

# Visionary Leadership for Management of Innovative Higher Education Institutions: Leadership Trajectories in a Changing Environment

Paul Mupa

Faculty of Arts and Education and Quality Assurance Unit, Zimbabwe Open University, PO box 1210,  
Masvingo, Zimbabwe

## Abstract

The study sought to explore the paths that leadership can take to come up with meet innovative changes in the higher education landscape. Most people look upon leadership in higher education to inject solutions to employment problems that are in society. It is through an innovative curriculum that such changes can take place. In such an environment, there is need for leadership with a vision. The kind of paths that leadership should follow to meet such changes is the object of this paper. The study was qualitative by nature and employed the case study design. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires were used as the main data generation tools. A convenience sample of 10 lecturers and 27 students was made. The major findings of the study were that leadership requires skills to bring in curriculum change and innovation. Leadership should have the ability of creating an organisational work culture that makes every one think of ways of doing work in new ways. The need to encourage academic professional development was highlighted as a useful path to take by a visionary leader. Learning should comprise of programmes that meet both the formal and informal sector market. There is need for leadership support through motivational strategies, introduction of ICT and creating a conducive climate for innovation as useful paths.

**Keywords:** leadership trajectories; management; innovative programmes; change; visionary leadership; higher education institutions

## 1. Background

Leadership in higher education is considered as the pillar and bedrock for bringing about innovation in the institutions. Without effective leadership, all goes wild. It is the drive way through which institutions can take to reach greater heights. The trend in some countries is that leadership is appointed as a result of possession of a qualification. This paper argues that the possession of a higher qualification is not enough for one to be appointed as leader in the higher education arena. The argument advanced for this thinking is that for innovation to take place in higher education institutions there is need for a visionary leader who can see over and beyond. The kind of innovations that leadership has to initiate requires a level minded person who possesses skills to manage change and innovation (Rogers, 2003). Universities are now ranked in terms of their performance and this kind of thing leaves no room for blind leaders. Competition that has arisen in universities of attracting new students, the issue of effective policy implementation, quality assurance, curriculum change and innovation, the introduction of new programmes that are market driven, among others, are issues that have to be addressed to by visionary leadership. Emerging concerns like the decline of resources for use in institutions, the make shifts from traditional pedagogy to learner-centred pedagogy and the need for e-learning, call for leadership with a long sight (Eddy and VanDerLinden, 2006). The need for visionary leadership arises in such contexts.

Research dealing with visionary leadership in higher education seems to be scarce (Almog-Bareket, 2012) and this prompts the need to carry out this study. Society places high expectation on leadership because it is seen as central and essential in delivering the change, improvement and performance expected of all organisations (Dinham, 2007). Leadership should not be single focused. It should not only show concern with curriculum or lecturers in the university but should think of students and all of society and how to involve them in the institutions (Mazurkiewicz 2009, p. 30). When we talk of visionary leadership, we are concerned with the ease with which one can move an institution from stagnation to a massive innovative system of education. Leadership has to appeal to the hearts and minds of the students, lecturers, communities and stakeholders of the higher education sector. It has to marry theory with practice and no doubt, present a bright vision of the future, develop a plan for achieving goals set by the organisation and motivates the members in the institution to realise that vision.

The world is changing and blind leaders cannot make institutions survive. Higher education institutions face market competition due to its proliferation. It is no longer easy to get high student numbers without aggressive marketing. Such situations require leadership with a vision to navigate the dusty, bumpy and rough road. Universities have large numbers of both academic and support staff who need leadership guidance. Leadership needs craftiness in coming up with innovations and also institutionalising new ideas, creating teams and networks for collaborative work and involving stakeholders in enhancing change (Dinham, 2007).

