

Navigating Complexity: Strategies for Developing 'Fit for Purpose' Leadership in Contemporary Higher Education

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Abstract – In an era marked by rapid technological advancements and evolving societal demands, higher education institutions face unprecedented complexity in leadership. This conceptual research explores strategies for cultivating 'fit for purpose' leadership that aligns with contemporary educational challenges. By synthesizing existing literature, this paper argues that institutions of higher learning have evolved, therefore creating a gap between leadership and higher education. This paper further argues that this evolution came as a result of global technological advancements and digital transformation. Thus, there is a need for curriculum redevelopment for digital era. The paper also argues that quality assurance, globalization, and internationalization are very significant, thus emphasizing the need for strategic leadership that aligns with societal and political expectations. In essence, the paper argues strategies for Developing 'Fit for Purpose' Leadership in Contemporary Higher Education. The paper underscores the importance of fostering collaborative leadership, promoting innovation, and developing policies and curricula aligned with the digital era's demands. Recommendations include investing in leadership development, promoting ethical leadership, and enhancing the role of women in leadership positions within higher education.

Keywords – Leadership, Fit-for-purpose, Digitalization, Higher Education Institutions, Policies, Quality assurance

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1 Introduction

The landscape of higher education leadership and management is evolving rapidly, presenting a complex and ever-shifting environment that demands personnel with the necessary skills, strategies, and insight to be 'fit for purpose' in the current era. The landscape of higher education leadership and management is marked by complexity, constant change, and significant challenges (Sibi & Miranda, 2022). In the contemporary era, the demands placed on personnel in academia necessitate a diverse range of skills, strategies, and insights to ensure they are fit for purpose. Thus, Adams, Kutty and Zabidi (2017) stated that an era of accelerations has been ushered in by the forces of information technology, globalization, and the knowledge-driven economy, propelling changes in both schools and society. For example, Covid-19 forced higher education institutions to embrace digitalisation. This propels leadership and management to adapt to avoid perishing.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper, it is imperative to distinguish leadership and management. According to Drugus and Landøy (2014), leadership refers to the position that promote behaviours of nurturing the achievement of organisational objectives. Leadership is seen as leading at an informal group level, with the leader being the one who leads this group, in contrast to management, which is thought to be more of a formal, institutionalized sort of leading (Bolden, Gosling & Hawkins, 2023). Leadership denotes the capacity to persuade others to complete the work. Both managers and leaders exist to curry the same mandate with regard to achieving institutional goals, particularly in 21st century.

21st century is characterised by technological acceleration, societal change, globalisation etc. thus, transformational leadership theory can be perceived as an outstanding theory that can be useful in the 21st century. As stated by Korejan and Shahbazi (2016: 452), "transformational leader is inspiring and creative and leads people in a way that they try more than their abilities in the organization and also invent and innovate in their work area".

Transformational leadership theory posits that effective leaders inspire and motivate their followers to exceed their own self-interests for the collective good of the institution (Kariuki, 2021). Idealized influence and inspirational motivation in a microfinance context: Review of literature. In other words, leaders who employ transformational leadership inspire followers through their vision, charisma, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. In higher education, transformational leaders can foster a shared vision, encourage creativity and innovation, and empower faculty and staff to reach their full potential.

Taking into consideration how higher education have been forced to change drastically in last 3 years (Covid-19 era) and over the years (prior Covid-19 era), transformational leadership theory can be a useful leadership style that can be useful in the in the 21st century. Transformational leadership theory continues to be highly relevant and useful in the 21st century. In fact, it is particularly well-suited to address the complex challenges and rapid changes that organizations, including higher education institutions, face in the

contemporary era. Besides, “scholars and theorists believe that transformational leadership management is more effective” (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016).

Leadership in higher education is critical to the success and advancement of educational institutions in the 21st century. As stated by Alexander (2020), by Today's higher education landscape is vastly different from that of the past, with increasing competition, technological advancements, globalization, and evolving student demographics. As such, effective leadership in higher education requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates strategic vision, innovation, collaboration, and a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Therefore, this paper explores the multifaceted challenges faced by leaders and managers in the contemporary higher education context and emphasizes the importance of adapting to meet the evolving demands of this dynamic sector.

