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Mabuya, Julia

2025

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Mabuya, Julia. (2025). The Role of the Secretariat in Enhancing Decision-Making and Accountability in a University of Technology [Master's dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg]. WIReDSpace. https://hdl.handle.net/10539/49213

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THE ROLE OF THE SECRETARIAT IN ENHANCING DECISION-MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Julia Mabuya
Student number: 2631074

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Management in Governance and Management

August 2025

ABSTRACT

Decision-making and accountability are important aspects of governance in South African higher education institutions. While University Secretariats are not active decision makers, they facilitate decision-making processes as part of governance processes. This study investigates the role played by the Secretariat and the extent to which this role supports accountable decision-making by addressing the research question: "How does the University Secretariat support decision-making and accountability at a University of Technology in South Africa?" This qualitative study employed a case study approach for a specific University of Technology, with purposive random sampling to select participants and data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The population consisted of 60 employees, from which 18 participants were selected across different staff categories. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected. The findings highlight three primary roles of the university Secretariat. Firstly, the Secretariat ensures secure documentation and maintains institutional memory to support informed decision-making. Secondly, it plays a crucial role in supporting the alignment with institutional policies, facilitating transparency, and promoting open communication across departments. Thirdly, it supports decision-making processes by organising meetings, recording discussions, and tracking outcomes, thereby promoting accountability and institutional integrity. Collectively, these roles can support greater operational efficiency, governance, and trust within the university. To address the gaps found in the role of the Secretariat, the study recommends the enhancement of ICT integration in the university administration systems and the enhanced provision of continuous professional development programmes to equip the Secretariat. The study's findings have significant implications for university governance, particularly through providing mechanisms for supporting the improvement of institutional efficiency, accountability and transparency. Addressing the discrepancies between the expected and actual roles of the University Secretariat can lead to a more structured governance framework, extending the Secretariat functions beyond administrative tasks to support strategic decision-making.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own, independent work. This submission is in partial fulfilment of the criteria for the degree of Master of Management (in the field of Governance and Management) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This work has not been previously submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

_____

Julia Mabuya

11 August 2025

DEDICATION

This research project is dedicated to my family, whose unwavering support and encouragement have been the bedrock of my academic journey. To my mentors and professors, thank you for your invaluable guidance and inspiration. Your belief in my potential has fuelled my passion for learning and growth. Lastly, I dedicate this work to my peers, whose collaboration and camaraderie have made this experience truly enriching. Together, we strive for excellence in governance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Greig Krull, for his help during the study process. Further gratitude is for Dr. Tiema Muindi for his support in learning how to use the qualitative data analysis tool for supporting the data analysis process, and the respondents for their time and participation in the interviews to gather data. I extend my gratitude to my two daughters, Lerato and Naledi, as well as Dr. Subbaye and Mr. Sithole for their unwavering support and encouragement; without their assistance, this research would not have been possible.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CGISA:	Chartered Governance Institute of Southern Africa
DHET:	Department of Higher Education and Training
EI:	Emotional Intelligence
GCIS:	Government Communication and Information Systems
HAI:	Historically Advantaged Institution
HDI:	Historically Disadvantaged Institution
HEA:	Higher Education Act
ICT:	Information and Communication Technology
IF:	Institutional Forum
MUT:	Mangosuthu University of Technology
NDP:	National Development Plan
SRC:	Student Representative Council
SU:	Stellenbosch University
UCT:	University of Cape Town
UFH:	University of Fort Hare
UoT:	University of Technology
USAf:	Universities of South Africa
VC:	Vice-Chancellor

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1. CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

There are 26 public higher education institutions in South Africa, as well as additional private institutions. The public institutions are categorised into three types of public higher education institutions in the country, namely, comprehensive universities, universities of technology, and traditional universities. The programmes and courses at the Universities of Technology (UoTs) are intended to prepare students for certain careers and focus on experiential learning as a component of the curriculum (Matiki, 2014). The distinguishing characteristic of universities of technology is their emphasis on technological innovation and transfer, as well as their provision of educational programmes aimed towards technological careers. They focus on undergraduate studies. In comparison, traditional and comprehensive universities offer a wider variety of subject choices and offer undergraduate, postgraduate, and professional degrees (Matiki, 2014). This study will focus on one UoT in South Africa: The Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT).

MUT is a public higher education institution in South Africa. It is constituted in terms of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (GCIS, 1997), and the MUT Statute (Nzimande, 2021). The Council of the University is the upper decision-making body within the university structure concerning governance and oversight, and it governs the University subject to the Act and the Statute governing the University. MUT can be categorised as a Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI) with historical problems with governance. For example, the University has twice been placed under administration (Mapulane, 2019).

There is an expectation in the MUT Strategic Plan 2020 – 2025 (MUT, 2019) that an enabling support environment is created for staff and students. A strategic goal is linked to how the university community will work to support this environment. The Strategic Plan states that one of its goals is to create a cadre of staff that enables the University to run efficiently (MUT, 2019). This group of staff includes the Secretariat and is part of the enabling environment. The work of the Secretariat fundamentally supports the University through participating in statutory structure meetings, recording decisions, and communicating decisions taken at these meetings (MUT, 2018; Strike, 2019). For

example, decisions are made, recorded for posterity, and transmitted to the university community. The timing of the communication with university stakeholders is a crucial role that the Secretariat plays. While Secretariat staff are not active decision makers, they facilitate decision-making processes as part of university governance. However, little is known about the Secretariat's perspectives regarding their role in supporting decision-making in universities in general (Llewellyn, 2007) and in South African UoTs in particular.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

While Corporate Secretaries are accountable to corporations and guided by the Companies Act 71 of 2008 (Department of Justice, 2009), University Secretaries (Registrars) are guided by the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (GCIS, 1997). There is a general misunderstanding of the Secretariat's role in the University's decision-making processes and accountability (Llewellyn, 2007). The Secretariat is the department, under the University Registrar, responsible for the administration process that enhances governance and improves executive accountability through the Council authority (MUT, 2017). The Secretariat, therefore, through the Office of the Registrar, monitors and keeps a record of the University governance by managing the administration processes to organise the operations of the University. In line with the MUT Strategic Plan (MUT, 2019) this role aims to ensure that:

- The university complies with legal obligations.
- The university's governance is aligned with good practices in the sector and optimises the university's effectiveness in achieving its vision, mission and values.

According to Granco et al. (2019), decision-making involves identifying a problem, gathering information, and assessing alternative resolutions. A step-by-step decision-making process can assist in making accurate decisions by organising relevant information and defining alternatives. Decision-making involves the exercise of judgement and the use of influence, and these two activities are how managers add value to general organisational processes. The Secretariat may not be involved in the entire process of decision-making within university governance. Still, it plays a significant role in supporting the entire process to be completed efficiently and effectively. The success and sustainability of the University depends on the proper and

accurate recording of decisions (Campbell & Carayannis, 2012). Through the Secretariat facilitating good governance, the proper recording of decisions may form an effective basis as a foundation to inform transparency, reflect accountability, and ensure efficiency in resolving the problems identified at the university. Good governance also implies accountability, transparency, participation, openness, and the rule of law (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2012).

Accountability is defined as the obligation to inform others about one's actions and decisions, justify them, and face consequences in cases of misconduct (Bovens, 2007). This is a critical component in the functioning of a university secretariat, especially within a UoT. The Secretariat plays a pivotal role in supporting that the institution operates effectively, transparently and in alignment with its strategic objectives. The Secretariat is responsible for maintaining accurate records, including meeting minutes, compliance reports and financial documentation. This transparency is vital for building trust among stakeholders, including students, academics, council members and other university staff. When stakeholders can access clear and reliable information about governance processes and decisions, it enhances their confidence in the institution's integrity and operational effectiveness (Turners Secretariat, 2024).

Effective decision-making relies heavily on the availability of timely and accurate information. The Secretariat facilitates this by organising meetings, developing agendas and ensuring that all relevant data is available to decision-makers. By holding itself accountable for providing comprehensive documentation and support, the Secretariat helps streamline decision-making processes, reducing delays and enhancing organisational agility (Leveille, 2006; Salmi, 2008). It should be kept in mind that Universities are subject to various legal and regulatory requirements (GCIS, 1997). In this context, the Office of the Registrar (of which the Secretariat forms part of) plays a crucial role in tracking compliance with these obligations, which can include progress against institutional goals, financial reporting and ethical conduct regulations. Accountability in this area not only mitigates risks associated with non-compliance but also reinforces the institution's commitment to ethical governance practices (Rathod, 2020).

Furthermore, accountability mechanisms allow for the ongoing evaluation of university performance against established benchmarks on an annual basis in line with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) reporting requirements (DHET, 2014). The Office of the Registrar can facilitate evaluations of academic programmes, administrative processes and overall institutional effectiveness. This reflective practice encourages a culture of continuous improvement, where feedback is actively sought and utilised to enhance educational offerings and operational efficiency (Leveille, 2006; Salmi, 2008). A well-functioning Secretariat acts as a communication hub within the university. By ensuring that all stakeholders are informed about governance matters and institutional changes, the Secretariat promotes engagement and collaboration across various departments. This engagement is crucial for fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility among academic staff, administrative staff, and students (Turners Secretariat, 2024; Simpson & Shaw, 2023). Accountability is closely tied to ethical governance. The Secretariat must check that all actions taken by university leadership align with ethical standards and institutional values. By holding itself accountable for its own ethical practices, the Secretariat reinforces the university's commitment to integrity, which is essential for maintaining its reputation and credibility (Leveille, 2006; Salmi, 2008).

The critical role of the Secretariat is to inform the university community of the decisions made to enable the management to act. Specifically, the staff within the Secretariat serve as assistants to the Registrar in the servicing of statutory governance structures inside the University. Similar to corporate secretariats, the responsibilities include acting as consultants, communicators, liaisons, and overall governance specialists (Martin, 2006). The Chair and other members of the governing body (the Council and the Senate), as well as other institutional governance structures as specified in the Higher Education Act (GCIS, 1997), rely on the Secretariat to ensure that they have the information and time necessary to function and make decisions effectively and efficiently. Therefore, the Secretariat under the Registrar contributes significantly to the University's decision-making procedures (FarajAllah et al., 2018).

In summary, accountability in the role played by the Secretariat is fundamental for fostering trust, enhancing decision-making processes, ensuring compliance with regulations, supporting continuous improvement, engaging stakeholders effectively and

upholding ethical standards. As universities face increasing scrutiny from various stakeholders regarding their performance and use of resources, the importance of an accountable secretariat cannot be overstated; it serves as a cornerstone for effective governance and sustainable institutional success (Rathod, 2020; University Chairs, 2024).

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Administrative service delivery is a major concern in South African universities (Jansen, 2023; Choeu, 2019; DHET, 2017). The specific UoT under study has been plagued by leadership and governance instability in the past twenty years. These governance challenges include a failure to adhere to established governance procedures in the past. This has resulted in the UoT under study being placed under administration by DHET twice (Mapulane, 2019). Therefore, research is required to understand current governance procedures to ensure that these governance challenges are not repeated in future.

The critical role of the Secretariat is to inform the university community of the decisions made (Strike, 2019), thus enabling the management to act and for other stakeholders to be aware of decisions. Few studies focus on support for decision-making in higher education institutions in South Africa, with a gap in studies focusing specifically on UoTs, and for such institutions placed under administration. One comparative study looked at the role of the Council Secretary in universities in the United Kingdom (Llewellyn, 2007), while a South African study reviewed administrative and secretariat challenges related to service delivery at a traditional university (Choeu, 2019). A more recent work reviewed dysfunctions in South Africa's higher education, including administrative service delivery challenges (Jansen, 2023). These studies indicate that more research is needed around the role that administrative staff play in service delivery and support for university governance. The problem that this study addresses is how the Secretariat can support accountable and transparent decision-making at a University of Technology in South Africa faced with administration issues. Addressing this problem can contribute towards improved governance procedures and administrative service delivery by leaders and administrative staff at a UoT.

1.4 RESEARCH PURPOSE

In line with the problem statement, the study intends to explore the role of the university Secretariat in supporting decision-making and accountability at a University of Technology in South Africa. The study aims to explore the functions that the Secretariat carries out at MUT and its role in providing support for decision-making and accountability. The intention is that this study will contribute towards improving the administrative processes within the specific UoT to be able to fulfil its governance goals and objectives. This study investigates the influence of the University Secretariat on promoting decision-making and accountability. It will explore the perspectives of those working with and within the Secretariat regarding its role as the guardian of decisions made by university institutional structures.

This study aims to contribute towards a better understanding of the role of the Secretariat at a UoT in South Africa, specifically in terms of supporting decision-making and fulfilling institutional administrative processes. It must be noted that this administrative support and governance cannot function effectively without a solid administrative infrastructure, seeing as how accurate data and efficient support from staff is required. In addition, the necessary administrative control systems and organisational capacities must be in place in any governance setting before any strategic goals can be implemented (Tricker, 2015).

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To understand the roles the Secretariat plays and the extent to which their roles support accountable decision-making, the study will investigate the roles played by the Secretariat by addressing the following research question: *"How does the University Secretariat support decision-making and accountability at a University of Technology in South Africa?"*

The main research question is supported by several sub-questions:

1. What are the expected and actual roles of the University Secretariat at a University of Technology in South Africa?
2. How does the University Secretariat support decision-making at a University of Technology in South Africa?

3. How does the university Secretariat support accountability at a University of Technology in South Africa?

1.6 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research aims to help determine how the University Secretariat facilitates accountable decision-making at the UoT and the extent to which it does so. It has been noted that within corporate governance, the Secretariat is often not given the credit it deserves for helping management record decisions accurately so that they can improve the quality of governance (Erismann-Peyer, Steger and Salzmann, 2008). Similarly, staff working in the University Secretariat may face the same challenges. FarajAllah et al. (2018) studied the participation of administrative staff in decision-making in a Palestinian university context, but there appear to be few studies on the Secretariat's involvement in supporting universities in ensuring that decisions are recorded properly and maintained in a safe place for future reference.

The anticipated benefits of the study may include a focus on improved governance processes. This is particularly relevant for a UoT that has been placed under administration. This is so that senior leadership at UoTs may be better able to utilise governance and administrative resources, and that institutional governance processes may be better supported. It may also benefit those working in the Secretariat area by overcoming any negative stereotypes associated with their work and fostering a sense of professional pride (Llewellyn, 2007). According to Llewellyn (2007), this type of research can foster dependency awareness and the formation of stronger administrative teams, both of which may increase governance effectiveness.

1.7 CHAPTER OUTLINE

The following chapter (Chapter 2) provides a review of relevant literature related to the role of the University Secretariat as well as the theoretical framework that underpins the study. Chapter 3 (Methodology) discusses the approaches taken for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 provides the findings of the study, which are then further discussed and analysed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 concludes the study.

