

# **Is it as simple as saying ‘Educational Management and Leadership Challenges?’ When the walls are shaken, cockroaches will fall: Head -on -collision with real challenges facing University leaders in Africa: Reality check in Botswana**

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## **Abstract**

Universities education Management is in the throes of a major transformation. This calls for a dedicated-entrepreneurial leadership crew set to release ‘the leadership nuclear’ amour at appropriate times to avert failures that could possibly be prevented. Decreasing public confidence, increasing concerns about higher education from state legislators, growing regulation at the state and national levels, fiscal challenges, globalization and other major concerns are facing African universities and higher education generally. This paper describes key principal and dynamic challenges confronting university leadership today, and provides a leadership operational framework that debunks these challenges. The paper is further premised on the fact that the university sector in Africa is experiencing unprecedented challenges affecting effective execution of their mandate. What is valuable about this study is enshrined in the study’s two leaf portal namely–providing a quality but comprehensive summary description of the prevailing common and unique challenges faced by Universities in Africa. Secondly the study provides a dossier to tackle selected leadership models that address these challenges in order to positively advance university education to the appropriate levels into the 21st century and beyond. Third and last, the study provides a platform for debate in dealing with contemporary challenges faced by current leadership within universities in Africa. I argue that the findings of this paper, contribute to the existing imbalances of information that characterize the current research in higher education. This contribution is particularly significant given the ongoing expansion of higher education throughout the world. The results of this study can be a foundation for futuristic research and assessment: for areas that require assessment in most African countries - aid in achieving a greater level of unification throughout most universities by amalgamating education policies and the adoption of policies and strategic planning to deal with various challenges

alluded to throughout the study. Who knows; the glimmer of hope comes amid growing pressures on higher education leaders from within their universities and diverse outside forces, uncertain economic conditions, and the rapidly growing influence of technological innovations. The present study will provide a definitive direction and position in terms of the challenges under investigation. The study further helps leaders in Universities to reflect on their own qualities as academic leadership and such reflection may help improve their leadership styles to achieve positive outcome and effective management of existing challenges.

Key words

**Educational Management, University leadership, Challenges, paradox of reality, Vision and Mission**

### **1.1 Introduction and Background to University leadership and challenges**

In 2004, Geoff Scott (2004) noted in his key note address to the Australian Universities Quality Forum on effective change management that the motto for higher education leadership now must be: “Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas”. Failed change in higher education has costs—not just economically but strategically, socially and psychologically

African universities find themselves trapped in the globalization ‘talk’ and ‘doing’. The volatile higher education landscape that needs to meet the challenges of globalization needs to develop leaders who are able to drive the institutions into the twenty first century. Almost two decades ago, Deem (2004) argued that higher education landscape faced several challenges, including international competition, and underfunding. The background of this research is anchored on the challenges faced by leaders in universities. Leadership in academia is, by some, regarded as more complex than leadership in the corporate world (Lowman, 2010; Ekman, Lindgren and Packerndorff, 2018). Understandably, universities meant to provide knowledge and conduct business for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual lecturers, learners or the institution as a whole. Arguably, the common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition. While giving and acknowledging specific circumstances in each university, I elected to focus on selected universities across Botswana for empirical data and relied on existing literature for universities across the continent. For many years, African universities have been certainly the engine driving change in our society. Typical of their actions includes performing research – alone and in collaboration – that improves lives of industry and societies in general and leads to new avenues of exploration. It is paramount to highlight that the challenges being interrogated cannot be discussed outside a post-pandemic world. The consumers of the outcome of this study should be quickly reminded here that, the COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the urgency for the Universities academic community challenges – and those of us who support it – to join forces to address these challenges. Prior to COVID 19, Universities were already suffocating from devious draw backs affecting tertiary education

performance. This study highlights the scale at which challenges are impacting university decision-makers and building tension across core university activities.

## **1.2 Composition of Administrative leadership**

Depending on the context of leadership, the common understanding of administrative leadership in universities is represented by individuals in permanent or fixed-term managerial roles such as Vice-Chancellors, University Presidents, Deans and Heads of departments ( Morris,2012, Sparr et el;2017). These nomenclatures can change depending on the education structures of a given university while performing the same roles. Understanding these individuals in their leadership capacities is fundamental to this paper, because these are the same persons confronted with the challenges the paper is interrogating and the same persons who need to provide cutting edge solutions to avert these challenges for the good of the university to which they belong. Fundamentally for the purposes of this paper, a leader is understood as someone who focuses on people, sets direction, motivates and inspires them, has long-range perspective, challenges the status quo, produces change and does the right thing. The quest to reach an understanding of leadership – on its nature and essence, its style and meaning, its exercise and practice – is difficult (McCaffery 2010:77-79). The source of the difficulty and challenges lies in the fact that leadership is an endless subject (Syrett & Hogg 1992; McCaffery, P., 2010,).

