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The Impact of Educational Leadership on Student Success in Higher Education: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Educational leadership is often regarded as the backbone of educational success since it considerably builds the capacity of the organisation in achieving its strategic goals. This paper examined the impact of educational leadership on student success in higher education, utilizing a qualitative literature review approach and gathered information from existing published documents and research work, such as articles, books, reports, and strategic plans. Based on the findings from the literature, the following recommendations are made for educational leaders in higher education: while leading their institutions, educational leaders should make an effort to implement strategic leadership and management in line with their institutions' vision, promote transformative change and innovation, implement cross-functional collaboration frameworks, enhance inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA), promote continuing professional development and growth, equip leaders and students with 21st-century skills, build health and wellness systems, promote resilience and positive attitudes in students, and engage students in decision-making, provision of student support services, and investment in education infrastructure and resources

Keywords: Educational Leadership; Higher Education; Graduation Rate; Student Success; Retention Rate.

Introduction

Leadership in Higher Education (LHE) comprises of individuals, groups, bodies, or committees that hold positions of power within an institution and are responsible for providing leadership towards the fulfillment of institutional goals, vision, and mission (Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis, 1996). LHE can be fulfilled in many ways, including as student bodies, program leaders, heads of schools, coordinators, deans, registrars, directors, and vice chancellors, and executive committees, senates, and councils, to name a few (Ali and Botha, 2006). Leadership positions are commonly designed in light of the institution's organizational structure and vision. As a result, the leader's approach is determined by his or her position within the institution as well as the nature of their function (Ali et al., 2006). Depending on their institutional goals, leaders are accountable for the vision and strategy, change and innovation, collaboration and communication, diversity and inclusion, professional development, well-being, and resilience, all of which have a direct influence on the academic success of students (Bakokonyane, 2022; Hallinger et al., 1996). Furthermore, educational leaders should ensure that their institutions provide curriculum and teaching methods that promote high standards of teaching, learning, research, and academic achievement among students, as well as enforce policies that eliminate discrimination

and unfairness and resolve conflicts within their institutions (Bush et al., 2016; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004).

Background

Leaders in institutions, including colleges and universities, have a great responsibility in demonstrating influence and ensuring institutional effectiveness, performance, and student success (Carrim and Shalem, 1999). Research shows that educational leadership is the foundation of educational success (Leithwood et al., 2004) and has a major and direct impact on both staff and students, and this progressively unfolds in student success, which can be measured by students' retention and graduation rates (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Problem statement

The problem statement is based on the challenges that exist in the context of educational leadership, including vision and strategy, change and innovation, collaboration and communication, diversity and inclusion, professional development and growth, and well-being and resilience, all of which contribute to student success in higher education. These challenges are further elaborated as follows:

- **Vision and Strategy:** The primary responsibility of educational leaders is to develop and communicate a clear and compelling vision and strategy for their institution or function. A vision is a statement of what the institution or function aims to achieve and why, whereas a strategy is a plan for achieving the set goals in order to realize the vision. However, developing and implementing a vision and a winning strategic plan may be challenging, especially when leaders confront conflicting demands, changing markets, obligations to regulators, and opposing external forces. Also, the corporate, business, functional, and operational strategies are most often not clearly defined and integrated to achieve the core educational mandate of the institutions. This creates a gap in effective strategy implementation (Bush and Glover, 2002; Bush, 2003).
- **Change and Innovation:** Leading and managing innovation and change in their institutions is another strain faced by educational leaders. Although innovation and change are necessary to maintain the quality and relevance of education, they can also lead to resistance, ambiguity, and conflict among leaders, and this may negatively impact student success (Bush et al., 2002; Bush, 2003).
- **Collaboration and Communication:** Facilitating and improving stakeholder collaboration and communication is the third problem facing educational leaders. Building trust, exchanging knowledge, resolving issues, and accomplishing objectives to a large extent depend on effective stakeholder collaboration and communication, especially with stakeholders that have direct influence on the institution's strategies and vision (Kujala, Sachs, Leinonen, Heikkinen, and Laude, 2022; Bush et al., 2002; Bush, 2003).
- **Diversity and Inclusion:** Another challenge for educational leaders is to accept and encourage diversity and inclusion in their educational settings. Diversity and inclusion are the awareness and respect for people's differences and shared characteristics, such as backgrounds, cultures, identities, skills, interests, etc. Diversity and inclusion are vital for improving fairness, teamwork, and quality of education, but they can also bring problems, such as judgments, preconceptions, exclusion, and conflict of interest, leading to poor student success (Bush et al., 2002; Bush, 2003).
- **Professional Development and Growth:** Another responsibility for educational leaders is to pursue and facilitate professional development for themselves and their staff members. Professional development and growth are the continuous learning and enrichment of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that increase the performance and well-being of educational leaders and employees. Professional development and growth are necessary for keeping up with the ever-changing educational landscape, but they may be challenges, especially when there is limited time, finances, or motivation in professional development (Bush et al., 2002; Bush, 2003).
- **Well-being and Resilience:** Maintaining and improving resilience and general well-being is another challenge facing educational leaders. Resilience and well-being are crucial for maintaining educational

