

## **Sustainable Educational Leadership in Post Covid-19 Era for Effective University Education in Nigeria**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper is about sustainable educational leadership in post Covid-19 era for effective university education. The paper presents university education as a bulwark against inequalities as effective university education addresses the importance of effective and sustainable university educational leadership in post Covid-19 era. This therefore calls for sustainable educational leadership in post Covid-19 era for effective university education in Nigeria. This paper contends that sustainable educational leadership is remarkably pivotal for innovation in the responses of educational leadership to the post COVID-19 era. To this end, the University leadership system must engage the expertise of existing diversity, equity, and inclusion of staff and stakeholders' staff to inform decision-making processes, create new structures to address immediate and remote decision-making needs, and alter existing processes to include more voices and participation in decision-making. This paper concludes that university leaders' personal attributes will help the university to adopt the strategy of sustainable educational leadership in post Covid-19 era for effective university education in Nigeria through decentralization, responsibility and adaptability, along with the experience leaders for University administrators. This paper therefore suggests that new mind-set, new attitudes and practices be incorporated into the new reality of universities to effectively harness the experience gained during the COVID-19 time for sustainable educational leadership in post Covid-19 era for effective university education.

*Keywords:* Sustainable, Educational, Leadership, Covid-19 era, University

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a sharp reminder that large scale, unpredictable events always bring about profound changes with significant consequences on many levels. In light of lockdown measures taken in many countries across the world to control the spread of the virus, academics were "forced" to adapt and move to online teaching, mentoring, research, and support teaching and learning activities in the university (Clausen et al., 2020). Academic leaders in higher education had to make decisions and to act quickly on how they were to manage large educational communities, addressing students', teachers', and staff's needs, as well as society's needs. Using an inductive approach, this paper seeks to highlight the main challenges faced by university leaders and to understand their responses to those challenges. Our focus is on the sustainable educational leadership in post covid-19 era for effective university education in Nigeria. According to Fernandez & Shaw (2020) Covid-19 pandemic brought several unpredictable challenges worldwide, forcing people to design and implement flexible solutions in order to adapt to the new reality. The crisis had a strong and deep impact on higher education at all levels. According to Fan et al. (2019) due to the complexity of higher education institutions and their multi-faceted mission of teaching, conducting research and contributing to society,

managing change in academia during COVID-19 become a profound challenge for university leaders.

Academic leaders are increasingly tasked with making day-to-day critical decisions that will shape the future of their institutions. Additionally, in light of the urgent and dramatic shifts, and needs which arose in the last few months, Heffernan & Bosetti, (2020) posits that universities have been confronted with various new issues and obligations toward students, staff, and academic audiences. Thinking ahead, this pandemic period could be the restart button that higher education needs. It might be an opportunity for universities to recalibrate their organizations and to build a more efficient, accessible, and adapted set of offerings to the knowledge-based society in the post-pandemic world of work. Therefore, the main goal universities should assume is to be ready to increase their community impact in a competitive environment (Hocine & Zhang, 2014).

According to Brooks & Jean-Marie, (2007) the process of designing future universities, academic leaders will play an essential role in providing and shaping sustainable educational leadership in the university. Given the increased complexity and diversity of situations that require immediate solutions, academic leaders will be making innovative decisions and responding to the needs of a sustainable education. In the middle of an acute crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic, academic leaders act under high psychological pressure, with great expectations from members of various organizations, institutions and the society at large for constant reassurance and support (Kohtamäki, 2019). However, the pressure of time, ambiguity, the lack of information, and high level of stress increase the difficulty of the decision-making process. In this context, wise academic leadership can help the organization become anti-fragile and resilient (Felix et al., 2015). According to Taleb (2012) making decisions in times of crisis requires great leadership competencies. Hence, analysing the perceptions and experiences of academic leaders as decision-makers in a university may provide valuable insights about the decision-making process in complex educational institutions during major crises, such as the COVID-19 crisis (Effanga & Dike 2020).

