



Transformational Leadership in Higher Education: Empowering Africa's Future

Henry Kiptiony Kiplangat

Kabarak University, Kenya

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Abstract

Transformational leadership, focusing on vision, innovation, and empowerment, is gaining prominence in African higher education systems. As the continent navigates the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, such as rapid technological advances, globalisation, and socio-economic inequalities, there is growing recognition that higher education institutions (HEIs) must play a pivotal role in preparing future leaders. Anchored on Kouzes and Posner's (2012) transformational leadership model, this paper explores the significance of transformational leadership in African higher education, examining how it can drive institutional change, enhance academic outcomes, and empower future generations. Through a review of existing literature, qualitative interviews with university leaders, and evidence-based case studies, the paper highlights critical principles of transformational leadership, its impact on African universities, and policy recommendations for its implementation. Although African higher education faces challenges such as resource constraints, political instability and government interference, brain drain and equity, transformative leaders can mitigate these challenges by expanding digital learning and technological advancement, decolonising, and contextualising the curriculum, as well as facilitating global collaborations and partnerships. African governments must ensure that universities have the autonomy to implement innovative leadership strategies without undue political interference.

Introduction

Leadership in higher education has long been recognised as critical to the development and prosperity of societies (Altbach et al., 2019). The need for innovative and effective leadership is particularly acute in Africa, where universities face significant challenges, including limited resources, political instability, and brain drain (Altbach, 2007). According to the World Bank (2020), African higher education is currently experiencing a funding gap of approximately \$1.2 billion annually, while a UNESCO report indicates that the average African university supports only 16% of its operating budget through government funding (UNESCO, 2021). Transformational leadership, which focuses on inspiring and motivating followers to achieve their highest potential while fostering institutional innovation and change, has emerged as a model well-suited to meet these challenges (Northouse, 2018). It involves creating an inspiring vision that drives organisational endeavours, encouraging innovation and positive change, and creating an environment that fosters trust among followers (Sahid et al., 2023). As Bush (2018) notes, transformational leaders, apart from creating inspiring vision, set accountable standards, positively influence followers, and articulate new visions so that a high level of confidence and passion drives followers.



In addition, Bush (2018) asserts that transformational leadership involves influencing followers to share a leader's vision to the extent they passionately take actions beyond their fundamental responsibility to achieve collective organisational goals. Bush describes the qualities of a transformational leader, such as charisma, good organisational abilities, and the ability to align professional individual goals with the visions of an organisation. Due to various socio-economic challenges in many African countries, the higher education sector faces unique challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, unreliable power supply, outdated curricula, and a shortage of skilled faculty (Mugimu, 2022). Many universities struggle to keep pace with the growing demand for education and the need to equip students with the skills necessary for today's globalised economy (Altbach, 2007; Altbach et al., 2019).

Despite these challenges, studies have highlighted the potential of transformational leadership to transform the African higher education sector. Miano (2021), for instance, noted that transformational leadership is required to steer universities toward modernisation as they embrace technological innovations and restructure institutional governance to enhance efficiency and accountability. Transformational leaders can also inspire faculty and students to achieve higher academic standards. This will help foster a culture of research and innovation and align institutional goals with the developmental policies of the nation (Jeanmonod, 2016; Al-Mansoori & Koc, 2019). In addition, transformational leaders are in a position to motivate students to become agents of positive change in their respective societies (Litz & Blaik-Hourani, 2020). Given this background, this paper addresses the growing role of transformational leadership in African higher education and how it can empower future generations by fostering academic excellence, promoting socio-economic equity, and driving national development.

Theoretical Framework: Transformational Leadership in Higher Education

This framework focuses on five critical areas of transformational leadership, following Kouze and Posner's (2012) framework: to model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. First, for a leader to effectively key into this framework, they must be credible from the perspective of their followers, given that a leader's credibility is the pillar upon which trust is built. Out of several characteristics of a leader that people would like to follow, honesty, competence, inspiration and forward-looking were the four characteristics that stood out in the study by Kouze and Posner (2012), each receiving over 60% votes. It is important to note that the first three attributes - honesty, competence, and inspiration- make up a leader's credibility, which is the foundation of effective leadership (Aerde, 2016). The credibility of a leader enables followers to have strong faith in their leadership, thereby passionately following their lead with the belief that such lead would only result in outstanding success for the organisation and, as well, their individual goals.