1.8 CONCLUSION

The objective of the study is to investigate the Secretariat's role in supporting the decision-making and accountability processes within a University of Technology in South Africa. This chapter has outlined the purpose and significance of the research and defined the research problem and questions. The next chapter will provide a review of relevant literature.

2. CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the literature related to the issues of governance, decision making and accountability in universities and the roles played by the Secretariat. To appreciate the role of the Secretariat in decision-making and accountability, the complexities of governance in UoTs, especially in historically disadvantaged institutions, are first contextualised for this study. This is followed by a review of the roles of the Secretariat and then specifically the role of the Secretariat related to decision-making. The chapter ends with a discussion of the theoretical framework guiding this study.

2.2 THE ROLE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It is important to grasp the fundamentals of university governance before beginning to think about decision-making processes (Campbell & Carayannis, 2012). Leadership and sound governance are crucial to the continued growth and prosperity of a university. Campell and Carayannis (2012) state that academic work within universities is conducted collaboratively, while the administrative activities at a university tend to follow more traditional hierarchical organisational structures. Central to effective management is bridging the gap between administration, management and governance, which often function independently within the same institution. The connections between the external environment and decisions about vision, mission, strategy, and implementation thereof fall under the purview of good governance (Daft, 2018). Governance centres on the norms and structures through which various constituencies can affect decision-making and be held to account. According to Campbell and Carayannis (2012), the institutional organisation and management of educational institutions vary greatly from one country to the next.

Effective governance in the higher education sector is crucial because it fosters the establishment of rules and regulations that contribute to the institution's success and reputation. Quality assurance, performance improvement, and process optimisation in higher education are the main elements of effective governance (Campbell & Carayannis, 2012). Effective governance involves making adjustments that are both beneficial and necessary, taking into account the interests of all parties involved.

The objective of good governance, according to Cadbury (2002, p. 43), is:

> *"...holding the balance between economic and social goals and between individual and communal goals. The governance framework is there to encourage the efficient use of resources and equally to require accountability for the stewardship of those resources. The aim is to align the interests of individuals, the organisation, and society as nearly as possible."*

The governing body is responsible for designing and implementing the governance framework and holds overall accountability for the organisation's performance. The governing body sets the organisation's direction and oversight while delegating responsibilities to ensure effective governance (Bovaird & Löffler, 2015). In addition, Kyere & Ausloos (2021) point out that compliance with regulatory, statutory, and legal obligations is essential, ensuring alignment with objectives within the defined ethical and cultural framework. The governance framework defines principles, structures, and accountability mechanisms to support governance processes. Appropriate authority and responsibility are delegated to ensure accountability and performance (International Finance Corporation, 2016).

2.3 SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

There are several statutory bodies within a South African University. Working closely with the Vice-Chancellor (the leader of a higher education institution) is the Council, which is the governing body and has a fiduciary duty to ensure that processes are adhered to and the decisions to enhance and develop the University are taken and implemented. The Council is the structure that plays the overall governance role and makes decisions for the University. On the academic front, the Senate is responsible for academic matters and making recommendations on policies, academic programmes, and other academic-related matters to the Council (GCIS, 1997). Hornsby and Osman (2019) state that University Councils and Senates form the core of university governance structures. These institutional structures can form committees to carry out any functions that have been delegated to them, and they can appoint individuals who have relevant expertise to serve as members of these committees to carry out functions that are shared by the Council. In support of improving matters of governance, administration and management in university councils, DHET released the *Guidelines*

for Good Governance Practice and Governance Indicators for Councils of South African Public Higher Education Institutions (DHET, 2017). These guidelines aim to provide a code of good governance for University Councils.

A University has a two-tier board, the Council, which deals with strategic and policy matters, and the Senate, which deals with approved academic issues. In addition to the two-tier board, there is an Executive Management Committee (EMC). The EMC consists of the University executive, where day-to-day matters are handled and led by the Vice-Chancellor (MUT, 2019). The institutional Statute is what specifies the make-up of the Council, the Senate, and the Institutional Forum (IF), as well as their respective roles. The IF is a consultative body that provides advice to the Council on matters that are relevant to the institution. There are also other structures established to assist these structures, such as management committees and the Student Representative Council (SRC), which is a body of representatives elected by students to deal with issues on behalf of students. These representatives are tasked with dealing with issues on behalf of the students. Both the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997) (GCIS, 1997) and the MUT Statute (Nzimande, 2021), approved by DHET, contain provisions that cover these governance structures.

For the UoT under study, the Council is a legal entity as sanctioned by the MUT Statute. The Council is responsible for the governance and control of the institution (Nzimande, 2021). It approves the Strategic Plan of the University, determines the tuition fees, approves the annual budget, approves the appointment of executive leadership positions and their terms of employment, and participates in decision-making. As it is the highest decision-making body in the University, it consists mainly of non-executive directors and representatives of various constituencies in the University. It is in this body that the decisions that govern the University are taken (Nzimande, 2021). This is the forum where the sustainability of the University is deliberated.

2.4 CHALLENGES TO GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SA UNIVERSITIES

2.4.1 General Challenges

According to Hornsby & Osman (2019), governance in South African higher education has a direct connection to the past. Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs), or universities that were traditionally deemed to be "white" in the past, continue to have better access to resources and more capacity than other universities. Jansen (2023) also highlights the effects of past higher education regulations and funding by characterising universities in South Africa suffering from chronic dysfunction as those isolated from major urban areas with a history of financial and intellectual deprivation. Dysfunction in university governance can be observed by councils that are deeply divided, spending days in meetings with no decisions taken, more special meetings convened to deal with incomplete matters, and people without the relevant experience or qualifications appointed to serve on the Council (Jansen, 2023).

Good governance has been a challenge at South African universities in the past twenty years. For example, in 2001, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) created a governance task team to address effectiveness, efficiency and accountability (CHE, 2022). Yet, since that report, a sizeable number of universities, mainly Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs), were required to undergo investigations and/or be placed under administrative control. The need for administrative control was due to issues with institutional administration and management (Mapulane, 2019; Hornsby & Osman, 2019). Where such challenges are raised, an independent assessor is appointed to advise the Minister of Higher Education and Training about recommendations for restoring good governance. If required, the Minister may then appoint an Administrator to oversee the implementation of the recommendations. Eleven independent assessors have been appointed for different South African universities since 2000 (Mapulane, 2019).

Some of the concerns articulated in the assessors' findings around governance were presented to the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Innovation by the DHET in August 2019 (Mapulane, 2019). The Department highlighted several factors that contribute to inadequate governance, including a failure on the part of councils, and in some circumstances the chairperson as well, to give strategic leadership and direction, and governance and management roles confusing with one another. Other factors raised included the inability on the part of council members to differentiate between the interests of the institution and the interests of the constituency

that elected or nominated them as representatives, as well as the failure to adhere to established governance procedures (Mapulane, 2019). Similarly, the Minister of DHET (2017) attributed university governance failures to:

> *"…inexperience and lack of the required expertise among some of the council members towards the fulfilment of their governance and fiduciary role; fraught relationships between councils and executive management and members of staff; failure of leadership especially at the level of the chairpersons of councils; unacceptable and counter-productive conduct by some council members; and non- adherence to proper meeting procedures."*

In contrast to Hornsby & Osman (2019), Jansen (2023) states that the different higher education types in South Africa have experienced governance challenges, not only the HDIs. Leadership and governance issues have also befallen HAIs or "former white" institutions which were perceived to be in good standing and with ethical councils (Jansen, 2023). Council and governance decisions taken by HAIs as the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Stellenbosch University (SU) have made the news due to issues of poor governance. Jansen (2023) further attributes some of the dysfunction to an element of corruption by Council members who do not have the best interest of the University they represent, but their interest in what they could gain by being part of the Council. This has even led to additional problems beyond poor governance. For example, the University of Fort Hare (UFH) has experienced shootings and the killing of staff members, and threats exerted on staff members for fulfilling their governance obligations. Damons (2023) reported on issues related to maladministration and assassination attempts in 2023 at UFH, as well as governance issues at other universities. University teaching and learning have been negatively impacted at a number of universities, and this reflects poor decisions taken in governance structures meant to drive the vision and mission of the institutions in line with the government's National Development Plan (NDP) (Jansen, 2023).

Governance and accountability issues within South African HEIs encompass a diverse range of factors. Jansen (2023) identified the first factor as related to funding. The ability of many South African universities to maintain their facilities, provide excellent education, and retain trained staff is hindered by budgetary constraints. Universities dealing with funding constraints also found it difficult to attract and retain qualified

faculty and staff. Inequalities in funding across institutions is a related challenge.

The second factor relates to the provision of quality higher education (Jansen, 2023). The attainment of equal access to higher education and the rectification of historical disparities continue to pose challenges. The endeavour to achieve equitable representation and equal opportunities for students and staff members across all demographic groups is an ongoing and persistent struggle. Additionally, students engage in demonstrations as a means of expressing their discontent with many issues, such as the imposition of tuition fees, limited access to education, and the need for curricula to be decolonised. The occurrence of these demonstrations occasionally leads to the disruption of academic activities and causes strained relationships between the university administration and the student body (Jansen, 2023).

The third factor, related to the focus of this study, is the effectiveness of university governance structures. Numerous HEIs have encountered challenges to the effectiveness and transparency of their governance systems at different junctures. The concerns raised encompassed issues of convoluted decision-making procedures, inadequate inclusion of relevant parties, and the potential for conflicts of interest. Ensuring accountability across various levels of university administration while addressing issues related to corruption and ethical misconduct is a concern (Jansen, 2023).

The fourth factor identified is institutional structure and culture. Achieving a harmonious equilibrium between the interests of academic and non-academic staff members, as well as aligning them with the overarching objectives of the institution, can potentially give rise to conflicts about matters such as remuneration, working environment, and representation within the organisational structure (Jansen, 2023).

2.4.2 UoT Challenges

The UoT case for this study, MUT, is regarded as an HDI, and as such, it has battled the difficulties associated with governance for some time. As a direct consequence of this, university administration positions have only been filled on a limited number of occasions (Hornsby & Osman, 2019). Additionally, MUT has been placed under

administration on a few occasions by the Minister. Administrators, who have been given the mandate to work with the University by the Minister, were appointed to deal with the University's difficulties (Mapulane, 2019).

The MUT Strategic Plan 2020 – 2025 (MUT, 2019) highlights that to overcome historical governance challenges, an enabling environment needed to be set up. Additionally, university leaders need to adhere to management systems and processes that are efficient and effective. This environment needs to support the delivery of services with compassion and speed, and adapt to the changing demands of both internal and external stakeholders. The strategic plan (MUT, 2019) articulates that administrative and decision-making processes are essential in supporting decision-making processes that are streamlined and facilitative.

MUT has an enrolment of approximately 15,000 students (MUT, 2019). The institution is characterised by its unique administrative structure, having experienced multiple assessors and administrators. At the time of the data collection for this study, the university was operating under administration which lasted until the end of 2024, which influenced the research environment. The Minister appoints an administrator (supported by a technical team) who acts as the governing body instead of the Council for a period of time, with the roles, functions and powers of a council (GCIS, 1997).

2.5 RESPONSIBILITY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND DECISION-MAKING

Responsibility serves as the fundamental pillar of ethical leadership, with the foundation of ethical leadership predicated on the principle of responsibility (Banks et al., 2021). Ethical leaders possess the awareness to acknowledge their role as custodians of the confidence bestowed upon them by their stakeholders, thereby assuming the responsibility of maintaining and adhering to moral principles. As Small and Lew (2012) explain, this includes the task of attending to the requirements of the institution’s community and its stakeholders, cultivating an environment that embraces diversity and inclusivity, and advocating for ethical behaviour. Having assumed responsibility, the leadership takes ownership of the decisions made and has to be accountable to the University, as this serves as a crucial link in fostering trust (Ehren & Baxter, 2021). The demonstration of integrity and transparency by leaders through the acceptance of responsibility for their actions and decisions is considered a crucial aspect of ethical

leadership. In addition to other considerations, ethical decision-making necessitates a dedication to the principles of equity and impartiality.

Huguet et al. (2021) state that leaders demonstrate ethical behaviour by embodying responsibility, accountability and ethical decision-making. This not only fosters trust but also contributes to the advancement of a more promising future for society. Similarly, Small and Lew (2012) see the fundamental principles of ethical leadership encompassing responsibility, accountability and decision-making. Leaders who adopt these principles acknowledge their responsibility to behave in the best interests of the institution and the wider community. Individuals demonstrate their sense of responsibility by assuming ownership of their acts, accepting accountability for their judgments, and making choices that prioritise ethical considerations and the pursuit of justice (Small & Lew, 2012).

The provision of transparency aids stakeholders in comprehending the rationale behind decision-making and the justifications for those decisions, enhancing both trust and responsibility within the process (Diakopoulos, 2020). Accountability is fostered through the utilisation of a decision register, which serves to hold individuals responsible for their decisions by meticulously recording the identity of the decision-maker, the precise timing of the decision, and the underlying rationale. As a result of this, the practice of making arbitrary decisions is discouraged, while the promotion of responsible behaviour is encouraged. Within the realm of risk management, the act of maintaining a record of decisions can prove beneficial in the identification of patterns or trends that may have had a role in specific outcomes (Reinalda, 2020). This enables the implementation of proactive risk management strategies and facilitates the adaptation of decision-making processes as needed.

A foundation of trust needs to exist inside the organisation for the validity of its decision-making procedures. The legitimacy and integrity of decision-making structures inside the organisation is potentially the most important factor in establishing and preserving faith in and acceptance of decisions that have been made (Harrison & Pelletier, 2000). Effective decision-making is a crucial indicator of board (or council) effectiveness. According to Bradshaw et al. (2007), effective decision-making processes are among the top factors that enable effective board leadership. The ideal is when the

board (Council) and the executives (Vice-Chancellor/Executive Management) agree on decision-making processes and on which decisions fall under each area. The council-level decisions are distinguished between those areas where the Council can anticipate having a type of input into a decision made by an executive, and those areas where the Council is merely being notified about the decisions made (Larsen, Maassen & Stensaker, 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2007). Decision-making is part of strategic leadership, which involves the analysis of data, using a wide range of strategic indicators and lines of thinking to address the contextual opportunities and problems the institution faces (Morrill, 2010).

