

Strengthening Leadership Capacity in Research Administration: A Personality-Informed Case Study from a South African Higher Education Institution

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Abstract:

At higher education institutions, research administration has become a strategic function. It has been found to contribute to research productivity and impact, institutional sustainability, compliance, postgraduate development and funding competitiveness. In the context of African universities, historical inequities, resource constraints and capacity gaps remain a challenge. Aligned to the increased demand for research excellence, strengthening the leadership capacity of research administrators becomes critical. Existing research administration scholarship tends to highlight the importance of institutional policies, research management infrastructure and capacity building initiatives. However, there has been less focus on interpersonal and behavioural dimensions of leadership within research administration teams. This article presents a personality-informed institutional case study conducted within the research administration environment of a South African higher education institution. The study used the Insights Discovery model, grounded in Jungian personality theory, to profile forty research administration staff members across four personality colour energies, namely Green, Blue, Red and Yellow. A mixed-methods case study design was adopted, combining the descriptive personality profile with qualitative analysis of participants' reflections on the colour profile. The findings revealed Green and Blue traits as being dominant, which indicated a team culture strongly oriented toward collaboration, relational support, empathy, quality assurance, process rigour, and analytical decision-making. Six cross-cutting themes emerged: self-awareness in leadership roles, communication preferences, team contribution and value, leadership development needs, decision-making approaches, and adaptability and flexibility. The findings suggest that personality-informed leadership development may offer a useful approach to strengthening research administration capacity. The study contributes to research administration scholarship by extending existing work on research productivity, research units, and institutional research cultures toward the internal leadership capabilities of research administration teams. The findings have implications for staff development, succession planning, team composition, communication strategy, and the professionalisation of research administration in African higher education institutions.

Keywords: higher education, Insights Discovery, leadership development, personality-informed leadership, research administration, research management.

Introduction

Over the past decade, research management and administration in higher education have moved from largely transactional support to a strategic profession that contributes directly to institutional research performance, sustainability, postgraduate development, innovation, and societal impact. Universities are no longer evaluated solely on their teaching missions but increasingly on their ability to generate new knowledge, secure external funding, strengthen international visibility, and demonstrate measurable impact across social, economic, and policy domains (Kerridge, 2021). Consequently, research administration has evolved beyond traditional administrative support functions and now occupies an important position within institutional research ecosystems. As the higher education landscape continues to change, the accompanying demands include accountability, compliance, research performance, and international competitiveness (Bonander et al., 2016). Within African higher education, these challenges are compounded by historical inequities, resource constraints, uneven research infrastructure, funding limitations, and varying levels of research capacity across institutions (Abrahams et al., 2009; Langa & Mouton, 2019; Mouton, 2008). Against this background, universities across the continent continue to pursue strategies to strengthen research cultures, postgraduate outputs and research impact.

Research administration has therefore emerged as a critical enabling role within institutional environments and is increasingly recognised as a professional field requiring specialised knowledge, leadership capabilities and strategic expertise. Internationally, organisations such as the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA) and, in Africa, SARIMA have contributed to the professionalisation of research administration through competency frameworks, certification pathways and leadership development initiatives (Kerridge et al., 2023). Research administrators operate as interdisciplinary professionals who collaborate with researchers, institutional leaders, funders, policymakers and other stakeholders in rapidly changing environments; according to White-Jones (2022), their training is essential, and junior research management administrators need support to take up the collaborative role.

Within African higher education institutions, the strategic importance of research administration is particularly evident. Frantz et al. (2022) demonstrated that research productivity is shaped by institutional research culture, leadership commitment, publication support mechanisms, research visibility strategies, research management infrastructure, and capacity-building initiatives. Similarly, De Jongh et al. (2023) found that research units play important roles in facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration, strengthening postgraduate development, supporting succession planning, and creating enabling environments for research engagement. While

considerable attention has been directed toward institutional systems and structures, comparatively little attention has been given to the leadership development needs of research administration staff themselves.

Various interventions are adopted to address the identified skills gap, but they tend to be generic approaches that do not necessarily recognise behavioural differences and individual strengths within teams. This gap is important because research administrators operate in environments that depend on relational skills. Their effectiveness often depends not on formal authority but on their ability to influence, coordinate, communicate, negotiate, and build trust across diverse stakeholder groups. Such responsibilities require leadership capabilities that extend beyond technical expertise and include self-awareness, emotional intelligence, adaptability, communication competence, collaborative problem-solving and the ability to navigate complex environments (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013; Northouse, 2021).

