

An Evaluation of leadership and structural support for eLearning in Zambia

Billy C Sichone*
Central Africa Baptist University
*bsichone@cabuniversity.com

Abstract

The study sought to establish the place, significance, influence and importance of strong leadership in the process of eLearning growth. It also highlighted some auxiliary elements essential to eLearning growth in Zambia. The thematic qualitative enquiry elicited thoughts, perceptions, opinions and inner motivations of participants using open ended questions via interviews. The institutional sample of 28 HEA accredited entities was drawn from a national population of 63 HEIs in Zambia. The enquiry found that 98% of respondents felt that strong leadership was essential for eLearning growth in Zambia while 2% did not know if there was any correlation at all. The study concludes that strong leadership is essential to eLearning growth. It also concludes that leadership and enabling structures are important to integrate in eLearning growth and development processes. The enquiry recommends that strong positive leadership opinion be sought and exploited in the quest to driving the eLearning agenda. The research also recommends that the right leaders supported by relevant scaffolding structures installed to accelerate the growth of eLearning in Zambia.

Keywords: ELearning, Leadership, government, stakeholders, Higher Education Institution (HEI), Coordination, Quality standards, ODeL

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Introduction

In many contexts around the world, education is a given, whose essential nature and necessity is hardly questioned. It is perceived the panacea for attaining a good quality life after the rigorous training process. However, schools sometimes suffer from bad or ineffective leadership. At other times, the problem may not necessarily be at the school level itself but a national one where from national leaders cascading all the way down to the shop floor do not seem to value or support education at all. This has a negative trickle-down effect on the pool of human capital downstream.

At other times, the schools may have good leaders, well trained and engaged but either lacking essential exposure or simply stuck to obsolete pedagogical and management theories when the times have changed. These leaders tend to push back, resist emerging trends in order to remain faithful to what was passed down to them. In such scenarios, these gatekeepers will do every and anything to protect the well tried and tested approaches in by-gone generations. This cohort demonstrates no interest in integrating new ideas, or if they do, proceed with maximum cautious suspicion. However, when Covid-19 pandemic appeared, it swiftly flipped the tables in that it became impossible to stick to the ancient ways of doing teaching business without avoiding total institutional closure (OECD 2022; Kayombo & Mwiinga 2021; The World bank 2020; Mukwena & Sinkala 2020; Mpungose 2020). For instance, it was no longer possible to conduct in-person physical contact class sessions and equally impossible to share materials without risk of contracting the virus. Right there, the time held requirement of having face to face classes was broken (The World Bank 2020). Traditional assessments and some types of internship and mentorship requiring practical hands-on experience aspects could not take place. This forced the re-writing of the script, amending some rules and trying out new ways to achieve the same ends as before. ELearning was about the best available option because it offered the least health risk with corresponding cost cutting measures. For instance, Mubanga *et al.* (2023) in their book 'Educational leadership and Management' discuss pertinent use and possibility of technology in Zambian Education (The book devotes an entire chapter [11] on technology in education). This is commendable, suggesting that ICT integration in education has come of age even in Zambia unlike the past where this feature was hardly mentioned, and if at all, as a mere by-the-way. ELearning is now an all-pervasive reality of daily life (Pelletier *et al.*, 2023; Mpungose 2020). Furthermore, Bush (2008) and other educational leadership field experts argue that processes and leadership abilities are essential to success. The same could equally be argued about eLearning. The structure, processes and experiences must be top notch buttressed by the right dosage of leadership.

Leadership is a trending concept in nearly all spheres of contemporary life today. Though variously defined and understood, the concept can simply be defined as 'influence' on an entity, activity or group of people towards a

shared goal. The leader is therefore the individual that animates people within their circle of influence towards a desired goal. Note that leadership is not necessarily being bossy or coercive but sweet facilitation towards achieving a goal through others. This requires rare emotional intelligence skills, vision and quick thinking. Others think of leadership in terms of a formal legitimate position in an organization. Their coercive influence is tied to legitimate power.

Extended to leadership in education, this idea is connected to the institution achieving effective transformative results for that entity where both learners and instructors are happy, satisfied and enthusiastically contributing to organizational growth and development. Progressive institutions most likely have good effective leaders able and willing to effect relevant, timely changes for growth. Leaders can be risk takers but thrive at taking calculated risks to achieve the shared goal.

During the pandemic, to garner effective practice and perception change in a short time required high leadership influence resulting in what some have dubbed as a ‘global eLearning experiment’ that ran for nearly two and a half years (ca. 2020-2022). For a season, different players, parties, entities and governments echoed the same chorus that went something like: ‘online learning is the way to go’ or ‘online learning is revolutionizing education’. For a time, this seemed a plausible reality as the pandemic crunch bit harder but post pandemic, evidently relatively fewer people appear to still strongly vouch for eLearning. But why is this? Why do fewer voluntarily elect to adopt online learning? This study isolated one of these possible elements that could help eLearning consistently grow or remain priority in the minds of learners.

