoveLife was challenging because it required cross-departmental teamwork, collaboration with government and foreign agencies, and community relationship management.

Scholarly literature indicates that collaborative leadership in non-profits has improved performance and efficiency. Turner (2022) stated that strategy, leadership, management, and talent development should work together to improve organisational success in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. He thought that non-profits could only be successful if they constantly promoted shared knowledge and answers developed by many people. Hargreaves and Elhawary's (2020) study of teacher learning teams found that knowledge-intensive outcomes increased when students were able to direct their own learning and work together. This increased healthcare workers' desire to provide quality care and stakeholders' involvement, both of which are important for LoveLife's long-term success.

Several studies found a link between joint leadership and more learning within a company. This was especially true in mission-driven businesses where the outside world is changing quickly. Meister and Willyerd (2020) say that innovative businesses intentionally establish joint

practices to find, train, and retain good employees. This is especially true in non-profit healthcare settings, where trained workers are hard to find. Collaboration made things easier and let project teams share best practices, reducing repetition and building group memory. Huebner and Flessa (2022) state that healthcare strategy management needs to consider the big picture and the long term to address uncertainty and complexity.

Collaborative leadership was a smart move for LoveLife to stay relevant amid sector-wide changes. Collaborative leadership improves outcomes both inside and outside the company, according to research. Graham and Woodhead (2021) found that healthcare leadership for continuous improvement during COVID-19 was linked to joint structures that gave field staff greater power and enabled them to solve problems in real time. According to LoveLife, cross-functional teamwork increased staff involvement, reduced programme repetition, and made it easier to adhere to financial rules and report to stakeholders.

Healthcare non-profits set up models for joint leadership that gave people more power, made them more effective, and spread out responsibility. Hoogsteen (2020) argued that working together at all levels of a company is important for joint effectiveness, the idea that the group can achieve its goals. LoveLife used performance management, leadership training, and cross-disciplinary task teams to celebrate the success of both individuals and groups. These internal processes, along with the group's ability to adapt programmes to meet new community needs and to respond to unexpected events outside the group, strengthened the connection between joint leadership and the group's effectiveness.

4.1.2 Problem Statement

While hierarchical structures can offer clarity in command and compliance, they become liabilities in volatile and complex healthcare environments. They delay decision-making, suppress operational insights, fragment communication, and hinder adaptive responses. Over time, these effects erode both productivity, defined here as the efficiency of converting inputs into outputs and performance management, understood as the systematic tracking, evaluation, and improvement of organisational outcomes.

LoveLife, a healthcare management non-profit, needed experienced leadership to improve performance and productivity due to complexity, volatility, and resource constraints. Collaborative leadership enabled cross-functional synergies, collective effectiveness, and sustained programme results in hierarchical models' failures (Hoogsteen, 2020; Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022). Despite these insights, many South African healthcare NPOs, notably LoveLife, battled with fragmented leadership, poor departmental integration, and inconsistent stakeholder participation. Ang'ana and Chiroma (2021) found that inadequate collaborative leadership structures led to silos, communication issues, and redundancy, thereby limiting organisational performance. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed issues with standard management methods and highlighted the need for flexible, collaborative solutions (Bednarz et al., 2021).

LoveLife struggled with strategy, team participation, and operational execution due to a lack of a consistent collaborative leadership structure. Some departments encouraged shared leadership and participatory decision-making, but without organisational consistency or support. Hargreaves and Elhawary (2020) found that well-intentioned leaders failed to combine

reciprocal responsibility, learning, and innovation in the absence of explicit collaborative frameworks. Internal procedural inefficiencies delayed programme implementation and eroded staff and external partners' trust, making LoveLife's adolescent health promotion efforts difficult. Research demonstrated that systematic collaborative leadership increased productivity and future-proofed organisations against shifting funding sources, community demands, and external shocks (Turner, 2022). LoveLife lacks a systematic, evidence-based leadership framework beyond a few successes. The lack of frameworks hampered information exchange, staff empowerment, and continuous improvement, which are necessary for lasting impact in resource-constrained contexts, according to Berardo, Fischer, and Hamilton (2020). The study identified a lack of experience and scholarship in developing, implementing, and assessing collaborative leadership frameworks for healthcare management NPOs like LoveLife.

4.1.3 Research Question

What are the impacts of entrenched hierarchical structures on collaborative leadership, productivity and performance management in healthcare NPOs?

4.1.4 Research Objectives

The main objective of the study was to develop a collaborative leadership framework to enhance organisational performance and productivity at loveLife, a leading South African non-profit organisation in healthcare management.

- To analyse how hierarchical structures hinder collaborative leadership in healthcare NPOs.
- To examine the relationship between hierarchical barriers and productivity/performance outcomes.
- To propose a theoretically grounded framework for reducing hierarchical constraints and enhancing performance management.

4.2 Literature Review

4.2.1 Introduction

Studies on leadership in non-profit healthcare organisations have stressed the importance of joint leadership for the long-term success and survival of the group. Through joint leadership, people can work together to break down functional silos, make better decisions, and hold one another accountable (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022). In South Africa, non-profits like LoveLife must deal with limited resources, high staff turnover, and the long-term effects of public health problems. This underscores the importance of leadership models that improve performance and build resilience (Bednarz et al., 2021). Research shows that joint leadership improves team performance, keeps employees motivated, fosters more creative programmes, and engages more stakeholders, especially in resource-constrained settings (Kinder et al., 2021).

Collaborative leadership helps healthcare managers address uncertainty, share information more quickly, and bring different professional groups together to work towards shared goals (Graham & Woodhead, 2021). Collaborative leadership frameworks offer many benefits, but

many non-profits cannot adopt them officially due to deeply rooted hierarchical cultures, inconsistent leadership development, and a lack of enabling policies (Ang'ana & Chiroma, 2021). This literature review combined studies from different fields and real-world data to critically examine LoveLife's leadership, consider the relationship between collaborative leadership and organisational performance, identify the main drivers and facilitators of change, and suggest ways to ensure the leadership model endures. The literature demonstrates that collaborative leadership is associated with higher organisational productivity, improved performance management systems, and greater stakeholder trust in healthcare NPOs. However, the persistence of structural and contextual barriers limits its impact, especially in resource-constrained environments.

A literature synthesis and LoveLife case study indicate that successful collaborative leadership involves structural, cultural, and strategic changes.

To institutionalise cooperation, Ang'ana and Kilika (2022) suggested formalising interdepartmental responsibilities, cooperative decision-making norms, and a performance management system for shared outcomes. To facilitate ongoing discussion and early issue identification, Lunden et al. (2020) recommended team forums, cross-functional committees, and open feedback mechanisms. Kinder et al. (2021) showed that continuous collaboration worked best when senior executives mentored and exhibited collaborative conduct, demonstrating a genuine commitment to business-wide leadership.

Research demonstrated that capacity-building programmes were essential to operationalising collaborative leadership frameworks. Hargreaves and Elhawary (2020) found that leadership coaching, peer learning circles, and conflict resolution workshops built trust and broke down interdepartmental silos. Berardo, Fischer, and Hamilton (2020) found that project dashboards and internal private online platforms enhanced transparency, institutional memory, and remote or hybrid working models, which were crucial during global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. LoveLife used these strategies to facilitate information sharing, reduce duplication, and boost stakeholder engagement. The study underlined the importance of flexible, inclusive leadership for continuous development and sustainability. Martin (2021) asserted that feedback-driven leadership development, in which leaders regularly sought and acted on staff feedback, boosted employee engagement, creativity, and job satisfaction. Turner (2022) also found that joint accomplishment and individual/team contribution remuneration plans increased employee ownership and motivation. At LoveLife, incentives for community successes and collaborative goal-setting increased alignment with organisational aims and enabled individuals to contribute to shared goals. According to Ang'ana and Chiroma (2021), reflective practice in leadership routines, such as after-action reviews and learning retreats, helped businesses adapt to shifting circumstances and develop collaborative leadership frameworks.

Another review suggestion was effective monitoring and evaluation. Huebner and Flessa (2022) found that quantitative and qualitative measures of collaborative leadership results helped firms recognise strengths, address difficulties, and adapt ways to maintain influence. LoveLife monitored programme performance and collaborative leadership culture using

balanced scorecards and participatory assessment. The organisational ecosystem gained accountability, transparency, and stakeholder buy-in from these measures.

Creating a sustainable collaborative leadership framework at LoveLife demonstrated that evidence-based techniques, leadership commitment, ongoing learning, and comprehensive assessment were essential to organisational performance, productivity, and long-term success.

The systematic literature review found that joint leadership is important for improving the performance and productivity of organisations, especially non-profit healthcare organisations such as LoveLife. Ang'ana and Kilika (2022) believe that joint leadership led to sustained success by fostering cross-functional unity and a shared sense of purpose and vision. Martin (2021) says that leadership that encouraged employees to participate in decision-making and share power and responsibility made workers happier and more engaged. Berardo, Fischer, and Hamilton (2020) also emphasised that structured teamwork and open communication channels are needed to break down silos and promote collaborative problem-solving. These findings were supported by LoveLife data.

The literature shows that leadership style, company culture, and work success are all connected in complex ways. Hargreaves and Elhawary (2020) state that for joint leadership models to work, leaders must keep learning, build their skills, and engage in thoughtful practice, which makes them more flexible and resilient. Lunden et al. (2020) say that digital teamwork tools and knowledge management systems support remote leadership, knowledge sharing, and effective collaboration, especially when situations are complex and changing quickly. Kinder et al. (2021) say that top leaders must commit to and model joint practices for them to become standard. This aligns with how things are done in LoveLife and in the healthcare management sector.

Turner (2022) believes that company benefits, performance management, and feedback systems can help people work together effectively over the long term. Huebner and Flessa (2022) say that companies were able to remain flexible, adapt their strategies, and remain accountable for their shared goals by continually monitoring and evaluating using both qualitative and quantitative indicators. To keep joint standards and encourage corporate learning, Ang'ana and Chiroma (2021) suggested combining learning methods such as after-action reports and group meditation. The research showed that for a joint leadership framework to work, it required a flexible, all-encompassing strategy that balanced strategic goals with practical rigour and put people and processes first to sustain group success. This study used a qualitative systematic literature review guided by Creswell and Creswell (2022). It followed PRISMA protocols to ensure transparency in the search, screening, and selection processes.

A search was conducted across PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar from January 2020 to March 2024, focusing on collaborative leadership, healthcare NPOs, and productivity/performance management. 126 records were identified; after double screening, 30 were retained for thematic synthesis.

Purposeful, criterion-based sampling ensured relevance. Data were extracted using a living codebook covering study context, leadership constructs, barriers/enablers, and performance outcomes. Thematic synthesis combined inductive coding of emergent barriers with deductive

mapping against categories from Collaborative Governance and Complexity Leadership theory. Four barrier clusters were identified. Ethical rigour was maintained through accurate citation, permissions checks for grey literature, and full audit trails. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, double coding, and peer debriefing with sector experts.

4.2.2 Collaborative Governance Theory

Collaborative Governance Theory positions leadership as a process of shared decision-making across boundaries that requires trust, transparency, and mutual accountability. In healthcare NPOs, this means integrating diverse expertise, aligning departmental objectives, and engaging external stakeholders to co-create strategies for service delivery and performance improvement. Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansell & Gash, 2008) defines governance as a structured, consensus-oriented process involving multiple stakeholders in decision-making. This model assumes that no single entity can address complex problems alone and that they require trust, shared responsibility, and iterative problem-solving. While suitable for complex public health systems, its success depends on organisational structures that permit inclusive participation, something hierarchical organisations inherently resist.

4.2.3 Complexity Leadership Theory

Complexity Leadership Theory emphasises the adaptive capacity of leaders in complex systems. It suggests that collaborative leadership enables organisations to respond quickly to emergent challenges, avoid performance bottlenecks, and sustain innovation. Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) distinguishes between administrative leadership (formal roles and structures), adaptive leadership (emergent problem-solving), and enabling leadership (creating conditions for interaction between the two). Hierarchies often place too much weight on administrative leadership, marginalising adaptive and enabling functions. This imbalance diminishes an organisation's ability to innovate and respond effectively to change.

4.2.4 Recent Adaptations for the NPO Context

Recent adaptations of these theories for NPO contexts (Ang'ana & Ongeti, 2023; Singh et al., 2023) underline three essentials: flattening hierarchies, decentralising authority with accountability, and embedding performance metrics into collaborative structures. Flattening hierarchies removes decision bottlenecks; decentralisation empowers teams while preserving accountability; and embedding performance metrics ensures collaboration yields measurable outputs.

4.2.5 Hierarchical Barriers in Healthcare NPOs

Hierarchical barriers in healthcare NPOs manifest through vertical reporting lines, centralised approvals and departmental silos (Vaggers & Anderson, 2022). Empirical evidence since 2022 shows:

- Decision Bottlenecks delaying operational rollouts (Martin, 2023).
- Siloed Communication limiting timely KPI updates (Vaggers & Anderson, 2022).
- Exclusion of Frontline Staff from strategic planning (Hoogsteen, 2022).

- Reduced Adaptive Capacity during external shocks (Huebner & Flessa, 2022).

4.3 Research Methodology

4.3.1 Research Approach and Design

A qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) was undertaken, following Creswell and Creswell (2022) and PRISMA guidelines. The SLR method enables structured synthesis of diverse studies to identify recurring patterns and contextual nuances.

To ensure accuracy and reliability, the qualitative systematic literature evaluation employed only secondary sources. The qualitative technique was suitable for researching leadership dynamics since it permitted in-depth investigation of complex phenomena, subtle settings, and organisational realities that cannot be measured (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). When using empirical, theoretical, and practice-oriented literature, qualitative organisational studies research enabled critical evidence synthesis and the mapping of conceptual and practical linkages relevant to collaborative leadership in healthcare non-profits (Dang, Van Nguyen & Tran, 2024). Systematic reviews were transparent and repeatable since they followed processes for searching, filtering, selecting, and assessing literature (Proctor, 2024).

Leadership research often uses this strategy to distil best practises, issues, and theoretical views when contextual limitations hinder primary fieldwork (Hameed, 2024). This research design combines rigorous literature discovery, data extraction, and qualitative synthesis. To guarantee relevance to collaborative leadership and organisational performance in healthcare management non-profits, peer-reviewed Chapters, organisational reports, engagement surveys, and comparative analyses were chosen using stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria (Ansmann et al., 2021). The method provides a multidimensional understanding of collaborative leadership, its consequences, and context. The finest qualitative health management research uses literature-driven inquiry to get policy and practice insights (Mannheimer, 2024). The interpretivist research prioritised meaning-making, context, and subjectivity over statistical generalisation and employed meticulous, transparent synthesis (Hossain, Alam & Ali, 2024).

4.3.2 Data Collection Procedures

A full search of academic databases and grey literature sources, using limited language and free-text terms related to healthcare non-profits, joint leadership, and group success, was the first step in identifying the literature (Reyes, Bogumil & Welch, 2021). Following the rules for systematic qualitative review (Fife & Gossner, 2024), the search method used Boolean operators, reduction, and proximity to achieve optimal sensitivity and specificity. PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were searched for Chapters published between January 2020 and March 2024 (Lunden et al., 2020) to ensure the evidence was up to date and useful. In 2021, Bednarz, Borkowska-Bierć, and Matejun conducted additional searches of "grey literature" sources, such as annual reports, staff engagement polls, and comparative reviews, to find relevant but not yet listed materials.

For relevance, preset rules for what to include and what to exclude were applied to 126 likely sources from the original search. We need at least one measurable leadership metric (such as

team size, collaborative meeting frequency, or degree of decentralisation) and one measurable organisational performance indicator (such as project success rate, stakeholder feedback, or employee retention). The focus should be on healthcare management non-profits (Turner, 2022). Opinion pieces, opinions, research that was not clear enough about how it was done, and sources that only talked about businesses or the government were left out (Hoogsteen, 2020). First, the title and summary were looked over, and then the full text was read. Two separate judges working together to conduct double screening reduced bias and improved source selection (Lunden et al., 2020).

A study-specific codebook was used to pull out publication type, corporate setting, research design, leadership metrics, performance results, and key findings (Reyes, Bogumil & Welch, 2021). The tabulated data was checked twice to ensure it was correct and complete, and any disagreements were resolved by consensus. For a thorough comparison and summary, the codebook helped connect themes from different studies. A PRISMA-style flow chart showed how many sources were found, screened, added, and removed at each review stage. This ensured that the data collection was open and could be replicated (Dang, Van Nguyen & Tran, 2024).

4.3.3 Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

We selected secondary data sources that quantified collaborative leadership and organisational performance in healthcare management non-profits using purposeful and criterion-based sampling (Ansmann et al., 2021). Sampling included diverse research methods, organisational settings, and geographic areas for breadth and depth. Triangulation and contextual variation promote credibility and transferability; this method used qualitative synthesis (Mannheimer, 2024).

4.3.4 Search Strategy

Databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar. Boolean string: (“collaborative leadership” OR “collaborative governance”) AND (“healthcare” OR “health sector”) AND (“non-profit” OR “NPO” OR “NGO”) AND (“hierarchy” OR “hierarchical structures”) AND (“productivity” OR “performance management”). Period: Jan 2020 – Mar 2024.

4.3.4.1 Inclusion Criteria Published in English between 2020–2024.

- Focused on healthcare NPOs or comparable non-profit settings.
- Examined hierarchical structures in relation to leadership, productivity, or performance management.

4.3.4.2 Selection Process

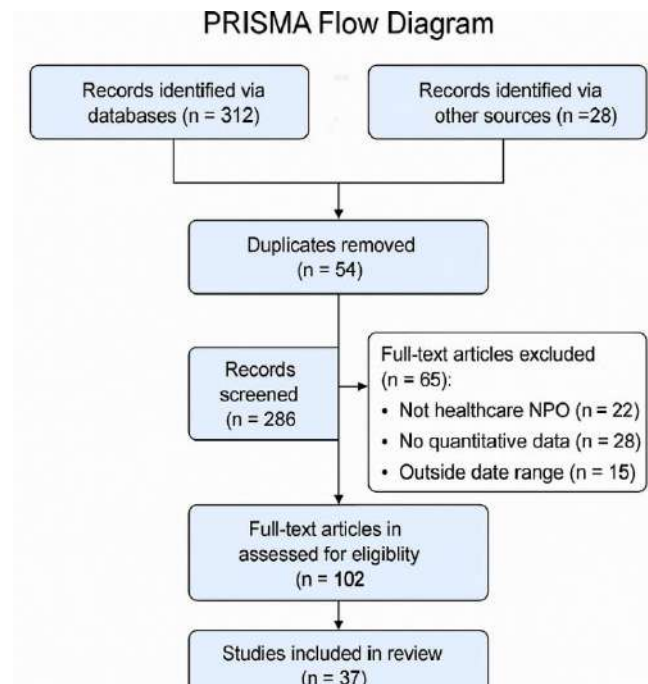


Figure 4-1: PRISMA flow diagram showing study selection process

Thirty-seven secondary data sources were used: 15 research studies reviewed by experts in the field, 8 sectoral and group yearly reports, 9 staff involvement surveys, and 5 national or regional comparative analyses. According to the rules for systematic reviews, the sample size was appropriate for both statistical synthesis and qualitative meta-analysis of the leadership-performance link (Turner, 2022). Naeem et al. (2024) showed that sample adequacy was established when new ideas stopped emerging from additional sources. This is called theory saturation. Sample variation made triangulation better for both internal and external validity (Lunden et al., 2020). The careful search procedure and double-screening method selected sources that were relevant and followed good research practices, thereby reducing sample bias (Reyes, Bogumil & Welch, 2021).

4.3.5 Data Analysis

NVivo 14 was used for thematic coding.

- First-cycle coding: inductive identification of hierarchy-related challenges.
- Second-cycle coding: deductive mapping to Collaborative Governance and Complexity Leadership constructs.

Evidence patterns were extracted, organised, and understood using quality theme synthesis and inductive and deductive coding (Proctor, 2024). Each source was reviewed using the study's objectives, leadership structures and processes, performance indicators, barriers and facilitators, and actionable suggestions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Thematic synthesis revealed new and unexpected findings via reading, open coding, comparison, and subject refining (Hameed, 2024). Mapping coded data into an analytical framework that linked collaborative leadership methods to organisational performance, using within- and between-

source comparisons, was a cross-study synthesis (Fife & Gossner, 2024). Analytical memo writing and visual mapping integrated many evidence streams to create higher-order themes and conceptual links (Mannheimer, 2024). Analysis was led by reflexivity, consistency checks, and clear documentation of assessments (Dang, Van Nguyen & Tran, 2024). Results from peer-reviewed studies, publications, and surveys were triangulated (Lunden et al., 2020).

To reduce selective reporting and confirmation bias, negative instances and opposing findings were acknowledged and incorporated into the interpretation of the results (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). In the qualitative meta-analysis, a sensitivity analysis examined how deleting low-quality or borderline-relevant sources affected the robustness and defensibility of the conclusions (Naeem et al., 2024). Secondary sources offered a multi-layered, contextually rich, empirically grounded synthesis of collaborative leadership in healthcare management non-profits, thereby improving theoretical and practical knowledge (Ansmann et al., 2021).

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Even though the study only used secondary sources, ethics were very important to it. Patents, openness and academic honesty were protected by using correct citations, giving credit to the authors, and explaining the research methods (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). During the review procedure, analytical decisions were documented and explained to ensure that source information was not misrepresented or misunderstood (Reyes, Bogumil & Welch, 2021). Dang, Van Nguyen, and Tran (2024) found that ethical risks were lower when only openly available, properly conducted studies were included. Protecting the privacy of study subjects was a top priority for all included studies (Proctor, 2024) in both ethics and institutional review standards. To avoid publication bias, the study specifically looked for and included private and "grey" works (Bednarz, Borkowska-Bierć & Matejun, 2021). Best practices in methods and ethics for combining qualitative data were used in this study (Ansmann et al., 2021).

4.5 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Many methods enhanced the rigour and reliability of the systematic literature review. The review was extensive, methodical, and repeatable due to rigorous searching, double screening, and organised data extraction (Lunden et al., 2020). Triangulation of sources, analytical methods, and theme interpretations enhanced credibility, whereas reflexive note-taking and audit trails increased dependability and confirmability (Reyes, Bogumil & Welch, 2021).

After reviewing interim results and analytic interpretations, healthcare management and organisational leadership professionals employed member checking and peer debriefing (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). According to Dan, Van Nguyen & Tran (2024), the extensive description of organisational contexts, leadership practises, and outcome metrics enabled readers to adapt the results to other situations. Regular research team methodological reviews and calibration enhanced the consistency and defensibility of reviews (Mannheimer, 2024). This strategy produced a trustworthy, transparent and practical synthesis of collaborative leadership and organisational performance in healthcare management non-profits (Naeem et al., 2024). Double-coding achieved 85% intercoder agreement; audit trail maintained for all coding decisions.

4.6 Results and Findings

Table 4-1: Summary of Barrier Clusters and Productivity/Performance Impacts

Barrier Cluster	Key Sources (2022–2024)	Impact on Productivity	Impact on Performance Management
Entrenched Hierarchical Structures	Ang’ana & Ongeti (2023); Martin (2023)	Decision delays; underuse of staff expertise	KPIs are inconsistently met due to a lag in corrective actions
Siloed Communication	Vaggers & Anderson (2022)	Duplication of work; delays in information sharing	Fragmented performance data; flawed reporting
Leadership Capacity Gaps	Hoogsteen (2022)	Inefficient programme execution; low team cohesion	Weak linkage between collaboration and output measures
Resource & Policy Constraints	Huebner & Flessa (2022); Singh et al. (2023)	Project interruptions; reduced innovation capacity	Inconsistent performance measures; limited trend tracking

4.6.1 Theme 1: Current State of Leadership Practices at LoveLife

4.6.1.1 Subtheme - Organisational Leadership Structures and Hierarchies

The systematic literature review found that LoveLife, a well-known non-profit organisation in healthcare management, had traditionally used a structured, hierarchical model. This is common for mission-driven groups that want to be efficient and accountable in their operations. The study used a theme analysis to investigate the details of these structures. It showed that the lovelies’ upper management level was usually controlled, with clear vertical lines of power and decision-making. Senior leaders and department heads were primarily responsible for strategic planning and monitoring finances. Lower and middle managers, on the other hand, were more involved with day-to-day tasks and carrying out orders rather than creating them (Ang ‘ana & Kilika, 2022).

This verticality made reporting clearer and more accountable, but it also put field employees at risk of losing their freedom and flexibility, a problem identified in larger studies of non-profit governance (Meister & Willyerd, 2020).

In comparison, Nagana and Chiroma (2021) found that many East African non-profits, especially those working in health care, used corporate-style structures to address donors' complex needs, ensure accountability, and comply with government regulations. This kind of organisational mirroring was also evident at loveLife, where external funds and frameworks required strict structures to protect resources and reassure external stakeholders of good management (Hoogsteen, 2020). But this method unintentionally strengthened organisational silos, making it harder for people from different departments to work together and slowing decision-making. Along the same lines as Berardo et al. (2020), the review found that loveLife's implementation of network-based leadership was inconsistent, often hampered by outdated reporting lines and staff self-interest.

One important lesson learned was that stiffness in the loveLife hierarchy affected the flow of information and limited knowledge sharing across levels. Senior management's unwillingness

to relinquish decision-making power caused delays, with multiple levels of approval often delaying decisions on program changes and innovations (Kinder et al., 2021). As a result, field teams and middle managers sometimes felt powerless, as they were not tied to the organisation's plan and couldn't make changes to address specific problems (Meister & Willyerd, 2020). The review found that this dynamic was especially strong when the environment changed rapidly, such as during public health events or funding changes, where people had to adapt quickly to continue providing services.

Still, the research showed that LoveLife's leaders had recently begun to wonder whether top-down government could work in the long term. The sector recognised the benefits of joint leadership, so small changes were made to eliminate roadblocks, such as hierarchical barriers, and to make decision-making more open to everyone (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022). For instance, cross-functional project teams and interdepartmental working groups were created to address complex program issues. This was done to move away from separate problem-solving methods and towards more integrated ones. There was some pushback to this change, however, some top leaders were still worried about how control and oversight might be lost. This shows the ongoing tension between responsibility and adaptation that Berardo et al. (2020) talk about.