## **1.3 Methodology**

According to Kothari (2012) writing on research methodology stresses that, “Some people consider research as a movement, a movement from the known to the unknown. It is actually a voyage of discovery.” He further goes on to say that “Research methodology is a way to systematically solve the research problem.” While this study is not the first of its kind in investigating challenges faced by university leadership, the methodological direction adopted allowed me to explore on the unknown and the known for the common good. A blended approach was adopted in which existing literature has been explored to find out what other researchers have found on the leadership challenges and also an empirical study conducted to gather firsthand experience from those who are directly working in universities across selected institutions in Africa. It is in this perspective that this project is written. In fact, the purpose as indicated earlier was to find out challenges that leaders of Institutions of Higher Learning face. To realize that purpose, a descriptive survey was conducted. Thus, the project was done with the effort of respecting the rules of scientific inquiry. As an experienced educational leader and having worked in the education sector for more than 25 years, it helped me to undo the ‘stranger mentality to this study.

## **1.4 Literature Review**

Several studies conducted illustrate several challenges modern universities in Africa face (Soan, 2017, Trivella, 2012, UVFC, 2015, Rehbock, 2020). The growing complexity and increasing

challenges of the university, both internal and external, give rise to the demand and need for leaders to be more accountable to staff, students and society.

The table 1.1 below presents, as obtained from existing studies key challenges modern universities faces.

**Table 1.1 Summary challenges faced by Universities**

Challenge	Challenge articulation
Fiscal Realities and funding paradox	<p>The need to balance university funding cannot be overemphasized.</p> <p>The fiscal struggle among institutions of higher education has preoccupied the agendas of nearly every university administrator for the past half-decade</p> <p>Increasing costs, flat or decreasing budgets, increasing competition for learners and external funding, as well as strategic reallocations, and program cuts and closures, have been the dominant challenges for university leaders in Africa</p> <p>Ultimate or resulting fiscal challenge for university leaders is : to convince external stakeholders, such as the public and state legislators, of the need for increased resources to implement the expanding mission and growing public expectations, while simultaneously developing new operational models with internal stakeholders such as faculty, administrators, and staff - for integrated, quality enhanced, lower cost outcomes (Evers and Sieverding,2015,Braun et al,2016; Trivella ,2012)</p>
The communication gap between universities and their communities	<p>Literature shows the communication gap between universities and their communities is becoming so serious - as evidenced by declining community support</p> <p>Need for concerted strategic thinking, planning, and action on a level that parallels universities strategic planning efforts in teaching, research and service Universities, through lack of communication, have not always effectively "empowered" their publics to work on their behalf</p> <p>Ironically, university characteristics often act as obstacles to effective communication .This manifests in the highly specialized language of the academy and the "ivory tower" traditions that value splendid isolation and the solitary scholar.(De witt et al,2011, Rehbock,2020, Braun et AL,(2016).</p>
Mission and Vision myopia (Clarity of Mission and Identity)	<p>University, so often has the challenge and responsibility for effectively articulating and explaining its mission and goals as well as fostering an identity that reflects these priorities.</p> <p>Most often, universities try to be "all things to all people and teach everything, research everything and do every community kind of work." The mandate 'song' of the three pillars of university (Teaching, Research and Community service) is overly ambitious and ambiguous in pursuing institutional missions and goals. The leadership expected to spear head their own mission often fall short in understanding what they exactly ought to do.</p> <p>That universities are unsure or confused about their missions and goals, the</p>

