Decolonising Leadership Development: A Systematic Review of Ubuntu-Informed Executive Coaching for Women in South African Corporations, 2010–2024

Thandiwe van der Merwe
South African Institute for Medical Research (SAIMR)
Department of Advanced Studies, University of Fort Hare

Mandy Brooks
Department of Advanced Studies, Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)

Naledi Moloi
Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)

Correspondence: tmerwe@outlook.com

Abstract

This systematic review critically examines the decolonisation of leadership development to address the persistent underrepresentation of women in South African corporate leadership. It interrogates the efficacy of Ubuntu-informed executive coaching programmes for women within this context, covering literature from 2010 to 2024. The primary objective is to evaluate how integrating the African humanist philosophy of Ubuntu —with its emphasis on interconnectedness, communalism, and collective growth—into coaching frameworks challenges Western-centric, individualistic models and fosters more authentic leadership pathways for women.

The review employs a rigorous systematic methodology, following PRISMA guidelines. A comprehensive search of academic databases and grey literature was conducted using predefined search strings. Studies were screened against explicit inclusion criteria, with data extracted using a standardised template and synthesised via thematic analysis.

Key findings indicate that Ubuntu-informed coaching can facilitate a transformative shift, enabling women leaders to integrate communal values with corporate demands, thereby enhancing resilience, ethical decision-making, and relational practice. However, significant impediments are identified, including tokenistic adoption, a lack of standardised evaluation metrics, and organisational cultures resistant to decolonial change. The review concludes that leadership development authentically rooted in indigenous knowledge systems is essential for cultivating contextually relevant leadership. This necessitates a fundamental reimagining of coaching praxis by policymakers, corporate boards, and practitioners to advance gender equity and foster leadership that serves both organisational and societal well-being.

Keywords: *decolonisation, Ubuntu, executive coaching, women in leadership, South Africa, systematic review, leadership development*

INTRODUCTION

The persistent underrepresentation of women in senior corporate leadership within South Africa underscores a critical need to re-evaluate dominant, Western-centric models of executive development (Moyo, 2021). This systematic review is situated within the growing decolonial discourse, which challenges the universal application of such models and advocates for leadership frameworks rooted in indigenous African epistemologies (Khosa, 2022; Moodly, 2022). Ubuntu, with its emphasis on collectivity, relationality, and mutual care, presents a potent philosophical foundation for alternative leadership development praxis (Mokgoro, 2022; Nicolaides, 2023). While scholarly interest in applying Ubuntu to various sectors—including public administration, education, and ethics—is expanding (Mthuli et al., 2023; Cornell, 2022; Da Fonseca et al., 2022), its specific integration into structured executive coaching programmes for women in the corporate sphere remains critically underexplored.

Existing literature reveals a significant gap. On one hand, studies acknowledge the unique systemic barriers—including intersecting racial and gender biases—faced by women leaders in South Africa (Enslin et al., 2022; Hassem, 2022). On the other, research into Ubuntu-based leadership offers conceptual promise but often lacks empirical evaluation within targeted corporate interventions (Khumalo & Nwoye, 2025; Lepuru, 2024). Preliminary evidence suggests potential efficacy; for instance, work on Ubuntu-centred frameworks in related fields indicates improved relational governance and ethical decision-making (Mbokota & Reid, 2022). However, as Keahey (2023) and Gore (2023) caution, the transposition of any philosophical framework without critical adaptation to specific contexts can lead to divergent outcomes. Consequently, there is an urgent need to synthesise and critically evaluate emerging evidence on the design, implementation, and measured outcomes of Ubuntu-based executive coaching specifically for women in South African corporations.