The study also found that these changing leadership structures had significant effects on LoveLife's culture and staff involvement. Employees who worked in strict hierarchies often reported lower motivation because their contributions were limited by narrow job titles and little room for new ideas (Ang'ana & Chiroma, 2021). Decentralised and joint leadership models, on the other hand, seemed to give teams a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility, which ultimately improved the business's performance and quality (Kinder et al., 2021). Notably, the move towards joint structures also promoted knowledge sharing and mutual support, which are important for resilience and flexibility in mission-driven settings (Meister & Willyerd, 2020).

The literature also found that external groups, such as donors and government bodies, had a significant impact on how LoveLife's leadership systems operated. It was common for funding agencies and government partners to want clear lines of authority, thorough reporting lines, and strong audit controls. This made it easier to maintain official structures (Hoogsteen, 2020). But some sponsors started to push for more organisational freedom and management styles that involve more people. This was in line with a worldwide trend towards better non-profit government. This duality made things hard for LoveLife's leaders, who had to balance the need to be in charge with the need to work together (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022).

It was also clear that LoveLife's history of hierarchical leadership reflected broader cultural and industry patterns common among African non-profits. Ang'ana and Chiroma (2021) wrote about how colonial government systems and donor-driven management frameworks had made the non-profit sector in the area more reliant on vertical power structures. Even though these rules make things stable and predictable, they might make it harder for organisations to learn, generate new ideas, and address tough social problems.

According to Berardo et al. (2020), overcoming this kind of structural lethargy would require a planned, long-term investment in leadership development and in managing corporate change.

Lastly, the Chapter showed that LoveLife's organisational structures originally helped keep things in order and on track, but their flaws became clearer as the group faced new challenges from both inside and outside the company. Research agreed that joint, lower-leadership models with shared responsibility, mutual trust, and decentralised power were better for healthcare non-profits, as they were more flexible and resilient (Kinder et al., 2021). Still, for change to go smoothly, people had to let go of old ways of thinking and train leaders at all levels to handle uncertainty and encourage open communication.

4.6.2 Theme 2: Barriers and Enablers to Effective Collaborative Leadership at LoveLife

4.6.2.1 Subtheme - Organisational and Resource Constraints

The data showed that organisational and resource limitations significantly affected LoveLife's ability to utilise joint leadership. Multiple studies found that leaders' attempts to adopt truly joint practices were hampered by a lack of money, staff, and cohesive systems (Ansmann et al., 2021). Ansmann et al. found that managers in healthcare organisations had to prioritise practical matters over investing in team building and democratic governance. This made it harder for people to work together as leaders and to make decisions. Also, Bednarz et al. (2021) showed that when resources were limited during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, structural weaknesses worsened, making it harder for managers to maintain communication with staff and keep them engaged. In the case of LoveLife, ongoing budget cuts limited access to training, technology, and cross-functional projects, thereby directly hampering the frequency and intensity of joint leadership practices. Overall, these results showed that if structural barriers are not addressed, they could strengthen traditional organisations and undermine the welcoming environment needed for teamwork.

Ang'ana and Kilika (2022) stated that structural stiffness and bureaucratic delays made it very difficult for people to work together as leaders in healthcare and non-profit settings. According to their study, groups that do not talk to each other and make decisions are bad for building trust and making it easier for people to work together. The study found that confidence declined and new ideas ceased to emerge when leaders lacked the freedom or means to recognise good teamwork. It was found that operational problems at LoveLife were caused by both top-down management and insufficient empowerment of direct staff, who often knew important details about the situation.

This was supported by Berardo et al. (2020), who found that network-based and joint governance efforts often failed due to strong power structures and a lack of aligned incentives among stakeholders. These structural limits made workers less likely to add meaningfully to shared goals, especially when there was confusion about their roles or a fight over resources.

Lack of resources also made it harder to start and sustain staff development programs, which, in turn, made it harder for people to work together. Meister and Willyerd (2020) said that if you want to build a flexible and cooperative workforce, you need to invest in professional development, digital infrastructure, and learning opportunities. However, when money was tight and people were moving quickly, these kinds of investments were often put off, leaving gaps in key skills and digital readiness. Turner (2022) agreed with this and said that businesses

that could not afford to upgrade their technology or set up learning platforms found it hard to support projects involving people from different departments and knowledge sharing. At LoveLife, leaders often had to prioritise short-term results over long-term team growth and innovation because the company lacked robust digital systems, and funding was always unclear. The literature review showed that having sufficient resources and using joint leadership in practice go hand in hand.

Several studies also showed that the lack of good communication systems and methods made the problems caused by limited resources even worse when people tried to work together. Lunden et al. (2020) found that when resources are limited, the lack of structured knowledge management and evidence-based practice slows information sharing between teams and makes it harder for everyone to work together to solve problems. Their cross-sectional poll of nurses showed that being ready to work together depended heavily on clear communication and easy access to tools that support decision-making. LoveLife had trouble finding and fixing practical problems on time because their reporting lines were fragmented and they lacked sufficient feedback systems. This made workers less trusting of their bosses and less willing to work together on projects, especially during periods of significant change.

Despite this, the study also identified factors that made it easier for groups like LoveLife to manage limited resources. Hoogsteen (2020) provided strong evidence that fostering a culture of group efficacy, in which teams believe they can achieve their goals together, can mitigate the demotivating effects of insufficient external resources. Hoogsteen's research showed that teams could work together even when money was tight if leaders showed trust, honoured small wins, and promoted team-based thought. Ang'ana and Chiroma (2021) found similar things. They said that purposeful relationship-building and informal networks often compensated for formal resource constraints, boosting mood and encouraging creative solutions to practical problems. In the case of LoveLife, leaders who encouraged peer support and cross-team mentoring helped prevent staff from burning out and losing knowledge.

Huebner and Flessa (2022) also noted the importance of strategic management and systems thinking in resource-constrained settings. According to their study, good healthcare leaders actively sought to make the most of limited resources by carefully setting priorities, planning for different outcomes, and involving stakeholders. At LoveLife, leadership teams that used these methods were better able to handle external shocks and secure buy-in for group projects, even when things were not going as planned. The research also showed that being open about resource constraints and letting employees help build budgets built trust and got employees to work within the company's limitations rather than hate them (Berardo et al., 2020).

Lastly, the study showed that group learning and the ability to use tacit knowledge became increasingly important, even though resources remained limited. Even though there were no official tools, both Berardo et al. (2020) and Lunden et al. (2020) found that joint leadership was more effective when employees were allowed to share local ideas and best practices across departments. At LoveLife, regular reflection meetings and recognising ideas from the ground up enabled leadership to be spread out and built resilience. These flexible methods reduced the negative effects of top-down restrictions and allowed people to keep working together even as things changed quickly.

4.7 Limitations

This review is limited to secondary literature published in English from 2020 to 2024, which may have excluded relevant older or non-English studies. It focuses on healthcare NPOs, which limits generalisability but strengthens contextual relevance. Interpretive synthesis involves some researcher judgement, though steps such as double coding and peer review reduce bias. A thorough literature review was conducted to compile data on joint leadership in the context of LoveLife, a non-profit healthcare company. But some problems with how the research was conducted might have limited the range and depth of the results. First, the systematic review relied on published studies. This posed the risk of publication bias, which occurs when studies with positive results are more likely to be published than those with null or negative results (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Naeem et al. (2024) point out that relying solely on written sources might have left out useful grey literature, group reports, and policy Chapters, thereby making the evidence base less complete. Also, the admission criteria were very strict regarding language, time frame, and study design. This could have meant that relevant foreign and local studies offering different points of view were left out, as Reyes, Bogumil, and Welch (2021) pointed out. Even though thematic analysis provided substantial insight into how leadership operates, it remained interpretive, and the results were influenced by the researchers' biases and the theories they chose (Fife & Gossner, 2024).

4.8 Evaluation and Future Directions

Practical steps include flattening hierarchies, embedding performance metrics into collaboration, and investing in leadership development. Future research should test these interventions empirically and compare them across sectors. Even with these flaws, the review added important information about joint leadership in healthcare non-profits, which helped both theory and practice. To improve future studies, researchers should use mixed-methods approaches, involve more stakeholders, and examine how leadership changes affect people over time. As healthcare services change, digital health tools become more popular, and social norms shift, it is important to continually re-evaluate and adapt joint leadership models. Turner (2022) and Kudyba (2020).

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THEME 2: EXPANDING FRONTIERS

The Chapters in this section explore how higher education can evolve to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world without losing sight of its deeper purpose. A conceptual framework for human-centred AI literacy argues for embedding ethical, decolonial, and experiential approaches to digital education in the South African context. A study of Middlesex University's transnational campuses demonstrates how Education for Sustainable Development can be operationalised across diverse cultural and regulatory environments, with measurable impact on student collaboration and a sense of belonging. The section closes with a study that interrogates the tension between employability and holistic development in private higher education, proposing a framework that understands them as complementary rather than competing goals. Across all three Chapters, the frontier being expanded is not only technological or pedagogical, but fundamentally human.

Chapter 5: Human-Centred AI Literacy: Rethinking Experiential Education for Sustainable Digital Futures

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Keywords

AI literacy;
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Abstract

The rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (generative AI) has created an urgent need for the ethical, context-sensitive integration of AI into higher education curricula, particularly in the Global South. South African institutions, contending with digital inequality, educational inequity, and shifting workplace expectations, must produce graduates who are both digitally literate and ethically aware. This Chapter proposes a conceptual framework for embedding AI literacy within experiential learning frameworks, emphasising social justice, inclusion, and sustainability.

The study adopts a conceptual, literature-based methodology, drawing on the works of Paulo Freire, David A. Kolb, Neil Selwyn, and Audrey Watters, as well as policy frameworks including the UNESCO *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI* (2021a). Human-centred AI literacy is framed as a pedagogical strategy grounded in critical pedagogy and experiential learning theory, positioning AI as a partner within iterative cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and application. Findings suggest that ethically anchored experiential education fosters student agency, resilience, and critical engagement, enabling learners to navigate digital landscapes responsibly while challenging algorithmic bias and the remaining vestiges of colonial thinking. The framework also contributes to decolonising higher education by embedding African epistemologies such as ubuntu. The study's contribution lies in offering a practically applicable, ethically grounded framework for AI integration that supports sustainable digital futures while situating African perspectives at the centre of global AI discourse.

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Background

The rapid advancement of generative AI has triggered significant debate about its role in education and broader society. Across the globe, universities and schools are increasingly grappling with the implications of integrating AI into their curricula, teaching practices, and administrative systems. The speed of adoption has been particularly striking: in less than a decade, generative AI has moved from the margins of research laboratories into mainstream applications, raising urgent questions about digital literacy, ethics, and equity (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In higher education, this transformation has intensified longstanding debates about the

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purposes of education in a digital society and the skills graduates will require to thrive in an uncertain future (OECD, 2021).

In the Global North, AI integration is often framed within discourses of efficiency, innovation, and competitiveness. Universities in the United States and Europe have invested heavily in AI-powered learning analytics, adaptive platforms, and automated assessment systems, frequently positioning AI as a tool to streamline learning or personalise student pathways (Floridi, 2019; European Commission, 2021). However, the discourse in the Global South, and particularly in Africa, requires a different orientation. While there are certain similarities, questions of access, inequality, and justice are inseparable from discussions of digital transformation here. South African higher education institutions operate in a context characterised by stark digital divides, legacies of colonialism and apartheid, and structural inequities that profoundly shape both the opportunities and challenges of AI adoption (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Mutemeri, 2022).

Within this setting, it is insufficient to focus merely on digital competence or technical fluency. As Selwyn (2019) argues, educational responses to AI must be critically attuned to and interrogate the power relations and ideological assumptions embedded within technological systems. Likewise, Watters (2021) cautions against uncritical narratives of technological inevitability, urging educators to recognise the political and social dimensions of AI adoption. These perspectives resonate strongly in South Africa, where debates about decolonisation, equity, and social justice continue to shape educational reform (Zembylas, 2021). Thus, while AI presents opportunities to enhance teaching and learning, its integration must be guided by frameworks that are ethically grounded, socially responsive, and context-sensitive.

5.1.2 Towards Human-Centred Literacy

Emerging scholarship increasingly points to the need for what may be termed “human-centred AI literacy”. This conception of AI literacy extends beyond the acquisition of technical skills to include ethical awareness, critical reflection, and the capacity to engage with AI technologies in ways that are responsive to local contexts and global challenges. It recognises that AI is not a neutral tool but a socially embedded technology whose development and deployment reflect values, priorities, and biases (Floridi & Cowls, 2019).

Human-centred AI literacy foregrounds learners' agency, positioning them not as passive consumers of digital products but as critical agents capable of questioning, shaping, and challenging technological futures (Hossain, 2025). Importantly, this orientation aligns with African communitarian philosophies such as ubuntu, which emphasise relationality, interdependence, and the ethical imperative of considering collective well-being (Marwala, 2020; Mhlambi, 2024). By embedding these principles into AI education, higher education institutions can cultivate graduates who are not only digitally competent but also socially conscious and ethically grounded.

In this regard, experiential learning frameworks are particularly well-suited. Drawing on Kolb's (1984) theory, which describes learning as a cyclical process of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and application, AI literacy can be embedded in ways that actively engage students in real-world dilemmas and ethical problem-solving. Rather than teaching AI as abstract knowledge or an isolated technical skill, experiential approaches situate learning

within authentic contexts, thereby fostering deeper understanding and transferable capacities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Long & Magerko, 2020). When combined with critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), such approaches encourage learners to interrogate dominant narratives about technology, challenge colonial epistemologies, and imagine more inclusive futures.

5.1.3 Problem Statement

Despite the evident need, South African higher education currently lacks a comprehensive, ethically anchored framework for embedding AI literacy in ways that are both contextually relevant and pedagogically sustainable. Existing global frameworks of digital literacy and AI integration often assume infrastructural capacities and socio-economic conditions that do not align with realities in the Global South. Without deliberate adaptation, these frameworks risk deepening inequalities, perpetuating colonial logic and excluding marginalised voices (Zembylas, 2021; Ng, 2021).

Therefore, the central problem is: How can South African universities implement ethically anchored, human-centred AI literacy through experiential learning to build students' capacity for resilience, adaptability, and responsible innovation?

5.1.4 Research objectives

In response to this problem, the study has three interrelated objectives:

- To conceptualise human-centred AI literacy as a pedagogical approach that integrates technical proficiency with ethical awareness and critical reflection.
- To analyse the relevance of experiential learning theory and critical pedagogy for embedding AI literacy in ways that promote agency, resilience, and inclusion.
- To propose a conceptual framework that adapts global frameworks to the South African context by embedding decolonial perspectives and African epistemologies.

5.1.5 Structure of the Chapter

The Chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a comprehensive literature review that examines definitions of AI literacy, human-centred approaches, critical pedagogy, experiential learning theory, and ethical considerations. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, positioning this work as a conceptual, literature-based study. Section 4 presents the findings as a proposed conceptual framework for embedding AI literacy in higher education. Section 5 discusses the practical implications for teaching, learning, and curriculum design. Section 6 concludes with reflections on the contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

5.2 Literature Review

5.2.1 Defining AI literacy

The term “AI literacy” has gained prominence in global discussions about the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required for engaging with artificial intelligence in everyday life. While early uses of the term often emphasised technical competence - the ability to understand how algorithms function or to code machine learning frameworks - contemporary scholarship stresses its multidimensional nature (Ng, 2021). Selwyn (2019) describes AI literacy not simply

as a set of digital skills but as an orientation towards technology that involves critical engagement, ethical reasoning, and awareness of broader societal implications. Similarly, Dwivedi et al. (2021) argue that AI literacy must prepare individuals to navigate what they call the “multidisciplinary challenges” of AI, encompassing social, cultural, and political considerations as well as technical ones.

In the South African context, the definition of AI literacy requires particular nuance. Digital inequality remains deeply entrenched, with uneven access to connectivity, devices, and digital skills training across student populations (Patel & Ragolane, 2024). For many students, engagement with AI will not begin from a position of abundance but from conditions of scarcity, where participation is mediated by infrastructural and financial barriers. Against this backdrop, AI literacy must be conceptualised not merely as the ability to use AI tools but as the capacity to do so critically, ethically, and adaptively in contexts of inequity. It is suggested that AI literacy in higher education should therefore be framed as both a pedagogical and social justice project: one that enables students to interrogate power, agency, and the implications of automation for society.

An essential dimension of AI literacy lies in recognising AI not as a neutral tool but as a socially embedded technology that reflects particular values and interests (Floridi, 2019). Algorithmic systems are shaped by the data they are trained on, the objectives defined by their creators, and the contexts in which they are deployed. This makes critical understanding indispensable: without it, students risk becoming passive consumers of technological products, uncritically accepting AI outputs as objective or authoritative. AI literacy must therefore be understood as a practice of agency and reflection, not simply of use.

5.2.2 Human-Centred Approaches to AI

Human-centred approaches to AI literacy foreground learners' lived experiences, values, and ethical commitments. This orientation resists technocentric perspectives that prioritise efficiency and optimisation above all else, instead asking how AI can be designed and used to promote inclusion, justice, and well-being (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). In higher education, this means embedding AI in curricula not only as a technical subject but as a field of critical inquiry where students learn to question whose interests are served by AI systems and whose voices are marginalised.

For South Africa, human-centred approaches are especially salient. Ubuntu, the African philosophy emphasising relationality and communal interdependence, offers a compelling ethical lens for reimagining AI education (Marwala, 2020). Rather than framing AI literacy in terms of individual competitiveness in global markets, ubuntu-oriented frameworks emphasise the collective benefits of responsible technology adoption. Mhlambi (2024) expands on this by proposing that African epistemologies can inform new paradigms of AI ethics, challenging Eurocentric frameworks that often universalise Western values.

A human-centred AI literacy framework, therefore, must move beyond individual skill acquisition to encompass developmental trajectories that include cognitive, behavioural, and normative competencies (Hossain, 2025). At the foundational level, students gain basic digital and conceptual knowledge about AI. As they advance, they are encouraged to critically analyse

AI's social implications, engage in collaborative problem-solving, and participate in shaping ethical guidelines and policies. Experiential education offers practical means for embedding these competencies: through real-world projects, simulations, and community engagement, students not only learn how AI functions but also develop empathy, ethical judgment, and advocacy skills (Sanders & Mukhari, 2024).

Such approaches also support decolonial imperatives by disrupting the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks in higher education. Zembylas (2021) reminds us that decoloniality requires situated responses that confront the specific forms of colonial power operating in different contexts. In South Africa, this means AI literacy initiatives must address not only digital skill gaps but also epistemic justice, recognising the validity of indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western perspectives.

5.2.3 Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Learning

Critical pedagogy, rooted in the seminal work of Paulo Freire (1970), positions education as a practice of freedom in which learners become active agents capable of questioning oppressive structures and imagining alternative futures. Applied to AI literacy, critical pedagogy entails moving beyond the transfer of technical knowledge to foster students' capacity to interrogate power, inequality, and ethics in digital societies. Students should not only ask how an algorithm functions, but why it has been developed, who benefits from its outputs, and who might be excluded or harmed (Selwyn, 2019; Watters, 2021).

Transformative learning theory, as articulated by Mezirow (2000), complements this approach by emphasising the deep shifts in perspective that occur when learners critically reflect on assumptions, confront disorienting dilemmas, and reconstruct their frames of reference. AI literacy provides fertile ground for such transformation, as students encounter ethical dilemmas around surveillance, bias, privacy, and automation that challenge conventional understandings of technology. Embedding case-based learning, ethical audits, and deliberative dialogue into curricula can enable students to grapple with these complexities in ways that foster critical consciousness (Vuledzani, 2024).

Zembylas (2021) further argues that critical pedagogy for AI literacy must explicitly engage with decolonial ethics. Universalist frameworks grounded in Western liberalism cannot adequately address the situated experiences of the Global South, where historical patterns of exploitation and exclusion continue to shape access to education and technology. A decolonial ethics of AI instead calls for pluralistic, context-sensitive approaches that foreground local values, voices, and epistemologies. This resonates strongly with South Africa's postcolonial educational reforms, where curriculum transformation seeks to dislodge entrenched Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies.

By combining critical pedagogy and transformative learning, AI literacy initiatives can therefore empower students not only to master technology but also to reshape it. Learners are encouraged to see themselves as co-creators of knowledge and as active participants in digital transformation processes. This contrasts with technocratic approaches that reduce students to consumers of pre-designed technologies. The emphasis is instead on developing agency, resilience, and ethical responsibility.

5.2.4 Experiential Learning Theory and its Relevance

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), developed by Kolb (1984), conceptualises learning as a cyclical process comprising four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This framework has been widely adopted in educational research, particularly in contexts where skills and knowledge must be applied to real-world challenges (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In relation to AI literacy, ELT offers a powerful structure for embedding both technical proficiency and ethical reflection.

Students engaging with AI can be guided through authentic projects - for example, using AI tools for data analysis in research projects, experimenting with chatbots for teaching support, or participating in simulations of algorithmic decision-making. These activities provide direct experiences that serve as the foundation for reflection. Reflection then allows students to critically assess not only their technical successes and failures but also the ethical dilemmas and social implications of their actions. From these reflections, broader conceptualisations are drawn about the role of AI in education and society. Finally, students apply these insights in new contexts, thereby reinforcing learning and adaptability.

The socio-technical challenges of digital inequality heighten the relevance of ELT in South Africa. Experiential approaches provide flexible pathways for participation, even in resource-constrained settings, by allowing students to learn from locally available technologies and contexts (Tarisayi, 2024). In addition, ELT's emphasis on reflection supports critical interrogation of phenomena such as data colonialism - the extraction and commodification of user data by global corporations - which disproportionately affects users in the Global South (Zembylas, 2021). Through cycles of experiential learning, students can analyse how their own data is appropriated and consider strategies for responsible digital citizenship.

Furthermore, ELT supports collaborative and peer-based learning, enabling students from diverse backgrounds to share experiences and co-construct knowledge. This aligns with African communal traditions of collective learning and resonates with calls for participatory, socially embedded education (Marwala, 2020). By situating AI literacy within experiential cycles, higher education institutions can therefore foster not only technical skills but also the ethical resilience and adaptability needed for sustainable futures.

5.3 Research Methodology

5.3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a conceptual desktop research methodology, which involves synthesising and interpreting existing literature rather than collecting primary empirical data. Conceptual research of this kind is particularly valuable in rapidly evolving fields such as AI education, where practices are still emerging, and where theoretical clarity and normative direction are urgently needed (Mertens, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Instead of measuring immediate outcomes, the study analyses scholarly contributions, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks to propose a framework for embedding AI literacy in higher education.

The research is guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the socially constructed nature of knowledge. Interpretivism acknowledges that technology is not neutral but deeply

embedded within cultural, social, and political contexts (Taylor & Broeders, 2023). Accordingly, this study does not approach AI literacy as a purely technical problem but as a multidimensional phenomenon involving ethical, pedagogical, and contextual dimensions. By foregrounding interpretation, it aims to capture the complexity of AI integration in diverse South African higher education environments.

5.3.2 Research Design

The study follows a thematic synthesis design. First, a wide body of scholarship was reviewed, including international debates about AI literacy (Selwyn, 2019; Watters, 2021; OECD, 2021), ethical frameworks (Floridi, 2019; UNESCO, 2021b), African perspectives on decolonisation and ubuntu (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Marwala, 2020; Mhlambi, 2024), and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984; Long & Magerko, 2020). Second, themes were identified relating to pedagogy, ethics, social justice, digital inequality, and decoloniality. Finally, these themes were synthesised into a conceptual framework for human-centred AI literacy.

This approach ensures that the proposed framework is grounded in existing theory and policy, yet flexible enough to accommodate local adaptation. As Tuomi (2018) notes, conceptual frameworks must serve both explanatory and normative purposes: they explain phenomena while also guiding future practice.

5.3.3 Sources and Data

The “data” for this study consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy frameworks, and books by seminal theorists. Particular attention was paid to the UNESCO *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI* (2021a), which sets normative standards for global AI governance, as well as to African scholarship highlighting local contexts and decolonial imperatives (Mutemeri, 2022; Zembylas, 2021). In addition, works from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 2000) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) provided theoretical underpinnings.

5.3.4 Limitations of Methodology

As a desktop study, the research is limited by its reliance on secondary data. While this allows for breadth of analysis, it cannot capture the lived experiences of students or educators. Nor can it measure the immediate impact of AI literacy interventions. For this reason, the conceptual framework proposed here should be seen as provisional and generative, to be refined through empirical testing in South African universities. As Metcalf et al. (2021) argue, ethical and educational frameworks for AI must remain dynamic, adapting to changing contexts and technologies.

5.4 Results and Findings

5.4.1 Overview

The synthesis of literature reveals three central findings. First, AI literacy in higher education cannot be reduced to technical proficiency; it must incorporate ethical reasoning, critical engagement, and contextual adaptability. Second, experiential learning theory offers a robust framework for embedding AI literacy in ways that actively involve students in real-world

problem-solving. Third, decolonial perspectives are essential for ensuring that AI education does not reproduce Eurocentric assumptions but instead validates African epistemologies and responds to local realities.

Together, these findings culminate in a conceptual framework that positions AI literacy as a cyclical, ethically anchored, and contextually grounded process.

5.4.2 The Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework integrates three dimensions:

- Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984).
- Ethical Anchoring (UNESCO, 2021b; Floridi & Cowls, 2019).
- Decolonial Adaptation, ubuntu (Zembylas, 2021; Mhlambi, 2024).

The interaction of these dimensions forms a layered pedagogical cycle for AI literacy in South African higher education.

5.4.2.1 *Experiential Learning Cycle*

At its core, the framework draws on Kolb's (1984) four-stage cycle:

- **Experience:** Students engage directly with AI tools (e.g., chatbots, adaptive learning platforms, data analytics). These are not presented as neutral systems but as objects for exploration and critique.
- **Reflection:** Learners analyse their experiences critically, asking questions about bias, equity, and social implications.
- **Conceptualisation:** Insights from reflection are connected to theory, ethical frameworks, and policy debates.
- **Application:** Students apply these insights in new projects or contexts, reinforcing adaptability and resilience.

This cycle is iterative, emphasising continuous engagement rather than a once-off intervention.

