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Harmonisation outcomes after insourcing services in South African higher education institutions

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Orientation: The study was conducted in two higher education institutions that underwent insourcing and harmonisation of conditions of employment for support services.

Research purpose: This study aims to determine how harmonisation shapes outcomes among support service labour in selected higher education institutions and to develop a management framework to harmonise conditions of employment following insourcing.

Motivation for the study: The study capitalises on organisational complexities in higher education institutions that experienced insourcing of support services employees to address concerns assumed to be premised on historical exclusionary and exploitative employment practices. The study documents the experience and perceptions of institutional stakeholders in creating new knowledge on harmonisation following insourcing.

Research approach/design and method: Employing a qualitative approach, 16 interviews were conducted with selected multi-level management and personnel directly involved in a harmonisation.

Main findings: The study found tangible and intangible aspects, processes and other psychological perspectives on implementing harmonisation across employment levels. Furthermore, it was found that an efficient and effective harmonisation framework is required. Effective harmonisation for inclusion was viewed as being compromised by factors such as government intervention, and a lack of policy, framework and legislation to guide the process.

Practical/managerial implications: Practical recommendations are provided for implementing harmonisation strategies following insourcing across employment levels in South African higher education institutions.

Contribution/value-add: The study contributes to novel theory on harmonisation after insourcing and provides a management framework for harmonisation of conditions of employment.

Keywords: insourcing; support staff; inclusion; harmonisation dynamics; higher education.

Introduction

Transformation and equality in the workplaces in post-apartheid South Africa are regarded as central to socioeconomic development initiatives in employment relations to ensure fair and equitable conditions of employment that reflect the desired realities of all in post-apartheid workplaces (Pouris & Ingles-Lotz, 2014). A central feature in terms of employment relations has been the challenge of constantly ensuring sound, inclusive and objective conditions of employment (Fløvik et al., 2019; Leask & Ruggunan, 2021).

In the drive for transformation in higher education institutions in sub-Saharan countries, which have been regarded historically as adopting a businesslike model in terms of employment practices for support service employees, these have been instrumental in the promotion of prosperity and full employment of the population (Lebakeng, 2018; Luckett & Mzobe, 2016). This model has been criticised as perpetuating historically institutionalised structural imbalances in employment circles. The study takes place in a turbulent economic environment with South Africa having experienced changes that emanated from a wave of strike-related action characterised by violence. Students, in solidarity with outsourced workers at universities nationwide, engaged in further strike action in the #Outsourcing-MustFall campaign encouraging universities to insource thousands of support workers who provided security and cleaning

services (Cottle, 2017; Luckett & Mzobe, 2016). Since then, insourcing as a practice has gained traction in contemporary sourcing arrangements in service sectors such as the higher education sector in South Africa (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Satgar, 2016). The increase in its prominence has been attributed to the creation of an equitable workplace that reflects the imagined realities of minority individuals and society. Considering the violent and aggressive nature of these strikes, the creation of frameworks for harmonisation becomes significant in preparing better handling of similar organisational situations that involve the insourcing of previously outsourced employees. Of note is that, despite insourcing, the insourced employees are likely to have heterogeneous conditions of employment compared to employees directly employed by institutions. The experience and perceptions of institutional senior management at a strategic middle-management level and division heads at an operational level, coupled with the experiences of insourced employees, are important to create new knowledge about harmonisation.

The practical relevance of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for higher education institutions and Human Resource Management (HRM) is increasingly significant, in particular, building equitable and sustainable businesses and ensuring that employees realise quality jobs through enabling conditions created by sustainable economic growth (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). For example, SDGs 8 and 10 reflect the responsibility of establishments to promote employment and optimal working conditions, and the social and economic inclusion of all. Particularly, target 8.5 advocates for equal pay for work of equal value, and target 10.4 aims to realise greater equality through fair and suitable policies on wages, which are central in the global quest to improve conditions of employment (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2016; Nilsson et al., 2016; United Nations General Assembly, 2015). This has resulted in new forms of HRM such as the common-good HRM (Aust et al., 2020), which is multi-stakeholder in orientation and considers both the immediate and future impacts of HR strategies on internal and external stakeholders (Aust et al., 2020). As such, these SDGs have increasingly emerged as significant benchmarks for development and transformation. Research on inclusivity in the workplace has established inclusion to be associated positively with job satisfaction, employee attitudes and task effectiveness (Ahmed et al., 2022; Jansen et al., 2017; Mor Barak, 2015). This, in turn, leads to outcomes of improved employee well-being, organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviours (Adams et al., 2020; Cottrill et al., 2014; Haynie et al., 2016).