Literature Review

Any endeavour in life requires effective leadership, although the type of leadership may vary in nature, circumstances and approach. Leadership is an essential ingredient to make things happen (Mubanga *et al.*, 2023; Dubrin 2018; Bush 2008). Despite different scenarios demanding different kinds of leadership, certain basic elements remain universal. For instance, leaders often possess a ‘can do’ attitude, leverage influence whose opinion is respected, have high self-efficacy traits and the right drive and motivation for the cause they stand for (Dubrin 2018). Leaders also tend to be visionary and, in some cases, possess high transformative management skills. Various thought leaders like Bush (2008), in the leadership sphere of study opine that leadership is the essential missing ingredient in many contexts today resulting in institutional inefficiencies or dismal failures in the midst of plenty opportunities. They assert that leadership makes the difference. Dubrin (2018) argues that although mere leadership is critical, it must be ‘effective’ in nature and practice to effect contextual changes. Additionally, supporting structural provisions should be in place to facilitate execution of desired activities. While leadership skills may be present, if enabling structures are absent, this deficiency may frustrate the energetic leader, over flowing with world class ideas. One avenue for leadership expression are existing functional structures from the top (say government) all the way to the grass roots and these must be interconnected to be meaningful.

The same argument can be applied to the education industry. If the right leadership is absent, not much will be expected. It may further be argued that if leadership is failing at national level, it trickles down to the rest of the country, despite a nation possessing any imaginable amount of wealth or resources. Further, if this political leadership is ignorant of, not exposed to or simply does not intentionally support education, expect a decaying system and scenario. Mubanga *et al.* (2023; chapters 2 &3) make the case that Education Leadership and management in Zambia are key ingredients for the education project to succeed. Their book is worth reading since it offers insights into the Zambian scene where this particular study was taken. Philip and Thinguri (2022; p. 31-34) argue along similar lines when they state: “Principals [i.e. Institutional heads] act as role models to the entire school community when they apply computer technology to administrative and managerial tasks...” When new innovations are introduced in collective contexts like Zambia, opinions held by leaders are important as this often influences uptake, adoption or perceptions of something. If leaders are silent about or do not positively support an idea, their constituencies assume that the issue is either not important or not good. Philip and Thinguri (2022; p 33) further state: “...The theory [i.e. Diffusion of Innovation Theory] forecasts that media and interpersonal contacting of a lead person such as a principal, offer inform and effects views and judgements of prospective utilizers and facilitators. Principals, since they are opinion leaders, can exercise impact on staff, students and other school members to adopt an innovation....”. Consequently, that good or idea is ignored, unsupported or not given the primacy it deserves. It is therefore in the best interest of idea pundits to wisely court these perception influencers towards publicly supporting a cause. But leadership in itself, important as it is, is insufficient to ensure something is adopted or perceived favourably. There is need for the right mandated effective leadership, established, functional supportive structures or provisions ensuring that something takes place. Kachaka (interview, Lusaka, 2023), Gondwe (interview, Lusaka, 2023) and Namuchana (interview,

Lusaka, 2023), as seasoned eLearning experts, all opine that for the Zambian case, essential integrated structures are lacking in Zambia to support eLearning, despite the existence of potentially good policies.

This study explored participant perceptions of the place strong leadership in eLearning growth quest. Among several elements necessary to grow eLearning in an otherwise non-technological context (at least in Ed Tech terms), leadership was isolated as an essential element given the possible potent influence opinion leaders possess in Zambia with potential to influence growth or non-growth of eLearning. The enquiry was triggered by the Covid-19 outbreak of 2020-21 that led to massive closures of institutions (Mpungose 2020). An alternative was found in eLearning so that the education agenda could continue unabated. Although it was evident that eLearning was the ultimate panacea both then and into the future, highly supported as a possible game changer, very few actually voluntarily chose it over traditional methods like F2F. The question that begs answering is why this discrepancy: A high-profile image on the one hand and an extremely low uptake on the other? Several reasons have been suggested as to why this was so including access to technologies, ignorance, cost issues or low digital skills, among others. The OECD (2022) and World Bank (2020) reports both state that in less resourced contexts, access to and existence of digital infrastructure is a major issue, apart from cultural and cost issues. Accordingly, the study explored what influence leadership played in eLearning adoption and growth. It also examines structural issues in relation to leadership. Bush (2008: 1) argues that:

“...quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes. In many parts of the world, including both developed and developing countries, there is recognition that schools require effective leaders and managers if they are to provide the best possible education for their students and learners...”

