

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN ZAMBIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE IN THE TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR IN ZAMBIA

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Structured Abstract

Purpose: *This study examines the relationship between strategic leadership practices and organisational performance in Zambia's tertiary education sector, focusing on public universities and colleges. It explores how leadership styles, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement influence academic quality, operational efficiency, and institutional responsiveness.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, integrating quantitative surveys of 200 academic staff, qualitative interviews with 15 senior administrators, and document analysis of institutional reports. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, hierarchical regression, and mediation analysis, complemented by thematic analysis of qualitative data.*

Findings: *Transformational leadership predominated in 68% of institutions and was associated with a 22% higher student retention rate compared to other leadership styles. Strategic investments in faculty development (40%) and infrastructure (35%) significantly enhanced research output and graduation rates. Underfunding was the most cited barrier (72%), followed by bureaucratic inertia (15%) and limited stakeholder buy-in (13%). Institutions with robust stakeholder engagement implemented curriculum reforms 40% faster.*

Practical Implications: *The study recommends formal leadership development programmes, performance-based resource allocation frameworks, and institutionalised stakeholder consultation mechanisms to enhance performance outcomes.*

Originality/Value: *This research contextualises strategic leadership models for resource-constrained higher education environments in sub-Saharan Africa, offering evidence-based policy and management insights.*

Keywords

Strategic leadership, organisational performance, tertiary education, transformational leadership, resource allocation, stakeholder engagement, Zambia

Introduction

Zambia's higher education sector operates in an environment marked by resource constraints, evolving societal expectations, and the imperative to align with global academic standards. Despite

policy reforms and the adoption of strategic plans by public universities, persistent challenges such as underfunding, outdated curricula, and limited stakeholder engagement hinder progress. Empirical evidence reveals gaps between strategic intentions and measurable outcomes, with only 40% of academic programmes at the University of Zambia meeting international benchmarks in 2023. This study evaluates the impact of strategic leadership on organisational performance, focusing on leadership styles, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement as key drivers of change.

Literature Review

Strategic leadership theories emphasise different governance approaches. Transformational leadership, focused on vision and innovation, has been linked to improved academic outcomes in African contexts, though its reliance on leader charisma may limit sustainability in resource-constrained environments. Transactional leadership supports accountability but risks reinforcing bureaucratic inertia. Distributed and servant leadership models promote collaboration and stakeholder focus but require cultural shifts. Hybrid leadership models combining transformational vision, transactional accountability, and distributed decision-making may be most suitable for Zambia. Organisational performance can be assessed through academic quality, resource efficiency, and stakeholder engagement, with the Balanced Scorecard providing an integrative framework.

Methodology

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Ten public tertiary institutions with established strategic plans were purposively selected. Quantitative data were collected via surveys from 200 academic staff, measuring leadership styles, resource allocation, and performance outcomes. Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with 15 senior administrators exploring experiences in strategy implementation. Document analysis of strategic plans and reports supported triangulation. Statistical techniques included hierarchical multiple regression and mediation analysis, while qualitative data were analysed thematically.

Results

Transformational leadership was the dominant style (68%), associated with significantly higher student retention rates (22% above other styles). Institutions prioritising faculty development (40%) and infrastructure (35%) reported the most substantial improvements in academic outcomes. Stakeholder engagement was linked to 40% faster curriculum reforms. Barriers included underfunding (72%), bureaucratic inertia (15%), and limited stakeholder buy-in (13%).

Discussion

Findings confirm that transformational leadership fosters collaboration, innovation, and commitment, enhancing institutional performance even in resource-limited contexts. Strategic resource allocation acts as a mediator between leadership style and performance. Strong stakeholder engagement accelerates institutional change by improving relevance, acceptance, and support for reforms. These outcomes align with international literature on adaptive leadership in higher education but underscore the challenge of aligning visionary strategies with constrained resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Strategic leadership, particularly transformational approaches, plays a decisive role in improving organisational performance in Zambia's tertiary education sector. To maximise impact, institutions should: (1) establish leadership development programmes to strengthen transformational competencies; (2) implement performance-based funding models protecting allocations for faculty development and infrastructure; and (3) formalise stakeholder engagement mechanisms to sustain relevance and responsiveness. Addressing underfunding and bureaucratic inefficiencies is essential to translate strategic plans into measurable improvements.

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