

# The Role of Educational Leaders and Managers in Advancing Global Rankings, Accreditation, and Quality Assurance in South African Higher Educational Institutions

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**Abstract:** *This literature-based chapter examines the role of educational leaders and managers in advancing global rankings, accreditation, and quality assurance in South African higher education, emphasizing the era of digital volunteerism and community engagement. Findings reveal tensions between global competitiveness and social transformation mandates, underutilization of digital volunteerism, hierarchical leadership constraints, and narrow quality assurance practices. Recommendations include developing leadership models integrating digital volunteerism, investing in adaptive leadership and digital infrastructure, revising policy frameworks to incentivize community engagement, and conducting longitudinal and comparative studies. The chapter concludes that transformative, digitally-enabled leadership can synergize global excellence with societal impact, fostering sustainable community development and equitable access to education.*

**Keywords:** Educational Leaders, Educational Managers, Global Rankings, Accreditation, Quality Assurance Digital Volunteerism, Community Engagement.

## 1. Background to the Study

Globalization has profoundly reshaped the higher education landscape, positioning global rankings, accreditation, and quality assurance as critical benchmarks for institutional success and legitimacy (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2016). South African universities, like many institutions in developing countries, face the dual challenge of meeting global standards while addressing deeply rooted socio-economic inequalities and transformative imperatives linked to their colonial and apartheid histories (Badat, 2010; Cloete, Maassen & Bailey, 2015). This complex context calls for educational leaders and managers to navigate competing priorities: enhancing research outputs and global visibility, while fostering social responsiveness, inclusivity, and community development (Salmi, 2009; Du Toit & Bitzer, 2019).

### Challenges in South African Higher Education Leadership

One prominent challenge is the persistent tension between global competitiveness and local relevance. While rankings often prioritize research productivity and reputational metrics (Altbach & de Wit, 2018; Hazelkorn, 2015), South African institutions are tasked with addressing local development needs, redressing inequality, and expanding access (Badat, 2010). Leadership approaches focused primarily on compliance with accreditation standards may neglect the transformative role universities must play in their communities (Thaver, 2016). Moreover, the institutional culture and capacity to drive innovation, particularly digital innovation that supports community engagement, remain uneven (Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016).

## 2. Literature Gaps

Despite extensive research on global rankings and quality assurance, significant gaps exist in literature that examines the integration of **community engagement** and **digital volunteerism** within leadership and quality frameworks in the South African context. While community engagement is recognized as a core university function (Bawa, 2014; Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016), few studies empirically explore how leaders operationalize digital volunteerism to extend civic participation and social impact (UNV, 2021; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2022). Most scholarship focuses either on global benchmarking or on community engagement in isolation, rarely connecting these areas to propose integrated leadership models that balance both priorities (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016).

### Theoretical Gaps

The dominant leadership theories applied in higher education, such as transformational leadership and distributed leadership (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Spillane, 2006), offer valuable insights but insufficiently address the unique challenges of leading in contexts marked by socio-economic disparities and technological divides. There is a lack of contextually grounded theoretical frameworks that incorporate **digital volunteerism** and **community engagement** as strategic leadership functions aligned with quality assurance and global competitiveness (Ng, 2022). Theories that combine social justice leadership with digital innovation remain underdeveloped, particularly for the Global South (Mohamedbhai, 2021).

### Practical Gaps

At the operational level, South African HEIs face significant hurdles in deploying digital technologies to enhance

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community engagement. Infrastructure deficits, digital literacy challenges, and fragmented institutional strategies hinder the effective implementation of digital volunteerism (Govender & Dhunpath, 2018; Makoe, 2020). Leadership development programs rarely equip managers with the competencies to leverage digital platforms strategically, missing opportunities to harness student, staff, and alumni volunteerism for both community benefit and institutional visibility (Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016). Additionally, there is inconsistent alignment between strategic plans and everyday practices regarding digital engagement and community outreach.

### Policy Gaps

Policy frameworks governing higher education quality and accreditation in South Africa, primarily driven by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), emphasize community engagement but lack clear, operationalized standards for evaluating digital volunteerism and technological innovation as part of quality assurance (CHE, 2020; DHET, 2017). This gap creates ambiguity and uneven institutional responses to integrating digital community engagement into accreditation submissions. Internationally, policy dialogues have yet to fully recognize digital volunteerism as a key element of institutional social responsibility and quality enhancement (UNV, 2021).

In sum, this study emerges at the nexus of global and local pressures on South African HEIs, with educational leaders playing a pivotal role in negotiating these challenges. The clear **gaps in the literature, theory, practice, and policy** underscore the need for integrated leadership models that leverage digital volunteerism and community engagement to enhance institutional quality and global competitiveness while remaining responsive to social transformation imperatives.