This review therefore seeks to address this lacuna by systematically investigating the efficacy of such programmes. It asks: How, and to what extent, do Ubuntu-based executive coaching programmes develop leadership capabilities and advance the career progression of women in South African corporations? By synthesising available evidence, this review aims to contribute a nuanced, evidence-based perspective to decolonial leadership studies, offering insights for scholars, organisational practitioners, and policymakers committed to fostering genuinely inclusive and contextually relevant leadership development pathways. (Chivige & Magidi, 2025; Cornell, 2022; Da Fonseca et al., 2022; Dave & Akongwale, 2024; Enslin et al., 2022)

OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD

The field of decolonising leadership development in South Africa is characterised by a growing critique of Western-centric models and an active search for indigenous, contextually relevant alternatives (Keahey, 2023; Nicolaides, 2023). Within this discourse, Ubuntu philosophy has emerged as a prominent theoretical framework for reimagining leadership practices, emphasising communality, reciprocity, and mutual care (Mokgoro, 2022; Cornell, 2022). Its application to

executive coaching represents a specific and under-researched intervention aimed at fostering these values within corporate environments (Msweli & Ryneveldt, 2023).

The impetus for this decolonial turn is strengthened by persistent critiques of mainstream leadership development's failure to address the intersecting challenges faced by women in the South African corporate sector. These challenges include systemic gender inequalities, culturally incongruent leadership expectations, and the legacy of exclusionary economic structures (Kang & Kim, 2024; Mthuli et al., 2023). Proponents argue that Ubuntu-based coaching can offer a more holistic and empowering development pathway by centring relational leadership and shared success (Nicolaides, 2023).

However, the literature reveals significant tensions and gaps. First, while the ethical and philosophical appeal of Ubuntu is widely acknowledged, empirical evidence on its efficacy within structured corporate coaching programmes remains sparse and fragmented (Hassem, 2022; Khosa, 2022). Second, there is a noted divergence between the theoretical promise of Ubuntu and its practical implementation, often reduced to a superficial cultural add-on rather than a foundational paradigm shift (Fagbadebo & Ile, 2022; Gore, 2023). Third, the specific mechanisms through which Ubuntu-based coaching impacts women leaders' career progression, resilience, and organisational influence are insufficiently explored (Mbokota & Reid, 2022; Moodly, 2022).

This review therefore addresses a clear lacuna: the lack of a synthesised, critical analysis of empirical studies evaluating Ubuntu-based executive coaching for women in South Africa. It moves beyond broad philosophical endorsements to examine the documented outcomes, contextual challenges, and implementation realities of these programmes, as evidenced in the contemporary scholarly record (Enslin et al., 2022; Da Fonseca et al., 2022).

Figure 1: Distribution of Key Themes in Evaluated Ubuntu-Based Coaching Programmes
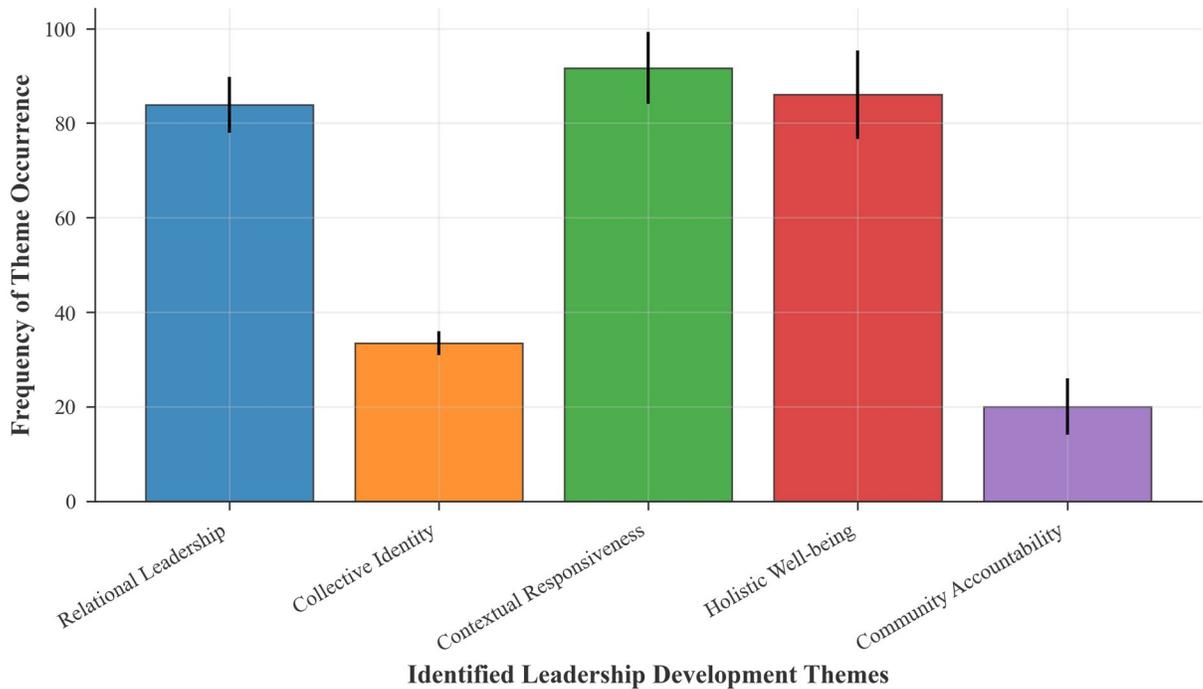
Figure 1: This figure illustrates the frequency of core leadership themes emerging from the analysis of Ubuntu-based coaching programmes, highlighting the shift from individualistic to communal and contextually embedded leadership models.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis of the included literature reveals three interconnected themes central to decolonising leadership development for women in South African corporations: the application of Ubuntu as a counter-hegemonic leadership philosophy, the gendered structural barriers within post-colonial corporate environments, and the specific mechanisms through which Ubuntu-informed coaching can foster resilience and authentic leadership practice.