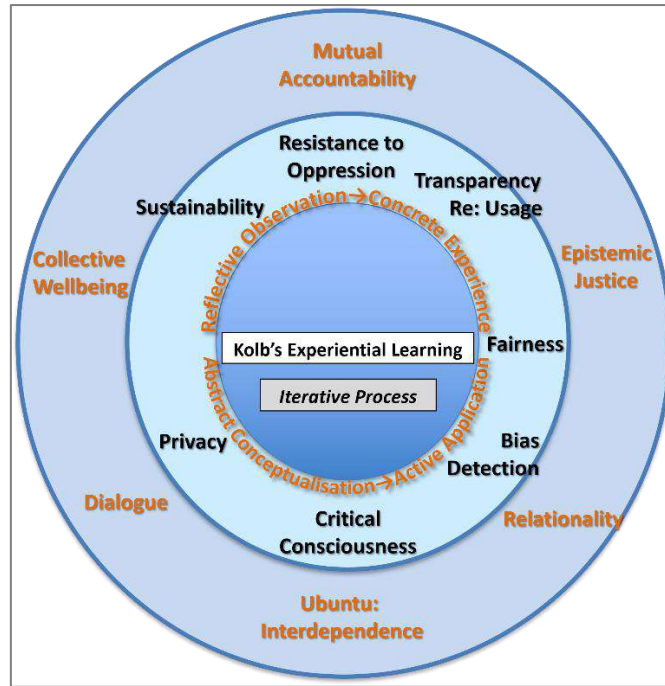


Figure 5-1: Core theoretical framework combining Kolb's experiential learning, ethics, and ubuntu. Source: Author's own construction.

This diagram (Figure 5-1) illustrates how experiential cycles, ethical principles, and decolonial adaptation form a layered pedagogical framework for AI literacy in South African higher education.

5.4.2.2 Ethical Anchoring

Overlaying the experiential cycle is a commitment to ethical principles. Following UNESCO (2021c), key principles include fairness, transparency, accountability, privacy, and sustainability. Students are not merely taught these principles abstractly but asked to apply them in experiential contexts. For instance, when developing an AI-powered educational tool, they must consider how to ensure algorithmic transparency, or when analysing datasets, they must reflect on privacy implications.

Responsible innovation requires vigilance throughout the learning process (Floridi, 2019). Embedding ethics in every stage of the cycle ensures that AI literacy is never separated from moral responsibility.

5.4.2.3 Decolonial Adaptation

The third dimension foregrounds decolonisation and African epistemologies. Zembylas (2021) emphasises that global AI frameworks often entrench Eurocentric values, marginalising local perspectives. By embedding Ubuntu principles - emphasising interdependence, empathy, and collective well-being - AI literacy can be reoriented toward community benefit rather than individual competitiveness (Marwala, 2020; Mhlambi, 2024).

This means students are encouraged to interrogate not only the technical and ethical aspects of AI but also the geopolitical and cultural contexts in which it operates. They ask whose

knowledge is privileged, whose voices are excluded, and how AI might be reimagined to support local needs.

5.4.3 Implications of the Framework

The conceptual framework has several implications for higher education:

- **Curricular Integration:** AI literacy should be embedded across disciplines, not siloed in computer science.
- **Pedagogical Innovation:** Project-based and community-oriented learning are crucial to operationalising the cycle.
- **Institutional Support:** Professional development for educators is essential, alongside policies for ethical AI adoption.
- **Social Justice Orientation:** By centring Ubuntu and decoloniality, the framework challenges colonial legacies and fosters inclusive digital futures.



Figure 5-2: Learner progression from technical competence to responsible innovation. Source: Author's own construction.

This diagram (Figure 5-2) captures the developmental journey of students, showing how the acquisition of skills, ethical engagement, collaborative agency, and innovation are sequenced into an integrated pathway.

5.4.4 Illustrative Example

Consider a hypothetical module where education students use AI to design adaptive learning tools for local schools. Students' first experience using AI software. They then reflect on issues such as whether the software reinforces English dominance at the expense of indigenous languages. Next, they conceptualise the issue through literature on linguistic justice and AI bias. Finally, they apply their insights by redesigning the tool to include multilingual support. This process illustrates how experiential learning, ethics, and decolonial perspectives intersect in practice.

5.4.4.1 *Practical Teaching and Learning Implications*

Building on the theoretical and conceptual discussions outlined earlier, this section examines how a human-centred framework for AI literacy can be applied to the everyday realities of teaching and learning. The implications extend far beyond technical skills: they touch pedagogy, institutional practice, ethics, and social justice. In the South African context, where digital divides and historical inequalities continue to shape the educational experience, these concerns are especially urgent. What follows is an integrated account of how curriculum, pedagogy, institutional responsibility, ethical engagement, and decolonial practice can function not as isolated tasks but as interwoven elements of an experiential, human-centred approach designed to prepare graduates for sustainable digital futures.

5.4.5 Curriculum Design

A critical starting point is curriculum reform. At present, AI-related content is too often confined to computer science or information technology programmes, leaving students in other fields underprepared to engage with the social, ethical, and practical implications of AI (Ng, 2021; Watters, 2021). Yet, as Dwivedi et al. (2021) point out, AI now cuts across every discipline, shaping law, education, medicine, business, and even the arts. In South Africa, where students frequently enter higher education from resource-constrained contexts, this fragmentation exacerbates inequality.

Embedding AI literacy as a cross-cutting element of curricula is therefore non-negotiable. It should not appear as a peripheral add-on but as a mainstream educational priority. Programmes in teacher education, for example, could incorporate modules that critically explore AI-powered learning platforms, helping future teachers to interrogate both their pedagogical potential and their risks of bias (Patel & Ragolane, 2024). In business schools, case studies of algorithmic financial decision-making could be used to highlight questions of equity and transparency. In this way, every graduate - regardless of discipline - can acquire not only technical awareness but also the critical judgement to assess the societal impacts of AI.

5.4.6 Pedagogical Strategies

If curriculum sets the foundation, pedagogy animates it. A human-centred and experiential approach requires a decisive shift from transmission-based teaching to active and participatory learning. Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning, combined with Freire's (1970) vision of education as praxis, provides a clear theoretical anchor. The challenge lies in practice: universities must design assignments that are project-based, problem-driven, and socially relevant.

Students might, for instance, be tasked with building AI chatbots that provide academic support in multiple South African languages, thereby addressing both the technical and cultural dimensions of inclusivity. Peer learning communities can deepen this approach. Sanders and Mukhari (2024) have shown how collaborative platforms enable students to share experiences, reflect collectively on ethical dilemmas, and build adaptability. Reflection should be embedded throughout - whether through journals, ethical audits, or presentations - to ensure that projects

do not merely showcase technical ability but also encourage critical articulation of ethical and societal implications.

5.4.7 Institutional and Educator Support

However, pedagogy will falter without institutional scaffolding. Faculty development is pivotal: lecturers themselves require technical fluency and confidence to guide students through experiential engagements with AI tools (Tarisayi, 2024). Professional development through mentoring, interdisciplinary workshops, and short courses is essential to equip educators for their dual roles as facilitators and ethical guides.

At the same time, institutions must set boundaries of trust. Policies on data privacy, intellectual property, and algorithmic transparency are not bureaucratic add-ons but necessary safeguards to ensure staff and students engage with AI responsibly (Vuledzani, 2024). The South African context brings an added layer of complexity, as infrastructural disparities remain stark. Universities with poor bandwidth or underfunded digital labs risk excluding already vulnerable students. Creative, low-cost responses - such as mobile-based AI learning modules that function offline - are vital in bridging this digital divide. Institutional leadership, therefore, has a responsibility to pair pedagogical reform with investment in robust digital infrastructure.

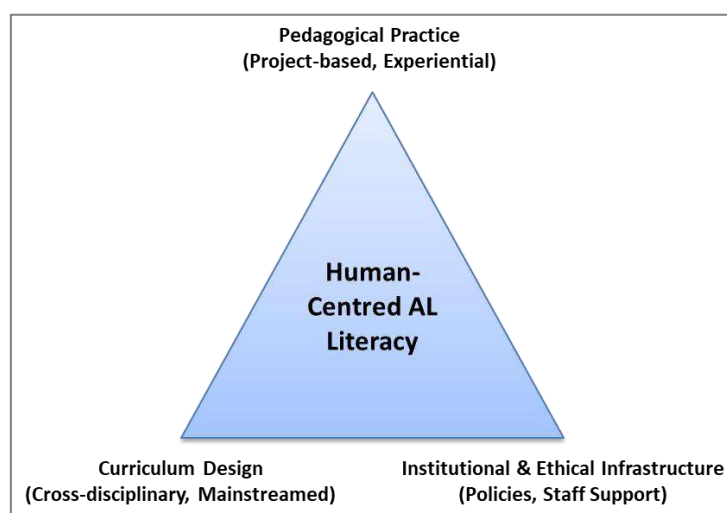


Figure 5-3: Structural dimensions connecting curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional support.

Source: Author's own construction.

The diagram (Figure 5-3) highlights the institutional responsibilities, curriculum integration, participatory pedagogy, and ethical infrastructure that must align to sustain AI literacy in practice.

5.4.8 Ethics and Responsible Innovation

Alongside institutional reform, ethical engagement is an indispensable dimension. UNESCO's (2021a) *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI* emphasises fairness, transparency, accountability, privacy, and sustainability as guiding principles. These must be translated into learning outcomes that prepare students not only to operate AI tools but to interrogate their biases and

limitations. Issues such as algorithmic grading or invasive learning analytics are already present on campuses worldwide, and South Africa is no exception (Vuledzani, 2024).

Responsible innovation, however, moves beyond harm mitigation. It requires cultivating graduates who actively shape the future of AI in alignment with justice and sustainability (Floridi et al., 2018). Experiential learning plays a key role here: when students are placed in real-world contexts where they must grapple with dilemmas of surveillance, algorithmic bias, or data ethics, ethical reasoning becomes a lived practice rather than an abstract principle. In this sense, responsible innovation becomes part of the very fabric of higher education rather than a distant aspiration.

5.4.9 Social Justice and Decolonial Perspectives

Finally, the framework insists on embedding social justice and decoloniality at the heart of AI literacy. As Maina and Kuria (2024) remind us, students' perceptions of AI are deeply shaped by access and privilege. Without intervention, AI integration risks reinforcing existing exclusions. Ubuntu, as articulated by African philosophers and echoed in educational debates (Marwala, 2020; Mhlambi, 2024), provides a powerful corrective. It shifts the emphasis from individual achievement to collective responsibility, from profit to communal well-being.

Decolonial perspectives extend this reorientation. Zembylas (2021) highlights the colonial logics embedded in digital systems, which perpetuate hierarchies of knowledge and power. In response, South African higher education must foreground indigenous philosophies, validate local epistemologies, and ensure that technologies serve rather than marginalise communities. Hossain (2025) similarly argues that technical competence must be coupled with critical awareness of how AI reinforces or disrupts social structures.

5.4.10 Practical Applications for Teaching and Learning

Practical strategies can translate these commitments into meaningful action. Students might, for example, design AI projects that address pressing local needs, such as overcoming language barriers in classrooms, expanding access to healthcare, or improving community safety. Such initiatives embed relevance into learning while positioning students as innovators capable of shaping sustainable futures. More broadly, the framework's implications demand that higher education treat AI literacy as a multidimensional endeavour: one that influences what is taught, how it is taught, and whose interests it serves. Curriculum reform, participatory pedagogy, institutional investment, ethical oversight, and decolonial practice must be understood as interdependent responsibilities rather than isolated tasks. By integrating these dimensions, universities can move beyond tokenistic approaches to AI and produce graduates who are technically proficient, critically reflective, ethically grounded, and socially responsive.

This lays the groundwork for the next step, which would consider the broader policy and strategic frameworks needed to embed such an approach across higher education systems.

5.5 Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

5.5.1 Conclusions

This Chapter has proposed a conceptual framework for human-centred AI literacy in South African higher education, grounded in experiential learning theory, critical pedagogy, and decolonial perspectives. The literature review highlighted the limitations of technocentric approaches that treat AI as a neutral tool, showing that AI literacy must be ethical, critical, and context-sensitive. The methodology, a conceptual desktop study, synthesised diverse scholarship and policy frameworks to generate a framework that is simultaneously global in scope and local in sensitivity.

The findings suggest that experiential cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and application provide an effective pedagogical structure for embedding AI literacy. Ethical anchoring ensures that students engage with principles of fairness, transparency, accountability, and privacy, while decolonial adaptation foregrounds ubuntu and African epistemologies. Together, these dimensions create a framework that produces graduates who are not only digitally competent but also ethically aware and socially responsible.

The Chapter contributes to scholarship in two ways. First, it offers an ethically grounded and practically applicable framework for AI integration in higher education. Second, it situates African perspectives at the centre of global discourse, addressing the urgent need to challenge Eurocentric dominance in technology ethics. In doing so, it adds to the growing body of work calling for sustainable, inclusive digital futures.

5.5.2 Limitations

As a conceptual study, the research is constrained by its reliance on secondary sources. Without empirical data, the framework remains theoretical and untested. It cannot capture the lived experiences of students or educators in South African classrooms, nor can it provide measurable evidence of impact. In addition, while the Chapter draws on a wide range of literature, there remains the risk of over-representing certain voices (e.g., Global North frameworks) relative to African scholarship. These limitations underline the need for cautious interpretation and ongoing refinement.

5.5.3 Future Research

Several avenues for further research are apparent:

- **Empirical Validation:** Pilot studies should be conducted in South African universities to test the framework's effectiveness in practice. Such studies might track student outcomes, resilience, and adaptability when AI literacy is embedded through experiential learning.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Comparative research across Global North and Global South contexts could illuminate how different socio-political realities shape the implementation of AI literacy.
- **Interdisciplinary Applications:** Further research could explore how AI literacy manifests across disciplines such as health sciences, law, and the creative arts, and

whether the experiential framework requires adaptation.

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Long-term research is needed to assess whether graduates trained in human-centred AI literacy sustain ethical engagement and responsible innovation in their professional lives.
- **Policy and Governance:** Future work should examine how institutional and national policies can support or hinder the integration of ethical AI in higher education, particularly in resource-constrained contexts.

By pursuing these directions, researchers and practitioners can refine the framework into a robust, empirically grounded framework capable of guiding sustainable digital transformation in higher education.

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Chapter 6: Embedding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Transnational Education (TNE)

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Keywords

Education for Sustainable Development;
Academic Governance;
Transnational Education;
Global Citizenship;
Quality Assurance

Abstract

Middlesex University, a practice-led and employability-focused institution, has adopted a new learning framework that further integrates Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into its curricula across global campuses. This initiative aligns with UNESCO's core competencies, systems thinking, anticipatory skills, and global citizenship and aims to prepare students for the complexities of a rapidly evolving world. The integration of ESD is strategically aligned with academic and corporate governance structures, as emphasised in the UK Quality Code and institutional academic strategies.

This study explores how ESD is being embedded across programmes at the London and Mauritius campuses and examines its impact on students' experience and employability. It also considers how academic governance mechanisms, such as academic assurance protocols and quality monitoring, support the effective implementation of ESD within a transnational education framework.

A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining institutional strategy analysis, curriculum mapping, and qualitative feedback from students and industry stakeholders. The study investigates how graduate competencies, creativity, critical thinking, and empathy are embedded into teaching, assessment, and employer engagement, and examines the influence of academic governance structures on curriculum innovation and quality assurance.

This Chapter offers a replicable model for embedding ESD in higher education and underscores the importance of aligning academic governance with institutional strategy and quality frameworks.

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 Background

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a crucial element of global higher education, focusing on equipping learners with the skills and values needed for a sustainable future, aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). As institutions engage in transnational education (TNE), integrating ESD into diverse curricula becomes increasingly vital.

Middlesex University reflects this commitment through its Strategy 2031, which positions sustainable development at its core. The university aims to transform student outcomes and serve communities globally, operating campuses in London, Mauritius, and Dubai. The London campus predominantly serves students from disadvantaged backgrounds, while the Mauritius campus has many middle-income students and international attendees. These diverse contexts require an inclusive approach to ensure all students have access to transformative learning experiences.

Central to Middlesex University's approach is its New Learning Framework (NLF), introduced in 2024, which embeds ESD across all modules. The framework emphasises transformational learning, research-informed teaching, and practice-based pedagogies. Competencies such as resilience, adaptability, and leadership are aligned with the UN SDGs, creating a structured pathway for integrating ESD into the curriculum.

This overview sets the stage for exploring the research gap in the implementation, effectiveness, and long-term impact of ESD across diverse higher education contexts.

6.1.2 Problem Statement

6.1.2.1 Institutional Context and Approach

Middlesex University's approach to ESD is characterised by whole-system integration, in which sustainability is not treated as an add-on but as a core element of all programmes. The university's curriculum mapping ensures that every programme is aligned with both graduate competencies and the UN SDGs, and quality is monitored through campus and faculty committees. Authentic assessments, often developed in collaboration with industry partners, provide students with opportunities to engage with real-world challenges, fostering creativity, critical thinking, and empathy.

The university also places a strong emphasis on stakeholder engagement, involving employers, professional bodies, and students in shaping the relevance and impact of ESD initiatives. Examples from the curriculum include modules such as "Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Sustainability" in Business Management, "Corporate Social Responsibility, Ethics and Sustainability" in Accounting and Finance, and "Global Climate Law and Governance" in Law. These modules are designed to provide students with practical, industry-informed experiences, supported by formative assessment, reflection, and personalised academic advising.

Despite the strategic emphasis on ESD and the development of robust frameworks for its integration, significant challenges remain in ensuring consistent and meaningful implementation across all the university's provisions and campuses. While the existing literature highlights the importance of whole-institution approaches, there is limited empirical evidence on how these strategies operate in transnational education settings, where cultural, regulatory, and operational conditions differ significantly from those on the home campus. This creates a gap in understanding how global ESD ambitions can be translated into locally relevant practice, and what mechanisms enable (or constrain) coherence across distributed learning environments.

To address this gap, the central problem this study explores is: *How can Education for Sustainable Development be effectively embedded in transnational education contexts to ensure both global coherence and local relevance?*

6.1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- Examine the institutional strategies and pedagogical approaches employed by Middlesex University to embed ESD within its transnational education provision.
- Explore the role of academic governance, quality assurance, and stakeholder engagement in supporting the effective implementation of ESD.
- Analyse how the UN SDGs are integrated into curricula, teaching, and assessment across the London and Mauritius campuses.
- Identify challenges and opportunities in localising global competencies while maintaining academic standards and institutional coherence.

6.1.4 Layout of the Chapter

The remainder of this Chapter is structured as follows:

- **Section 2** reviews the literature on ESD and TNE, highlighting key links, difficulties and frameworks relevant to the study question.
- **Section 3** details the methodology used in the Chapter, including a mixed-methods approach to data gathering and analysis from institutional documents, curriculum mapping, and qualitative feedback from students and industry stakeholders.
- **Section 4** presents the findings, focusing on the integration of ESD at Middlesex University and the role of academic governance.
- **Section 5** discusses the implications of these findings for policy and practice, with a particular focus on the challenges and opportunities of embedding ESD in transnational contexts.
- **Section 6** concludes the Chapter, offering recommendations for institutions seeking to develop sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready education across global campuses and future work, and to consider students' feedback to further develop the ESD approach.

6.2 Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Transnational Education (TNE), highlighting key links, challenges, and frameworks relevant to the study question.

6.2.1 Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) emerged from global efforts to address environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic instability through education. Its roots can be traced to the 1992 Earth Summit and Agenda 21, which emphasised the role of

education in promoting sustainable development (UN, 1992a; UN, 1992b). International organisations have played a foundational role in shaping Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD, as defined by UNESCO, aims to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to contribute to sustainable development across social, economic, and environmental domains (UNESCO, 2017). The OECD was among the early promoters of ESD as a strategic approach to reforming education systems through interdisciplinary learning and active citizenship (OECD, 2008). ESD was positioned as a transformative paradigm that fosters critical thinking, systems thinking, and values-based learning, aimed at equipping learners to address complex sustainability challenges. (UNESCO, 2012). Five priority action areas, policy, learning environments, educator capacity, youth empowerment, and local action, were further outlined in the roadmap for ESD, highlighting its systemic nature (UNESCO, 2020).

The adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), catalysed the integration of ESD into higher education (UNESCO, 2016; UNESCO, 2020). Universities are increasingly recognised as key actors in advancing sustainability in their core operations: ‘education, research, campus operations and experiences, institutional frameworks, reporting and community outreach’ (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2021, p. 3).

Whole institution approaches and contextual adaptation are increasingly recognised as essential for embedding sustainability in education, with education systems positioned as key leverage points for transformative change. (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2020). As per the Advance HE, institutions should consider how “sustainability competencies can connect with and reinforce other strategic priorities such as employability, enterprise, entrepreneurship, inclusive curricula and internationalisation” (Advance HE, n.d).

ESD is a pedagogical approach that equips learners with the competencies needed to address sustainability challenges. It promotes critical thinking, systems thinking, and participatory learning, aligning with the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2020). Indeed, in today’s educational sphere, ESD is increasingly recognised as a transformative educational paradigm that underpins progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It positions education as a strategic enabler, empowering individuals and communities to make informed decisions and engage in purposeful action to drive societal transformation and environmental stewardship (Tafese & Kopp, 2025).

ESD equips learners of all ages with the cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural competencies necessary to address complex global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, and social inequality (Homer *et al.*, 2025). It fosters critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and systems-based understanding, thereby enhancing individuals' capacity to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development.

Recent literature highlights the multidimensional nature of ESD, which encompasses three core domains of learning:

- Cognitive: Enhancing intellectual engagement and problem-solving skills to understand sustainability issues (Deepak *et al.*, 2024).

- Socio-emotional: Cultivating empathy, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal competencies to foster inclusive and collaborative action (Yoshida, 2024; Danageuzian *et al.*, 2025).
- Behavioural: Promoting the adoption of sustainable practices and responsible citizenship through experiential learning (Homer *et al.*, 2025).

Integration of ESD into curricula often involves cross-disciplinary learning, community engagement, and transformative pedagogies (Zguir *et al.*, 2021), and empirical studies have demonstrated that ESD initiatives significantly enhance learners' motivation, analytical capacity, and engagement with sustainability-related content. For instance, Danageuzian *et al.* (2025) found that integrating socio-emotional competencies into formal education improves empathy, motivation, and school climate, contributing to more resilient and sustainable communities.

However, embedding ESD effectively requires contextual adaptation. For example, Green School in Taiwan transitioned from a locally focused curriculum to one integrating ESD principles, using wetland conservation as a thematic anchor to connect global goals with local realities (Zguir *et al.*, 2021). This case illustrates how issue-based and interdisciplinary learning can foster sustainability awareness from the earliest stages of education.

6.2.2 Transnational Education (TNE)

TNE refers to educational programs delivered across borders, often involving partnerships between institutions in different countries. While TNE expands access to global education, it also presents challenges related to curriculum relevance, cultural sensitivity, and educational equity (Reeves *et al.*, 2024).

The Global Alliance for Transnational Education (1997) defines TNE as “any teaching or learning activity in which the students are in a different country to that in which the institution providing the education is based”. Knight (2016) expands the TNE definition by categorising TNEs into 2 major categories in her TNE framework – Collaborative versus Independent TNE provisions. The collaborative category of transnational education refers to arrangements in which foreign higher education institutions (HEIs) partner with local institutions to jointly deliver academic programs. Common examples of this include twinning programs, jointly developed or co-founded universities, and joint/double/multiple degree programs. In contrast, the independent or stand-alone category involves foreign HEIs operating without direct academic collaboration with local institutions in the host country. In these cases, the design and delivery of academic programs are managed solely by the foreign provider (Knight, 2016).

Several frameworks have been proposed to guide the integration of ESD into higher education, including transnational contexts. UNESCO's ESD Roadmap outlines key competencies, such as systems thinking, anticipatory skills, and normative reasoning, that should be embedded across curricula and institutional strategies. These competencies are designed to be adaptable across cultural and national contexts, making them suitable for TNE environments (UNESCO, 2020).

The TNE 3.0 framework, developed by Times Higher Education, positions foreign universities as catalysts for local development through sustainability, innovation, and entrepreneurship. It emphasises the need for TNE providers to align with national development goals while maintaining global academic standards, thereby creating a dynamic ecosystem of mutual benefit (Times Higher Education, 2024).

TNE has traditionally been critiqued for its Western-centric models, which may not align with local contexts. However, recent developments show promise (Reeves *et al.*, 2024). Middlesex University exemplifies the dynamic evolution of transnational education (TNE) through its active engagement in international branch campuses and collaborative academic programs. As highlighted in Knight's framework, institutions like Middlesex contribute to the global mobility of higher education by offering academic programs across borders, often through independent provision such as branch campuses or franchise arrangements. These models allow Middlesex to deliver its curriculum and qualifications directly to students in host countries, aligning with the "import/export" model of TNE. Such initiatives not only expand access to UK-based education but also reflect the university's commitment to internationalisation and educational outreach. By participating in both collaborative and independent TNE modes, Middlesex University plays a significant role in shaping global trends in higher education while navigating the complexities of quality assurance, academic oversight, and cross-cultural engagement.

6.2.3 Linking ESD and TNEs: Opportunities and Challenges

The convergence of ESD and TNE offers both opportunities and complexities. ESD supports lifelong learning that is practical, locally relevant, and culturally sensitive. It adapts to evolving sustainability concepts, balances global challenges with local priorities, and recognises the global impact of local actions (Agbedahin, 2019). TNEs can serve as a vehicle for global dissemination of sustainability principles, but their effectiveness depends on how well these principles are localised. The interconnection is particularly relevant to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

The integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into transnational education (TNE) is increasingly guided by global governance systems that set strategic direction and ensure equitable representation across campuses. International frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and UNESCO's ESD Roadmap provide normative guidance for institutions to embed sustainability into teaching, research, and operations. These governance systems promote fairness, inclusion, and coherence by encouraging institutions to align their strategies with global sustainability priorities while respecting local contexts (UNESCO, 2017).

One key opportunity for embedding ESD in TNE lies in curriculum co-design. By involving local stakeholders, faculty, students, and community partners in developing learning outcomes and content, institutions can adapt global competencies to local realities, thereby enhancing relevance and ownership (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). Flexible governance frameworks further support this integration by allowing institutions to balance global academic standards with local autonomy. Digital transformation also plays a pivotal role. Online and blended learning

platforms facilitate the dissemination of sustainability-oriented content across borders while enabling contextual adaptation through localised case studies and interactive learning tools (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, partnerships and networks among institutions, governments, and civil society strengthen ESD implementation by fostering mutual capacity-building, resource sharing, and intercultural dialogue (Horan, 2022). Leveraging the broad support for the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which multiple stakeholders widely endorse, allows universities to demonstrate impact, build networks, meet growing demand for sustainability-related education, and access new funding opportunities (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2021).