### Area of Focus

This chapter focuses on the critical role of educational leaders and managers within South African higher education institutions in advancing global rankings, accreditation, and quality assurance, while simultaneously fostering community engagement through digital volunteerism. The unique South African context—with its legacy of inequality, socio-economic challenges, and ongoing transformation—provides a fertile ground to examine how leadership navigates the complex interplay between global standards and local responsibilities (Badat, 2010; Cloete et al., 2015).

Specifically, the area of focus is twofold. First, it explores how leadership strategies influence an institution's performance in global benchmarking systems, and second, how these strategies can incorporate innovative community engagement mechanisms that leverage digital volunteerism to support social transformation and institutional sustainability (Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016; UNV, 2021).

Digital volunteerism, defined as the use of digital platforms to mobilize volunteers for community and civic purposes, has surged globally due to increased internet penetration and the COVID-19 pandemic's push toward virtual engagement (Brabham, 2013; UNV, 2021). In higher education, digital

volunteerism offers a novel mechanism for universities to extend their impact beyond physical campuses and traditional community service models (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2022). However, its adoption and strategic integration remain underdeveloped in many South African universities, largely due to infrastructural and leadership challenges (Makoe, 2020; Govender & Dhunpath, 2018).

Thus, this chapter seeks to analyze how educational leaders can leverage digital volunteerism to align community engagement with the imperatives of accreditation and quality assurance frameworks. It interrogates leadership models that successfully balance the pursuit of research excellence and global recognition with transformative community engagement, drawing lessons from South African case studies and broader international experiences (Knight, 2012; Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

By focusing on leadership's role in synthesizing these seemingly competing demands, this study aims to contribute to theoretical and practical understandings of quality leadership in higher education that is locally responsive, socially just, and globally competitive.

## 3. Literature Review

### Educational Leadership and Global Rankings

The rise of global university rankings has profoundly influenced leadership practices in higher education worldwide. According to Hazelkorn (2015), rankings shape institutional priorities by emphasizing research output, citation impact, and internationalization metrics, often at the expense of teaching quality and community engagement. Marginson (2016) critiques this phenomenon as a "global hierarchy" that privileges elite institutions and risks homogenizing diverse academic cultures. In the South African context, Cloete, Maassen, and Bailey (2015) highlight that while global rankings incentivize performance improvements, systemic inequalities related to funding, infrastructure, and legacy issues constrain many institutions' abilities to compete effectively.

Leadership literature reflects these tensions. Transformational leadership models, which emphasize vision and change management, have been posited as key to navigating the pressures of global competitiveness (Du Toit & Bitzer, 2019). However, critiques argue these models insufficiently address the complexities of South African universities, where leadership must also prioritize social justice and redress (Badat, 2010; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016). Adaptive leadership, which encourages responsiveness to dynamic challenges, offers a more nuanced framework, enabling leaders to balance competing demands of rankings and local relevance (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009).

### Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education

Quality assurance mechanisms in higher education have evolved as critical tools for maintaining standards and enhancing institutional credibility (CHE, 2020). Accreditation processes, guided by bodies such as the Council on Higher Education in South Africa, focus on

institutional governance, curriculum quality, and student outcomes. However, Thaver (2016) contends that quality assurance often becomes a bureaucratic exercise centered on compliance rather than meaningful enhancement of learning experiences.

Several scholars argue for a redefinition of quality that includes social impact and community engagement as core dimensions (Bawa, 2014; Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016). Such reconceptualizations challenge traditional metrics by advocating for integrated quality frameworks that recognize universities' roles as civic actors. This approach aligns with international trends that view universities as "anchor institutions" committed to sustainable development goals (SDGs) and local community transformation (Knight, 2012; Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

### Community Engagement in Higher Education

Community engagement is a well-established, yet variably implemented, function of universities globally. In South Africa, policy mandates emphasize community service and partnerships as vehicles for social justice and development (DHET, 2017). However, empirical studies reveal significant gaps in translating policy into practice (Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016). Mncube and Harber (2013) argue that community engagement is often tokenistic, lacking genuine collaboration with local stakeholders.

Bawa (2014) proposes that community engagement must be embedded within institutional missions and supported by leadership commitment to be transformative. This requires strategic frameworks that integrate community projects with teaching and research activities, creating mutually beneficial partnerships (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016). However, the digital dimension of engagement remains understudied, particularly in how it can amplify reach and deepen impact.

### Digital Volunteerism and Technological Innovation in Higher Education

Digital volunteerism refers to mobilizing volunteers via digital platforms to support civic, educational, and social initiatives (Brabham, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital tools, showcasing their potential for remote mentorship, fundraising, and capacity building (UNV, 2021; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2022). In higher education, digital volunteerism can augment traditional community engagement by connecting universities with alumni, industry partners, and global networks (Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016).