leaders' motivation and efficacy, but they may also be challenges, mainly when they are stressed, burned out, isolated, etc. (Bush et al., 2002; Bush, 2003).

Research objectives

This paper was directed by the following research objectives:

- To evaluate the role of educational leadership in shaping student success in higher education.
- To examine characteristics of effective educational leaders in higher education.
- To determine the impact of educational leadership on academic performance and retention in higher education.
- To examine strategies for enhancing student engagement through educational leadership in higher education.

Research questions

This paper sought to answer the following research questions:

- How does educational leadership shape student success in higher education?
- What characteristics distinguish good educational leaders in higher education?
- How does educational leadership impact student academic achievement and retention in higher education?
- What are some strategies for enhancing student engagement through educational leadership in higher education?

Significance of the study

In the context of Botswana's educational setting, visionary leadership that envisages a future in which students are equipped with the right tools, skills, and knowledge lays the groundwork for educational greatness and economic development (Bakokonyane, 2022; Moswela, and Kgosidialwa, 2019; Swami, Gobona, and Tsimako, 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to assess the impact of educational leadership in shaping student success in higher education in the context of Botswana, identify and examine the characteristics of effective leaders in higher education, develop strategies for increasing student engagement through leadership, and determine the impact of leadership on academic performance and retention. These findings may be valuable to Botswana's higher education administrators and researchers. This study also contributes to the body of knowledge on the role of educational leadership in shaping student success in higher education.

Literature review

This section provides the literature review on the following themes: educational leadership and student success in higher education; characteristics of effective leaders in higher education; strategies for improving student engagement through leadership; and the impact of educational leadership on academic performance and retention. Definitions of concepts are also provided.

Definition of concepts

Student Success

Student success is defined differently depending on the setting, which can include both psychosocial and educational dimensions. Because of its dynamic nature, the definition of student success compels an adaptive approach that takes into consideration varied student backgrounds, learning styles, and career goals. Depending on the perspective, a number of variables, such as an individual's educational and social needs, academic progression, demographics, and institutional support, might influence student success in higher education. The Michigan State University (n.d.) defines student success as an institution's ability to provide an inclusive, equitable curriculum and environment, as well as the academic, social, wellness, and financial support necessary for all students to learn, thrive, persist, graduate, and succeed after graduation. This reflects a comprehensive approach to both professional and personal development that is flexible enough to accommodate

a range of student social needs and academic goals. In this study, student success is also understood to mean the retention and graduation rates of learners in higher education.

Educational Leadership and Student Success in Higher Education

Effective leadership in higher education is critical for encouraging student success since it has a direct impact on both academic performance and the whole educational environment (Bass, 2020; Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe, 2008). Academic institution leaders, such as deans, department heads, faculty members, and student representative councils, play an important role in developing a vision and setting goals that are in line with students' needs and aspirations (Wyllie, 2020; Bush et al., 2016). These leaders contribute to the development of an engagement culture that supports student participation and perseverance by pushing for inclusive policies and establishing supportive structures (Robinson et al. 2008). Furthermore, great leadership fosters a culture of responsibility and openness, making students feel valued and inspired to succeed. Leaders who actively mentor and coach students not only help them achieve academic success, but also foster important abilities like teamwork and resilience (Brown and Smith, 2019). Finally, leadership's involvement in shaping an institution's climate is critical in realizing students' full potential and laying the groundwork for long-term success (Brown and Smith, 2019; Robinson et al. 2008).