However, embedding ESD in TNE is also challenging. Ensuring contextual relevance remains a significant challenge, as global sustainability frameworks may not align neatly with local priorities or cultural norms, potentially leading to superficial or tokenistic integration or to being perceived as imposed or imported (UNESCO, 2020). This challenge is also intertwined with the need to decolonise education in TNE settings. Decolonisation of education at all levels calls for a critical rethinking of whose knowledge is valued, whose voices are heard, and how curricula are shaped. It demands that institutions move beyond the transfer of Western models and instead co-create educational experiences that reflect and respect local epistemologies, languages, and sustainability priorities (Du Plessis, 2021; Race, 2022).

Governance complexity also poses additional challenges, with TNE involving multiple layers of oversight: home institution, host country, and regulatory and international standards, which can complicate curriculum design and quality assurance (Knight, 2016). Pedagogical tensions may arise when ESD's emphasis on participatory and interdisciplinary learning conflicts with traditional disciplinary structures or assessment models (Lozano, 2017). This would also include the use of new technologies and tools, and Generative AI. Furthermore, policy and resource disparities across transnational campuses can hinder consistent implementation, particularly in student admissions, certificate recognition, research, funding, staff development, infrastructure, and community engagement.

6.3 Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to explore how ESD principles are embedded within Transnational Education programmes. The methodology was designed to capture both the structural integration of ESD principles and the lived experiences of stakeholders engaged in TNE contexts.

The mixed-methods approach was selected to address the complexity of embedding ESD within TNE, which involves multiple layers of institutional policy, curriculum design, and stakeholder engagement. By triangulating data from institutional documents, curriculum mapping, and student feedback, the study aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the formal and informal mechanisms by which sustainability principles are integrated into transnational programmes.

This approach also enabled the identification of contextual variations, recognising that TNE operates across diverse cultural, regulatory, and pedagogical environments. The combination

of methods ensured that both the intended curriculum (as documented) and the enacted curriculum (as experienced by students and stakeholders) were critically examined.

6.3.1 Research question and aim

This Chapter will attempt to answer the following question: “How do students perceive the impact of embedding Education for Sustainable Development in their experience on their study programme of choice?”

The following aims were used to frame the study:

- Establish how ESD can be consistently mapped to university programmes.
- Evaluate the students' perceptions and understanding of ESD and UN SDGs in relation to their studies.
- Evaluate the impact of increasing students' awareness of ESD on their view of their programme of study.

6.3.2 Data collection

Three primary data sources were identified and analysed:

- **Institutional documents:** A purposive sample of documents was collected from Middlesex University London and Middlesex University Mauritius, including strategic plans, validation reports, teaching and learning policies, and programmes and modules handbooks.
- **Curriculum mapping:** A structured curriculum mapping exercise was conducted to trace the presence and progression of ESD-related competencies across programmes and modules. UN SDGs informed the mapping framework.
- **Student Feedback:** Focus groups were used to gather students' views on TNE programmes at Middlesex University.

6.4 Ethics

The study was part of a wider piece of research into the implementation of the learning framework at Middlesex, and, as such, an overall ethics application was approved by the university system under number 29764.

The following was also adhered to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethical manner and in line with the GDPR principles:

- **Informed consent:** All participants of a focus group were fully informed about the research purpose, data usage, their rights to withdraw, confidentiality measures, and participation was voluntary.
- **Data protection and storage:** GDPR compliance was ensured throughout the project in line with Middlesex policy on storage and access.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** All recordings of data were anonymised, including audio recordings and transcripts, so the only way to identify students or staff was through

demographic information.

6.5 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was applied to all qualitative data sources, drawing on the flexible and widely recognised methodology outlined by Punch (2014). The process involved:

- Immersing in the data through repeated reading of transcripts and raw survey responses to build familiarity.
- Identifying initial codes by noting recurring language, patterns, and issues that aligned with the UNSDG and ESD.
- Reviewing and refining themes that emerged, ensuring they were conceptually linked to the understanding of ESD and UN SDGs.
- Synthesising the themes and articulating the findings in relation to the aims.

Given the objective of this Chapter to gain a broad understanding of students' understanding of ESD, the analysis focused on identifying themes and notable divergences across student cohorts, semesters, and data sources.

6.6 Results and Findings

This section presents the findings on Middlesex University's strategic and pedagogical integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within its transnational education (TNE) framework. The university's approach is characterised by curriculum innovation, graduate competency mapping, authentic assessment, and robust academic governance.

6.6.1 Strategic Integration and Curriculum Design

Middlesex University's Strategy 2031 positions sustainability as a core institutional theme, aiming to transform student outcomes and community impact through inclusive, future-focused education. The strategy reflects a commitment to preparing students not only for successful careers but also to become agents of positive change in their professions and communities. This vision is operationalised through a whole-institution approach that integrates sustainability into teaching, research, operations, and partnerships. The university has demonstrated its commitment to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through its membership in the SDG Accord and its consistent reporting on sustainability initiatives across its campuses in London, Dubai, and Mauritius (Middlesex University, n.d.). Middlesex ranks among the top 400 universities globally, out of 1,705 from 115 countries and regions, for its contribution to the SDGs, as recognised by the 2023 Times Higher Education Impact Rankings (Times Higher Education, 2023).

Stakeholder engagement is a cornerstone of Middlesex University's approach to ESD, ensuring that sustainability education is both locally relevant and globally impactful. Perspectives and recommendations of employers, government agencies, professional bodies, and students are considered in the design and delivery of programmes to meet evolving societal needs. In Mauritius, for example, programme offerings are aligned with national development priorities, including the government's vision for internationalisation, green growth, and skills

development. Academic programmes meet the requirements of local professional bodies, ensuring that qualifications are recognised and valued in the labour market. This alignment supports graduate employability and reinforces the university’s role in driving policy agendas. Stakeholder feedback is systematically integrated into curriculum development and review processes, making ESD a shared responsibility across sectors. Through these partnerships, Middlesex ensures that its graduates are not only equipped with sustainability competencies but also empowered to apply them to support regional transformation.

Governance plays a central role in embedding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) across the institution. The New Learning Framework (NLF), introduced in 2024, translated strategic intent into practice by embedding sustainability across all levels of the university system, from governance to management to services to programmes and modules. This whole-system approach ensures that ESD is not peripheral but central to curriculum design, teaching, and assessment (Middlesex University, 2024).

As a transnational institution, Middlesex University operates across diverse regulatory and cultural contexts. The parent university operating at the London campus is governed by the Office for Students (OfS) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), while the Mauritius campus is regulated under the national Higher Education Act. The Dubai campus aligns with the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). These frameworks shape institutional strategy and present distinct opportunities and challenges, particularly in aligning global sustainability goals with local priorities.

ESD is embedded in Middlesex’s academic governance, not only through its geographical reach but also through its inclusive curriculum design. Each campus serves different target markets: London has strong industry links across several of its programmes and attracts a diverse North London urban student body; Mauritius engages with African and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) priorities. Despite these differences, the university ensures coherence through shared graduate competencies and SDG mappings.

At the heart of Middlesex’s academic model are eight graduate competencies, which serve as foundational pillars for preparing students to make meaningful contributions to society and the workforce. These competencies underpin the learning outcomes across Middlesex University’s course portfolio and are systematically embedded into the design of every programme’s teaching, learning, and assessment practices. These competencies are not only taught but also reinforced through practical experiences such as internships, volunteering, student leadership roles, and community engagement. They align closely with the SDGs and are central to Middlesex’s strategic integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

Table 6-1: Mapping of Middlesex Eight Graduate Competencies to the SDGs

Middlesex University Graduate Competencies			
Leadership and Influence	Curiosity and Learning	Communication, Empathy, and Inclusion	Collaborative Innovation
SDG 16	SDGs 4 and 9	SDGs 5 and 10	SDG 9

Middlesex University Graduate Competencies			
Resilience and Adaptability	Problem Solving and Delivery	Technological Agility	Entrepreneurial Mindset
SDG 3	SDGs 4, 9, 11 and 13	SDGs 8 and 17	SDGs 1 and 8

Source: Own compilation

Every programme across the three campuses is mapped to both these competencies and the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This dual mapping embeds ESD into the curriculum, aligning academic delivery with institutional strategy and global priorities.

Middlesex University ensures harmonisation of quality assurance (QA) processes across its London, Dubai, and Mauritius campuses to maintain academic integrity and consistency in the delivery of ESD. Shared QA frameworks, including programme validation, monitoring, and enhancement procedures, support the university's transnational model. However, flexibility is built into these processes to allow for contextual adaptation, ensuring that programmes respond to the specific needs, policies, and priorities of each country and region. Students are active participants in QA processes, with their voices fully integrated into institutional discussions through formal roles on committees, in feedback forums, and in programme validations. The diversity of the student body is reflected in these engagements, ensuring inclusive representation across campuses. Notably, representatives from all campuses and students were involved in designing the New Learning Framework, contributing insights that shaped the integration of sustainability and graduate competencies. This participatory approach reinforces the university's commitment to co-creating quality education that is relevant, inclusive, and transformative.

A key strength of Middlesex's approach lies in the cyclical model of ESD implementation. ESD is embedded in the curriculum to enhance employability, equipping students with essential competencies such as systems thinking, ethical reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving. When graduates enter the workforce, they apply these competencies in professional settings, embedding ESD principles into their work environments. This creates a virtuous cycle in which alumni become agents of change, influencing organisational practices and contributing to sustainability transitions. Their experiences and feedback, in turn, inform curriculum development and quality assurance processes, reinforcing the relevance and impact of ESD across academic and professional domains.

6.6.2 Competencies in the curriculum

A comprehensive analysis of Middlesex University's curricula and quality assurance documentation demonstrates a strategic and systematic integration of ESD across all academic programmes. This commitment is reflected in the inclusion of sustainability-focused modules, authentic assessments aligned with real-world challenges, and the integration of competencies that support the development of socially responsible and environmentally conscious graduates. The university's approach ensures that students not only engage with sustainability concepts in theory but also apply them in practice, fostering critical thinking, ethical decision-making, and global citizenship.

First of all, at Middlesex, the curriculum is intentionally designed to embed graduate competencies and the UN SDGs across a wide range of programmes through dedicated modules and learning outcomes. These modules foster awareness and critical engagement with sustainability, ethics, and global challenges. The following examples illustrate how this approach is implemented within the Faculty of Business and Law:

- BA (Hons) Business Management: The module “Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Sustainability” tasks students with solving real-world challenges for local organisations, including sustainability certification and AI-driven innovation. Students present their solutions via elevator pitch videos, fostering applied learning and industry engagement, and linking the experience to SDG 8, SDG 9, and SDG 12, to name but a few.
- BA (Hons) Accounting and Finance: Modules such as “Corporate Social Responsibility” and “Ethics and Sustainability” explore ethical frameworks and sustainable financial practices, aligning with all the SDGs. Students are required to assess one SDG and its application worldwide.
- LLB (Hons) Bachelor of Laws: Modules such as “Global Climate Law and Governance” and “Human Rights Law” incorporate mootings and court visits, linking legal education to SDG 13 and SDG 16.

Additionally, the modules utilise authentic assessments, developed in collaboration with industry partners, to simulate professional scenarios and foster experiential learning. Middlesex’s approach to authentic assessment is informed by principles of meaningful learner engagement, alignment with real-world professional contexts, and the development of practitioner identities – an approach that collectively enhances the relevance and impact of learning outcomes (Ajjawi *et al.*, 2023). For instance, within the Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries, in the BA (Hons) Advertising, PR and Branding programme, students apply campaign-planning knowledge through NGO partnerships, demonstrating how sustainability can be embedded in the creative industries.

Secondly, formative assessment plays a pivotal role in competency-based education by offering continuous feedback that informs both teaching and learning. Unlike summative assessments, which evaluate learning outcomes at the end of a module, formative assessments are spaced throughout the curriculum to monitor student progress and guide instructional adjustments. This ongoing process allows educators to identify learning gaps and intervene promptly, thereby enhancing student engagement and achievement. Moreover, formative assessment encourages students to reflect on their learning, promoting metacognitive skills and self-regulated learning behaviours essential for lifelong learning.

In competency-based models, students learn by “doing” - engaging in authentic tasks that mirror real-world challenges. This experiential approach, supported by formative feedback, helps students develop soft skills such as problem-solving, communication, and collaboration. Research shows that when formative assessment is integrated with competency-based learning, students are more likely to acquire personal, social, and methodological competencies. These competencies are critical for success in dynamic work environments and align with the goals of twenty-first-century education (Alt *et al.*, 2023).

Thirdly, industry events are integrated into the curriculum and the overall student experience. For example, guest speakers' talks and panel discussions are organised for the Commemoration of International Women's Rights Day, linking the event to SDG 5 and SDG 10. Law students in Mauritius had the opportunity to visit the Office of the President of Mauritius, offering them a glimpse into SDG 16. Entrepreneurship events and competitions are promoted to help students turn their ideas into successful ventures (SDG 8).

Table 6-2: Final theme analysis from the student focus groups

Theme	Art & Creative Industries (ACI) Students	Health, Social Care & Education (HSCE) Students	Business and Law (BAL) Students	Science and Technology (S&T) Students	Student Learning Assistant (SLA) Perspective	Mauritius Students
Group Collaboration	- Increased peer interaction - Class structure changes limit collaboration - Reduced cross-programme collaboration - Fewer networking opportunities	- Limited cross-discipline collaboration - Case studies provide collaborative settings - Placements offer practical collaboration - More interdisciplinary work	- Group work within programmes is effective - Interdisciplinary collaboration good - Students like real-world preparation - Limited exposure to other disciplines	- Limited opportunities to collaborate with students from other disciplines - Students prefer to work with familiar peers but recognise the value of working with new peers - Intra-class collaboration depends heavily on group dynamics and lecturer facilitation.	- Students value interdisciplinary opportunities - Chances to interact beyond the programme - Desire for industry-relevant group work	- Limited formal cross-program collaboration, with interactions mostly dependent on overlapping coursework. - Informal peer exchanges provide insights into different programs but fall short of enhancing overall collaboration. - Group work challenges arise from unequal sizes, impacting the collaborative spirit of assignments.
Sense of Belonging	- Sense of academic community - Some networking opportunities - Fewer programme-wide activities	- Placement schedules limit interaction - Peer discussions are valued when available - Clinical settings create communities - Cohort identity can be fragmented	- Lack of shared modules between cohorts - Few networking opportunities - Hindered peer connections - Programme identity	- Modules are shared, but so is the interaction that takes place - Students in small programs appreciate larger shared modules for networking with other disciplines.	- Frequent requests for integrated activities - Stronger academic community - Cohort identity development	- Students feel a sense of belonging at university, thanks to supportive student associations. - Find their schedules, promote interaction. - Take pride in their community, but some feel disconnected due to time constraints and large seminars.

Source: Own compilation

Table 6-3: Summary of participant demographics

Faculty/Area	Number of participants	Notes
Student learning assistants (SLA)	7	Online form used for absent SLA's
Business & Law (BAL)	3 students	Faculty-specific group
Science & Tech (S&T)	5 students	Faculty-specific group
Health, Social Care and Education (HSCE)	5 students	Faculty-specific group
Arts & Creative Industries (ACI)	7 students	Faculty-specific group
Mauritius Campus	20 students	Campus-specific group

The students' views were analysed in accordance with Section 3.4 and synthesised into two main themes, which represent the initial impact of ESD. The focus group findings from the students who participated (n = 47) revealed interesting insights into the impact of ESD embedded in students' program curriculum. The two main themes found in the analysis were Group collaboration and a sense of belonging.

Regarding group collaboration, all students expressed a growing appreciation for interdisciplinary and peer-led learning, aligning with the collaborative innovation competency and SDG 9. From a subject-based perspective, ACI and BAL students noted a reduction in cross-programme collaboration but an increase in real-world preparation, reflecting an emerging entrepreneurial mindset (SDGs 1 & 8) and Problem Solving and Delivery (SDGs 4, 9, 11, & 13). The HSCE and S&T students emphasised the significance of placements and lecturer interactions in fostering collaborative activities, which demonstrate Communication, Empathy, and Inclusion (SDGs 5 & 10) and Resilience and Adaptability (SDG 3). The SLAs, in their role, reinforced the importance of more industry-relevant group work and inter-subject interaction, further supporting the development of Leadership and Influence (SDG 16) and Technological Agility (SDGs 8 & 17).

Regarding sense of belonging, all students described varying levels of academic community and cohort identity. The ACI and S&T students appreciated the shared modules and networking opportunities, indicating the achievement of Curiosity and Learning (SDG 4 & 9) and Communication, Empathy, and Inclusion competencies. HSCE students typically found a sense of community through their clinical placements, whereas the BAL students struggled with fragmented cohort identities, suggesting areas for strengthening resilience and Adaptability, as well as Leadership and Influence. The SLAs consistently advocated for additional activities to strengthen academic communities, reinforcing the importance of Collaborative Innovation and Empathy in inclusive learning environments.

When comparing the campuses, the students' views reveal some similarities. The Mauritian students cited the lack of intra-programme collaboration opportunities. However, many cited the informal collaborations as a strength and a positive aspect for the changes to the LF. The student noted the need for more interdisciplinary links and also mentioned inconsistencies in group sizes, which are evident in the formal format and impact their experience. When examining the development of a sense of belonging, the students on the Mauritius campus

expressed great pride in their campus, associating themselves with the university as a whole rather than with a more subject-focused one, in contrast to their Hendon counterparts. Where the Hendon students cited the schedule as a reason for a reduced sense of belonging, the Mauritius campus students cited it as having a positive impact on their sense of belonging. Overall, the learning framework has had a similar impact on the student experience in terms of group collaboration towards SDG 9; however, the development of a sense of belonging is higher among Mauritius-based students as they work towards SDG 5 and 10. These differences could be due to a scale issue, as the Mauritian campus has fewer students overall. This could also be an example of how a TNE approach has been successfully localised to have an impact at the Mauritius campus.

6.6.3 Practical/ T&L Implications

Embedding ESD at the institutional level in governance and management structures, particularly within the context of TNE, provides Middlesex University campuses with a unique strategic pathway to address global challenges while remaining locally relevant, thereby enhancing the institution's relevance and reputation among local and regional stakeholders. By aligning sustainability goals with institutional strategies, the university fosters a shared understanding of sustainability across diverse cultural and geographic contexts. This promotes inclusive decision-making and ethical reflection. Collaborative governance across campuses leads to gains in resource efficiency, as joint initiatives and shared expertise, at all levels, including strategic and academic, reduce duplication and strengthen impact. Leal Filho *et al.* (2021) highlight that effective governance frameworks, characterised by reliability, accountability, and adequate resources, are essential for integrating sustainability into higher education institutions. To effectively integrate ESD across campuses, Middlesex needs to adopt a governance approach that is sufficiently flexible to ensure global coherence while meeting local pedagogical needs. By adopting such an approach, Middlesex University positions itself as a transformative leader in transnational education, capable of addressing sustainability challenges through coordinated, context-sensitive action.

Further strategic investment is needed, particularly at the Mauritius University campus, to increase its impact through ESD implementation, research, and innovation. It is not enough to follow the lead of the parent university; rather, it is necessary to create new, context-specific knowledge that responds to the region's unique environmental, social, and economic challenges. The Middlesex University campus must aim to be a co-creator of solutions to complex societal challenges. This shift from universities as knowledge producers to co-creators of solutions reflects growing demand from students and employers for engagement with real-world problems and actors (Agusdinata, 2022). Addressing SDGs requires not only disciplinary knowledge but also transdisciplinary approaches that integrate action-oriented knowledge and new decision-making models. Universities play a pivotal role in generating, adapting, and implementing such knowledge, and Middlesex University Mauritius should expand its capacity for participatory sustainability research and actively involve non-academic actors, including local communities, municipalities, and innovative companies. This can be achieved through living lab models that foster co-creation and real-world experimentation (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2021). Collaboration opportunities can be further identified by mapping the business plan and

institutional strategies against the SDGs, fostering both internal and external partnerships to advance sustainability goals (Mori Junior *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, universities are uniquely positioned to lead by example in sustainability governance. As stated by Leal Filho *et al.* (2021), institutions that “walk the talk” by integrating SDG principles into their strategic and operational policies can serve as role models for other sectors. Middlesex University should continue to strengthen operational sustainability across its campuses through initiatives such as green building design and energy-efficient systems, while evolving its governance structures to reflect holistic, inclusive, and extramural sustainability leadership (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2021). This will not only reinforce its institutional credibility but also enhance its societal impact across both campuses.

Moreover, evaluating students’ perceptions and understanding of ESD and the UN SDGs in relation to their studies has significant practical and pedagogical implications. Firstly, it highlights the need to integrate sustainability more explicitly into the curriculum, especially in disciplines such as Accounting and Finance, where students may not immediately see the relevance of ESD and SDGs. Research shows that integrating ESD into university curricula enhances students’ motivation, engagement, and ability to solve complex sustainability challenges (Ferguson *et al.*, 2022). If students demonstrate limited awareness or understanding, lecturers may need to redesign modules to include sustainability-focused content, such as ethical investing, ESG reporting, or sustainable business practices.

Secondly, the findings can inform teaching strategies, encouraging the use of active learning methods, such as case studies, debates, and simulations, which make sustainability concepts more engaging and relatable (Hung & Pan, 2025). Thirdly, understanding students’ perceptions helps align teaching with employability goals by showing how sustainability intersects with professional practice. This can lead to the inclusion of real-world examples and industry partnerships that reinforce the relevance of ESD and SDGs.

Additionally, assessment methods may need to evolve to better capture students’ critical thinking and the application of sustainability principles, rather than focusing solely on theoretical knowledge (Espinoza-Ramos & Capucci-Polzin, 2025). The research may also reveal disparities in understanding based on students’ backgrounds, prompting more inclusive and culturally responsive teaching approaches. Finally, the evaluation serves as a feedback mechanism for continuous improvement, guiding staff development and encouraging academics to reflect on their own practices (Hung & Pan, 2025). Overall, the research supports a more holistic, relevant, and future-oriented approach to teaching and learning in higher education.

Furthermore, evaluating students from Middlesex University’s Transnational Education (TNE) programmes provides a mixed but insightful picture of how ESD and the UN SDGs are embedded in the Learning Framework (LF) principles and mapped to the graduate competencies, shaping their learning environment. All students from all the subject faculties value opportunities for real-world collaboration, particularly when activities are interdisciplinary or industry-relevant. This aligns with the development of competencies such

as Collaborative Innovation, Entrepreneurial Mindset, and Communication, Empathy, and Inclusion, supporting SDGs 5, 9, and 10.

Interestingly, students expressed gratitude for new modules in their programmes that explicitly integrate the SDGs and graduate competencies, noting their relevance to employability and real-world preparation. However, students identified challenges with balancing workloads and with the consistency of integration across programmes. Some students and staff reported limited awareness of the ESD and the UN SDGs, with several indicating they had not noticed significant changes in their learning experience or, therefore, in their understanding of these goals. This suggests that while the governance and framework produced are conceptually strong, there is room for further analysis and development of staff's teaching practice to strengthen the links between the framework and the subject-related curriculum.

Overall, while the teaching and learning work to map the ESG framework is beginning to shape student learning in meaningful ways, the feedback points to a need for further research to ensure greater visibility and integration of ESG across programmes, thereby ensuring consistent impact and understanding within the institutional TNE learning landscape.

6.7 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This study has explored Middlesex University's strategic integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within its transnational education (TNE) learning framework, highlighting how sustainability principles and graduate competencies are embedded across campuses and curricula. The Chapter highlights how Middlesex University has adopted a whole-institution approach, aligning its governance, curriculum design, and quality assurance processes to ensure the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are mapped into all programmes. The introduction of the New Learning Framework (NLF) and the mapping of eight graduate competencies to the SDGs represent a significant institutional commitment and an opportunity to embed this work to help prepare students as globally aware, socially responsible individuals for the future workforce.

Key findings from student focus groups revealed two main themes: group collaboration and sense of belonging. Students valued interdisciplinary and real-world learning experiences, which supported the development of competencies such as Collaborative Innovation, Entrepreneurial Mindset, and Communication, Empathy, and Inclusion. However, feedback also indicated inconsistencies in the visibility and integration of ESD across programmes, with some students and staff expressing limited awareness of them.

The main contribution of this work lies in demonstrating how ESD can be operationalised within a TNE context through strategic alignment, inclusive curriculum design, and authentic assessment. It also provides a model for embedding sustainability into institutional governance and pedagogy across diverse cultural and regulatory environments.

Future research should build on these insights by incorporating more in-depth qualitative methods, such as longitudinal interviews with a larger sample size and a cross-section of students from the TNE landscape. Additionally, the use of module and programme surveys would enable quantitative analysis, adding another layer to the qualitative insights. These

approaches will help evaluate the long-term impact of ESD integration on student learning, engagement, and employability across the institution's global campuses.

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Chapter 7: Cultivating Minds or Careers? Rethinking the Purpose of Higher Education

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Higher education purpose;
Graduate employability;
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Conceptual framework.

Abstract

The purpose of higher education has increasingly become contested between two dominant expectations: preparing graduates for the labour market and fostering holistic personal development. This study explores how private higher education institutions can balance these competing priorities by integrating employability with broader educational goals such as critical thinking, ethical awareness, and societal contribution. Using a two-phase research design, the study first conducted a semi-systematic literature review to identify key themes, institutional approaches, and best practices related to the dual purposes of higher education. This was followed by qualitative focus group discussions with higher education experts in South Africa to refine and contextualise a conceptual framework developed from the literature.

The findings reveal that, while employability remains a dominant driver due to market and stakeholder pressures, institutions increasingly recognise the importance of holistic development for graduate success. Key strategies identified include curriculum integration, industry partnerships, community engagement, personalised learning pathways, and the development of both technical and transversal skills. The study further highlights how factors such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, institutional positioning, and student expectations shape educational priorities. The main contribution of the study is a refined conceptual framework that positions employability and holistic development as complementary rather than competing objectives. The framework provides practical guidance for private higher education institutions seeking to develop graduates who are both work-ready and socially responsible in a rapidly changing global context.