Despite its potential, South African HEIs face infrastructural challenges, including limited broadband access, digital literacy gaps, and resource constraints (Makoe, 2020; Govender & Dhunpath, 2018). This digital divide restricts widespread adoption and innovation in volunteer-driven community initiatives. Leadership capacity to strategize and implement digital volunteerism remains limited, reflecting a critical practical gap identified in recent studies (Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016; UNV, 2021).

### Integration of Leadership, Community Engagement, and Digital Volunteerism

Emerging scholarship highlights the need for integrated leadership models that harmonize global ranking ambitions with local engagement priorities using digital innovation (Ng, 2022; Mohamedbhai, 2021). Distributed leadership frameworks, which promote shared responsibility and collaboration across institutional levels, show promise in fostering innovation and responsiveness to diverse stakeholder needs (Spillane, 2006; Du Toit & Bitzer, 2019).

Furthermore, studies from Brazil, India, and Malaysia suggest that universities achieving global excellence also demonstrate strong community linkages and strategic use of technology in outreach (Knight, 2012; Altbach & Salmi, 2011). These hybrid models provide valuable lessons for South African institutions grappling with complex transformation mandates. However, literature calls for context-specific frameworks that reflect the socio-political realities and infrastructural limitations of the Global South (Mohamedbhai, 2021).

### Summary of Literature Review Gaps

Overall, while there is substantial literature on leadership, global rankings, quality assurance, and community engagement, there is a paucity of integrated research that situates digital volunteerism as a strategic leadership tool to simultaneously advance global competitiveness and local social transformation in South African HEIs. Theoretical models often overlook the digital dimension, practical leadership training neglects technological capacities, and policy frameworks lack clear standards for evaluating digital engagement's impact on institutional quality.

## 4. Findings

The comprehensive review of literature and analysis of South African higher education leadership practices reveal several critical findings. First, there is a clear tension between the imperatives of global rankings and the social transformation mandates of South African universities. Leadership often prioritizes research output and international visibility to improve rankings, sometimes at the expense of meaningful community engagement (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2016). However, institutions that successfully integrate community engagement into their strategic missions tend to gain reputational benefits both locally and internationally, indicating that these objectives need not be mutually exclusive (Knight, 2012; Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016).

Second, digital volunteerism emerges as a potent yet underutilized tool for enhancing community engagement and expanding institutional reach. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption globally, yet South African universities lag behind in strategically embedding digital volunteer programs into their community engagement frameworks (UNV, 2021; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2022). The limited technological infrastructure and leadership capacity contribute to this gap (Makoe, 2020).

Third, leadership models in South Africa remain heavily influenced by traditional hierarchical and compliance-

focused approaches, which constrain innovation and limit responsiveness to the dynamic demands of rankings and social transformation (Du Toit & Bitzer, 2019; Thaver, 2016). Adaptive and distributed leadership frameworks offer promising alternatives but require significant institutional support and capacity-building to be effective (Heifetz et al., 2009; Spillane, 2006).

Fourth, quality assurance mechanisms tend to focus narrowly on procedural compliance, with insufficient emphasis on the qualitative aspects of social impact, community involvement, and digital innovation (CHE, 2020; Bawa, 2014). This narrow focus creates a disincentive for institutions to invest strategically in digital volunteerism and innovative community partnerships that may not directly influence accreditation outcomes.

## 5. Conclusion

Educational leaders and managers in South African higher education institutions occupy a pivotal role in advancing global rankings, accreditation, and quality assurance while simultaneously fulfilling the vital mandate of social transformation through community engagement. The literature affirms that these dual objectives—global competitiveness and local responsiveness—can be synergistically achieved through innovative leadership that embraces digital volunteerism as a strategic tool.

However, significant gaps exist in theory, practice, and policy that hinder this integration. Theoretical leadership models often lack contextual relevance and fail to incorporate the potential of digital platforms. Practically, infrastructure and capacity constraints limit the deployment of digital volunteer initiatives. Policy frameworks provide insufficient guidance and incentives for embedding community engagement and digital innovation within quality assurance and ranking strategies.

Addressing these gaps requires transformative leadership committed to adaptive, distributed, and socially just practices that leverage digital technologies. Such leadership not only enhances institutional prestige but also deepens the societal impact of universities, fostering sustainable community development and equitable access to education.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the role of educational leaders in advancing global rankings, accreditation, and quality assurance within the context of community engagement and digital volunteerism:

### Theoretical Recommendations

To enhance the theoretical foundations of leadership in South African higher education, it is recommended that new leadership models be developed and empirically tested to explicitly integrate digital volunteerism and community engagement as strategic functions. Existing frameworks often prioritize global rankings and accreditation metrics while neglecting the potential of digital platforms to foster inclusive and socially responsive leadership (Ng, 2022;

Mohamedbhai, 2021). By embedding these elements into leadership theory, scholars and practitioners can better understand how digitally-enabled initiatives contribute to both institutional prestige and societal impact.

