

Building a sustainable retail future: Evidence-based strategies for transforming leadership education in South Africa



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Orientation: South Africa's retail sector, the nation's second-largest employer, faces a leadership skills gap threatening competitiveness in the Industry 4.0–5.0 era.

Research purpose: This study investigates misalignment between retail education at Public Higher Education Institutions and retail sector leadership competency demands, proposing evidence-based curriculum strategies.

Motivation for the study: Retail leaders require technical proficiency, adaptability and customer-centric skills for sustainable transformation, academic programmes prioritise theoretical knowledge over practical competencies. This disconnect limits graduate employability and threatens sectoral sustainability, necessitating curriculum reform.

Research design, approach and method: Qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis employed sequential multi-methods data collection through semi-structured interviews with 12 human resources (HR) specialists from major retailers and content analysis of curriculum documents from Public Higher Education Institutions offering Advanced Diplomas in retail. ATLAS.ti facilitated data analysis.

Main findings: Significant competency gaps exist between retail priorities (self-leadership, adaptability, communication and customer centricity) and academic focus (theoretical knowledge and analytical skills). Two contrasting personas, Cindy (industry ideal) and Gwen (academic product), illustrate this gap, underscoring balanced practical-theoretical curricula.

Practical/managerial implications: Recommendations address self-leadership development, customer-centric approaches and experiential learning while maintaining academic rigour. Industry-academia partnerships can bridge skills gaps and enhance graduate readiness.

Contribution/value-add: This research advances curriculum theory by integrating theoretical foundations with industry competencies. Evidence-based personas offer novel frameworks for understanding academic-industry divergence, contributing implementable solutions for skills shortages.

Keywords: sustainable retail future; leadership education transformation; transformational leadership; future-ready leadership capabilities; South African retail sector; industry–academia partnerships.

Introduction

Leadership plays a critical role in driving sustainable digital transformation across all sectors (Hariyani, Hariyani & Mishra 2025). Within this broader landscape, the retail industry stands out as a sector facing a particularly acute challenge in developing the capable leaders needed to navigate this shift. The sector is currently grappling with a significant leadership skills deficit, stemming from difficulties in identifying essential leadership competencies and implementing strategic development initiatives (Afolabi et al. 2023). This challenge is intensified by Industry 4.0–5.0 transformational demands, which require adaptable retail leaders to possess advanced interpersonal and analytical skills (Khatri & Dutta 2023). The urgency of addressing this leadership gap is particularly pronounced for emerging young adult leaders who will drive the sector's future sustainability (Kim et al. 2022). In South Africa, where retailing serves as the second-largest employer, providing jobs to 19% of the workforce (South African Reserve Bank 2023; Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority [W&RSETA] 2025), these persistent skills shortages pose significant risks

to the sector's long-term sustainability and competitive positioning (Ferreira et al. 2020; Jacobs & Karpova 2022). Developing future retail leadership capabilities requires strategic collaboration between public higher education institutions (PHEIs) and industry stakeholders to ensure sustainable sector transformation (Pantano, Pizzi & Rogers 2020).

The development of leadership skills among students and graduates is a recurring concern in the literature on graduate employability, with higher education institutions increasingly striving to identify effective strategies for fostering leadership attributes in their students (Maykrantz & Houghton 2020; Skalicky et al. 2020). However, current research underscores a critical disconnect between the transformation of skills requirements in the retail sector and the curricula provided by higher education institutions (Jacobs & Karpova 2022; Pantano et al. 2020). This misalignment is particularly pronounced in South Africa, where higher-education graduates frequently express dissatisfaction with their preparedness for the workplace, citing inadequate exposure to labour market expectations (W&RSETA 2025). Although advanced retail programmes in South Africa incorporate management and practical skills, they fall short of addressing the sector's rapidly changing demands for sustainable leadership capabilities. This gap not only limits graduates' readiness for employment but also threatens the sector's ability to achieve sustainable transformation, emphasising the urgent need for curriculum reform that aligns with sustainable retail sector requirements (Venter 2022; W&RSETA 2024).

This article addresses this challenge through a unique multi-theoretical lens, combining dynamic capabilities theory, transformational leadership theory and curriculum theory to examine the alignment between advanced retail education programmes at South African PHEIs and the leadership competencies required for a sustainable retail future. The study makes three distinct contributions to the literature: firstly, it develops evidence-based personas that illuminate the contrasting expectations between academia and the retail sector regarding graduate readiness; secondly, it provides empirical insights into the specific leadership competencies required for sustainable digital transformation in retail; and thirdly, it offers practical, resource-conscious strategies for transforming leadership education curricula to prepare Gen Z graduates for sustainable retail leadership roles. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis of human resources (HR) specialists' perspectives and curriculum content analysis, this research ultimately proposes evidence-based recommendations for enhancing advanced retail education to address the critical leadership skills gap threatening the sector's sustainable future (Coşkun Yaşar & Aslan 2021; El-Astal 2023).

The study is therefore guided by the following research objectives (ROs) and their corresponding research questions (RQs), which provide the structural framework for the literature review, methodology, findings and conclusion:

- **RO1:** To identify the leadership competencies that HR professionals in the South African retail sector expect of advanced retail graduates, in the context of business sustainability and long-term value creation.

RQ1: What leadership competencies do HR professionals in the South African retail sector expect of advanced retail graduates in relation to business sustainability and long-term value creation?

- **RO2:** To examine the gap between the leadership competencies expected by HR professionals in the South African retail sector and those developed by advanced retail curricula at South African PHEIs, in preparing young adult graduates for leadership roles.

RQ2: What is the gap between the leadership competencies expected by HR professionals in the South African retail sector and those currently developed by advanced retail curricula at South African PHEIs?

- **RO3:** To propose evidence-based curriculum recommendations for South African PHEIs to bridge the gap between HR professionals' leadership competency expectations and current advanced retail education programme outcomes.

RQ3: What evidence-based curriculum recommendations can be proposed for South African PHEIs to bridge the gap between HR professionals' leadership competency expectations and current advanced retail programme outcomes?

Literature review: Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks that shape an understanding of leadership development within the South African retail sector. These frameworks are dynamic capabilities, transformational leadership and curriculum theory.

Dynamic capabilities theory

Dynamic capabilities theory emerged in the 1990s as an extension of the resource-based view, as articulated by Teece, Pisano and Shuen (1997). This theory emphasises how organisations not only respond to changing market conditions by creating novel products and processes but also routinely adapt their operational strategies (Radebe 2024; Schwarz, Rohrbeck & Wach 2020). The core of the theory lies in its focus on experience accumulation, knowledge articulation, and the codification of processes that drive both dynamic and operational routines (Mola et al. 2021). In an era of increasingly nonlinear and unpredictable changes in the retail environment, the ability to harness dynamic capabilities is a crucial strategic imperative for retailers (Da Silva Freitas & Gastaud Macada 2019).

Thus, bridging the leadership skills gap is essential for retailers to unlock the full potential of dynamic capabilities.