It is important that leadership in higher education be based on a vision that brings together expectations from students, staff and stakeholders at large. There is need to develop a strong bond with these constituencies for innovation to take place. Leadership has to project into the future by coming up with a direction for followers and then communicate the vision. Followers need to be inspired to overcome the difficult times and hurdles they confront with in the organisation during performance of duties. Leadership has to nurture followers so that they can develop and gain skills that assist them to meaningfully contribute to organisational achievements (Bass et al., 1990). This scenario points to the need for leadership to remove stumps and blocks for followers to follow their paths easily. Visionary leadership clears the road for followers. For change to take place in the institutions of higher education leadership has to develop trust and commitment among followers (Covey, 2006).

It is argued that leadership with a vision should possess the ability to “foresee the future” (Ylimaki, 2006). Directions that are set should not clear road signs which take the travellers to the right destination. Employees enjoy working in an environment in which direction is clearly seen and priorities are set so that they can perform their work effectively and achieve the goals of the institution. Leadership has to foresee customer requirements, particularly the needs of the students and the kind of market driven programmes they require and then prepare students to meet the needs before hand. It is imperative that leadership possess foresight to foresee the future and make prudent decisions. To that end, the survival and growth of the higher education institutions largely depend upon leadership and its ability to predict the future or place emphasis on issues that matter (Nienaber, 2010). Leadership has to place greater emphasis on collaborative partnerships since they reduce the cost of introducing new technologies and also improve the quality of developing programmes (Jung, 2005, p. 4).

## **2. Statement of the problem**

The higher education arena is faced with several challenges that require visionary leadership to tackle and come up with the needed changes and innovations. Student demands in terms of courses and programmes that meet market demands are some of the challenges. students are demanding quality teaching. Lecturers need staff development programmes in order meet the quality levels expected by the students. The world of work demands that products from universities be relevant to the needs of world of wok. There is high need of staff development of lecturers so as to improve their pedagogical skills. Very few studies have been carried out that relate to visionary leadership in higher education. This study fills the void.

## **3. The concept visionary leadership**

Visionary leadership is related to the idea of being able to see. The ability to see the future gives the leadership in organisations strong background to meet the challenges and solve them without hassles (Senge, 2006). Visionary leadership boosts confidence among followers and inspires them to work beyond what they could have done without that inspiration (Berson et al., 2001). Nanus (1989) emphasizes the need for commitment and regards this as central for leadership to ignite innovation in higher education. Bennis (1989) argues that there is a close connection between vision and improvement in organisations.

Visionary leadership holds skills of motivating employees, creating long-term partnerships with other organisations or institutions, production of appropriate resources for use in the institution and no doubt, this enables the organisation to change over time. Visionary leadership presents a system of basic assumptions whereby leading values are translated into rituals, language, and symbols (Katz, 1999). Visionary leadership has the capability of describing an ideal state to followers and show the gap between the current state and the ideal state and this motivates people to work (Yoeli and Berkovich, 2010). Visionary leadership goes along with followers easily and finds it easy to influence them towards goal achievement. Such leaders are exemplary. This is in line with of the idea of Plato that knowing what to do and doing it are two different things (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978).

Visionary leadership is a dynamic, interactive phenomenon (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 18). Visionary leadership sees issues in context and the content of the vision varies. This seems to indicate that some leaders see more than others depending on the style of the leader (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 30).

## **4. Theoretical Framework: Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership is the ability to motivate and to encourage intellectual stimulation through inspiration (Avolio et al., 2004). McColl-Kennedy and Anderson (2005, p.116) further defined transformational leadership style as “guidance through individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence.” Rafferty and Griffin (2004) viewed vision as the main characteristic of transformational leaders. Vision and inspiration activate a transformation process within the follower (Scandura and Williams, 2004) that is, a relationship or sense of identification with the leader develops, which results in acceptance of the leader’s vision and values, and goal achievement becomes the norm (Gillespie and Mann, 2004; McColl-Kennedy and Anderson, 2005). Transformational leaders inspire followers to exert effort beyond

self-interest in favour of collective group accomplishment (Berson and Avolio, 2004). Parolini et al. (2009) concluded that transformational leaders are more likely to focus on the organisation's goals and to use charismatic methods of influence such as vision and inspiration. A visionary leader has the ability to tap potential from members inside and outside the organisation. Visions therefore can be made true through high levels of interaction, both formally and informally, with various stakeholders of the higher education arena.

