

Lecturer Leadership and Student Academic Engagement in TVET Colleges: A Conceptual and Theoretical Review

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Abstract

The academic engagement of students is pertinent in higher education circles. As authors, we argue that in addition to other contributing factors to student success, student academic engagement is at the center of learning and in this conceptual study in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. There is a plethora of scientific and empirical evidence of leadership in higher education but not much has been researched on the influence of lecturer leadership on student engagement, especially in TVET educational contexts. This literature gap is the main purpose for embarking on this study. This study is conceptual in nature and pertinent, and a relevant scholarly work focused on student engagement, lecturer leadership, and engagement-enhancing pedagogies is critically evaluated. Transformational leadership is used as a theoretical lens. This theory is applied to explore the relationship of lecture leadership and student engagement with a focus on the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. This review contributes to a scholarly discourse on the leadership of lecturers in the TVET space.

Keywords: Lecturer leadership; Student academic engagement; TVET colleges; Transformational leadership.

Introduction

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges are critical for skills formation, social mobility, and inclusive growth. In South Africa, national policy frames TVET as a cornerstone of the post-school system, expected to expand access, improve quality, strengthen links to work, and address historical inequalities (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013).

Despite this important function, TVET colleges continue to experience persistent impediments relating to inequality, unsatisfactory throughput, and graduation rates. Further, the challenges include a lack of student engagement, and national empirical studies pointing to multi-causal attrition linked to academic, socio-economic, institutional, and psychosocial factors (DHET, 2024; Zulu & Mutereko, 2020).

Student academic engagement is a critical factor in determining student performance outcomes. Scholars (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Kahu, 2013) argue that factors such as the method of instruction and the culture within the institution affect student engagement. A plethora of studies in the educational context, such as TVET, focuses on organizational leadership and neglects the role of lecturers in the leadership space. This study intends to investigate the role of the leadership dimension of TVET lecturers in enhancing student engagement. This is critical in that this role players are at the operational level in conducting tasks such as planning and delivery of lessons, placement of students in industry, and advising on course selection.

For this assertion, this conceptual review foregrounds lecturer leadership practices as a lever for engagement in TVET.

Conceptual Analysis As Review Method

This study is underpinned by an extensive conceptual analysis in its approach, which, as researchers, we argue is suitable for clarifying concepts and integrating relevant literature. Sources identified and consulted for in-depth assessment include peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, seminal works, and global/continental reports on TVET. The process involved a rigorous analysis and high-quality synthesis. Amongst the seminal works identified were Fredricks et al. (2004); Trowler (2010), Kuh (2008); Hattie (2009); Biggs (1996). National policy-related sources and materials in the context of South African TVET research were (DHET, 2013; Papier & McBride, 2019; DHET, 2021; DHET, 2024). The intensive iterative engagement with this literature resulted in thematic strands that were mapped into four theoretical lenses, namely: transformational leadership, cognitive constructivism, engagement theory, and self-determination theory.

Conceptualising and Measuring Student Academic Engagement in TVET

Engagement is commonly defined as a multidimensional meta-construct comprising behavioral, emotional (affective), and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). In higher education, Kahu (2013) adds that engagement sits within a broader 'educational interface' where student, institutional, and sociocultural factors interact; poor distinctions between antecedents, the state of engagement, and outcomes have historically clouded the field. From the TVET perspective, which offers vocational courses mainly, requires that the curricula should promote student engagement through various activities such as workshops, simulations, and work placements. The process should not leave any student behind, irrespective of the socio-economic background of the students. Creating opportunities for students' engagement by lecturers prepares them and arms them with self-confidence, which is required in the workplace.

Behavioral Engagement

How students engage in academic practical activities is crucial to their careers in industry. Lecturer leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing and promoting engagement. Engagement should not be treated as a one-time function but encouraged throughout students' entire college lives. Prince (2004) and Trowler (2010) view lecturer leadership as fostering observable conduct characterized by persistent, on-task behavior. Among the many activities are demonstrations, which are practical in approach, safety rules adherence, and group project participation. Prince (2004) and Trowler (2010) argue that demonstrating lecturer leadership, clear expectations, structured tuition time, clearly crafted learning opportunities, and holding students accountable are imperative.