2 Methodology

The study made use of secondary data sources, including books and journal articles. As a result, the paper is qualitative in nature and makes an argument on the challenges of managing and leading higher education in the digital age using the desktop method.

3 Evolution of South African higher education

Leaders and managers in higher education must acknowledge how South African higher education has changed. According to Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2019), the development of higher education in South Africa has been a dynamic and transformational process that has been greatly impacted by historical, social, and political variables. Understanding this progression offers understanding of the difficulties, developments, and objectives of the nation's higher education system. Since the end of apartheid, higher education institutions in South Africa have seen a tremendous transition. This is well documented in literature (Botha, 2009; Lefa, 2014). Higher Education institutions as a whole have worked to rectify past inequalities and foster a setting that is favorable to learning, research, and innovation with an emphasis on inclusion, equity, and quality education. Perhaps this was one of the reasons certain institutions were not future-focused since they were still working to correct historical inequities. However, it is still unclear to what extent these institutions' administration and leadership have successfully adjusted to the shifting demands of students, scholars, and society at large. What is important to note is the post-apartheid evolution. For example, the #Fees must fall movement that drastically changed the landscape of higher education. The aftereffects of the movement are still being felt in the current activities of institutions of higher learning. Since then, the Students' Representative Councils (SRC) in higher education seems to have more power in influencing the day-to-day activities of an institution, from how to write assessments, when to make submissions and class attendance. As a result SRC in higher education are more radical than ever before.

South Africa's higher education system has undergone a significant transition since the end of apartheid. Access, equity, quality, and relevance have been the focal points of important projects. Primarily emphasis has been increasing student enrollment, especially for historically underrepresented groups. Financial support programs, such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), were established to assist students from low-income backgrounds (Mngomezulu, Dhunpath & Munro, 2017). However, there are currently a lot of protests taking place due to NSFAS funding for students. Students feel entitled to NSFAS funds to the extent that if there is a delay in the allocation of funds, students resort to protest to demonstrate their demands. Leadership and management of higher education should be more evolved on how National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allocates student's allowances.

It should also be noted that efforts (e.g. NGap) over the years were also made to increase the representation of black academics (women) and administrators within institutions (Sadiq, Barnes, Price, Gumedze & Morrell, 2019).

Furthermore, the South African government introduced policies to enhance the quality and relevance of higher education. The Higher Education Act of 1997 established a framework for governance, management, and quality assurance. The establishment of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) further strengthened quality assurance mechanisms.

There has been an emphasis on research, innovation, and involvement with society in order to match higher education with the demands of the nation's growth. According to Coetzee, Neneh, Stemmet, Lamprecht, Motsitsi and Sereeco (2021), universities should be encouraged to respond more quickly to the social, economic, and technical issues that South Africa is facing. Partnerships between higher education institutions and industry, as well as community engagement initiatives, have become more prevalent.

4 Technological advancements and digital transformation

The integration of digital technologies and creative solutions to improve teaching, learning, research, and administrative procedures within educational institutions is referred to as technological advancements and digital transformation in higher education (Benavides, Tamayo, Arango, Branch & Burgos, 2020). It involves leveraging digital tools, platforms, and data-driven approaches to improve the overall educational experience and outcomes for students, faculty, and staff.

Higher education has been significantly impacted by the digital revolution, which has changed administrative, teaching, and learning procedures. Leaders and managers must adopt new technologies and successfully integrate digital tools and platforms into their organizations. In order to do this, it is necessary to support online learning, use data analytics for informed decision-

making, put in place effective administrative systems, and make sure cybersecurity precautions are in place. To stay ahead, leaders must also foresee upcoming technology advancements and make the necessary adjustments.

The use of digital transformation is currently increasing. Higher education institutions are currently modifying their processes, business structures, and practices in order to adapt to new technologies. According to Alenezi (2021), the objective of digital transformation in higher education institutions is to develop novel, state-of-the-art, and effective methodologies and practices to advance the goal of higher education.