## 5. Literature

It is argued that there is no more powerful engine driving an organisation towards excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile vision of the future, widely shared (Nanus, 1992, p. 3). Across the educational leadership literature (Bennis & Nanus, 1985), the term *vision* has had two primary definitions. It has been more generally defined in terms of a particular leader's ability to foresee a compelling image of an organisation and more specifically defined as goals or targets towards an improved future. A visionary leader should possess the ability to see the future. Today's educational leaders need to look beyond the mainstream definitions of *vision* (i.e., images and goals) to "drive educational organisations towards excellence and long-range success" (Nanus, 1992, p. 3).

There are ten characteristics of successful visionary leadership and these are: imaginative, experienced, intuitive and analytical; seeks excellence; oriented towards action; empowerer; calculating risk taker; independent; passion for achievement and workaholic; reward oriented; optimistic; powerful. A visionary leader has special skills in creating new marketplace positions and in transforming traditionally "stuck" organisations and reorienting them towards the implementation of a winning vision of how and where the organisation will compete. This is the leader who gains the commitment of his/her organisation's people to the achievement, in a more pragmatic rather than linear/sequential planned way, of the vision. She/he so clearly creates change through very personal leadership. The visionary, more clearly than any of the other leaders, creates an organisation which reflects his/her own personality, style and preferences. She/he is the leader who "wins hearts and minds" and charismatically takes the organisation into a new successful era. The process of visionary leadership involves the design of a desired future and the motivation of others in the organisation to share it and commit oneself to taking personal responsibility for its achievement (Nwankwo and Richardson, 1996).

## 6. Three types of leadership:

Conservative visionary leadership chooses to reject institutional demands and preserve the organisational status quo by either defying or giving an appearance of complying. Thus, this leadership pursues a classic vision that can cause the institution to lose its legitimacy (Taylor and De Lourdes Machado, 2006). Calculated visionary leadership chooses to accept institutional demands and attempts to excel at fulfilling them. Thus, this leadership attempts to be the best at what is considered environmentally legitimate (Davies and Glaister, 1996). Vigorous visionary leadership chooses to fight institutional demands either by negation or by manipulation. These leaders manage to balance institutionalised demands and achieve legitimacy and at the same time achieve a degree of freedom to experiment and innovate (Collins, 2001).

Visionary leadership recognises the social climate in which it lives and works, takes risks, and succeeds in transforming the vision into details (Chance, 1992). Visionary leadership provides bridges from the present to the future. It is important for leaders to be able to translate the vision into practice.

It is argued that many early leadership studies have conceptualised vision as a leader's mental image of an organisation's future that is significantly more appealing than the status quo. It was noted that "To choose a direction, a leader must first have developed a mental image of a possible and desirable future state of the organisation...a vision articulates a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organisation, a condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists" (Bennis, 1989, p. 89). A leader's vision provides a clear sense of where the organisation should try to go and what the organisation should try to do. Research on effective leaders suggests that leaders foresee and a compelling mental image of the institution's future and then empower key staff members to make his or her vision a reality (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989). Similarly, Rogus (1990) indicates that educational institutions with evidence of long-term change have talented visionary leaders who foresee a future ideal and motivate others to implement that vision. A leader with a vision is talented, has an image of the future and has immense power that is non-existent to a person who has a blind vision.

## 7. Research Methodology

This research was grounded in the qualitative paradigm. The use of a qualitative approach to research studies relies on the data production methods that are flexible and sensitive to the social context that such data is derived from, without losing any of the standardisation or structure, and on data analysis methods that presuppose the understanding of the complexity that is entailed onto the details (Patton, 1990). The study was qualitative by nature. The research employed the case study design.