7.1 Introduction and Background

Higher education has long stood at the crossroads of two competing objectives: preparing students for the labour market and fostering holistic personal development. Ron Miller (2011) critiques the utilitarian perspective that reduces education to a mechanism for producing employable graduates who serve a "global economic machine." This study examines how educational institutions navigate the tension between marketability and wholeness in education, balancing career preparation with the cultivation of creativity and self-authorship. The transformation of higher education has been widely studied, with scholars such as Trow

(2007) identifying elite, mass, and universal models, each serving distinct societal roles. Frank (2009) underscores the ongoing debate between education as personal development and vocational training, while Gillespie et al. (2001) highlight the role of curriculum design and campus experiences in shaping students' internal growth. Tight (2014) argues that higher education should ultimately cultivate intentional, critical, and engaged individuals rather than merely workforce-ready graduates. These perspectives raise the broader philosophical question of whom higher education should serve and what its ultimate outcomes ought to be, emphasising the need for institutions to balance personal growth, societal contribution, and career preparation in an era of rapid social and technological change.

The increasing pressure on higher education institutions to produce "marketable" graduates often comes at the expense of holistic education (Noddings, 2012). Universities must navigate the tension between economic demands and their mission to cultivate well-rounded individuals. This study analyses how higher education institutions should balance these objectives and whether their approaches reflect a convergence or divergence in priorities.

Universities are the sources from which professionals emerge into an increasingly complex society. They are tasked with training specialists in various disciplines and cultivating responsible citizens who are ethically committed to the environment and to one another (Ordieres, 2018). However, many institutions seem to prioritise the development of academic content knowledge and analytical skills over nurturing personal and social responsibility (Colby & Sullivan, 2009). As Fischman and Gardner (2022) argue, higher education in many parts of the world has lost sight of its principal purpose: to increase "higher education capital" by helping students think critically, express themselves clearly, explore new areas, and remain open to potential transformations.

The market-driven approach to higher education, in which institutions respond to consumer demands, may lead to a decline in intellectual complexity and a growing emphasis on vocational training. This could deprive students of the chance to become scholars who think critically and instead reinforce their roles as consumers. Educators often assume that outcomes such as personal development, emotional intelligence, and ethical responsibility will arise as by-products of a university education without requiring explicit attention (Colby & Sullivan, 2009).

Conversely, scholars maintain that universities should focus on teaching students how to bolster the foundations of their excellence, integrity, and social contribution. Institutions must continually navigate issues of morality and develop responsible citizens equipped with autonomy, strategic knowledge, and ethical commitment (Ordieres, 2018).

The tension between career preparation and holistic personal development presents a longstanding challenge in higher education. The aim of this study is to analyse how institutions, with a focus on private higher education institutions, navigate this balance and whether their approaches reflect convergence or divergence in priorities. As a result, the study will propose a framework to navigate this focus.

7.2 Methodology

This study employs a two-phase research design, combining a semi-systematic literature review (Snyder, 2019; Snyder, 2023) and qualitative research to develop and refine a conceptual framework for balancing career preparation and holistic education in private higher education in South Africa. The first phase involves identifying and analysing scholarly articles, while the second phase refines the conceptual framework through expert discussions in the South African private higher education context.

7.2.1 Phase 1: Semi-Systematic Literature Review

The purpose of a literature review, according to Snyder (2019), is to systematically collect and synthesise previous research. There are different types of systematic literature reviews. The study employed a semi-systematic review to provide an overview of the topic and to create an agenda for the subsequent qualitative research (Snyder, 2019). This agenda was presented as a conceptual framework that formed the basis for focus group discussions in the qualitative part of the research (Snyder, 2023). The semi-systematic literature review explored how international universities balance the dual purposes of higher education: employability and holistic development. The review followed a structured approach, including the formulation of inclusion and exclusion criteria, database searches, and qualitative content analysis.

7.2.1.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following criteria guide the selection of literature:

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Studies focusing on higher education's role in career preparation and holistic development.
- Research discussing institutional policies, curricula, and pedagogical approaches to balancing these dual objectives.
- Only empirical studies, theoretical analyses, case studies and systematic reviews.
- Qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method studies.
- Studies using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, surveys, document analysis and/or observations.
- Articles with a clear conceptual or empirical basis.

Exclusion criteria:

- Studies unrelated to higher education.
- Articles focusing solely on vocational education or professional training without discussing broader educational goals.
- Opinion articles and editorials
- Literature not published in English.

7.2.1.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Relevant articles were identified using the academic databases EBSCOhost and Google Scholar. A keyword search strategy was applied using terms such as higher education purpose, employability, education, holistic learning in universities, creativity in higher education, career preparation, personal development, and societal development. After screening abstracts and full texts, ten articles were selected for in-depth analysis.

A thematic analysis was conducted to extract key insights from the selected literature. Themes were identified by patterns in how universities structure curricula, pedagogy, and institutional policies to address both marketability and holistic education. The findings informed the development of a conceptual framework (Snyder, 2023) that seeks to balance these dimensions.

7.2.2 Phase 2: Qualitative Research – Focus Group Discussion

Following the development of the conceptual framework, a qualitative approach was used to refine and contextualise it for private higher education institutions in South Africa. Eight higher education experts participated in a focus group to evaluate the framework's relevance and applicability in the local context.

7.2.2.1 Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling selected eight participants with expertise in higher education policy, curriculum development, and pedagogy in South Africa. The sample includes:

- Senior academics and deans from South African private higher education institutions.
- Policy analysts specialising in private higher education.
- Representatives from institutions' career development offices.
- Scholars with expertise in transformative and holistic education.

7.2.2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The focus group discussion followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to provide insights into the conceptual framework's strengths, limitations, and applicability. Key discussion points included:

- The practicality of balancing career readiness and holistic education in South African private higher education institutions.
- Institutional barriers and enablers in implementing such a balance.
- Adaptations needed for contextual relevance.

The discussion was recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Data coding was conducted to identify refinements to the framework, ensuring that it accounts for the unique socio-economic and policy dynamics of South African private higher education.

7.3 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical research standards, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality of responses. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee.

7.4 Literature review

An initial search of EBSCOhost and Google Scholar identified 53 articles. After all the Chapters were screened and the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, 10 Chapters remained for extraction and analysis. These studies were conducted in Europe, the United Kingdom and selected regions in Asia, South America, and Australia. Six articles were reviews, and four were primary studies. The four studies that collected primary data were Abelha et al. (2020), Goulart et al. (2021), Brooks et al. (2020), and Wohlgezongen and Contronei-Baird (2023). Table 7-1 below lists all 10 selected articles.

Table 7-1: Articles selected for review

	Authors	Year	Article title	Journal
1.	Samo, P.	2014	The role of higher education in supporting graduates' early labour market careers	International Journal of Manpower
2.	Brooks, R., Gupta, A., Jayadeva, S. & Abrahams, J.	2020	Students' views about the purpose of higher education: a comparative analysis of six European countries.	Higher Education Research and Development
3.	Abelha, M., Fernandes, S., Mesquita, D., Saeber, F. & Ferreira-Oliveira, A	2020	Graduate Employability and Competence Development in Higher Education—A Systematic Literature Review Using PRISMA	Sustainability
4.	Donald, W., Ashleigh, M.J. & Baruch, Y.	2018	Students' perceptions of education and employability.	Career Development International
5.	Winterton, J. & Turner, J.	2019	Preparing graduates for work readiness: an overview and agenda.	Education and Training
6.	Wohlgezongen, F. & Contronei-Bairs, V.	2023	In Search of Responsible Career Guidance: Career Capital and Personal Purpose in Restless Times.	Journal of Management Education
7.	Rae, D.	2007	Connecting enterprise and graduate employability challenges to the higher education culture and curriculum	Education and Training
8.	Horinko, L.M.	2018	Graduate education and humanities crisis	Canadian Review of American Studies
9.	Goulart, V.G., Liboni, L. & Cezarino, L.	2021	Balancing skills in the digital transformation era: The future of jobs and the role of higher education	Industry and Higher Education
10.	Mohan, M., Sharma, P., Arora, S., Badesra, S., Dhankhar, G. & Guar, R.	2024	Evaluating Education's Impact on Workplace Readiness: A Meta-Analytical Examination	Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental

The thematic analysis of the 10 studies identified the most common focus areas: employability was the most frequently recurring theme, followed by higher education purpose, and graduate work readiness, career guidance, and management education focus and purpose.

The Chapters present various perspectives on balancing career preparation with holistic personal development in higher education. These approaches could be broadly categorised as market-driven and holistic, with many institutions attempting to integrate elements of both, as shown in Table 7-2.

Table 7-2: Institutional Approaches to be Balanced

Market-driven approaches	
Focus on meeting job market demands and enhancing employability.	
Abelha et al. (2020).	Align educational outcomes with industry needs.
Goulart et al. (2021).	Adapt to the evolving demands of the technology job market.
Holistic approaches	
Prioritise personal development and broader educational goals	
Brooks et al. (2020)	Students view higher education as serving multiple purposes beyond career preparation.
Wohlgezogen & Cotronei-Baird (2023).	Propose integrating career capital development with personal purpose.

The Chapters also discuss various integration strategies adopted by universities to address both career preparation and personal development in higher education. However, the studies also note ongoing challenges in implementing these balanced approaches, including resource constraints, differing stakeholder expectations, and the rapid pace of change in the job market. The integration strategies discussed are:

- Curriculum integration

Rae (2007).	Connect enterprise education with employability and career development.
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- Skills balancing

Goulart et al. (2021).	Focus on soft skills alongside technical competencies, especially in IT education.
Abelha et al. (2020).	Integrate both technical and transversal competencies.

- Stakeholder collaboration

Winterton & Turner (2019).	Reconcile different stakeholder perspectives on graduate work readiness.
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- Personalised learning

Donald et al. (2018).	Emphasise Career Development Learning (CDL) to enhance employability and support personal growth.
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The Chapters also present various perspectives on educational outcomes. Not one type was overwhelmingly dominant across the studies, suggesting diverse perspectives on outcomes and approaches. However, four distinct outcome types could be identified, namely:

- **Career preparations:** The emphasis is on employability, industry alignment and technical skills. Implementation strategies for career preparation outcomes include integrating industry partnerships into educational programmes, incorporating work-integrated learning experiences, and developing curricula that reflect current industry trends and technologies.

Abelha et al. (2020).	Emphasise aligning educational outcomes with industry needs.
Goulart et al. (2021).	Stress adapting to the evolving demands of the technology job market.

- **Personal development:** The focus is on critical thinking, personal growth and adaptability. Implementation strategies for personal development outcomes include adopting student-centred instructional approaches, incorporating reflective practices and self-assessment into the curriculum, and providing opportunities for students to explore and develop their personal values and goals.

Brooks et al. (2020).	Students view personal development as a significant purpose of higher education.
Wohlgezogen & Cotronei-Baird (2023).	Propose integrating personal purpose development with career preparation.

- **Integrated outcomes:** A combination of technical and soft skill development. Implementation strategies for integrated outcomes include redesigning curricula to incorporate both technical and soft skill development, implementing Career Development Learning programmes that address both career and personal growth, and creating learning experiences that require students to apply both technical knowledge and soft skills.

Donald et al. (2018).	Highlight the importance of Career Development Learning (CDL) in enhancing both employability and personal growth.
Abelha et al. (2020).	Call for the development of both technical and transversal competencies.

- **Societal contribution:** The emphasis is on social responsibility, civic engagement and ethical decision-making. Strategies for achieving societal contribution outcomes include integrating ethics and social responsibility into cross-disciplinary curricula, providing opportunities for community engagement and service learning, and encouraging critical thinking about societal issues and the role of one's profession in addressing them.

Brooks et al. (2020)	Students view societal development as one of the purposes of higher education.
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The studies analysed also present diverse stakeholder perspectives (concerns and challenges) on higher education outcomes and approaches. Students' primary concerns focused on employability, personal growth and return on investment. For employers, the main concerns were job-ready graduates and the relevance of their skills. Higher education institutions' concerns included balancing multiple objectives and maintaining academic standards, while policymakers sought high graduate employment rates and increased capacity for innovation.

Students face challenges in balancing immediate job market needs with long-term personal development. For employers, these include rapidly changing skill requirements and the gap between education and industry needs. Higher education institutions struggle to reconcile diverse stakeholder expectations and resource constraints. Policymakers face challenges in aligning education policies with economic and social goals.

Thus, each stakeholder group had distinct primary concerns, desired outcomes, and challenges, reflecting their unique perspectives and roles in the higher education ecosystem, as indicated in Table 7-3.

Table 7-3: Stakeholder perspectives

Student perspectives	
Brooks et al. (2020).	Students recognise the importance of employability but also value personal and intellectual development.
Donald et al. (2018).	Students express awareness of the need for both technical and soft skills.
Donald et al. (2018).	Students express concerns about the financial implications of higher education and its impact on their future careers.
Employer perspectives	
Abelha et al. (2020).	Value graduates with both technical proficiency and soft skills.
Ray (2007).	Perceive a gap between skills taught in higher education and workplace requirements.
Goulart et al. (2021).	Seek graduates who can adapt to rapidly changing technological and business environments.
Policymaker perspectives	
Winterton & Turner (2019).	Focus on aligning higher education outcomes with national economic and innovation strategies.
Winterton & Turner (2019).	Concern with ensuring that higher education contributes to social mobility and workforce development.
Abelha et al. (2020).	Need for policies that support the development of both technical and transversal skills in higher education.

Several Chapters discussed innovative approaches and best practices for integrating career preparation with personal development in higher education. These approaches aim to create a more holistic educational experience that prepares students for both their professional careers and personal growth. Table 7-4 summarises the best practices reported in the studies.

Table 7-4: Best practices

Industry partnerships	Establish strong connections between higher education institutions and industry.
Reflective practices	Incorporate reflection into the curriculum.
Flexible and adaptive curricula	Regularly update to remain relevant.
Holistic assessment	Evaluate both technical skills and personal competencies.
Personalised learning pathways	Offer customised options
Ethical and Social Responsibility Integration	Incorporate across disciplines

Some of the emerging approaches discussed by the studies are listed and explained in Table 7-5.

Table 7-5: Emerging approaches

Personal Purpose Integration	
Wohlgezogen & Cotronei-Baird (2023).	This approach integrates career capital development with personal purpose exploration. Aims to help students align their career goals with their personal values and aspirations.
Multi-stakeholder Collaboration	
Winterton & Turner (2019).	Emphasise the importance of involving multiple stakeholders (academia, industry, students) in curriculum design and implementation. Ensures that educational programs address diverse needs and perspectives.
Competence-based Curriculum Design	
Abelha et al. (2020).	Advocate for embedding both technical and transversal competencies into curriculum design. Ensures a balanced development of job-specific skills and broader personal competencies.

A few approaches, identified in the literature as successfully balancing the holistic educational experience, were also identified during the analysis, as shown in Table 7-6.

Table 7-6: Successful Balance Approaches

Career Development Learning (CDL)	
Donald et al. (2018).	Highlight the effectiveness of CDL in enhancing both employability and personal growth. Integrates career preparation into the broader curriculum, helping students develop both job-specific skills and transferable competencies.
Enterprise Education Integration	
Rae (2007).	Proposes connecting enterprise education with employability and career development in curriculum design. Embeds entrepreneurial thinking and skills across various disciplines, fostering both career readiness and personal initiative.
Soft Skills Focus in Education	
Goulart et al. (2021).	Emphasise the successful integration of soft skills development alongside technical training. Addresses industry needs while also supporting students' personal development.

Research across multiple continents shows that higher education successfully balances career preparation and personal development through curriculum redesign and blended learning approaches, with positive reception from students and employers.

Following the presentation of the literature review results, a framework was developed to form the basis of the qualitative research focus group discussions in the next phase of the study.

7.5 Conceptual Framework: Balancing Employability and Holistic Development in Higher Education

7.5.1 Introduction

The conceptual framework presented here is developed from a semi-systematic literature review to be refined through focus group discussions in the study's second phase. This framework addresses the balance between labour market demands for job-ready graduates and the need for holistic personal development in higher education.

7.5.2 Core Themes from Literature Review

- Employability (most frequent)
- Higher Education Purpose (second most frequent)
- Graduate Work Readiness
- Career Guidance
- Management Education Focus and Purpose

7.5.3 Institutional Approaches to Balancing Education

Two primary approaches were identified:

- Market-driven approaches: Focus on meeting job market demands and enhancing employability.
- Holistic approaches: Prioritise personal development and broader educational goals.

7.5.4 Integration Strategies in Higher Education

Universities employ various strategies to integrate career preparation and personal development:

- Curriculum Integration: Connecting enterprise education with employability (Rae, 2007).
- Skills Balancing: Developing both soft and technical skills (Goulart et al., 2021; Abelha et al., 2020).
- Stakeholder Collaboration: Aligning expectations among students, employers, and policymakers (Winterton & Turner, 2019).
- Personalised Learning: Supporting Career Development Learning (CDL) (Donald et al., 2018).

7.5.5 Higher Education Outcomes

Four key educational outcome types were identified:

- **Career Preparation:** Focus on employability, industry alignment, and technical skills (Abelha et al., 2020; Goulart et al., 2021).
- **Personal Development:** Emphasising critical thinking, adaptability, and personal growth (Brooks et al., 2020; Wohlgezogen & Cotronei-Baird, 2023).
- **Integrated Outcomes:** Combining technical and soft skill development (Donald et al., 2018; Abelha et al., 2020).
- **Societal Contribution:** Emphasising civic engagement, social responsibility, and ethics (Brooks et al., 2020).

7.5.6 Stakeholder Perspectives and Challenges

Each stakeholder group has distinct concerns and challenges:

- **Students:** Desire both employability and personal growth, but worry about financial return on investment.
- **Employers:** Seek job-ready graduates with relevant skills, but see gaps in higher education outcomes.
- **Higher Education Institutions:** Struggle to balance diverse objectives within resource constraints.
- **Policymakers:** Focus on high graduate employment and economic development, but face difficulties aligning policies with industry needs.

7.5.7 Best Practices for Balancing Career and Personal Development

- **Industry Partnerships:** Strengthening ties between academia and the workplace.
- **Reflective Practices:** Encouraging student reflection within curricula.
- **Flexible and Adaptive Curricula:** Regularly updating educational programmes.
- **Holistic Assessment:** Evaluating both technical competencies and personal growth.
- **Personalised Learning Pathways:** Customised educational tracks.
- **Ethical and Social Responsibility Integration:** Embedding ethics across disciplines.

7.5.8 Emerging Approaches in Higher Education

- **Personal Purpose Integration:** Aligning career capital development with individual aspirations (Wohlgezogen & Cotronei-Baird, 2023).
- **Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Engaging industry, academia, and students in curriculum design (Winterton & Turner, 2019).
- **Competence-Based Curriculum Design:** Embedding both technical and transversal competencies (Abelha et al., 2020).

7.5.9 Successful Balance Approaches

- **Career Development Learning (CDL):** Integrating career preparation into curricula to enhance both employability and personal growth (Donald et al., 2018).
- **Enterprise Education Integration:** Embedding entrepreneurial thinking across disciplines (Rae, 2007).
- **Soft Skills Focus in Education:** Integrating soft skills alongside technical training (Goulart et al., 2021).

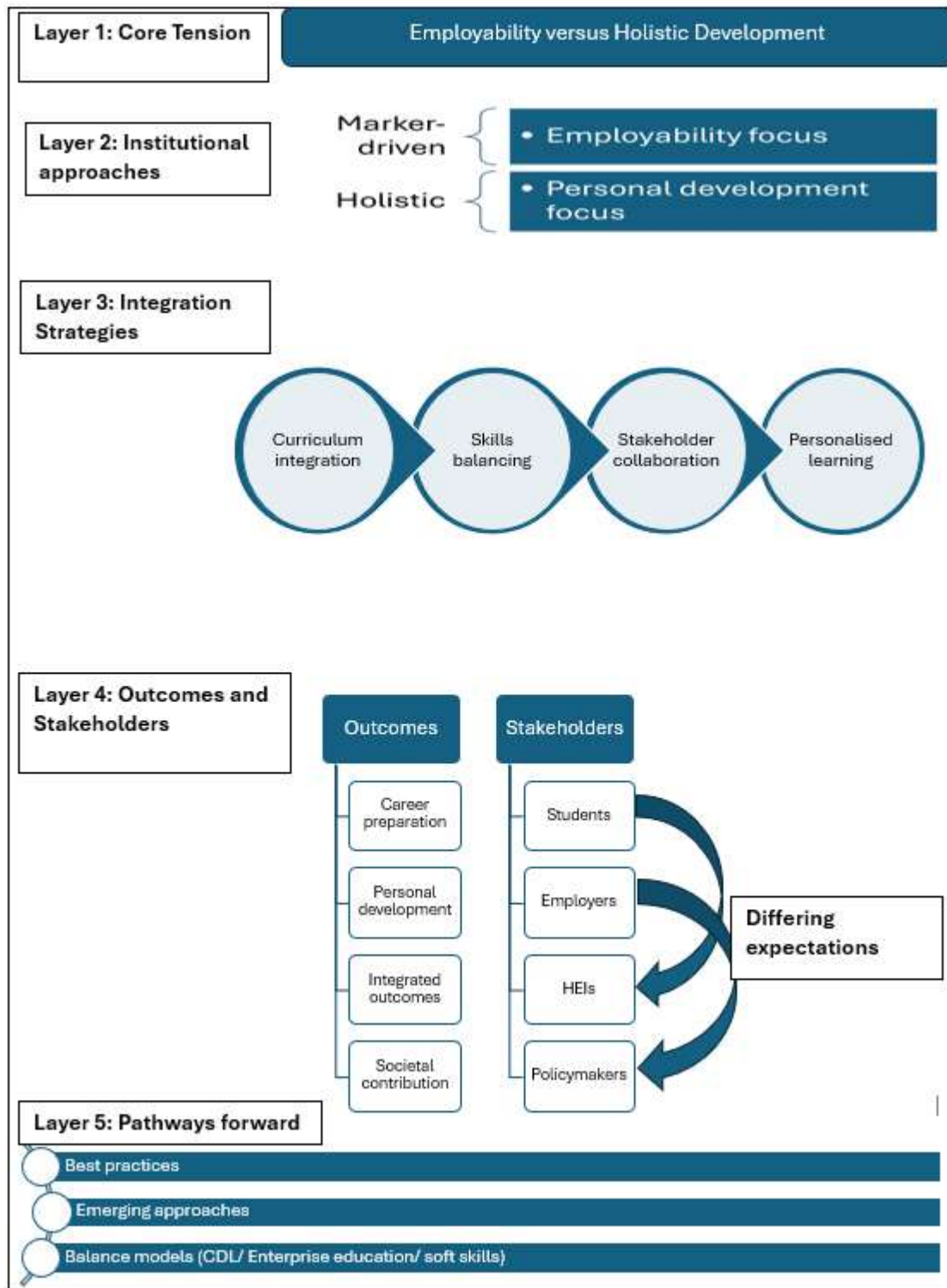


Figure 7-1: Visual Conceptual Framework: Balancing Employability and Holistic Development in Higher Education

One can also present it more visually as:

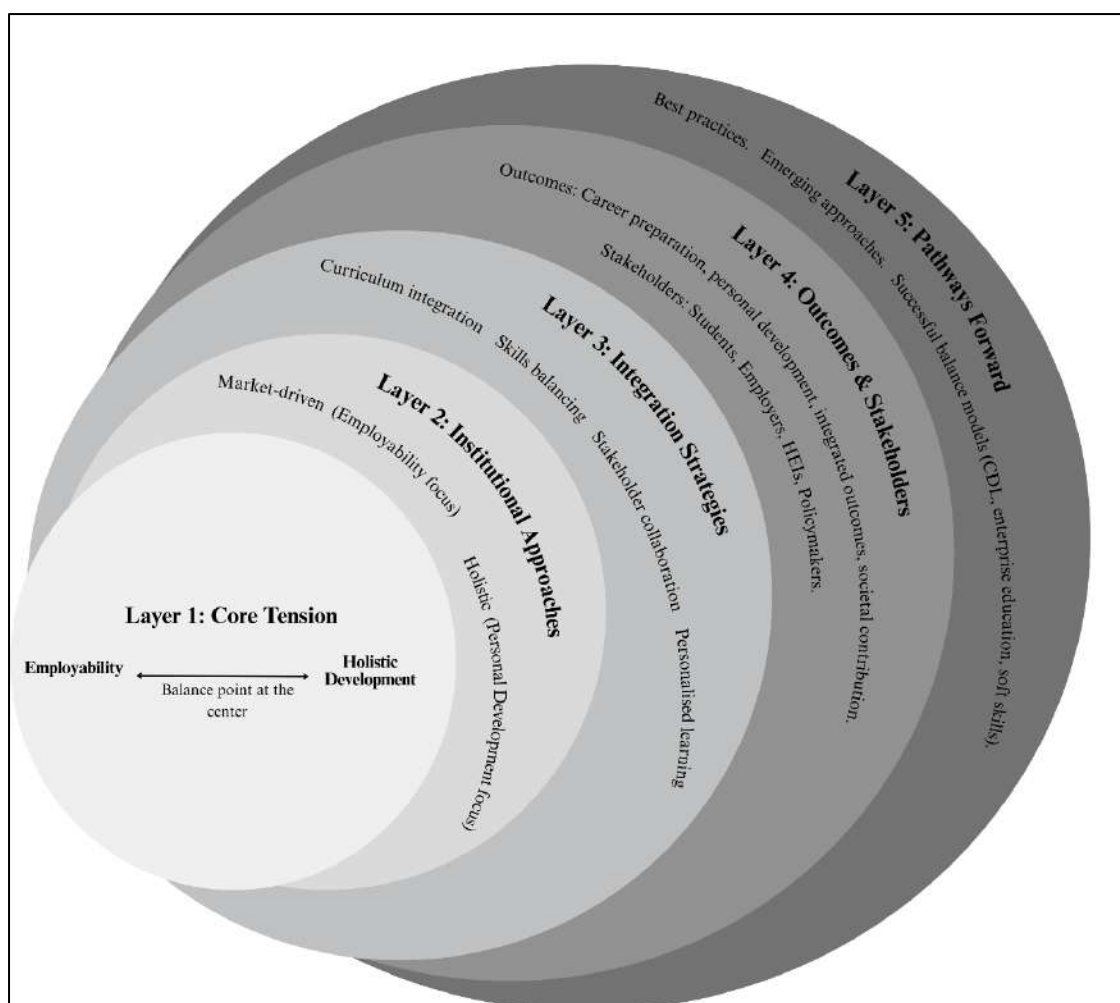


Figure 7-2: Layered Framework

During the second phase of the study, this conceptual framework will be refined through focus group discussions with key stakeholders to ensure its relevance and applicability. The aim was to develop a dynamic and adaptable conceptual framework for higher education that effectively integrates employability with holistic personal development. The findings and improvements to this framework are presented in the following paragraph.