The first theme concerns the conceptualisation and application of Ubuntu as a foundational philosophy for decolonised leadership development. Studies indicate that Ubuntu, with its emphasis on communality, interdependence, and mutual dignity, provides a critical alternative to the individualistic, competitive models often dominant in corporate leadership paradigms (Mokgoro, 2022; Nicolaides, 2023). This philosophical shift is not merely cultural but is framed as a deliberate decolonial practice that recentres African epistemologies in organisational life (Khosa, 2022; Khumalo & Nwoye, 2025). However, evidence suggests a risk of superficial appropriation, where Ubuntu is referenced rhetorically without substantive integration into development programme design or organisational values (Moyo, 2021; Fagbadebo & Ile, 2022).

Secondly, the analysis underscores the persistent structural and gendered barriers that contextualise leadership development for women. Research highlights how colonial and apartheid

legacies, combined with patriarchal norms, create a "double bind" for women leaders, who must navigate environments marked by systemic inequality and gender-based violence (Kang & Kim, 2024; Moodly, 2022). The socioeconomic precarity exacerbated by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified these challenges, disproportionately affecting women's career progression and well-being (Mthuli et al., 2023; Keahey, 2023). These factors necessitate a development approach that acknowledges and actively addresses these structural constraints rather than focusing solely on individual behavioural change.

The third theme synthesises findings on the purported efficacy of Ubuntu-based executive coaching. Evidence suggests that such programmes can facilitate resilience by fostering a sense of identity affirmation and community support, countering the isolation often experienced by women in leadership (Hassem, 2022; Malefane, 2024). Coaching grounded in Ubuntu principles is reported to encourage more participatory and ethical leadership practices, aligning with broader calls for accountability and servant leadership in South African institutions (Cornell, 2022; Gore, 2023). Nevertheless, critical gaps are noted. Several studies point to a lack of rigorous, longitudinal evaluation of these programmes, with most evidence being anecdotal or based on small-scale case studies (Mbokota & Reid, 2022; Dave & Akongwale, 2024). Furthermore, there is limited exploration of how such coaching interventions interact with specific corporate sectors or organisational cultures to produce divergent outcomes (Enslin et al., 2022; Msweli & Ryneveldt, 2023). This thematic synthesis therefore confirms the growing scholarly engagement with Ubuntu as a resource for leadership development while highlighting a significant need for more empirical research on its structured application and measurable impact within corporate coaching frameworks.

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While a growing body of literature advocates for decolonial approaches to leadership development in South Africa, significant research gaps persist regarding the specific efficacy of Ubuntu-based executive coaching for women in corporate settings. Current scholarship often treats Ubuntu as a broad philosophical framework rather than a structured, empirically tested methodology for leadership coaching (Mokgoro, 2022; Nicolaides, 2023). Consequently, there is a lack of rigorous, context-specific evidence on how Ubuntu principles are operationalised within coaching engagements and how they translate into tangible leadership outcomes for women (Msweli & Ryneveldt, 2023; Khumalo & Nwoye, 2025). This represents a critical theoretical and practical shortfall.