Additionally, according to Eden, Burton-Jones, Casey and Draheim (2019), digital transformation is being adopted progressively at educational institutions throughout the world to ensure that students' learning is supported by digital technologies. Thus, in the context of the contemporary knowledge society, the digital transformation must be considered as a critical process in which the production of knowledge and the processing of information take place through information technologies such as virtual reality, online learning video integration, gamification, and big data (Alenezi, 2021).

Alenezi, Wardat and Akour (2023) alluded that technological advancements and digital transformation in higher education have the potential to enhance accessibility, personalized learning, collaboration, and innovation. However, it is crucial to ensure equitable access to technology, digital literacy training, and data privacy and security measures to mitigate potential challenges and ensure that the benefits of digital transformation are realized by all stakeholders in higher education.

5 Curriculum redevelopment for digital era

Leadership and management of higher education institutions are faced with a challenge to review curriculum designed before the digitalisation and transformation. For example, taking into consideration that teaching and learning shifted to online platform due to Covid-19. Covid-19 brought a radical transformation in institutions of higher learning, particularly in the South African contexts because online teaching and learning was not promoted because most curriculum design prior Covid-19 became outdated overnight.

Digital age has the potential to usher in a well-designed curriculum that incorporates technological transformation and modern-day education. Such kind of curriculum will result into a new advanced generation of professionals. New professionals that will be able to be productive in the new world of work. However, designing a new curriculum brings sets of challenges that require institutions of higher learning to involve relevant stake holders (industries, students, academics, government, etc). Thus, the main factor that needs to be taken into consideration is to design a curriculum that is relevant and current, a curriculum that takes into consideration societal needs and demand, flexible curriculum that.

Besides, according to O'Neill (2015: 9), "the curriculum is highly influenced by the social, physical, economic and cultural environment". Furthermore, the new curriculum may come in two forms, minor changes to current curricula or

major changes. It is critical to understand the distinction between minor curriculum adjustments and complete curriculum reform when considering curriculum redesign (Oliver & Hyun, 2011). The curriculum is frequently modified at educational institutions, usually by the faculty who alter specific courses or instructional strategies. It is important to note that adjustments (minor or major) of curriculum can be influenced by discipline, programme or relevance of the qualification.

This can also improve graduations. According to Glover, Law and Youngman (2002: 294), graduateness is “defined as the effect on knowledge, skills and attitudes, of having undertaken an undergraduate degree, and ‘employability’ defined as the enhanced capacity to secure employment”. Therefore, an improved curriculum will result in improved graduations. Besides, Uchiyama and Radin (2009) believe that an improved curriculum provides an effective strategy for articulating, aligning, and integrating learning outcomes across a sequence of courses and explicitly identifying to students, instructors, administrators and external stakeholders how student learning outcomes are delivered within a degree program. Thus, all these factors play a significant role in the graduation of students in higher education.

6 Institutional policies fit for digital era

Policies in higher education play a fundamental role in day-to-day activities. There are policies in place that play a significant role in both the review and development of curriculum at the national level as well as the institutional level. For example, Teaching and learning policy, Assessment policy, plagiarism policy, Academic Quality Assurance Policy, Language policy, SAQA, HEQSF, etc. Besides, policies provide guidance, accountability, consistency, efficiency, and clarity on how curricula can be developed or reviewed. For example, assessment policy provides an assessment framework for the institution.

However, another factor that needs to be questioned is the relevance of these policies and frameworks because they were also instigated before COVID-19, and some institutional policies did not factor in online teaching and learning as well as online assessment. Thus, before we can discuss the impact of policies on curriculum, the question is, are these policies in question relevant to developing and reviewing curriculum in these trying times? Therefore, institutional policies need to be updated to maintain the relevancy of the curriculum. On the contrary, Mzangwa (2019) believes that policy amendments may disadvantage black people in South African society in terms of access, equity and participation in higher education. Instead, “the rich continue to afford and gain access to Higher Education whilst the poor majority, consisting mainly of black people, seem not to benefit from the introduction of policies aimed at transforming higher education in South Africa” (Mzangwa, 2019: 2).

