A trajectory of the establishment of Madibaz YouthLab in crystallising student leadership development at Nelson Mandela University

Bernard Karabo Sebake (*a*)

(*a*) Doctor of Public Administration at Madibaz YouthLab, Nelson Mandela University, South Campus, Goldfield office 10, Gqeberha, RSA

**ABSTRACT**

The formulation of student leadership development has been a focal point and a product of shaping student leaders who occupy positions of leadership in the higher education sector. The persisting challenges of the society find a discomfort in wasted opportunity for any leadership initiative which is not aligned with the policy narrative of African development and nation building. This notion led to a situational response in student leadership development that missed an opportunity to fashion student leadership development that addresses the complex challenges of society. This study intends to pen down the experience of transitioning student leadership towards activating agency for social transformation. It also intends to address how student development must be perceived as an integral part of social innovation and a catalyst for reimagining the future of South Africa for the attainment of a sustainable future. One of the key shortfalls of the transactional approach to student leadership development is how the notion of leadership development in higher education is mismatched from the quadruple helix framework model which demonstrates failure for being futuristic in nature tends to be problematic. In this instance, the study used a quadruple helix framework to justify the transition that map the intention of Nelson Mandela University’s establishment of Madibaz YouthLab. The study is a qualitative conceptual framework using a literature review to argue this important transition. The study conclusion and recommendation are postured to add to the discourse on the reformulation of student leadership development in higher education shifting towards adding value to sustainable development.

**ARTICLE INFO**

**Article history:**
Received 01 October 2023
Received in rev. form 26 Nov. 2023
Accepted 12 December 2023

**Keywords:**
Student Leadership Development, Higher education, Quadruple helix model, Social Transformation, Activism and agency

**JEL Classification:**
I23

**Introduction**

The notion of student leadership development is fundamental for shaping the intergeneration of leaders through foregrounding socio-political and economic sectors of any developing nation. The concept of leadership is an important process for education and training that is critical for shaping human development through various professional and curricula pedagogies to facilitate continuous change in a developing society (Richard, Noujaim, Thorndyke & Fischer, 2019).

The response on the impact of higher education in this context provides an education that must guarantee self-organisation and self-reliance in which a developing nation is embedded on uninterrupted social engineering in transforming the society for realisation of its policy perspective (Sovgira, Bida, Leshchenko, Zakharova & Chernyshenko, 2019). The Social Labs are utilised to unpack and synthesize the evidence of any challenge into compelling needs, insights, and scope to a specific and meaningful design for innovation in addressing the systemic challenge (NMU, 2022). In this context, any society has a collective responsibility to shape its prowess of nation-building on the basis that leadership must be shaped for all walks of life. This study argues that student leadership in higher education has been trapped in an environment where it only focusses on transactional approaches for shaping leaders for operational requirements earmarking stable higher education. Further to the earlier, the establishment of Madibaz YouthLab at Nelson Mandela University introduces a radical shift in the need to change the narrative of student development and leadership in higher education.

* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6780-508X

© 2023 by the authors. Licensee SSBFNET, Istanbul, Turkey. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).
The imagination of a social laboratory was invented to realign leadership as an environment where social innovation is at the cutting edge of ideas to resolve societal challenges (Epstein, Epstein, Almenar, Groh, Pescetelli, Moro, Obradovich, Cebrian & Rahwan, 2019). The notion of higher education that is in service to society must be able to respond to the material needs of society in shaping the narrative that higher education must reimagine what society must be all about. The enablers of the social dynamics of any community depend on such a community’s ability to partake in social innovation and its revolution for sustainable future (Miranda, López, Navarro, Bustamante, Molina & Molina, 2019). In this context, the study is inspired by the quadruple helix model that believe that developments must be organised around scientific research and innovation, industry, and society (Lazarov & Semenesescu, 2021). The earlier argument posits that universities must be at their best to create an ecosystem for the thriving social conditions of a developingnation. Additionally, changing the structural arrangements of the African continent has to survive and overcome the post-colonial era through investing in human development to respond to the complexities of the colonial hangover of socio-economic controls (Adam, 2015).