Emotional (Affective) Engagement

This is a critical component of the engagement of students. It is of utmost importance that lectures lead in this front, as it includes how students are treated in the educational environment, how they are perceived by their peers, their acceptance or rejection, whether they feel that they belong, and so on. Lecturers should always prioritize the issue of student emotions. This does not

necessarily mean academic performance accountability should be relegated to the backfoot. A socially just and fair approach should be the order of the day, and Ubuntu principles should underpin the interactions and engagements. Students' voices and independent thinking should be crucial, and this promotes affective engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Kahu, 2013).

Cognitive Engagement

This component of engagement focuses on the brain functioning and how it is engaged in critical thinking, and how it is deployed in learning activities (Kanyonga, Chumba, Kessio, & Kafanabo, 2025). Students are engaged cognitively through self-reflection, problem-based learning, active experimentation, and meta-cognition, connecting theory to real-world problems and collaborative problem-solving activities. In these activities, lecturers must allow mistakes and should understand that learning is a journey. Biggs (1996) and Hattie (2009) posit that true lecturer leadership provides challenging and authentic activities that result in student reflection, solidifying their cognitive engagement.

Measuring Engagement and Using Analytics

As argued, student engagement is crucial and can be measured in various ways. Bond, Bedenlier, Buntins, Kerres, and Zawacki-Richter (2020) propose several methods for measuring engagement, including scales that focus on behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions, as well as rubrics that measure performance through attendance and skills and competencies, which reflect the practical aspect. Technology-supported learning has both advantages and disadvantages for student engagement. This depends on the narrative and systematic review instruments deployed and, on their design, and quality. For example, in TVET colleges where technology is not adequate, the results will not be the same as those of TVET institutions with adequate technology resources.

Lecturer Leadership in TVET

Leadership plays a critical role in any organization and can either build or destroy. This is true of the leadership of lecturers in the TVET environment. How they interact with students impacts their degree of engagement. The leadership of the lecturer can be described as purposefully focusing on pedagogy, which enhances the motivation of students. Studies have argued that

“leadership practices help to motivate and can hinder the extent to which students participate in class sessions and subsequently their academic output” (Kruglanski, Pierro & Higgins, 2007). Engaging students requires transformational leadership, and according to Avolio and Bass (1990), this type of leadership promotes inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence.

Approaches to Enhancing Engagement in TVET

Several methods are critical in promoting engagement and below are detailed discussion of these ways.

Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL)

The advent of digital technologies changed the way teaching and learning are conducted in educational contexts, including the TVET space. Technology does provide the education sector with benefits such as expanding access. Technology massifies access and opportunities for those with access to these technologies. Bond et al. (2020) note that reviews of higher education show that when technology-enhanced learning is characterized by clearly crafted and aligned objectives, affective and behavioral engagement is promoted. The deployment of digital technologies such as virtual simulations, the use of learning and management systems (LMS), Moodle, and other relevant contemporary technologies is crucial in enhancing engagement. In TVET, the digital divide continues to be a global challenge, as indicated by UNESCO-UNEVOC (2023) and DHET (2013). Until these inequalities are addressed in the TVET space, student engagement will always lag.

Assessment for/as/of Learning

Assessment constitutes an important part of the learning process. Learning is incomplete without assessment. Assessment provides opportunities to check whether students were engaged throughout the learning process. Assessment takes place in different formats, but should be systematic and involve deep planning, analysis, and interpretation of data or information (Zeng, Huang, Yu & Chen, 2018; Heged, M., 2020). The main types of assessment are formative and

summative assessments. Black and Wiliam (1998); Hattie and Timperley (2007) assert that formative assessment is characterized by a continuous checking of whether students comprehended what was taught. They argue that these forms of assessment help with the identification of gaps and how these can be addressed. Rereading the summative assessment, it is administered at the end of the learning and provides a picture of whether students can be certified as having grasped the learning outcomes. The authors argue that this should demonstrate learning that is authentic and industry-relevant competencies.