## **Conjectural Context**

### *Educational Leadership in Post Covid-19 Era*

As a large institution, a university is governed by diverse structures and management bodies, from Chancellors, Rector, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Vice-Rectors, and Deans to academic councils, department directors, administrative boards and such like. Due to these particularities, academic these different leadership management roles and titles, varying from strategic management, administrative roles to transformational and visionary roles (Nwokocha, et al., 2020). Even in normal times, coordinating all those decision for an effective, pre-determined educational goal can be very difficult (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Many scholars investigating leadership in higher education has proposed different models to conceptualize the dimensions of academic leadership. These researchers have also admitted the complexity and diversity of roles leaders in university education must play in order to sustain educational leadership in the university especially in a post COVID-19 era for effective university education (Zafar et al., 2020, Onyekwere et al., 2019)

According to Finkelstein et al., (2016) there is a leadership dimension related to teaching. An effective leader should inspire his colleagues to feel excited about learning and to make good decisions about the educational process. Secondly, there is leadership related to the research dimension of a university, emphasizing the role

of producing relevant knowledge assumed by higher education institutions. Galbraith and Jones (2010) opined that the next dimension in the model is related to strategy, vision, networking and focusing on setting a direction and advocating for it. Thus, an effective leader needs to formulate a clear vision for how to achieve that goal, which will provide a set of expectations as well as intrinsic motivation for colleagues (Nwokocha, 2019). Additionally, this vision needs to be advocated eloquently to the rest of the university, in order to obtain the resources needed to implement it. At the same time, Galloway and Ishimaru (2015) focuses on another three aspects of leadership which are:

#### *The motivational dimension*

Motivation dimension does not just refer to the factors that activate behaviours of educational leadership. It also involves the factors that direct and maintain educational goals and actions that are directly observable. It frequently appears in leadership and personal development programs as a tool that individuals and leaders can use to assess sustainable education.

#### *Recognition and interpersonal skills*

Recognition and interpersonal skill in educational leadership play a vital role in sustaining educational leadership to ensure that leadership is effective and efficient to meet institutional pre-set goals. When things are not going well, individuals can also feel frustrated. They can become bored or impatient, which can lead to some poorer behaviours. When these happen university education cannot be sustained in the post COVID-19 era. This can be overcome by reengaging effective and efficient educational leaders through a new set of challenges and an opportunity to deliver their cultivated leadership skills. It must be kept in mind that people do their best when working towards a common and collaborative goal with others. It is important though from a leadership perspective to help these individuals focus on their deliverable educational objectives as well as their social relationships and structures.

#### *Leadership by example recognition support*

Individuals with a high level of emotional need for achievement can be very effective leaders. Their desire for achievement means that they will face into their work and drive their teams towards high volumes of work and a high quality of delivery. Unfortunately, this drive can also be a bit of an Achilles' heel for these leaders. If they do not check their drive, and effectively manage their own teams, these individuals run the risk of overworking their team members and ultimately losing their follower-ship and support. They also face the risk of personal burn-out. A good leadership by example may need help to give themselves space to recover from the exertions and exhaustion of their work.

Trust has its own merits in developing efficient teams for a sustainable educational leadership in the post COVID-19 era. The reverberation of trust facilitates a proactive attitude of the faculty members, which contributes to the increase of the teams' efficiency. Through their positive attitude to work, like encouraging innovation and not complaining about difficult tasks, managers increase the performance of faculty members (Gigliotti, 2019). The feeling of the team and the sense of community was perceived as being a powerful resource for implementing effective decisions and face the challenges, which emphasizes the important role of a distributed leadership and the value of controlling uncertainty through building meaningful actions for university members. At the same time, Harris and Patton (2019) present

that sharing trust and common directions increased the psychological safety and effectiveness of members from the lower level of the organization.

The individuality and the effectiveness of the teams are supported by organizational resilience and flexibility. An organization that discovers its internal resources of adaptability and learning becomes more powerful in dealing with environmental demands (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). The pandemic forced leaders to find new solutions, to adapt, and the results did not take long to appear: teaching platforms, new approaches for the teaching process, and the advantages of offering education for students all over the world, new intra-university communication channels and so on. According to Hrabowski (2019) these achievements open new perspectives not only for the continued existence of universities, but also for their development.