Dynamic capability theory calls on retailers to proactively anticipate the managerial and leadership skills that future

retail leaders will need to ensure a workforce capable of functioning and performing effectively (Onyema et al. 2020). Dynamic capabilities theory becomes particularly relevant for business sustainability as retail organisations must continuously sense market shifts toward responsible consumption, seize opportunities in sustainable business models and transform operations to meet evolving stakeholder expectations while maintaining profitability (Grewal et al. 2021), as a gap between an organisation's current skills and competencies and its future needs can hinder growth (Akkaya & Qaisar 2021).

Transformational leadership theory

The philosophy of transformational leadership was introduced by Bass (1985), who proposed that leadership is a process in which leaders and those they lead work together to reach higher levels of morale and motivation (Bass 1985; Brown, Brown & Nandedkar 2019; Burns 1978). Empirical studies identify the key leadership competencies embedded in transformational leadership as directly relevant to the retail sector: Critical thinking, communication, strategic decision-making, adaptability, resilience, interpersonal skills and integrity (Bakhshandeh 2021; Kontostavlou & Drigas 2021). Of these, adaptability is increasingly foremost as organisations face rapid changes (Ohlsson, Alvinus & Larsson 2020). At the core of all these capabilities lies self-leadership, the foundational competency upon which all other leadership abilities are built (Goldsby et al. 2021). Self-leadership is defined as the process of influencing oneself to achieve self-motivation and reach specific goals, grounded in the principles of self-regulation, self-reflection and self-determination (Harari et al. 2021). In addition, self-leadership prepares the groundwork for more advanced leadership styles, such as transformational leadership (Flores 2020; Maykrantz & Houghton 2020). These findings directly contextualise the leadership competency expectations of HR professionals explored in RQ1.

Ly (2025) argued that digital transformation partially mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and sustainability outcomes, accounting for 36% of the total effect. Therefore, transformational leaders achieve sustainability goals both directly and by driving digital innovation. Transformational leadership facilitates sustainable organisational transformation through six core operational areas: Building a sustainability-focused strategic direction, orchestrating cultural and organisational transitions, developing technological and environmental competencies, encouraging cross-boundary collaboration, maintaining ethical compliance standards and generating stakeholder value (Hariyani et al. 2025). In this context, integrating transformational leadership principles into PHEI curricula can enhance graduates' ability to influence and innovate, vital for future retail leaders navigating complex, customer-centric environments (Siangchokyoo, Klinger & Campion 2020).

Curriculum theory

Curriculum theory contributes to this study by providing insights into curriculum planning, implementation and assessment, focusing on the relationship between learning objectives, content, instructional strategies and evaluation (Coşkun Yaşar & Aslan 2021; Syomwene 2020). Addressing RQ2 and RQ3, curriculum theory in the higher education context differs significantly from that of compulsory basic education and definitions of what higher education curriculum entails remain contested (Ambler, Solomonides & Smallridge 2021; Annala et al. 2023; Hicks 2018). A curriculum framework is considered a system of planned outcomes, subject matter, learning experiences and evaluation procedures, with curriculum practice having four dimensions: objectives or outcomes, learning content, teaching techniques and assessment procedures (Coşkun Yaşar & Aslan 2021; Deng 2018; Hunkins & Ornstein 2016). Curriculum changes in higher education are complex and time-consuming because of the scope of change and the institutional processes involved (Weiss et al. 2021). Arguments in the higher education curriculum literature also call for a more creative, innovative curriculum with a shift in focus from learning outcomes to the learning process itself (Bovill 2017; Bovill & Woolmer 2019; Kinchin 2022). This study explores what is taught (curriculum) at PHEIs to identify precisely where the gap lies between advanced retail curricula at South African PHEIs and the leadership competency demands of the sector (Wheelahan & Moodie 2021).

Leadership competencies in the retail sector

All leadership theories acknowledge that leaders make important decisions about organisational resources while facing dynamic challenges, and that leadership skills are key to organisational success (Vasilescu 2019). Among the key leadership skills identified in 'Transformational leadership theory' section, adaptability is becoming increasingly important as organisations face rapid change (Ohlsson et al. 2020). Furthermore, in the retail sector, maintaining customer-centricity while managing digital transformation requires leaders to possess a comprehensive grasp of technologies alongside deep-seated strategic and managerial acumen (Ali & Xie 2021; Felsberger et al. 2022; Jacobs & Karpova 2022). This being said, a solid grounding in traditional retail operations skills ensures that businesses maintain their core strengths even as they adapt to environmental challenges (Jacobs & Karpova 2022; Venter 2022). Therefore, the literature aligns with research by the W&RSETA (2025), which confirms that the skills gaps across South African retail organisations include soft skills such as emotional intelligence and people management, leadership and management skills, including mentoring, coaching, and conflict management, and technical skills. These findings directly contextualise the leadership competency expectations of HR professionals explored in RQ1.

The academic–industry competency gap in higher education

Higher education systems generally aim to prepare students for the workforce; therefore, institutions should continually adapt and align their curricula with the needs of the sectors they serve (Southworth et al. 2023). However, current research underscores a critical disconnect between the skills requirements of the retail sector and the curricula offered by higher education institutions (Jacobs & Karpova 2022; Pantano et al. 2020). Curriculum changes in higher education are complex and can be time-consuming because of the scope of change and the institutional processes involved (Weiss et al. 2021). The W&RSETA sector skills plans, reviewed over a 10-year period, consistently identify leadership and management skills as scarce and critical skills in the sector, demonstrating that the gap between graduate outputs and sector requirements is structural and persistent (W&RSETA 2024). Furthermore, the argument in the literature is that first-level retail education focuses on the fundamentals and practical skills of retailing, while advanced retail education should provide intensive, focused and applied specialisation that meets the requirements of leadership roles in the sector (Council on Higher Education [South Africa] 2013; Pantano et al. 2020). These structural findings directly contextualise RQ2 of this study.

Curriculum transformation strategies for higher education

Arguments in the higher education curriculum literature centre on the need for a more creative, innovative curriculum, including a shift in focus from learning outcomes to the learning process itself (Bovill 2017; Bovill & Woolmer 2019; Kinchin 2022). There is also a call for more innovative teaching and learning strategies to prepare learners better for the future of work (Kukulska-Hulme et al. 2020; Muniandy & Abdullah 2023; Zhao, He & Su 2021). The relationship between the instructor and the curriculum is critical because individual factors, such as the instructor's experience, background, beliefs and goals, affect curriculum practice (Hemmi, Krzywacki & Liljekvist 2019). In higher education, teaching staff are not a homogeneous group: some have a purely theoretical academic background, while others bring a combination of practical sector and academic experience (Scherer et al. 2021). This distinction directly affects the extent

to which curriculum content aligns with industry requirements. Evidence-based curriculum reform strategies that address the competency gap, including industry-academia partnerships, work-integrated learning and experiential approaches, are thus central to responding to RQ3 and to the broader aim of building a sustainable retail leadership pipeline in South Africa (Ferreira et al. 2020; Khatri & Dutta 2023; Pantano et al. 2020).