One approach receiving attention within organisational leadership development is personality-informed leadership learning. Personality frameworks are used to enhance self-awareness, improve communication, strengthen teamwork and support leadership development (Judge et al., 2002). Although personality-informed approaches have been widely used in organisational settings, relatively little work has applied them to research administration environments.

The current study addresses this gap through an institutional case study conducted within the research administration environment of a South African university. Using the Insights Discovery model, grounded in Jung's theory of psychological types (Jung, 1921), the study explores personality profile distributions among research administration staff and examines how personality-informed reflection contributes to leadership development, communication and decision making. By focusing on the human dimensions of research administration, the study extends existing scholarship beyond institutional systems and structures toward a deeper understanding of the leadership capabilities required to support effective and sustainable research ecosystems.

Literature review

Research administration as a strategic institutional function

Research administration has undergone significant transformation over the past several decades. Traditionally viewed as an administrative support function concerned primarily with grant management and reporting, research administration now occupies a strategic position within universities (Derrick & Nickson, 2014). Contemporary research administrators support multiple institutional functions, including grant development, ethics oversight, postgraduate support, innovation management, research impact assessment, internationalisation initiatives, and strategic research planning.

Within African higher education institutions, this strategic role is particularly important because universities continue to operate within contexts shaped by historical inequalities, funding constraints, and uneven research development (Abrahams et al., 2009; Mouton, 2008). Leadership within African higher education institutions must also be understood within broader transformation, decolonisation, and institutional development agendas (Badat, 2010; Cloete et al., 2015). Consequently, leadership in these environments increasingly requires relational, adaptive, and contextually responsive approaches. Ubuntu-informed leadership perspectives further emphasise relational accountability, interconnectedness, empathy, and collective responsibility, which align strongly with the collaborative dimensions of research administration work (Letseka, 2012; Mbigi, 2005). Personality-informed leadership development may be particularly relevant within research administration environments because these contexts require continuous interaction across diverse institutional stakeholders, competing priorities, policy frameworks, and high-pressure organisational systems. Integrating personality-informed approaches with leadership development may therefore strengthen institutional functioning by improving relational coordination, team cohesion, communication effectiveness, and strategic responsiveness (Antonakis & Day, 2017; Goleman, 1998; Northouse, 2021; Webber, 2018).

Research structures, capacity building, and succession development

Research administration is closely associated with the development of institutional research structures designed to facilitate collaboration, capacity development, and research sustainability. De Jongh et al. (2023) found that research units contribute substantially toward developing collaborative research cultures and strengthening postgraduate development through mentorship, workshops, seminars, supervision, and research engagement opportunities. Their findings identified succession development and capacity-building as important outcomes of research structures. Capacity-building therefore extends beyond academic staff and postgraduate students and includes research administrators who contribute significantly toward institutional research performance.

Leadership in research administration contexts

Leadership within research administration environments differs from traditional academic leadership because research administrators often influence processes and outcomes without direct formal authority. Transformational leadership emphasises vision, motivation, and intellectual stimulation and has been associated with organisational effectiveness and innovation (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978). Servant leadership focuses on supporting others and facilitating growth and development (Eva et al., 2019).

Distributed leadership perspectives suggest that leadership emerges through interactions among multiple individuals within organisational systems rather than residing solely in formal positions (Bolden, 2011). Because research administration work involves collaboration across multiple stakeholders, leadership within these environments frequently requires a combination of transformational, servant, and distributed leadership approaches.

Personality-informed leadership development

Personality research has consistently demonstrated relationships between personality traits and leadership effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002). Personality influences how individuals communicate, process information, make decisions, manage relationships, and respond to organisational challenges. Jung (1921) proposed that individuals differ in their preferred ways of perceiving and interacting with the world. Building upon Jung's work, the Insights Discovery model organises behavioural preferences into four colour energies representing distinct personality tendencies. Blue personalities are typically analytical, systematic, and detail oriented. Red personalities are often decisive, action-oriented, and results-focused. Green personalities tend to value collaboration, empathy, and relationship-building, while Yellow personalities often demonstrate enthusiasm, creativity, and optimism (Insights Group, 2023).