Accountability in governance refers to the obligation of individuals or organisations to explain, justify, and take responsibility for their actions, decisions, and policies. It establishes a relationship where one party must provide information and justify conduct to another, including stakeholders, oversight bodies, or the public (Trinidad, 2023). Trinidad (2023) also highlights that accountability is rooted in three key components: transparency, answerability, and enforceability. Transparency ensures that relevant information regarding actions and decisions is accessible, enabling public scrutiny and informed evaluation. Answerability requires those in positions of authority to justify their decisions and actions to those affected, while enforceability involves the implementation of consequences or sanctions when accountability standards are not upheld. Accountability functions on two levels: horizontal accountability, which operates among peers and stakeholders, and vertical accountability, which pertains to higher authorities and oversight bodies. Accordingly, accountability promotes good governance by ensuring the responsible use of authority and prudent administration of resources (Sithole, 2016). In addition, accountability processes play a transformative role in guiding institutional decision-making, aligning with broader principles of transparency, trust, and efficient governance practices.

2.6 THE ROLE OF THE SECRETARIAT IN UNIVERSITIES

The University Secretary (in the South African context, known as the "Registrar"), to whom the Secretariat reports, is at the heart of governance in the university (Strike, 2019). Strike (2019) further states that there is a significant amount of variation in the Secretariat's role due to the specifics of each university, the national characteristics of

the law, and the governing instruments of the respective universities, as guided by the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997) (GCIS, 1997) as well as the Statute that has been approved by each institution. The Secretariat acts as a conduit between the leadership and the staff and external stakeholders. For example, the Secretariat handles communications with the institution's external and internal stakeholders (Trionsory & Aminudin, 2024; Adams, 2020). Internal stakeholders are committee members, students, unions, staff, internal departments, and the external stakeholders are the Council members, the Convocation, DHET, and other higher education institutions in the country.

The Secretariat needs to communicate the decisions that have been made to the rest of the community to give management the ability to take action (Llewellyn, 2007). The role of the Secretariat staff (MUT, 2018) means that the Secretariat assists the Registrar in recording the deliberations at these meetings and formulating decisions. The Secretariat interprets the discussion, summarises, and captures salient points. The Secretariat has to understand the functions of the Council and be familiar with all legislation governing the Council and its Committees (MUT, 2018).

The Secretariat interacts with top executives from every division as part of the meeting process. This provides opportunities to provide guidance to upper management and coordinate meetings (FarajAllah et al., 2018). The University's governance structure would fail without a robust administrative infrastructure; this is due to the requirement for reliable data and effective support from staff members (GCIS, 1997).

DHET (2017, p. 48) identified the following wide range of competencies for a council secretary to support the effective functioning of a council:

a) *"Ability to compile meaningful agendas timeously for council members in a format conducive to their participation in meetings;*
b) *Superior skills in drafting accurate minutes in an appropriate format;*
c) *Superior knowledge of the legislative and regulatory environment within which council functions;*
d) *Ability to collect inputs from staff members in an appropriate format and in time for compiling agendas for council meetings;*
e) *Ability to arrange meetings, and organize travel and accommodation for council*

members; and

f) Superior writing skills in drafting council related regulatory documents."

In its pivotal role in ensuring that every university has a robust system of governance, it is up to each University to decide how all responsibilities are assigned and delegated to ensure that appropriately skilled and experienced governance professionals serve the University (Strike, 2019). Some of the responsibilities of the Secretariat, as outlined by Llewellyn (2007) are to:

- Promote good governance,
- Work with the Executive Management and Council (and its Committees) to effectively establish and implement governance practices to improve accountability,
- Provide advice and Secretariat support to the Council, other decision-making bodies, and management in the good governance of the University.
- Assist/support the Vice-Chancellor (VC) and executive leadership in effectively implementing the Strategic Plan,
- Provide high-level advice and strategic support to the VC and the executive to improve accountability,
- Ensure that academic programmes and the faculty board are assisted in meeting the core business of the University by making sure that relevant meetings are supported, and the production of minutes and resolutions are implemented.
- Regarding compliance, oversee the effective discharge of the University Statute and all other legislative obligations, and
- Ensure the smooth operation of Council Committees, provide Secretariat support to all University Committees, and effectively align with all other regulations to promote information management.

2.6.1 Secretariat role in facilitating decision-making and accountability

The significance of proficient decision-making and accountability cannot be overstated, as they are crucial elements for the achievement of the institution (Huguet et al., 2021). The Secretariat assumes a pivotal role in the facilitation of decision-making processes, provision of support to important stakeholders, and maintenance of accountability within the organisation (Ehren & Baxter, 2021; Stensaker et al., 2024). The

responsibility lies with this entity to oversee the coordination of administrative procedures, facilitate effective communication across various departments and committees, and ensure that decisions are made per established norms and procedures. The Secretariat assumes the responsibility of coordinating and documenting meetings, encompassing the tasks of formulating agendas, documenting minutes and upholding official records. The Secretariat also fulfils the role of offering administrative support to the university's top management, governing bodies, and committees. This role facilitates the creation of reports, formulation of policies and procedures, and management of logistical aspects of meetings and events (Banerjee et al., 2020).

Ege et al. (2021) states that the administrative function has a pivotal role in the formulation and execution of policies and procedures. Through this action, the Secretariat actively fosters and upholds the principles of transparency, ethical behaviour, and accountability throughout the institution. In conclusion, it can be asserted that the Secretariat assumes a crucial function in bolstering the processes of decision-making and fostering accountability inside the university.

2.6.2 Facilitating informed decision-making

The Secretariat possesses specialised knowledge and proficiency in the field of procedure since it assumes the crucial role of ensuring that decision-making processes adhere to established rules and legal requirements (Stensaker et al., 2024). The skill set required by the Secretariat plays a crucial role in upholding the principles of fairness, openness, and uniformity within the process of making decisions (Madrid & Patterson, 2016). The Secretariat facilitates the process of informed decision-making by the collection, organisation, and distribution of relevant information. Before convening meetings, it encompasses the dissemination of pertinent documents, reports, and recommendations to the relevant parties. The Secretariat often has the responsibility of coordinating and facilitating meetings when important decisions are made (Hornsby & Osman, 2019). For meetings, the university Secretariat assists in making decisions: (1) *before the meeting*: clarifying the questions before the meeting, (2) *during the meeting*: conceptualise clear decisions at the meeting; (3) *after the meeting:* sign off the minutes and file them for posterity and accountability (Association of Australian University Secretaries, 2024).

The official records of the decisions made at meetings are provided by the Secretariat in the form of meticulously accurate and complete minutes. This record serves to promote accountability and transparency, and it is often consulted in the future to enhance comprehension of the conditions surrounding decisions and the underlying rationale (Diakopoulos, 2020). Secretariat skills include the ability to take accurate and concise minutes, formulate recommendations and keep track of items that require follow-up. To master the skill of minuting, the Secretariat personnel need to clearly understand the environment and stakeholders (Tricker, 2015). Llewellyn (2007) states that Council documents, prepared for the institutional record, may not reveal the full level of influence wielded by the Secretariat due to the complexity of the Council procedures and the implementation of Council decisions.

2.6.3 Professionalism and Practices in the Conduct of the Secretariat

The Secretariat, on behalf of the Registrar, is responsible for the safekeeping of official committee documents by effectively providing a professional, proactive, and accountable service to the University's stakeholders. FarajAllah et al. (2018) highlight that the University Secretariat coordinates responses to effective decision-making through minute-taking that provides effective resolution of meetings. The Secretariat, therefore, works to support the executive management and council in influencing decision-making, enhancing policy development to mitigate risks and improving compliance, and further supporting initiatives in the University to innovate and change practice in pursuit of the University Strategy and its objectives.

The Secretariat needs to maintain open and transparent communication channels within the Secretariat and with other departments and ensure the timely dissemination of information and effective coordination of resolutions taken (McKenzie, 2019). For the dissemination of information to reach the right people within the set timeframes, considering department timelines, it is critical to maintain accurate and up-to-date records of meetings, decisions and actions taken by the organisation (Llewellyn, 2007). Having to deal with people from various levels of authority in the university, its stakeholders, as well as members of the Council, the university Secretariat should demonstrate professionalism in all interactions and activities. This entails being

courteous, respectful, and efficient in dealing with stakeholders (Tripathy, 2020).

It is critical to foster a culture of teamwork and collaboration within the Secretariat and encourage the sharing of knowledge, skills, and resources to achieve common goals (Adams, 2020). By observing this, the unit is striving for continuous improvement in the functioning of the Secretariat by seeking feedback, identifying areas for improvement, and implementing necessary changes. Overall, the university Secretariat's impact on decision-making stems from its ability to streamline processes, provide accurate information, and ensure that decisions align with the university's mission, policies, and regulations (Buckland, 2004). By following these practices, the secretariat effectively fulfils its role in supporting the university's objectives and contributing to its overall success.

2.7 OTHER STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IN DECISION-MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The role of university leadership, encompassing administrators and department heads, is crucial in cultivating an environment that facilitates prudent decision-making and fosters a sense of responsibility (Subramanian & Rathish, 2024). University leaders have the potential to support the Secretariat in improving decision-making processes and promoting accountability inside the institution through the provision of direction, the cultivation of transparency, and the establishment of explicit expectations (Campbell & Carayannis, 2012). Subramanian and Rathish (2024) emphasised that the leadership of a university plays a crucial role in supporting the process of making effective decisions and establishing the relevant structures and committees for reviewing proposals and approving policies.

To effectively traverse the intricate challenges faced by universities, universities must leverage the knowledge and cooperation of their stakeholders and the academic communities (Awasthy et al., 2020). This assists the Secretariat with improving decision-making and accountability in the University. Various university stakeholders, encompassing staff, students, administrators, and alumni, contribute a range of viewpoints and experiences to the process of decision-making. By engaging with stakeholders, the Secretariat can access a diverse array of perspectives, hence enhancing the calibre of decision-making processes. The involvement of stakeholders in decision-making processes promotes a feeling of ownership, transparency, and inclusiveness, thereby

bolstering accountability (Ehren & Baxter, 2021). The involvement of stakeholders in a collaborative manner serves to expand viewpoints, offer specialised expertise, encourage decision-making based on empirical evidence, sustain ethical principles in governance, and maintain ongoing assessment (Awasthy et al., 2020).

2.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section aims to explain the theoretical underpinnings of decision-making processes and their consequential impact on the operational dynamics of the Secretariat. A comprehension of group dynamics and decision-making processes has significant importance for the Secretariat's operations as it enables effective facilitation of discussions, mediation of conflicts, and ensures alignment of decisions with institutional objectives (Xing et al., 2023).

2.8.1 Decision-Making and Agency Theory

The relationship between the Council and the University leadership is a key feature of university decision-making and accountability. This study also examines the Secretariat's role, which supports the Registrar, by recording meeting deliberations and decisions (Strike, 2019). A collegial relationship between committee members and the Secretariat is vital to enabling the University to function efficiently and effectively. At the same time, there is potential for conflict of interest and differing priorities in these relationships. This can be articulated in the Theory of Agency (Angwin, 2015), a conceptual framework that originated in economic studies but has since been applied across various fields, including organisational governance (Eisenhardt, 1989). Agency Theory explores the relationship between principals (those who delegate authority, such as the University Council) and agents (those who act on behalf of the principals, such as University leadership and the Secretariat). The theory examines how authority is delegated, the conflicts of interest that may arise due to differing goals and motivations between principals and agents, and the mechanisms employed to align these interests and ensure accountability (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Scholarly research, including Eisenhardt (1989), has highlighted the theory’s role in governance by demonstrating how it helps resolve conflicts and foster collaborative decision-making. Additionally, Shapiro (2005) underscores its significance in

promoting effective communication, a crucial aspect of the Secretariat's function. The application of Agency Theory in higher education governance is exemplified by Kivistö (2008), who examined its relevance in explaining the complexities of government-university relationships, particularly in governance structures, institutional performance, and financial oversight. Similarly, Urbanek (2020) employed the theory to analyse Poland's higher education reforms, identifying agency-related challenges and recommending governance frameworks to mitigate conflicts of interest.

In the context of this study, Agency Theory will provide a guiding framework to investigate the power dynamics and authority delegation between the University Council, leadership, and the Secretariat. It will also help to analyse the Secretariat's role and potential conflicts of interest and how these are mitigated to ensure effective decision-making. For instance, the Secretariat operates as an intermediary agent, balancing its accountability to the Council with its operational support role to university leadership (University Chairs, 2024). By applying Agency Theory, this study aims to uncover how the Secretariat navigates these complex relationships to support decision-making and accountability.

Furthermore, Agency Theory will aid in understanding how formal governance structures, such as legislation and organisational policies, influence the Secretariat's role. The theory highlights the importance of transparency, trust, and effective communication in reducing agency problems such as information asymmetry and goal misalignment (Shapiro, 2005). By focusing on these elements, the study will assess the Secretariat's contribution to the accurate documentation, communication, and implementation of decisions, thus reinforcing the University's governance and accountability framework.

2.8.2 Decision-Making Process

The Secretariat interprets committee discussions, summarises them, and captures salient points, which include the recording of decisions. To perform this function effectively, the Secretariat must have a comprehensive understanding of the Council's operations and be familiar with all legislation governing the Council and its Committees (Strike, 2019). According to Tarter and Hoy (1998), decision-making is a rational, deliberate, and purposeful action that begins with the development of a decision strategy, proceeds

through the implementation phase, and culminates in the appraisal of results. Figure 2-1 outlines the decision-making process as articulated by Tarter and Hoy (1998).

The theory of decision-making, particularly in the context of organisational management, finds its roots in classical management theories, specifically those that emphasise rationality and systematic problem-solving. Tarter and Hoy (1998) expanded on the decision-making models, adding insights into the structured approach organisations must take when making important decisions. This rational, structured framework is essential in high-level organisational governance. In the context of the Secretariat, it emphasises the importance of a deliberate approach where decisions are carefully strategised, implemented and appraised, promoting consistency and accountability. The Secretariat's involvement in interpreting and summarising committee discussions directly ties to how decisions are developed and implemented within the Council. By applying Tarter and Hoy's (1998) framework, the study can examine how the Secretariat contributes to the decision-making process, supporting the processes such that the decisions are rational and aligned with organisational goals and governance structures.

Several studies have applied decision-making theories in governance and organisational settings. For instance, Tarter and Hoy's (1998) decision-making process has been applied in school leadership teams using decision-making processes to improve organisational effectiveness and accountability (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). For this study, the theory will serve as the foundation for understanding how the Secretariat aids in the decision-making process within the university's governance structures. By evaluating the systematic process of decision-making (Tarter & Hoy, 1998)—starting with deliberation, through implementation, and culminating in the evaluation—the theory will help explore how the Secretariat's work supports or hinders the governance structures.



Figure 2-1: Decision-making process.
Data source: (Tarter & Hoy, 1998).