Modelling the way requires a leader to clarify his values by distinctly expressing such values to every follower within an organisation. To ensure that every individual regards such values, such values have to align with organisational goals rather than personal goals. Having done this, a leader takes the lead through action, thereby setting an example through routines that show that a leader is committed to the values he has expressed. Inspiring a shared vision entails envisioning a positive dream for the organisation and exemplifying confidence in such a vision. It also entails carrying followers along by making them realise that one understands their dreams and has their interests at heart. Challenging the process involves a leader keen on innovation and growth and looking for new opportunities, products and services. In addition, a leader challenges the process by taking calculated risks and ensuring that valuable lessons are learned whenever he fails. By encouraging collaboration among followers and creating an environment of trust, a leader can enable every follower to act and contribute positively to organisational growth. Lastly, nurturing the heart entails acknowledging



individual efforts and creating a sense of community by celebrating every team achievement (Kouze & Posner, 2012; Aerde, 2016). This framework serves as a lens for understanding the role of transformative leadership in higher education in Africa.

The Role of Transformational Leadership in Empowering Africa's Future

The roles of transformational leadership in empowering Africa's future include institutional transformation, enhancing research and innovation, socio-economic impact and community engagement. For the continent to overcome the challenges above, African universities must undergo significant institutional changes to remain competitive in the global knowledge economy. Transformational leadership is critical to these changes as leaders reimagine the role of universities in African society and align them with the continent's socio-economic development goals (Altbach et al., 2019). For instance, the University of Cape Town implemented a transformative leadership model (Vision 2030) to transform its academic offerings to facilitate inclusivity and further reflect the South African demography. This vision aimed to achieve a university community where members could work together with a sense of belonging (University of Cape Town, 2024). African universities are increasingly called upon to become innovation and research excellence centres. Achieving this requires shifting institutional priorities and cultivating a research culture that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration (Cloete et al., 2015). For example, Kenyatta University's Chandaria Centre for Innovation has fostered collaborative research between researchers within the university and between researchers and the private sector (Nyiringango, 2024).

In addition, African universities have a unique role in addressing local communities' socio-economic challenges. Transformational leaders in higher education ensure that universities contribute to regional development by fostering entrepreneurial skills, addressing community needs, and engaging in impactful social outreach (Mugimu, 2022). An illustrative case is the University of Ghana's 2023 Health Outreach Programme, which was part of the university's 75th celebration. The health outreach was held at Madina Main Market and Agbogbloshie, a deprived community in Madina, a suburb of Accra (University of Ghana, 2023).

Critical Characteristics of Transformational Leaders in African Higher Education

The characteristics of transformational leaders in African higher education include visionary leadership, inclusivity and diversity, collaboration and partnership building. Transformational leaders in African universities must have a clear and compelling vision that inspires faculty, students, and staff to work towards common goals. This vision often centres on improving academic quality, fostering innovation, and ensuring that the institution contributes to national and regional development (Ololube et al., 2012). Such leaders must also emphasise adaptability to local contexts while integrating global best practices. Given African countries' diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts, transformational leaders must adopt an inclusive approach, ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have access to quality education (Lumby & Azaola, 2014). This requires policies and initiatives that actively promote gender equity, support marginalised students, and encourage participation from various demographic groups.

African higher education institutions must collaborate with local and international partners to access resources, expertise, and research opportunities. Transformational leaders excel at fostering partnerships with government agencies, international organisations, private sector entities, and other universities to drive institutional development (Bertot et al., 2013). Building a robust network of collaborations can enhance university visibility and impact within the global academic landscape.



Challenges of Transformational Leadership in Higher Education: The African Perspective

Transformational leadership in higher education across Africa is crucial in reshaping institutions to address the continent's unique challenges (Altbach et al., 2019). Such leadership inspires change, fosters innovation, and drives the development of academic institutions and the broader society (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, despite the potential for significant impact, African higher education leaders encounter numerous challenges that limit their ability to fully implement transformational leadership (Cloete et al., 2015).

Key Challenges Facing Transformational Leadership in African Higher Education

Key challenges facing transformational leadership in African higher education are as follows:

Resource Constraints

African universities are often chronically underfunded, severely hampering their ability to invest in essential infrastructure, research initiatives, and faculty development programmes (Bertot et al., 2013). This financial shortfall undermines efforts to broaden access to quality education, modernise institutional frameworks, and foster environments conducive to learning. Universities struggle to maintain essential operations without sufficient funding, let alone embark on innovative projects that could transform the educational landscape (DeMillo, 2015). Additionally, many African universities lack well-equipped libraries, laboratories, and technology-enabled classrooms (Mugimu, 2022). This inadequacy in infrastructure limits the capacity to foster innovation and research excellence, both critical components of transformational leadership. The absence of modern facilities affects the quality of education and deters potential collaborations with international institutions.

