Leadership at Higher Education Institutions: Concepts, Theories, Practices, and Issues

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Abstract: Globalization, massification of higher education, accountability, and high-speed technological change has led to an increase in the role of leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs). The unique feature of universities as complex organizations is professional autonomy, shared governance, and various expectations of stakeholders that carry out work in universities, which complicates the process of leadership. In the present paper, the issue of leadership in higher education is reviewed based on academic literature. It will examine the conceptualization of leadership, prevailing leadership theories used in the academic science, monarch leadership position in various levels of institutions, and the predicaments of the academic leader. The review highlights transformational, distributed, ethical, and situational leadership as especially relevant to higher education institutions. However, persistent challenges such as governance constraints, role ambiguity, inadequate leadership preparation, and resistance to change continue to affect leadership effectiveness. The paper concludes by identifying research gaps and emphasizing the need for context-sensitive leadership development frameworks to enhance institutional effectiveness in higher education.

Key words- **Leadership, higher education institution, academic leadership, organization, theories of leadership.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities and colleges of higher learning play a significant role in the social, economic and national building in terms of producing qualified human resources, generating new knowledge and encouraging innovations. Over the past few decades, education has been undergoing a sea change in higher education institutions worldwide due to globalization, marketization, and changes in technology as well as increased public responsibility (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley, 2009). The developments have made the leadership in institutions of higher learning (HEIs) more complex.

The concept of leadership in higher education is completely opposite of what leadership is in business or bureaucracies due to the existence of shared governance, academic freedom, collegiality, and strong professional identities (Birnbaum, 1988). The leaders of the university are confronted with the dilemma of balancing managerialism and academic principles and the needs of the governments, accreditors, faculty, students, and the society at large (Middlehurst, 2013).

This paper is meant to comment on leadership in higher education by providing reviews on key theoretical considerations, leadership practice and challenges covered in the literature. In particular, the following objectives will be discussed in the paper:

1. To establish what leadership is in relation to higher education.

2. In order to revise the crucial leadership theories that can be relevant to HEIs.

3. To communicate about the matter of leadership in higher education institutions.

4. To overview relevant issues and gaps in the study of leadership in higher education.

II. CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

The concept of leadership has been studied extensively yet has been highly controversial. Northouse (2022) defines leadership as a process, which entails the influence of a group of people with an aim of attaining a common goal. Yukl (2013) further adds to this explanation by stating that leadership is a deliberate effort to positively influence other people in order to guide their actions and associations within an organization.

In the case of higher education institutions, leadership is considered as a phenomenon. Ramsden (1998) embodies the capacity of academic leadership to be in control of teaching and research; that is, to give them the conditions within which they

can perform their best. According to Bryman (2007) the leaders of institutions of higher learning are rather credible, collegial and influence people rather than wield hierarchical power.

Higher education institutions operate in a decentralized approach unlike other forms of organizations where power is decentralized among the faculties, departments, and committees (Birnbaum, 1988). This implies that leadership in institutions of higher learning is mostly obtained by means of persuasion, bargaining and collaborative decision making as opposed to control and command.

III. LEADERSHIP THEORIES THAT APPLICABLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

1. Developing the Trait and Behavioral Theories.

Initial research on leadership focused to find individual traits of good leaders. The trait theory maintained that leaders possess individual characteristics such as intelligence, self-confidence and charisma (Stogdill, 1974). Nonetheless, empirical studies were unable to single out a specific collection of leadership qualities that could be utilized in any context and hence this approach has come under criticism (Yukl, 2013).

The approach to leadership was behavioral theories that focused on studying the behaviors of leadership such as task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors (Blake and Mouton, 1985). Within the framework of a higher education facility, successful leaders tend to be leaders who are able to balance the administrative responsibilities and the personal relationships (Bryman, 2007). Although the behavioral theories help in emphasizing the importance of the developable leadership skills, they do not explain how the context contributes to the effectiveness of the leadership.

2. The Contingency and Situational Theories.

Contingency theories state that how well a leader performs depends on how well the style fits in several applications of the situation (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson, 2013). The contingency theories are particularly useful in institutions where higher education operates because leaders of the institutions end up in a number of situations.