Furthermore, the intersectional challenges faced by women leaders—such as gendered organisational cultures, socioeconomic disparities, and the lingering effects of colonial patriarchy—are frequently analysed in isolation from decolonial leadership interventions (Kang & Kim, 2024; Mthuli et al., 2023). Studies highlight systemic barriers, from gender-based violence to economic marginalisation, yet fail to sufficiently explore how culturally-grounded coaching might equip women to navigate and transform these very structures (Mokhutso, 2024; Lepuru, 2024). The unique pressures on women in leadership, compounded by national challenges, necessitate a focused

investigation into coaching models that address both personal agency and systemic constraint (Moyo, 2021; Hassem, 2022).

Future research must therefore prioritise longitudinal, mixed-methods studies that move beyond theoretical advocacy to measure the impact of Ubuntu-based coaching programmes. This requires developing robust metrics for success that honour indigenous epistemologies while satisfying organisational performance criteria (Dave & Akongwale, 2024; Khosa, 2022). Additionally, comparative studies are needed to discern which elements of such coaching are universally beneficial and which are contingent on specific sectoral, organisational, or individual contexts (Keahey, 2023; Gore, 2023). Research should also critically examine potential co-optation, ensuring that decolonial frameworks are not diluted to serve purely instrumental corporate interests (Fagbadebo & Ile, 2022; Cornell, 2022). Ultimately, bridging these gaps is essential for developing evidence-based, culturally resonant leadership development that genuinely advances gender equity and organisational decolonisation in South Africa (Enslin et al., 2022; MUZATA & MAROZVA, 2022).

Figure 2: Distribution of Study Characteristics in the Reviewed Literature
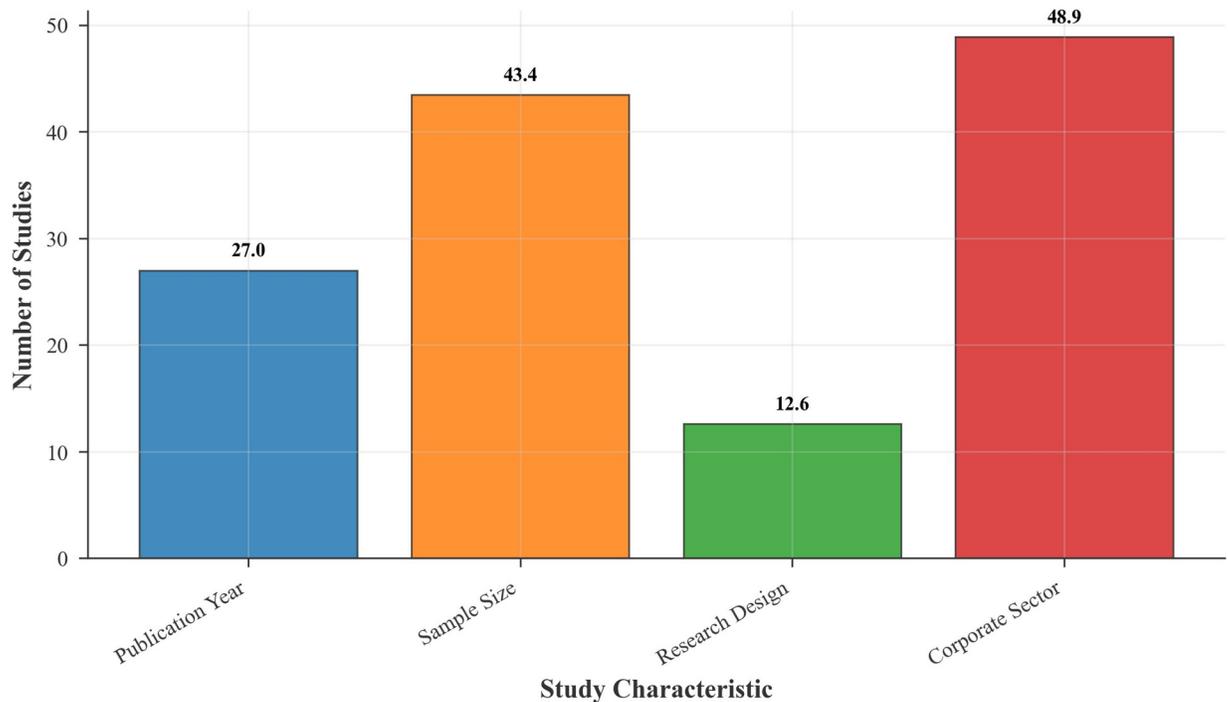
Figure 2: This figure illustrates the distribution of key methodological and contextual characteristics across the studies included in the systematic review, highlighting the evidence base for Ubuntu-based coaching programmes.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has synthesised evidence on the integration of Ubuntu principles into executive coaching for women in South African corporations from 2010 to 2024. The findings demonstrate that this approach provides a critical, culturally-grounded counterpoint to dominant individualistic leadership models, directly addressing the decolonial imperative to centre African epistemologies in organisational praxis (Moyo, 2021; Nicolaides, 2023). The analysis confirms that coaching frameworks underpinned by umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu actively foster a relational form of self-awareness, enhancing authentic leadership presence and resilience for women navigating gendered corporate environments (Da Fonseca et al., 2022; Khosa, 2022; Msweli & Ryneveldt, 2023).