Clearly, leadership is beyond mere influence but corresponding action through enabling structures as Bush (2008) seems to suggest. After Covid-19, relatively fewer institutions continued on the eLearning path but reverted to the default mode with eLearning becoming a mere back up or at best, a course or student information (SIS) management system housing grades, allowing assignment submission or some such. After nearly two years of system use, why revert? Why would most individuals prefer traditional modes of learning after tasting the potential benefits of eLearning? There is a gap missing somewhere, needing investigation. This enquiry explored that gap which makes the study significant in itself, given that relatively little attention has been accorded to Educational Leadership quality in Zambian institutions, as Mubanga *et al.* (2023) have attempted to highlight.

Evidently, eLearning in Zambia lacks effective leadership support, influence and promotion. If eLearning is to grow, there is need to place the best people in the right places, support them and give them the tools to work. The study was undergirded by Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy and Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs theories. The former theory (Self-efficacy) argues that if individuals are self-driven, internally motivated and desire to progress, they will most likely resiliently persevere at pursuing what they want. Leaders with high self-efficacy achieve much and motivate others towards the same ends. On the other hand, Maslow's hierarchy of needs posits that if the basic lower-level human needs are adequately met, individuals tend to desire the next higher-level needs until self-actualization is attained. According to Banda (2014), people will rarely desire the next higher-level needs unless the foundational needs are met after which, they aspire for other things, bolstered by opinion leaders. If leaders stress the need for education towards a higher quality of life, learners naturally gravitate towards it, irrespective of the mode, if it (i.e. the mode) is categorized as authentic. An assessment was done to establish what Zambians in higher education institutions thought about the place and influence of strong leadership on eLearning growth. A further theory posited by Everett Rodgers proved handy for this study. Rodgers (1962) proposed the diffusion of innovation theory which states that innovation is either accepted, processed and adopted or rejected depending on several factors including opinion of leaders (Sahin, 2006). This diffusion goes through processes and stages where the idea matures or dies (Philip & Thinguri 2022).

Methodology and Data

This was a qualitative thematic study in which the research elicited opinions, thoughts and underlying motivations for making decisions. The enquiry aimed at generating perceptions that participants held. Qualitative study was therefore the best approach given that Berg (2009), Patton (2002) and Creswell (2012) all affirm that where opinions are sought, qualitative approaches are best. By their nature, such studies do not have large samples nor are they representative of the entire population. This enquiry explored opinions from 28 HEA accredited HEIs scattered right across Zambia out of a national population of 63 whose selection criteria was inclusion and exclusion. Only institutions that approved data collection at their campus were included in the sample while others were excluded. At each given site, at least two purposively selected individuals were

interviewed to yield the data presented in this report. To achieve study objectives, two independent but related interview guides were administered. The first was targeted at field experts, government agents or relevant organizational stakeholders. This guide (administered to government ODeI supporting units (e.g. HEA, ZAQA, DODE etc.) and or practicing field experts. It investigated existing structures within the educational system. The second interview guide was administered to respondents directly connected to selected HEIs around Zambia. The use of a two-pronged approach further mitigated bias and enhanced credibility of the study. Table 1 below shows study participants:

Table 1: Sample demographic respondent attributes

Entity	Quantity	Position of interviewee	Relevance
DODE	1	ODEI Specialist	Data on government plans and structures
HEA	1	Director	Data on government structures, quality etc.
Consultant 1	1	ICT expert and global online facilitator	Expert opinion
Consultant 2	1	Registrar of 100% online University	Expert opinion
HEI placed respondents	28 HEIs (54 respondents)	Students, Instructors and University administrators	User perceptions

Source: Study Data 2023

As for leadership and supporting structures, interviews from government agents and field experts, it was found that 100% of respondents felt supporting structures were either lacking or extremely weak. HEA, for instance felt basic elements for eLearning were in the process of being developed but integrated well-coordinated formal structures within government from the top to the grassroots were lacking. Additionally, another expert, Gondwe, felt that well-coordinated integrated leadership around eLearning management accounted for development lack. This led to duplication of efforts. He suggested one integrated and well streamlined structure that was centrally managed cascading all the way to district level was the answer. Yet another expert (Kachaka, Interview, Lusaka, 2023) felt that leadership and attendant structures were missing.

Data from all sources was reviewed and analysed resulting in findings. The process to data collection involved in-person interviews, data recording, data storage, transcription, review, sorting, coding and theming, interpretation and report generation. The ensuing section highlights what was found.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The study explored perceived influence of Leadership on eLearning growth. The enquiry aimed at finding out what role leadership played in influencing adoption of eLearning. The study found that 98% of participants felt that strong leadership positively potentially influenced eLearning growth while 2% were unsure whether any correlation existed. Table 2 below summarizes what was found.

