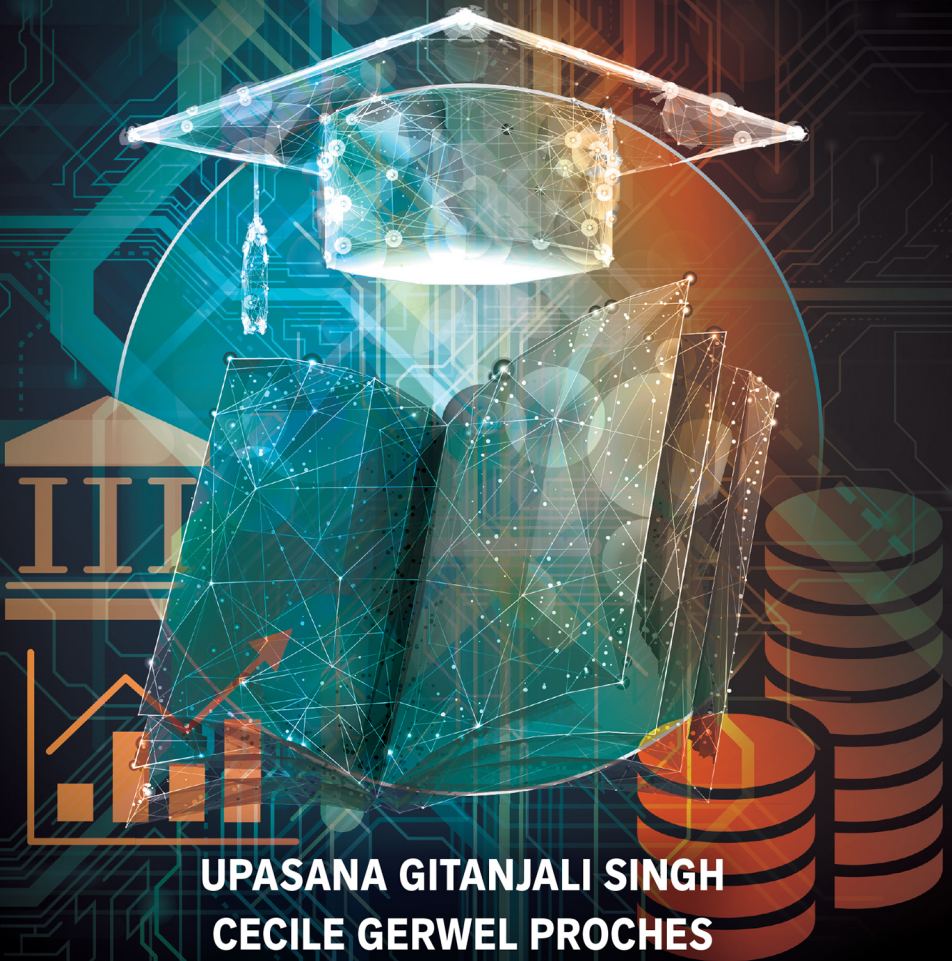


HIGHER EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN VUCA CONTEXTS

Accessing VUCA Prime and
Wisdom for Effective Leadership



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Higher Educational Leadership in VUCA Contexts

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Higher Educational Leadership in VUCA Contexts: Accessing VUCA Prime and Wisdom for Effective Leadership

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Ruenda Loots oversees the curriculum development, and teaching and learning for two academic programs in sustainable development at Stellenbosch University. As program leader, she works to create experiential, immersive learning

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Foreword

This book provides a venue for authors to express how they leverage VUCA Prime (vision, understanding, clarity, and agility) to address emerging issues in higher education leadership in this VUCA context (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous). The book explores diverse issues confronting leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs), pertaining to how to challenge the status quo; organisational change, strategy, and culture; gender; various leadership approaches to navigate the VUCA world including agile, resilient, and adaptive leadership; learning to (re)lead in a changing world and in times of crises; challenges and opportunities for higher education (HE); artificial intelligence (AI) and HE; and revisiting the curriculum, and teaching and learning.

This book seeks to be academically informed and practitioner-focused because, by design, it incorporates recent research into VUCA and VUCA Prime, leadership, HEIs, education, information systems, and generative AI. It supplements the research with real-world applications, toolkits, and case studies designed to enhance leadership development and effectiveness.