Research methods and design

This study employed a qualitative, multi-method research design following an interpretative phenomenological philosophy (Smith & Nizza 2022; Vivek, Nanthagopan & Sarmatha 2023). The design enabled a deep understanding of leadership skills development in the South African retail sector to address three research questions (RQ1–RQ3), which guided the design of the semi-structured interviews and the document analysis of the PHEI curricula.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was particularly suitable, as it allowed for a detailed examination of participants' personal experiences and perspectives, revealing deeper insights into the leadership skills gap in the South African retail sector (Eatough & Smith 2017; Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2022).

Data collection occurred through two methods. Primary data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 12 HR specialists recruited using convenience and snowball sampling techniques (Ahmed 2024; Bergen & Labonté 2020; McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl 2019), and through document analysis of Advanced Diploma in Retail Management curricula (Kayesa & Shung-King 2021). The semi-structured interviews, lasting 90 min each, were conducted with 12 HR specialists from large South African retailers, providing insights into leadership development practices and skills requirements of the retail sector. Document analysis of the advanced diploma curricula enabled systematic examination of curriculum content and outcomes from five participating PHEIs.

Twelve participants were identified and participated. They represented various retail categories, including general merchandise, grocery, clothing and technology retailers, as outlined in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Human resources participant profile ($N = 12$).

Participant code	Role at time of interview	Sex	Years in the retail sector	Main retail category
1	Training and development manager	M	> 15	General merchandise
2	Leadership development manager	M	> 10	Grocery
3	Chief executive for people support HR	F	> 14	General merchandise
4	Talent management manager	F	> 20	General merchandise
5	Salespeople support manager	M	> 10	General merchandise
6	Divisional training manager	F	> 7	Grocery
7	Talent acquisition manager	F	> 4	Clothing
8	Talent acquisition consultant	F	> 10	Clothing
9	Senior learning manager	F	> 15	General merchandise
10	Senior manager of leadership development	M	> 15	General merchandise
11	HR executive	M	> 15	Technology
12	HR officer	F	> 20	Technology

HR, human resources.

The curriculum documents were analysed from five PHEIs offering Advanced Diplomas in Retail Management, as shown in Table 2. The inclusion criteria for selecting these five institutions were that they offered an advanced diploma specialising in retailing, out of the 26 PHEIs in South Africa.

The trustworthiness of the study was established through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, which serve as the qualitative equivalents of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, respectively (Anney 2014). Credibility was strengthened through 90-min in-depth interviews that allowed thorough participant reflection, member checking of emerging themes with selected participants and triangulation between the two data sources, interview transcripts and curriculum documents, to ensure interpretations were corroborated across independent datasets (Bergen & Labonté 2020; Creswell & Poth 2018). Transferability was addressed through a thick description of the research context, including detailed participant and institutional profiles, thereby enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings in comparable settings (Dabengwa, Raju & Matingwina 2020). Dependability was maintained through a systematically documented IPA process applied consistently across all 12 interview transcripts and 39 curriculum documents, supported by ATLAS.ti 23/24 software (Berlin, Germany), which provided an auditable record of all coding decisions (Frechette et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2022). Confirmability was established through comprehensive audit trails, comprising research journals, reflexivity memos and coding logs, and through active reflexivity by the researchers to bracket prior assumptions and minimise interpretive bias across both primary and secondary data (Anney 2014).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, University of Johannesburg research ethics committee. The ethical clearance number is IPPM-2022-692(D). Ethical considerations included written informed consent from all participants, confidentiality and anonymity protection, secure data storage and management, voluntary participation rights and protection of organisational identities.

TABLE 2: Participating public higher education institutions ($N = 5$).

PHEI	Qualification SAQA ID	Number of documents included
Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT)	101912	5
Durban University of Technology (DUT)	111427	7
Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)	109901	5
University of Johannesburg (UJ)	94789	7
Vaal University of Technology (VUT)	105704	5

PHEI, public higher education institution; SAQA ID, South African Qualifications Authority identity document.

Results and discussion

Data analysis of the interviews with human resources specialists

To address RQ1, data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a 29-question guide (see Appendix 1 for the questions). These questions were designed to elicit HR professionals' perspectives on the leadership competencies required in the evolving retail environment. This research identified several crucial competencies through in-depth interviews with HR professionals (detailed participant description in Table 1), revealing a clear hierarchy of desired attributes for future retail leaders. The codes were ranked by frequency to determine the most desired attributes (Figure 1).

Aligning with transformational leadership theory's emphasis on individual agency and personal development (Bass 1985), *self-leadership* emerged as the most prominent competency, with 38 coding instances in the dataset. Self-leadership aligns with the current retail sector leadership skills requirements, where an individual's ability to take initiative and take self-directed actions is key. One of the participants articulated:

'But actually, when you are starting at the start, you are the leader of self. You're leading yourself, and you are making sure that your deliverables are completed so that someone else can do their part in it. So really understanding what does leadership mean and what does it mean to me as an individual? What does it mean to the business?' (Participant 3)

The literature describes self-leadership as encompassing personal responsibility, motivation and development, aligning with recent studies that highlight self-leadership's significance in today's workplace (Bäcklander, Rosengren & Kaulio 2021; Maykrantz & Houghton 2020).

The second prominent concept was *effective communication*, which was coded 27 times, signalling its fundamental role in retail leadership. Participant 8 emphasised the significance of effective communication skills, 'It would be the communications skills. I think it is key to be in a graduate position in our space'.

Closely related, *customer-centricity* (coded 26 times) was identified as essential for future retail leaders. One of the participants highlighted the dual nature of this competency:

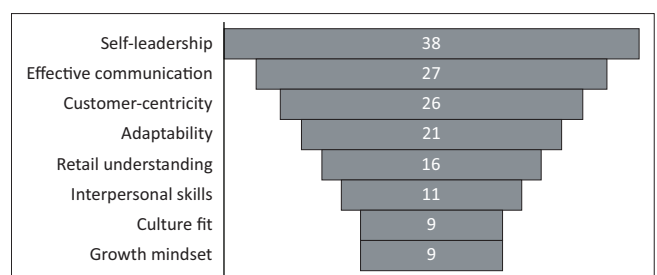


FIGURE 1: Code frequency in ideal employee characteristics for human resources specialists.

‘Very, very importantly, it’s the people skills as well, because it’s not just your internal customers, which are your employees that as a leader you would need to cater to, but it’s the customer base as well. It’s understanding the different customers and their needs.’ (Participant 12)

This dual focus on internal and external customer relationships demonstrates the complex interpersonal demands placed on retail leaders.