The pandemic showed us new horizons and forced us to think from a new and innovative perspective. The challenge for academic leadership is how to encourage the necessary skill-set and mindset shifts for all who work in higher education (Kezar et al., 2019). The value of sustainable educational leadership is seen when leadership as a dynamic and collaborative process articulate the strategic goals for effective university leadership. At this point there is the effective distribution of responsibilities among staff (Jones et al., 2012).

### **Effective University Leadership in Post Covid-19 Era**

According to the crisis management model proposed by Leggon (2006) and applied to the COVID-19 crisis, there are some steps that every leader should be aware of in order to be effective in managing crisis. In the initial phase, it is important to frame crisis correctly and to communicate as early as possible the paths and methods that will be followed to manage crisis. At the same time, the exploration of the problem together with different experts and formulating a clear strategy with well-defined indicators are important steps in managing crisis (Malisch et al., 2020). Next, the leader should communicate the decisions and the chosen scenarios, and then commit to action. Finally, evaluating, learning, and adapting the efforts according to feedback is essential (Onyekwere et al., 2019).

Accordingly, from the above-mentioned model of crisis management, some recent studies on sustainable educational leadership in the post COVID-19 era has highlighted the most essential leader characteristics that bring effectiveness in time of crisis. Kusumaningrum et al (2019), Effanga and Dike (2020), Clausen et al., (2020), Zafar et al., (2019), Nwokocha et al. (2019) proposed four key-competencies for an effective educational leader:

1. Providing meaningful roles for developing and maintenance of role structure and goal direction, necessary for effective group performance achieved through planning, organization, co-ordinating, staffing, directing, reporting, budgeting.
2. Focusing on learning experiences through provision of adequate and effective resources, and allocating resources adequately to the necessary quarters to support effective teaching and learning.
3. Emotional agility and emotional intelligence to enhance resilience to adversity in the face of in the administration and management of university educational leadership.
4. Acknowledging fear of the unknown about the outcome or consequences of changes arising from crisis will increase university education leadership confidence. This will make them more open to teamwork and solution-oriented to the crisis. Great leaders will not be overwhelmed by fear of crisis that comes

as a result of university leadership, but will lead by respect which comes with proper experience and discipline.

Regarding academic leadership, the most important feature of leadership during the COVID-19 crisis that emerged in the latest publications on this topic brings distributed leadership to attention (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Usually, a university is a large institution with many faculties and departments, so a leader acting alone cannot succeed in a time of such a difficult crisis. According to Nwokocha et al. (2020) the academic leader should be the one setting the strategy and the institutional priorities and at the same time giving their team the autonomy to assume the responsibility of their own decisions based on the specificity of their faculties/ departments. Such a distributed leadership can be more effective in improving the quality and rapidity of decisions while increasing the sense of empowerment and motivation of each team (Rall et al., 2020). The challenges of such a complex period require that top leaders engage in an explicit delegation of leadership that values the leadership potential of the people in their organization.

The academic decisions of shared leadership helped universities find solutions adapted to the crisis and to make local decisions benefiting from greater organizational agility, innovation, collaboration, and shared support. A shared leadership paradigm helps a university to respond to a crisis through distributed leadership and an increase in responsibility at any organizational level (Ross & Berger, 2009). Moreover, distributed leadership means making connections between people at all levels of the organization facing the challenges of a crisis and allows the transformation to be felt as meaningful for everyone. Moreover, it promotes psychological safety in the organization. So, the role of leaders is crucial in guiding the institution through finding the most appropriate solutions for empowering, developing a culture of trust, and orienting toward solutions that lead to effective results (Rosser & Chameau, 2006).

At the same time, disrupting organizational norms, displaying courageous decisions, and engaging in proactive adaptation helps the transition from face-to-face activities to online, remote education. Academic leaders who see crises as strategic opportunities for innovation and using new technologies and techniques are the ones that bring the best results and practices. Effective leadership in crisis means risk taking, courage, flexibility, orientation toward goals and solutions, strategic vision and using an innovative approach meant to gain competitive advantage (Santamaría, 2014). Leaders with great flexibility and adaptability and the capacity to perceive a crisis as an opportunity are effective in their decisions and have a strong capacity to navigate through uncertainty and to learn from experience.