We believe that apart from the pressures faced by organisations to transform their human resource dynamics, market volatility, costs, political factors, government regulations and competition also play an equal role in influencing the insourcing decision (Lam & Khare, 2016; Sentoft et al., 2015). The study at hand capitalises on situations in higher education institutions in South Africa after they insource support service employees mainly to address stakeholder concerns assumed to be premised in historically exclusionary and exploitative employment practices in the sector. Luckett and Mzobe (2016), in their study on the role of support service employees in ending outsourcing in South Africa, argued that outsourcing labour reinforces exclusionary practices. Most researchers view insourcing, which entails the practice of providing in-house services for an activity previously outsourced to an external service provider, as a solution to the employment arrangement (Cabral et al., 2013; Okogwu, 2014). Okogwu (2014) further asserted that organisations that have implemented insourcing are often characterised by differences in pay policies and structures as well as diverse conditions of employment applicable to different categories of employees across the organisations. In addition, the differences in conditions of employment, particularly between insourced employees and institutional employees, often have been seen, unintentionally, to create an elusive classification of employees (Luckett & Mzobe, 2016). Managing employees with different conditions of employment has the potential to result in disputes and adversarial employment relations (Bayart et al., 2013). Therefore, it can be argued that where such similar disputes and adversarial employment relations arise, there is a need for harmonising the conditions of employment to mitigate the differences between insourced employees and those already employed. According to Ferdman (2017), the dimensions of diversity and group characteristics influence the approach and experience of inclusion; therefore, cultivating inclusion for diverse social groups differs owing to the nature of, among other things, the historical relations between groups. It is in such cases that organisations turn to the implementation of harmonisation as a strategy to ensure alignment and equality in organisational employment aspects. Harmonisation of conditions of employment has been regarded as relevant in helping an organisation to align inconsistently varying conditions of employment within a single establishment. The reasoning is that harmonisation, if implemented correctly, does not only make conditions of employment fair and inclusive for employees but also helps to ensure that conditions of employment are not unlawfully discriminatory. However, we concede that it is not unusual for conditions of employment to differ within and across occupation categories. Insourcing inherently and often unintendedly results in two sets of employees with heterogeneous conditions of employment, which creates a misalignment of organisational policies. To this end, we posit that harmonisation after insourcing serves as a strategy to eliminate discriminatory practices and to promote inclusiveness within categories of insourced personnel.

The problem

The debate on insourcing of support services has taken centre stage in contemporary employment relations deliberations, particularly in the South African higher education sector, as evidenced by the #Outsourcing-Must-Fall and the #End-Outsourcing movements (Booysen, 2016). These movements,

among other objectives, aimed to end outsourcing as a staffing practice for support services and advocated for inclusive and improved conditions of employment (Kgatle, 2018; Luckett & Mzobe, 2016). This saw the South African higher education sector resorting to insourcing its support services to address stakeholder concerns and to improve employment relations in the sector. Dumba (2014) revealed that organisations that have insourced after outsourcing often find themselves with a heterogeneous workforce. Although it is common for conditions of employment to be heterogeneous, these must, however, be justifiable and reasonably comparable. While the main aim for insourcing is to redress historical employment imbalances, particularly in the higher education sector in line with its transformation initiatives, this unfortunately and/or unintentionally often leads to a workforce with incomparable heterogeneous conditions of employment that do not reflect the transformative and inclusive philosophy for which it advocates. Although harmonisation of conditions of employment comes as an intervention to assist in ensuring justifiably varied conditions of employment, there is evidence showing that conditions of employment of insourced employees often remain significantly different from those of employees previously employed directly by institutions (Heffernan, 2018; Lebakeng, 2018; Luckett & Mzobe, 2016). Consistent with the views of Karasvirta and Teerikangas (2022), we believe that the comparability of conditions of employment both within and across occupational categories is an important consideration in strategic business change, yet organisations often experience difficulty in ensuring that they are fair and equitable through compliant and transparent processes. The reasoning is that harmonisation may be of value as an employment relations concept and may present the much-needed framework for managing the insourced conditions of employment of its employees and an appreciation of dynamics in the challenges and opportunities of the process, particularly in higher education and similar. Considering the above, in the study at hand, we attempt to document the experience and perceptions of institutional senior management at a strategic middle-management level and division heads at an operational level, coupled with the experiences of insourced employees in the creation of new knowledge on harmonisation following insourcing, specifically, how harmonisation creates inclusiveness after insourcing.

Research purpose

The study attempts to develop a management framework that can be used effectively and efficiently to harmonise conditions of employment of insourced employees in South African higher education institutions.

Literature review
Contextual background

Conradie (2016) argued that the contract of employment does not provide sufficient protection and regulation in the

employment relationship. In particular, the contract of employment offers little protection to employees against arbitrariness (Maharaj, 2019). To that end, Section 23 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa provides for a framework and provisions that uphold fair labour practices in the workplace. While the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act* (BCEA) aims to achieve equality in the workplace through the enforcement of basic and minimum conditions of employment, the *Employment Equity Act* (EEA) on the other hand, aims to achieve equity in the workplace through fair treatment and the establishment of equal opportunities. Of importance is Section 6(4) of the EEA, which prohibits unfair discrimination in terms and conditions of employment for employees performing work that is the same or substantially the same or of equal value. The EEA, however, considers differentiation fair and rational, if it is proportionately effected without any bias against any particular employee or group of employees based on the listed grounds. Despite attempts by legislation to ensure equal pay for work of value in the workplace, Maharaj (2019) argued that the process requires a consultative or consensus-driven approach between employers and employees in the determination of the value of work as unilateral evaluations employers further perpetuate and legitimise discrepancies in terms and conditions of employment. While it is important to ensure inclusive and comparable differences in conditions of employment, unjustified differences have an impact on both individual and organisational outcomes (Bamberger et al., 2021; Sampson, 2020; Vettori, 2015).