7 Changing demographics and student expectations

Changing demographics and student expectations in higher education refer to the evolving characteristics and preferences of the student population (Howell, Hamilton & Jordan, 2023). These changes may have a significant impact on higher education institutions in terms of enrollment, program offerings, teaching methods, support services, and campus culture. According to Irons and Elkington (2021), modern higher education institutions function in a diversified and globalized world while serving a student body that is getting more and more diverse and has a range of expectations. Leaders and managers must comprehend the changing demography and adapt their strategies accordingly to ensure inclusion, diversity, and equality inside their organisation. They must devise plans to accommodate the changing needs of children, including those for individualised instruction, adaptable program alternatives, and strong support systems.

Higher education institutions should update their policies, curricula, services, and campus environments in response to changing demographics and student expectations. They must strive to create inclusive and supportive learning environments, integrate technology effectively, and enhance career preparation initiatives to meet the evolving needs and expectations of today's diverse student population.

8 Financial pressures and funding models

Financial pressures and funding models in higher education in South Africa are significant factors that influence the accessibility, quality, and sustainability of tertiary education (Ayuk & Koma 2019). Higher education institutions face significant financial pressures, including declining government funding, increased competition for grants, and rising operating costs. Nevertheless, this is a historical problem which was also tried to be addressed through the #Fees-must-fall. Ayuk and Koma (2019: 177) further stated that “Since 2015, South Africa has witnessed heightened tensions between the demand for increased HE access at a lower cost to the students (or their sponsors) with the expectation of maintaining globally competitive educational standards”. The “#Fees-Must-Fall movement focused on the financial struggles of historically disadvantaged black students in South Africa” (Raghuram, Breines & Gunter, 2020: 95). As a result, institutions of higher education are still experiencing challenges that # FMF posed. Free quality education in higher education is still another aspect that came because of #FMF. In the main, time management and leadership in higher education, only get instructions from the Department of Higher Education and training regarding how student financing is handled through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). However, NSFAS often delays students’ payment of allowances, which often results in student protests because students see such kind of initiative as an entitlement. In other words, DHET “must” give students monthly allowances and pay their tuition fees. Thus, the management and leadership in higher education are not being proactive about this matter. Maybe it is because they

may have minimum influence on student funding, but their intervention regarding this is questionable.

Leaders and managers must possess financial acumen to develop sustainable funding models, seek alternative revenue streams, and make strategic budgetary decisions. To preserve their university's financial stability, they also need to handle the complexity of tuition pricing arrangements, scholarship programs, and fundraising initiatives.

Higher education institutions in South Africa are under heavy financial hardship due to rising tuition fees, increased student enrolment, and funding restrictions from the government. Various financing mechanisms should be used to solve these issues, including government funding, donations, research grants, public-private partnerships, and student financial aid. Therefore, working with external stakeholders to build sustainable finance methods that guarantee affordability, access, and high-quality education is essential. By encouraging fair access and improving the standard of education delivered, finding creative solutions and diversifying financing sources will help ensure the long-term financial sustainability of higher education in South Africa. However, this can be possible through adequate leadership and management in higher education.

Another important aspect that needs to be highlighted is the issue of students' backgrounds. Other students can afford tuition fees others can't. This also interrogates diversity among students.

9 Quality assurance and accreditation

Quality Assurance and Accreditation in higher education play a significant role in maintaining an institution's integrity. According to Harvey and Williams (2010), quality assurance and accreditation are essential elements of South African higher education, serving to ensure the quality, relevance, and credibility of academic programs and institutions. These processes are governed by various regulatory bodies and frameworks, aiming to maintain standards, protect student interests, and promote institutional integrity. This is maintained through the Council on Higher Education (CHE), Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), internal programme audits, institutional academic review and institutional policies.