Accordingly, Joseph (2021) notes that the Youth Social Labs are established against the assertion aligned with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s understanding of the social commitment and responsibilities to promote African capabilities for its fast-growing development for a sustainable future. The Madibaz YouthLab is introduced as a social hub or lab that support the landscape of leadership development through practical pathways. The Madibaz YouthLab is an establishment where student leaders reimagine prototype solutions to enhance positive experience of life, which is based on catalytic innovation. In this context, universities are required to educate young leaders who are expected to be catalysts for social change and this positions Madibaz YouthLab as a hub of convergence where ideas that are of a cutting edge innovation matter. The study is a qualitative study that reviews the establishment of Madibaz YouthLab of the Nelson Mandela University as a strategy to cultivate active citizenry in student leaders.

**Literature Review**

**Conceptual and Theoretical Background**

**Setting the Scene: Quadruple helix Framework**

The art of shaping human development inculcates three elements that always create evidence-based orientation, which are the human capability based on research and innovation; industrial needs; and social conditions of the society. The first helix research and innovation tackles the review of systematic challenges that create barriers to progress through scientific or evidence-based mechanism in shaping the course of development (González-Martinez, García-Pérez-De-Lema, Castillo-Vergara & Bent Hansen, 2021). The student leadership development must be catalytic in approach to embed the culture of leading through scientific evidence in quantifying the impact of their action to improve the systematic bondages to uplift the conditions of life of the citizenry. Afonso, Monteiro and Thompson (2012) suggest that the second helix (industry) is introduced to argue that the scientific nature of an improved version of development must assist in addressing the nature of the need of a rapidly evolving industry through increased ecosystem for improving socio-economic conditions of the society. In this context, Madibaz YouthLab was established to promote social impact that resolves conditions of the community through critical engagements and social innovation. The third helix addresses the capacity to improve the social conditions of the community which recognises that all efforts for development must be relevant to unlock challenges of the economy and communities living conditions (Afonso et al., 2012).

The central argument of the study, posture universities at the centre to empower human development through understanding their role in society and cultivating agency for students and youth (Sebake, 2022). In this regard, Madibaz YouthLab is established as a social innovation space that addresses the scientific intervention that forms part of the educational pedagogy for student leadership and development at Nelson Mandela University. This effort is synchronised with efforts to service society through solution-based interventions that are embedded into the university culture of being in service to society.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Complexity Theory**

The global context reflects a picture for academic and professional interests on how the world is organised and its systemic challenges that are rapidly hindering development in the area of policy and management field (Eppel & Rhodes, 2018). The notion of shaping capabilities of student leadership creates an important link between the universities and society, and in this context, it qualifies to fit within the proposed helix being research and innovation; industry and society. However, it must be noted that how complex the system is designed to connect the university and society is often as complex as ever. The earlier assertion vindicates the notion that complexity theory is often used to establish the connection between innovation and development against rapidly complex systems that require to be adapted as new systems to enable development in the most difficult times (Matei & Antonie, 2015). It is in this regard that the application of complexity theory is used to posture a university that is in service to society through shifting its student leadership development initiatives to qualify through scientific pathways on how they serve society and the rapidly changing demand of the industry. The advantage of the complexity theory acknowledges that this process is based on critical thinking, design, and development and the aim to interrupt the status quo (Sebake & Jack, 2023).
Cultivating Human Development in a Post-Colonial Society

The history of the colonial era in Africa established a fractured human capacity based on the interests of the colonisers with a fractured economy that thrives for the minority (Zaman, Shahid, Heng, Shahid, Zaman & Heng, 2018). Additionally, the capacity required during the colonial era did not expose the majority to the concept of innovation, which is currently interrupting a developmental state and its economy to thrive (Zaman et al., 2018). In this context, social labs are catalysed to reimagine and nurture fresh ideas that are being invented to promote self-generated solutions. For instance, how does the youth rethink the energy crisis that is affecting South Africa and what are alternative reimagined energy saving and generation mechanism. It is in this regard that social labs are established as a laboratory and a fabric of social change and comfort to improve the conditions of lives of ordinary citizens (Kim, Wellstead & Heikkila, 2023). It is in this regard a central argument of the study is that student leadership development requires mapping through the scientific evidence-based with the interest of resolving complex issues that affect the community and this is inspired by the quadruple helix frameworks.