### ***Sustainable Educational Leadership***

Due to the specificity of the COVID-19 crisis, which brings a lot of stress and uncertainty, the leader's personal characteristics and leadership style are also very important for building trust and accountability in the organization. From this point of view, a servant leadership emphasizing a collaborative, empathetic, emotionally stable leader personality can help build a strong community through commitment to the needs of the organization's members (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006; Waterman, 2011). A servant leader also focuses on the motivational and aspirational aspects and recognizes followers' need for psychological support and belonging. Schuster and Finkelstein (2006), and Zumeta (2010) presented that if followers are treated as ends in themselves, rather than a means to an end, they will reach their potential and so perform optimally even in crisis.

Organizational factors are equally important in facilitating effective solutions in response to crisis challenges. Making effective decisions in crisis means building organizational resilience (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). A resilient university is one that adapts and improves its responsiveness to challenges through absorbing adversities and going further (Shields, 2010). The organizations that respond efficiently to crisis and changes are the ones that develop a culture of flexibility, learning from experiences, and orientation toward understanding the specificity of situations and of employees' issues (Small & Rentsch, 2010). Moreover, an adaptive university is oriented, through accepting unpredictable contexts and finding ways to transform them into opportunities, toward sharing their own values and having an impact on their communities. Due to the unpredictable and dynamic character of COVID-19 situation, educational leadership should cultivate dynamic, and interactive relationship between leaders' and situational factors, focusing on enabling adaptability, learning and innovation in within a context of knowledge-based organizations (Spillane, 2006). Furthermore, leadership strategies should be embedded in context, with leaders valuing their characteristics to shape the dynamic emergent processes, in order to face the adaptive challenges requiring new patterns of decisions. More specific, the main leadership functions derived from those processes are adaptive, administrative, and enabling, interacting one to each other to every level (Sprague & Massoni, 2005).

#### *Decision-making in post covid-19 era educational leadership*

The post-Covid-19 era has brought about shared governance which has been in decline for years, but has now receded even more on most university leadership. Since the pandemic occurred, there have been dozens of examples of reported overreach among governing boards and committees making unilateral decisions without input from faculty, staff, and sometimes even the administration (Staniscuaski et al., 2020). Thus, there was a decline in the rating of senior leadership, governance trust, governance purpose, governance understanding, governance adaptability, governance productivity, as well as ratings of appreciation and recognition from leadership. Additionally, there were concerns about being able to effectively conduct the work of research, service, and teaching. It is also important to note faculty perceptions related to leadership and governance was similar across all institutions regardless of institution type (Stillman, 2009).

#### *Utilizing the expertise of existing diversity, equity, and inclusion of staff and stakeholders staff to inform decision-making processes*

The changes that will be made at the university include altering tenure, promotion, and review policies; creating a modified evaluation process highlighting the need for documentation and adapted teaching expectations and evaluations; suspending teaching evaluations, establishing emergency funds for childcare and technology, and accommodating salary increases at the time of promotion based on productivity losses; and formally recognizing the intensified care giving demands. According to Uhl-Bien et al., (2007) an optional pandemic impact statement was provided for faculty to include in their annual review, promotion, and tenure cases. An atmosphere of openness is part of the cultural change that will advance the terms of a shared commitment and leadership to sustainable educational leadership in post Covid-19 era for effective university education in Nigeria

***Create new structures to address immediate and remote needs decision-making needs***

According to Wheatley (1999) the need for new structures that can support better decision-making and leadership during this critical times is vital. Faculty and administrative leaders in university education should design them, aiming to ensure better decision-making since this unrepresented group is specifically tasked with ensuring administrative strength, taking a proactive leadership approach advocacy and equity not neutral approach.