With heightened emphasis on accountability and quality assurance, leaders and managers in higher education must navigate the intricacies of accreditation processes, compliance with regulatory frameworks, and the delivery of high-quality educational programs. They must put in place reliable quality assurance procedures, perform continuous improvement, and ensure that their procedures align with industry standards and best practices. Effective leadership and management are essential to establish a culture of excellence and institutional excellence.

Quality assurance and accreditation are essential components of South African higher education. The CHE (CHE, 2020), through its regulatory bodies, ensures that institutions and programs meet the required quality standards,

enhancing the credibility and reputation of the sector. These processes contribute to continuous improvement, protect student interests, and promote international recognition of South African qualifications. According to Myburgh and Calitz (2022), South Africa aims to provide a robust and globally competitive higher education system by upholding quality assurance and accreditation.

10 Globalization and internationalization

Knight (2008) asserts that globalization and internationalization are becoming more prevalent in higher education. Given that South Africa is a developing nation, globalization and internationalization are especially important there. These procedures entail the incorporation of global viewpoints, partnerships with foreign institutions, and academic and student mobility.

According to Rensburg, Motala and David (2015), South African higher education is becoming more international as institutions collaborate internationally, draw foreign students, and participate in worldwide research networks. In addition to navigating the intricacies of foreign collaborations, leaders and managers must guarantee cultural sensitivity and diversity and build plans for successful international hiring and retention. In addition to promoting multicultural understanding and navigating the intricacies of global policies and regulations, they must encourage a global perspective.

Internationalization and globalization are of utmost significance in South African higher education. These procedures can improve academic quality, increase academic possibilities, increase global competitiveness, promote economic growth, solve social issues, encourage cross-cultural interaction, and develop global citizens. By embracing internationalization and globalization, South African higher education can stay relevant, connected to the rest of the world, and prepared to handle the challenges of a world that is changing quickly.

11 Societal and political expectations

Societal and political expectations for higher education significantly influence the function, objectives, and operation of universities. These expectations reflect society's changing needs and demands and are driven by larger social and political factors. Many stakeholders' expectations and needs are considered since higher education institutions function within larger socioeconomic and political settings (Stephens, Hernandez, Román, Graham & Scholz, 2008; Berghaeuser & Hoelscher, 2020). The intricacies of public views, political objectives, and shifting societal expectations must be navigated by leaders and managers. They must participate in efficient stakeholder management, convey to society the importance of higher education, and promote the interests of their institutions.

Brennan (2008) claims societal and political expectations shape the role and responsibilities of higher education institutions, particularly in the South African context. These expectations may include equitable access, workforce

preparation, research and innovation, community engagement, ethical development, democratic citizenship, governance and transparency, and social responsibility. Higher education institutions need to actively respond to these expectations, adapt their strategies, and collaborate with stakeholders to fulfill their societal obligations and contribute to the betterment of society.

12 Recommendation

As stated earlier, Modern higher education leadership and management function in a complex and constantly changing environment that poses many problems and necessitates that staff members have the knowledge, abilities, and perspectives necessary to be "fit for purpose" in the modern period. Considering this, it is suggested that the following actions be taken to improve the efficiency of management and leadership in higher education in South Africa.

12.1 Foster collaborative and inclusive leadership

Given the complexity of the higher education landscape in South Africa, leaders should cultivate a collaborative and inclusive leadership style. This involves actively involving stakeholders, such as faculty, staff, students, and external partners, in decision-making processes from both local and international spaces. Engaging diverse perspectives and fostering a teamwork and shared governance culture can lead to more effective decision-making, improved problem-solving, and increased buy-in from the university community. Institutions of higher learning exist in a global market. Therefore, interrelations with both local and international stakeholders can promote the university's global status. Leaders and managers should actively engage with external partners, including government, industry, and community organizations, to address the challenges and complexities of the contemporary higher education landscape.