International instruments primarily aim to improve labour conditions globally by promoting minimum standards in employment conditions. International frameworks and employment standards are essential guiding principles in the establishment of labour social policies, legislation and practices. More importantly, these instruments and employment standards are important in the development and evaluation of conditions of employment. With specific regard to conditions of employment, these predominantly include the United Nations (UN) and ILO initiatives operationalised through their conventions and recommendations; the decent work agenda; the principle of equal pay for work of equal value; the UN Declaration of Human Rights; and the SDGs. This study is underpinned by selected UN goals from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, at the heart of which lie 17 Global Goals that make up the 2030 SDG. Broadly, these goals aim to reduce inequality, enhance education and health education and stimulate global economic growth (Nilsson et al., 2016). We frame our study in SDGs 5, 8 and 10, which are central to the efforts aimed at policies, practices and initiatives for promoting diversity, equity, decent work and economic growth and inclusion within organisations. The thesis behind this is that with the achievement of equitable, inclusive and sustainable development, employees realise quality jobs through enabling conditions created by sustainable economic growth (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Although employee conditions of employment are managed within the prescript of legislative provision in other change initiatives, little is known about the harmonisation process, its

importance, how it can best be implemented and outcomes in the context of an insourcing where no formal regulation exists.

Harmonisation of conditions of employment

Harmonisation of conditions of employment encompasses a process of changing and implementing employment conditions that are similar and justifiable for all employees (Cowling & Mailer 2013). It is seen as a deliberate effort to eliminate unjustified differences found in employment aspects, such as pay structure, working hours and benefits, both within and across common categories of employees for manual and non-manual employees. Harmonisation of conditions of employment therefore entails the implementation of a common approach or criteria to employees' conditions of employment, in most cases following a merger of different entities (Armstrong, 2017). Numerous studies show that harmonisation is influenced by various elements in the workplace including legislative provisions that may aim to foster equity in the workplace, such as equality in pay and remuneration and at the same time eliminating and prohibiting pay discrimination (see Aleksynska & Muller, 2014; Armstrong, 2017). More often than not, harmonisation of terms and conditions of employment serves as a labour relations management tool that simplifies personnel administration and helps in managing and changing misaligned employment aspects such as conditions of employment and labour policies. According to Bayart et al. (2013), harmonisation usually results in more efficient administration for the organisation, as well as improved productivity relationships between different grades of employees. Contrary to the opinion of Bayart and colleagues, Suff and Reilly (2007) were of the view that harmonisation of conditions of employment results in increased wage bills and benefit contributions such as pension and medical aid schemes.

Dynamics of harmonisation

Employee insourcing

Insourcing has relatively been given less attention in comparison with the amount of research that has been done on outsourcing (Cabral et al., 2013; Hartman et al., 2017; Stentoft et al., 2015). Insourcing broadly encompasses the decision to internalise in-house the provision of a service or function that had previously been provided by an external entity (Cabral et al., 2013). The implications are that insourcing will create a direct employer–employee relationship between employees providing a service or function and the organisation to which they are offering the service. This essentially eliminates the ambiguity of the true identity of the employer which perpetuates exploitative and discriminatory employment relations (Prassl, 2013). Many benefits for human resources can be attributed to insourcing. However, there is always conflict in ensuring fairness in employment on the one hand, and the sustainability of organisations on the other hand (Dumba, 2014). Insourcing

has been associated with positive outcomes such as improved flexibility and control (Heaton, 2004; Kumari, 2013) and access to organisational human resources benefits (Cohen & Moodley, 2012). Literature has also established insourcing to be linked to negative impacts such as increased cost (Kumari, 2013; Moloi et al., 2017), reduced HR impact and liability (Drauz, 2014), and reduced efficiency and expertise (Stentoft et al., 2015). Outcomes of insourcing have not been subjected to similar scholarly attention as outsourcing; hence, limited empirical evidence exists on the outcomes.

Participatory employment relations and inclusion

Employee participation is broadly defined as information and responsibility sharing through a formal structure (Wong et al., 2018). This involves giving employees an opportunity to participate in decision-making on what needs to be done, how it is done and by whom (Behravesh et al., 2020), which is likely to impact inclusion, employee engagement and productivity positively. Inclusion is believed to maximise the benefits of diversity (Combs et al., 2019; Ferdman, 2017), the extent to which employees perceive being part of key organisational processes and decision-making (Nishii, 2013), and a pluralistic approach to organisational factors (Mor Barak & Daya, 2014; Swan, 2016). On that note, inclusion is also perceived as a positive organisational construct that ensures equality and fairness in the workplace (Le et al., 2020). Inclusion therefore manifests in different dimensions in the workplace and is driven by various factors in the workplace. These drivers have been linked to inclusive environments or climate (Dwertmann et al., 2016; Nishii, 2013), inclusive practices (Offerman & Basford, 2014: Shore et al., 2018) and inclusive leadership values, philosophy, strategies and decisions (Adams et al., 2020; Ashikali et al., 2021). Furthermore, inclusiveness has been linked with outcomes such as high-quality relations (Adams et al., 2020), improved performance (Shore et al., 2018), high morale, intention to stay and organisational commitment (Mor Barak, 2015) and innovation (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Consequently, these outcomes allow an organisation to execute its goals and objectives effectively and efficiently. Notwithstanding these benefits of inclusion, the pertinent and critical question is how harmonisation plays a role in ensuring the inclusiveness of marginalised employees, thus the establishment of a workplace where diverse employees feel included and welcomed.

Research design
Research approach

The study made use of an interpretive phenomenological approach that entails exploring a phenomenon while preventing accidental or deliberate generalisation. The interpretive paradigm is considered in this study as it focuses on understanding reality from the subjective experiences of individual participants, acknowledging differences in individual experiences, knowledge, perspectives, interpretations and multiple social realities.