Figure 2.1 is based on the method in organisation theory that is referred to as the contingency approach. It says that organisational effectiveness is tied to or "contingent upon" a correct fit between the decision-making style, the organisation, and its environment (Tarter & Hoy, 1998). For this study, this decision-making process will be used as a lens to examine how the Secretariat is involved in the University's decision-making processes. In this decision-making process, the Secretariat within a University is only involved directly in the latter part of the process (steps 4, 5, and 6). They ensure that the proper decisions made by the relevant statutory structure are captured accurately to enable the executive or implementor to communicate effectively with other structures and role players. While the Secretariat does not make decisions, in many instances, the Secretariat becomes the first point of reference for meeting chairs and managers (MUT, 2018). The Secretariat staff have to ensure that official documents are compliant with regulations. In the decision-making and implementation processes, the role that the Secretariat plays is essential. This includes understanding the discussions that occur at meetings, as well as the ability to interpret those discussions and to support putting into action the decisions that have been reached to ensure the

effectiveness of the institution (FarajAllah et al., 2018).

2.9 CONCLUSION

To effectively navigate the complexities of making decisions in higher education, efficient governance structures are required to aid decision-making processes. This section reviewed the literature related to the role of governance in higher education, challenges to good governance and accountability in South African universities, governance issues at the UoT case, the role of the Secretariat in universities, and the role of the Secretariat in supporting decision-making in higher education governance. The theoretical framework guiding this study will focus on the Secretariat's role in supporting decision-making and accountability. The theoretical framework draws on Agency Theory and the role of the Secretariat within Tarter and Hoy's (1998) decision-making process. The next chapter will present the study methodology.

3. CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study applied a naturalistic, interpretive methodology. Consequently, the researcher examined phenomena in their natural context, looking for the meanings that people had ascribed to them (Snyder, 2019). This was a qualitative case study of administrative support within a specific UoT in the South African context. An overview of the methodology is presented to serve as a guide to data collection and analysis processes. This section discusses the methodological approach, sample method, research instruments, the data collection process through interviews, and the thematic analysis.

3.2 CASE STUDY DESIGN

The study's primary aim was to explore how the Secretariat at a University of Technology contributes to the institution's accountability for making decisions, how those decisions were made, and what effect that has on the institutional administrative processes for achieving institutional objectives. The research design aimed at determining the role of the Secretariat in supporting decision-making and accountability in a UoT. The UoT that was investigated as a case was the Mangosuthu University of Technology in South Africa. The specific UoT was selected as the researcher is an employee at that institution.

This qualitative study adopted a case study approach to investigate the role of the Secretariat within a university setting. This methodology was chosen as it enables an in-depth exploration of a specific issue within its real-world context, incorporating diverse data sources and viewpoints to provide a comprehensive understanding (Gerring, 2004). According to Lee and Saunders (2017), the advantage of using a case study is that it provides a comprehensive exploration of a research problem. A case study facilitates in-depth analysis of intricate phenomena within their natural environment, offering rich insights that broader research methods might overlook. In addition, Lewis (2022) points out that by integrating multiple data sources, case studies present a holistic view of the subject, ensuring that various dimensions of the issue are captured. However, a case study has limited applicability, since case study findings are based on a specific context,

and they may not be easily transferable to other settings or populations. Due to the researcher's close engagement with the case, there is a possibility of bias influencing data collection and interpretation (Gerring, 2004).

This study employs a qualitative case study design. The case study approach is particularly suited to examining the Secretariat's role within the university, as it allows for an in-depth investigation of this specific context. Data was collected from staff within the Secretariat and those who work with the Secretariat. A case study approach ensures a deeper understanding of the experiences of those working within or engaging with the Secretariat in a specific UoT, aligning with the study's objective of capturing insights into the roles provided by this function.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

Interviews are a method of gathering information in qualitative research (Owen, 2014). Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Since the objective of the study was to investigate the roles of the Secretariat, for example, how the Secretariat could aid decision-makers in a university, interviews were used to gather information. Semi-structured interviews, which use a loose format based on free-form questions, were preferred over their more rigid counterparts (Britten, 1995). This type of interview was more flexible than others because it allowed the interviewer to pursue a less structured series of questions and investigate themes that were brought up by the interviewee on the spot (Gill et al., 2008). To ensure comprehensive data collection, researchers should remain adaptable during interviews, ready to explore unexpected themes that may arise.

This flexibility is vital for capturing the nuances of participant experiences, which are often complex and multifaceted (Lewis, 2022). A semi-structured approach enabled potential discussion of the areas of governance and decision-making practices identified by each interviewee (Conteh & Toyoshima, 2005). The semi-structured interview method entailed questioning, listening, and documenting responses (Warren, 2002). Respondents were able to share their perceptions and experiences on the Secretariat and its function at the University. Interview questions were drawn up based on the research questions and what emerged from the literature review. Two sets of similar questions were drawn up to gather multiple perspectives: for the staff working in the Secretariat

and for the staff working with the Secretariat. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

3.4 SAMPLING

Purposive random sampling was used for identifying participants for the semi-structured interviews (Guarte & Barrios, 2006). Purposive sampling is a method of sampling in which the researcher makes subjective selections of potential participants who are representative of the population (Conteh & Toyoshima, 2005). The sample was selected from the leadership and professional services staff involved with secretarial functions through the university and members of the Secretariat itself. The population size was 60 employees, either directly dealing with the UoT's Secretariat or part of the Secretariat, with 18 participants being identified as a sample from each category of staff identified. The population was an all-inclusive group that was being studied (Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2014).

Purposive sampling offers several advantages in qualitative research. One key benefit is targeted selection, as it enables researchers to focus on individuals with specific knowledge or experiences relevant to the research question, ensuring that the data collected is highly relevant and informative (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Additionally, this method is cost- and time-efficient, as it allows researchers to concentrate on a specific group, making data collection more manageable compared to broader, random sampling approaches (Patton, 2014). However, purposive sampling also has some limitations. A primary concern is the potential for bias, as the subjective nature of participant selection can introduce researcher bias, affecting the objectivity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Furthermore, findings from purposive sampling may have limited generalisability since the sample represents a specific subset rather than the broader population, making it difficult to extend conclusions beyond the study context (Patton, 2014).

The focus of the study was on university employees who work in the Secretariat, as well as those who work closely with Secretariat employees in governance structures like the Office of the Vice-Chancellor & Principal, the Academic Administration Office and the Administrator and their Technical Team which made up the University's governing

body (in the absence of the Council). The Registrar plays a pivotal role in the research because of their position as the University's information officer and as the custodian of the decisions made by the statutory structure. The research population consisted of:

- Administrator and the Technical Team (in place of the Council as the University was under administration) (4 staff)
- Executive management (14 staff)
- Faculty Deans (3 staff)
- Office of the Registrar Staff (6 staff)
- Office of the Vice-Chancellor (4 staff)
- Directorate of Institutional Research & Planning (DIPR) (3 staff)
- Secretariat Staff (7 staff)
- Academic Heads of Departments (19)

Groenewald (2013) states that for a typical phenomenological study, the number of participants should be around ten participants. A purposive sample of 18 participants from across these categories was identified and invited to participate, and the 18 were interviewed. The selection of 18 participants from the population of 60 individuals was guided by the specific criteria relevant to the research objectives, aligned with a purposive sampling approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The aim was to purposively include at least one participant from each population group above, as well as to invite all Secretariat staff (who are colleagues of the researcher). The sample was deliberately drawn from personnel in the Secretariat, individuals working closely with the Secretariat, as well as those responsible for preparing and providing reports for the Administrators' meetings, particularly as the University was still under administration when the study was undertaken.

This targeted approach ensured that the selected participants possess firsthand knowledge and experience pertinent to the research focus. By concentrating on those actively engaged in the administrative and executive processes surrounding the Secretariat, the study benefits from insights that are both contextually rich and operationally relevant. Consequently, the sample of 18 individuals represents a strategically chosen subset whose roles and responsibilities align closely with the research aims, thereby enhancing the validity and applicability of the findings, enhancing the validity and applicability of the findings (Patton, 2014).

3.5 PROCESS OF ANALYSIS

The study employed a rigorous and systematic process of qualitative data analysis using coding and memoing (Razaghi et al., 2015). For data analysis to get going, Punch and Oancea (2014) states that coding and memoing are two basic operations for the analysis of qualitative data. Coding is the starting activity in qualitative analysis. Coding is the process of putting tags and names to pieces of data and the process of reading carefully through transcribed data, line by line and dividing it into meaningful analytical units (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The purpose of coding is to index data and provide a basis for storage and retrieval. The process of assessing qualitative data was not linear and was influenced both by the objectives of the study and the methodology that lies behind it (Cottrell & Rousset, 1997). In this regard, the data were analysed based on roles (staff within the Secretariat as well as those working with the Secretariat) as well as according to the research questions. Interview data were also analysed individually per interview and across interviews per interview question.

Thematic analysis as a method of analysing qualitative data was used for the study. It was a method applied to a set of texts, such as interviews, to identify meaningful themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This type of analysis closely examined the data to identify common themes, such as topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly in the study (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Thematic analysis is a flexible method. There are various approaches identified for conducting thematic analysis, but the most common form follows a six-step process: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Following this process enabled the researcher to retrieve and collect all texts and other data associated with some thematic ideas.

The process of qualitative thematic data analysis involved several steps. First, the data were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The transcripts were then read multiple times to familiarise the researcher with the content (Flick, 2014). Initial codes were generated by identifying significant phrases, words, or ideas in the text (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). These codes were systematically applied across the dataset (Lee & Saunders, 2017). Next, the codes were grouped into themes by identifying patterns and relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately captured the meaning of the data and

aligned with the research objectives. Any discrepancies or overlaps were resolved by revisiting the data (Flick, 2014) and holding discussions between the researcher and supervisor. The themes were then named and defined, providing clear descriptions of their scope and content (Lee & Saunders, 2017). Finally, the results were synthesised into a coherent narrative, supported by direct quotes from the data, to illustrate key findings and provide contextual understanding (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018).

After the data from the interviews was transcribed and coded, the qualitative data analysis tool, NVIVO, was used to support the analysis of the data collected for this study. Qualitative data analysis software assists with the coding and interpretation of information to make informed decisions (Lewis, 2022). When dealing with large volumes of data, NVIVO supports qualitative analysis and provides several benefits to the researcher (Hilal & Alabri, 2013), such as to assist in managing the transcribed interview data in a systematic and structured manner and making it easier to spot patterns and themes in the data. NVivo includes capabilities for examining qualitative data, including coding, categorisation, and querying. These tools helped the researcher find links, trends, and insights in data that may not have been evident in only using manual coding (Hilal & Alabri, 2013).

3.6 LIMITATIONS, FEASIBILITY AND POSITIONALITY

The recruitment process for this study was successful, with 18 out of 18 invited participants agreeing to take part, reflecting a positive response and willingness to contribute to the study. Clear communication in the invitation outlined the study's objectives, significance, and the value of participant contributions, which facilitated high engagement levels among busy university leaders. However, there are limitations to consider. The small sample size (18 participants) may not fully represent the broader population of stakeholders (internal or external) who engage with the Secretariat, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings. In addition, as the researcher works within the Secretariat at the UoT under study, there may be inherent biases in the data collection and interpretation processes. The researcher’s positionality as an insider could have influenced the way participants responded, as they may have perceived a colleague rather than an unbiased or external researcher, which could impact their openness or the nature of their responses (Berger, 2015). This insider perspective could

also lead to unconscious biases in interpreting the data, emphasising certain themes while overlooking others. Another limitation is that at the end of this study, the case university emerged out of administration, with a new university leadership being appointed. This means that the contextual factors affecting the role of the Secretariat may be different in future. Acknowledging these limitations and positionality is crucial to maintaining transparency and reflexivity throughout the research process.

Additionally, the study was conducted at a university emerging from administrative challenges, which historically had issues with poor governance. This context impacted record-keeping and process management, potentially affecting the reliability and generalisability of the findings. Consequently, similar studies conducted in institutions with robust governance protocols may yield different results. These limitations highlight the need for future research to consider these factors and potentially replicate the study in different contexts.

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical guidelines established by the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and the Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) were followed throughout the study. Accurate information about the study's methods, procedures and results was provided throughout the research to relevant stakeholders (Arifin, 2018). A participant information sheet outlining the study's purpose, methods, and expected outcomes was provided to participants. This briefing for participants explained what the study was about and the expectations for participation.

Participants' social, reputational and emotional well-being is likely to be protected if they are prompted to share information that can only be articulated freely and voluntarily, rather than placing them in awkward social situations (Arifin, 2018). Since the focus of the research was on professional roles and the decision-making process, well-being was carefully considered by not asking participants personal questions, and participants were free not to answer specific questions if they felt uncomfortable.

The study did not commence until the universities (both Wits, as the institution where the research is approved, and MUT as the university case study) provided ethical

clearance and approval. The ethical clearance from Wits is provided in Appendix B and the approval to conduct research from MUT is provided in Appendix C. Approval according to ethical standards was required to ensure the safety of participants in the study and the researcher.

3.7.1 Confidentiality and anonymity

Participants who were interested in taking part in the study were assured of confidentiality and data protection. The researcher maintained confidentiality by keeping the conversations private and encouraged participants to do the same (Wiles et al., 2008). The researcher further enabled greater confidentiality of the interviewees by holding them in a private location which could be chosen by the participant (Gibson, Benson & Brand, 2013). While anonymity was not possible during the interview process, pseudonyms were used in reporting the quotations by participants, and personal or identifiable information is not shared.

3.7.2 Informed consent

The researcher drafted consent forms to collect voluntary, informed consent from participants. Participants were given a thorough explanation of the study's goals and risks before signing any consent forms, and they were given the option to discontinue participation in the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable continuing with the interview (Bazzano, Durant & Brantley, 2021). If participants had questions, they had access to the researcher and the supervisor's contact information.

3.8 CREDIBILITY AND DEPENDABILITY

Criteria for proving rigour in qualitative research include truth value, consistency, impartiality and application (Moreno et al., 2021). Regarding analytical techniques, Moreno et al. (2021) argue that consistency is key to ensuring reliability. It was incumbent upon the researcher to evaluate the validity of the study, taking into account the suitability of the research methods used and the processes followed. As shown in Figure 3-1, Trochim (2006) suggests the following criteria for evaluating qualitative research:

- Credibility: Establishing the credibility of the findings from the point of view of

the individuals who took part in the study.

- Transferability: The extent to which the findings of qualitative research can be applied to a different setting.
- Dependability: Emphasises the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs.
- Confirmability: It refers to the degree to which others could confirm the results.