	<p>great question that arises is-how can communities and policy makers be expected to understand the priorities, much less support them?</p> <p>One of the major leadership challenges for universities - is to clarify and communicate the University's mission and establish reward, policy, and organizational structures that reflect this mission (Shajahan et al,2013, Soan,2017, De Witt,2014)</p>
Deregulation and globalization of Higher Education	<p>Contemporary literature concurs on the tenet of deregulation of higher education across the tertiary education landscape</p> <p>One of the paradoxes challenging University education leaders is that universities must not only have a clear sense of purpose and mission , they also must be able to change, adapt and respond to ever new problems, increasing competition, new technologies, diverse populations, and often conflicting expectations and globalization</p> <p>(Shajahan et al,2013, Soan,2017, De Witt,2014)</p>
Pedagogy	<p>Resource based teaching calls for specific resources which are beyond the reach of many universities. The current staff may need radical tune up to cope with existing global demands on teaching strategies.</p> <p>(Das et AL,2011, Trivella ,2012)</p>
Curriculum Development,	<p>Existing curriculum in most universities no longer addresses industrial requirements rendering it irrelevant and obsolete.</p> <p>(Shajahan et al,2013, Soan,2017, De Witt,2014)</p>
Technology and Innovation	<p>Equipment needed to drive the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> revolution is inadequate both from the institutional and student perspectives making the IT revolution lag behind. Innovation in higher education often occurs under conditions of relative plenty, often with incremental dollars and under mild time pressures.</p> <p>The challenge to innovate usually carries with it both time pressures and reduced resources. Short deadlines and declining resources, unless handled with extraordinary skill and delicacy, lead to defensiveness, if not outright hostility, within both church and state and local jurisdictions</p> <p>Poor morale is an unpromising environment for thoughtful innovation.</p> <p>( Soan,2017, De Witt,2014)</p>
Unemployed graduates	<p>Dwindling public trust due to the increase in the number of unemployable graduates.(UVFC,2015)</p>

**Source: Compiled by Researcher (2022)**

### 1.5 Empirical studies on challenges

The following section of the study provides a brief stopover to look at existing studies conducted in other parts of Africa and the globe. This supports the studies perceptive that this study is not the first of its kind but a furtherance to existing researches conducted to examine critical

challenges facing universities in Africa and Botswana in particular. The table below provides a reflection of the empirical evidence being alluded to.

**Table 1.2 Snapshot studies: Reflections**

Program relevance (Hanna ,2003)	Hanna (2003) says that, “Higher education institutions around the world face the growing problem of relevance as they enter the 21st century.” The aspect of relevance, the content of curricula must be relevant to current trends in politics, economics, society, culture and all other domains of life. This without doubt will enable student-teacher interactions that meet the expectations of the 21st century.
Critical factors affecting education (DeWitt, 2014),	According to DeWitt (2014), ten (10) critical issues were identified and needed to be examined. Among these are common Core Standards, Student learning, technology, social media, politics, high stakes tests, school leadership, pre-service teaching programs, school climate and poverty. Very important are these factors for the development of the education system.
Educational development in the Carribean islands (McCarney, & Skolnik, 2005).	Research conducted in the Caribbeans (McCarney and Skolnik, 2005) shows that the overall development of higher education still poses a great level of difficulty to all the Caribbean countries, this lengthy case is linked to higher priorities other than research for innovation, culture and research. It was found out that universities needed to take measures in aligning themselves with different organizations and forming partnerships to sensitize the population on the importance of research to the region’s development; partnership proved to improve the research policy in the developing countries.

Source: Compiled by Researcher (2022)

### 1.6 Leadership dynamics

Management of University education depends on effective leadership in the creation of a conducive teaching and learning environment thus providing students with quality and relevant education. Daft and Das (2011) argue that the primary mandate for current and future leadership is founded upon results-oriented, solutions-driven and performance-based criteria and actions. In support of this, is Dixon (2003) who states that truly authentic leaders distinguish themselves in difficult times - they make their mark in a turbulent environment, characterized by uncertainty, dynamic change and major upheaval, conditions which are all symptomatic of African universities today. The need for leadership development models that can tackle modern day challenges cannot be over emphasized. The table below provides some key leadership forms

necessary to deal with contemporary challenges prevailing across universities in Africa and other parts of the globe.

**Table 1.3 Leadership models**

Leadership style	Articulation
Entrepreneurial leadership	Leaders in Universities know that times of great challenge are also times of great opportunity. Rather than being daunted by these and other problems, leaders should be at the forefront of innovation - responding in ways that are as unique as the universities themselves. Having an entrepreneurial mindset is a prerequisite to manage stagnation challenges (Dixon,2003,Soan,2017)
Team leadership	This type of leadership accepts multiple talents especially in turbulent environments. The notion of going solo does not work in these environments. Every member of staff has a role to play and must be a strong team player. (Trivella,2012,Daft,2008)
Institutional leadership	The institution has values that are clearly articulated and these values provide the leadership required collectively. Individualism does not work in these circumstances. Continuous development of the appropriate value is necessary despite it being a challenge on its own (Das et al,2011, Rehbock,2020, Das et al,2011)
Expressive leadership model	Emphasis is on the ability to complete set task-getting things done. The issue of close relationship is distant and main concern is that targets have to be met (De witt, 2014, Soan,2017).