## 7.1 Sampling procedure

Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich cases to participate in the study. Patton (1990, p.169) argues that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information – rich cases for study in-depth”. This study focused on participants who had knowledge and lived experiences of higher education to include universities colleges and who were willing to take part in the investigation (Flick, Kardorff and Steinke, 2004). Lecturers in higher education institutions to include colleges and universities were sampled to participate in the research. A convenience sample of ten lecturers and twenty seven students was used to get the participants.

## 7.2 Instrumentation

The open-ended questionnaire was used as the main data gathering instrument. Open ended questionnaires gave respondents an opportunity to elaborate on issues asked (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Open-ended questions provide a response format that gives respondents the freedom to provide answers which they care to make. The researcher then has to make sense of all the responses given, construct appropriate categories and then code the categories so that the data can be analysed. Open-ended questions are the most important questions on the survey by offering important and unpredictable insights into human behaviour (Burton, 2000). It is suggested that open-ended questions allow for more detailed expression of respondents’ views (Sander & Stevenson, 1999; Fung & Carr, 2000) and that qualitative information on the respondents is far more helpful than aggregated statistical data.

### 7.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

The researchers also employed the semi-structured interviews as the other tool for data generation. Participants were booked and they were interviewed at different times. The mobile phones were used to record the data generated.

## 8. Findings and discussion

### Practicing leadership for Sustainable Development

Participants were of the opinion that visionary leaders need to practice the concept of sustainable development to meet the changes in higher education. They had this to say:

*P1: There is need for leadership in higher education to uphold the idea of sustainable development in order to make education meaningful to societies they serve.*

*P2: Everyone is worried about the future and it is through sustainable development issues that societies can survive.*

*P3: Higher education is the bedrock upon which sustainable development can ignite and this has to done through visionary leadership*

Education for sustainable development has come to be seen as a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future [...] This represents a new vision of education, a vision that helps people of all ages better understand the world in which they live, addressing the complexity and interconnectedness of problems [...] The vision of education emphasises a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to developing the knowledge and skills needed for a sustainable future as well as changes in values, behaviour, and lifestyles (UNESCO, 2003, p. 4).

### Taking account of emerging needs the modern world sets like e-learning

Participants were of the opinion that higher education institutions have to provide e-learning facilities. They had this to say:

*P1: E-learning should not be considered as a supplementary mode of education but a main form of higher education provision mode of learning especially at graduate level.*

*P2: The idea that e-learning is flexible in terms of geographical access and in terms of its scheduling makes it mandatory for visionary leaders to consider its use.*

*P3: The goal of education for all has to be met even by higher education institutions and this can be the path to achieving that goal.*

*P4: E-learning makes use of various styles and meets the overall expansion of educational access to people in remote communities. It has to be looked at by institutions as an economical way of expanding their services, widening opportunities for students around the world, and making effective use of the emerging technologies.*

*P5: In fact, it is ideal that institutions integrate e-learning components in their services.*

*P6: Through e-learning students can access knowledge outside classroom boundaries and this is a challenge visionary leaders in higher education must meet.*

In the field of education, ICT use has been found to correlate positively not just to literacy, but also to cognitive development and creativity in students (Tchombe et al as cited in Chin-Roemer, DeCrease and Gomez, 2011).

When teachers are provided with ICTs and are trained in their use, they quickly transfer those skills to their students (Salinas and Sanchez, 2009). Similarly, librarians with proper ICT training are often viewed as gatekeepers of knowledge to their patrons and in their communities (Omekwu, 2006).