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the Insights Discovery model is a commercially developed organisational tool and has not been subject to the same level of independent psychometric scrutiny as more established personality instruments such as the Big Five Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. While practitioners have reported its utility in improving self-awareness and team communication in applied organisational settings (Rees & Porter, 2015; Webber, 2018), peer-reviewed validation studies examining its reliability and construct validity remain limited. The model should therefore be understood as a practical developmental framework rather than a diagnostic psychological classification system. In this study, Insights Discovery was selected for its accessibility, its established use within higher education staff development contexts, and its capacity to generate structured reflection, not as a substitute for clinical psychological assessment.

Personality-informed development interventions have demonstrated value in improving self-awareness, communication effectiveness, team functioning, and leadership development (Antonakis & Day, 2017; Judge et al., 2002). The current study extends existing research administration scholarship by integrating institutional research management literature with personality-informed leadership development, thereby contributing a practical framework for strengthening leadership capacity within higher education research administration environments.

Methodology

Study design

This study adopted an embedded mixed-methods case study design (Yin, 2018), in which quantitative personality profile data were integrated with qualitative reflective data to develop a comprehensive understanding of leadership capacity within a single research administration environment. The study was informed by a pragmatic research paradigm, recognising that leadership development within research administration is a complex organisational phenomenon that benefits from the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), pragmatism emphasises the value of selecting methods that best address the research question.

Research setting

The study was conducted within the research administration environment of a South African higher education institution with a historical commitment to transformation, social justice, research development, and institutional capacity-building. The environment included staff involved in central and faculty-facing research support functions, including research development, grants administration, postgraduate support, ethics coordination, innovation support, research reporting, and broader research office operations. In this university there is a central research office and decentralisation of research activities to the different faculties.

Participants

The participants were forty purposively selected research administration staff members employed within the institution's research administration environment. The group included staff working across different research support functions at different levels of responsibility and experience. This diversity was important because research administrators often exercise leadership informally through coordination, communication, problem-solving, stakeholder support, and implementation of institutional processes. Participation formed part of a broader staff development and leadership capacity-building initiative, guided by ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and respectful engagement.

Data collection

Data were collected through two primary sources. First, participants completed the Insights Discovery online personality profile assessment, which generated individual reports indicating participants' dominant and supporting colour energies across the Blue, Red, Green, and Yellow dimensions, including descriptions of preferred communication styles, strengths, possible blind spots, decision-making tendencies, team contributions, and development areas.

Second, facilitated reflection sessions generated the primary qualitative data. Participants responded verbally and in writing to structured prompts relating to their leadership behaviours, communication preferences, team contributions, and development needs. All participant quotations presented in the Results section were drawn directly from these reflection sessions and represent participants' own expressed perspectives, not text generated by the Insights Discovery tool. The use of both profile data and facilitated reflections enabled interpretation of how personality preferences manifested in daily research administration work, including communication with colleagues, interactions with academics, responses to deadlines, approaches to conflict, and adaptation to institutional change.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed descriptively. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the distribution of dominant personality colour profiles across the participant group and to provide contextual information regarding the collective behavioural profile of the team. The qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis. Codes developed inductively from participant reflection data and were then grouped into preliminary categories before being refined into broader themes. Six themes were identified: self-awareness in leadership roles, communication preferences, team contribution and value, leadership development needs, decision-making approaches, and adaptability and flexibility.

Integration occurred through a process of complementarity, whereby the quantitative findings informed the interpretation of the qualitative data without seeking statistical relationships between personality profiles and participant responses. Rather than treating the personality profiles as explanatory variables, they served as developmental reference points through which participants interpreted and reflected upon their professional experiences.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles governing research with human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee, and written informed consent was obtained. Individual personality profiles were not reported in a way that could identify participants, and findings were presented at aggregate and thematic levels. Personality profiles were treated as developmental tools rather than fixed labels or measures of competence. The researchers adopted reflexive analytical practices throughout the study to critically consider how prior experiences, institutional familiarity, and leadership perspectives may have

influenced the interpretation of participant reflections and thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness and rigour

Several strategies were used to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Methodological triangulation combined quantitative profile distribution data with qualitative reflection data to allow for deeper interpretation of leadership behaviours and development needs. The facilitated reflection process supported interpretive validity because participants had opportunities to engage with and make sense of their own profiles. Thematic analysis was conducted carefully to identify patterns across participants rather than relying only on isolated profile descriptions. Findings were interpreted in relation to existing research administration literature, and reflexive practices were maintained throughout (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

The results are presented in two sections. First, descriptive quantitative findings illustrate the distribution of personality colour profiles across the research administration team. Second, qualitative findings from facilitated reflection sessions are presented through six themes that emerged from the analysis.