Research strategy

The study adopts a sequential, multi-method qualitative design (Morse, 2003) to allow the use of multiple instruments and procedures so that triangulation of the findings can reflect an attempt to achieve a deep understanding of the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this study, document analysis, focus groups and interviews were employed to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena under study.

Research setting

Data for the study were drawn from two higher education institutions in Gauteng province, South Africa. The study was on harmonisation after insourcing and was therefore limited to institutions that had insourced and harmonised conditions of employment for support services. Furthermore, only the views of multi-level management personnel directly involved in harmonisation, as well as the views of insourced employees, were included in the study. The views of other stakeholders and officials were deliberately excluded.

Research participants and sampling methods

The population focus for this study was employees of higher education institutions who underwent an insourcing exercise in South Africa. In total, 16 participants were purposively sampled from multi-level institutional management personnel to form 9 individuals and 2 focus groups from the remaining 7 participants. The participants were from a targeted population and an identified context involved with the insourcing and harmonisation of conditions of employment in higher education institutions. From the sample of 16 participants, most of the participants (43%) were aged between 35 and 44 years. Of the sample, 38% had 16 or more years of experience. Five participants had acquired either a master's or a higher degree with only two having qualifications less than a school leaving certificate (Matric) and 44% were employee representatives, while 19% were division heads of departments. Table 1 presents a summary of the sample participants.

Data collection methods

The data collection method for this study was semi-structured individual and focus interviews, conducted face-to-face and electronically at the behest of the participants. The semi-structured interview method, through the interview schedule, provided a means of obtaining in-depth data on phenomena such as challenges and opportunities in the harmonisation of conditions of employment (Babbie & Mouton, 2011). Examples of questions that were included in the interview schedule include: 'Which management approach would foster harmony, fairness and transparency in the harmonisation process?' and 'Describe in detail the possible specific impacts that harmonisation of conditions of employment has on institutional employment relations'.

Research procedure and ethical considerations

In the initial phase, gatekeeper's permission to conduct research was obtained from the selected higher education institutions prior to collecting data, after obtaining ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the university in the Gauteng province, South Africa. Firstly, document analysis was conducted to identify and understand the obligation that institutions have towards employees in the harmonisation process. As suggested by Adams et al. (2014), documents provide background and context, supplementary data and a means of tracking changes as well as verification of findings from other data sources. With the permission of sample institutions, relevant institutional statements, reports and communiques were selected for document analysis. Secondly, assistance was sought from Human Resources Departments of selected organisations to locate and approach appropriate insourced employee representatives, who were contacted electronically. These were contacted with the relevant information and invitation to participate voluntarily in the study through focus group discussions. These provided referrals to other representatives who could be recruited for the focus group discussions. They, in turn, were also invited to participate in the study. Eventually, two separate focus group discussions were conducted per institution. The first session was made up of four participants, and the second session comprised three participants. Focus group discussions lasted between 90 min and 120 min. Participants were fully informed of the nature of the study and of the voluntary nature of the participation in the study to ensure that participants provided informed consent. Strict ethical guidelines of confidentiality and anonymity were upheld in the study by using pseudo-names, such as PA1 and PA2 allocated to the participants during the discussions. Discussions were also audio recorded to enhance the trustworthiness of the data and the study in transcribing, analysis integration and reporting. All data and transcripts were password protected and electronically stored for research purposes only using Google cloud data storage services and backed up to enhance the confidentiality and integrity of data.

TABLE 1: Participant characteristics.

Institution	Research participant	Designation	Experience with insourcing and outsourcing
A	PA1	Senior Manager	Yes
	PA2	Middle Manager	Yes
	PA3	Middle Manager	Yes
	PA4	Division Head	Yes
	PA5	Division Head	Yes
	PA6	Employee Representative	Yes
	PA7	Employee Representative	Yes
	PA8	Employee Representative	Yes
B	PB1	Senior Manager	Yes
	PB2	Middle-Management	Yes
	PB3	Middle-Management	Yes
	PB4	Division Head	Yes
	PB5	Employee Representative	Yes
	PB6	Employee Representative	Yes
	PB7	Employee Representative	Yes
	PB8	Employee Representative	Yes

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

The interview schedule served to guide the data collection during the interview process. Full transcriptions were made of the interviews. In addition, an observer role was adopted in the primary data collection phases, which was appropriate to this study. This resulted in accounting for interpretations and meanings of data during reflection. Recording of interviews facilitated the natural flow of data during interviews. Recorded interviews were transcribed after the interview sessions to ensure the reliability of the data as key points, and the context could still be remembered. Field notes taken during the entire data collection process were filed for reference purposes. This promoted reflexivity in the research process.

Data analysis

The analysis steps for the study included the following processes: a pre-exploration of the data through reading the documents and transcripts; data coding through labelling segmented text; developing themes from the established codes; establishing connections and relations between themes; and integrating the categories to develop a theory. Open coding was used to identify units of meaning from sample data. Axial coding was used to provide more structure to the data. After this, codes were collated to develop themes using selective coding.

The first phase in the analysis of data was document analysis, which made use of thematic content analysis. The analysis of documents used manifest content analysis. Inductive content analysis was also used to categorise derived information into categories that answer the central questions of the research. The data gathered from the interviews and the focus group discussions were analysed thematically to establish condensed meanings of data and to establish connections or relations between codes, categories and sub-categories of data using ATLAS.ti Version 8.