Characteristics of Effective Leaders in Higher Education

Effective higher education leaders exhibit a variety of traits that are critical in creating a climate conducive to student success (Escobedo, Goess, and Krimbill, 2019). A vital talent is the ability to think adaptably and visionary, allowing leaders to negotiate the complexities of educational demands and institutional changes. Furthermore, leaders must foster strong organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB), which are essential for improving institutional environment and efficiency (Escobedo et al., 2019). Such behaviours inspire teachers and administration to collaborate beyond their designated responsibilities, favorably influencing student outcomes. The characteristics that distinguish school leaders as successful leaders and contribute to students' academic achievement have been linked to outstanding leadership in educational organisations, and leaders who demonstrate leadership, continuous improvement, good ethics, and professionalism are more likely to have students who perform well academically (Bush et al., 2016). According to Jacob and Michael (2005), professional development is also critical; matching leadership qualifications with contemporary educational needs ensures that leaders have the necessary abilities to promote real change in higher education (Jacob et al.). Together, these attributes not only improve institutional efficacy, but also foster a supportive learning environment in which students can succeed both intellectually and personally (Mncube, Davies, and Naidoo, 2015). Effective leadership techniques in institutions improve operational efficiency, competency, and service delivery (Davies, 2020). Other researcher have asserted that in order to ensure effective leadership practices at schools, it is essential to establish comprehensive leadership training programs to equip education administrators with adaptable skills for diverse situations. Effective leadership traits within educational institutions are crucial for improving operational efficiency, competency, and service delivery (Keddy, Kofi, Christopher and Zukiswa 2024; Davies, 2020).

The Impact of Educational Leadership on Academic Performance and Retention in Higher Education

Day, Gu, and Sammons (2016) argue that good leadership is critical to improving academic performance and retention among higher education students. Leaders who prioritize supportive academic settings build an engagement culture in which students actively participate in their education (Day et al., 2016). For instance, studies indicate a moderate relationship between performance in prerequisite courses and success in advanced coursework, suggesting that targeted leadership strategies can identify and support at-risk students early on (Brown et al., 2019). Moreover, institutions that implement intentional retention policies have seen notable improvements in graduation rates, especially among low-income populations (Colleen O'Brien and Jennifer, 2007). Such approaches demonstrate that strategic leadership not only enhances individual student outcomes but also contributes to a more inclusive educational experience (Colleen O'Brien et al., 2007). Educational leaders can radically change the landscape of student achievement by investing in resources that meet both academic

and socio-emotional needs, resulting in higher retention rates and better overall academic performance (Brown et al., 2019; Colleen O'Brien et al., 2007).

Strategies for Enhancing Student Engagement through Leadership in Higher Education

Effective leadership is pivotal in crafting strategies that enhance student engagement in higher education. Leaders must adopt a multidimensional approach that encompasses personalized teaching methods to foster intrinsic motivation among students (Adelman and Taylor, 2018). As highlighted in the educational literature, an expanded framework for school improvement emphasizes the importance of addressing barriers to learning while innovatively aligning curriculum and engagement strategies, which is essential for sustaining student interest and participation (Adelman et al., 2018; Chirichello, 1999). Furthermore, Liang and Hong (2024) point out that integrating technology-enhanced learning tools and project-based assignments can significantly promote critical thinking and deeper engagement, equipping students with vital skills for the modern workforce (Liang et al., 2024). Leaders may foster an environment in which students feel valued and driven by establishing an inclusive school community that actively includes student feedback into decision-making processes. Finally, this complete engagement approach not only improves academic achievements but also prepares students to successfully navigate future obstacles (Liang et al., 2024; Adelman and Taylor, 2018).

Student bodies play a crucial role in educational leadership by bridging the gap between students and management, resulting in mutual understanding and collaboration (Speckman and Mandew, 2014). Engaging students in decision-making enables educational leaders to identify students' needs and develop inclusive solutions that improve their learning experience. Through this engagement, students' collective voices are heard, allowing educational leaders to make informed decisions that align with the mission of the institution, as well as resolve community conflicts, build trust, and foster a positive academic environment that benefits both students and management (Speckman et al., 2014; Bodibe, 2009).

Methodology

This paper used a qualitative data collection method (content analysis), in which the researcher systematically searched, read, and critically analyzed existing published research on the subject. Sources included secondary data from academic articles, books, strategic plan documents, and reports on educational leadership in higher education.