Participant characteristics and personality profile distribution

Forty research administration staff members participated in the study, representing functions including research development, grants administration, ethics management, postgraduate support, innovation activities, and broader research office operations. The sample comprised 30 females (75%) and 10 males (25%), reflecting the gender profile commonly observed within research administration environments. Analysis of the Insights profiles demonstrated that Green energy was the dominant behavioural orientation (50%, $n=20$), followed by Blue (27.5%, $n=11$), Yellow (12.5%, $n=5$) and Red (10%, $n=4$), as shown in Table 1. These distributions indicate the collective behavioural tendencies within the team. The predominance of Green and Blue profiles suggests a team characterised by collaboration, relationship building, procedural rigour, analytical thinking and service orientation, while the relatively small proportion of Red and Yellow profiles indicates fewer naturally directive, highly assertive behavioural preferences. These collective tendencies provided an important context for interpreting participants' reflections on leadership, communication, decision-making and team functioning.

Table 1: Distribution of Dominant Personality Colour Profiles

Personality colour	Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Green	Supportive, collaborative, empathetic	20	50.0
Blue	Analytical, structured, process-oriented	11	27.5
Yellow	Enthusiastic, expressive, optimistic	5	12.5
Red	Directive, decisive, results-focused	4	10.0
Total		40	100.0

Source: Authors' own data; characteristics adapted from the Insights Discovery framework (Insights Group, 2023).

Qualitative findings

The qualitative analysis generated six interconnected themes that illustrate how personality awareness influenced participants' understanding of leadership and team functioning within the research administration environment. All quotations presented below were drawn from participant responses during facilitated reflection sessions conducted after participants received their personality profiles.

Theme 1: Self-awareness enhanced leadership reflection rather than personality labelling

The strongest finding emerging from the reflection sessions was the increased awareness that resulted from engaging with the profiles. Participants described the profiling process as an opportunity to reflect critically on their leadership behaviours, interpersonal interactions and areas for growth, and became more aware of how their behavioural preferences influenced how they supported colleagues, managed conflict, made decisions and responded to organisational demands. Rather than viewing personality profiles as fixed characteristics, participants frequently interpreted them as developmental starting points. One Green-oriented participant reflected:

"I realise that I naturally focus on ensuring that everyone is comfortable and supported, but I sometimes avoid difficult conversations because I don't want to upset relationships."

Similarly, a Blue-oriented participant commented:

"I want to ensure that every detail is accurate before moving forward, but I sometimes realise that waiting for perfect information slows progress."

Across personality groups, participants increasingly recognised both strengths and potential blind spots. Green-oriented participants identified empathy and relationship building while acknowledging challenges with assertiveness. Blue participants recognised analytical thinking but reflected on perfectionism and delayed decision-making. Yellow participants valued creativity and enthusiasm but recognised difficulty maintaining structure, whereas Red participants acknowledged decisiveness while recognising that direct communication could be interpreted as overly forceful. These findings suggest that personality-informed reflection can promote leadership self-awareness by helping participants evaluate how their preferred behaviours influenced their effectiveness.

Theme 2: Communication differences influence collaboration more than conflict

Participants consistently described communication as one of the areas most influenced by the personality profiles. Rather than simply recognising different communication preferences, participants reported a shift in how they interpreted workplace interactions: behavioural differences that had previously been viewed as interpersonal conflict were understood as differences in communication styles. Blue-oriented participants valued structured communication with clear expectations and detailed information. Green participants preferred supportive, relational interactions characterised by trust and respect. Yellow participants preferred interactive, energetic, face-to-face engagement, whereas Red participants preferred concise, direct communication focused on efficiency and outcomes. Several participants described how this awareness altered their perceptions of colleagues.