The rapidly evolving retail environment requires high *adaptability*, demonstrated by 21 coding instances. Adaptability was listed alongside other essential leadership skills, including critical thinking, effective communication, strategic decision-making, resilience, interpersonal skills and integrity, as noted by Bakhshandeh (2021) and Kontostavlou and Drigas (2021). A participant emphasised adaptability with the response:

‘I think, as the recent past has shown us, everything is really unpredictable in the world around us, so they need to have the resilience and tenacity and the ability to think on their feet, because sometimes you can’t wait for a decision.’ (Participant 3)

Understanding retail operations and context (coded 16 times) was equally emphasised. A participant noted:

‘Well, typically whenever you go into any industry, and in retail especially, your credibility in your depth of retail knowledge is key, because that is what then allows individuals to take you seriously as a young individual that’s coming to the environment.’ (Participant 2)

The research identified two additional crucial competencies: *cultural fit* and *growth mindset* (both coded 9 times). Participant 4 described the foundational nature of cultural alignment, ‘Culture fit is key, because we can always train employees on specific skills’. This perspective suggests that while practical retail skills can be developed, cultural alignment is a more intrinsic quality. Regarding a growth mindset, Participant 6 noted, ‘You need to display a willingness to want to learn and grow, but it really is open to everyone’. This emphasis on continuous learning and development aligns with the sector’s dynamic nature and need for adaptive leadership capabilities.

This thorough understanding of required leadership competencies provided the foundation for developing the persona of the ideal retail graduate from an HR specialist perspective, Cindy (Figure 2). The persona concept originates in the marketing and design disciplines as a goal-directed design tool to represent archetypal users rather than average users, capturing their behaviours, needs and motives in a single representative (Shi et al. 2025). Since its origins, the persona concept has expanded well beyond marketing into human capital management, where employee personas represent groups of people with common characteristics, ranging from demographics to skills and competencies (Mikhlin & Saukkonen 2023). In the context of data-driven research more broadly, personas function as explicit, human-readable archetypes condensed from empirical data to characterise specific behaviours, preferences and traits, offering the analytical advantages of informativeness,



Source: Image created by Mariëtte Frazer and Lia M. Hewitt using Canva version 1.39.0.

FIGURE 2: Persona of Cindy: Ideal graduate for human resources specialists.

readability and robustness (Shi et al. 2025). Adapted here to an HR and graduate employability context, Cindy functions in precisely this way; she is not an invented character but rather a composite representation emergent directly from the competency themes and attributes identified through the analysis of HR specialists’ perspectives. Shi et al. (2025) demonstrate that large language models and AI tools are particularly powerful in synthesising complex behavioural patterns into meaningful, human-readable profiles. By presenting Cindy as a thoughtfully crafted visual persona, these essential traits and skills are brought together in a relatable and accessible way, enabling a more in-depth exploration and analysis of the qualities considered crucial for a successful transition into the retail sector.

Cindy’s persona embodies the essential competencies identified by HR professionals as crucial for success in the retail sector. Her strong self-leadership orientation would enable her to take proactive ownership of her growth and development within the organisation. Her relevance to the retail sector stems from integrating two critical capabilities: customer-centricity and adaptability. Through practical retail exposure during her studies, she has developed both natural communication abilities and deep retail understanding, demonstrating the balanced combination of soft and technical skills demanded by the retail sector. Cindy demonstrates strong stakeholder awareness, understanding how retail decisions impact customers, employees, suppliers and communities. Her systems-thinking approach enables her to identify business risks and opportunities amid changing market conditions. Additionally, Cindy’s growth mindset

and ability to align with organisational culture exemplify the type of adaptive, culturally aware leadership that modern retail environments require.

Data analysis of curriculum documents

Curriculum analysis of advanced retail diploma programmes across five South African PHEIs, conducted in response to RQ2, revealed three distinct thematic categories: core capabilities and soft skills, retail operations and strategy, and financial management integrated with research methodology. The ATLAS.ti 23/24 output of this analysis is presented in Figure 1-A2 to Figure 4-A2 (Appendix 2), with code frequencies summarised in Table 3. These themes illuminate how PHEIs conceptualise retail leadership development and, when compared with the competencies identified by HR professionals, reveal a significant divergence between sector expectations and current programme outcomes.

Critical evaluation and thinking emerged as the most emphasised core capability (37 occurrences), indicating PHEIs' strong focus on developing graduates' analytical and evaluative abilities. This emphasis manifests through curriculum design that challenges students to engage in complex problem-solving and decision-making scenarios. Effective communication (28 occurrences) represents the second most prioritised capability, with curricula incorporating various forms of professional and academic communication development. Process management and assessment (21 occurrences) rounds out the core capabilities, suggesting PHEIs' attention to developing systematic thinking and organisational skills.

The strongest curricular emphasis appears in retail knowledge and principles (87 occurrences), demonstrating PHEIs' commitment to establishing a comprehensive theoretical foundation. This substantial focus indicates that advanced retail programmes prioritise deep sector-specific knowledge as a cornerstone of leadership development. Operations management (47 occurrences) and retail strategies (43 occurrences) follow as significant areas of focus, suggesting a balanced approach between operational competence and strategic thinking ability. The attention to retail trends (34 occurrences) indicates PHEIs'

effort to ensure graduates can contextualise their knowledge within current sector developments.

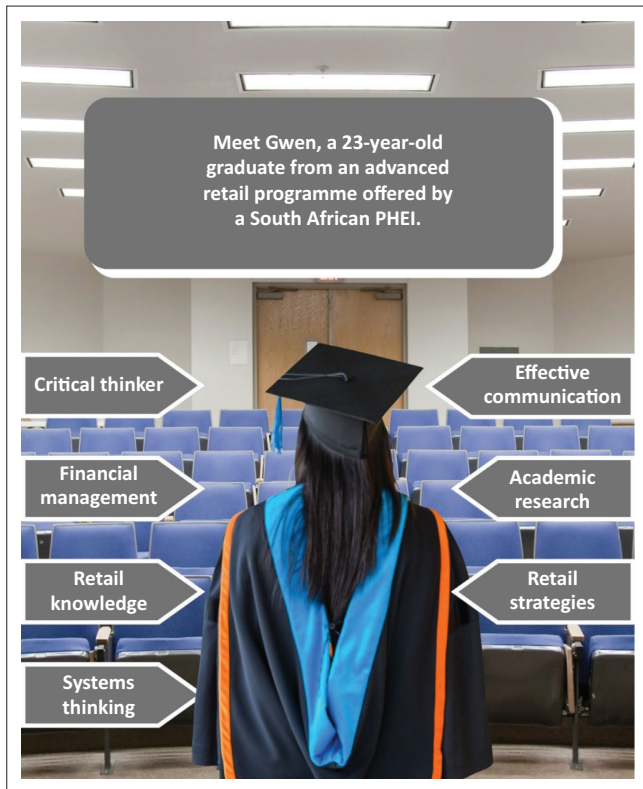
Management accounting (36 occurrences) emerges as a key focus area, highlighting the importance PHEIs place on developing financial decision-making capabilities. Cost accounting (20 occurrences) and accounting principles (13 occurrences) complete the financial competencies, suggesting a comprehensive approach to financial skill development.

Research methodology emerges as a significant component, with academic research (20 occurrences) being strongly emphasised. Quantitative methods (19 occurrences) and qualitative methods (17 occurrences) show nearly equal emphasis, while the research process and data collection (both 11 occurrences) are given balanced attention. This distribution suggests PHEIs' commitment to developing graduates with strong research capabilities across multiple methodological approaches.