### **Focusing on market-driven ICT-related curriculum**

Participants raised the need for focusing on an ICT related curriculum. They had this to say:

*P1: We need an ICT based curriculum in order to meet the globalised world needs*

*P2: Leadership has to appreciate the fact that ICT training is a fast-changing area in any society, higher education institutions need to continuously update and customize their curriculum based on skill needs of commerce and industry.*

*P3: Considering the fact that most students are adults and seeking knowledge and skills applicable to their life, the case of need-based curriculum development and revision offers useful insights to institutions.*

*P4: ICT is the in-thing today and a curriculum that lacks it is devoid of reality*

It is argued that one of the main objectives of higher education is to open widespread opportunities for current and prospective employees, through a relevant curriculum, whether employed or returning to work, to acquire, increase or update their skills and knowledge during the course of their working lives (Tome, 2011).

### **Developing collaborations and partnerships**

Participants had this to say:

*P1: Leadership with eyes has to develop collaborative partnerships with other institutions.*

*P2: Collaborative partnerships are important for higher education providers in that they reduce the cost of introducing new technologies and also improve the quality of developing programmes.*

*P3: By forming appropriate partnerships with other institutions, universities can secure external content experts and teaching support.*

*P4: Partnerships with professional organisations may help create quality programmes, recruit students and build capacity for quality practices.*

Finding creative ways to share resources and expertise is the key issue in forming partnerships with other organisations. Partnerships at university level have been seen to be useful world-wide (Smith, 2008).

### **Making collaborative decisions about the future**

Participants aired the following sentiments:

*P1: Innovative management requires collaborative decision making.*

*P2: Decision making for the future has to be done collaboratively so that changes would be met without shock.*

Effective visionary leaders should focus on the relationship among individuals within a university and the promotion of pedagogical leadership which places an emphasis on the development of the institution through shared purpose and the development of this (Day and Harris, 2002). This shows that higher education systems visionary leadership for collaborative decision making.

### **Developing viable implementation structures in the institutions of higher education**

*P1: Communication is the lifeblood of any institution. It has to be facilitated in order to share the vision with other members in the institution.*

*P2: It is also ideal to come up with structures in organisations that work towards innovation and implementation of new ideas.*

*P3: Procedures in organisations should not be so complicated to implement changes that are coming in from the internal and external world.*

It is argued that sustainability of innovation occurs through creating a sense of community and ownership, by changing the existing culture, by enhancing and closing feedback loops, and by recognising the actions of one's peers through a public reward system. The role of leadership in adopting innovations in organisations, the openness in both vertical and horizontal communication and establishing a wide network with individuals and institutions outside, appear to be crucial in sustaining educational innovations (Holtzman, 2014); Smith, 2006).

### **Improving and developing technical capabilities of staff**

The participants' concerns seem to engrave professional development at the centre stage of all learning in higher education institutions. Participants had this to say:

*P1: Higher education leaders who are visionary should ensure that staff members receive enough professional development in order to function effectively in their areas.*

*P2: There is need to ensure that lecturers or tutors are given the tricks of the field.*

*P3: The issue is not about possessing the relevant qualifications for one to be an effective lecturer or tutor but it also involves having knowledge about the mechanics of the field.*

Professional development consists of reflective activity designed to improve an individual's attributes, knowledge, understanding and skills. It supports individual needs and improves professional practice. Good leaders change organisations; great leaders change people. People are at the heart of any organisation and it is only through changing people, nurturing and challenging them, helping them grow and develop, creating a

culture in which they all learn, that an organisation can flourish. Professional development refers to an up-front training for all individuals involved and accessible opportunities to learn new skills as well as to unlearn beliefs about students or instruction that have dominated their professional careers. Higher education practitioners need training in pedagogy in order to be effective (Seezink and Poell, 2010).