Table 7-7: Focus Group Questions to Test the Visual Model

Layer 1: Core Tension- Employability ↔ Holistic Development How do you see the balance between employability and holistic development in higher education? In your experience, do institutions successfully balance these two priorities, or does one tend to dominate?
Layer 2: Institutional Approaches- Market-driven vs. Holistic How do institutions position themselves, market-driven or holistic? What drives that positioning? / What factors influence an institution's choice to lean more towards employability or holistic development?
Layer 3: Integration Strategies- Integration Strategies – Curriculum, Skills, Collaboration, Personalisation Which integration strategies (e.g., curriculum integration, stakeholder collaboration, skills balancing, personalised learning) do you find most effective in bridging employability and holistic goal?
Layer 4: Outcomes & Stakeholders

How well does the model capture the different outcomes (career preparation, personal growth, societal contribution) expected from higher education?
Layer 5: Pathways Forward- Best Practices and Emerging Approaches Which best practices or emerging approaches have you seen that successfully balance employability and holistic development? What would you add or change in this layer? / What refinements would you suggest to make the “pathways forward” layer more representative or actionable?
Overall Model Does the model clearly show how these layers connect? What key refinements would you suggest?

7.5.10 Findings and Discussion

Through the use of ATLAS.ti and document analysis- specifically employing intentional AI coding- a total of 150 initial codes were identified. After careful review and analysis by the researchers, these were consolidated into 33 key codes, as presented in the table below. Using intentional coding, the researcher provided the main research questions to ATLAS.ti, which resulted in the identification of four main themes:

- Balanced Assessment
- Effective Strategies
- Influencing Factors
- Model Enhancements

Themes	Codes
Balance Assessment	Balance Challenge
	Complementarity
	Employability
	External Pressures
	Graduate Attributes
	Holistic Development
	Integration
	Practical Application
	Prioritisation
	Qualifications
Effective Strategies	Community Engagement
	Educational Development
	Employability
	Graduate Attributes
	Industry Partnerships
Influencing Factors	4ir
	Academic Offerings
	Branding
	Institutional Focus
	Market Demands
	Stakeholder Pressures
	Student Expectations
	Co-Curricular Learning
Model Enhancements	Educational Values
	Employability Integration
	Government
	Holistic Development
	Integration Of Ai
	Lifelong Learning

7.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

- **Balance Assessment**

The findings from the Phase 2 qualitative analysis highlight the insights from the literature review, showing that achieving a balanced assessment of employability and holistic development remains an ongoing challenge in higher education.

As per the quote from participant 5- “I actually believe you have to have a balance”

The codes identified, such as Employability, External Pressures, Graduate Attributes, and Holistic Development, highlight this complex issue. Overall, the theme of Balanced Assessment confirms that higher education institutions must adopt intentional, context-aware approaches that accommodate diverse pressures while still supporting the development of well-rounded, work-ready graduates.

Participant 1 quoted- “Higher Education Institutions tend to lean towards either employability or holistic development, depending on a combination of external pressures and internal values.”

- **Effective Strategies**

The findings indicate that effective strategies for balancing employability and holistic development depend on collaborative, experience-rich, and future-oriented educational practices. The codes identified - Community Engagement, Educational Development, Employability, Graduate Attributes, and Industry Partnerships - demonstrate that meaningful integration occurs when institutions intentionally connect learning environments with real-world contexts.

Participants highlighted that community engagement and industry partnerships are powerful mechanisms for enhancing both employability and broader graduate attributes. These strategies not only provide practical exposure but also foster personal growth, social awareness, and the formation of professional identity. Educational development initiatives further support this balance by equipping students with foundational skills while promoting reflective, adaptable learning.

Participant 3 stated- “I have seen some private institutions doing better in this regard than others through clear suites of graduate attributes that balance employability and the attributes that cater for educational development.”

- **Influencing Factors**

The data analysis showed that a range of external and internal factors significantly shapes the balance between employability and holistic development. The identified codes (4IR, Academic Offerings, Branding, Institutional Focus, Market Demands, Stakeholder Pressures, and Student Expectations) demonstrate the complexity of the environment in which private higher education operates.

Highlighted by participant 2- “I believe that academic offerings, reputation, branding, location, quality of teaching, cost, campus facilities and the type of student support may influence how a university is perceived.”

Participants noted that market demands and stakeholder pressures drive institutions to prioritise employability-focused outcomes. Internal dynamics, such as institutional focus and branding, further shape how programmes are positioned and how balance is conceptualised within the institution. Student expectations emerged as a particularly influential factor, with learners increasingly seeking qualifications that promise both personal development and strong employment prospects.

As quoted by Participant 4- “Well-balanced approach between theory and practice (application)...”

- **Model Enhancements**

The findings identified several key enhancements to strengthen the proposed conceptual model and improve its relevance in the private higher education context. The identified codes- Co-curricular Learning, Educational Values, Employability Integration, Government, Holistic Development, Integration of AI, and Lifelong Learning- highlight areas where the model can evolve to better address emerging needs and expectations. Participants emphasised that co-curricular learning opportunities and the explicit articulation of educational values are essential to maintaining the balance between employability and holistic development.

Participant 2 quoted– “It is almost as if holistic development should be considered part of employability...”

Strengthening employability integration, without compromising broader developmental goals, was also viewed as critical to ensuring graduates are both work-ready and personally grounded. Additionally, the role of government emerged as an important structural influence, shaping institutional frameworks and policy alignment. The integration of AI and the promotion of lifelong learning were seen as increasingly important enhancements in a rapidly changing educational landscape, especially given technological advances and shifting career trajectories.

As stated by participant 2- “placing a greater emphasis on lifelong learning, incorporating service learning, experiential learning, and community engagement are crucial to enhancing students' employability.”

Participant 5 stated, “It should be only employability, but you've got a third thing that you have not actually added into it. Moreover, I am going to put it there. It's artificial intelligence.”

Overall, the Model Enhancements theme suggests that the framework should incorporate flexible, future-focused components that align with institutional values, policy environments, and evolving student and industry needs. The figure below illustrates the newly proposed framework for Balancing Employability and Holistic Development in Higher Education.

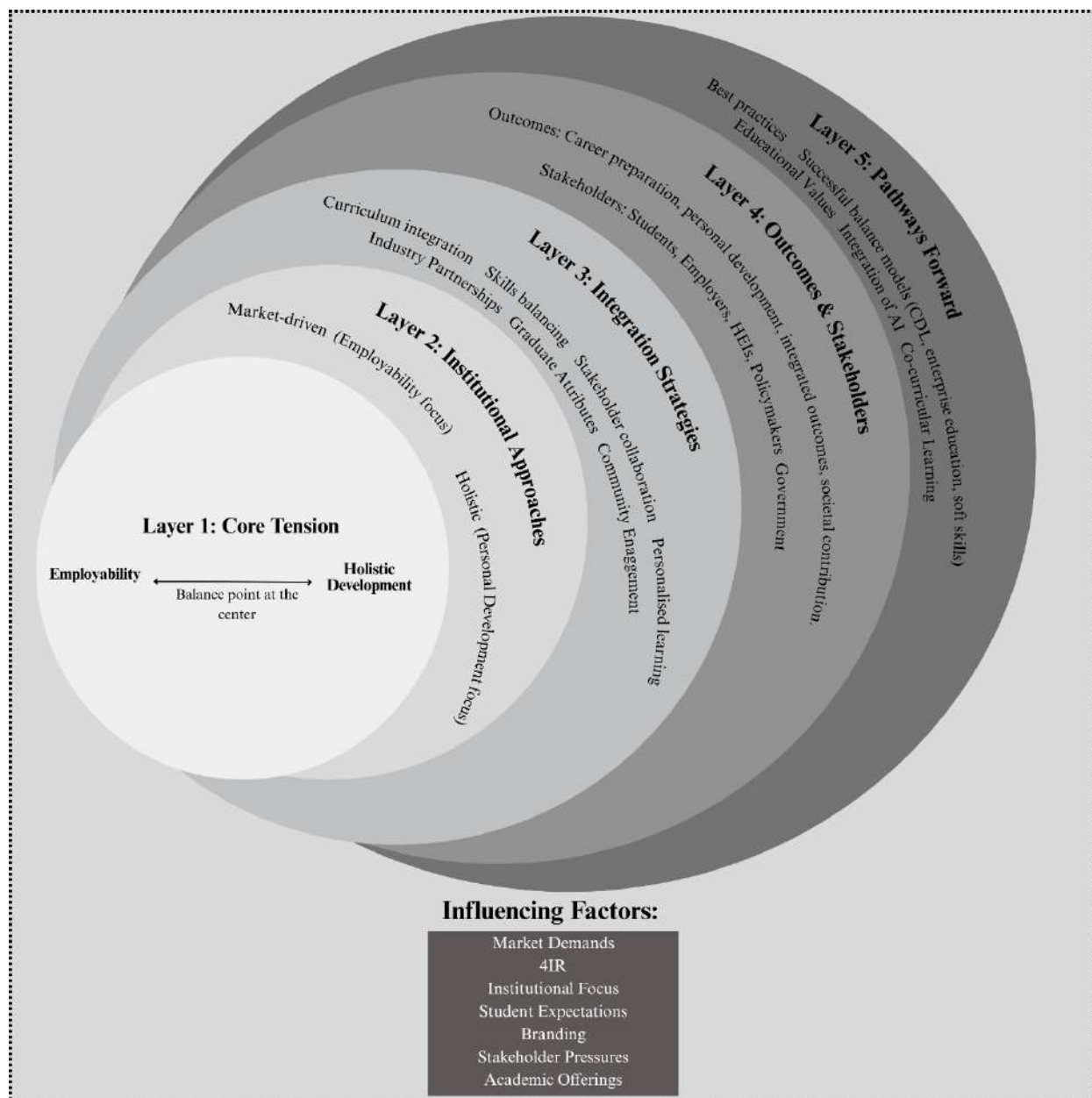


Figure 7-3: Improved Framework for Balancing Employability and Holistic Development in Higher Education

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THEME 3: GOVERNANCE FOR GLOBAL PROGRESS

The Chapters in this section approach governance from two distinct but complementary angles. A systematic literature review of forestry land reform projects in rural KwaZulu-Natal examines the complex challenge of balancing natural resource stewardship with community business aspirations, highlighting co-management, indigenous knowledge, and multi-stakeholder collaboration as essential mechanisms for sustainable rural livelihoods. A conceptual study on celebrity endorsements in private higher education shifts the lens to institutional governance and brand integrity, exploring how credibility and endorser-brand alignment shape student trust and perceptions of academic quality. Both Chapters underscore that effective governance requires attentiveness to local context, participatory decision-making, and a long-term view of the communities being served.

Chapter 8: Evaluating the Impact of Celebrity Endorsements on Brand Perception in Private Higher Education Institutions

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Keywords

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Brand Perception.
Higher Education
Marketing.
Institutional Credibility.

Abstract

In South Africa's increasingly competitive higher education sector, private institutions like STADIO Higher Education are exploring innovative branding strategies to attract and retain students. One such strategy is the use of celebrity endorsements to enhance brand visibility and influence student enrolment decisions. Despite its growing popularity, a lack of conceptual clarity persists regarding the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements in the context of private higher education. This Chapter investigates the potential impact of celebrity endorsements on brand perception within STADIO Higher Education and similar institutions, drawing on the Source Credibility Model and the Match-Up Hypothesis. Using a systematic literature review methodology, this study synthesises insights from contemporary literature (2018–2025) across marketing, branding, and higher education disciplines. Findings indicate that the celebrity's perceived credibility, authenticity, and alignment with the institutional brand are crucial to enhancing student trust and fostering a positive brand perception. When strategically implemented, celebrity endorsements can support STADIO's brand positioning as a modern, relevant, and student-centred institution. The study contributes theoretically by contextualising marketing frameworks for private higher education and, practically, by offering actionable recommendations for selecting endorsers aligned with STADIO's objectives and values. Limitations stem from the Chapter's conceptual nature, suggesting the need for empirical validation through future qualitative and quantitative research.

8.1 Introduction

8.1.1 Background

The global higher education sector is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by increased marketisation, digital disruption, and heightened competition for student enrollment, particularly among private institutions (Marginson, 2019; Altbach & de Wit, 2020). In response, institutions are adopting aggressive branding and marketing strategies traditionally associated with consumer markets (Ivy, 2020; Naidoo & Reddy, 2021), such as celebrity endorsements to enhance brand visibility, credibility, and emotional connection with prospective students (Schimmelpfenning & Hunt, 2020).

Celebrity endorsements have been shown to influence consumer perceptions by leveraging the endorser's credibility, attractiveness, and perceived expertise (Lee & Koo, 2021). When strategically aligned with a brand's values, endorsements can lead to positive brand

associations and increased trust (Jain & Roy, 2023). In higher education, such associations may affect perceptions of academic quality, innovation, and institutional legitimacy. However, the applicability of celebrity influence in this sector remains under-researched, particularly regarding the balance between commercial appeal and academic integrity (Ndlela, 2022; Abubakar & Mpiganjira, 2023). The existing literature revealed a gap in empirical studies, with most contributions being conceptual or theoretical, underscoring the need for frameworks that explain how branding strategies shape enrollment decisions.

This Chapter addresses that gap by explicitly adopting a conceptual approach, drawing on theoretical models such as the Source Credibility Model and the Match-Up Hypothesis (Ohanian, 1990; Erdogan, 1999; Lee & Watkins, 2022), without relying on empirical data. It reviews the relevant literature on celebrity endorsements and their influence on consumer perceptions in higher-education branding, outlines the conceptual-methodological framework, and discusses key themes derived from prior studies. Practical implications are explored, with recommendations for private institutions such as STADIO Higher Education. The Chapter concludes by synthesising the main contributions, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

8.1.2 Problem Statement

Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) are increasingly adopting commercial marketing strategies, including celebrity endorsements, to enhance their brand visibility and attract a digitally engaged student population (Ivy, 2020; Naidoo & Reddy, 2021). Celebrity endorsements have long been shown to enhance brand appeal, credibility, and recall in sectors such as fashion, sports, and technology (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2018; Jain & Roy, 2023). However, their use in higher education, a sector grounded in values such as academic integrity, credibility, and trust, raises critical questions about fit, authenticity, and long-term reputational effects (Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020; Lee & Watkins, 2022).

Theoretical frameworks that guide endorsement effectiveness, such as the Source Credibility Model and the Match-Up Hypothesis, suggest that perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and congruence between the endorser and the brand are key factors influencing endorsement effectiveness (Ohanian, 1990; Erdogan, 1999; Lee & Koo, 2021). However, the empirical literature remains limited on how these models apply to higher education brands, especially in developing contexts such as South Africa, where brand perception significantly influences enrollment choices (Abubakar & Mpiganjira, 2023; Ndlela, 2022).

The problem is that the impact of celebrity endorsements on brand perception in private higher education remains poorly understood, particularly regarding institutional credibility and student decision-making.

8.1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

8.1.3.1 Research Objectives:

- To investigate the perceived impact of celebrity endorsements on brand awareness and visibility in PHEIs.
- To assess how the credibility and authenticity of celebrity endorsers influence

students' perceptions of institutional trust and academic quality.

- To evaluate the alignment between celebrity image and institutional values in shaping brand perception.

8.1.3.2 Research Questions:

- How do celebrity endorsements affect brand awareness and visibility in PHEIs?
- In what ways do the credibility and authenticity of a celebrity endorser influence students' trust and perceptions of academic quality?
- How does the congruence between a celebrity's public image and the institution's values affect brand perception?

8.1.4 Significance of the Study

In an increasingly competitive, market-driven higher education environment, especially in the private sector, institutions must differentiate their brands to attract and retain prospective students (Altbach & de Wit, 2018; Naidoo & Reddy, 2021). Celebrity endorsements have become a strategic tool in this regard, offering institutions opportunities to increase brand visibility, emotional engagement, and cultural relevance among younger audiences (Lee & Koo, 2021; Jain & Roy, 2023). However, the use of such endorsements raises complex questions about authenticity, credibility, and the potential erosion of academic values, which have yet to be fully explored in literature, particularly within the context of private higher education in emerging markets.

This study is significant for three key reasons. First, it contributes conceptually to the limited body of literature on higher education marketing by critically analysing the application of celebrity endorsements in institutional branding (Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020). Second, it provides marketing practitioners and higher education leaders with a theoretically informed framework to assess the risks and rewards of celebrity branding. Finally, the study has policy relevance, particularly for institutions seeking to align their branding strategies with institutional mission and academic integrity while remaining competitive in an evolving education landscape (Ndlela, 2022; Abubakar & Mpinganjira, 2023).

8.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two prominent marketing theories: the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) and the Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990), both of which provide insight into how consumers evaluate endorsements.

8.2.1 Source Credibility Model

Originally conceptualised by Hovland and Weiss (1951) and later refined by Ohanian (1990), the Source Credibility Model highlights three dimensions that determine an endorser's persuasive power: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. In educational contexts, these dimensions extend beyond physical appeal to include perceived competence, alignment with academic values, and moral character (Lee & Watkins, 2022). For instance, a celebrity known for their academic achievements or philanthropy may be perceived as more credible when

endorsing a university brand than one with no educational background or public service experience.

Recent studies have confirmed that perceived credibility enhances message acceptance and positively influences brand attitudes (Jain & Roy, 2023; Abubakar & Mpinganjira, 2023). In private higher education, credibility also affects student trust, a critical component of brand loyalty and enrolment decisions (Ndlela, 2022). Therefore, this study conceptualises celebrity credibility as a driver of both trust and institutional perception.

8.2.2 Match-Up Hypothesis

The Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) posits that a high degree of fit between an endorser and the brand leads to more positive consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions. In the case of PHEIs, a "match" may involve alignment between the celebrity's persona and the institution's identity, mission, or target audience. For example, a celebrity with a public reputation for social activism or educational advocacy would likely be seen as more appropriate for a socially conscious university brand than an amapiano culture artist icon known solely for entertainment (Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020).

Brand–endorser congruence enhances brand engagement and perceived institutional value, fostering stronger emotional and cognitive associations among prospective students (Lee & Koo, 2021; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2018). Conversely, poor alignment may result in student scepticism, negative word-of-mouth, and reputational risk, particularly in academic markets where credibility is paramount.

8.2.3 Integration into Conceptual Model

By integrating both theories, this study proposes a framework (see Figure 8-1) in which influencer credibility and endorser–brand fit serve as antecedents to intermediary constructs, such as student trust, brand engagement, and perceived institutional value. These, in turn, contribute to brand perception and enrolment intention. These are critical outcomes for PHEIs competing in a saturated market.

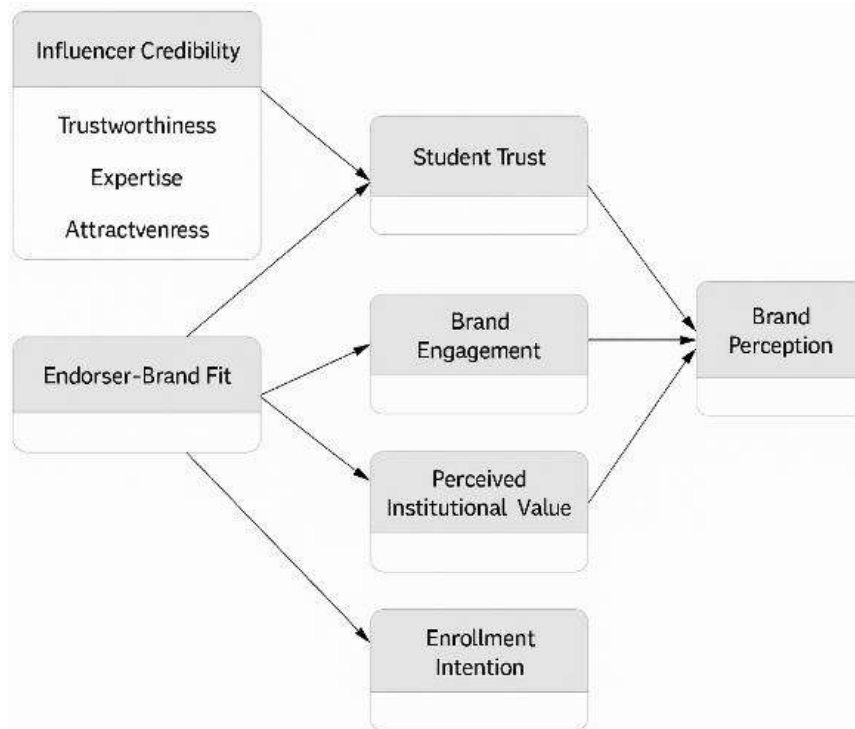


Figure 8-1: Conceptual Model

Source: Author's own compilation, based on Ohanian, 1990; Kamins, 1990; Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020

This conceptual model provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how celebrity endorsements shape brand perception and enrolment intention within the context of STADIO Higher Education, a leading private higher education institution in South Africa. It draws on two well-established frameworks: the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) and the Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990), both of which have been validated across diverse sectors and are now applied in this study to the educational domain.

8.2.3.1 Influencer Credibility

The Source Credibility Model posits that an endorser's trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness are crucial in shaping consumer attitudes (Ohanian, 1990). In STADIO's case, celebrities associated with professional success, leadership, or educational advocacy may enhance perceptions of legitimacy, especially in a context where prospective students often seek assurance about institutional quality (Lee & Watkins, 2022). For example, when STADIO collaborates with public figures known for their commitment to education or personal development, the intention is to transfer these qualities to the institutional brand. Abubakar & Mpinganjira's (2023) study revealed that when credibility is high, students are more likely to trust the brand and consider its offerings.

8.2.3.2 Endorser-Brand Fit

The Match-Up Hypothesis underscores the importance of congruence between the celebrity and the brand. When STADIO partners with individuals whose public image reflects its brand values, such as innovation, accessibility, and employability, students perceive the endorsement

as more authentic (Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020; Jain & Roy, 2023). Poor alignment, however, can result in scepticism and damage brand credibility (Kamins, 1990).

8.2.3.3 *Student Trust*

Trust is a mediating factor that connects credibility and brand outcomes. In South Africa, where competition between public and private institutions is high, establishing trust is essential for enrolment conversion (Naidoo & Reddy, 2021). Research confirms that trustworthy endorsements influence students' perceptions of institutional credibility and long-term value (Ndlela, 2022).

8.2.3.4 *Brand Engagement*

Engagement refers to the extent to which students feel emotionally and behaviourally connected to a brand (Lee & Koo, 2021). STADIO's campaigns featuring relatable or aspirational figures can foster deeper engagement with the brand, especially on social media, where digital storytelling and ambassadorial advocacy are powerful tools for influencing student behaviour (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2018).

8.2.3.5 *Perceived Institutional Value*

When an endorser fits well with the institution's identity, students may perceive STADIO as offering high value, both academically and professionally. This perception influences how students compare STADIO to other institutions and whether they see its qualifications as worthwhile investments (Abubakar & Mpinganjira, 2023; Jain & Roy, 2023).

8.2.3.6 *Brand Perception and Enrolment Intention*

The interplay of credibility, trust, engagement, and perceived value shapes students' brand perception, which directly informs their enrolment intention. In the case of STADIO, where strategic growth depends on student acquisition and reputation management, this framework helps clarify how celebrity endorsements can serve both marketing and institutional goals (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

8.3 Literature Review

8.3.1 The Marketisation of Higher Education

The increasing competition among higher education institutions, particularly PHEIs, has led to aggressive branding strategies that mirror those in the corporate sector. Altbach and de Wit (2020, p. 2) observe that "the globalisation of higher education has led institutions to behave more like businesses, competing for students, funding, and prestige". Naidoo and Reddy (2021) argued that in the South African context, this competitive dynamic is intensified in the private sector, where institutions such as STADIO must utilise market tools, including advertising, digital media, and celebrity endorsements, to differentiate their offerings.

8.3.2 Branding and Emotional Positioning in Higher Education

Branding in higher education now incorporates emotional, aspirational, and social dimensions to appeal to a new generation of students. Ivy (2020, p. 46) noted that "a strong university brand communicates more than just reputation, it signals value, purpose, and differentiation".

Ng and Forbes (2018) found that students are more inclined to choose institutions whose brands align with their identity and life goals.

Jain and Roy's (2023, p. 108) study on endorsement in educational and service marketing concluded that “brand congruence and message credibility were stronger predictors of brand equity than traditional media exposure”. This implies that higher-education branding efforts that use celebrities can have a measurable impact when the endorser’s image aligns with the institutional brand.

8.3.3 The Role and Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsements

Celebrity endorsements influence consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and brand loyalty, especially among millennials and Gen Z. Salem (2024, p. 340) defines celebrity endorsement as “a strategic marketing practice where a public figure’s image and credibility are leveraged to create brand associations that extend beyond product attributes, influencing consumer identity, aspirations, and purchase intentions.” Researchers have increasingly applied this strategy in non-traditional sectors such as health and education, reflecting its growing relevance beyond consumer goods.

For example, Salem (2024) found that celebrity endorsements significantly influence consumers’ purchase intentions in the fashion industry, highlighting their role in shaping attitudes and buying behaviour. Similarly, a study by Lee and Koo (2021) on university branding in Korea found that students perceived celebrity-endorsed institutions as more innovative and globally connected, leading to higher brand engagement and preference.

In South Africa, Abubakar and Mpinganjira (2023, p. 130) reported that celebrity endorsements “positively influence student perceptions of brand appeal, especially when the celebrity is viewed as a thought leader or role model”. However, they caution that misalignment between the celebrity’s values and the institutional culture can pose reputational risk.

8.3.4 The Source Credibility Model and Brand Trust

The Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) remains central in explaining how the effectiveness of endorsements is shaped by perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Ohanian (1990, p. 41) explains that “source credibility significantly affects attitudes toward the advertisement and the endorsed brand”. These dimensions have been adapted in higher education marketing to reflect authenticity, educational alignment, and social impact.

Lee and Watkins (2022, p. 8) found, in a study of influencer credibility in university branding, that trustworthiness was the most influential dimension of credibility, followed by expertise. They noted: “Students trust influencer endorsements when they are seen as competent, honest, and aligned with educational values”. This confirms the role of perceived authenticity in shaping student trust, a precursor to brand loyalty and enrolment decisions.