Additionally, social justice and adaptive leadership frameworks should be expanded to specifically address digital transformation and socio-economic inequities in higher education contexts. Traditional models of leadership may not fully capture the complex realities faced by universities in the Global South, where resource constraints, uneven access to technology, and socio-economic disparities influence leadership effectiveness. Integrating digital strategies and equity-focused approaches into leadership theory provides a more relevant and actionable conceptual foundation for driving transformative change in South African universities.

### Practical Recommendations

From a practical perspective, it is essential for universities to invest in leadership development programs that build competencies in digital strategy, adaptive change management, and community partnership management (Du Toit & Bitzer, 2019). Equipping educational leaders with these skills ensures they are prepared to navigate the dual pressures of enhancing global competitiveness while fulfilling social transformation mandates. Professional development initiatives should incorporate experiential learning, mentoring, and exposure to successful case studies of digital volunteerism to strengthen leaders' capacity to implement innovative strategies effectively.

Moreover, institutions should establish formal digital volunteerism platforms that connect students, staff, alumni, and external partners in mutually beneficial community projects (UNV, 2021). These platforms can facilitate structured engagement, knowledge sharing, and collaboration across geographic and disciplinary boundaries. Alongside this, upgrading technological infrastructure and digital literacy initiatives is critical to support widespread adoption of these platforms (Makoe, 2020). Ensuring that both leaders and participants are digitally competent enhances the reach, impact, and sustainability of volunteer-driven community engagement programs.

### Policy Recommendations

At the policy level, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) should revise accreditation and quality assurance criteria to include robust measures of community engagement and digital innovation impact (CHE, 2020; DHET, 2017). Current policy frameworks often emphasize procedural compliance and research output, providing limited incentives for leaders to prioritize socially responsive practices. Updating these criteria would encourage institutions to adopt a more holistic approach to excellence, balancing global competitiveness with local relevance.

Policy interventions should also include funding models and performance metrics that incentivize integrated community engagement alongside global excellence strategies. By linking resource allocation to measurable outcomes in both

digital innovation and societal impact, policymakers can promote sustained institutional commitment to these objectives. Furthermore, fostering national and regional collaborations enables universities to share best practices, pool resources, and develop scalable models for digital volunteerism, thereby strengthening leadership capacity and institutional resilience across the higher education sector.

## 7. Recommendations for Further Research

Future research should include longitudinal studies assessing the impact of digital volunteerism on institutional rankings, community development outcomes, and student learning experiences in South African universities. Long-term empirical evidence is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership strategies that integrate digital engagement with community service, and to identify best practices for sustainable implementation.

Comparative research across institutions in the Global South is also recommended to identify scalable and contextually appropriate models of leadership that successfully integrate community engagement and digital innovation. In addition, studies should investigate the barriers and enablers to the adoption of digital volunteerism strategies, including cultural, infrastructural, and policy-related factors. Such research will provide actionable insights for educational leaders, policymakers, and scholars seeking to enhance institutional performance while addressing social equity and digital transformation challenges.

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### Definition of Key Terms

- [31] **Educational Leaders** – Educational leaders are individuals who inspire, guide, and influence institutional vision, strategy, and change to enhance learning outcomes and organizational performance (Bush, 2011; Du Toit & Bitzer, 2019).
- [32] **Educational Managers** – Educational managers are responsible for planning, organizing, and overseeing the day-to-day administrative and operational functions of educational institutions to ensure efficiency and compliance (Ng, 2022; Spillane, 2006).
- [33] **Global Rankings** – Global rankings are systematic evaluations of higher education institutions based on performance indicators such as research output, teaching quality, and international visibility to benchmark institutions worldwide (Hazelkorn, 2015; Altbach & de Wit, 2018).
- [34] **Accreditation** – Accreditation is a formal process through which institutions or programs are evaluated and certified against predefined quality standards to ensure legitimacy and credibility in higher education (CHE, 2020; Thaver, 2016).
- [35] **Quality Assurance** – Quality assurance refers to the systematic policies, procedures, and practices that monitor, evaluate, and enhance the effectiveness and quality of teaching, research, and institutional governance (Bawa, 2014; Du Toit & Bitzer, 2019).
- [36] **Digital Volunteerism** – Digital volunteerism involves individuals contributing skills, knowledge, or services remotely through digital platforms to support educational, social, or community initiatives (UNV, 2021; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2022).
- [37] **Community Engagement** – Community engagement is the strategic collaboration between educational institutions and local or wider communities to address societal needs, promote social development, and enhance mutual learning (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016; Mncube & Harber, 2013).