### **Improving teaching and learning practices**

Participants had this to say:

*P1: There is need for leadership with a vision to reflect on what is happening in their institutions as regards teaching and learning practices.*

*P2: The process of managing change and innovation demands that.*

*P3: Reflection is important in ensuring that students are motivated to learn and see value in the learning process.*

Learners are motivated by success, volition, value, and enjoyment (Knowles et al. 1998). For students in higher education, relevancy adds value to learning, and intrinsic motivation based on success, value, and enjoyment are significant motivating factors. Students are motivated to learn if learning opportunities are efficient and yield mastery of skills and increases in knowledge that can be applied immediately to the work of teaching (Merriam et al. 2007; Zepeda, 2008).

### **Providing students with best conditions for learning**

Participants had this to say:

*P1: Students need best conditions for effective learning and it is the role of the visionary leader to provide such conditions.*

*P2: Student Services and tutoring/teaching need to be revamped for quality service delivery.*

*P3: Typical forms of student services in recent years include face-to-face and/or online tutoring and counseling, telephone or email services, digital libraries, and mentoring.*

*P4: With the development of ICT, higher education institutions are able to offer individualised and interactive student services faster and easier than ever.*

*P5: Cases of comprehensive student services and integration of online technology in tutoring and assessment of services have to be provided.*

*P6: Best conditions of learning should be created and this includes equipping lecturers and tutors with requisite instructional methods. These people need knowledge of how to sequence matter and of how to come up with instructional objectives that meet the demands of the society at large.*

*P7: The library should be equipped with useful books. These are the kind of things that make learning effective in higher education.*

The library is considered as the heart of student learning in the education system. In the knowledge factory, students want to gain knowledge through reading various texts and universities should provide viable libraries in order to make their students information rich. It is argued that visionary leadership needs to provide pedagogic leadership within their own and in other organisations driving forward improvements and raising standards in teaching and learning (DCFS, 2009a:19).

### **Develop craft literacy and craft competency among staff**

The issue of staff development was dominant among the responses given. Participants highlighted that:

*P1: The need for leadership to develop craft literacy and craft competency among lecturers and tutors and other staff members in order to improve quality service delivery is a cornerstone for visionary leadership.*

*P2: Since the quality of student support services is heavily dependent upon the lecturers and tutors' performance, higher education institutions should operate in a rather unique system which can come up with new ideas. Such people have to be able to implement policies effectively.*

### **The use of mobile technologies**

Participants felt that:

*P1: Visionary leadership in higher education institutions should have eyes to introduce mobile technologies in their operations. As the need for mobility is growing and mobile technologies are rapidly becoming prevalent in education, institutions should consider integrating mobile technologies in content presentation, interactions, assessment and measurement, and support services.*

*P2: This can cater for students in the block release and ODL programmes. The pressure remains on libraries to reach learners in ways familiar to learners, especially mobile phones.*

It is argued that libraries need to be on the move taking digital access to individuals, anywhere and anytime (Barker, 2010).

### **Making the institution a learning organisation where everyone is a learner**

Participants echoed the need to make higher education institutions learning organizations. They had this to say:

*P1: Visionary leadership has to make institutions of higher education learning organisations. Learning does not end and people have to continually learn. They should never come a time when members in the institution get contented that they now know and relax.*

P2: Brain is like a slate which rotates and it has to be sharpened all the time.

P3: One of the mandates of universities is to carry out research and it is through that kind of activity that lecturers get sharpened.

## 9. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that for visionary leadership in higher education to play its part, effective management of innovative programmes has to be done. Leadership needs eyes to realise the need for quality assurance processes in all aspects of the organisation. There is need for learner-centred practices so as to increase interactivity between the learner and the content. Leadership should focus on market driven curricula and develop collaborative partnerships so as to meet globalisation demands. For staff to be effective and manage to engage in innovations there is need for professional development and training. Leadership has to engage in reflective behaviour so as to evaluate the services provided and see whether they are meeting customer requirements. This study therefore recommends academic professional development in higher education systems in order to meet and manage the innovations. The study further recommends the need for instituting quality systems that assist leadership with eyes to see the areas that need continuous improvement in their systems in order to manage innovations easily.

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