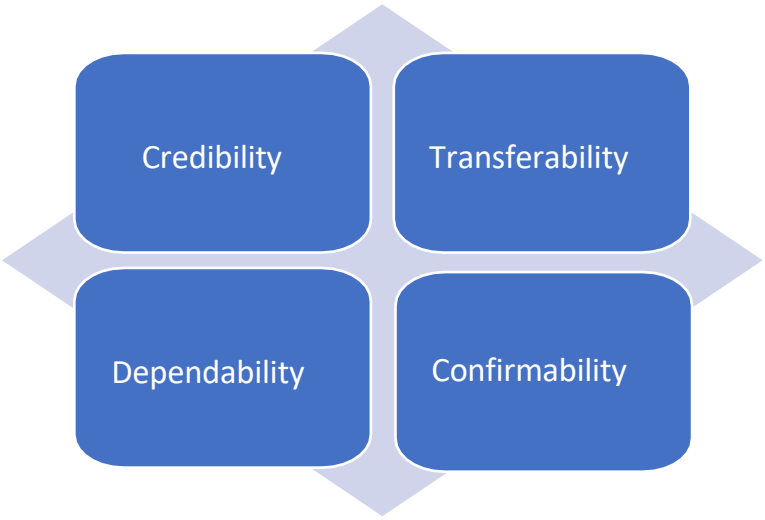


Figure 3-1: Process of evaluating qualitative research
Source: (Trochim, 2006)

3.8.1 Credibility

To ensure credibility, the study employed multiple strategies to verify the trustworthiness of its findings. Data triangulation was utilised by gathering information from multiple sources, including interviews with Secretariat staff and university administrators, ensuring a well-rounded perspective. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of the data and interpretations. Reflexivity was also maintained, with the researcher consistently reflecting on their positionality as an insider to minimise potential biases during data collection and analysis (Berger, 2015).

3.8.2 Transferability

Transferability was sought by providing a detailed description of the research context,

participants, and processes. The study has provided descriptions of the University of Technology's governance structures, the roles of the Secretariat, and the decision-making processes to allow readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other higher education institutions. The study also identified key contextual factors, such as legislative frameworks and institutional policies that could influence the Secretariat's roles, providing a basis for potential comparisons with similar settings (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3.8.3 Dependability

Dependability was promoted through clear documentation of the research design, methodology, and data analysis processes. An audit trail was maintained, detailing all decisions made throughout the research, including data collection procedures, coding strategies, and theme development. Peer debriefing was used with the research supervisor to review the research process and findings and enhance the consistency of the study (Flick, 2018).

3.8.4 Confirmability

Confirmability was addressed by ensuring that findings were derived directly from the data rather than the researcher's biases or assumptions. Direct quotes from participants and university documentation were included to substantiate findings and demonstrate alignment with the data. Additionally, a review of the coding process with the supervisor helped confirm the objectivity of the analysis (Lee & Saunders, 2017).

3.9 CONCLUSION

This study adopted a qualitative case study to achieve the objectives of the study for investigating the role of the Secretariat in supporting decision-making at a UoT in South Africa. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the identified role players (both those within the Secretariat and those who engage with the Secretariat) to share their experiences and perspectives on the function that the Secretariat of the University ought to fulfil in supporting decision-making and accountability. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the findings. The next chapter will present the study findings.

4. CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of the data related to the study's research questions on the expected and actual roles of the university Secretariat, and how the Secretariat supports decision-making and accountability at the University of Technology in South Africa. The presentation and analysis of the findings are divided into two sections: An analysis of the demographic characteristics of the study's participants and an analysis of the participants' responses in the context of the research questions.

4.2 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Table 4-1 provides an overview of the various positions held by the participants of this study in the UoT. The distribution of the sample size of the study indicates that the participants were drawn from different departments, representing diversity in their duties and responsibilities, including those working within the Secretariat (n=7) and those who engage with the Secretariat (n=11). Participant numbers are used to represent participant data.

Table 4-1: Participant information

Employment positions	Participant number	Gender	Age Category	Years of experience in higher education
Academic Deans	2 (Participants 1, 2)	Male Male	55 – 60 55 - 60	25 years 24 years
Administrator	1 (Participant 3)	Male	65 – 70	40 years
Administrator's Technical Team	3 (Participants 4, 5, 6)	Male Male Female	65 - 70 60 – 65 55 - 60	39 years 22 years 11 years
Executive Management	4 (Participants 7, 8, 9, 10)	Female Male Male Male	55 – 60 55 – 60 60 - 65 65 - 70	32 years 18 years 24 years 40 years
Registrar	1 (Participant 11)	Male	55 - 60	30 years
Secretariat	7 (Participants 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18)	Female Female Female Female Female Female Male	55 – 60 55 - 60 55 – 60 45 – 50 35 - 40 35 – 40 45 - 50	5 years 10 years 25 years 10 years 15 years 16 years 26 years
Total Sample Size		18		

The sample size involved a diverse group of 18 participants from different roles within the UoT. This group indicates a range of gender and age groups (from 35 to 70 years), and many years of experience in higher education, providing a thorough perspective for the study.

4.3 EXPECTED AND ACTUAL ROLES OF THE UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT

4.3.1 Documented Expected Roles

The expected roles of a member of the Secretariat are defined in the UOT's job descriptions for Committee Members (MUT, 2018). The role requires a Bachelor's degree with English or Communication as a subject, while required experience involves "servicing statutory committees" in higher education (MUT, 2018). The following skills are listed in the job description as important for the role: "Critical and analytical thinking, Reading and Comprehension, Writing ability, Research and Collation of information, Communication and Computer literacy" (MUT, 2018). Further roles of the Secretariat in relation to institutional governance, such as meeting procedures, are described in institutional guidelines and committee charters (MUT, 2023).

The first key performance area for staff in the Secretariat is "Meeting Administration" (MUT, 2018). In this instance, the Secretariat Unit plays a critical role in managing the administration of meetings for the various university statutory committees. Core duties include the facilitation of meetings through organising and coordinating committee sessions, including the logistics, recording of meetings, storage of documentation and preparing reports (MUT, 2018). The second key performance area is "Publication" while the third key performance area is "Communication" (MUT, 2018). These two areas are closely related. Publication refers to the compilation of agendas and minutes and the distribution of meeting packs. Communication refers to the communication with meeting members and other stakeholders outside of meeting times, such as asking members for action reports on items allocated to them in a meeting. Additional key performance areas are "Budgeting", "General Assistance to the Manager and Deputy Registrar" and "Action Plan Schedule" (MUT, 2018). This includes the tracking of meeting expenditure, carrying out of additional requested duties, and supporting the implementation of meeting resolutions and action items.

The next section presents the perceptions and views expressed by participants in response to the first research question: *What are the expected and actual roles of the university Secretariat at the University of Technology in South Africa?*. Table 4-2 presents the first three of the six themes that emerged in response to this research

question, focused on the expected roles of the Secretariat.

Table 4-2: Emerging themes from the first research question on expected roles

Category	Theme	Description
Expected Roles	Information and process repository	The Secretariat is expected to act as a central point for managing and disseminating critical information, promoting smooth operational processes within the university.
	Information sharing	The Secretariat is expected to facilitate discussions, share relevant information, and coordinate efforts to achieve common goals.
	Meeting management	The Secretariat is expected to organise, coordinate, and manage meetings, with the function that agendas, minutes, and decisions are accurately recorded and followed up on.

4.3.2 Theme 1: Information and processes repository

The data presented forms part of the responses from the participants on the extent to which being an information and processes repository is part of the university Secretariat's expected roles and duties:

Participant 2: *So my belief is that that Secretary must know everything… running the office, the actual functionality, even looking into budgets and assisting where possible to say "hey, no, we are going off target here let's see how can we adjust".*

Participant 9: *A great extent, as I had indicated before, we would lose track. They complete our lives, maybe just to put it bluntly, the secretariat completes our lives as the executives, because they keep records. You know the records are kept for future references. So for me the secretariat plays a very important role in that sense.*

Participant 7: *Are the chairperson's responsibilities either to summarize that, and if it's not summarized at the end of the discussion point, then Secretary must put their hand up and say sorry, chair, but could you formulate? Or could the meeting*

formulate that resolution so that it's clear who needs to do what?

Participant 11: *And also keep tally of all the recordings of the processes and proceedings happen from there and at times when future requested be able to bring out things that was done prior and give us direction sometimes in that line.*

Based on the analysis of the data, the point underscored by *Participant 9*, emphasises the expectation of the University Secretariat in terms of their role in the storage and safety of documentation for reference and for future use. These views are also expressed by *Participant 11*, pointing out the Secretariat duties of record keeping of the proceedings of meetings and making them available for future decision-making. *Participant 2* expands on this through the wider expectation of the role of the Secretariat to assist decision-makers to stay on track by being familiar with past decisions, objectives and processes. Similarly *Participant 7* indicates that the Secretariat is expected to help provide clarity on moving forward with decisions and who is responsible. Such views indicate the expected role played by the university Secretariat in organising and keeping track of information. The analyses of responses from participants suggest that the university Secretariat is expected to be a central point for information and processes handling.

4.3.3 Theme 2: Information sharing

The responses of the participants provide insight into the extent to which information sharing forms part of the expected roles of the university Secretariat:

Participant 3: *They are expected to put the draft minutes together or draft notes. It's not always for a meeting only but also reports and communication. Secretariat can be used to capture other information so that its kept accurately and securely, and this is very important, the expected role is to make sure that records are available when needed.*

Participant 6: *I've got one committee. I'll sit on the… they book the meeting sort of a month ahead, then a week before they remind me. Then three days before they remind me. Then two days before reminding me. And then on the day they remind me twice before the meeting happens. So you know that's I think that's a bit overkill but that's kind of what good working environment and support is expected to be.*

Participant 12: *It means that the decisions that need to be made at the highest-level can… are cascaded through the various structures where they are debated and fine-tuned before they are approved.*

Participant 6 underscores the role of the university Secretariat in sending reminders, pointing out how they communicate and organise meetings on regular basis. A key aspect may be to ensure the reminders are useful to meeting participants, but not to have too many reminders. The shared views from *Participants 3* and *12* emphasise the expected role played by the university Secretariat of ensuring that decisions are documented and are then presented for deliberations and reviewed by the relevant structures before final approval. In this way the relevant decisions are communicated to relevant stakeholders. The data suggest that the university Secretariat is expected to hold a key role in facilitating the flow of information and collaboration within the university and thereby enhance the operations of the University.

4.3.4 Theme 3: Meeting management

The data presented forms part of the responses from the study participants on the extent to which meeting management is part of the expected roles of the university Secretariat:

Participant 3: *Is to make sure that you capture as accurately as possible. You know the process in the meeting, be it conversations, debates, arguments are very important to capture the decision-making very accurately.*

Participant 6: *So for me the function of the secretary of this is to first of all make sure the meeting happens and it happens on time with all of the players present. That probably means that you have to chase people.*

Participant 9: *Organize the meeting. Sending out the meeting invite capturing the discussions that culminate into the decisions and also compiling the minutes.*

The views of the participants, such as *Participant 6,* point out the expected role of the University Secretariat in ensuring that meetings are held as scheduled and attended by all members. *Participant 9* mentions logistical roles, including preparing meetings, sending invitations, and documenting discussions and decisions in the minutes.

Participant 3 has stressed the accuracy of the minutes required, especially regarding support for the discussions and decision-making process. The analysis of the responses reflects the coordinated role of the university Secretariat in managing of meetings and documents and ensuring that these take place as scheduled.

Table 4-3 presents the next three of the six themes that emerged in response to this research question, focused on the actual roles of the Secretariat play out in practice and the skills required, going beyond the traditional expected roles.

Table 4-3: Emerging themes from the first research question on actual roles

Category	Theme	Description
Actual Roles	Act with integrity	The Secretariat is required to uphold high standards of confidentiality and integrity by managing sensitive information and acting in the best interests of the institution.
	Capacity and collegiality	The Secretariat requires the resources and capacity to be able to carry out its functions. The Secretariat can be successful in a collegial atmosphere.
	Role Challenges	The secretariat faces significant challenges in managing meetings, particularly when agendas are not ready in time and scheduled meetings are postponed. There may also be power dynamics at play. This results in delays in decision-making processes and frustration among stakeholders and meeting participants, which negatively impact the secretariat's credibility and effectiveness.

4.3.5 Theme 4: Act with Integrity

The data presented provides responses from the study participants on the extent to which maintaining confidentiality and integrity is part of the actual roles and responsibilities of the university Secretariat:

Participant 2: *Everything, every document, every confidential paper need to be there and they need to be accountability and everything. As Secretary needs to hold on that they're going to be very honest, reliable and you know they're going to take to heart that everything within the office stays within the office.*

Participant 10: *It is to act in the best interest of that institution. Other words, they call it also your fiduciary responsibility, accountability. So it's about the best interest*.

Participant 3: *So the accuracy is very key and it must be recorded so that you have evidence because you know it's not… it's an institution that belong... It's a public entity, a public university.*

Participant 2 reflects that the Secretariat has to be discreet with the sensitive documents and information in their custody, and they should be accountable in this respect. A key skillset or quality required is honesty and reliability. This is further emphasised by *Participant 10* and *Participant 3,* introducing the idea of the university Secretariat having a fiduciary duty to act in the best interest of the University, considering that it is a public institution.

Transparent record keeping, with documentary evidence, is also seen as paramount, as the institution is a public institution, all its activities ought to be open and subject to accountability. The views expressed by the participants indicate that the university's Secretariat supports the confidentiality and integrity of the University data and processes by ensuring that the operations of the Secretariat are conducted with professionalism and care.

4.3.6 Theme 5: Capacity and collegiality

The data presented provides responses from the study participants around the opportunities and challenges associated with acting with agency within the roles and responsibilities of the university Secretariat:

Participant 9: *I think it's very important we have a responsibility as the Executive Management to ensure that they are kept abreast with the latest developments. For*

example, they [have the] opportunity to attend workshops, to attend seminars, to be aware of new issues that have come up.

Participant 8: *I think management needs to provide capacity building for secretariat where maybe they identify what is required or needed in resources, and at the very same time they need to allow Secretary to do their work.*

Participant 17: *I've also attended training on records and note-taking. So in order for me to improve my skills, I've attended several trainings. So I think I'm equipped with information. Yeah. I'll be able to produce accurate records.*

Participant 13: *We are to solve problems as well. And we are expected to represent the university being professional, being knowledgeable. So we are to have skills, acquire skills, not through education alone, but the experience.*

Participant 14: *For example, when you are corrected in that area, you feel like you are being recognized, that you are a human being. That is why even when I engage with colleagues, I try to be professional and not to be pushing anybody but request. But I'm impressed with the way support is given.*

The analysis of the responses from the participants points to the role of the university Secretariat to be able to conduct its duties effectively. *Participants 9* and *8* point out that there is a responsibility on the part of managers to ensure that the Secretariat staff are afforded opportunities for skills development and capacity building and that the needed resources are made available. *Participant 17* indicates that members of the secretariat have attended training to improve their skills, but *Participant 13* indicates that skills development goes beyond access to training. This is an area where greater support may be needed for the Secretariat. *Participant 8* also points out the importance of maintaining the independence of the university Secretariat, as a way of enabling it to perform in an objective way without potential interference. Participant 14 points out the importance of feeling supported as a member of the Secretariat and the need for collegial relations in working together. The findings emphasise the importance of creating opportunities for building relationships, which are key elements of collaboration.