The book is a valuable resource for HEI leaders and diverse stakeholders to draw on, as HEIs continue to face multiple disruptions in an ever-evolving VUCA world. Now more than ever, HEI leaders need to demonstrate proactive and agile leadership to navigate the various issues that threaten the very existence of HEIs.

Organisation of the Book

Chapter 1

This chapter by Loots, Moloto, and von der Heyde answers the question, what do we need to do differently in higher education to confront a crisis-ridden world and prepare university graduates to navigate new uncertain futures? The authors advocate for a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to curriculum renewal that prioritizes critical thinking, generative imagination, and ethical engagement. They emphasize the need for visionary leadership to support the co-creation of graduate attributes and learning outcomes that equip graduates with hope and imaginative solutions for complex global problems. Their approach is illustrated through practical examples and imaginative exercises.

Chapter 2

In this chapter, Colquitt and McLaughlin apply a unique perspective to VUCA contexts. They centre masculinity in relation to VUCA, or ‘the VUCA of masculinity’. Colquitt and McLaughlin see higher education and leadership learning as an opportunity to challenge the VUCA of masculinity. University-aged men experience challenges to their masculinity during postsecondary education. Despite being already socialised with many messages around masculinity, there are unique aspects particular to University-aged men, like social media and the high rate of mental health issues among this population. HEIs are therefore a place where men can unlearn behaviours and develop new, healthier behaviours through leadership training. Using frameworks from Colquitt (2020) and Edwards (2023), the authors highlight the opportunities for intervention within the higher education context.

Chapter 3

In this chapter, Hinck focusses on the US Airforce’s (USAF) use of adaptive leadership for new learning, improved leader development, renewed focus on looming threats, and mobilising resources to tackle tough challenges. A discussion on how the USAF re-imagined leader development training and education, with VUCA leadership (verifiable-success, unifying-standards, continuous-learning, and affirmation-celebration) is shared through two case studies. Also, a new model, the VUCA Ecosystem, which is an interconnectedness of VUCA Context, VUCA Prime, VUCA Change, and VUCA Leadership is presented. Furthermore, a framework, VUCA Ecosystem Audit for Leaders, of asking the right questions to aid people and organisations to thrive, is presented. The chapter ends with two case study options to put into practice the new model and ecosystem.

Chapter 4

In this chapter, Singh and James explore the critical role of leadership in addressing the global challenge of status quo thinking within HEIs. The chapter highlights the essential leadership traits needed to foster innovation, the strategies required to overcome inertia, and the initiatives necessary for sustainable growth. Recommendations are provided to help HEI leaders foster a culture of change and innovation. The chapter argues for leaders in HEIs to embrace transformative leadership practices that challenge the status quo, foster innovation, and build resilience. Singh and James further highlight that it is necessary to respond to current challenges but also proactively prepare for future disruptions. By adopting a forward-thinking approach and prioritising sustainable growth, HEI leaders can ensure their institutions remain relevant and competitive in a rapidly changing world.

Chapter 5

The chapter, by Botha and Proches, presents a case study of organisational change in a South African HEI. The study focusses on the experiences and beliefs of middle managers. Middle managers were ideal candidates for the study because of

their role in implementing change, but at the same time, they did not have input or agency regarding the choice and structure of the changes. Twelve participants shared their perceptions with the authors. Botha and Proches identified a number of critical areas where the middle managers felt a lack of control and input. Botha and Proches argue that cost saving measures in faculty reduction should be weighed against the effects on employee quality of life within the organisation. They provide recommendations for HEIs in the process of implementing change.

Chapter 6

This chapter, by Hassan and Ali, examines how the VUCA Prime landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for HEIs. It is argued that for leaders to thrive in this environment, they must develop a range of essential knowledge and skills, including digital literacy, data-driven decision-making, cybersecurity, digital pedagogy, change management, partnerships and collaborations, digital leadership, continuous learning, strategic planning, communication and stakeholder engagement, innovation and entrepreneurship, and digital governance. By acquiring these skills and adopting a VUCA Prime mindset, HEI leaders can harness technology effectively, stay ahead of the curve, and make informed decisions that drive their institutions forward. The 10-step strategic road-map outlined in the chapter provides a clear and actionable guide for leaders to navigate the complexities of the VUCA Prime landscape and create a culture of innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