The final phase of the analysis employed data triangulation to make sense of all data gathered by combining data sources to mitigate the weaknesses within each data source (Fusch et al., 2018). The approach to triangulation and integration involved identifying themes that emerged from different data sources and methods (interviews and focus group discussions) and sorting them into similar categories. Convergence coding was applied to identify similarities or agreement, silence and dissonance within the different data sources and was used to describe the relationship between the data sources.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg, Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) Research Ethics Committee (IPPM-2019-277 [D]).

Results

Interviews and focus group discussions with management and insourced employees, respectively, revealed various possible inclusion potentials associated with harmonisation after insourcing. Participants focused on both tangible and intangible aspects such as being involved in processes and other psychological perspectives. Effective harmonisation for inclusion was viewed as compromised by external factors such as government intervention, and a lack of policy and legislation to guide the process. The following itemised themes emerged from the interviews:

Improved sense of value

Focus group discussions with insourced employees revealed that harmonisation made them feel valued through a single grading system. This fostered feelings of equality with other employees. As explained by one insourced employee:

> 'Harmonisation refers to placing on the same grading … So, by so doing, it was to try and place us in a better position with everyone in our grade. So, it is then the process of bringing everyone on board on the same level.' (PA8, Insourced employee, focus group 1)

Others explained that there was an improvement in the sense of belonging and productivity owing to harmonisation as the insourced employees experienced similar conditions as institutional employees. This was attributed to access to similar facilities among all employees, compared to the previous outsourcing where they had to use different facilities, as expressed by one manager:

> 'I would say improved productivity and improved process. I think it's going to be better. We have better salaries and use the same gates as everyone. So it's better because before you would really feel that you don't belong here and we had our own gates to get in and out of the University.' (PA7, Insourced employee, focus group 1)

Overall, management also pointed that because of harmonisation, insourced employees expressed that they had improved conditions of employment and felt included in the institutions by taking part in institutional activities, leading to better treatment compared to their previous employment under outsourcing. Consequently, this improved the morale of the insourced employees, and they felt that they were part of the organisation and belonged to the institution. As highlighted by one:

> 'With their old employer they did not have benefits, I can tell you so for them it's a plus. Again, they also have employment security, whereas with the service provider's company they would have a different arrangement. Again, the advantage would be that it created an inclusive arrangement for them where they felt included, unlike when they were still working for their old employers.' (PB1, Manager, interview 4)

Others reported that insourced employees particularly were not committed during outsourcing because they did not have a sense of dedication to institutions:

'Well, I suppose, just from a human perspective, the benefits of the staff are enormous. Okay. I've already indicated that they enjoy more benefits, and that's beneficial to your staff morale. People that were working on the outsourced model didn't feel the sense of loyalty and dedication to the organisation and now they have.' (PA2, Manager, interview 2)

Fair conditions of employment

Focus group discussions highlighted how some HR benefits had a bearing on feelings of inclusion in the institutions. Reflecting on their socioeconomic status and historical employment experiences, job security, access to pension funds and free educational development opportunities for employees and their dependents was deemed to be facilitating fair opportunities for all employees. In addition, senior managers further highlighted that harmonisation promoted ILO goals of decent work. These views are represented in the extracts below:

'I can say comrades have mainly benefited in terms of health and education for children. Their children can now come here and learn but before they could not come here unless they applied for some bursary. The University gives health checks for free every now and then and employees can go and get checked. As well as benefits for leave because under the previous employer if you do not work there will be no pay.' (PB8, Employee representative, focus group 2)

'A lot of benefits. And again, another benefit is that career-wise they have stable jobs, and their children can learn for free. So, there is great improvement in terms of the well-being of the employees.' (PA1, Manager, interview A3)

Need for a participatory employment relationship

Focus group discussions emphasised a challenge in that they expected immediate harmonisation and placement in similar grades with similar salaries and conditions as the institution employees. This seemed to disregard differences in skills, experience and qualifications but was based on similarity in occupations by institutional counterparts:

'I think management should just have been honest from the beginning and also consider that we are also human beings. The fact that we are cleaning after them does not mean we are less human. We were happy when we heard that we were joining the University, we thought we were going to the land of milk and honey. Only to find out that it is the same as outsourcing, but I am not disputing the fact that it is better.' (PB6, Insourced employee, focus group 2)

In contrast to the focus group discussions, managers in interviews were of the view that the expectations of the insourced employees were too high, and institutions expected to harmonise conditions of employment over time. As explained by some:

'Well, one challenge which we saw throughout the process was managing the various stakeholders. You know when you get to the table like this, each comes with their own perceptions or idea type outcomes they want from the process, and some are not practically possible. I find that a huge challenge to manage all those because the employee representatives want this outcome, and the University wants something else, and the expert is advising something else or something. So, to really, you know, come up with something that will make everyone happy was a huge challenge.' (PA4, Manager, interview A4)

Some insourced employees also underlined not being involved in meaningful decision-making in consultation processes, to some extent. This was mainly a result of engagement and consultations. Focus groups felt that management did not genuinely take their views and opinions on board. As represented in the excerpt below:

'Their approach towards us as workers is not good. Because when we discuss something, the deliveries, it's not easy for us to get things that we want. And if you raise your voice to show them that we are colleagues and not contract, they do not take us seriously. And sometimes we get information late.' (PA8, Insourced employee, focus group 1)

Impact of external influences

Both managers and insourced employee participants underlined that no precise policy or legislative guidelines were followed in the harmonisation process. Both focus groups and interviews highlighted that institutions did not take the regulated transfer business route. This leaves the process open to not having enough guidelines to inform and guide the harmonisation process to full, fair and peaceful harmonisation of conditions of employment after insourcing. As highlighted by managers and insourced employees:

'It discriminates against other workers as these employees were not getting benefits and leave because we're not employees, but we were working. How does that work? The problem that causes all this is the law itself.' (PB6, Insourced employee, focus group 2)

Some managers in interviews emphasised that political and government influence mainly emanated from the drivers of the insourcing, which stemmed from the socio-political domain, and they were of the view that this filtered through to the harmonisation process. In addition, managers noted that institutions are accountable to the government; therefore, some decisions were beyond the institutions themselves:

'This challenge was also coupled with the challenge that University leadership or management stood between government, which required accountability and a student–staff alliance, which demanded an immediate change of the status quo. The decision to take in employees to address more economic and social problems which government itself was supposed to be responsible for in terms of regulating terms of conditions of employees and became an institutional problem.' (PA4, Manager, interviews A4)

Furthermore, there were concerns of insourcing drivers infiltrating into the harmonisation process itself. Managers also felt that impartiality of the process of harmonisation is to some extent influenced by external factors such as political influence:

'So, to be fair, in a normal corporate setting, the decision to insource should be a business-driven decision. And in this case, this was not the case, it was driven by external stakeholders and institutions had to comply and insource. Look, so when you harmonise, you can use a different approach; the politics and the unions still influence the processes.' (PB4, Manager, interview B4)

For focus group discussions, employees were, however, of the view that the government did not support them enough in the harmonisation process:

> 'That is the problem we have, is that the government only comes to us when they want votes but when they win, they are nowhere to be found. I even still said it with the other Comrades that they should have at least told the University to pay us well and treat us good as their employees. Because now we were on our own. So, I think these politicians come and promise us better jobs and to improve us but they never commit to it.' (PB6, Insourced employee, focus group 2)

Discussion

Outline of the results

Drawing on the case of higher education institutions, we examined the link between harmonisation and inclusion in the workplace. In particular, we looked at how harmonisation fosters inclusion and contributes towards SDGs. The study demonstrates how harmonisation of conditions of employment promotes inclusive workplace practices such as equality and belongingness, fair income, security in the workplace and meaningful participation. It was through harmonisation that the conditions of employment of insourced employees reflect decent conditions such as job security, comparative salaries and participation. For the employee, it implies reduced discrimination and vulnerabilities, and access to decent work. Thus, the role of harmonisation is not limited to the creation of alignment in organisational procedures and structures but moves a step further to promote inclusive organisational labour practices.

The findings of the study demonstrated that harmonisation improves the sense of belonging and equality through the use of a singular grading system. The findings indicated that grading criteria in the harmonisation process influence employees' perceptions of belonging, which are driven mostly by the feeling of fairness in compensation. Pay information in literature has been found to reduce speculation and, at an individual level, enhance empowerment perceptions and a sense of worker importance (Bosch & Barit, 2020). Although insourced employees may not agree with the grade rankings, remuneration is a discretionary concept that is not determined in the same way in all institutions. Fair differentiation in remuneration is an important consideration in ensuring equality in distributive aspects such as equal pay for work of equal value. A difference in remuneration at a post level is therefore not always discriminatory in nature. In some instances, this may be attributed to the employees' personal attributes and success in bargaining for higher remuneration levels.

In addition, the concept of improved morale was raised. Employees doing the same job had heterogeneous conditions of employment before harmonisation, ensuring equity and happiness among employees within similar occupational categories. Previous research (Nur et al., 2020) pointed out that improved terms and conditions of employment improve employee morale in the workplace. Improved morale may be indicative of the extent to which employees perceive value within the workplace based on organisational practices and policies. This leads to the acknowledgement of harmonisation as a useful tool in ensuring consistency in employees' remuneration, which is multi-dimensional and improves employee morale and perceptions of fairness, critical in the establishment of transformed conditions of employment.

Data from the study show that external politics influenced the process of harmonisation. This raises the concern of instrumentalisation of inclusion practices for compliance and a shift from existing structural workforce issues, which unintentionally institutionalise historical power relations between the marginalised support service employees and institutional management. This shift focuses on short-term concerns at the cost of long-term structural transformations, undermining the social justice case of the insourced employees for inclusion and equality. Harmonisation therefore needs to be implemented in direct support of institutional strategic objectives to enhance the legitimacy of decisions in the face of competing socio-political demands. This may be central, given that the economic and socio-political day-to-day struggles of insourced employees as members of a wider society filter through to the negotiated position in harmonisation. It creates an unintended coalescence of institutional and societal issues where demands relating to issues that should rightfully be the responsibility of the government fall to the harmonisation table with the support of external pressures.

The study findings show evidence of polarised interests in terms of expectations between insourced employees and institutional managers. Expectations often serve as a reference point in the evaluation of organisational outcomes. As observed by Boesby Dahl (2014), organisational policy may be directed at a particular group of employees and may face resistance owing to unfulfilled promises of inclusion by the policies. The expectations of insourced employees relating to terms and conditions of employment enhance the understanding of the factors that the employees regard as essential and shape the psychological contract. The argument flowing from this is that if the impact of expectations is not recognised, the legitimacy and objectives of harmonisation are weakened. Diagnostic assessments should be developed and implemented to establish the true needs and expectations of employees and the institutions. Novel collaborative actions from the multiple stakeholders, employees and the institutional management are therefore required for employment relations practices to contribute effectively towards the SDGs in general and inclusion specifically.