It must be noted that the concept of social innovation is an important aspect in the area of transformation for most of the destitute and the vulnerable community for activating their ability for self-organisation and social change (Neumeier, 2012; Sebake & Jack, 2023). The need for theming human development within the context of social innovation is an important phenomenon in shifting towards responding to complex systematic conditions of life confronting ordinary citizens where policy narrative remains an important environment for deliberate convergence (Hartwell, 2017). It is also arguable that cultivating human capital through social innovation interventions is equal to connecting students with the needs of the industries while still at the training level, through providing solutions that are cutting edge for sustainable development. One of the key drivers that emerged through Madibaz YouthLab is to play into a prototype system for services that was adapted for the township economy during covid-19. It is in this context that social labs remain spaces for reimagining the world where no amount of interruption is insurmountable (Sebake, 2021).

Student Leadership Transition to Social Innovation

The existence of student leadership development in higher education serves as an organised space for shaping youth human development for supporting their functionality through various leadership dynamics. The involvement of students in activities that shape their social ability has contributed immensely to building a sense of belonging in universities, which is steadily articulated through student involvement theory (Sebake, 2018). The universities have often trained student leaders as a response to their functionality while in the university and this created fundamental limits to broaden the horizons to the broad range of issues that affect the society at large. The earlier undermined the notion that leadership must be a collective ecosystem to resolve the complex challenges that affect nation-building (Glowacki & von Rueden, 2015). In this context, leadership development was seen to be more about the foundation of democratic embeddedness in areas of entrenching understanding of institutional governance and its evolutions. In this regard, leadership development was historically conceptualised through establishing cohesion institutionally which was limited to the stability and unity of purpose of a collective understanding of institutional narrative (Post, 2015).

The atmosphere of student leadership development from the above demonstrates to be that of transactional in nature and has little opportunity to think of social innovation as an important pedagogy. The environment of social innovation assists in shaping the greater knowledge of students to play a meaningful role in serving the community through solving complex challenges that are impediments to social change (Edwards-Schachtler & Wallace, 2017). The art of shaping student leadership development is to transition it to inculcating social innovation represents a call for embracing the transformation agenda of the society, which remains a collective effort for all active citizenry (Avelino, Wittmayer, Pel, Weaver, Dumitru, Haxeltine, Kemp, Jørgensen, Bauler, Ruijsink & O'Riordan, 2019). It is arguable that this transition exposes student leaders with an opportunity to understand their important agency to lead the aspirations of their communities through evidence-based interventions as opposed to only shaping critical understanding of theories of leadership. This created a value-added experience for Madibaz YouthLab in which the shift remains deliberate to shape student leaders that remains catalysts for social change and understand their important role in society.

The Establishment of Responsive Systems for Student Leadership

There is a notion that universities have a responsibility to shape society as an environment that is friendly for social cohesion (Sebake & Jack, 2023). This notion recognises that creating a responsive system must be based on its relevance and impact to transform the society through establishment of comfort for its citizens. It is arguable that the - university through initiatives of a focus on social innovation are a key aspect of such efforts for nation-building. The establishment of a responsive system for society means that it has the capacity to counteract social challenges which remains an important aspect of contributing to the development of the African continent for the future. These ecosystems in society are argued against the ability to foreground social innovation as a practical concept that goes beyond academic discourse (Ayob, Teasdale & Fagan, 2016). The students are the most important segment of young people and universities must prepare them for the complexities of society to contribute effectively towards shaping opportunities through self-generation.

The concept of social innovation is central to policy narrative of any developing nation (Ayob et al., 2016), in which student leadership development must be scientifically themed to respond to the material needs of any development agenda. For instance, it is necessary to project human development in this case from the National Youth Policy 2020-2025; Pan African Agenda 2063; National Development Plan 2030; and Skills Development Act from the South African context (Sebake & Jack, 2023). In this context,
the study posits that the student leadership development is not left out of being an incubator for social innovation, and Madibaz YouthLab is an epitome of such a thought process and a strategic response for Nelson Mandela University.