8.3.5 Match-Up Hypothesis and Endorser–Brand Congruence

The Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) posits that endorsements are most persuasive when the celebrity aligns with the brand in terms of image, values, or expertise. Schimmelpfennig

and Hunt (2020, p. 493) found that “endorser–brand congruence positively affects consumers’ attitudes, intentions, and brand associations”. Jain and Roy (2023) extended this to education, noting that alignment in perceived values (e.g., success, hard work, transformation) significantly influences students’ willingness to recommend or choose an institution.

In a recent application, STADIO’s marketing campaigns have utilised figures associated with career advancement or entrepreneurship, thereby aligning with its brand promise of employability and accessibility. Such strategies draw directly on the Match-Up Hypothesis, linking celebrity identity with student aspirations.

8.3.6 Brand Engagement, Student Trust, and Institutional Value

Student trust and brand engagement are crucial mediating factors in the endorsement–perception relationship. According to Naidoo and Reddy (2021, p. 125), “trust in an institution enhances the likelihood of student enrolment, retention, and long-term loyalty”. Similarly, Lee and Koo (2021, p. 25) define engagement as “the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment of a student in the brand”, which can be strengthened by endorsement strategies that promote authenticity and relevance.

Perceived institutional value, a measure of the quality and return on educational investment, is influenced by both the credibility of the endorser and the clarity of the institutional message. Jain and Roy (2023, p. 109) argued that perceived value is “amplified when the endorser reflects the aspirations and career goals of the student audience”. These findings support the inclusion of perceived value as a variable in the conceptual model.

While endorsement strategies can increase brand visibility, trust, and engagement, their effectiveness depends on the celebrity's credibility and alignment with institutional values. The conceptual model proposed in this Chapter draws on these findings to examine the pathways through which such endorsements affect brand perception and enrolment intention in institutions like STADIO.

8.4 Research Methodology

8.4.1 Research Approach and Rationale

This study employed a conceptual research approach, grounded in a systematic literature review (SLR). Conceptual research does not involve original empirical data collection; instead, it synthesises, evaluates, and integrates existing scholarship to develop new theoretical insights or frameworks (Baden & Major, 2021). Given the limited theoretical development in the application of celebrity endorsements within higher education branding, this approach is appropriate for generating conceptual clarity and proposing relationships among constructs such as influencer credibility, endorser–brand congruence, student trust, and enrolment intention.

Conceptual studies are increasingly recognised as essential in marketing and branding literature for advancing theory beyond isolated empirical cases. As Snyder (2019, p. 333) posited, “conceptual Chapters can synthesise disparate findings across contexts to propose frameworks or models that explain emerging phenomena.” Recent research reinforces this view as

Vladimirova et al. (2024, p. 183) argued that “conceptual reviews synthesise disparate findings across contexts to propose frameworks that explain emerging phenomena in marketing and branding,” while Salem (2024, p. 340) highlighted that “conceptual frameworks remain critical for advancing theory beyond isolated empirical cases, especially in dynamic sectors such as branding and consumer behaviour.” This is especially relevant in contexts such as South Africa’s evolving private higher education sector, where branding strategies are shaped by commercial logic yet have received little scholarly investigation.

8.4.2 Research Design

The study employs a systematic literature review design structured according to the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). This design incorporates a clearly defined research question, a reproducible search strategy, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, systematic data extraction, and synthesis of findings to support theory development. The guiding research question is:

“How do celebrity endorsements influence brand perception and enrolment intention in private higher education institutions?”

8.4.3 Search Strategy and Databases

To ensure academic rigour, a structured multi-database search was conducted using a combination of controlled vocabulary and Boolean operators. The databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, ProQuest, and Google Scholar (used for grey literature and cross-checking). The following search strings were employed: (“celebrity endorsement” OR “influencer marketing”) AND (“brand perception” OR “university branding”); (“source credibility” OR “trustworthiness”) AND (“student trust” OR “enrolment intention”); and (“match-up hypothesis” OR “endorser–brand fit”) AND (“institutional branding” OR “education marketing”). The search was limited to publications from 2018 to 2025 to ensure the inclusion of the most recent developments in branding, digital marketing, and higher education.

8.4.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The screening process was conducted in two stages: an initial title and abstract review, followed by a full-text assessment. The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2018 and 2025; studies focused on celebrity or influencer marketing in higher education or service contexts; conceptual and empirical articles grounded in credible theoretical frameworks; and publications written in English. Exclusion criteria included studies published before 2018, non-English publications, research focused solely on traditional products such as fashion or beverages, and non-peer-reviewed sources, including opinion articles and blogs. This rigorous screening process resulted in a final set of 28 relevant studies selected for full analysis.

8.4.5 Data Extraction Process

Data from the selected studies were extracted using a literature review matrix, capturing key variables including author(s) and year, title and journal, research context and country, sector focus (education), theoretical framework used (e.g., Source Credibility, Match-Up

Hypothesis), key constructs examined, research design (qualitative, conceptual), and major findings related to endorsement effectiveness and brand outcomes. This structured approach enabled the researcher to trace patterns, contrast findings, and map themes across studies, thereby supporting conceptual development.

8.4.6 Data Analysis and Synthesis

The extracted data were analysed using narrative synthesis and thematic mapping, aligned with the principles of conceptual aggregation (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003, p. 214). Studies were clustered under four core themes: (1) Influencer Credibility and Student Trust, (2) Endorser–Brand Fit and Brand Authenticity, (3) Impact on Brand Engagement, and (4) Perceived Institutional Value and Enrolment Intention. Relationships between these constructs were visually mapped into the conceptual model (see Figure 8-1), which is grounded in the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) and the Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990). Furthermore, the findings were contextualised within STADIO’s brand positioning to enhance the model’s practical relevance and applicability in a private higher education setting.

8.4.7 Ensuring Rigour and Trustworthiness

Although conceptual Chapters do not adhere to traditional validity procedures such as reliability estimates or empirical triangulation, this study ensured methodological rigour through several strategies. These included transparent documentation of the search and screening process, a clearly justified theoretical grounding, and triangulation across multiple disciplines, including education, marketing, and psychology. Additionally, the application of the PRISMA framework enhanced transparency and replicability. “Collectively, these measures strengthen the trustworthiness of the review and contribute to the robustness of the proposed conceptual model” (Snyder, 2019, p. 337).

8.4.8 Hypotheses

Although this study is conceptual, the following hypotheses were proposed to guide future empirical validation of the model. These hypotheses were grounded in the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) and the Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) and were supported by recent studies (Jain & Roy, 2023; Lee & Watkins, 2022).

H1: Influencer Credibility → Student Trust

H1: There is a positive relationship between the credibility of a celebrity endorser and students’ trust in the private higher education institution.

- *Rationale:* Trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness are core elements of source credibility, which shape how students evaluate brand trust (Ohanian, 1990; Lee & Watkins, 2022).

H2: Endorser–Brand Fit → Perceived Institutional Value

H2: A strong match between the celebrity endorser and the institution’s brand positively influences students’ perceptions of institutional value.

- *Rationale:* When students perceive alignment between a celebrity’s persona and institutional identity, the institution is seen as more authentic and credible (Kamins, 1990; Jain & Roy, 2023).

H3: Student Trust and Engagement → Brand Perception

H3: Student trust and brand engagement mediate the relationship between endorsement attributes and brand perception in private higher education.

- *Rationale:* Trust and engagement function as psychological mechanisms linking source effects with favourable brand outcomes (Naidoo & Reddy, 2021; Lee & Koo, 2021).

H4: Brand Perception → Enrolment Intention

H4: Positive brand perception significantly increases students’ intention to enrol in a private higher education institution.

- *Rationale:* Brand perception, when influenced by trusted and relevant endorsements, enhances students’ likelihood to consider and choose the institution (Abubakar & Mpinganjira, 2023).

8.5 Ethics

This study is conceptual in nature and based exclusively on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, published books, and credible academic databases. As such, it does not involve human participants, personal data, or any form of field-based data collection. Therefore, formal research ethics approval was not required.

Nonetheless, the researcher adhered to principles of academic integrity, transparency, and responsible scholarship in conducting the literature review. All sources consulted have been properly cited and referenced to avoid plagiarism and intellectual misappropriation, in accordance with the ethical standards of academic research (Resnik, 2020).

Should the proposed conceptual model be subjected to empirical testing in future studies, involving data collection from students or marketing professionals, full ethical clearance will be sought from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to commencement.

8.6 Findings

This study synthesised literature from 2018 to 2025 to examine how celebrity endorsements influence brand perception and enrollment intention within PHEIs. The findings are grounded in the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) and the Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990), providing a structured framework for understanding how endorsement variables interact with trust, engagement, and institutional perception.

The themes presented in this section were derived through a systematic coding and thematic clustering process. After extracting data from 28 peer-reviewed studies, key constructs, including “credibility,” “trust,” “brand fit,” “engagement,” and “institutional value,” were identified through open coding. These constructs were then grouped into higher-order categories through axial coding, linking related concepts to broader themes. For example, codes

related to trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness were clustered under Influencer Credibility, while codes referencing congruence, authenticity, and alignment were grouped under Endorser–Brand Fit. Finally, selective coding was applied to integrate these categories into four overarching themes:

- Influencer Credibility and Student Trust
- Endorser–Brand Fit and Brand Authenticity,
- Impact on Brand Engagement, and
- Perceived Institutional Value and Enrolment Intention.

This thematic clustering ensured that the conceptual model reflects both theoretical foundations and recurring patterns in the literature.

8.6.1 Influencer Credibility Builds Cognitive Trust in the Institution

The literature strongly supports the view that influencer credibility, defined by trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, plays a pivotal role in shaping students’ cognitive trust in an institution (Lee & Watkins, 2022). In educational branding, cognitive trust relates to a prospective student’s confidence in the institution’s promises, academic offerings, and reputation.

For example, Jain and Roy (2023, p. 109) found that “endorsements by public figures who are perceived as role models, such as socially responsible celebrities, professionals, or alumni, can establish immediate trust bridges between the student and the institution”. Ohanian (1990) posits that credibility, particularly trustworthiness, is the most influential trait in service-based contexts, a finding validated in higher education by Lee and Koo (2021). Their study on Korean private universities confirms that the perceived credibility of endorsers significantly predicted student satisfaction and perceived brand reliability.

For STADIO, credibility is a key differentiator, especially in a sector where students often question the legitimacy or value-for-money of private degrees. When a celebrity is perceived as honest, competent, and relatable, their endorsement reduces perceived academic risk and enhances confidence in the institution.

8.6.2 Endorser–Brand Congruence Enhances Institutional Authenticity

The match between the endorser’s image and the institutional identity emerged as a critical factor influencing authentic brand perception. As per the Match-Up Hypothesis, when there is a perceived synergy between the celebrity and the institution’s values, the endorsement appears more natural and persuasive (Kamins, 1990).

Schimmelpfennig and Hunt (2020, p. 495) note that “endorser–brand fit positively influences the believability of the endorsement and the perceived authenticity of the institution.” This has direct implications for institutions like STADIO, which market themselves as affordable, future-focused, and career-relevant. If a celebrity endorser exemplifies those traits, such as being a working professional, academic achiever, or public intellectual, the institution gains associative credibility.

Ng and Forbes (2018, p. 320) add that “brand congruence enhances emotional and cognitive resonance with prospective students, thereby positioning the institution as aligned with their life goals and values”. When such alignment is absent or perceived as forced, it risks brand dissonance or backlash.

8.6.3 Student Trust and Digital Engagement Act as Mediating Variables

Student trust and digital brand engagement act as key mediators that explain how endorsement attributes translate into brand perception. Trust enables belief in institutional claims (e.g., “internationally recognised,” “employment-focused”), while engagement strengthens emotional attachment and behavioural interaction.

Naidoo and Reddy (2021, p. 127) emphasise that “in private higher education, trust is not just relational but transactional, it reflects a student’s confidence that their financial and academic investment will yield credible returns.” In the context of social media, influencers can increase both affective and behavioural engagement with educational brands by stimulating likes, shares, and content participation (Lee & Koo, 2021). Furthermore, Abubakar and Mpinganjira (2023, p. 130) revealed that “endorsements that encourage student engagement through storytelling or peer influence tend to generate virality and platform-based reputation, which contribute indirectly to the brand's perceived value”.

8.6.4 Positive Brand Perception Predicts Enrolment Intention

The ultimate pathway identified in the literature is that enhanced brand perception, shaped by credible and congruent endorsements, significantly predicts students' enrollment intention. This is consistent with McCracken’s (1989) theory of meaning transfer, where the symbolic and psychological traits of a celebrity (e.g., success, ambition, resilience) are transferred to the institution.

Owens, Rennhoff, and Roach (2024, p. 2823) noted that “in market-driven education systems, financial and image-based incentives increasingly shape institutional reputation and student choice, often outweighing traditional academic metrics.” Similarly, Adams and Thompson (2024, p. 78) emphasised that “perceptions of institutional innovation and adaptability, often communicated through digital platforms, are becoming central to competitive positioning in education markets.” Therefore, celebrity endorsements that are well-aligned and strategically targeted can serve as a heuristic for quality, especially among first-generation or underinformed students. For STADIO, a private provider seeking brand equity in a competitive market, this insight underscores the value of strategic, values-based celebrity partnerships for converting awareness into enrolment.

Table 8-1: Summary of Conceptual Findings and Theoretical Links

Theme	Conceptual Insight	Theoretical Support	Key Source(s)
Influencer Credibility → Trust	Credibility (trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness) enhances students’ cognitive trust in institutions.	Source Credibility Model	Ohanian (1990); Lee & Watkins (2022); Jain & Roy (2023)
Endorser–Brand Fit → Authenticity	Congruence between endorser and institution enhances authenticity and perceived value.	Match-Up Hypothesis	Kamins (1990); Schimmelpfennig & Hunt (2020)

Theme	Conceptual Insight	Theoretical Support	Key Source(s)
Trust & Engagement → Brand Perception	Trust and engagement mediate the effect of endorsement on students' perceptions of the institution.	AIDA & Hierarchy of Effects	Naidoo & Reddy (2021); Lee & Koo (2021)
Brand Perception → Enrolment Intention	Positive brand perception, shaped by trusted endorsers, increases the likelihood of student enrolment.	Meaning Transfer Theory	McCracken (1989); Altbach & de Wit (2020)

These findings form the basis of a theoretically robust conceptual model that not only maps the pathways through which celebrity endorsements influence student decision-making but also highlights how private institutions, such as STADIO, can strategically leverage endorser attributes to shape perceptions and drive enrollment. The model advances the literature by integrating endorsement theory with higher education branding, a field that remains under-theorised in the African context.

8.7 Discussion

The findings underscore the strategic potential of celebrity endorsements in shaping brand perception within private higher education institutions (PHEIs). However, their application raises important ethical considerations, particularly in developing markets such as South Africa, where students may be more vulnerable to image-driven persuasion. Overemphasis on celebrity appeal risks commodifying education and overshadowing academic values, potentially leading students to prioritise perceived prestige over program quality. As Owens, Rennhoff, and Roach (2024, p. 2823) caution, “financial and image-based incentives increasingly shape institutional reputation and student choice, often outweighing traditional academic metrics.” This dynamic necessitates transparent communication and safeguards to ensure that marketing strategies do not exploit aspirational vulnerabilities among first-generation or under-informed students.

Real-world examples illustrate both the promise and pitfalls of such strategies. STADIO Higher Education has featured public figures associated with entrepreneurship and career success in its promotional campaigns, aligning with its brand promise of employability and accessibility. Similarly, other South African institutions have leveraged influencers in digital campaigns to position themselves as modern and student-centric. While these initiatives can enhance engagement, they also underscore the need for robust ethical governance frameworks to mitigate reputational risks and uphold academic integrity.

A critical reflection on the limits of digital influence is equally important. While social media and influencer culture offer powerful tools for engagement, their dominance in marketing strategies can create unrealistic expectations and foster superficial brand associations. Adams and Thompson (2024, p. 78) emphasised that “perceptions of institutional innovation and adaptability, often communicated through digital platforms, are becoming central to competitive positioning in education markets.” Yet, reliance on digital endorsements may marginalise students who lack a strong social media presence or access, thereby reinforcing inequities in information dissemination. Furthermore, influencer-driven narratives can

overshadow substantive indicators of quality, such as accreditation, faculty expertise, and graduate outcomes.

While celebrity endorsements can serve as effective heuristics for quality and differentiation, their ethical and practical limitations must be acknowledged. Institutions should adopt values-based endorsement strategies, prioritise transparency, and complement digital campaigns with evidence of academic rigour and credibility. This balanced approach ensures that promotional appeal does not compromise institutional authenticity or student trust.

8.8 Practical Implications

This Chapter offers important implications for marketing strategists, higher education administrators, and policymakers concerned with brand positioning in competitive education markets. The analysis, grounded in the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) and the Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990), reveals that the use of celebrity endorsers must be strategically calibrated to enhance brand perception and influence prospective student behaviour.

From a strategic communication standpoint, celebrity endorsements can be a potent vehicle for shaping brand perception within private higher education institutions (PHEIs). As demonstrated in the literature, when endorsers are perceived as credible, trustworthy, and knowledgeable, they are more likely to evoke favourable attitudes and influence consumer (student) decision-making (Ohanian, 1990; Erdogan, 1999). This is particularly relevant in the education sector, where trust and institutional legitimacy are paramount.

Furthermore, the congruence between the endorser's public persona and the institution's brand identity is critical. The Match-Up Hypothesis posits that "the effectiveness of a celebrity endorser increases when there is a logical fit between the celebrity and the product or service endorsed" (Kamins, 1990, p. 4). In the context of PHEIs, this means aligning with public figures who embody educational advancement, social mobility, or youth empowerment. Endorsers lacking this alignment risk diminishing institutional credibility and alienating key stakeholder groups.

Furthermore, the growing centrality of digital media and social platforms in shaping student perceptions necessitates an integrated communication strategy. Social media enables immediate feedback loops and peer-driven evaluations of celebrity campaigns, making it vital for institutions to monitor brand sentiment and measure engagement metrics (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

8.9 Recommendations

- **Implement Strategic Endorser Selection Frameworks:** PHEIs should adopt a formalised approach to selecting celebrity endorsers, incorporating brand fit assessments, audience resonance analyses, and reputation audits. Selection should prioritise reputational alignment over sheer popularity.
- **Co-create Authentic Narratives:** Institutions are encouraged to move beyond transactional celebrity appearances by co-developing authentic, values-based

narratives. For instance, a celebrity sharing personal experiences with education may build stronger emotional and cognitive resonance with potential students.

- **Monitor and Evaluate Campaign Effectiveness:** The deployment of data-driven tools such as sentiment analysis, engagement tracking, and brand equity surveys will assist in quantifying the impact of endorsement campaigns on student attitudes and enrolment intention.
- **Mitigate Reputational Risk through Crisis Preparedness:** Given the volatile nature of celebrity reputation, institutions must establish contingency plans, including reputational risk matrices and termination clauses in endorsement contracts.
- **Integrate Stakeholder Feedback:** Incorporating insights from internal stakeholders, management, faculty, current students, and alumni can enhance endorsement relevance and ensure alignment with institutional culture and values.

These recommendations contribute to the evolving discourse on brand management in higher education by providing an evidence-informed framework that balances promotional appeal with institutional authenticity. The framework illustrated how influencer credibility, defined by trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, interacts with endorser-brand fit to shape student perceptions and enrollment behaviour. Credible influencers foster student trust, which in turn strengthens brand engagement and enhances the perceived institutional value. When the influencer aligns closely with the institution's identity, this synergy amplifies brand perception and signals authenticity, ultimately driving enrollment intention. By integrating these pathways, the model strikes a balance between promotional appeal and institutional integrity, providing a strategic approach to higher-education branding in competitive markets.

8.10 Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

8.10.1 Conclusions

This Chapter examined the impact of celebrity endorsements on brand perception in private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in the South African context. Drawing on the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) and the Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990), the Chapter synthesised current literature to evaluate the strategic value and challenges of leveraging celebrity figures in brand-building efforts.

The analysis revealed that credibility, authenticity, and brand–celebrity alignment are pivotal factors that influence students' perceptions of institutional brands. These findings align with prior research in consumer behaviour and advertising (Till & Busler, 2000; Erdogan, 1999) but offer new insights by applying them to the less-explored domain of higher education branding. Furthermore, this Chapter contributes to ongoing discourse by positioning celebrity endorsement not merely as a promotional tactic, but as a strategic tool for brand differentiation and trust-building in increasingly competitive education markets.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in extending the Source Credibility and Match-Up Hypothesis frameworks to higher education branding, suggesting that student enrolment

decisions are influenced by both the symbolic value and perceived authenticity of institutional communication. In practice, the study guided institutional marketers seeking to navigate the complexities of utilising celebrity figures without compromising academic integrity or brand authenticity.

8.10.2 Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. Firstly, it is a conceptual Chapter based on secondary data and theoretical analysis. As such, it does not include primary empirical evidence, which may limit the generalisability and contextual sensitivity of the conclusions drawn. Secondly, celebrity endorsements are culturally and contextually situated, and what works in one region or demographic may not be applicable in another. The findings, while broadly relevant, may require adaptation for institutions operating in different cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic environments. Thirdly, the evolving nature of digital platforms and influencer culture means that any conclusions drawn from the current literature may rapidly become obsolete. What is considered “credible” or “authentic” today may shift as audience expectations and media platforms evolve.

8.10.3 Future Research

Building on this conceptual foundation, future research should undertake empirical investigations to test the proposed relationships between celebrity characteristics, brand alignment, and student brand perceptions in PHEIs. Quantitative studies, such as those using structural equation modelling (SEM) or regression analysis, could be employed to validate the theoretical frameworks presented in the study.

Additionally, qualitative research, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews with prospective students and marketing administrators at the institution, could explore nuanced interpretations of celebrity influence in the higher education decision-making process.

Future studies may also examine:

- The longitudinal effects of celebrity endorsements on institutional reputation and student trust.
- The comparative impact of celebrity endorsements versus student or alumni endorsements.
- The ethical and reputational risks associated with celebrity misalignment or public controversies.

Lastly, expanding this research across different geographic and cultural contexts would contribute to a more global understanding of branding strategies in higher education and offer comparative insights for marketing practitioners and academic scholars alike.

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Chapter 9: Balancing act of natural resource management against community business aspirations within the forestry land reform ecosystem – systematic literature review

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Abstract

This Chapter focuses on forestry management resource operations in the land reform ecosystem located in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal. In 2020, the forestry sector contributed 25 per cent towards the agricultural sector's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The forestry sector is predominantly located in rural and deprived areas. This study aims to explore the complexities of integrating best practice forestry resource management principles with community business aspirations. A systematic literature review approach comprising four stages of screening and analysis was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The research findings revealed the importance of implementing best practices in natural resources management as a tool for long-term community livelihood sustainability and entrepreneurial participation within the value chain. The research indicates that collaboration among stakeholders is paramount to protecting natural resources. The study contributes to local economic development by advancing knowledge on the sustainable management of natural resources in rural settings. In addition, the study identified significant research gaps in our understanding of natural resources that future researchers could address. Ultimately, the rural development contributions envisaged in Chapter 6 of the South African National Development Plan (NDP) will be realised through sustainable employment creation.

9.1 Introduction

In any academic study, a literature review is important in providing a holistic view of the subject matter as addressed by scholars in similar or different contexts. In post-democratic South Africa, previously disadvantaged and vulnerable communities received land parcels after following the procedures set out in the Restitution of Land Rights Act (No. 22 of 1994). This occurred even though the country's Constitution promotes restitution, land tenure, and redistribution, as per Section 25(5)–(7) of Act 108 of 1996. According to Forde, Kappler and

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Björkdahl (2021:327), “distributive justice measures are a way of compensating those affected by structural economic violence and addressing structural inequalities”. Furthermore, Mphahlele (2023:iv) concludes that “a more streamlined approach that involves the active participation of relevant stakeholders, a well-defined funding model, and the selection and capacity building of farmers involved in developing land reform farms”. Additionally, Sandambi (2025:12) concludes that “agricultural policies in most countries have been unable to promote great prosperity for their populations”.

The transition of land reform beneficiaries created opportunities for new entrants in the small enterprise development ecosystem. In some instances, community members had to manage business operations within their newly acquired land parcel(s). Furthermore, the new land beneficiaries are now faced with varying legislative compliance as land owners including, among others, trusts (Trust Property Control Act, No. 57 of 1988), property management (Communal Property Association, Act No. 28 of 1996), water licence (National Water Act, No. 36 of 1998), fire management (National Veld and Forest Fire Act, No. 101 of 1998), environment (National Environmental Management Act, No. 107 of 1998), traditional leadership (Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act, No. 41 of 2003), and corporate governance (Companies Act, No. 71 of 2008). Additionally, concurrent legislative amendments and policy directives directly or indirectly affect the management of natural resources.

Considering the above, the Chapter focuses on the Communal Property Associations (CPAs) and their structures for managing operations in land reform projects in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). There have been varying business ventures that were started during the implementation of land reform projects, including renewable energy (Diale, Kanakana-Katumba & Maladzhi, 2021), food systems (Donner & De Vries, 2023), shopping centres/retail malls (Mkansi & Nsakanda, 2025), and waste management (Nduwimana et al., 2026). The study is premised on the United Nations (UN) championing natural resource management that promotes long-term sustainable development and the preservation of cultural heritage. This Chapter focuses on natural resource management within the forestry land reform CPA ecosystem, tracking the community development trajectory as they strive to achieve community aspirations, such as sustainable livelihoods. The study is anchored in the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF), which emphasises the key capitals that drive community development, including financial, human, social, environmental, and physical capital. The systematic literature review (SLR) is being conducted around the theme of natural resources (i.e., SLF capital). The following section presents a literature review, followed by the research methodology adopted. Thereafter, the results and findings will be highlighted, along with their practical implications. Finally, the study's conclusions, limitations, and future research directions will be presented.

9.2 Literature Review

The UN has identified the protection and management of natural resources as central to the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, as stipulated in the Resource Management System, to comprehensively manage resources sustainably. The management of

SLF capital, which encompasses natural resources within the land reform ecosystem, focuses on co-management in rural forestry settings. The World Bank defines co-management as “the sharing of responsibilities, rights, and duties between the primary stakeholders, in particular, local communities and the nation-state, a decentralised approach to decision making that involves the local users in the decision-making process as equals with the nation state” (World Bank, 1998:11). According to the African Union (AU) strategy, as articulated in the Africa Green Minerals Strategy (AGMS, 2024:i), the goal is “a transparent, equitable and optimal exploitation of mineral resources to underpin broad-based sustainable growth and socio-economic development”.