Chapter 7

The virtual leadership approaches of first-line leaders at a South African HEI are explored and described using an inductive qualitative research approach. In this chapter by Badru, Proches, and Ojogiwa, the participatory and collaborative leadership styles adopted by the 13 sampled academic leaders and directors of professional services participants, before and during the pandemic, were the same, although with adjustments. These included a greater use of distributive and intentional approaches, and attributes of trust, empathy, and effective communication emerged as prominent among the leaders, while honesty, being a change agent, leading by example, patience, and time management were less frequently noted. The chapter provides adaptive leadership strategies, attributes, and behaviours that could be employed by first-line leaders in higher education settings, during times of crisis.

Chapter 8

This chapter, by Singh, analyses the emerging challenges and opportunities for HEIs in the current VUCA climate. The authors explore leadership skills that are becoming important in this VUCA context for HEIs. They identify three especially salient challenges for institutions: The tensions between globalisation and status-quo thinking; racial and gender equity and the systemic barriers embedded within the higher education system; and E-leadership and the move of institutions onto a virtual platform. The authors provide case examples of HEIs making change through successful leadership practice and agility for each of the challenges.

Chapter 9

In this chapter, Suleiman and Akanbi explore the multifaceted nature of crises that HEIs face, ranging from financial instability and enrolment declines to public health emergencies and cybersecurity threats. By examining case studies and drawing on contemporary research, the study provides invaluable insights into the principles and practices that underpin resilient leadership. The chapter is structured to offer a systematic analysis of crisis management strategies, starting with the foundational concepts of resilience and leadership in higher education. It addresses the critical role of proactive leadership in anticipating potential crises and preparing institutions to respond effectively. Emphasising the importance of adaptive and transformational leadership, Suleiman and Akanbi highlight how leaders can foster a culture of resilience that permeates every level of the institution.

Chapter 10

In this chapter, Samuels explores the impact of leadership transparency on teaching and learning processes in South African HEIs, which are unique in political and socio-economic circumstances. Through a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, and relevant academic texts, published within the past decade, the findings revealed the aspects that have favourable influences on the strategic direction of educational institutions. The establishment of a culture of openness, where knowledge is freely exchanged, instructors and staff are empowered, helps to minimise uncertainty, creates an academic environment that promotes creativity and social responsiveness, and increases adaptability in teaching techniques and administrative procedures. Furthermore, transparent communication is key for navigating the complex socio-political dynamics and frequent policy changes, within HEIs. The study highlights the significance of clear and open leadership in educational environments and provides a structure for future investigation.

Chapter 11

In this chapter, Anaya and Cepero Espinosa focus on international students' needs and how an institution may be responsive to their academic, psychological, and spiritual well-being, thereby re-defining goals for students and institutions. The VUCA Prime design process was used to explore the experiences of 500+ international students studying in Canada's largest graduate leadership programme. Pathways to re-designing higher education programmes and improving leadership practices are presented. In offering strategies and tactics, the authors draw on real-world applications that are academically informed and practitioner focussed, and where programmes and professors are agile, through being reflective, responsive, and relevant. The practice of academic hospitality leverages generosity and goodwill, inclusion in the midst of diversity, equity despite difference, and personal and professional growth.

Chapter 12

This chapter by Fatima, Yasin, Waqas, and Imran, explores the role of agile leadership in fostering the success of HEIs in a VUCA environment. The concept of VUCA is explained, and the link to the HEI sector is established. After that, the role of leadership in general and with the specific role of agile leadership is explained in HEIs in the VUCA environment. The core dimensions of agile leadership are outlined and their link to the successful operation of HEIs is elaborated. A framework of agile leadership and its outcomes in the context of VUCA, as well as the challenges and solutions for its adaptation, are presented. The chapter concludes with policy recommendations for diverse stakeholders in HEIs to practice agile leadership to drive innovation and adaptation during a period of change.

Chapter 13

In Chapter 13, Elkhoury highlights the necessity and advantages of a collaborative approach to leadership of assessment in the context of rapid advancements in AI. Elkhoury argues that a collaborative leadership framework, characterised by shared decision-making with students, inclusivity, and interdisciplinary cooperation, is essential for effectively navigating the opportunities and challenges posed by AI. It is argued that educational institutions can collaborate to re-imagine assessment for an AI-driven world. These approaches emphasise the importance of innovative partnerships and AI integration to enhance the educational experience.