The findings reveal that PHEIs structure their advanced retail curricula to develop graduates who excel in critical thinking and analytical skills, supported by strong communication skills and comprehensive retail sector knowledge. The substantial emphasis on retail knowledge principles, combined with financial acumen and research methodology, shapes a distinctly academic orientation to retail leadership development. Drawing on the same persona methodology used to construct Cindy, in which empirical data is synthesised into a relatable, human-readable archetype (Mikhlin & Saukkonen 2023; Shi et al. 2025), this curricular focus gave rise to the persona of Gwen (Figure 3). As mentioned personas represent groups of people with common characteristics in a fictional yet data-grounded figure, Gwen embodies the ideal PHEI retail graduate as reflected through the analysis of curriculum and graduate programme expectations, one who demonstrates strong critical thinking abilities, effective communication skills, sound financial management capabilities and robust research competencies, while maintaining a solid foundation in retail knowledge, systems thinking and retail strategy development.

TABLE 3: Code frequency in public higher education institution curriculum themes.

Theme group	Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency
Theme emerging from the holistic development of graduate capabilities	Core capabilities and soft skills	Critical evaluation and thinking	37
		Effective communication	28
		Process management and assessment	21
Themes emerging from retail-sector-aligned curriculum content	Retail operations management and strategy	Retail knowledge and principles	87
		Operations management	47
		Retail strategies	34
		Retail trends	34
	Financial management	Management accounting	36
		Cost accounting	20
		Accounting principles	13
Theme emerging from the academic-aligned curriculum content	Research	Academic research	20
		Quantitative methods	19
		Qualitative methods	17
		Data collection	11
		Research process	11



Source: Image created by Mariëtte Frazer and Lia M. Hewitt using Canva version 1.39.0.

FIGURE 3: Persona of Gwen: Ideal retail graduate from a public higher education institution perspective.

The persona of Gwen represents a theoretically strong graduate whose analytical mindset and comprehensive understanding of retail principles would enable her to contribute effectively to both strategic planning and financial management within retail organisations. Her academic research capabilities and systems thinking approach would position her well for roles requiring data-driven decision-making and strategic analysis, though she may need time to develop practical retail experience. Gwen's analytical capabilities extend to stakeholder impact assessment and long-term business model evaluation, positioning her well for roles requiring sustainable business strategy development. While her strong communication skills and critical thinking abilities would facilitate effective collaboration in cross-functional teams, her theoretical orientation might require adjustment when facing the immediate, practical challenges of day-to-day retail operations. Nonetheless, Gwen's solid foundation in retail knowledge and strategy development, combined with her financial acumen, would make her particularly valuable in roles focused on retail planning, analysis and process improvement.

Comparing ideal graduate personas from human resources and public higher education institution perspectives

Through the lens of systems theory and dynamic capabilities theory, comparing Cindy and Gwen's personas reveals fundamental differences in how the retail sector and academia conceptualise the ideal retail graduate. As a Gen Z

representative, Cindy embodies transformational leadership through her strong self-leadership orientation and ability to adapt to complex retail environments (Bass 1985; Kim et al. 2022). Her profile aligns with dynamic capabilities theory, demonstrating the ability to integrate, build and reconfigure competencies in response to rapidly changing retail environments (Mele et al. 2024; Teece 2022). In contrast, Gwen's persona, shaped by curriculum theory principles, reflects academia's systematic approach to knowledge and skill development (Deng 2018; Rasmussen, Rasch-Christensen & Qvortrup 2022). Her strong analytical and research capabilities represent the structured learning outcomes emphasised in higher education, though they may require adaptation for practical retail applications.

The comparison reveals significant disparities between retail sector expectations and academic preparation. While HR specialists prioritise transformational leadership competencies (Siangchokyoo et al. 2020), self-leadership, adaptability and strong interpersonal skills, as evidenced by Cindy's persona. Public higher education institutions focus more heavily on analytical capabilities and theoretical knowledge, as shown in Gwen's profile. This misalignment could explain some of the challenges faced by retailers when onboarding retail graduates into the retail sector.

The most significant difference appears in leadership development approaches. Through the transformational leadership theoretical lens (Siangchokyoo et al. 2020), Cindy's profile emphasises immediate leadership capability through self-leadership, team management and customer engagement. This aligns with the retail sector's need for graduates who can quickly assume leadership roles and influence organisational outcomes (Putra et al. 2020). Conversely, Gwen's leadership development follows a more theoretical trajectory, focusing on strategic thinking and systems analysis rather than direct leadership application.

From a dynamic capabilities perspective (Teece 2022), these personas reflect different approaches to developing adaptive capacity. Cindy's profile emphasises immediate adaptability and practical problem-solving, enabling rapid response to market changes and customer needs. Gwen's analytical strengths and research capabilities, while valuable for long-term strategic planning, may require further development to meet the immediate adaptive requirements of the retail sector.

Narrowing the academic–retail sector gap in retail education

The comparison between Cindy and Gwen's personas reveal significant differences in how the retail sector and academia envision the ideal retail graduate, directly informing the evidence-based curriculum recommendations proposed in response to RQ3. While addressing these differences requires careful consideration of the practical constraints facing South African PHEIs, including limited funding, resource constraints and variable student preparedness, several strategic approaches could help narrow this gap.

A pragmatic approach to narrowing the gap between academic excellence and retail sector readiness should focus on incremental integration rather than wholesale curriculum revision. This could be achieved through strategic partnerships between the retail sector and academia, leveraging external resources and expertise while maintaining academic integrity. Developing critical skills, particularly in areas of self-leadership and customer-centricity, should be targeted using innovative teaching methods that maximise limited resources.

Given the resource constraints in South African PHEIs, emphasis should be placed on high-impact, low-cost interventions that can be implemented incrementally to enhance graduate development. By incorporating reflective components into existing assignments, PHEIs can foster self-leadership and critical thinking without requiring additional resources. Implementing peer mentoring systems would provide students with practical leadership experience while creating supportive learning environments. Virtual simulations and case studies offer cost-effective ways to expose students to real-world retail scenarios. At the same time, industry-based projects can narrow the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. These interventions, when strategically integrated into existing curricula, can significantly enhance graduate capabilities without placing undue strain on limited institutional resources.

In response to RQ3, the evidence suggests that the goal is not to transform Gwen into Cindy but rather to create a hybrid model that combines analytical excellence with practical capabilities, achievable within the South African higher education context. This balanced approach would produce graduates who are both academically strong and retail-ready, capable of contributing meaningfully to the retail sector's evolving needs.

Theoretical and practical implications

This study makes several theoretical contributions to improved understanding of retail leadership development in higher education. Through the lens of dynamic capabilities, the findings reveal the complex adaptive nature of retail education, demonstrating how retail sector requirements and academic preparation create interconnected subsystems that influence graduate development (Van Assche et al. 2019). This systemic perspective provides new insights into how different stakeholders' expectations and approaches shape retail leadership competencies, extending our understanding of educational ecosystem dynamics.