“Understanding that not everyone communicates in the same way helped me realise that some tensions were actually style differences rather than personal issues.”

Another participant reflected:

“I now realise why some people respond differently in meetings and I have to try and communicate more clearly.”

Participants increasingly recognised that effective communication required adapting their approach according to the needs of others rather than relying solely on their preferred style. Personality awareness thus improved interpersonal understanding by reframing communication differences as behavioural diversity rather than conflict, an important leadership capability where collaboration across stakeholder groups is central to daily work.

Theme 3: Behavioural diversity strengthened collective team capability

Participants viewed the diversity of personality profiles as contributing positively to overall team functioning. Rather than perceiving certain profiles as more effective than others, participants described complementary

contributions that enhanced collective performance. Blue-oriented participants associated their contributions with procedural rigour, analytical thinking, compliance and quality assurance. Green participants highlighted their ability to build relationships and create collaborative working environments. Yellow participants described enthusiasm, creativity, and the ability to energise teams, whereas Red participants identified accountability, decisiveness and outcome focus as key strengths. As one participant explained:

"I may not always be the loudest person in the room, but I know that I contribute by making sure things are accurate and done properly. People rely on me because they know I will make sure nothing is missed."

Another reflected:

"I think my contribution is creating a space where people feel supported. I naturally want everyone to feel included and heard because when people feel valued, they work better together."

Rather than emphasising individual strengths in isolation, participants increasingly recognised that effective research administration depended on integrating complementary behavioural approaches. Personality diversity may therefore strengthen leadership capacity within research administration teams by enabling different individuals to contribute distinct but complementary capabilities toward shared organisational goals.

Theme 4: Leadership development was viewed as behavioural growth rather than skills acquisition

Participants identified leadership development needs that extended beyond technical competence. Reflection on personality preferences enabled participants to recognise behavioural capabilities requiring deliberate development, particularly in relation to conflict management, strategic communication, assertiveness, confidence-building, adaptability, and decision-making. Green-oriented participants frequently highlighted challenges related to difficult conversations and setting boundaries, whereas Blue participants expressed a need to improve flexibility and responsiveness in rapidly changing situations. Yellow participants reflected on strengthening planning and prioritisation, while Red participants recognised the importance of strengthening collaborative engagement and listening skills. One participant reflected:

"I realise that I avoid conflict because I want people to feel comfortable, but sometimes leadership means having difficult conversations even when it feels uncomfortable."

Another commented:

"I sometimes overanalyse situations because I want everything to be right before moving forward. I think I need to become more

comfortable making decisions when I do not have all the information.”

Participants viewed these needs as opportunities for growth rather than deficiencies, indicating that personality-informed development may help research administrators identify behavioural competencies to develop while building on existing strengths.

Theme 5: Decision-making reflected complementary rather than competing approaches

Decision-making emerged as an area in which behavioural differences became visible within the team. Participants described differing approaches to gathering information, evaluating options and consulting others. Blue-oriented participants frequently adopted systematic and evidence-based approaches, whereas Green participants prioritised collaboration and consensus-building. Yellow participants often relied on intuition and interpersonal understanding, whereas Red participants demonstrated direct and outcome-focused approaches. Importantly, participants did not regard these approaches as mutually exclusive; they recognised that different organisational situations required different decision-making styles. One participant observed:

“I need time to gather information before I make a decision because I want to feel confident that I have considered all the possible implications.”

In contrast, another reflected:

“Sometimes I want us to move faster. I feel that spending too much time discussing options can delay progress.”

These findings suggest that effective leadership within research administration requires behavioural flexibility rather than reliance on a single preferred decision-making style, balancing analytical rigour, collaboration, and timely action according to organisational demands.

Theme 6: Personality awareness improved understanding of responses to organisational change

Participants described adaptability and flexibility as an important leadership capability within an environment characterised by changing institutional priorities, funding requirements, and organisational restructuring. Although participants differed in their response to change, personality awareness appeared to improve understanding of these differences. Green and Blue participants generally preferred gradual, structured, and consultative approaches to organisational change, whereas Yellow participants displayed greater enthusiasm for new ideas and evolving situations. Red participants tended to adapt more readily when change was aligned with clear objectives and strategic priorities. One participant reflected:

“I prefer knowing what is happening and understanding the process before I feel comfortable with change. When things change too quickly without explanation, I feel uncertain about how to move forward.”