Collaborative partnerships can bring about opportunities for research, funding, internships, and community engagement, contributing to the institution's relevance and impact. The South African higher education landscape faces numerous challenges, such as limited financial resources, expanding student enrolment, and the need to bridge the skills gap between academia and industry (Chetty & Pather, 2015). To address these challenges, visionary leaders should adopt a collaborative approach, forging partnerships with external stakeholders, and embracing digital innovation to enhance teaching and learning. Furthermore, leaders must proactively address social and economic inequalities by ensuring equitable access to education and opportunities for all students.

12.2 Embrace Strategic Thinking in the 21st Century

The 21st century is characterized by change and transformation. Therefore, strategic thinking in higher education should be promoted for institutions of higher learning to remain relevant. Leaders and managers in South African

higher education need to adopt a strategic mindset that goes beyond day-to-day operations. They should have a clear vision for the institution's future, anticipate and navigate challenges, and identify opportunities for growth and innovation. Thus, the institutional vision must also be revised. Strategic thinking involves considering long-term goals, analyzing the external environment and making informed decisions that align with the institution's mission and values.

12.3 Capital Develop change management competencies

Leaders and managers must possess strong change management skills in today's rapidly evolving higher education environment. They should be able to anticipate and adapt to change, effectively communicate the need for change, and provide support and resources to navigate transitions. For example, the shift which was brought about by Covid-19 proved that leaders and managers must possess strong change management skills. Change management competency involves fostering a culture of agility, resilience, and continuous improvement, while also addressing the concerns and uncertainties of stakeholders.

12.4 Invest in professional development and continuous learning

Leaders and managers should prioritize their professional development and continuous learning to be fit for purpose in the contemporary higher education landscape. This includes engaging in relevant training programs, attending conferences and workshops, and staying abreast of emerging trends and best practices in higher education leadership and management. Lifelong learning ensures leaders are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to address evolving challenges. However, the leaders and managers should also invest in personnel development.

12.5 Foster innovation and entrepreneurship

The contemporary higher education landscape demands leaders and managers who can foster innovation and entrepreneurship within their institutions. With the current unemployment rate in the South African context, leaders and managers should encourage students to be innovative as well as business minded. Students should leave institutions of higher learning with the aim of being employers, not employees. Thus, leaders and managers in higher education should create an environment that encourages experimentation, supports interdisciplinary collaboration, and nurtures entrepreneurial thinking among faculty, staff, and students. This can involve creating incubators, supporting research commercialization, and forging industry and community partnerships.

12.6 Promote ethical and values-driven leadership

Higher education institutions have a major role in preparing the younger generation for a propitious future. Apart from imparting quality education, they need to instill high ethical values and practices in the student fraternity (Nair, 2014). Practicing ethical behaviour should start with leaders and managers. Leaders in higher education should prioritize ethical leadership and uphold the institution's core values. They should demonstrate integrity, transparency, and accountability in decision-making processes and ensure ethical conduct throughout the organization. Leaders must also champion diversity, equity, and inclusion, promoting a campus culture that embraces and celebrates the contributions of all individuals.

12.7 Promoting the culture of women in leadership

Promoting a culture of women in leadership in higher education in South Africa requires concerted efforts at multiple levels, including institutions, government, and society. This can be done through establishing clear gender equality policies and practices as well as through leadership development and training programs designed specifically for women. In other words, promoting a culture of women in leadership in higher education in South Africa requires a multifaceted approach involving policy changes, leadership development programs, empowerment initiatives, addressing bias and discrimination, flexible work policies, collaboration with external partners, research and data collection, and institutional support and accountability. By creating an inclusive and supportive environment, higher education institutions can empower women to assume leadership roles and contribute to the advancement of the sector and society.

13 Conclusion

The contemporary higher education leadership and management context is characterized by complexity, constant change, and significant challenges. To be 'fit for purpose' in this era, leaders and managers must possess diverse skills, strategies, and insights. They must adapt to changing demographics, embrace technological advancements, navigate financial pressures, prioritize quality assurance, embrace globalization and internationalization, and respond to societal and political expectations. Leaders and managers can steer their institutions towards success by effectively addressing these challenges, fostering innovation, excellence, and societal impact in the ever-evolving higher education landscape.

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