The research advances curriculum theory by explaining the delicate balance required between theoretical knowledge and practical competencies in retail education. The findings extend previous works (Deng 2018; Rasmussen et al. 2022) on adaptive curriculum development, demonstrating how theoretical foundations can be meaningfully integrated with industry-driven competencies while maintaining academic

rigour. This theoretical contribution is particularly relevant in the South African context, where resource constraints necessitate innovative approaches to curriculum design and delivery.

The numerous practical implications of this research offer direct applications for stakeholders within South Africa's retail education ecosystem. Curriculum developers at PHEIs, retail-sector HR professionals and higher education policymakers, as primary stakeholders, can implement evidence-based strategies and interventions to transform retail leadership education. The beneficiaries include students pursuing advanced retail qualifications, retail organisations seeking skilled graduates and the broader South African economy, which depends significantly on sustainable retail sector growth.

The evidence-based personas of Cindy and Gwen provide a conceptual framework for understanding the academic-industry divide, enabling stakeholders to visualise the gap between current educational outcomes and retail sector requirements. This framework facilitates more targeted curriculum development decisions by clearly illustrating the contrasting expectations between academia and industry. Beyond this conceptual application, the findings translate into specific, actionable interventions that can be implemented within existing resource constraints. These include embedding self-leadership development throughout advanced retail curricula (Bäcklander et al. 2021; Maykrantz & Houghton 2020), implementing retail sector-based projects and experiential learning opportunities (Ferreira et al. 2020; Khatri & Dutta 2023) and establishing structured partnership programmes between PHEIs and retail organisations (Pantano et al. 2020).

In line with the literature, transformational leaders advance sustainable digital transformation across six critical dimensions: strategic sustainability alignment, organisational change management, competency development in digital and environmental domains, collaborative relationship building, ethical and regulatory compliance and multi-stakeholder value creation (Hariyani et al. 2025). For retail education, curricula should develop leaders capable of operating across these integrated dimensions to ensure long-term sector sustainability. This approach addresses the current disconnect between academic preparation and retail sector needs, particularly in developing practical leadership capabilities (Jacobs & Karpova 2022).

For graduate development, the research suggests the need for structured transition programmes that effectively bridge theoretical knowledge and practical application (Kim et al. 2022). This includes early career development initiatives that focus on building self-leadership capabilities (Bäcklander et al. 2021). Furthermore, competency-based assessment frameworks should be implemented to ensure alignment with both academic standards and retail sector requirements (McCormack et al. 2022; Skalicky et al. 2020; W&RSETA 2025). Such programmes would address the identified gap

between the theoretical strengths represented by Gwen's persona and the practical competencies embodied by Cindy, creating a more balanced approach to graduate readiness.

The framework addresses South Africa's specific context, where retail serves as the second-largest employer, ensuring that educational transformations contribute meaningfully to national economic development while building sustainable retail futures (Venter 2022). However, all practical applications must account for South African PHEIs' resource constraints and the specific needs of the local retail sector. This necessitates strategic, phased implementation approaches that maximise impact while ensuring sustainable adoption across the higher education system (Grewal et al. 2021; W&RSETA 2025). The collaborative approach requires careful consideration of resources and stakeholder engagement to ensure sustainable implementation within the unique challenges facing South African higher education institutions.

Limitations

While this study provides critical insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research is confined to a specific regional context, South African PHEIs and the local retail sector, which may limit the generalisability of findings to other countries with different educational structures and retail sector dynamics. Secondly, the study relies on a qualitative methodology, which, while rich in depth and detail, may lack the broader representativeness that a larger, quantitative study could offer. Using purposive sampling to select HR professionals, though necessary for accessing specific expertise, may also introduce selection bias. Finally, as the study focuses on advanced diploma programmes, it may not capture the full range of retail education at the undergraduate or other diploma levels, which could also impact graduate readiness.

Future research

Looking forward, this research opens avenues for future exploration, particularly in implementing resource-conscious, high-impact educational strategies within PHEIs. Expanding this research to include a broader array of educational levels and exploring quantitative approaches could further validate the findings. The study suggests that sustainable success in retail leadership development lies in creating innovative, strategically integrated curricula that bridge the gap between academic excellence and retail sector readiness. Such an approach, though challenging, offers a promising pathway for cultivating the next generation of retail leaders equipped to thrive in South Africa's evolving market.

Conclusion

This study investigated the gap between the leadership competencies expected by HR professionals in the South African retail sector and those developed through advanced

retail education programmes at South African PHEIs. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis of HR specialist interviews and systematic content analysis of PHEI curricula, the research addressed three RQs.

RQ1: What leadership competencies do HR professionals in the South African retail sector expect of advanced retail graduates in relation to business sustainability and long-term value creation? Human resources professionals identified a clear competency hierarchy, with self-leadership, effective communication, customer-centricity, adaptability and retail contextual knowledge as the most critical attributes for sustainable graduate contribution. These competencies are embodied in the Cindy persona, which represents the sector's vision of a practically capable, self-directed and interpersonally agile graduate leader.

RQ2: What is the gap between the leadership competencies expected by HR professionals and those developed by advanced retail curricula at South African PHEIs? Curriculum analysis across five PHEIs revealed a strong emphasis on retail knowledge and principles (87 instances), critical thinking (37) and research methodology – competencies embodied in the Gwen persona. Comparing Cindy and Gwen exposes a structural gap: The competencies HR professionals regard as most essential – self-leadership, adaptability and customer-centricity – are largely absent from formal PHEI curricula. Public higher education institutions produce analytically strong graduates who are underprepared for the immediate practical and interpersonal demands of retail leadership.

RQ3: What evidence-based curriculum recommendations can be proposed for South African PHEIs to bridge this gap? Rather than wholesale curriculum revision, the study recommends a hybrid graduate model that preserves PHEIs' analytical strengths while deliberately embedding practical leadership development. Specific recommendations include integrating self-leadership as an explicit, assessable curriculum strand; incorporating experiential learning through industry-based projects and simulations; establishing structured PHEI-retail partnerships; and adopting competency-based assessment frameworks aligned with sector expectations. These interventions are designed to be achievable within South African PHEIs' resource constraints.

Together, these findings contribute to a novel conceptual framework, the Cindy-Gwen persona model, for understanding and addressing academic-industry gaps in professional education. Theoretically, integrating dynamic capabilities, transformational leadership and curriculum theory advances understanding of how PHEIs can develop adaptive, sustainability-oriented retail leaders. For South Africa, where retail is the second-largest employer, bridging this competency gap carries direct economic significance. The success of retail leadership development ultimately depends on creating integrated curricula that produce graduates who are both academically rigorous and industry-ready.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Mariëtte Frazer: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Lia M. Hewitt: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Mariëtte Frazer, upon request.