As per the situational theory the university leaders must change their leadership styles in relation to the circumstances that they are experiencing like when conflict among the faculty members arises, curriculum changes are being introduced, or the changes in external policies. Middlehurst (2013) argues that the key elements of university leaders are the flexibility and attention to the context.

3. Transformational Leadership and Transactional Leadership.

The transformational leadership theory that was created by Burns (1978) and further explained by Bass (1985) has been widely employed in research studies on higher education. Transformational leaders inspire their followers using vision, intellectual stimulation, personal attention, and motivation in the achievement of the group goals. As demonstrated in empirical studies, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and innovation are positively related to transformational leadership in the institutions of higher learning (Bryman, 2007; Nguni, Sleegers, and Denessen, 2006).

Transactional leadership, in its turn, is also interested in the exchange between leaders and followers through rewards and punishment. Despite the desirable nature of transformational leadership in the context of higher education, it is necessary to have transactional behavior to offer a stable operation and accountability (Birnbaum, 1988).

4. Distributed and Shared Leadership.

Distributed leadership is a development of coping with the increased complexity of higher learning institutions. This leadership paradigm deems leadership as a social process that is dispersed among individuals and groups rather than being assigned to the individual (Spillane, 2006). As revealed by Bolden et al. (2009), distributed leadership fits well with the collegial experience of a higher education institution and may enhance increase in collaboration and engagement.

Shared leadership is closely related but places greater emphasis on mutual influence and joint responsibility among group members (Pearce & Conger, 2003). It has been demonstrated in studies that a distributed leadership has the ability to improve on the quality of decisions made, professional learning and organizational capacity (Gronn, 2002). However, hierarchical systems, role ambiguity and absence of change orientation may be an obstacle to the application of distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011).

IV. LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PRACTICE AND ROLES.

Leadership in higher learning is exercised at all levels of institutions including the institutional level (vice-chancellors or presidents), faculty level (deans), and the departmental level (heads of departments). In every level, there are respective obligations and concerns.

Departmental leadership becomes very important since the teaching and research departments are the primary units of the organization (Gmelch and Buller, 2016). The departmental heads are middle level leaders that are critical in lessening the gap among the institutional administration and faculty. They affect the morale of the faculty members, students and research output directly (Bryman, 2007).

The best practice in higher education leadership is the ability to create a common vision, form partnerships, facilitate professional growth, enhance innovation, create equitable and open-minded decisions (Ramsden, 1998; Middlehurst, 2013).

However, the majority of higher education leaders are not trained on leadership, but rather they are using their experience in higher education (Gmelch, 2004).

V. LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE ISSUES.

Nevertheless, the leadership in the sphere of higher education is pegged by a number of reasons. Role ambiguity is one of the major issues where academic leaders have conflicting roles (from administrators, faculty members, students and external constituents) (Bryman, 2007). The other forces that render leadership in the higher education ineffective are limited power and bureaucracy complexities.

Challenges in governance patterns also exist particularly in the case of the public institutions whereby the political meddling and government regulations can limit the autonomy of the institutions (Altbach et al., 2009). Other forces that complicate the issue of leadership in higher education are resistance to change by the faculties, scarcity of resources, and accountability.

The other major issue is lack of systematic leadership development. Numerous academic heads have not trained to hold leadership roles formally, which also does not reflect positively on decision-making and organizational performance (Gmelch & Buller, 2016).

VI. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS.

Although much has been researched on leadership in higher education, it still has some gaps. First of all, longitudinal studies which examine the progress of leadership practices over time are absent. Second, most of the research surrounding leadership is Western-based and the lack of research in the developing countries. Thirdly, empirical studies on distributed and ethical leadership should be undertaken more.

The research in the future ought to be based on a comparative, mixed-method and longitudinal research methods to better understand the leadership effectiveness in other higher education contexts. Research on the leadership development programs and their impacts on institutional effectiveness are also required as well.

VII. CONCLUSION

The paper has covered leadership in higher institutions of learning by evaluating the diverse theories, practices, and challenges. It seems that transformational, situational, ethical, and distributed leadership the aspects are effective in the role of a leader in higher education institutions. But governance, role ambiguity and lack of preparation usually influence the effectiveness of leadership.

In order to cope with such challenges, institutions of higher learning should invest in leadership development and embrace a situational relevant leadership model. With the university being in the phase of change and with the growing demands, leadership will remain significant in the process of quality and relevancy provision.

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