Political Instability and Government Interference

In several African countries, political unrest frequently disrupts the functioning of higher education institutions (DeMillo, 2015). Strikes, protests, and civil unrest can delay academic calendars, disrupt administrative operations, and reduce funding allocations, complicating the implementation of long-term strategies. This instability creates an environment of uncertainty, hindering strategic planning and execution (Bass, 1985). Government interference often compromises universities' autonomy, particularly in appointing university leadership and allocating resources (Dinh et al., 2014). Such interference limits leaders' ability to pursue transformational agendas and make independent decisions prioritising academic growth over political considerations. For instance, the introduction of the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS) in Nigerian Universities in 2020 was rejected by the Nigerian Academic Staff Union of Universities for not aligning with the autonomy of the nation's tertiary institutions, leading to a nine-month strike that disrupted academic activities in many Nigerian universities in 2020 (Ukpe, 2020).

Brain-Drain

Brain drain, the departure of highly skilled academics, researchers, and leaders from Africa for better opportunities abroad, is a significant challenge to transformational leadership in African higher education. This exodus deprives institutions of the talent necessary to lead transformative initiatives and hinders efforts to build solid academic cultures. For instance, a 2022 report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) acknowledges the potential dangers of brain drain in Africa, mainly due to the increasing global demand for information technology workers and the wage surge. This, for Africa, has continued to exacerbate the existing skills shortage as experts opt for greener pastures abroad. Due to resource constraints and relatively lower salaries, African universities often struggle to attract leading international scholars, further isolating them from the global academic community (Cloete et al., 2015).



Access and Equity

Gender inequality limits access to higher education in many African countries, with women and girls facing significant barriers to pursuing tertiary education (Lumby & Azaola, 2014). Socio-economic disparities also hinder access for students from rural areas or low-income families. For instance, the African Development Bank reports that only about 35% of female students in sub-Saharan Africa complete secondary education, significantly limiting their opportunities for higher education. The quality of education available in urban centres and rural areas often starkly contrasts (Altbach et al., 2019). For example, South African universities have been able to create opportunities that improved access to education for marginalised groups such as school leavers and working professionals, by employing a Virtual and Augmented Reality (VAR) platform (Dhurumraj & Ramaila, 2023).

Critical Opportunities for Transformational Leadership in African Higher Education

Several critical opportunities exist for transformational leadership in African higher education. These include expanding digital learning and technological advancement, decolonising and contextualising curriculum, fostering global collaboration and partnerships, addressing social and economic development goals, building inclusive and equitable educational systems, harnessing the African youth dividend, and enhancing research capacity and output.

Expansion of Digital Learning and Technological Advancements

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital learning tools. Transformational leaders in African universities can expand access to education by integrating e-learning platforms, reducing physical infrastructure constraints, and reaching students in remote areas (Mugimu, 2022). This shift not only broadens access but also prepares institutions for future disruptions. For example, several African universities like the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa and Kabarak University, Kenya, leveraged digital learning platforms during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic to ensure continuous learning in which students were able to access learning materials and take their lessons from anywhere (Habanyana, 2023). Transformational leaders can utilise new technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, and virtual reality to create innovative teaching and research environments. These technologies can enhance learning outcomes and enable African universities to compete globally (DeMillo, 2015). In addition, transformational leadership can improve staff and student management through digitising traditional cultures and establishing digital channels of communication (Díaz-García et al., 2023).

Decolonisation and Contextualisation of Curriculum

There is a growing movement to rethink and better reshape African curricula to reflect local cultures, knowledge systems, and histories. Transformational leaders can spearhead efforts to decolonise education, promote African scholarship, and create curricula relevant to African contexts and challenges (Cloete et al., 2015). Transformational leadership provides opportunities to design curricula that break away from rigid disciplinary boundaries, fostering interdisciplinary learning that addresses real-world African challenges in areas such as public health, governance, and environmental sustainability (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Global Collaboration and Partnerships

African universities can build partnerships with institutions worldwide. Transformational leaders can lead collaborations with international universities, research institutions, and donor organisations to exchange knowledge, boost research capacity, and increase funding for innovative projects. African universities can collaborate on cross-continental research initiatives that address issues unique to the continent, such as climate change adaptation, renewable energy development, and poverty reduction



(Bertot et al., 2013). Leaders can leverage these collaborations to increase their universities' global influence.