Chapter 14

In this chapter, To shares a descriptive account of how higher education leadership in Cambodia navigates the VUCA environment stimulated by colonialism, imperialism, and globalisation. International collaborations, enhanced educational quality in achieving the sustainable development goals, addressing financial constraints, limited resources, and suggestions of innovative solutions are described. A postcolonial theoretical lens is used to provide insights into how HEIs respond to globalisation, offering practical strategies for leaders in similar contexts. The importance of culturally informed leadership and adaptive strategies that leverage historical and cultural dynamics in a globalised world is highlighted.

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Preface

Higher education is at a pivotal juncture. Worldwide, institutions are being restructured by a confluence of disruptive factors – technological innovations, evolving economic models, demographic changes, and the persistent pressures of globalisation. The landscape is volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA), necessitating a thorough reevaluation of university operations, knowledge creation and dissemination, and leadership responses to a swiftly changing educational ecosystem. Central to these shifts is a necessity: to guide with creativity, adaptability, and prescience. This book offers a pertinent and sharp analysis of the leadership and governance issues influencing the future of academia.

Historically, higher education institutions (HEIs) have served as centres of knowledge creation and societal progress. However, their durability has frequently been challenged by historical transformations – be they social, political, economic, or technical. Currently, the magnitude and velocity of change exceed those of prior eras, making conventional models of higher education governance insufficient. The world has become unpredictable and dynamic. HEIs must build innovative leadership models that prioritise adaptability, collaborative governance, and strategic agility. The authors in this book contend that leadership in the VUCA era must not only respond to uncertainty but also proactively reinvent the purpose and procedures of higher education.

A prevalent motif in this work is the significance of imagination in the development of education. Higher education frequently prioritises efficiency, compliance, and minor modifications, focussing on superficial adjustments, instead of pursuing pronounced and systemic changes. This book contests the prevailing status quo. It considers imagination as an essential competency for educators, administrators, and policymakers, aiming to transform education for an uncertain future. This book delves into the possibilities of innovative approaches to leadership in higher education, including topics such as curriculum renewal, agile leadership models, digital transformation, and collaborative assessment methodologies.

The VUCA paradigm offers a valuable and essential perspective for comprehending modern higher education leadership. The unpredictability of political and economic landscapes requires leaders capable of manoeuvring through upheaval with strategic insight. Ambiguity in technological progress and student requirements requires leaders who adopt perpetual learning and adaptability. The intricacy of institutional frameworks and stakeholder expectations necessitates systemic analysis and adaptive decision-making. Ultimately, ambiguity in global educational trends necessitates boldness and foresight to facilitate radical change.

In this collection, researchers urge the use of VUCA Prime principles – vision, understanding, clarity, and agility – as essential guidelines for academic leadership in the 21st century.

This book provides practical ideas derived from international case studies, in addition to leadership theory. Discussions on e-leadership and artificial intelligence-driven governance underscore the revolutionary potential of digitalisation in HEIs. Chapters analysing curriculum redesign emphasise the importance of collaboratively developing graduate traits that are both market-relevant and foster ethical, critically engaged citizens. Discussions on agile leadership examine the necessity for HEI leaders to reconcile institutional autonomy with collaborative governance, so ensuring that academic settings remain attuned to societal demands. Furthermore, thoughts on the obstacles of conventional thinking in higher education offer a crucial critique of established academic cultures that frequently oppose change. This book offers a hopeful yet pragmatic perspective for the future of higher education, which is currently under increasing pressure from financial restrictions and global competitiveness. Leadership in higher education should be reconceptualised not only as an administrative role but as a strategic and ethical endeavour that may catalyse systemic change. The authors of this book encourage readers to question obsolete assumptions, explore innovative governance frameworks, and adopt leadership as a profoundly humanistic and forward-thinking pursuit.

This is not merely an academic discourse about leadership but a summons to action. The trajectory of higher education will not be determined exclusively by technology advancements, regulatory structures, or commercial forces; it will be influenced by its leaders' creativity, bravery, and foresight.