4.3.7 Theme 6: Role Challenges

The data presented responds to the study participants around the challenges associated with power dynamics and meeting delays in fulfilling the responsibilities of the university Secretariat:

> Participant 4: *Again, there is a power dynamic at play. A secretariat, you know, the chairperson can bully the secretariat into changing the minutes to reflect… to give a different meaning to the minutes. But the secretary needs to be... That's why the record-keeping is so critical. We also have this trust relationship that maybe can also contribute is also that also about power dynamics there.*

> Participant 12: *Challenges are always delays, delays, delays. And we are living in a time whereby time is very scarce. And the delays of receiving agenda items has been… it has been always one of the problems that I've always encountered ever since I started as a secretariat. Receiving agenda items, I don't receive them on time... The resource persons and members keep on reminding them, even when you already sent an email to tell them that the meeting is going to sit at a particular time, they still come with their agenda items late.*

> Participant 12: *For me, [the] main challenge is cooperation, you know, from committee members. In all committees that I have done, it's the same challenge. Cooperation, not withstanding to, I mean, not adhering to deadlines for submission of agenda items, such that it becomes a problem, you know, for us as committee officers, because there are deadline dates which are set in the calendar, in the university calendar. Everybody knows about these, but people never adhere to those deadline dates. And when the agenda don't go out on time, then secretariat also gets the blame as it it's our fault.*

The secretariat confronts several significant challenges that impede its operational efficiency and effectiveness. A critical challenge faced by the secretariat is maintaining trust with committee members and other stakeholders. There may also be power dynamics at play (indicated by *Participant 4*) that put pressure on the Secretariat not to act professionally or not act with integrity. Therefore, addressing these challenges through enhanced record management practices and strategic stakeholder engagement strategies is vital for the secretariat's success.

The challenges in meeting management (as raised by *Participant 12*) have significant implications for the secretariat's effectiveness and credibility. They can lead to eroding stakeholder trust and confidence, delays in project implementation and decision-making, and inefficient use of resources and time, which can negatively impact the university's overall performance and reputation. Further, the implications of non-adherence to the approved university calendar and postponing of scheduled meetings hinder the work of the Secretariat and the university, as decisions to be taken are delayed.

4.4 UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT SUPPORT FOR DECISION-MAKING

This section presents the perceptions expressed by participants in response to the second research question: *How does the university Secretariat support decision-making at the University of Technology in South Africa?*. Table 4-4 provides an overview of the themes that emerged.

Table 4-4: Emerging themes from support for decision-making

Theme	Description
Record keeping	The Secretariat is to maintain accurate records that facilitate decision-making.
Process management	The Secretariat supports decision-making processes by organising the necessary steps, follow-ups, and coordination between stakeholders.
Communication and collaboration	The Secretariat supports communication and collaboration between decision-makers, which can enhance the sharing of ideas, feedback, and consensus-building.
Alignment of decisions and resolutions	The Secretariat aims to promote consistency, ensuring decisions and resolutions are aligned with previous meetings.
Compliance management	The Secretariat aims to support alignment with relevant policies and procedures.

4.4.1 Theme 1: Record keeping

The responses below show the extent to which record management by the university Secretariat provides support for decision-making:

> Participant 9: *The secretariat would also ensure that the records of the meeting are kept and the secretariat would also ensure that those minutes are properly edited and that they are shared with the members of the Secretariat.*

> Participant 6: *You know, prepare the attendance... What do you call attendance records or lists and send it out. And also when a meeting has happened, you know, to indicate who were present, who were not present. So it's all about managing meetings and capturing the discussions as accurately as possible.*

> Participant 16: *It's to facilitate decision-making through a generation of minutes, which serves as a true reflection on the discussions or resolutions of the outcome of the meetings.*

The views of the participants highlighted the critical tasks by the university Secretariat in supporting decision making through the preparation of meeting resolutions and thereby providing records of decisions arrived at. *Participant 9* underscores the important role of record keeping played by the university Secretariat, arguing that it enhances transparency and accountability by having a formal record of proceedings, and this facilitates follow-up actions and also keeps meeting participants well informed. *Participant 6* also emphasises the support for decision-making through the university Secretariat, facilitating attendance management and diligent recording of discussions, which enhances a systematic approach, and adherence to processes and procedures at the University. *Participant 16* emphasises the role of providing an accurate record of the decision-making process. The views indicate that the university Secretariat aims to ensure that resolutions are recorded, accurate records are maintained, minutes are drafted and distributed, and attendance is managed; this helps bring transparency and organisation to decision-making processes at the University.

4.4.2 Theme 2: Process management

The presented data focuses on the extent to which process management by the

university Secretariat provides support for decision-making:

> Participant 7*: In supporting management. Because the resolutions that you take at the at the meeting are enough for you to implement, for the management to implement, people are accountable. By giving them the resolutions, the list of resolutions that were taken during the meeting so they can be able to implement using those resolutions.*

> Participant 14: *I can say to ensure that the meetings sit quarterly or the meetings sit as per the scheduled dates. [And] number two to ensure that all the resolutions are implemented. And also to remind the resource people about addressing the pending matters, if there are pending matters in the meeting.*

> Participant 9: *... the various decision-making structures of the university rely heavily on the Secretariat's role. Without the Secretariat's presence and coordination, that would create chaos and inefficiency, as their function is critical in managing risks and ensuring smooth decision-making processes."*

The analysis of the data emphasises the decision-making support role played by the university Secretariat through documenting and circulating resolutions of meetings, with *Participant 7* pointing out that this is done to provide the management with information so that actions or implementation is undertaken, adhering to the expected processes and procedures. *Participant 14* points out the preparation for and the management of meetings, ensuring that the meetings are conducted periodically or whenever schedules are arranged. The issue of risk management, according to *Participant 9,* ensures that decision-making processes at the university are adhered to, and this aims to minimise any chances of disruptions at the University due to poor decision-making processes. This continuity is crucial in terms of sustaining momentum in decision-making and supports the university to move forward on a range of matters requiring resolution.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Communication and collaboration

The data presented forms part of the responses from the study participants on how communication and collaboration by the university Secretariat provides support for

decision making:

> Participant 16: *Sharing the resolutions of the outcome of the meetings with the relevant stakeholders, should implement what decision has been taken in order to improve whatever that needs to improve or facilitate the development or implementation of any or any strategy or policy of framework of the organization.*

> Participant 14: *Your faculty affairs, your finance, affairs, academic affairs, and all the well-being of the university, so you need to have a good listening skill in order to do your work properly in order to capture your main needs.*

> Participant 6*: In practice, well, as I say, what I'm understanding is they normally arrange, they help... Of course, in consultation with the chairperson in particular.*

The views of the participants, such as *Participant 16*, underscore how regular communication by the university Secretariat, not only informs the various stakeholders but also serves as a means to promote follow-ups and accountability at the University in the implementation of decisions made. *Participant 14* mentions the importance of listening skills and getting feedback from different stakeholders, arguing that such an approach promotes decisions that are accurately captured by the Secretariat. *Participant 6* highlights the role of the Secretariat in supporting the chairperson regarding the organisation of meetings, noting their importance in this process of supporting decision-making.

4.4.4 Theme 4: Alignment of decisions and resolutions

The data presented relates to the extent to which the study participants view the alignment of decisions and resolutions by the university Secretariat provides support for decision-making:

> Participant 6: *It's a written record of what happened, which management needs, you know for decision-making. So minutes is a very critical measure that we use for decision making and also, you know keeping things on record.*

> Participant 5: *Meetings will give us an indication of what happened, what transpired in the previous meeting in order for us to see, and the decision made the*

day of. And if we go it wrong, if we make a decision and it's being wrong, they can interject in the meeting and say but this is what happened in the previous meeting, just to bring your attention to that by giving us the attention.

Participant 14: *We'll implement the wrong resolution, so as a secretariat you need to produce the correct or proper resolutions.*

Participant 11: *The secretariat is key because without that happening it would mean that decision making is made in a vacuum.*

Participant 5 and *Participant 14* both highlight the responsibility of the University Secretariat for maintaining accuracy and continuity in decision-making at the University through sharing meeting resolutions and sharing the decisions made and their history. The role requires a quality assurance aspect in supporting the alignment of decisions taken and the resolutions implemented. In addition, *Participant 6* views the university Secretariat as a custodian of knowledge and information for making decisions, pointing out its key role in facilitating decision-making processes due to the availability of and access to various records that might be required by the management at the university. *Participant 11* adds to this by noting that without the important role of the Secretariat the university risks making decisions "in a vacuum".

4.4.5 Theme 5: Compliance management

The data presented represents responses from the study participants in terms on how they view the support for compliance management by the university Secretariat as providing support for decision-making:

Participant 10: *Yeah, I think management should also, it's almost like a bilateral type of arrangement. It's what you call it. It's from both sides. Secretariat is there to guide management in terms of certain principles as I've mentioned.*

Participant 11: *So the various structural structures have got subcommittees and those subcommittees have to ensure that the role players that are involved.*

Participant 14: *There are protocols that needs to be followed for that to happen until*

the policy gets to the council for approval. So it's our responsibility as well to make sure that we make people comply with the work and the activities and protocols of our university or of our unit.

Participant 16: *...there is a need to have collaborations in discussions at the meeting where both parties, the accounting part and the oversight, which is in this case is the council and the management and will discuss the issues pertaining to the direction of the university or even financial implications of the university.*

In relation to the university Secretariat's support role in decision-making at the University, *Participant 11* highlights the need for the relevant role players at different levels to be involved in the decision-making process, while *Participant 14* emphasises the compliance function. *Participant 10* highlights the guidance role in supporting decision-makers, stating that there is a requirement to work together with the Secretariat. *Participant 16* also adds how this supports the sustainability and strategic direction of the university. This helps to promote that the policies and procedures are being adhered to by the various players at the University.

4.5 UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT SUPPORT FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

This section presents the data and analysis from the participants of the study to address research question three: *How does the university Secretariat support accountability at the University of Technology in South Africa?*. Table 4-5 provides a summary of the themes that emerged.

Table 4-5: Themes on University Secretariat support on accountability

Themes	Description
Compliance	The Secretariat aims to promote compliance with university regulations and policies, holding individuals accountable to maintain operational integrity and consistency.

Monitoring and evaluation of decisions	The Secretariat promotes transparency by facilitating the processes to monitor and evaluate decisions, enhancing accountability in decision-making processes.

4.5.1 Theme 1: Compliance

The data presented reflect the views of the participants around the aspect of compliance by the university Secretariat in supporting accountability:

> Participant 7: *To what extent do I support accountability processes in the university? To an extent whereby, to me, I believe it's vital to comply with the timeline agreed on. I have to take accountability if those timelines are not being met.*

> Participant 12: *So that's the first part. Are the decisions properly processed, so the secretariat helps in ensuring that these statutory committees and structures meet to process the decisions.*

> Participant 13: *To chair and members of the committee to say, look what you're discussing now is perhaps not relevant for this particular meeting or where it's in contravention with the Charter of a particular meeting, but in essence for me, how secretariat contributes to decision making is by providing clear directions and guidance.*

> Participant 3: *They're not playing, but they have conversations. They interact and there are rules, you know, so the secretariat is like a referee, you know, refereeing the process.*

Responses from *Participants 7, 12,* and *13* highlight how the university Secretariat supports accountability at the UoT, particularly in terms of promoting adherence to regulations or compliance. Responses, such as one from *Participant 7*, highlight the importance of timeliness for accountability, arguing that the mandate of the university Secretariat includes responsibility for project timelines and their verification. *Participant 12* states that the Secretariat supports decision-making through the functioning of statutory committees and structures, which is a critical function of the

Secretariat. Such a function creates accountability in that it enforces adherence to procedures and processes while allowing decisions to be made within the framework of a university mandate. The data indicates the neutral (or referee) role required by the university Secretariat to help ensure that the processes are complied with, with *Participant 3* pointing out that the university Secretariat's neutral position is evident while providing guidance to processes and adherence to regulatory requirements. The data show that the university Secretariat performs advisory functions, as it guides discussions, thereby promoting the relevance of discussions to the agenda and in conformity with the University Statute and Charter. The Secretariat also assists committee members by bringing relevant issues to their attention and highlighting any possible infringements of the Charter.

4.5.2 Theme 2: Monitoring and evaluation of decisions

The data presented reflect the views of the participants around the monitoring and evaluation of decisions made by the university Secretariat in supporting accountability:

> Participant 1: *When the decision is made and then after you have to as a person who's responsible for that, I can come back and report the progress made on your submission, whether it was by Senate or APC and whatever that makes it easy and you make things flow and you can hold people accountable.*

> Participant 15: *Thing I think that's one of the critical points because management is dependent... Many decisions are dependent on, you know, meetings that have happened, discussions and resolutions that have been taken. So, by keeping accurate minutes, that's how secretariat contributes*.

> Participant 16: *The role of secretariat is to ensure that you know those principles of governance and management are being pursued and also achieved because the records that are being produced and kept by secretariat is the how can I say the yardstick that we use.*

> Participant 4: *Secretariat helps management to also evaluate themselves in terms of achieving objectives and targets within the strategic plan. So, in that way Secretariat plays a big role in fulfilling the strategic objectives of the university.*

The statements from Participants 1, 4, 15, and 16 provide insights into how the university Secretariat supports accountability through providing support for the monitoring and evaluation of decisions at the UoT. The views of *Participant 15* stress that accurate minutes are instrumental in information dissemination for managers that, in turn, form a basis for informed decision-making. According to *Participants 1* and *16*, the Secretariat plays a critical role in promoting that the principles of good governance are observed through good recordkeeping and following up on the progress of decisions taken and the implementation of resolutions. The approach enhances accountability in that management can review their practice against the university's strategic objectives and governance frameworks. According to *Participant 4*, in the Secretariat, providing the information and documentation required, management is in a better position to undertake a review on how best the institutional objectives are achieved.