**Source: Compiled by Researcher (2022)**

### 1.7 Findings

I selected seven (7) universities in Botswana and conducted in-depth interviews in search of the truth to support my literature review outcomes. The sample size consisted of three Vice Chancellors, seven deans, ten Heads of Departments and four professors. Below is a summary of the key findings as enunciated. The table below provides details of scores on eleven (11) most common challenges faced by universities in Botswana.

### Key

#### Prevalence (P) & Impact (I)

Score of five (5) on prevalence and impact with five (5) at high P & I and one (1) at low P & I

**Table 1.4 Score index**

5	4	3	2	1
High P & I	Medium P & I	Moderate P & I	Neutral P& I	Low P&I

**Table 1.5 Percentage score on challenge prevalence and impact**

Determinant	Score factor						% score by frequency				
	5	4	3	2	1	7	% @5	% @4	% @3	% @ 2	% @1
Vision and mission paradox	5	2	0	0	0	7	71	28	0	0	0
Funding and fiscal realities	7	0	0	0	0	7	100	0	0	0	0
Multidirectional communication	4	1	1	1	0	7	57	14	14	14	0
Technology, digitalisation and e-learning	5	0	1	1	0	7	71	0	14	14	0
Quality Research	2	4	1	0	0	7	28	57	14	0	0
Collaboration/strong networks	2	0	3	2	0	7	28	0	43	28	0
Diversity Management	0	0	4	3	0	7	0	0	57	43	0
Graduate labour market relevance	2	5	0	0	0	7	28	71	0	0	0
People resources	4	2	1	0	0	7	57	28	14	0	0
Student enrolment	2	2	2	2	1	7	28	28	28	14	0
Infrastructure dilapidation	2	3	3	1	1	7	28	43	43	14	14
Poor Management of available funds	3	2	1	1	0	7	43	28	14	14	0
Research paradox	3	3	1	0	0	7	43	43	14	0	0

**Source: Compiled by Researcher (2022)**

The above scoring in terms of prevalence and impact of the challenge on the performance of the university affected is heavily weighed against five (5) main common challenges which are exclusively Vision and mission paradox (100% score), funding and fiscal realities (100%) prevalent and impactful, technology and digitalization with four (4) rating themselves at 3 and graduate labour market relevance rating 2 and 5 on 5 and 4 score index respectively. It is therefore prudent to conclude, inconclusively of course, that from the sampled universities (names not provided for ethical reasons) failure to interpret vision and mission and define the university actual reason for existence is paradoxically a challenge to the majority of leadership. This is made worse by funding and fiscal challenges, irrelevant curriculum and lack of digital tools to redefine their competitive positions in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution. It is interesting to note that the findings from the literature reviewed (Das, A.; Kumar, V; Kumar, U. 2011, De Witt, 2014, Trivella, 2012) show no significant differences in challenges affecting both private and public universities with few exceptions, on funding models and enrolment issues- notably public sponsored universities have less challenges on funding and enrolment as they get



full support from the states as opposed to private universities that rely more on a different model despite government sponsoring some of the programs offered though selectively.

Further challenges emanating from the study include many, among others, changing management styles because the world is also changing fast are developing ethical values, develop strategies for implementation, involvement of critical stakeholders, lack of ongoing professional building , accreditation of programs by National Council for Higher Education in the respective countries handling social issues especially relationships, quality assurance to meet required standards, Code of conduct , regulating disciplinary actions , full time presence at the institution, shortage of administrative skills, lack of sensitivity to the needs of subordinates, resistance to change e.g. parents , over dependence on tuition paid by students , disagreements among leaders and this hinders progress, low technology integration in teaching and learning, pressure from politicians, students scholarships not equally distributed in the country, and students indiscipline especially from Public Institutions, poor Policy implementation approaches, wrong people doing the right job , poor leadership: ,administrative challenges leading to strikes, under funding for government institutions and the little fund allocated comes late. These findings are also reported in studies conducted by several researchers (UVC, 2015, De Witt, 2011, Rehbock, 2020).