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Appendices starts on the next page →

Appendix 1

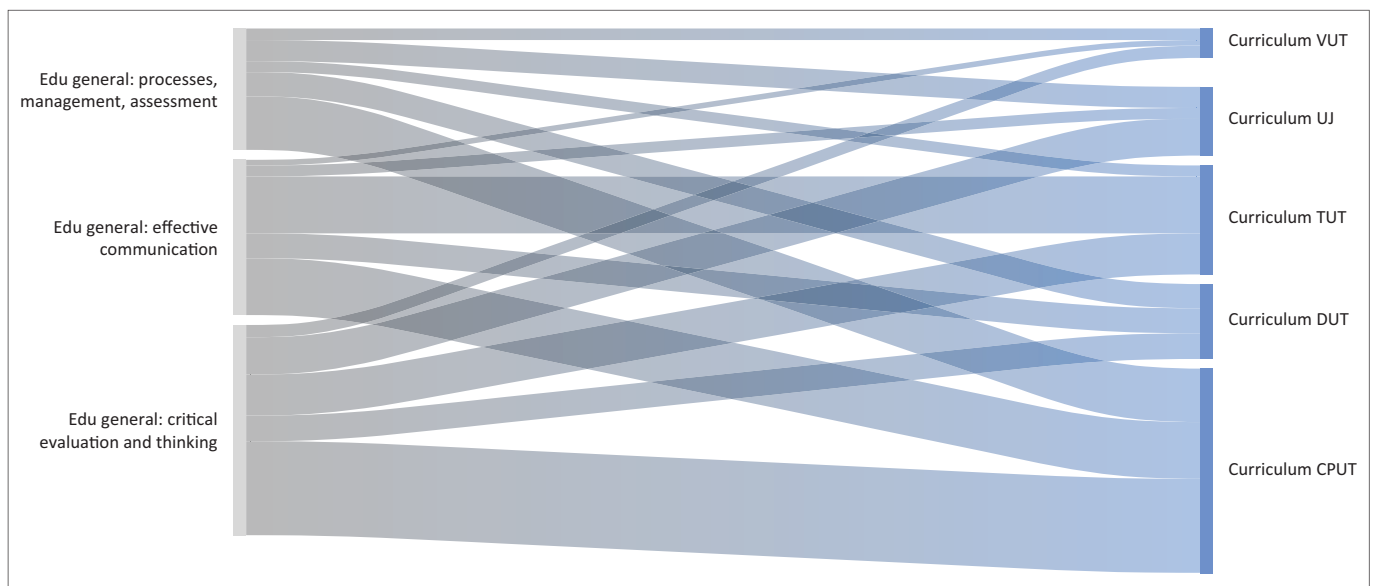
Interview guide questions

To help me understand your context, I am going to ask you a few questions, starting with:

1. In your view, which skills and characteristics are the most valuable in a retail employee today?
2. What challenges is the retail industry facing regarding leadership skills?
3. What strategies is your organisation using to address those challenges?
4. What areas of employee development does your organisation focus on?
5. How has technology changed how leadership roles are carried out in the retail industry?
6. In your experience, what are the most effective methods for fostering and cultivating leadership skills among young adult graduates in the South African retail industry?
7. What kind of training do you think is needed to bridge the leadership skills gap among young adult graduates in the South African retail industry?
8. On a scale of 1–10, where would you rank leadership skills development as a priority for your organisation? (1 if not a priority at all, and 10 if leadership skills, development is the top priority)
9. What leadership skills do you think future South African retail sector leaders will need?
10. What areas of leadership development does your organisation focus on?
11. In your opinion, which leadership level in your organisation receives the most development opportunities?
12. How does your organisation develop future leaders?
13. Describe any specific tools, learning strategies, or interventions that your organisation uses to develop leadership skills?
14. Please describe the scope of mentoring and coaching practices in your organisation for future leaders.
15. What do you believe to be the most reliable way of measuring and assessing leadership skills within the South African retail industry?
16. What strategies would you recommend to employers in the South African retail industry to engage and retain young adult graduates with leadership capabilities?
17. Have you noticed any particular trends in leadership development within the South African retail industry?
18. In your opinion, which skills are most lacking among young adults (under 35), particularly those who graduated from a public higher education institution (PHEI)?
19. In your experience, to what extent are graduates from advanced retail programmes sufficiently prepared to understand leadership and the skills required to be a successful leader?
20. Are there any societal or cultural elements that may be hindering the development of leadership skills among young adult graduates in the South African retail industry?
21. In your opinion, do you think retail graduates feel equipped and prepared for a leadership role?
22. What are your thoughts on PHEIs' ability to develop future leaders in the retail industry?
23. What changes to the advanced retail curricula offered at PHEIs would you recommend to enhance leadership skills among young adult graduates?
24. What do you consider to be the leading obstacles to young adult graduates achieving their full leadership potential in the South African retail industry?
25. How do you see the role of leadership in the retail industry changing in the future?
26. What techniques do you think could be used to attract and recruit young adult graduates with strong leadership skills in the South African retail industry?
27. How has the leadership skills gap within the South African retail industry changed over the past 5 years?
28. What do you think are the most important attributes for successful leadership development in the South African retail industry?
29. Any other comments you would like to make?

Appendix 2

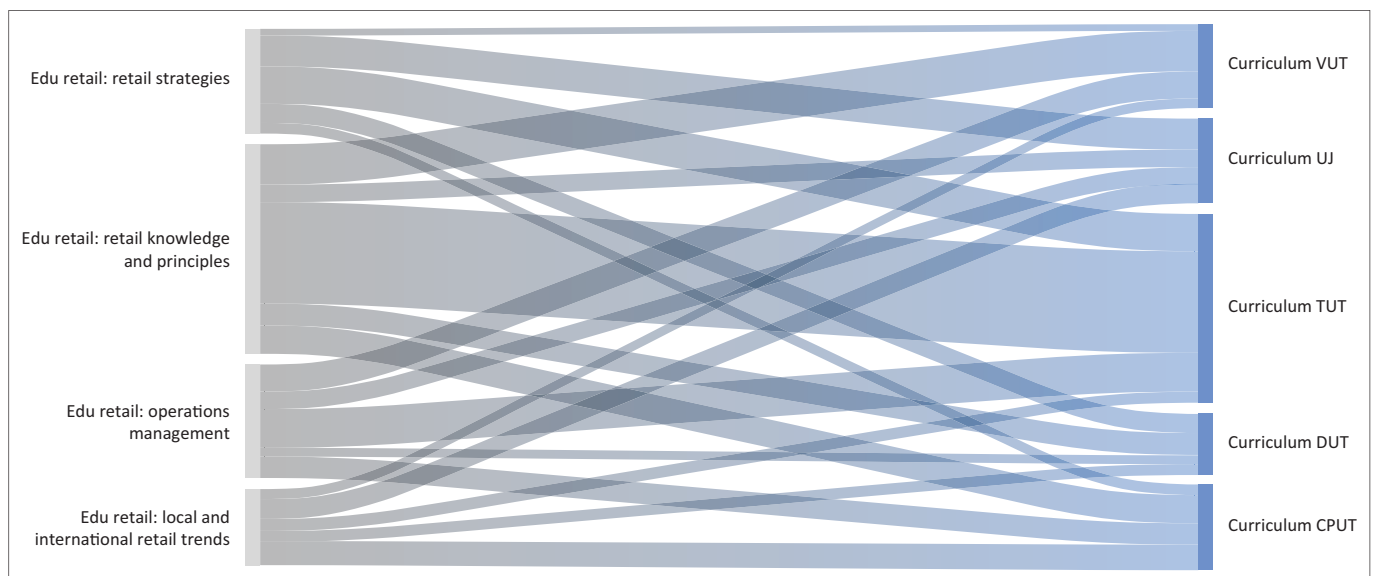
ATLAS.ti 23/24 output



Source: ATLAS.ti23/24 output

CPUT, Cape Peninsula University of Technology; DUT, Durban University of Technology; TUT, Tshwane University of Technology; UJ, University of Johannesburg; VUT, Vaal University of Technology.