**Social Labs and its Educational Pedagogy**

The existence of social labs in society has been to provide a space for reimagining the social prowess of life where new ideas are cultivated and tested. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 promoted an inferior education for most Africans and left them with the ability to advance their memory rather than creativity (Moore, 2015). This created over time little opportunity if not at all for citizens, to participate in the envisioned society that they wish to settle in, and further shifted reliance to the neoliberal interests that impose innovation to most South African citizens. Hence the bantu education through the apartheid regime have established a slow success in capacity of Africans to participate in social enterprise as a basis for social transformation (Gallo, 2020). The Madibaz YouthLab is positioning student leadership at Nelson Mandela University to realise the power of a collective in solidarity to serve humanity through cultivating education and knowledge that is relevant to respond to the needs of the deprived communities. Additionally, the earlier vindicates the notion that for more than two decades of democracy, South Africans are caged in bondages of a neoliberal system that has not created confidence in their ability to fully participate in innovation and the importance of scientific helix (Sebake, 2017).

Given the arguments, it is important for higher education to appreciate the value chain that responds to the global competitiveness for South Africans to be noted as an important role-player in the area of social innovation. The essence of modern education must assume that social innovation is an important intellectual capital that fronts creative and integrated strategies for resolving embedded systemic challenges of the development agenda (Andion, Alperstedt & Graeff, 2019). It is in this context that the existence of Madibaz YouthLab is anchored by the strategic intend in responding towards the reformation of the educational pedagogies for student leaders to move beyond isomorphic mimicry of theorising leadership and lead through scientific evidence. In the bigger scheme of development, education is argued as an important social capital that must be regarded as an ecosystem for social transformation and its narrative must inspire confidence for social innovation through cultivating social agency and active citizenry.

**Research & Methodology**

The literature review study like any scientific study must be conducted with certain approaches to ensure that its scientific nature is not compromised (Snyder, 2019). The concept of research methodology must be understood as a set of instruments that can be utilised to provide valid data that produces fair and balanced factual data. Hence it is often referred to as a strategic choice that the researcher chooses to follow in the journey of scientific discovery of new knowledge or facts about a phenomenon or environment (Kumar, 2019; Sebake & Mukonza, 2021). It is in this regard that the next section intends to table the methodological choice and approach of the study.

**Research Design**

The research design reflects a route map within which the approach to the research is clearly defined to ensure that the study is credible and has reliable instruments to arrive at the valid data (Dannels, 2018). It is often that the research approach may either be a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method, and a choice must be made whether the study may need to contain certain numerical data and which purpose would serve in a literature review study. The literature review study is often a utilisation of text to uncover the nature of the in-depth information and knowledge about a study under investigation (Natow, 2020). In this regard, the study utilises a qualitative study method to gain knowledge about a subject that is investigated.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data analysis of qualitative research reviews literature through articles that are scholarly in nature and documents that are about the subject of the study, and such get to be analysed to provide valid data that serves a balance and factual conclusion (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In this regard, approximately ninety-three (93) academic articles were reviewed and approximately forty (40) were found to be relevant, with additional two (2) pieces of documentation such as reports and concept notes for Madibaz YouthLab utilised. The notion of data analysis remains the art of selecting the relevant materials for the study inclusive of identifying and assessing relevant data that depict relevant information and make sense of its meaning (Lester, Cho & Lochmiller, 2020). In this context, the researcher identified thematic areas that are argued through literature on the selected articles to arrive at the findings that are discussed in the next section.