Addressing Social and Economic Development Goals

African universities are positioned to play a pivotal role in achieving national development goals, including those outlined in the African Union's Agenda 2063. Transformational leaders can align their institutions' research and educational missions with their respective countries' broader social, economic, and environmental goals (Altbach et al., 2019). Transformational leadership can empower African universities to produce entrepreneurial graduates who contribute to solving the continent's unemployment crisis. By fostering innovation, universities can transform into hubs of economic growth. An example is the entrepreneurial incubator programme established at Makerere University, Uganda, in 1997, an outreach programme that links the Makerere University Business School with private, public and NGO sectors. This programme promotes entrepreneurial culture among individuals and institutions across Uganda (Makerere University Business School, 2022).

Building Inclusive and Equitable Educational Systems

African higher education has an opportunity to become more inclusive and gender-sensitive. Transformational leaders can drive initiatives that increase access to education for women and underrepresented groups, helping to close the gender gap in higher education (Lumby & Azaola, 2014). For instance, the African Virtual University (AVU) initiative, launched in 2011, has established the largest network of Open Distance and eLearning higher education institutions across Africa, comprising 53 institutions. This initiative has contributed to training 75,000 students across Africa (Open Education Consortium, 2024). By using technology and flexible learning models, transformational leaders can improve access to higher education for students from marginalised communities, particularly those in rural areas or economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Harnessing the African Youth Dividend

Africa's growing youth population requires universities to shape the future workforce. Transformational leaders can harness this demographic dividend by creating education systems responsive to young people's needs, ensuring they are well-prepared to contribute to their countries' development (Dinh et al., 2014). For example, the University of Iringa, Tanzania, has employed the "learning by doing" approach as it works towards transforming into an entrepreneurial university to produce graduates who are equipped with innovative and entrepreneurial capacities (Chachage et al., 2024). By fostering critical thinking, innovation, and leadership skills, transformational leaders can help produce the next generation of African leaders and entrepreneurs (DeMillo, 2015).

Enhancing Research Capacity and Output

African universities can significantly increase their research output by building capacity in critical health, agriculture, and technology areas. Transformational leaders can create environments prioritising research and innovation by fostering collaboration across disciplines and with global partners. Initiatives like the research alliance between the University of Cape Town and several research networks across the world, such as the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU), Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), and Australia Africa University Network (AAUN) has strengthened global knowledge exchange, while also boosting internal research and collaboration (University of Cape Town, 2024).

Recommendations for Promoting Transformational Leadership in African Higher Education

Governments and international agencies should invest in leadership development programmes for university administrators, focusing on the skills needed for transformational leadership, such as



strategic thinking, innovation management, and change leadership (Northouse, 2018). These programmes should be tailored to address African higher education leaders' unique challenges and aim to equip them with the tools necessary to inspire change effectively.

African governments must ensure that universities have the autonomy to implement innovative leadership strategies without undue political interference. This requires comprehensive policy reforms that protect academic freedom and institutional governance while encouraging transparency and accountability (Cloete et al., 2015). Additionally, policies should promote collaboration between higher education institutions and local industries to align educational outcomes with job market demands. For example, developing a framework for public-private partnerships could enable universities to leverage industry resources in curriculum development, thereby enhancing employability outcomes for graduates.

Universities should prioritise creating a culture encouraging innovation, research, and creativity. This includes incentivising faculty to engage in research, supporting interdisciplinary collaboration, mentoring young researchers, and involving students in projects that have real-world relevance. A culture of innovation can be nurtured through interdepartmental competitions, innovation grants, and collaboration with tech hubs. Institutions like the University of Nairobi, which has initiated several innovation contests, have observed increased student engagement and successful project outcomes, showcasing the potential benefits of fostering creativity (University of Nairobi, 2024).

Conclusion

Transformational leadership is critical for the future of African higher education. Transformational leaders can drive the continent's socio-economic development by fostering institutional innovation, promoting inclusivity, and empowering students to become future leaders. Although African universities face challenges such as resource constraints, political instability and government interference, brain drain and equity, transformative leaders in African higher education can mitigate these challenges by expanding digital learning and technological advancement, decolonising and contextualising the curriculum, and facilitating global collaborations and partnerships. They must also address social and economic development goals, build inclusive and equitable educational systems, harness the African youth dividend, and enhance research capacity and output.

Governments and international agencies must invest in leadership development programmes for university leaders in areas like strategic thinking and innovation management. African governments must ensure that universities have the autonomy to implement innovative leadership strategies without undue political interference. Universities should also prioritise creating a culture that encourages innovation, research, and creativity to align with the requirements of the 21st century. All of these, in line with the five areas of transformative leadership proposed by the theoretical framework, challenge African university leaders to model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart.

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