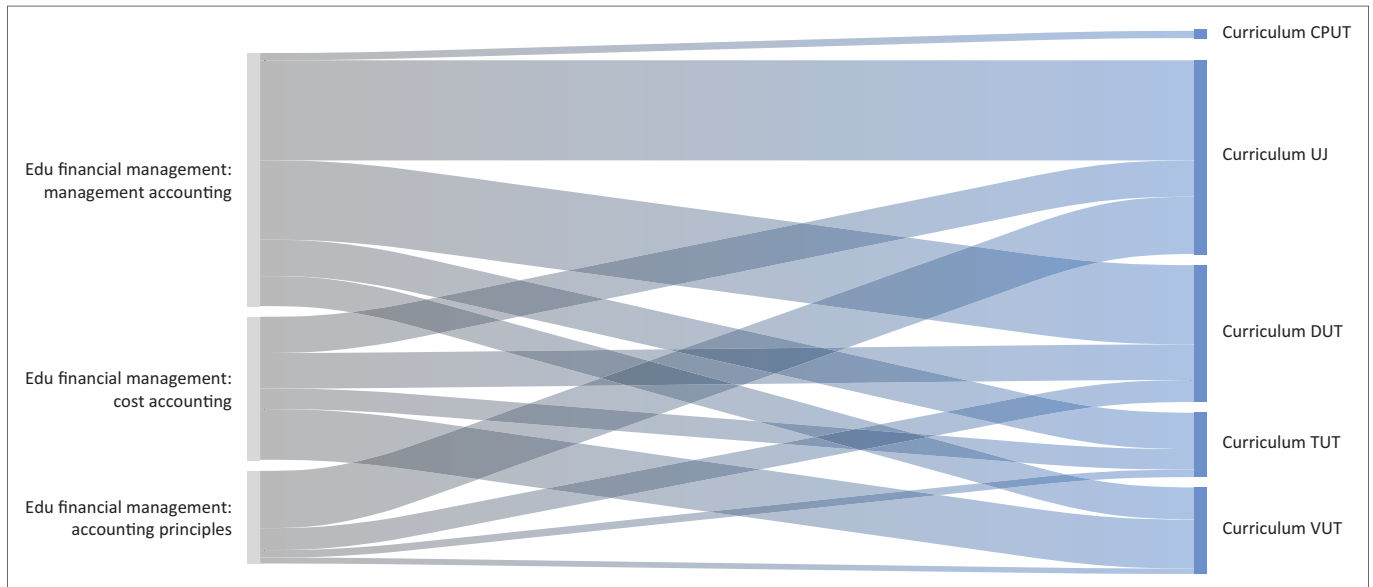
FIGURE 1-A2: Sankey diagram of theme: Core capabilities and soft skills.



Source: ATLAS.ti23/24 output

CPUT, Cape Peninsula University of Technology; DUT, Durban University of Technology; TUT, Tshwane University of Technology; UJ, University of Johannesburg; VUT, Vaal University of Technology.

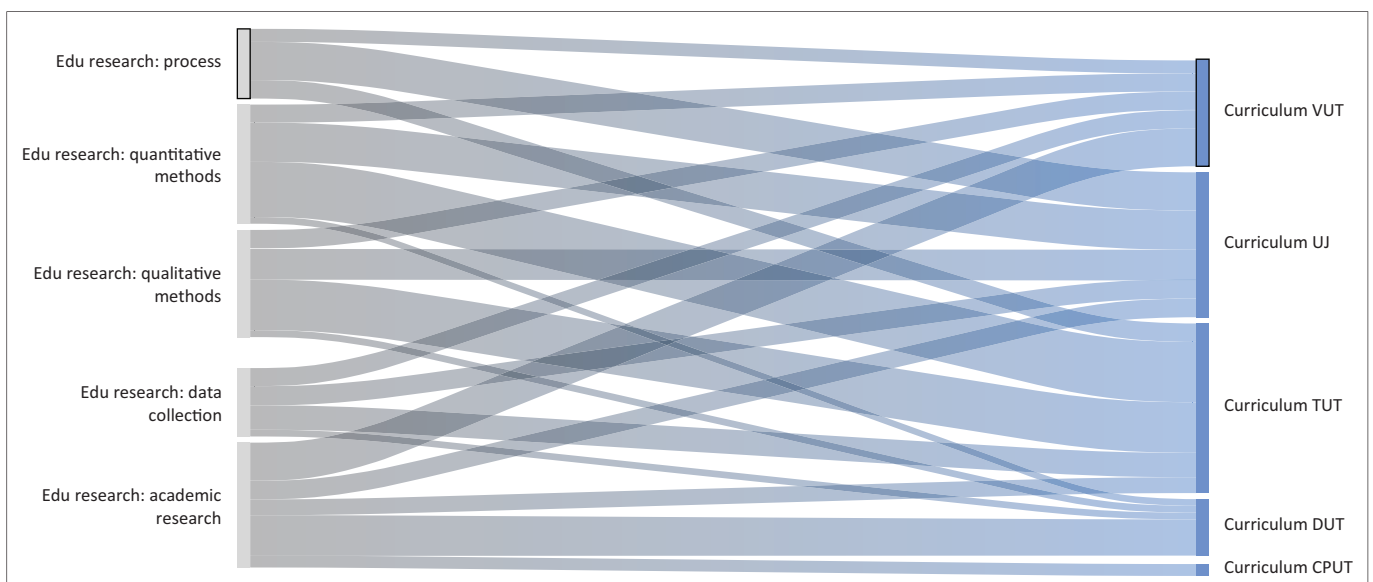
FIGURE 2-A2: Sankey diagram of theme: Retail strategy and operations management.



Source: ATLAS.ti23/24 output

CPUT, Cape Peninsula University of Technology; DUT, Durban University of Technology; TUT, Tshwane University of Technology; UJ, University of Johannesburg; VUT, Vaal University of Technology.

FIGURE 3-A2: Sankey diagram of financial management.



Source: ATLAS.ti23/24 output

CPUT, Cape Peninsula University of Technology; DUT, Durban University of Technology; TUT, Tshwane University of Technology; UJ, University of Johannesburg; VUT, Vaal University of Technology.

FIGURE 4-A2: Sankey diagram of theme: Research.