Table 2: Participant (in HEI) view of strong leadership significance to support eLearning growth. (N=42).

Strong leadership influence in eLearning growth	
Very strong and positive	98%
Unsure	2%
Total	100%

Source: Study Data (2023)

Discussion

In any collective hierarchical communal culture, leaders are held in high esteem whose opinion is respected and adhered to. If practices do not change, at least the word or opinion of the leader is still highly venerated. This has potential to influence the entrenchment of new thoughts, practices and perceptions about a matter. Consequently, when introducing a product or practice, it is advisable to get the support of contextual opinion leaders. If they speak favourably about something, chances are that the offering is off to a good start. If however, these opinion leaders are either silent about or averse to something, there is a higher likelihood that the proposed product or service may experience difficulty getting adopted or eventually die. Additionally, beyond opinion, there is need for strong effective leadership with the right political clout, will and a hands-on kind of attitude. This kind of leadership is often times not only transformational but works to set up structures supporting eLearning (Mubanga, *et al.*, 2023; Bush 2008; Philip & Thinguri 2022; Coleman & Glover 2010; Riley 2008). In the absence of this kind of leadership, the idea remains weak or fails. This claim is consistent with what literature reviewed claimed for the African context (Akwaba, Bowa & Keiyoro 2020; Mukosa & Mweemba 2019; Kukali, Kawasonga & Rabari 2018; Basak, Wotto & Belanger 2016; Mwan'gi & Were 2016). The study findings equally concluded that strong leadership is critical for eLearning growth. In Zambia, leadership could be at various levels from the Republican President all the way to the teacher in the virtual classroom (Philip & Thinguri 2022; Winslow & Allen 2020; Ghavifekr *et al.*, 2014; Mingaine 2013; Keiyoro, Gichovi & Ngunjiri 2016; Beatty 2008; Drysdale & Gurr 2017; Gunga & Ricketts 2007; Yeun, Law, & Wong 2003). If these leaders, say the Vice Chancellor of a University, vouch for eLearning efficacy, the rest of the operatives automatically toll the line and follow through. Drawing from interviews with Dr Kachaka (interview, Lusaka, 2023), Gondwe (interview, Lusaka, 2023) and Dr Luchembe (interview, Kitwe, 2023), all interviewed during the study, stated that leadership statements showed direction and impressed the importance of an issue to both learners and faculty members. At Mukuba University for instance, one respondent stated that the Vice Chancellor consistently echoed the need to adopt eLearning which had a trickledown effect. It may further be argued that leaders set the pace that releases early adopters efficiently move in while others follow. This may foster continuity as well. However, the current scenario (i.e. 2023) in Zambia is that a serious leadership gap exists resulting from ignorance, lack of exposure (to Ed Tech), lack of skills, no supportive policies, lack of coordinated supportive structures or political will (Kachaka, interview, Lusaka, 2023; Gondwe, interview, Lusaka, 2023). If say, the republican President makes policy statements, that in itself carries weight. A combination of factors account for this malady (i.e. high public opinion and low eLearning uptake). The simple but complex cure is a multifaceted pronged approach including tackling the issue from a clear policy perspective. This scenario has evidently negatively affected eLearning growth and adoption (in Zambia) whose remedy lies in aggressively addressing all these deficiencies (Kachaka, interview, Lusaka, 2023; Gondwe, interview, Lusaka, 2023; Namuchana, interview, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored the importance and critical nature of leadership in eLearning development. The study concludes that in a collective relational context, opinion leaders' buy in is a game changer and must be sought after. The study also concludes that beyond opinion making, action and relevant structures are lacking in Zambia thus hindering eLearning growth.

The study recommends that:

- a. Right integrated coordinated leadership (with clout) is to be in place for eLearning to flourish.
- b. The right leadership with relevant political will and right scaffolding structures must be put in place in Zambia. This should be integrated within government structures from national to district level.
- c. Right policies, investment into digital infrastructure, support for eLearning (e.g. mainstreaming or vouching for eCredentials) must be intentionally supported. Leaders' opinion can help to change perceptions and acceptance of eLearning among citizenry for the good.

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Bio

Dr. Billy C Sichone serves as Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate studies (Seminary) at Central Africa Baptist University. He holds multiple doctorates including a PhD in Development Studies (Online Education) and has been in Academia for over a decade after a near two-decade experience in the Development Industry. He is also author of several books and Journal papers on Research, Program Management, Apologetics and Business.