May this book provide you with inspiration and pragmatic insights to adeptly manage the intricacies of higher education leadership during a period of significant transformation.

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With appreciation,
The Editors

Chapter 1

The Power of Imagination: Leading Curriculum Renewal for Transformative Higher Education

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Abstract

This chapter addresses the urgent need for changes in higher education to confront the complex challenges of a crisis-ridden world. The authors argue that traditional educational models have often prioritized technical skills over critical thinking, generative imagination, and ethical engagement, thereby contributing to societal issues. The authors propose a holistic approach to curriculum renewal as a pivotal point of transformative change. This approach emphasizes the co-creation of graduate attributes and learning outcomes relevant to real-world contexts. By advocating for interdisciplinary collaboration, the chapter envisions a future where graduates are equipped to navigate volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. The authors discuss the importance of visionary leadership that inspires values and practical application, positioning higher education institutions (HEIs) as catalysts for positive change. Through reflective insights from the authors' experiences in curriculum renewal, the authors encourage educators to identify transformative opportunities within their own contexts. The chapter concludes with an imaginative exercise aimed at re-envisioning higher education as a space where both students and academics can cultivate their imaginations and hope for a better future. This exploration highlights the necessity for educational systems to evolve beyond traditional paradigms, fostering an

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environment where imagination is not only encouraged but also essential for addressing contemporary global challenges.

Keywords: Curriculum renewal; graduate attributes; learning outcomes; generative imagination; transformative education; leadership mindset

Preface

Once upon a time, there was a well-resourced yet isolated land, known as Higher Education, where a council of wise Elders was dedicated to training Great Imagineers – visionary thinkers whose creativity was essential to the Real World, an unpredictable realm just beyond the borders of Higher Education.

As demands for these Great Imagineers grew louder, Higher Education continuously expanded, hoping to produce more Great Imagineers at a faster rate. In time, the once-inspiring training grounds became dull and overcrowded. The result was a generation of Conventional Thinkers who were ill-equipped to complete worthy quests in the Real World.

“We need not Standard Bearers and Mundane Practitioners,” echoed urgent voices from the Real World. “We need Great Imagineers who can forge better futures from these uncertain times!”

Heeding this desperate call, the Elders convened, and they are still fervently searching for the spark that will rekindle Imagination in an age of Conformity

From Conformity to Generative Imagination

The world is increasingly in need of thought leaders and innovators who can tackle the complex challenges of our time and beyond. Higher education is expected to deliver these problem solvers, yet graduates are often ill-equipped to face the “real world” where they will need to navigate accelerated change and disruptive innovations while contributing toward solutions for multifaceted, interconnected global crises (Di Battista et al., 2023; Lawrence et al., 2024; Lund et al., 2021).

While ecological collapse and technology-driven futures are easy to picture, envisioning a world where people, nature, and peace flourish is challenging. This has led to a sense of hopelessness and “pervasive pessimism” (Mulgan, 2022, p. 13) among academics and students alike, despite a collective desire for significant positive change.

As authors, we are deeply involved in the higher education sector: as facilitators, curriculum designers, and lifelong learners. Over the past five years, we have collaborated at the intersection of higher education, sustainable development, and

social entrepreneurship. Consequently, we contend that *generative* imagination in higher education is essential to deliver graduates who can envision hopeful alternative futures and create social innovations to realize those futures. Generative imagination is the capacity to envision regenerative futures that starkly contrast with the fatalistic and pessimistic outlooks often associated with the current polycrisis.¹

In this chapter, we propose a departure from conventional academic practices; a shift reflected in our writing style. We invite you to join us in reimagining how higher education can be transformed. We start by exploring the current state of higher education in a VUCA world and its contribution to an identified imagination deficit (Mulgan, 2022).

We reflect on our experiences with curriculum renewal as an opportunity for visionary leadership and collaboration aimed at reimagining educational systems. We propose the use of curriculum renewal as a strategic tool for transforming higher education, by focusing on graduate attributes and learning outcomes as leverage points for change. As we share our experimental examples, we encourage you to identify agentic moments where you can contribute to transformation in your environment within higher education.

To conclude, we offer an imagination exercise designed to envision the future training grounds of higher education as spaces where both students and academics can strengthen their imagination and activate their hope for the future.