The following two incepts [whose views were concurred with the majority respondents' views (88%)] provides a rich discourse on the experiences and challenges of heads of universities grounded on their day to day experiences: One of the Vice Chancellors had this to say;

*“The truth of the matter, in light of a broader analysis of change forces and challenges we face in higher education ( economic, technological, political, demographic and social changes) -the ever changing nature of national, local and university micromanagement, which essentially leads to nothing other than a paper trail. Over the years I find some practices beyond my influence of the university processes highly boring and more irritating, due to the levels of bureaucratic practices especially on financial matters and reporting structures and decision making processes. Additionally the present vision and the global requirements are distant apart. Technology is moving faster than us and we are under pressure to adapt to the world new order and sometimes the status quo binds and bound us backwards...” Vice Chancellor, (02)*

A head of department had this to say:

*‘We are in a dilemma whereas learning and teaching leaders we found ourselves trapped in academic paradox- in which we have ‘little room to lead’. Time consuming and unproductive meetings, dysfunctional systems, unnecessary bureaucracy, excessive reporting with no tangible outcome, too much talking, excessive paper work at the expense of real work, planning and review more than action, are getting in the way of us as leaders. The advent of google meetings and other online platforms have brought more confusion than anticipated benefits-it’s just a mess here...’ (Head of Department (05)*

## **1.8 Recommendations**

The major challenges have been the critical factors which cause retardation in the growth of higher education along with social and economic development among individuals in the region. Diffusing some of these challenges requires universities to start to redirect a portion of their resources, including faculty interests, and expertise, research priorities and of course service based activities from disciplined perspectives to community-based defined problems in a holistic manner. By doing so, most of the challenges being faced will fall off.

The need to have an entrepreneurial culture-starting with leadership is key to unlocking the value needed to deal with key challenges such as suffocated funding and fiscal realities, Vision myopia, obsolete programmes and communication dilemmas' just but to mention a few.

Tradition-bound universities rarely welcome the degree of change that is required to ensure they continue to thrive in the short and long term. The need for leadership in establishing a dialogue with all stakeholders in academia cannot be over emphasized. Thus the interchange must be continual, collaborative, and apply creativity to connect the old ways with new innovative and creative ones that promote learner learning, experience, and career preparedness thereto.

It is important indeed to advise those leading institutions of higher education –that they need leadership training in order to prepare them to address issues and or challenges that can happen in the course of their work especially when assuming leadership roles in universities (Trivella, Ipsilantis, Papadopoulos, and Kantas, 2012)

In line with this, Hill believes that there is a crisis in leadership in many sectors of society today and Higher Education is not immune to these concerns. There is need to build communities of leader-scholars, willing and able to learn and tackle together the challenges of contemporary academic life (Op. cit.).

Another significant recommendation to lay down here is that of creating space to build leadership. The etymology of the roles of a chief executive can serve as a rough guide. A university president is expected to be all three-administrator, leader and manager. . In fact, unless the executive delivers on the roles of manager and administrator, he or she is unlikely to be able to claim moral authority among the university to be a leader. In addition, unless able colleagues are found who are perceived as surrogates to serve the institution's administrative needs and deal with the countless issues, an executive will never have a moment to look for, let alone find, the right path.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

In my conclusion, I argue that our traditions as well as the stereotypic image of the universities held by many, regarding universities as the "fountain of knowledge" sets a tone of belief where universities are regarded as the dispensers of knowledge while other stakeholders such business, public, media, and policy makers are on the receiving end (recipients). Throughout this study

both from observation and personal experience, I argue in support of the University World News that in Africa, among other challenges, there is also lack of willingness to face challenges. University World News (2013) points out that, "There appears to be growing willingness in Africa to provide better oversight to higher education institutions. But academics, including vice-chancellors, are "not taking up the challenge to domesticate and harness the spaces they are given". This was one of the lessons learnt at a convening of higher education leaders and researchers from across the continent. The challenges faced by universities today can be eradicated if these institutions borrow Tom Peters argument on listening organizations where he argues for the need to listen to what the public and their representatives are saying that has value for informing our agenda. Notably in his book, *Thriving on Chaos* (Knopf, 1987), Tom Peters tells corporate leaders that "the listening organization is ... the one most likely to pick up quickly on changes in its environment." African universities, with their special mission to serve their communities, must be "listening organizations." From the literature survey conducted, it can be gleaned that both academia and industry require management and leadership development. Exploratory information shows that management and leadership qualities are imperative both at a floor level in dealing with the day to day operations as well as in the implementation of projects that require management commitment. It is only through this that many of the challenges will easily be eroded and dealt with decisively. University education industry is changing rapidly and the status quo is being challenged every moment. Deloitte's research has identified seven key challenges facing the sector, ranging from increasing consumer expectations to workforce attraction and retention. It is expected that higher education institutions have to and must think globally and develop a strong student and wider stakeholder value proposition which definitely differentiates them from their competition and turn some of the challenges into opportunities.

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