Another noted:

“Change is easier for me when people are brought along in the process. I think people need time to understand why things are changing and how it will affect them.”

Rather than interpreting reluctance as resistance, participants viewed responses to change as reflecting different behavioural preferences and recognised that colleagues required different forms of communication and support during transitions. Personality-informed development may therefore strengthen organisational adaptability during periods of institutional change. Table 2 summarises the six themes and their leadership implications. Collectively, the findings suggest that personality-informed reflection may strengthen leadership capacity within research administration environments by promoting adaptive communication, collaborative team functioning, reflective leadership practice, and greater responsiveness to organisational change.

Table 2: Summary of themes and leadership implications

Theme	Illustrative evidence	Analytical interpretation	Leadership implication
Self-awareness	Participants recognised strengths and blind spots	Reflection promoted behavioural insight	Supports adaptive leadership development
Communication	Different communication styles created misunderstandings	Awareness reframed conflict as a behavioural difference	Improves stakeholder engagement
Team contribution	Participants valued complementary strengths	Diversity enhanced collective capability	Supports balanced team design
Leadership development	Participants identified growth areas	Self-awareness facilitated developmental planning	Informs leadership programmes

Decision-making	Different approaches affected speed and consensus	Behavioural flexibility is required	Supports situational leadership
Adaptability	Responses to change varied	Tailored change management may improve transitions	Enhances organisational resilience

Source: Authors' own analysis of participant reflection data.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that leadership capacity within research administration extends beyond technical competence and organisational structures. While previous studies have emphasised research infrastructure, institutional policies, research cultures, and support systems (Frantz et al., 2022; Kerridge & Scott, 2018), the current findings suggest that interpersonal dynamics and behavioural characteristics are equally important dimensions of effective research administration. The principal value of personality-informed development lies not in categorising individuals according to behavioural preferences, but in facilitating reflective leadership practice. Across the six themes, participants demonstrated increased self-awareness, appreciation of behavioural diversity, more adaptive communication, and clearer understanding of their leadership strengths and developmental needs. The most significant finding is that personality-informed development enhanced participants' self-awareness rather than simply increasing awareness of personality types. Rather than accepting personality profiles as fixed descriptions, participants critically evaluated how their tendencies supported or constrained their effectiveness. This aligns with leadership literature that identifies self-awareness as a foundational capability underpinning effective leadership (Goleman et al., 2013; Northouse, 2021). Improved self-awareness enables research administrators to recognise the impact of their behaviour on others, regulate their responses and adapt their leadership practices to situational demands. Personality-informed reflection thus contributes to leadership development not because it predicts leadership potential but because it encourages reflection on leadership practice.

The study further demonstrated that personality awareness influenced participants' understanding of communication within the team. Greater awareness of behavioural differences enabled participants to reinterpret previous interpersonal tensions as differences in communication preferences rather than personal conflict. These findings support research demonstrating that leadership effectiveness depends not only on communication competence but also on communication adaptability – the ability to modify communication

behaviours according to the needs of different individuals and organisational contexts (Goleman et al., 2013; Solaja et al., 2016). Within research administration environments, where staff routinely engage with academics, institutional leaders, postgraduate students, funders and external partners, the ability to communicate flexibly across diverse stakeholder groups represents an important leadership capability.

A notable finding was participants' recognition that different behavioural preferences contributed complementary strengths to overall team functioning, representing a shift from viewing personality as an individual characteristic towards understanding behavioural diversity as a strategic organisational resource. Research on team effectiveness has consistently demonstrated that cognitively and behaviourally diverse teams are often better equipped to address complex organisational challenges because they draw upon complementary perspectives and capabilities (Belbin, 2010; Judge et al., 2002). Effective research administration appears to depend less on identifying an ideal leadership profile than on creating environments in which diverse behavioural strengths are recognised, valued, and intentionally integrated.