The Once-inspiring Training Grounds

Higher education has in many ways contributed to the problems awaiting graduates in the “real world.” Most environmental degradation, financial collapses, and systemic injustices have emerged at the hands of highly educated individuals and societies. Orr (1991, 1994) argues that the crises are rooted in issues of values and mindsets that stem from misguided educational practices, making the global polycrisis primarily *an educational challenge*. When considering these unfolding and colliding crises, we need to redefine notions of “education” and “success” because the world “desperately needs ... people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane” (Orr, 1991, p. 12).

Neoliberalism has altered the mission of higher education from fostering critical thinking and civic engagement to prioritizing technical skills and vocational training (Gyamera & Burke, 2018). This shift marks a departure from *paid-eia*, the ancient Greek concept that education should focus on the mastery of one’s person, not just subject matter (Orr, 1994). This is evident in the current

¹Polycrisis refers to a situation where multiple, interconnected crises occur simultaneously, spanning various domains such as ecological, social, economic, and technological. These crises interact in complex ways, often reinforcing each other and making it difficult to address any single issue in isolation (Søgaard Jørgensen et al., 2024). The concept highlights the systemic nature of global challenges in VUCA contexts, where the combined effects of these issues pose significant risks to global sustainability and human well-being.

conveyor belt approach to higher education that prioritizes knowledge transfer and skills-for-employment models over holistic development, critical thinking, and imagination. In essence, this favors economic value above critical thinking, moral responsibility, and the development of engaged citizenry (Orr, 1994), which in turn diminishes the role of HEIs as “critics and consciences” (Harland et al., 2010, p. 85) of society, and reduces their capacity to address social justice and equity issues (Raimondi, 2012).

Freire (1979) argues that true education is an act of liberation, fostering a profound awareness of social realities and empowering individuals to challenge and transform them. HEIs must leave behind “the grim instrumentalism of neoliberal conceptions of [education]’s purpose and value” (Stanistreet, 2021, p. 561) and resist the idea that higher education’s main priority is to equip individuals to enter the workforce for the immediate reality of the 4th Industrial Revolution (Harland et al., 2010; Raimondi, 2012). Higher education must equip students with new mental models, supported by the critical skills needed to address the crises their generations will be tasked to solve.

We recognize that one of the key tensions HEIs face is the pressure to address unemployment rates by delivering graduates who can enter the workforce effectively. Governments and societies have entrusted universities with the mission to provide an employable graduate workforce (Hill et al., 2016) to meet the increasing demands from the knowledge economy for highly skilled labor. When HEIs succumb to these pressures of educating for employment and prioritize the alignment of educational outcomes with market needs, education itself runs the risk of going into a state of paralysis (Morley, 2024). This paralysis occurs because the focus shifts from nurturing critical thinking and ethical engagement to merely fulfilling bureaucratic requirements and economic objectives.

HEIs are also accountable to students, who entrust them with their time and resources in pursuit of a decent, sustainable future. While some studies still report overall better employment prospects and greater earning potential for graduates compared to non-graduates (Irwin et al., 2022), the reality remains that higher education does not guarantee employment or sufficient livelihoods. In South Africa (the authors’ home country), graduate unemployment rates have nearly doubled in the past decade, with 11.8% of South African graduates facing unemployment in the first quarter of 2024 (Statistics South Africa, 2024), despite a shift toward high-skilled labor demand and substantial growth in tertiary enrollment rates (MacGinty, 2024).

Even graduates who secure employment will need to constantly grapple with VUCA realities, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lund et al., 2021). In a world where young people are more likely than older generations to be in the grips of fatalism, pessimism, and anxiety (Duffy, 2021), HEIs need to be spaces where young people can critically reflect on the state of the world and activate their imaginations.

The Imagination Deficit

As graduates confront the ongoing crises of climate change, increasing inequality, and remaining social injustices, we also encounter a less obvious but critical

issue: a deficit of imagination (Mulgan, 2022). Many young people, especially in the African context, struggle to envision a better future because the hardships of their current situation render imagination a luxury (Honwana, 2012). Impoverished youth and middle-class youth facing economic hardships often lose sight of their long-term prospects, focusing instead on immediate survival issues, with little hope or expectation for what lies ahead (Blatterer, 2010; OECD, 2019).