Findings and discussion

Research findings suggest that there is an undeniable link between successful leadership and student success in higher education, since strong leadership frameworks generate a climate conducive to academic and personal growth. To improve student engagement and success, educational leaders must prioritize collaborative efforts, encourage inclusion, and foster an accountable culture. Leaders may have a substantial impact on academic achievement and the whole university experience by providing resources, establishing clear communication paths, and encouraging new teaching approaches (Bakokonyane, 2022). Furthermore, embracing diversity in leadership can provide a broader perspective, fostering creativity and innovation that appeals to the diverse student body. Finally, great leadership not only transforms institutional practices but also helps students reach their full potential, so building a dynamic academic environment that prepares them for the future. The dedication to effective leadership will definitely have long-term advantages for students, institutions, and society as a whole.

Summary and Conclusion

According to the reviewed literature, educational leadership is essential for determining the future of education. Effective leadership can help students succeed, provide a great learning environment, and foster a culture of continual growth. Educational leaders should embrace new tactics and technology to improve teaching and learning and increase stakeholder participation. By implementing these approaches, educational leaders may positively influence the future of education and have a positive impact on student success in higher education.

Recommendations

Based on the examined literature reviewed in this study, the following recommendations are made in relation to educational leadership's role in shaping student success in higher education.

- **Implementation of Strategic Leadership and Management:** Educational leaders ought to involve stakeholders in the process of developing institutional vision and strategy, aligning it with core values, and monitoring progress and performance on a regular basis in relation to leadership performance and student success (Davies, 2020; Ranke, 2024).
- **Promotion of Transformative Change and Innovation:** Educational leaders have to promote a transformative and innovative culture by encouraging and promoting creativity, experimentation, and innovation among staff and students. Leaders have to successfully lead change by demonstrating its purpose and advantages, addressing stakeholders' concerns and requirements, celebrating achievements, and learning from challenges (Xianghan 2024; Kiss and Vass, 2019).
- **Implementation of Cross-Collaboration Frameworks:** Educational leaders have to establish and preserve strong connections, communication, and design and sustain collaborative frameworks and processes that accommodate all key stakeholders who may directly or indirectly contribute to student success (Delcoure and Carmona, 2019).
- **Enhancement of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA):** Educational leaders need to promote a culture of diversity and inclusion in which they appreciate and celebrate the different backgrounds of their stakeholders, give equal opportunities and assistance to all learners, and address the concerns and hurdles that prevent inclusion. Likewise, equity and accessibility need to be promoted for effective leadership (Andersen, 2022).
- **Promotion of Continuing Professional Development and Growth:** Educational leaders need to create and execute a strategy for professional growth and development, assess professional development outcomes, and determine how important they are for fostering professional growth and student success (MacLeod, 2020; Adey, 2006).
- **Equipping Leaders and Students with 21st Century Skills:** Educational leaders have to emphasize the development of 21st-century skills and technology integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence in education. Leaders should integrate curriculum with the needs of the contemporary workforce, ensuring that students graduate with the skills required for success in an ever-changing landscape (Ranke, 2024; Mpuangan, 2023; Rajaram, 2021; Maponya, 2020).
- **Building Health and Wellness Systems:** To promote well-being, educational leaders should use health and wellness support networks and prioritize purpose and balance in their leadership roles. The COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbated the importance of addressing mental health issues worldwide (Khawaja, Anjos, and Qureshi, 2023; Eisenberg, Golberstein, and Hunt, 2009).
- **Promotion of Resilience and Positive Attitudes in Students:** Resilience is an essential characteristic for future leaders. Educational leaders need to provide a conducive learning atmosphere that creates a growth attitude enabling students to overcome challenges and see failures as opportunities for development.
- **Engagement of Students in Decision Making:** Educational leaders need to establish collaborative systems and processes that allow student bodies to engage in decision making, ensuring that students feel respected and engaged in their school leadership processes and outcomes (Trowler, 2010).
- **Provision of Student Support Services:** Educational leaders have to ensure that students have access to academic and nonacademic learner support systems that are connected with and incorporated into learner-specific needs. Students should be able to receive "right-on-time" support and get assistance as needed, based on their group or individual needs. Colleges and universities can also utilize statistics to analyze the efficiency of support systems and make improvements to internal processes and policies (Bartram, 2009; Avramidis and Skidmore, 2004).
- **Investment in Educational Resources and Infrastructure:** By investing in resources that address both academic and socio-emotional needs for both leaders and students, educational leaders can

fundamentally transform the landscape of student success, ultimately leading to higher retention rates and improved overall academic performance.

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