4.6 CONCLUSION

The chapter has presented the findings based on the three research sub-questions. For the first question about expected and actual roles, the data brought forth such themes as the expectations of the Secretariat being an information and processes repository, sharing information, and managing meetings. Other roles that support the Secretariat to enact their functions are to act with integrity and operate with capacity and collegiality. However, there are role challenges related to power dynamics and meetings not taking place as scheduled or documentation being provided late. These challenges not only limit the effectiveness of the Secretariat but also university governance procedures in general. The findings for research question two show that the Secretariat supports decision-making at the university in various ways, such as in keeping records, managing decision-making processes, communicating and collaborating, aligning decisions and resolutions, and compliance management. In support of accountability in terms of research question three, the study shows that the Secretariat undertakes this role through promoting compliance and the monitoring and evaluation of decisions. The findings indicate that the Secretariat is engaged in diverse roles and responsibilities towards the support of institutional governance and efficiency. The next chapter will discuss the findings in relation to the literature and theoretical framework.

5. CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a discussion of the research findings with a focus on the roles of the Secretariat at a UoT in South Africa and the extent to which their roles support accountability and decision-making. The chapter presents a discussion of the findings, guided by each of the three research questions, aligned with the review of the literature and the theoretical framework.

5.2 THE EXPECTED AND ACTUAL ROLES OF UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT

The findings of this study indicate that the expected roles of the university Secretariat at the UoT include acting as an information and process repository, sharing information, and managing meetings. The enactment of these roles is supported by acting with integrity, capacity and collegiality. However, there exists some misalignment between the expected and actual roles of the Secretariat, which can undermine its potential to contribute to institutional governance at a higher level. The expected roles were found to be:

5.2.1 Expected roles of the university Secretariat

Information and process repository: The findings from this study seem to point toward an expected role for the Secretariat as a central hub for university information and processes, implying a responsibility to secure the preservation and ready access of information and documents. The Secretariat is expected to act as a central point for managing and disseminating critical information, to support smooth operational processes within the university. This requires careful knowledge management (Shattock, 2006). The Association of Australian University Secretaries (2024) notes the critical importance of managing records and archives. The findings suggest that the positioning of the Secretariat as an information repository can significantly contribute to accountability and, hence, the transparency of the institution in its governance operations.

Information sharing: This study found that the Secretariat facilitates information

sharing through meeting arrangements and established communication channels. The Secretariat is expected to facilitate discussions, share relevant information, and coordinate efforts to achieve common goals. The findings also point to the university Secretariat functioning as drivers for collaborative environments through engaging with different stakeholders. Small and Lew (2012) refer to this as a liaison role. This linking practice not only enhances internal teamwork but also supports the cultivation of a trusting environment where departments can unite to pursue common goals.

Meeting management: Meeting management emerged as one of the key roles played by the Secretariat, which includes the logistics related to meetings as well as the record keeping for the distribution of information to the relevant stakeholders. The Secretariat is expected to organise, coordinate and manage meetings, making certain that agendas, minutes, and decisions are accurately recorded and followed up on. The study findings emphasise this role, noting that managing of meetings should not only relate to organisational support but also the involvement in promoting that such meetings contribute to sound decisions and promoting an environment conducive to transparency, accountability, and productivity. Hatch (2018) similarly underscores the key role in preparing and presenting information that supports decision-making.

5.2.2 Aspects that support the actual roles of the university Secretariat

Acting with integrity: The Secretariat is required to uphold high standards of confidentiality and integrity by managing sensitive information and acting in the best interests of the institution. The Secretariat can promote that the institution holds itself in high esteem through stringent adherence to ethical standards, thereby further promoting transparency and equity within decision-making processes. Stakeholder trust can be built or maintained, especially when dealing with challenging and sensitive matters, if the Secretariat treats matters with confidentially, integrity and impartiality. The reputation of the institution is facilitated by secretariats that can maintain high ethical standards, ensure transparency, and support decision-making with fairness. This is supported by Strike (2019, p. 28) who highlights that “Good governance empowers, supports and encourages decision-takers, simplifies and improves decision-making processes and demonstrates trust and competency to others”. The attention to integrity significantly contributes to the trustworthiness of the secretariat who have to deal with sensitive issues that require tact and objectivity.

Capacity and collegiality: The Secretariat requires the resources and capacity to be able to carry out its functions. Similarly, Strike (2019) highlighted the importance of secretariats having the competencies to carry out their roles with empathy. The Secretariat can be more successful in a collegial atmosphere. This highlights the utility of the agency theory (Angwin, 2015) as the effectiveness of the governance roles between university leaders and the secretariat is affected by the collegiality of the relationships. If the institution invests resources (such as training) in the members of the secretariat then then this function is likely to perform better, reducing possible conflicts of interest. The study found that skills development is an area that could be enhanced for the Secretariat at the UoT. The university could provide customer-oriented training and continuous development programmes tailored to the secretariat environment. These programmes would equip the secretariat with the necessary skills to effectively engage with stakeholders, foster trust and cultivate positive working relationships.

Role Challenges: Due to power dynamics, the Secretariat may face pressure not to act with integrity, especially around records management. Agency theory (Angwin, 2015) can be used to assist in managing potential conflicts of interest. Effective stakeholder engagement is vital for securing strong support and positive reception of the secretariat's initiatives, thereby enhancing its ability to achieve its objectives. Therefore, addressing agency challenges through improved record management practices and strategic stakeholder engagement strategies is vital for the secretariat's success. The study also found that the Secretariat faced challenges related to meeting documents not being made available on time as per request, and meetings being postponed or not going ahead as scheduled. This finding could relate to the broader institutional governance challenges, since the UoT has been placed under administration several times. To partly address the challenges related to meeting management, the secretariat should consider implementing technology to streamline meeting scheduling, reminders, and communication to foster open communication channels and encourage active participation from stakeholders. An integrated information technology system can provide those in charge of making decisions with assistance in making the appropriate decisions at the appropriate times. Such a system supports the effective and efficient implementation of the decisions made (Şuşnea, 2013).

5.3 THE UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT'S SUPPORT FOR DECISION-MAKING AT A UNIVERSITY

The literature points out that the Secretariat is integral to the decision-making process in universities by providing crucial administrative support. Particularly in the decision-making process (Tarter & Hoy, 1998), the Secretariat within a University is directly involved in the latter part of the process (making the decision, implementing the decision, and monitoring and evaluating the decision). The Secretariat is a channel for "sharing information, soliciting feedback, and engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes" (Subramanian & Rathish, 2024, p. 57) that can promote trust and transparency. This suggests that an effective Secretariat not only supports the logistics of decision-making but also contributes to the transparency and neutrality of the process.

The findings of this study regarding the roles of the university Secretariat in supporting decision-making at a South African University of Technology indicated five key themes: record keeping, process management, communication and collaboration, alignment of decisions and resolutions, and compliance management. Each theme highlights the Secretariat's pivotal role in promoting effective governance, transparency, and compliance within the institution. The findings are discussed below.

5.3.1 Record keeping

The findings show that the Secretariat supports decision-making by preparing and maintaining accurate records of meeting resolutions. Accurate documentation provides a foundation for future reference. Studies by Akagha et al. (2023) and Adams (2020) support this, emphasising that proper documentation and meeting management practices are fundamental to good governance. The Secretariat, therefore, plays an important role in step four of the decision-making process (Tarter & Hoy, 1998) by recording the decision that was made. The accuracy of such records enables further actions related to such a decision, such as its implementation.

This study's findings indicate that decision-making is strengthened through systematic attendance management and meticulous recording of discussions and decisions. The Association of Australian University Secretaries (2024) and Bovaird and Löffler (2015) highlight that structured recordkeeping promotes transparency and procedural

adherence. The study indicates that the Secretariat's efforts in recording resolutions, distributing minutes, and managing attendance support accountability and help move towards a culture of informed decision-making. Agency Theory supports this, as Kettunen and Kantola (2020) point out that structured meeting management minimises agency problems by basing decisions on documented discussions, rather than personal discretion, thereby enhancing institutional integrity.

5.3.2 Process management

The findings indicate that the Secretariat supports decision-making processes by organising the necessary steps, follow-ups, and coordination between stakeholders. The role of recording and distributing information to various stakeholders is essential for equipping management with the necessary knowledge and information to develop action plans. This process can support responsibility and effectiveness in university governance. The Secretariat, therefore, plays an important role in step five of the decision-making process (Tarter & Hoy, 1998) by recording the progress on the implementation of decisions taken and sharing this information. According to the Association of Australian University Secretaries (2024), regular meetings, updates, and open communication are vital for maintaining engagement and addressing institutional challenges. The report further emphasises that Secretariat members must be accountable, fostering an environment of transparency and informed decision-making. Agency Theory aligns with this view (Kettunen & Kantola, 2020), highlighting the Secretariat's role in mitigating information asymmetry between university leadership and stakeholders, assisting management to act in the best interests of the institution.

5.3.3 Communication and collaboration

The findings highlight the significant role of the Secretariat in supporting decision-making through communication and collaboration, enhancing the sharing of ideas, feedback, and consensus-building. Well-structured governance frameworks, as indicated by study participants, are critical in relaying information and fostering stakeholder confidence and cooperation. Additionally, the findings suggest that active listening and feedback mechanisms support well-informed decisions through accurate capturing of discussions and by gathering insights from a variety of stakeholders. A report by the Association of Australian University Secretaries (2024) supports this,

noting that participatory governance enhances decision legitimacy by incorporating diverse stakeholder input. If decision-making processes are designed to be “inclusive, participatory, and evidence-based”, this promotes “informed choices that align with the institution’s mission, vision, and strategic goals” (Subramanian & Rathish, 2024, p. 58). In this context, the Secretariat’s role in promoting communication and collaboration helps to support that decisions align with institutional goals. Agency Theory (Angwin, 2015) further underscores this function, as it helps bridge the principal-agent gap by setting a clear and effective information exchange between governing bodies and university administrators.

5.3.4 Alignment of decisions and resolutions

The Secretariat supports consistency by aligning decisions and resolutions with those of previous meetings, thereby contributing meaningfully to decision-making and governance guidance. If decisions or resolutions are not adhered to or followed-up on, the Secretariat needs to raise this issue. The study findings emphasise the importance of preserving institutional memory, facilitating access to knowledge, and promoting accountability and transparency in university processes. The findings underscore the Secretariat’s duty to maintain accurate records of decisions and resolutions, maintaining alignment with institutional objectives. Shattock (2006) emphasises that knowledge management enhances documentation and information sharing, improving university operations. From an Agency Theory perspective, Xing et al. (2023) reflect that effective knowledge management reduces the risk of misalignment between university management and stakeholders, facilitating informed decision-making based on accurate institutional records.

5.3.5 Compliance management

The findings indicate that the Secretariat promotes alignment with relevant policies and procedures. The findings show that tracking compliance enables management to exercise oversight, fostering stronger governance and institutional sustainability. This means that decisions are not taken in isolation (or in a vacuum) but as part of a governance framework. Agency Theory supports this function, as it promotes that the Secretariat acts as a governance and communication mechanism to align the interests of university leadership with institutional policies, mitigating risks associated with non-

compliance. These findings highlight the importance of discharging delegated duties in line with policies as part of higher education governance. As Kivistö (2008) notes, Agency Theory further contextualises this, emphasising the role of governance structures in minimising risk exposure by safeguarding that decision-making aligns with institutional objectives and stakeholder interests.

5.4 UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT SUPPORT FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

The findings from this study suggest that the Secretariat's role in maintaining comprehensive records and providing necessary documentation to external bodies supports institutional accountability. Strike (2019) notes that the Secretariat's work in in supporting good governance, through ensuring alignment with relevant regulatory frameworks, is vital in holding university leadership accountable for their decisions. This discussion of the findings is based on the extent to which the Secretariat supports accountability at the UoT. The discussions of the findings are guided by the two themes that emerged from the analysis of the data: compliance, monitoring and evaluation.

5.4.1 Compliance

The university's Secretariat makes a significant contribution to enhancing accountability in the institution by promoting compliance with regulations and monitoring the timelines for project execution. The study shows that the Secretariat is also responsible for the standardisation and review of its operations, as this promotes accountability and efficiency. This is supported by Strike (2019) who indicates the need for regular review of the Secretary's role and how it functions to ensure there is objectiveness, impartiality and independence in carrying out the role.

Through the statutory committees and the organisational structures, the Secretariat seeks to ensure that the decisions made are aligned with the governance framework and that individuals and committees are responsible for their activities. The study further suggests that the Secretariat advises in terms of guiding discussions so that structures and meetings comply with the University Charter. This aligns with the argument by Strike (2019) about the importance of the advisory role to leadership. A forward-looking perspective on regulatory oversight, as the Association of Australian University Secretaries (2024) posited, creates a setting in which compliance may be anticipated

and observed; this underlined criticality therefore operates at every level of the institution's setup.

5.4.2 Monitoring and evaluation

The findings indicate that the Secretariat promotes transparency by facilitating processes to monitor and evaluate decisions, thereby seeking to enhance accountability in decision-making processes. Minutes of meetings and other information shared by the Secretariat to other stakeholders at all levels within the university promote shared goals, commitment to the institution and transparency in decision-making processes. According to Shattock (2006), the sharing of information by the Secretariat instils a culture of accountability in that the stakeholders can gauge their performance against set institutional objectives. The findings suggest that information sharing by a university Secretariat has the potential to cultivate a culture of accountability. The Secretariat, therefore, plays an important role in step six of the decision-making process (Tarter & Hoy, 1998) by supporting the processes for the monitoring and evaluation of decisions implemented and the sharing of this information.

5.5 CONCLUSION

The discussion of findings has indicated that the Secretariat at the UoT plays a supporting role in facilitating effective governance, decision-making, and accountability in this institution. The main findings that emerged were that the multilevel functions of the Secretariat include securing documentation, holding transparent meetings, seeking to enforce policies, and managing information sharing. However, there are some role challenges for the institution to address in promoting good governance. Regarding the decision-making process, the Secretariat plays an important role in supporting the making of decisions, the implementation of those decisions and the monitoring and evaluation of those implementations. In its multi-functionality, it was established that this role contributes to effective collaboration, promotes ethical behaviour, and enhances the institutional memory to support informed decision-making and accountability. In general, the Secretariat appears to play an important role that underpins many of the university's strategic objectives while supporting and promoting the sustainability of its governance framework.

6. CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides conclusions of the study in terms of its findings and recommendations. The conclusions of the findings are based on addressing the research questions: the expected and actual roles of the Secretariat, their approach in supporting decision-making processes and accountability, and how these impacts on the general operations of the case of a University of Technology in South Africa. Recommendations are also provided in this chapter, with suggested approaches on how some of the gaps identified could be addressed, and the potential impact in the implementation of such approaches. The chapter ends with a reflection on the study in terms of the implications and possible directions for future studies. Figure 6-1 provides an overview of the themes for each of the research sub-questions.