***Alter existing processes to include more voices and participation in decision-making***

It is vital for university administrators to be proactive on sustainable educational leadership in the post COVID-19 era for effective university education and reach out to various existing policy groups such as tenure and promotion committees, in how to handle the impact of COVID-19 in the university. Faculty should also include guidelines on how to quantify impacts of COVID-19 on their three academic pillars of teaching, research and service. Clear metrics, tangible benchmarks, and effective communication are critical for decreasing bias in merit and promotion decisions in university education leadership. Furthermore, the processes for supporting existing institutional decision-making structures and altering leadership processes for the inclusion of different individuals who might be more sensitive to the plights of students and staff is paramount. This can be achieved through inclusive communication, continued monitoring for equitable distribution of resources and conscientious attention to differential impacts on the workplace climate. Also, engaging campus leaders and experts in diversity, equity, and inclusion which will broaden participation in decision-making and ensure needed attention to faculty is also imperative to ensure greater accountability and transparency in decision-making (Nwokocha & Akaande, 2020).

**Conclusion**

This paper dwells on sustainable educational leadership in post COVID-19 era for effective University education. It provides insights on educational leadership in post covid-19 era, the motivational dimension, recognition and interpersonal skills, leadership by example recognition support, effective university leadership in post COVID-19 era, sustainable educational leadership, decision-making in post COVID-19 era educational leadership, utilizing the expertise of existing diversity, equity, and inclusion of staff and stakeholders staff to inform decision-making processes, create new structures to address immediate and remote needs decision-making needs and alter existing processes to include more voices and participation in decision-making.

This paper concludes that there are educational leader's personal attributes which emphasizes responsibility, adaptability and building on previous experiences as a leader. Behind this, is a pertinent combination of individual characteristics which are a strong proactive attitude and an assumed risk-taking behaviour, which will help the leaders sustain educational leadership in post COVID-19 era for effective University education and create meaningful leadership experiences even in crisis.

Leaders' personal attributes will help the university to adopt the strategy of unity through decentralization. Proving responsibility and adaptability, along with the experience, the university's top leaders can adopt strategies that will allow mid-level leaders of the institution to express their leadership styles, offering them the

freedom of action within a given general framework. When deans and heads of departments act responsibly, identifying viable solutions to continue the activity during and after the pandemic period, decentralization will give educational administrators the opportunity to create and apply new systems, to communicate in a new way, to find new advantages and solutions in order to be able to continue their activity. Once these new systems, procedures and solutions are tested and applied, university administrators should explore their potential of sustaining university educational leadership even in the post-pandemic period.

Allowing faculties and academics to decide and act independently within a given framework, leaders and administrators of the university should be able to show trust in administration. Their actions are expected to support and transcend the three themes of effective leadership of self-perceived trust of leaders, manifested through responsibility and adaptability. When this is efficiently put into practice at the institutional level, the strategy of unity through decentralization of the university should be further reflected by the desire to reinvent the University for a Sustainable Educational Leadership in post COVID-19 era.

### **Recommendations**

From this paper, the following suggestions have been recommendations have been made:

1. New mind-set, new attitudes and practices should be incorporated into the new reality of universities to effectively harness the experience gained during the COVID-19 time.
2. University leadership and management should provide tools for academics and faculty to provide insightful perspectives on university leadership dynamism to effectively manage the post Covid-19 era of university administration.
3. University leadership should provide trainings and initiatives to foster change, innovation, and adaptation for finding the best ways to address local, national, and global challenges.
4. University education leadership should provide faculty with care responsibilities with greater flexibility around research and teaching demands.
5. To inform and improve decision-making, leaders should maximize the inclusion of individuals who have expertise in diversity, equity, and inclusion. Inclusion could take the form of a new administrative structure like a rapid response team or integrating individuals into existing decision-making processes.
6. Administrators should embrace shared governance structures on campus rather than making unilateral decisions particularly on the key areas of priority setting, budget, admission, specifically as it relates to changes in programs and faculty.
7. Administrators should adopt a shared leadership approach and delegate decision-making authority to those closer to key decisions about faculty policies and practices and teaching and learning such as deans and department chairs.



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