Despite its transformative power, imagination has been somewhat overlooked in educational settings outside of the arts (Von Wright, 2021). Imagination is a multi-faceted cognitive process, integrating our knowledge of reality with active interpretation. It is the tool humans need to create meaning, motivate purposeful action, and envision desired outcomes (Fettes, 2013). As such, generative imagination - the ability to creatively conceive alternative, hopeful futures - is central to our ability to challenge existing norms, foster critical reflection, and, ultimately, envision regenerative futures (Dewey, 1998; Finn & Wylie, 2021; Freire, 1979; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Mulgan, 2022). This form of imagination not only inspires hope but also acts as a catalyst for enhanced creativity and innovation, countering the stifling effects of pessimism that can inhibit creative thought.

Generative imagination energizes individuals to explore ideas and possibilities that may not typically arise in everyday contexts. It creates a positive feedback loop, where engaging in generative thinking leads to heightened creativity and innovative solutions. In our experience, this process resembles a snowball effect; as one begins to operate within the realm of generative imagination, it triggers further profound creativity and practical innovation. We illustrate this dynamic in our reflections in the following sections.

We align with Castoriadis (2002) in suggesting that imagination acts as the energy through which consciousness and the material world are integrated, leading to the generation of society itself. As our distinctly modern understanding of the individual/society dichotomy disintegrates, acts of imagination – once seen as purely individual endeavors – become simultaneously acts of social generation. Therefore, it is imperative that higher education equips graduates with the understanding that “the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make *and could just as easily make differently* [emphasis added]” (Graeber, 2015, p. 227). For graduates to “make differently” their futures, we need to fundamentally rethink both the type of person we aim to develop within our HEIs and the curricula we design to foster these skills.

The Role of Great Imagineers in Higher Education

To effectively “make differently” our curricula, we need Great Imagineers *within* HEIs to take up their agentic roles as leaders, irrespective of their position within the educational landscape. Educators, management, and administrators within academia must adopt a leadership mindset and courageously participate in driving curriculum change (Annala et al., 2023; Mupa, 2015).

In this discussion, we envision leadership that transcends traditional managerial skill sets. We define it as a mindset grounded in vision, values, and the ability to inspire others. Table 1.1 outlines the key characteristics of the leadership

Table 1.1. Key Characteristics of a Leadership Mindset to Transform Higher Education.

<p>Visionary Courage that challenges the status quo and envisions alternative futures through active, spirited determination. (Muhimmah et al., 2022)</p>	<p>Resilience Against Resistance to innovatively navigate institutional inertia and remain steadfast in the face of skepticism. (Şen et al., 2013)</p>
<p>Fostering Imagination by creating environments where experimentation, creativity, and innovation are valued. (Judson, 2023; Nielsen, 2006)</p>	<p>Empowering All Levels to promote agency across the academy to encourage multidisciplinary contributions from faculty, management, and students. (Ballesteros et al., 2023; Tian & Risku, 2019)</p>

Source: Authors' own.

mindset we believe necessary for transforming higher education in VUCA contexts, which we will reference in our imaginative exercise in the final section of this chapter.

This mindset is central for activating key nodes within the leadership network of higher education. Our experiences with curriculum renewal have shown that the roles we occupy are pivotal. Each role offers a unique perspective on how transformative leadership can be realized within the HEI. In Table 1.2, we illustrate our positionalities as the academic, the *pracademic*,² and the social impact practitioner, as well as our reimagined versions of higher education.

In our curriculum renewal initiatives, the *academic* drives intellectual and pedagogical innovation; the *pracademic* ensures the authentic practical application of educational theories; and the *social impact practitioner* orchestrates the holistic experience that ties these elements together. This figure highlights the interconnectedness of these roles and emphasizes our collective impact on curriculum renewal, which will be further explored in the following sections.

In the next section, we will illustrate how this leadership mindset manifests in the continuous, iterative process of curriculum renewal. Our experimental examples focus on co-creating graduate attributes and aligning learning outcomes, which are essential for transforming curricula. We will share specific instances of practical implementation, demonstrating how concrete initiatives and collaborative efforts have enabled us to align our curriculum with the demands of a VUCA world.