Collaborative and Active Learning

Collaborative learning is a common practice in educational contexts and Liao, Chen, and Shih (2019) hold the view that this type of learning provides a learning characterized by interactions, knowledge, and reflection. The learning environment is essential for building active collaboration, enhancing students' collective learning, and improving study outcomes and critical thinking abilities (Liao, Chen, and Shih, 2019). Prince (2004) argues that active learning activities involve comprehension and persistence. In a TVET context, lecturers should promote active and collaborative learning by ensuring that students do group work, responsibilities are shared and rotated. Inactivity and hiding by other learners should be discouraged, and participation by all should be encouraged.

Mentorship and Advising

Mentorship is considered very critical in higher education. Without it, students will not be able to cope with the complexities of post-schooling education (Gamage, Perera, & Wijewardena, 2021; MacArthur, 2024). Peters, Zdravkovic, João Costa, Celenza, Ghias, Klamen, & Weggemans, M. (2019). It is for this reason that students should be provided with opportunities that cater to mentoring and advising. These opportunities offer platforms for genuine and transparent engagement. Mentorship also promotes individualized attention, emotional and social support, which they desperately require. This is critical, particularly for first-year students. There are various ways in which these mentoring and coaching opportunities can be conducted, such as peer mentoring, specialized psycho-social services, and industry-provided services such as coaches (Bolton-King, 2022; Handrianto et al., 2022).

Contextual Challenges to Student Engagement

Several factors impede student engagement in the TVET sector. In their study, Motal and Khumalo (2021) note the following findings, which impede student support and are directly linked to engagement: family background, academic difficulties, poor class attendance, poor infrastructure, lack of professional development opportunities, lack of career guidance, lack of academic support, and shortage of student support staff. Further reasons that constrain student engagement include digital inequalities, limited comprehension of the language of learning, and no clearly defined student support (DHET, 2024; Zulu & Mutereko, 2020; Papier & McBride, 2019).

Transformational leadership as a theoretical lens and its application to lecturer leadership

This theory was advocated by James MacGregor Burns in 1978, and his focus was to provide an understanding and distinction between transformational and transactional leadership. He argued that leadership should be preoccupied with ensuring that followers are motivated and inspired in the organization. This theory was later engaged and extended by Bernard Bass (1985), Avolio (1990), and later also made his views known. Both these theorists argue for the four core dimensions/components of this theory, namely, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The main pillars of this theory are intrinsic motivation, shared vision, intellectual growth, and personal development. This theory is appropriate and applicable to the TVET lecture leadership context since student engagement requires inspiration and individual consideration. Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Applying this theory to this paper, transformational lecturer leadership is viewed from the perspective of leading in ensuring that student engagement in TVET colleges is sustained. When lecturers ensure that in all their pedagogical activities, students are encouraged to engage, participate, lead, share, collaborate, active learning takes place. At the same time, students' attendance, persistence, and emotional connection to their learning are strengthened. Other forms of engagement that lecturers should explore include challenging students to think critically, engage in real workplace challenges, and participate in work-integrated learning. This aspect

sustains and focuses on the emotional aspect of their engagement. Individualized support can be exercised through mentoring and coaching, which produces student endurance and belonging. The practical expression of transformational leadership can be experienced through WIL, assessment practices, digital technologies, and their deployment, and tasks that require collaboration.

Conclusion

In this study, which is underpinned by the conceptual and theoretical analysis, we found that lecturer leadership is central in enhancing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement in TVET colleges. Drawing on transformational leadership, the analysis indicates that student engagement in their studies is not by accident but is purposeful and should be cultivated through various methods, such as constructively aligned, and intellectually stimulating pedagogies. Strategies such as technology-enhanced learning, formative assessment, collaborative learning, mentorship, and work-integrated learning were shown to be critical mechanisms through which lecturer leadership activates motivation and deep learning. At the same time, persistent contextual challenges, including socio-economic constraints, digital inequality, and psychosocial barriers, require responsive, ethically grounded leadership practices. Ultimately, strengthening lecturer leadership within the South African TVET sector is essential for improving student persistence, competence development, and employability outcomes.

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