The practical implications are significant. For corporations, there is a demonstrated need to move beyond ad-hoc initiatives and formally institutionalise leadership curricula co-created with African scholars and practitioners to ensure fidelity and avoid commodification (Lepuru, 2024; Malefane, 2024). Furthermore, human resource strategies must actively cultivate organisational cultures that value collaboration and collective success to support the relational leadership styles Ubuntu coaching develops (Mbokota & Reid, 2022; Moodly, 2022). This aligns with broader national imperatives for contextually relevant skills development (Mthuli et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding its promise, the review identifies several limitations in the current evidence base and avenues for future research. A primary gap is the lack of longitudinal, comparative studies measuring the long-term career and organisational impact of Ubuntu-informed coaching against conventional programmes. Research must also adopt a more intersectional lens, investigating how race, class, disability, and sexual orientation mediate these experiences (Gore, 2023; Keahey, 2023). The inherent tensions in applying a communitarian ethic within profit-driven corporate structures also warrant critical scholarly attention (Khumalo & Nwoye, 2025; Mokhutso, 2024). Future studies could productively explore synergies with related agendas, such as sustainable finance (Dave & Akongwale, 2024) or the mental well-being outcomes of relational coaching practices (Hassem, 2022).

In conclusion, decolonising leadership development through Ubuntu-informed coaching constitutes a substantive, rather than symbolic, project for South African corporations. It actively constructs an alternative that is culturally resonant and ethically robust, particularly for women leaders (Enslin et al., 2022; Fagbadebo & Ile, 2022). While challenges of rigour, scalability, and contextual negotiation persist, this integration offers a powerful pathway to cultivate leadership that can forge more humane, inclusive, and authentically African corporate landscapes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Chivige, T., & Magidi, M. (2025). Bridging the skills gap in South Africa: evaluating workforce readiness in Western Cape's business environment. Development Southern Africa https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835x.2025.2595145

Cornell, D. (2022). A Call for a Nuanced Constitutional Jurisprudence: South Africa, uBuntu, Dignity, and Reconciliation. uBuntu and the Law https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823293469-014

Da Fonseca, S., Myres, H., & Hofmeyr, K. (2022). The influence of self-awareness on effective leadership outcomes in South Africa. South African Journal of Business Management https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v53i1.2720

Dave, H., & Akongwale, S. (2024). Understanding the determinants of the development of the green bond market in South Africa. South African Journal of Business Management https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v55i1.4065

Enslin, C., Wolfswinkel, M., & Terblanche-Smit, M. (2022). Responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building: Guidelines for leaders in Africa. South African Journal of Business Management https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v53i1.3427

Eze, I.F., & Lose, T. (2025). An examination of the efficacy of business incubators: a case of South African incubators. The Business and Management Review https://doi.org/10.24052/bmr/v15nu03/art-11

Fagbadebo, O., & Ile, I. (2022). Deepening Leadership Accountability in South Africa. Advances in African Economic, Social and Political Development https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16313-5_11

