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Transformational leadership and institutional development in public universities in East Africa

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Abstract
Transformational leadership (TL) has been an increasing focus of discussion on effective leadership and organizational change in higher education over the past decade. The three countries in East Africa, namely Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, experience several challenges in their public universities such as low funding, bureaucratic style of management and accountability gaps. Therefore, this qualitative document analysis assesses the degree to which transformational leadership contributes to institutional development and academic performance in public universities in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The study synthesized data from journal articles, government reports and institutional policies published between 2014 and 2024. Results indicated that TL positively impacts staff motivation, institutional innovation, and research productivity, however, it has limitations due to the politicized nature of governance structures and lack of leadership capacity training. Consequently, the study recommended establishing formalized leadership development frameworks and strong regional collaborations to support higher education transformation.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, institutional development, higher education, East Africa, governance, public universities

1. Introduction
The importance of leadership in higher education continues to grow as it plays a key role in defining how universities respond to global competitiveness, research requirements, and social accountability (Bush & Glover, 2014) [5]. The rapid expansion of public universities in East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania) to address the growing demand for post-secondary education presents new challenges, specifically limited funding, decreased research output, and inefficient administrative practices (Nganga, 2019) [15].
Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) [6, 2] is a model for visionary leadership, motivating and innovating that can address these challenges. By placing emphasis on empowerment and organizational learning, transformational leaders can motivate academic communities to exceed expectations (Avolio & Bass, 2004) [1]. Although there is a growing body of literature examining TL in various contexts, there is very little known about TL in East African universities (Oanda & Jowi, 2020) [17].
Therefore, this paper explores the degree to which transformational leadership is used in public universities in East Africa and its impact on institutional development.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Defining Transformational Leadership
Transformational leadership emphasizes four key aspects:
- Idealized influence — Developing trust and modeling desired behaviors;
- Inspirational motivation — Developing a clear vision;
- Intellectual stimulation — Encouraging creativity; and
- Individualized consideration — Mentoring and supporting individuals (Bass & Riggio, 2006) [3].

Research studies in educational settings have demonstrated that TL positively affects job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and knowledge sharing (Gumus *et al*., 2018;

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Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005) [7, 11].

2.2 Institutional Development in Higher Education
Institutional development pertains to the continuous improvement of institutional policies, procedures, and performance systems that strengthen the sustainability and quality of institutions (Knight, 2019) [10]. Public universities in East Africa are the backbone of national human capital development (Teferra, 2016) [23]. However, ineffective governance and leadership hindered institutions' ability to be responsive to external pressures (Oanda, 2021) [18].

2.3 Transformational Leadership in African Universities
There is empirical evidence indicating that TL has been shown to be positively related to improvements in institutional performance in African universities. Nguni, Sleegers, and Denessen (2006) [16] found that TL contributed to enhanced teacher commitment and innovation in Tanzanian secondary schools, a concept that applies to higher education. Studies from Ghana (Tuwor, 2019) [25] and Kenya (Onyango, 2020) [21] also provide evidence that TL that includes a vision for the future and participative approaches contribute to improved institutional innovation.
Yet, system-wide constraints that include hierarchical cultures, insufficient funding, and limited opportunities for training (Oketch, 2016; Muriisa, 2020) [20, 13] can inhibit the long-term sustainability of TL.

2.4 Theoretical Framework
This study integrated Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory with institutional theory (Scott, 2014). Although TL focuses on the individual's influence, institutional theory highlights the structural context that determines if TL can result in institutional change.

3. Methodology
Qualitative document analysis (QDA) was the methodology employed to examine the degree to which TL is being implemented in public universities in the context of policy, institutional and professional documents (Bowen, 2009) [4]. QDA allows researchers to systematically interpret written documents to identify patterns, meaning, and relationships between TL and institutional development.
Purposive sampling was employed to select documents that would ensure relevance and credibility (Bowen, 2009) [4]. The examied data sources were, Peer reviewed journals (2014-2024), policy and strategy documents, institutional records, and international reports such as UNESCO.
Content analysis of thematic data was employed to analyze the data collected. Iterative coding resulted in the identification of the following emerging categories:
- Transformative practices
- Leader influence on staff and innovation
- Performance factors at the institution level
- Constraints and priorities for strategy.

4. Findings and Discussion
4.1 Extent of Transformational Leadership Practices
Results indicated a partial and growing adoption of the dimensions of transformational leadership in public universities in East Africa. Some examples of inspirational motivation were provided in the form of strategic visions that emphasized innovation and inclusivity. For example, Makerere University's Strategic Plan (2020-2030) has a priority on transformative pedagogy and collaborative governance (IUCEA, 2021) [8].

4.2 Influence on Staff Motivation and Organizational Learning
Transformational leaders in East African universities were associated with greater staff engagement, shared decision-making, and improved research collaboration (Onyango, 2020) [21]. TL promotes intellectual stimulation by providing encouragement to experiment with digital learning and curriculum design.

4.3 Institutional Development and Academic Performance
Universities that practiced TL demonstrated greater research productivity and improved student retention rates (Teferra & Altbach, 2017) [24]. The University of Nairobi's reforms to the leadership structure between 2018 and 2022 that used a team-based approach to governance corresponded to significant gains in the university's digital transformation and outreach efforts (Mwaura, 2021) [14].

4.4 Constraints to Transformational Leadership
Despite the positive trends identified in this study, TL's realization is limited by:
- Limited financial autonomy;
- Politicized leadership appointments;
- Limited opportunities for leadership training (Wanzala, 2022; Muriisa, 2020) [26, 13].

These structural constraints reduce the coherence of leaders and the alignment of institutional visions (Oanda & Jowi, 2020) [17].

4.5 Strategies for Enhancing Leadership Capacity
Results suggested that universities should:
1. Develop formalized leadership development programs focused on emotional intelligence, ethics, and participative management;
2. Support regional networking through IUCEA for knowledge exchange regarding leadership;
3. Establish performance-related appointments to increase accountability.

These strategies may promote a transformational culture within universities.

5. Implications For Policy And Practice
- Include formalized transformational leadership training in national higher education policy frameworks.
- Develop regional centers for excellence in university leadership under IUCEA.
- Embed leadership performance metrics in accreditation and funding systems.
- Promote inclusive gender pipelines in leadership.

6. Conclusion
Transformational leadership significantly contributes to institutional development in public universities in East Africa by promoting staff motivation, innovation, and performance improvements. However, systemic and capacity constraints restrict the complete potential of TL. To develop meaningful progress in this area requires the concerted effort of governments, university councils, and

regional organizations to establish formalized leadership development programs, establish transparent governance systems, and develop management approaches that emphasize innovation.

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