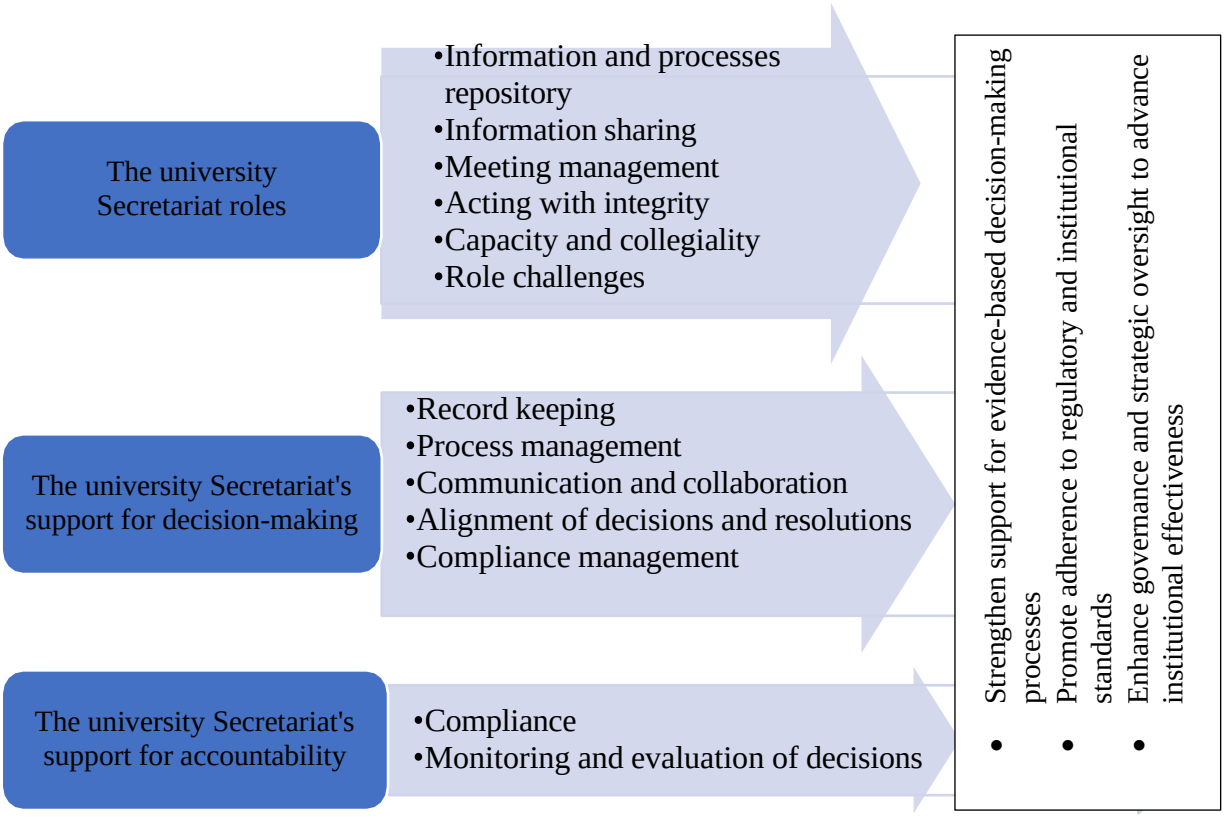


Figure 6-1: A summary of the main roles and the ways of supporting decision-making and accountability.

Source: Researcher's own adaptation

6.2 EXPECTED AND ACTUAL ROLES OF THE UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT

This study highlights the expected and actual roles of the university Secretariat. The Secretariat plays a role in information sharing and collaboration, facilitating communication across departments and fostering a cooperative academic and administrative environment. Additionally, it manages the meetings of defined governance structures (governance framework), helping to support institutional compliance and accountability. Strike (2019, p. 38) notes the multiple roles required in this often complex support process:

> *"Secretaries are often part of the contested decision-making process; ensuring the decisions needed are well-framed, considered in the right place, by the right people, that those involved are well-informed, that the decisions needed are transparently made, the outcome recorded, retained and communicated."*

In practice, the Secretariat role requires members to act with integrity, given the nature of the sensitive and confidential information discussed in meetings. By safeguarding sensitive information and upholding ethical principles, the Secretariat supports institutional credibility and stakeholder confidence. It also requires the capacity to carry out its functions to align with management expectations and is enabled in this role by positive collegial relations. Some further support is needed in capacity development for the diverse components of the Secretariat's roles. Additionally, the Secretariat faces role challenges related to power dynamics and meeting structures not performing as expected (with postponements or delays). Agency theory has assisted in making some of these challenges more visible. These governance challenges need to be addressed more broadly within the university to improve overall effectiveness. Overall, the findings indicate that the Secretariat's role is pivotal to support operational efficiency, collaboration, and governance within the university.

6.3 UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT SUPPORT FOR DECISION-MAKING

The University Secretariat of UoT fulfils a variety of roles that support different decision-making processes, promoting structure, transparency and accountability. The first aspect of the Secretariat that supports decision-making is accurate record-keeping. This includes the structuring and managing of different meetings, following through with issues that were addressed, and documenting outcomes that promote transparency

and accountability for decisions made. The second aspect of the Secretariat that supports decision-making is the management of decision-making processes. This requires the set up and coordination of various administrative procedures with efficiency in decision-making (Gilloz, 2022) and the capacity to support the strategic interests of the institution. The aspect of the Secretariat in communication and collaboration at the university has also been noted, as the Secretariat can support an environment of openness where information is circulated, and departments work collaboratively in making decisions. Such practices can facilitate informed decision-making, as well as seek to ensure that different viewpoints have been taken into account.

Another fundamental role is the alignment of decisions and resolutions, where the Secretariat acts as the repository of institutional memory and documentation. This is accompanied by in-depth records from the Secretariat of past decisions and policies, which provide a historical context for supporting the making of viable and informed decisions. Compliance management and adhering to procedural execution seek to support the institutional standards of consistency, equity, and adherence to regulatory frameworks. The findings show that the Secretariat can play a fundamental role in providing support in the making of decisions at the university. This is done through different approaches to support, as discussed in Chapter 5.

6.4 UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT SUPPORT FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

The UoT's Secretariat fulfils several key roles that can help in institutionalising a culture of accountability. The Secretariat fulfils a compliance role through monitoring adherence to policies and standards at the institutional level; this, in turn, helps to promote uniformity and equity in practice, contributing towards a transparent governance environment. This collaborative environment helps to embed accountability within day-to-day practices, wherein stakeholders are better informed and more capable of decision-making with more open processes. In supporting governance, the Secretariat can strengthen accountability through the establishment of clear frameworks and protocols to guide the activities of institutions and their decision-making processes. This includes the support for monitoring and evaluation processes for decisions taken through reporting on institutional progress towards implementation and asking for updates.

These aspects enable the Secretariat to promote accountability within the university and to promote institutional trust and integrity.

6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING THE ROLE OF THE SECRETARIAT

To improve the performance and effectiveness of the Secretariat at the University of Technology in supporting decision-making and accountability, the following recommendations address identified gaps, their implications and suggested solutions.

6.5.1 Enhanced Secretariat Skills Development

The study examined the expected and actual roles of the Secretariat and found a challenge regarding secretariat staff being expected to meet certain professional standards; however, staff themselves felt they needed training and greater support. It is therefore recommended that management ensures that Secretariat staff are afforded opportunities for skills development to fulfil their expected roles.

In the private sector, qualifications are relevant to the role of Company Secretary, requiring specific qualifications and experience (Strike, 2019). There is also a professional body called the Chartered Governance Institute of Southern Africa (CGISA), which professionals can join and offers programmes for those working in corporate governance (Robinson, 2019). In Australia, there is similarly an Association of Australian University Secretaries (2024). However, there appears to be no similar professional body for university Secretariat members in South Africa. The establishment of such an institute or professional body for university administrators may help to professionalise administrative roles in the sector and increase opportunities for professional development.

6.5.2 Information and Communication Technology Support for Decision-Making

The study found a possible risk relating to power dynamics between meeting chairs and the secretariat, as well as challenges relating to meeting documentation not being available on time or meetings not taking place as scheduled. Relevant role players do not always adhere to the expected timelines, resulting in delays or sometimes the

postponement of meetings. The University leadership could look to strengthen the Secretariat's role in promoting adherence to protocols to strengthen governance support. From the perspective of the Secretariat, these challenges could be partly mitigated by enhancing the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) processes and systems for document management at the university. As noted by Şuşnea (2013), such a system supports the effective and efficient implementation of the decisions made. A digital documentation system could be used to ensure better organisation of and tracking of records and follow-ups to promote decision accountability. An ICT system could also support better meeting management.

6.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE AT THE UOT

The study's findings are situated within this distinct context of a UoT in South Africa, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities present in an environment where the university was under administration. The recommendations provided have significant implications for university governance, particularly in terms of promoting institutional efficiency, accountability, and transparency. Addressing the gaps between the expected and actual roles of the university Secretariat will contribute to a more structured governance framework, with the Secretariat being able to extend its work beyond administrative tasks to support strategic decision-making. This alignment will help to enhance policy implementation, institutional planning, and the Secretariat's overall contribution to governance structures.

Introducing digital documentation and meeting management systems may streamline decision-making processes, facilitate better communication between key stakeholders, and strengthen institutional memory. Strengthening governance support and policy implementation will reinforce compliance mechanisms and improve policy enforcement. Increased engagement between the Secretariat and university leadership will better align governance practices with institutional objectives, fostering a stronger culture of accountability and responsiveness. Ultimately, these improvements will lead to a more robust governance system that promotes institutional effectiveness and stakeholder confidence.

6.7 LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The limitations of this study are based on several factors, with one being the limited scope of the study by focusing on only one university (a single case), rather than investigating the roles of University Secretariats at multiple universities (multiple cases) in the country. These findings stress the critical role played by the university Secretariat in enhancing governance, decision-making, and accountability within a South African University of Technology, although due to the nature of the qualitative study, the findings are not generalisable to other universities in South Africa. Future research that investigates the role of the Secretariat across multiple universities can reduce this knowledge gap. Particularly, it would be of interest to evaluate differences (if any) between universities with well-established governance structures and those with a history of governance challenges to assess whether similar issues arise in different settings. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of Secretariats.

Additionally, this study has particularly focused on the expected and actual roles played by the University Secretariat. The findings have shown that the roles consist of different functions that are enacted as well as different skillsets or dispositions that can support such functions. Future research could further investigate alignment and differences between Secretariat roles (i.e. the provision of administrative, logistical and governance support) and Secretariat functions (or specific activities) required to perform those roles, as well as the principles or behaviours that guide how the roles and functions are executed. Additionally, this could be mapped to specific skillsets required.

The study highlights the need for further research on how the institutional context affects the role of the Secretariat, how specific governance structures, resources, and leadership styles can either enable or constrain the Secretariat's ability to perform effectively. Exploring this aspect will provide further insights into contextual challenges and opportunities that shape Secretariat functions in different universities. Understanding the interplay between institutional context and Secretariat performance is essential for designing targeted interventions to strengthen governance structures across diverse higher education environments. The research primarily focused on internal stakeholders, given that the university was under administration. Future studies

may consider incorporating external stakeholder viewpoints (such as current and past Council members, alumni and DHET officials) to provide a more comprehensive perspective. Given the changing nature of university work and increased reliance on technologies, future studies could also focus specifically on digital transformation and its impact on the Secretariat's role. Further research is needed on how technology can further support governance and accountability in South African higher education.

6.8 CONCLUSION

This study has underscored the university Secretariat's essential role in enhancing administrative functions and strategic objectives, ultimately contributing to effective governance and accountability. By acting as an information hub, facilitating decision-making, and fostering collaboration, the Secretariat fosters institutional memory and promotes transparency. Staff capacity building and collegial relations are key for navigating complex governance challenges, while the commitment to confidentiality and integrity strengthens stakeholder trust.

The findings highlight the need for ongoing improvements in the Secretariat's practices to align with the university's strategic vision and adapt to future challenges. These continuous improvements will enhance its role as a driver of organisational effectiveness and collaboration within the institution and maintain its responsiveness to the evolving needs of the higher education environment. Overall, the study illustrates that a proactive Secretariat is significant for sustaining high standards of governance and achieving the institution's long-term goals.

7. REFERENCES

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8. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Questions:

Questions for Secretariat Staff participants:

a) What is the intended or expected functions of the Secretariat?
b) In practice, how do you enact your role and responsibilities?
c) What are some of the challenges you face in enacting your role and responsibilities?
d) How does your role and responsibilities support decision-making?
e) To what extent do you support accountability processes in the University?
f) How does your role fit into the bigger picture of the University's efforts to reach its strategic goals?
g) How involved is management in helping the Secretariat fulfil its mission in support of University governance?
h) What recommendations you can make for the Secretariat to better support management in decision making and accountability at the UoT?
i) Do you have any general comments to add?

Questions for all participant groups, except the Secretariat:

a) What is the intended or expected functions of the Secretariat?
b) In practice, how do the staff members of the Secretariat enact their roles and responsibilities?
c) How do the roles and responsibilities of the Secretariat support decision-making?
d) To what extent does the Secretariat support accountability processes in the University?
e) How involved is management in helping the Secretariat fulfil its mission in support of University governance?
f) What is the impact of the Secretariat on the operations at the UoT in terms of achieving strategic goals and strategic vision?
g) What are some of the main governance, decision-making and accountability challenges at the UoT?

h) What recommendations can be made for Secretariat to better support management in decision making and accountability at the UoT?

i) Do you have any general comments to add?

Appendix B: Ethical Clearance

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE: **WSG-2023-53**

PROJECT TITLE: **The role of the secretariat in enhancing decision-making and accountability in a University of Technology**

INVESTIGATOR	Julia Mabuya
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	School of Governance
DATE CONSIDERED	29 June 2023
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Minimal Risk
EXPIRY DATE	Date of submission of the Research Report

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 14 March 2024

CHAIRPERSON _____
Rekgotsofetse Chikane

cc: Supervisor:

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature _____ **Date** 15/03/2024

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix C: Gatekeeper letter

MUT
MANGOSUTHU
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Research Directorate

UMLAZI KWAZULU-NATAL
PO Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban
Tel: 031 907 7450

28 February 2024

REF: RD1/09/2024

Ms Julia Mabuya
Secretariat
Mangosuthu University of Technology

Dear Ms Mabuya

PROTOCOL: 'The role of secretariat in enhancing decision-making and accountability in a University of Technology.'

The MUT Research Ethics Committee considered your application at their meeting held on 19 February 2024. It is my pleasure to inform you that permission to conduct the research project above was granted.

The approval is valid for two years from 19 February 2024. Any changes to the project must immediately be brought to the attention of the MUT Research Ethics Committee.

Your acceptance of this approval denotes your compliance with South African National Research Ethics guidelines (2004) and the MUT Research Ethics Policy, Procedures and Guidelines

Good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr A Mienie
Director: Research