**Discussions and Findings**

The purpose of the conceptual study is to ensure that there are arguments backed by the literature and praxes which forms the basis of contributing to the scientific complex literature review (Jaakkola, 2020). It is expected that radical ideas that are evolving around the subject under investigation be articulated to present facts and the impact of such a phenomenon. The conceptual study always presents an opportunity to shape theories and concept-centric review to establish the impact of the intervention (Vom Brocke, Simons, Riemer, Niehaves, Plattfaut & Cleven, 2015). In this context, the study in this section intends to provide scientific arguments that presents the establishment of Madibaz YouthLab for Nelson Mandela University as an important radical shift.
Foundational Principles of Madibaz YouthLab

The university through its vision 2030 perceives its role as an important bridge to contribute in cultivating social networks through solidarity of purposes in improving and shaping the developmental agenda of Africa (NMU, 2022). The concept of setting up an establishment to maximise social development that is scientific creates an opportunity to embed the helixes that are helpful to the agenda of universities being at the cutting edge of transformation. It is argued better that social networks and partnerships are of purpose in improving social impact to the community that is being served (Serrat & Serrat, 2017). The Madibaz YouthLab in this regard is established to respond to the cultivation of ideas that converge to resolve complex social phenomena that remain vestiges of development.

In addition, the understanding of decolonisation that is viewed to be an effort to speed-up transformation through social justice is part of an important agenda for Madibaz YouthLab existence. Amongst the pillars of interventions, Madibaz YouthLab is underpinned by the need to decolonise, embed systems thinking and complexity, and a general focus of generating futures thinking through establishing the capacity for social innovation (NMU, 2022). It is in this context that social innovation is valued as future works and building agenda towards building social capital that improves the conditions of society. This provides impact for remaining in service to society in a sustainable manner and positions student leadership as future thinking generation of ideas.

Mapping and Design of Madibaz YouthLab

It is a common cause that every idea is emerging to make an impact in the educational and skills’ development as part of shaping human capital for the benefit of the vulnerable communities requires mapping and design. The concept mapping and design is a move towards a systematic foresight on how implementation must unfold and adapt an evidence-based approach for high-impact interventions (James, Randall & Haddaway, 2016). The Madibaz YouthLab is anchored by the principles of co-creation as a tool of innovation towards discovering new knowledge that interfaces with the social challenges of society (NMU, 2022). The earlier argument posits UNESCO posture on supporting the global economy through international networks and solidarity (Bergman, Bergman, Fernandes, Grossrieder & Schneider, 2018). It is however arguable that collaborative efforts must be understood as a reflection of nation-building from the outset. It is in this context that social network is an integral part of transitioning towards social cohesion through recreating solution for vulnerable society and positioning the capabilities of global competitiveness.

The Madibaz YouthLab is a contributor to an integrated pedagogy of learning, which provides an experience that is the epitome of youth development and social development of African communities. Shum and Ferguson (2012) suggest that social learning is part of shaping the cognitive capabilities of youth that rely on their own thinking and reimagine to society that thrives through self-organisation. It is in this regard that social labs are created to generate an exchange of ideas that are noble to cultivate agency for social change and transform lives of the vulnerable citizens, yet it remains a beacon of hope for societal prosperity. Additionally, social learning enhances analytical knowledge to reimagining complex equations that are negatively affecting any narrative of social transformation (Hernández-García, González-González, Jiménez-Zarco & Chaparro-Peláez, 2015). The #FeesMustFall movement was also anchored by the need for decolonise education that has value to transform the minds of young people through social learning approach that assists shaping the socio-economic experiences suffocated by growing inequality, poverty and unemployment (Kele & Mzileni, 2021; Sebake & Jack, 2023). The study argues in affirmation that Madibaz YouthLab facilitates space for shaping learning which is decolonised on the basis that it is shaped by youth creativity through self-generation of shared vision for development.

Social labs are spaces that inspire the connection of youth through imagining the world that represents new minds that challenge the status quo in the persisting landscape of positioning youth as active citizenry. The formation of Madibaz YouthLab was to connect youth in various ideological contexts to co-exist in shaping the narrative of the societal transformation agenda (NMU, 2022). In this context, social labs are spaces that shape social cohesion and where ideas that are at the cutting edge of innovation matter and they exist to promote the prowess of nation-building. Hagan (2020) underscores that human-centredness reflects the dominance of innovation and it shapes leadership that is scientific and addresses the material needs of rapidly changing economic patterns. In this regard, the formation of Madibaz YouthLab is an embodiment of human centeredness where leadership through the vision that is evidence-based is nurtured.