The predominance of collaborative and relationship-oriented behavioural preferences observed in this study also resonates with Ubuntu-informed understandings of leadership that emphasise interconnectedness, mutual responsibility, empathy, and collective success (Letseka, 2012; Mbigi, 2005). These characteristics may reflect broader cultural values that shape professional practice within African higher education institutions. Leadership development programmes should therefore affirm relational strengths while supporting the development of complementary capabilities such as assertiveness, strategic influence, and adaptive decision-making.

The findings also extend previous studies. Frantz et al. (2022) highlighted institutional research culture and infrastructure as important drivers of research productivity; the current study demonstrates that the individuals operating within these structures also require development and support. Similarly, De Jongh et al. (2023) identified succession development and collaborative research cultures as important functions of research structures. Personality-informed development should therefore be viewed as a complementary strategy for strengthening research administration ecosystems. Research administrators should not be viewed merely as operational support personnel but as institutional leadership actors who shape the effectiveness, sustainability, and strategic direction of university research ecosystems, with leadership reflecting relational influence, institutional coordination, and strategic facilitation (Derrick & Nickson, 2014; Webber, 2018).

Implications for practice

This study contributes to research administration scholarship in several ways. First, it extends existing literature beyond institutional systems, professional competencies, and organisational structures to examine the behavioural dimensions of leadership within research administration. Second, it demonstrates that personality-informed development is valuable not because it classifies individuals according to behavioural types but because it promotes reflective leadership practice. Third, it introduces behavioural diversity as a strategic resource that may strengthen leadership capacity, communication, and organisational adaptability within research administration teams. Finally, by locating the study within an African higher education context, it contributes to the growing body of research examining research administration from perspectives beyond North American and European institutional settings.

Taken together, these findings suggest that leadership within research administration should be conceptualised as an adaptive and relational capability that integrates technical expertise with self-awareness, communication adaptability, appreciation of behavioural diversity, and reflective professional practice. Investment in these human dimensions of leadership may be as important for strengthening institutional research ecosystems as investment in policies, infrastructure, and research support systems.

Proposed personality-informed leadership development framework

The findings support the development of a personality-informed leadership development framework for research administration environments comprising five interrelated dimensions: (1) personality-informed onboarding and self-awareness development; (2) communication adaptability and conflict management training; (3) cross-functional mentoring and collaborative leadership development; (4) succession planning and strategic leadership preparation with attention to behavioural diversity and equity; and (5) reflective coaching and continuous professional development. Integrating these dimensions may strengthen interpersonal effectiveness, team cohesion, institutional adaptability, and leadership sustainability. Personality-informed approaches should be viewed not as isolated development interventions but as part of broader institutional capacity-strengthening strategies within higher education research ecosystems.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single institutional context, and findings therefore cannot be statistically generalised across all higher education institutions. The relatively small sample size may also limit broader applicability. The Insights Discovery model

is a developmental and organisational tool rather than a diagnostic psychological instrument; findings should be interpreted as behavioural insights rather than definitive psychological classifications. The qualitative data emerged from facilitated reflections rather than formal research interviews, which may have influenced the depth of responses. The observation regarding gendered profile distribution, while noteworthy, cannot be interpreted statistically given the sample size and should be explored in future research. Future studies should include multiple institutions, larger and more diverse samples, and longitudinal designs examining the impact of personality-informed interventions over time.

Conclusion

Research administration has increasingly become central to the sustainability and effectiveness of higher education research systems. While institutional policies, infrastructure, and support mechanisms remain essential, the current study demonstrates that interpersonal leadership dynamics and behavioural characteristics also contribute substantially toward research administration effectiveness.

The predominance of Green and Blue profiles reflected strengths in collaboration, support, analytical thinking, and procedural rigour, while identifying opportunities to strengthen assertive leadership, adaptability, and strategic influence. The Ubuntu-informed relational values evident in the predominant profile orientations represent an important cultural resource for leadership development, one that should be affirmed and deliberately extended rather than replaced. The study contributes to research administration scholarship by extending existing literature beyond institutional systems and structures toward understanding the human dimensions of research administration environments.

As African universities continue to strengthen research ecosystems within increasingly complex and competitive global environments, investing in the human and relational dimensions of research administration leadership may become as important as investing in infrastructure, policy, and research systems themselves. Personality-informed leadership development offers one possible pathway toward strengthening adaptive, collaborative, and sustainable research administration environments capable of supporting future-ready higher education institutions across the African continent.

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