²A *pracademic* is both an academic and a practitioner in their field. *Pracademics* are often employed in educational institutions, but they also participate in industry practices (Dickinson et al., 2022).

Table 1.2. Author positionality and hopes in the Realm of Higher Education.

	My position relating to HE	My hope for HE
The Academic	“I am deeply entrenched in a traditional HE setting, while leading a program that tries to do education differently. I look for creative ways to resist restrictive policies and standardization to promote pedagogical transformation.”	<i>“Classroom-less, exam-free universities, where lessons can only be learned with hands dirtied in real-world praxis!”</i>
The Pracademic	“I play between spaces of place-based social impact and HE. Being a neutral intermediary that holds the tensions between multiple disciplinary and sectoral worlds is a delicate balancing act.”	<i>“Learning environments that celebrate the wisdom of our communities and places, rooted in the spirit of our shared humanity.”</i>
The Social Impact Practitioner	“As a practitioner outside the rigid structures of academia, I have the freedom to imagine alternatives to HE norms. My role positions me to act as a catalyst for change within the educational landscape.”	<i>“Curiosity-driven learning through education that cultivates wisdom, ethical sensitivity and a deep connection to community and environment.”</i>

Exploring Imaginative Curriculum Renewal

Curriculum renewal is often identified by HEIs as a powerful catalyst for change within higher education (Van der Merwe, 2022). Curriculum renewal is a crucial process for maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of learning in a rapidly changing world. It should be done as a continuous and iterative process to align curriculum, program outcomes, and educational goals as expressed in graduate attributes (Cooper, 2017).

In the following sections, we will discuss the importance of graduate attributes and learning outcomes in the transformation of curricula for VUCA futures. We will examine the current state of these elements and envision potential changes. Our reflections will draw from our experiences in co-creating graduate attributes and cohesive learning outcomes as foundation steps for curriculum renewal. Additionally, we will invite you to “make differently” the future of higher education through imaginative exercises.

Graduate Attributes

Most HEIs market the type of graduate they aim to deliver. These graduate attributes describe the qualities and capabilities a student should develop during their time at the institution, for their benefit as professionals and citizens (Christensen & Kift, 2000).

These attributes typically include (Wong et al., 2022):

- self-awareness and lifelong learning,
- employability and professional development,
- global citizenship and engagement, and
- academic and research literacy.

Despite their noble intentions, graduate attributes are often criticized as being ineffective in the real world. The emergence of graduate attributes is often driven by institutional branding and the marketization of higher education (Wong et al., 2022), resulting in policies that seem like institutional afterthoughts. This top-down approach can create a disconnect between institutional expectations and students' goals, reducing graduate attributes to mere marketing tools aimed at enhancing university brands rather than fostering meaningful competencies (Ingram & Allen, 2019).

When graduate attributes do not resonate with academics or students, there is little traction for them within teaching, learning, and assessment practices (Bridgstock, 2009; Wald & Harland, 2019). Academics often struggle to translate graduate attributes into the context of their specific disciplines (Barrie, 2007). This can be further hampered by time and resource constraints within academic environments (Barrie, 2012; Oliver, 2013).

When graduate attributes are not embedded in curricula and enacted into practice, students may view these attributes as separate from their formal qualifications, showing little interest in mastering them (Su, 2014). Ultimately, a student can excel academically without being a self-aware, engaged citizen committed to lifelong learning.

Imagine if ...

We co-created graduate attributes that guided the real-world-relevant curricula we need.

Co-created graduate attributes with real-world relevance can have profound implications for curriculum design. By clearly defining the type of desired graduate before a program is conceptualized, graduate attributes become a functional compass for curriculum design, rather than a superficial marketing currency.

The creation of relevant graduate attributes requires diverse voices from academic content experts, practitioners, civil society, and students. A collaborative process must be prioritized to ensure the formulation of graduate attributes that are grounded in real-world needs of communication, leadership, critical thinking, collaboration, ethics, professionalism, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning (Wafi et al., 2022).

“Backcasting,” a technique introduced by Robinson (1992), involves envisioning a desirable future, and then identifying the steppingstones (graduate attributes, in this case) to achieve this future. This method is particularly beneficial for meeting VUCA challenges and has proven effective in curriculum design (Thorén & Vendel, 2019; Wiggins & McTighe, 2008).