Overall, harmonisation after insourcing can contribute to the development of inclusion of minority groups and develop an enhanced sense of belonging and value in organisations but this does not entail that the identity of individual change. Arguably, if harmonisation is understood as an intervention to ensure alignment and fairness, it can be used to establish inclusive outcomes. On that note, harmonisation can be viewed as a normative organisation practice that ensures

alignment and of conditions of employment and the employment practices. Furthermore, the effects of harmonisation may be more significant given the support service employees' exploitative employment conditions and historical socioeconomic circumstances. This suggests that harmonisation moves a step further from structural workplace inclusion issues to socioeconomic concerns of the minority groups.

Practical implications

The challenge of ensuring fair and inclusive conditions of employment, the retention and motivation of employees, as well as the reduction or elimination of unjustified differences between categories of employees requires new strategies and streamlining of contractual arrangements (Armstrong, 2017). Firstly, at a theoretical level, this study contributes by adding new insights to the theoretical body of knowledge on the regulation and management of conditions of employment in the South African workplace. Although harmonisation and conditions of employment have been studied and regulated in different contexts such as traditional employee consolidation like mergers and transfers where prescriptive regulations exist (Lohrke et al., 2016; Romero, 2015; Schönreiter, 2018), this study exposes multiple complexities and unique insights into harmonisation in a specific context, that of insourcing previously outsourced employees. It highlights literature and regulative frameworks of conditions of employment in the workplace through investigating patterns of challenges and opportunities in the process of harmonisation where traditional boundaries of consolidation are challenged.

Secondly, given the role of higher education in social transformation, a contribution is made at a practical level. The study adds to higher education management practices by presenting a harmonisation framework for managing the insourced conditions of employment of its employees and an appreciation of the dynamics existing in challenges and opportunities that arise in the process of harmonisation. Applying the proposed management framework from this study will provide valuable insight to institutional managers to achieve sustainable transformational changes that promote equality and inclusion, and ultimately contribute towards the achievement of SDGs. This guides employment relations managers in implementing a sound, transparent and compliant harmonisation framework to ensure an inclusive, well-managed and effective insourcing transaction in higher education. Concerns about representation and engagement by insourced employees demonstrate the central role these aspects play in organisational processes. A practical implication thereof is that the harmonisation task team and committees need to be made up of credible and independent individuals. This may be important in ensuring that decisions are accepted by insourced employees as fair and impartial, free from undue external pressure, lobbying or even public pressure. Being independent trusts that input from beyond the task team members is received and evaluated in line with harmonisation objectives. In addition, flexible structures of engagement in harmonisation consultation should be established, which permit the representation of employee interests at the appropriate level where their true concerns are addressed.

The historical context and experiences of insourced employees shape the future aspirations of insourced employees. The expectations created by insourced labour may create incongruent expectations between management and insourced labour in terms of desired outcomes. It is essential that institutions establish and implement an expectation assessment to plan proactively and to establish the key needs and interests of stakeholders to mitigate against too high expectations that may potentially lead to a breach of the psychological contract.

Last, the findings also pose implications for the strategic management of labour sourcing. Management and insourced employees highlighted the influence of external factors in the harmonisation process. Institutions may consider implementing harmonisation in direct support of institutional strategic objectives to enhance the legitimacy of decisions, in the face of competing socio-political demands. Linking the harmonisation to institutional strategic objectives creates a clear and solid position to manage processes and adversarial external influences for the benefit of institutions and insourced employees. Therefore, for higher education institutions that have insourced to be sustainable and to meet the expectations of their stakeholders, they should adopt a common-good HRM approach to ensure a suitable balance among competing social and economic interests among stakeholders for sustainable HRM practices.

The harmonisation framework

Therefore, the need exists for the development of a management framework for institutional management that will ensure fairness and transparency for the effective and efficient harmonisation of conditions of employment after insourcing. The proposed harmonisation framework is presented in Figure 1. The harmonisation framework proposes key phases to be implemented to ensure effective and efficient harmonisation of conditions of employment after insourcing. The first phase is the planning phase for the harmonisation process by setting key objectives and deliverables of the harmonisation process. Based on the objectives, a strategic engagement structure for the primary stakeholders (institutional management and insourced employees) is to be developed jointly by said primary stakeholders. Timelines for the harmonisation are also to be developed jointly and aligned with critical success factors for the process.

The second phase is the assessment phase, in which job evaluation is to be implemented of the insourced positions to establish the value of the positions in the institutions and to enable objective grading. This should include a cost affordability and sustainability analysis by institutions based on the job evaluation. An expectation assessment

should also be administered to stakeholders to enable awareness and the establishment of an objective stakeholder management strategy. In addition, a determination needs to take place of both national and international labour legislative provisions and principles applicable to the harmonisation process. The outcomes are intended to help the harmonisation process to develop objective, feasible and compliant decisions and strategies.

The third phase is the implementation phase, based on the information gathered in Phase 2. This will encompass the grading and placement of the employees. Next, a comprehensive induction programme is administered to the insourced employees. This must not only be on policy and administrative issues but should also move further to ensure that employees are aware of the expected practices and behaviour, which are part of institutional culture and the implications they have for the overall objectives of the institutions. Employee outcomes need to be established and may include improved conditions of employment. Throughout all the phases, primary parties ought to ensure consistency and transparency through continuous and reliable consultation and communication to ensure effective implementation.

Limitations of the study

Three limitations can be noted that were ascribed to the study. Firstly, the study was conducted in the higher education sector in South Africa, which has many higher education institutions, but because of time and access constraints, only two institutions were included in the sample of the study. More participants could have been included to gather more information and a broader perspective. In addition, many stakeholders influence decisions and processes in higher education, and only employers and insourced employees were considered for this study sample.