In the South African context, according to Natural Resources Management (2024), “it brings together natural heritage management, land use planning, water management, biodiversity conservation, and the future sustainability of industries like agriculture, mining, tourism, fisheries and forestry”. The KZN government objective in managing natural resources is “to identify, monitor and research on current land use, veld condition and land degradation on a scientifically research basis” (DARD, 2024). Notwithstanding the above position(s) by different stakeholders that the management of natural resources is important for achieving sustainable development within the international community, each actor’s actions remain important in shaping the natural resources management landscape. Collaborative management, or co-management, has been defined as “the sharing of power and responsibility between government and local resources users” (Berkes, George & Preston, 1991:12). Singleton (2000:7) defines co-management as “the term given to governance systems that combine state control with local, decentralised decision making, and accountability and which ideally combine the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses of each”.

Co-management can also be understood as “a situation in which two or more social actors negotiate, define, and guarantee amongst themselves a fair sharing of the management functions, entitlements, and responsibilities for a given territory, area or set of natural resources” (Borrini-Feyerandend, 2007, p. 1). The section that follows lays a foundation on the subject matter before applying the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) model. The literature review on co-management of natural resources in rural settings is based on a funnel approach, as depicted in Figure 9-1, starting with international scholarly reviews and then moving to the African continent. The regional organisation is the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Thereafter, the focus shifts to South Africa and, finally, to the KZN perspective on how stakeholders and actors within the landscape manage these valuable assets.

Martinho and Ferreira (2020:1) conclude that “there is a need for stakeholders to explore and improve the interlinkage with climate change impact, specifically concerning improving the relationships of forestry greenhouse gas emissions impacts with forest size and output in Europe”. The major issues in Europe identified for co-management of natural resources include the following: public land (Mills & Nie, 2021), conservation management (Ma *et al.*, 2023), and sustainable cities (Radulescu *et al.*, 2025). In Australasia, the main issues addressed by stakeholders include governance systems in community-based resource management projects

(Dale et al., 2020), marine resource management (Ullah et al., 2022), indigenous fire practices (Maclean *et al.*, 2023), and land conflicts (Putri & Ehsonov, 2024).

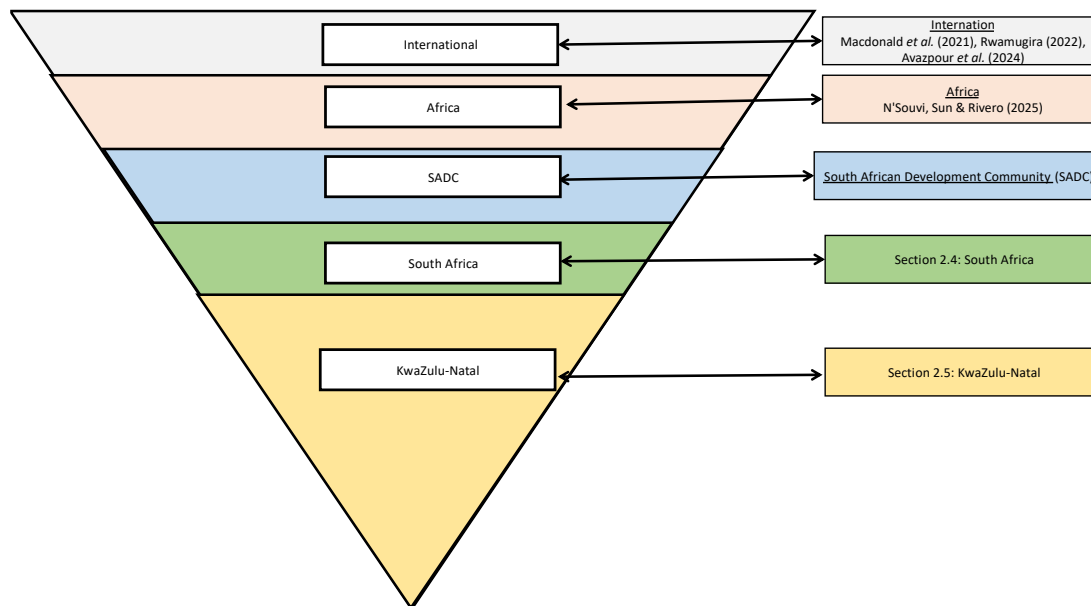


Figure 9-1: Funnel Approach (Literature Review) Source: Author's Compilation (2025)

Ma et al. (2023) argue that local community stakeholders' input is limited to the planning process, which involves developments that are mostly championed by national and global goals and that directly reside within the protected landscape. Co-stewardship or co-management with indigenous people, in which responsibilities are shared with the federal government, has gained prominence in places such as California (Moore et al., 2024). Muderwa, Baltazar and Ferreira (2025) found that the relaxation of the forest code to access the Amazon has resulted in more negative impacts on the forest management system. Additionally, climate change has negatively affected forest management. In Venezuela, maintaining a balance between economic growth and the exploitation of natural resources (for example, oil production) that generates foreign exchange has been challenging for the authorities (Udemba & Yalçintaş, 2023).

Mapedza (2023) argues that a management protocol should be in place to ensure proper access to and management of natural resources during disasters, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, which serves as a learning experience. Furthermore, Akello (2024:60) concludes that "effective natural resources management strategies involving governments, communities, Non-Profit Organisations (NGO), and the private sector are essential for balancing resource use and conservation, ensuring a resilient future". Kostauli (2024:iv) concludes that "community public private partnership with a private investor for commercial activities to reinforce capital to diversify mechanisms for income generation and job creation for local people". The empowerment of community members, especially youth, supports the long-term sustainability of projects, as seen in the Umzimvubu Water Catchment (South Africa), where capacity-building programmes have strengthened community resilience. Sardeshpande and Shackleton (2025) argue that a proper system should be in place to identify key stakeholders, as this will bring long-lasting, sustainable natural resource management as partners. Figure 9-2 summarises natural resources management in selected case studies across different areas. In

the next section, a further literature review analysis will be conducted, incorporating the PRISMA model in natural resources management.

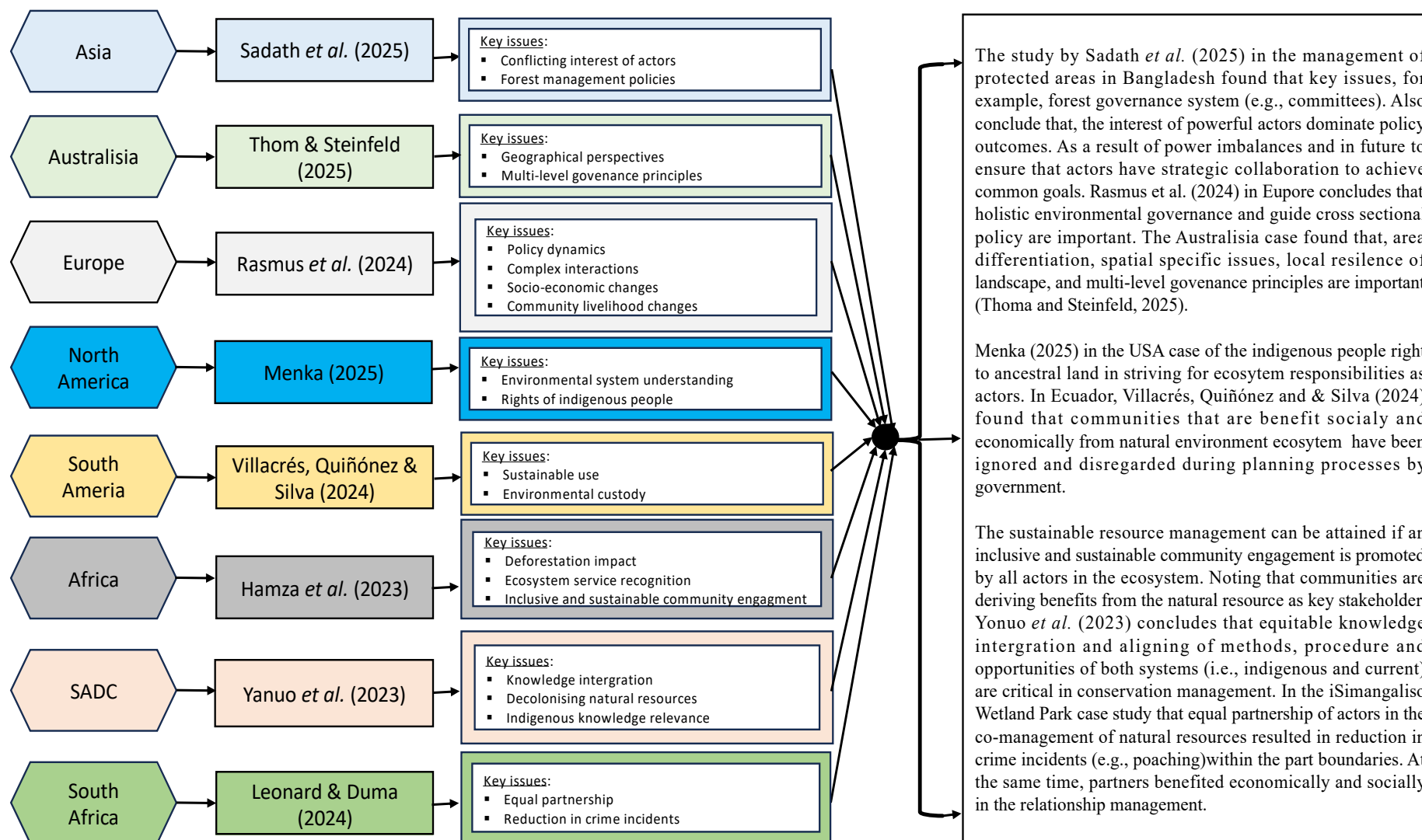


Figure 9-2: Selected Studies (Protected Areas) Source: Author's Compilation (2025)

9.3 Research Methodology

To achieve the aim, the study conducted a literature search across various databases, as depicted in Figure 9-3, using a funnel approach to identify literature on the management of natural resources. The search for the topic using keywords in search engines began internationally and then moved to the African continent. Later, the focus shifts to Southern Africa, and then to South Africa. Finally, a search was conducted for KwaZulu-Natal literature using the following databases: EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, ProQuest, Sabinet, and Web of Science. Just over 25,000 results were retrieved when searching for “natural resources management in land reform projects” across the selected databases, covering international ecosystems. The search was then restricted to the local landscape of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, yielding 1,021 sources across the databases. The search terms included the following:

- (“Natural AND resource” OR “Natural” OR “Resources”)
- (“Resources AND management” OR “Resources” OR “management”)
- (“Natural AND land” OR “Natural” OR “Land”)
- (“Management” AND “land reform” OR “Land reform” OR “Africa”)
- (“Land reform” AND “Africa” OR “Land reform” OR “Southern Africa”)
- (“Land reform” AND “South Africa” OR “South Africa” OR “Land reform”)
- (“KwaZulu-Natal” AND “Land reform” OR “Land reform” OR “KwaZulu-Natal”)
- (“northern KwaZulu-Natal” AND “Land reform” OR “Land reform” OR “northern KwaZulu-Natal”)

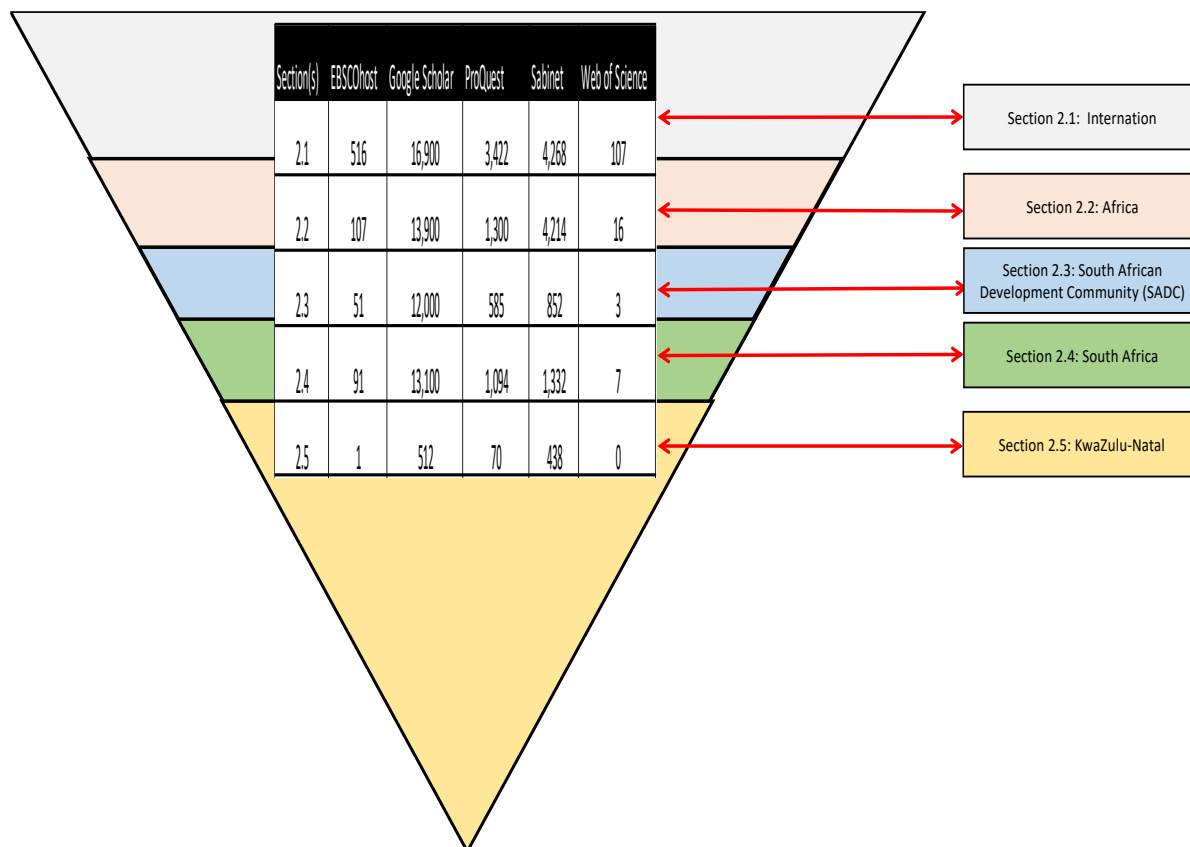


Figure 9-3: Funnel Approach (Database Search) Source: Author's Compilation (2025)

A systematic literature review was conducted, integrating the PRISMA flowchart to refine the search and to understand natural resource management concepts within land reform projects. The systematic literature review provides a rigorous technique in analysing the current state of the scientific topic (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). It contributes a complete and unbiased overview of the current literature on the specific topic. The method can also identify gaps in the literature. This process aims to highlight how land reform beneficiaries manage natural resources on the land parcels they own in the forestry sector during the post-transfer period, in relation to their developmental goals of sustainable community livelihoods.

The process highlights key findings, research gaps, and possible future research areas. It also provides key learnings for academics, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers within the land reform ecosystem. The process involves applying filters and removing records from the identified databases, as depicted below, covering the steps that follow.

9.4 Documents selection

A systematic literature review perspective was used to map the existing literature to inform the topic's expansive research question. In accessing article sources, both the abstracts and titles were reviewed to determine inclusion and exclusion criteria for the PRISMA flowchart. An electronic database search was conducted on five databases as follows:

- EBSCOhost: <https://0-research-ebSCO-com>
- Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com/scholar>

- ProQuest: <https://www.proquest.com>
- Sabinet: <https://0-journals-co-za>
- Web of Science: www.webofscience.com

As part of the implemented search strategy, peer-reviewed literature published between 1 January 2024 and 18 July 2025 about natural resources management in land reform projects in KwaZulu-Natal was considered. Following the reading of full-text articles, only six articles were retained for further analysis, as depicted in Table 9-1. This was part of the screening procedure implemented to meet the inclusion criteria. The criteria used for inclusion were as follows:

- Articles not in KwaZulu-Natal
- Cases not in the northern KwaZulu-Natal
- Articles not relevant to the research study goal

Finally, six articles remain, as illustrated in the PRISMA flowchart for the study (Figure 9:4).

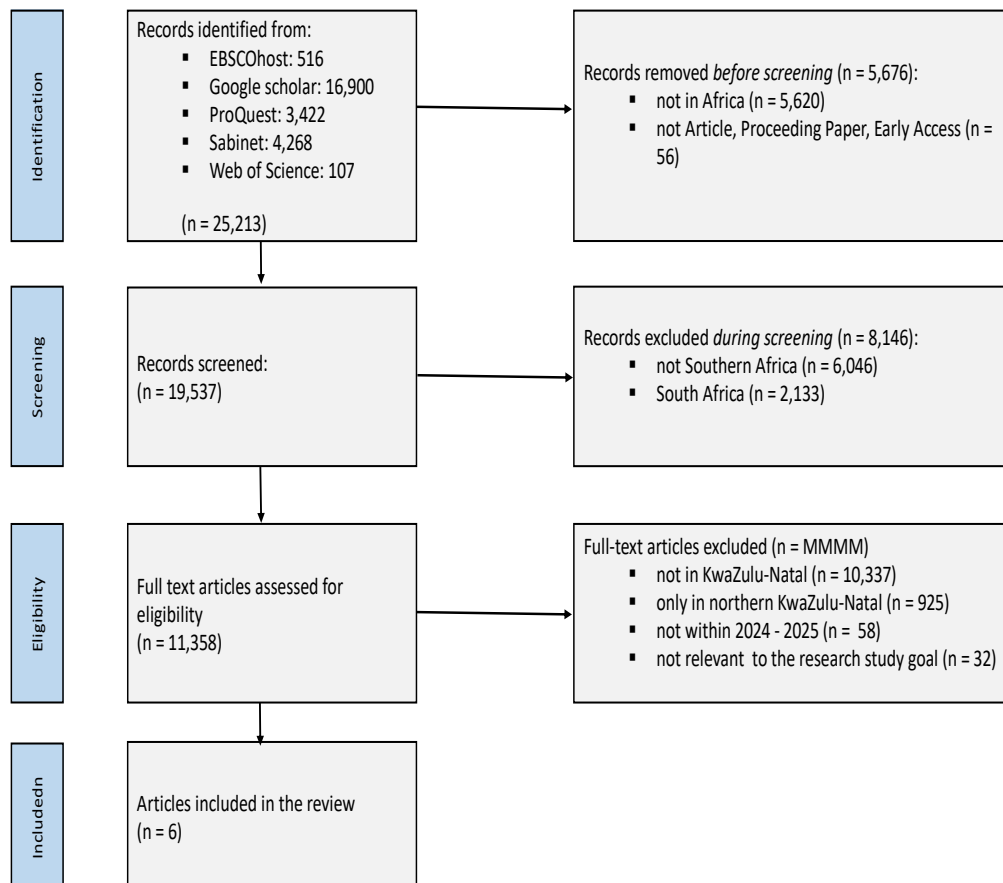


Figure 9-4: Source: Adopted PRISMA flowchart

9.5 Methods of analysis

The research analyses the identified articles to answer the research question of how forestry land reform projects balance natural resource management with community business aspirations, including, among others, improving sustainable community livelihoods. In conducting a transparent literature review, a systematic process was followed, augmented by the PRISMA flowchart. The following criteria were followed in analysing the six identified articles:

- Study objectives
- Methodology used in analysing the unit of analysis
- Results
- Main findings
- Implications for future research

The matrix in Table 9-1 is featured below.

9.6 Ethics

This article is based on a doctoral study, which received ethical clearance from Stadio Higher Education (Ethical Clearance Number: Stadio-2024-2-21811011).

9.7 Results and Findings

Table 9-1: Result matrix

Author/Date	Research objective and topic	Methodology / unit of analysis	Results	Main findings	Themes	Implications for future research or practice
Zenda, D (2024)	A systematic literature review on the impact of climate change on the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in South Africa	Smallholder farmers in South Africa 35 articles reviewed	Climate change impact on smallholder farmers livelihoods Coping strategies implemented by farmers Loss of livestock, resulted in hardship	Urgent interventions required including support programs	Water efficient farming practices Livestock management Livelihood diversification Environmental sustainability and resilience	Meta-analysis review of climate of climate change impact on smallholder farmers
Nkabinde, B., Lekhanya, LM & Dorasamy, N (2024)	Rural-urban migration challenges in South Africa: Case of KwaZulu-Natal (SA)	Quantitative approach, 350 non-probability sample respondents	Strong significance between increased crime level in urban areas Increased informal settlement impact on natural resources Extra cash required for policing and crime in cities Urban planning on service delivery challenges	Need for urban planning to enhance service delivery Pull vs push factors that encourage migration Impact of rural-urban migration on resources Develop strategies to address service levels		Rural-urban migration studies Deeper understanding of push-pull migration factors
Singh, S., Martins, A & Tefera, O. (2025)	Green human resource management and Sustainable Development Goals in non-profit organisations	Interpretivist qualitative study Eleven case studies analysed Data analysis using NVivo version 12	Development of sustainable practices with Human Resources Lack of quality leadership within the NPO ecosystem Poor or lack of stakeholder engagements	Collaborative challenges Limited or no innovative outlook Governance challenges for compliance		Efficiency in linking HR practices to leadership skills NPO understanding towards development Limited studies focusing on SA's NPO's
Mthembu, B.E., Cele, T & Mkhize, X (2025)	Climate change impacts on agricultural infrastructure and resources: Insights from communal land farming systems	Quantitative structure questionnaire study with 60 communal farmers in Bergville (KwaZulu-Natal)	Roads (87%), Bridges (85%), Arable Land (81%), and Erosion (81%)	Extreme weather events impact on communal farmers Lack or limited access to information		Climate change priority for local municipalities Implementation of National Climate Strategies Identification models for climate hazards Investment in climate adaptive systems
Baloyi <i>et al.</i> (2025)	A review of community-based strategies for addressing encroachment in the semi-arid savannah rangelands of Southern Africa	PRISMA guidelines in literature	Extraction of plants for medicinal purposes Extraction of plants for firewood purposes	Implementation of indigenous and traditional knowledge		Incorporate indigenous knowledge into practice IKS benefit to modern scientific systems Inclusion of community participation
Mubangizi, B (2025)	Enhancing rural livelihoods and sustainability through a place-based approach to research	Placed based approach	Institutional dynamics in rural livelihoods	Identification of disconnect between local authorities and sustainable development efforts in rural areas Conventional top-down approach overlook complex realities		Institutional support for Placed Based Approach (PBA) Interdisciplinary collaboration in research

Source: Author's Compilation (2025)

The importance of protecting the environment has been paramount in the 21st century, as also emphasised by the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 17 (i.e., life of land), which implies the protection, restoration, and promotion of the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, including the management of forests and the reduction of biodiversity losses. The study has provided a foundation for the layout of natural resources management within South African land reform projects. It is evident from Mubangizi (2025:1) that the place-based approach (PBA) offers a new way to enhance natural resource management, involving inclusive stakeholders who champion rural livelihood sustainability. Baloyi *et al.*'s (2025) study, conducted according to the PRISMA guidelines, concludes that integrating Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge Systems (IKS) fosters collaboration among rural communities to address environmental challenges that threaten their ecosystems and species survival.

It was concluded that local government municipalities are failing to prioritise climate action, to implement approved national climate strategies at the local level, to lack a mechanism for identifying climate hazards, and to invest only minimally in climate-adaptive systems, which ultimately impact the sustainability of communal farmers (Mthembu *et al.*, 2025). According to Singh *et al.* (2025), the role of non-profit organisations (NPOs) in rural areas is pivotal in assisting rural communities. NPOs' efforts to achieve operational efficiency are hindered by a lack of leadership skills within the landscape and by a broader understanding of their role in development within their own systems. Additionally, limited studies in South Africa focus on NPOs (Singh *et al.*, 2025). Urgent intervention is required to provide support programmes to smallholder farmers to mitigate climate change impacts on their livelihoods (Zenda, 2024).

Lastly, Nkambinde *et al.* (2024) found that rural-urban migration negatively impacts natural resource protection, and further understanding is required at the local municipal level regarding the push-pull factors driving the high migration patterns observed in recent years within the South African jurisdiction, as exemplified by the City of eThekweni. Finally, protecting natural resources by land reform communities poses a challenge, as they concurrently strive to improve beneficiaries' sustainable livelihoods. It is worth noting that the environment provides long-term benefits essential to the survival of the forestry industry, a key economic sector in South Africa. Natural resources management intersects with areas such as biodiversity conservation, ecology, environmental science, forestry sustainability, evolutionary biology, and multidisciplinary sciences. Maintaining a healthy balance becomes a challenge for all stakeholders.

9.8 Practical Implications

The literature review, as summarised above, provides a foundation for stakeholders to implement the forestry land reform programme. This acknowledges that new land beneficiaries are not all equipped with the resources, knowledge, and skills to understand the intricacies of the natural resources bestowed upon the community leaders as land custodians. It requires the inclusive participation of all stakeholders in addressing shortcomings. The study provides options for consideration, including PBA Mubangizi (2025) and IKS (Baloyi *et al.*, 2025), with the understanding that some land parcels contain environmentally sensitive areas, historic sites (i.e.,

Zulu cultural history), and monuments that require protection by all parties. The roll-out can be coordinated on a case-by-case basis within the respective district municipalities of KwaZulu-Natal, coordinated by the provincial government, and inclusive of academic institutions (e.g., UKZN and UniZulu) and NPOs (e.g., Amafa).

9.9 Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

As far as the author is aware, this is possibly the first comprehensive, systematic literature review of the KwaZulu-Natal land reform projects in South Africa. It provides an overview of current literature, including scholarly coverage of the topic, using peer-reviewed articles. Balancing community aspirations with the protection of natural resources is crucial for all stakeholders. This will provide long-term protection of key resources for future generations. Ultimately, SDG 17 will be achieved sustainably. The study period, spanning 2024 to 2025, limited the scope for further retrieval. A further expansion to five years will provide added sources for consideration within the same subject matter. The geographical delimitation of studies to KwaZulu-Natal results in findings specific to the provincial context and limits generalisability to other provinces. Future studies are encouraged within the land reform landscape to mitigate risks that impact community sustainable livelihoods.

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⁵ CBNRM: Community-Based Natural Resource Management



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