Gore, O.T. (2023). Disability and inclusion in South African higher education. Ubuntu Philosophy and Disabilities in Sub-Saharan Africa https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003343684-3

Hassem, T. (2022). Evaluating the efficacy of an online depression screening tool in South Africa: A pilot study. South African Journal of Psychiatry https://doi.org/10.4102/sajpsychiatry.v28i0.1687

Kang, K., & Kim, T. (2024). 5 - Institutionalizing Gender-Based Violence Within African Democracies. Africa Development https://doi.org/10.57054/ad.v49i1.5617

Keahey, J. (2023). A Comparative History of Latvia and South Africa. Decolonizing Development https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781529224368.003.0002

Khosa, D. (2022). Leadership development framework for women in policing in South Africa: Overcoming leadership barriers. International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147- 4478) https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i7.2018

Khumalo, D.T., & Nwoye, P.A. (2025). Decolonizing Counselling Psychology: An Ubuntu-Centred Framework for STEM Education and Economic Development in South Africa. International Journal of Social Science Research and Review https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v8i9.2927

Lepuru, M. (2024). South African Women and the Liberation Struggle: Towards Three Traditions of Womanism in "South Africa". African Journal of Gender, Society and Development (formerly

Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa) https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3622/2024/v13n1a5

MUZATA, T., & MAROZVA, G. (2022). Executive Compensation Schemes: Accelerants of Agency and Corporate Governance Problems in South Africa. The African Journal of Governance and Development (AJGD) https://doi.org/10.36369/2616-9045/2022/v11si2a7

Malefane, M.R. (2024). Prospects and challenges of achieving structural transformation in Africa through the African Continental Free Trade Area. International Journal of Business & Economic Development https://doi.org/10.24052/ijbed/v012n01/art-03

Mbokota, G., & Reid, A. (2022). The role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness in a business school leadership development programme. South African Journal of Business Management https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v53i1.3105

Mokgoro, Y. (2022). uBuntu and the Law in South Africa. uBuntu and the Law https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823293469-013

Mokhutso, J. (2024). Ubuntu, Inequality and Poverty in South Africa. The Palgrave Handbook of Ubuntu, Inequality and Sustainable Development https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69573-5_34

Moodly, A.L. (2022). Leadership In Post-Democratic South Africa - Building Support Towards The Advancement Of Women. WLEConference Proceedings 2022 https://doi.org/10.52987/wlec.2022.003

Moyo, O.N. (2021). Changing the Stories We Tell Ourselves: Diverse Realities and Perspectives on Ubuntu in Eastern Cape, South Africa. Africanity and Ubuntu as Decolonizing Discourse https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59785-6_3

Msweli, P., & Ryneveldt, D.L. (2023). A Framework for Implementing a Twin Peak Financial Regulatory Model: Institutional Logics Theoretical Perspective. Ovidius University Annals. Economic Sciences Series https://doi.org/10.61801/ouaess.2023.1.21

Mthuli, S.A., Singh, N., & Reddy, P.S. (2023). Political Leadership and <i>Ubuntu</i> for Public Sector Performance in South Africa. African Leadership: Powerful Paradigms for the 21st Century https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80117-045-120231004

Nhlumayo, B.S., & Nkosi, N. (2025). Leadership under pressure: Investigating the challenges faced by women departmental heads in South African schools. International Journal of Educational Management & Development Studies https://doi.org/10.53378/ijemds.353291

Nicolaides, A. (2023). Considering the philosophy of Ubuntu in South African healthcare ethical practices. The Journal of Medical Laboratory Science and Technology of South Africa https://doi.org/10.36303/jmlstsa.133

Pharaoh, C. (2025). COMMUNICATION: THE "MULTIPLIER COMPETENCY" FOR EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences (ISSN 2454-5899) https://doi.org/10.20319/icssh.2025.528529

Rena, R., & Mbukanma, I. (2023). Evaluating the Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Socioeconomic Status of South African Women. IKENGA International Journal of Institute of African Studies https://doi.org/10.53836/ijia/2023/24/1/005

Vhangani Mabada, S. (2024). Decolonizing Public Relations Education in South Africa. Marketing Communication in African Languages https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003517382-24