The second limitation relates to methodological choices adopted for the study. The study used purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique prone to selection bias and does not control for representativeness (Creswell, 2018). Consequently, the generalisability of the results is limited, in that it is also not possible to generalise the research findings to other contexts or sectors. By their nature though, qualitative researchers do not aim to generalise findings, but instead to understand the contextualised experiences, meaning and explanations of participants regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). Thirdly, the study employed a cross-sectional design that captured experiences at a single moment in time and, by nature, could not capture the opportunities and experiences prior and after the harmonisation intervention. Consequently, experiences and impacts could not be captured over extended periods.

Recommendations for future research

A recommendation flowing from the study is that future studies should test the proposed Harmonisation Framework for conditions of employment after insourcing empirically to broaden the evidence from this study. Future research should explore workforce harmonisation and transformation using a quantitative survey or mixed-method research design to investigate whether similar perceptions will be found on a larger scale for insourced employees and management. The recommendation is also for empirical studies on the perceptions of harmonised employees and sectorial officials.
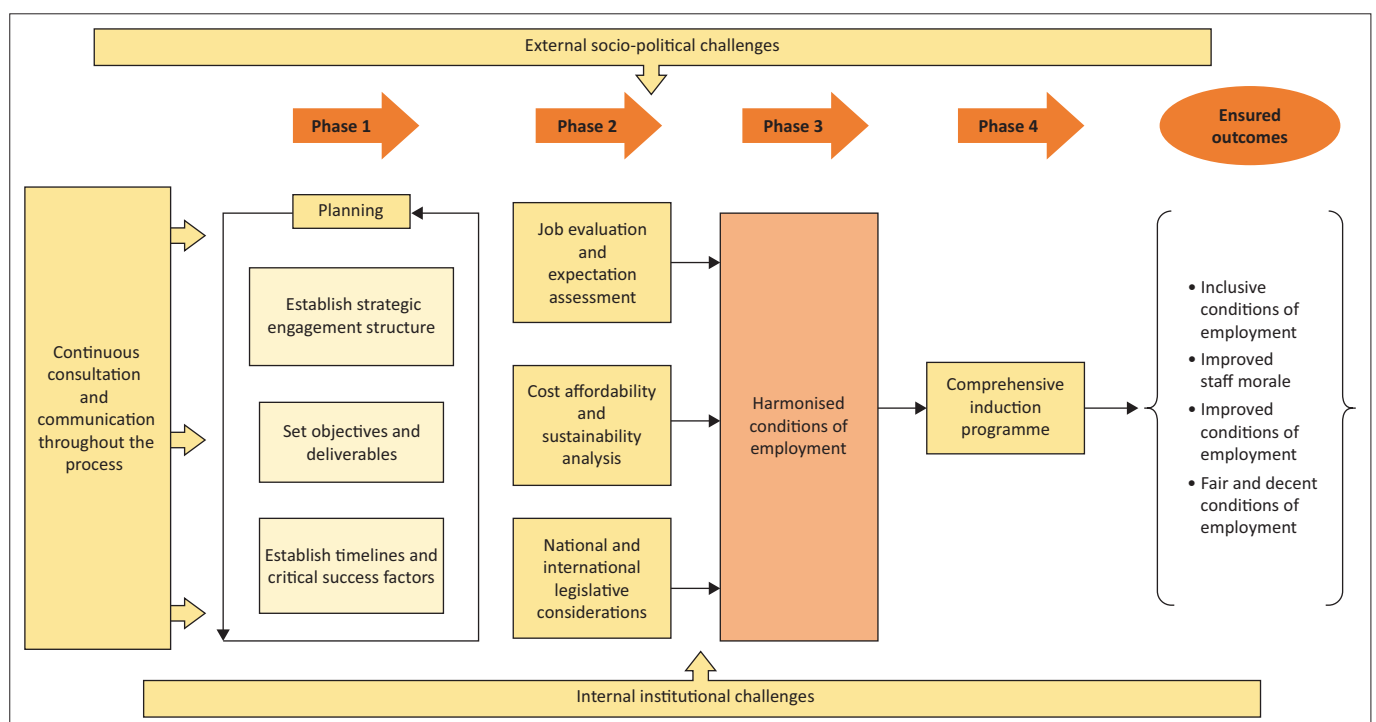

FIGURE 1: An illustration of the proposed harmonisation framework.

Finally, this research study should be duplicated in other sectors, as the methodology is not entirely bounded by business type or sectorial category.

Conclusion

This study presents the observation that imbalances are present in conditions of employment in all occupational categories in higher education and are not only confined within the academic and management cohort of institutional employees. For this reason, it becomes imperative that higher education institutions should equally prioritise attention on redress and conditions of employment of all employees, regardless of occupational category. Consequently, conclusions made by this study on harmonisation after insourcing aimed at improving the understanding and nuance surrounding the management of conditions of employment. The study therefore locates the basis for future research to further explore and investigate aspects of harmonisation and conditions of employment that relate to this research study.

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Authors' contributions

B.C. was the main researcher and was responsible for conceiving ideas, conducting fieldwork and writing up the manuscript. C.M.G. supervised the research and made conceptual contributions to the study. H.K. co-authored the manuscript and addressed the editor's and copy editor's concerns.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, B.C., upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available because of data containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Disclaimer

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