![Figure 1: Designed principles that anchored Madibaz YouthLab; Source: Madibaz YouthLab 2022](image)

Implementation Strategy and Impact

It is a common cause that after mapping and design of the focus of social interventions, critical awareness and consciousness programmes were first to create knowledge about the existence of the social lab as a convergence of critical and intellectual engagements (NMU, 2022a). The notion of intellectual engagements establishes new possibilities for knowledge and discovery of the scientific nature of how the world is organised (Soudien, 2013). In this context, the nature of the implementation strategy is
building intellectual dialogue that represents the African values, in which “Imbadu Series” was established in 2022 to tackle topical issues that affect societal transformation. The concept “Imbadu” was used as a Xhosa gathering where no formal invitation is made and is an honest dialogue that cherish ideas not age or position in society. This initiative was a decolonised stand of Madibaz YouthLab to the decolonisation projects in student leadership as an important educational pedagogy of note (NMU, 2022a).

The formation of Madibaz YouthLab was established to cherish social innovation as a new strategy for evidence-based leadership. The notion of evidence-based leadership assists nurturing human talent to shape the narrative of social innovation in resolving complex regime of challenges that faces societal transformation (Hamlin, 2016). The Madibaz YouthLab established a platform for student leaders for an integrated solution thus far in the student nutrition programme that resolved nutrition challenges amongst the students. Hickey, Shields and Henning (2019) suggest that student poverty remains an antithesis of learning and teaching and serves to interrupt the narrative of human development. This project injected lessons to involved student volunteers and it contributed to student nutrition. The Madibaz YouthLab has inspired students as entrepreneurs in which a prototype car was developed to resolve inter-campus shuttling of students. It is in this context that Madibaz YouthLab is playing a role in promoting social innovation for students and this remains leadership through evidence based.

Conclusions

The concept of social labs are an important space for design and engineering life that is reimagined and aligned with policy frameworks such as Agenda 2063, National Development Plan 2030 etc. The social labs enabled radical shifting from the conventional nature of student leadership development in higher education in cultivating energy for social innovation as a renewable learning pedagogy. This phenomenon vindicates that higher education is expected to provide a value-based student centricity that addresses emerging paradigms that trouble a developing nation. This new paradigm for student leadership development have proven to be a necessary strategic shift in embracing quadruple helix model where education must be based on research and innovation, industry and the society. The earlier provided a basis for the establishment of Madibaz YouthLab as an important move than auxiliary shift. It is a pedagogical move that is embedded in connecting student leaders with their development agenda and as catalysts for social change. The literature reviewed was also presented to vindicate that Madibaz YouthLab is an important institutional arrangement that inspires youth to reimagine a world that is totally liberated by their innovative thinking and reconstructed to articulate a decolonised education and development. The study through its findings presented educational pedagogical value and integrated learning that Madibaz YouthLab has injected through resolving and shaping complex equations. It is in this regard that complexity theory was utilised to present the complex literature on social labs aid innovative ideas in addressing rapid changes in the world. The social labs were presented as hub of convergence for osmosis of ideas that shape activists for social change beyond isomorphic mimic through theorising leadership. It is in this context that the study concludes that student leadership development must shift from conventional linear approaches to scientific ones in which the need of the industry and society are reimagined. The recommendation is presented below to reconfigure student leadership development utilising quadruple helix model higher education sector below:

i. There is a need to review the frameworks for student leadership in order to embrace the quadruple helix framework in preparing student leaders as catalysts for social change.

Acknowledgement

As an author, I publish this manuscript to contribute to knowledge out of Nelson Mandela University critical intervention to student development. Author Contributions: This manuscript contributes towards validating scientific frameworks for student leadership development. This is a reimagined configuration to respond to leadership through scientific evidence and navigate student leaders for high impact interventions. Funding: This research was funded by Nelson Mandela University as part of its knowledge injection through its critical intervention strategies. Informed Consent Statement: The Division of Student Life and Development agreed to the publication as an important journey for contributing to scientific knowledge which is a demonstration of a university in service to society. Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions. Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References


**Publisher's Note:** SSBFNET stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

© 2023 by the authors. Licensee SSBFNET, Istanbul, Turkey. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147-4478) by SSBFNET is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.