Strategic leadership for a Zimbabwean University in turbulent times: Literature analysis

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A B S T R A C T

The role of strategic leadership in ensuring organisational survival and success has attracted much attention among researchers worldwide. However, research needs to be conducted on the practice of university strategic leadership in Zimbabwe, especially in times of environmental turbulence. This conceptual paper examines extant literature on strategic leadership to propose a situated strategic leadership framework for research and practice in universities in Zimbabwe. A background literature review on models and frameworks of strategic leadership was conducted in several peer-reviewed journals to identify the dimensions and significance of the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Zimbabwe. The findings show that university strategic leadership requires individual and organisational capabilities, collective sense-making processes, and inclusive envisioning of the future in turbulent times. Three competencies of leading self as a university strategic leader involve strategic thinking, building personal social capital, and ethical competence. Additionally, five organisational-level capabilities include (1) setting and pursuing direction, (2) leading to drive strategy and results, (3) agility in leading strategic change, (4) building and using human capital, (5) and promoting an entrepreneurial and resilient culture. Based on the above components, an integrative framework of strategic leadership is proposed, which hinges on a holistic and systemic balance of the needs of multiple stakeholders, collective sense-making and inclusive envisioning of the future of a university. The paper concludes that university strategic leadership in turbulent times is complex and multi-dimensional, and integrates individual and organisational capabilities and processes to reshape Direction, Alignment and Commitment (DAC).

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Introduction

Universities in Zimbabwe are undergoing unique and prolonged environmental turbulence, which is challenging for many strategic leaders. The periods of currency instability and hyperinflation depict a hostile economy affecting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Zimbabwe (Mandibaya & Khan, 2020). For example, the annual hyperinflation rate rose 676% in March 2020. Environmental turbulence differs from conventional critical situations because of the large and uncontrollable scale of change. More importantly, the distinctive elements are the high velocity of fluctuation and the unclear patterns of evolution, which often leads to quick deterioration due to complexity, dynamism, and unpredictability during environmental turbulence.

The notion that leadership is critical for excellence, organisational sustainability, failure, or mediocrity is old and well-established in many sectors. However, it is worrisome that a recent study by Haage, Voss, Nguyen and Eggert (2021) concluded that 64% of current academic leaders in a university in Germany feel unprepared for the position they currently hold. This observation is not exceptional to the German university as it is evident in many countries. Leadership in HEIs is criticised for overemphasising vertical at the expense of horizontal competencies for leaders. Ruben, De Lisi and Gigliotti (2017) define vertical and horizontal competencies. Vertical competencies are the sector-specific capabilities regarded as prerequisites for successful leadership in a particular organisation or sector. In contrast, horizontal competencies are the “generic” knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA) essential for leadership effectiveness in various roles, unfamiliar terrain and dynamic complexity. Recently, Samimi, Cortes,
Anderson, and Herrmann (2020) have implored researchers of strategic leadership to explore how the internal and external contexts simultaneously influence strategic leaders' behaviours and day-to-day practices or theorise how strategic leaders influence both the internal and external context.

While we know much about the challenges and skills required by university leaders, there is little known about the context-specific frameworks or models of strategic leadership in the disrupted HEIs, especially in Zimbabwe. Existing models of strategic leadership have skirted the HEI in Zimbabwe. Instead, researchers have focused on other contexts, such as public service and small and medium enterprises in Zimbabwe (Svotwa, 2019). Outside Zimbabwe, Kanyangale(2017) explored strategic leadership in entrepreneurial Small and medium enterprises(SMEs), while Davies and Davies (2010) examined strategic leadership in schools in America, to mention a few. The unprecedented economic turbulence, dynamic complexity and rate of change, various forms of under-resourcing of HEIs (e.g. human, physical, financial resources) and tense political environment in Zimbabwe call for new theories, new applications and thinking about strategic leadership of universities (Mandibaya & Khan,2020).

In response to this call, the paper aims to examine extant literature on strategic leadership to ultimately propose a conceptual and context-specific framework of strategic leadership for research and practice in a university in Zimbabwe. The paper grapples with the question: what is the nature of strategic leadership in the disrupted HEIs in Zimbabwe? This paper is valuable as it contributes an integrative framework that illuminates strategic leadership components for a university when disruption is prolonged or turbulence has become a new norm.

The conceptual paper begins by unraveling the essence and complexity of strategic leadership as a critical concept before presenting the methodology used in this literature analysis. Subsequently, findings are presented to depict the nature of dimensions that constitute existing generic and context-specific frameworks and models of strategic leadership. Drawing from the identified commonalities and insights on dimensions in the frameworks, the paper proposes a new and integrative strategic leadership framework for a Zimbabwean university during prolonged turbulence. Future research directions and the limitations of the paper are also presented.

**The Essence and Complexity of Strategic Leadership**

Clarity on the essence and complexity of strategic leadership is a critical foundation for this literature analysis. There is no scholarly consensus on the meaning of strategic leadership. As such, it is prudent to focus on two key issues to gain conceptual clarity: (1) level and scope of responsibility and (2) ontology of leadership.

**Level and scope of responsibility**

The seminal work of Katz and Kahn (1966) is precise that there are three levels or categories of leadership in an organisation. These are strategic, operational (supervisory) and tactical levels of leadership. House and Aditya (1997:444) surmise that “... strategic leadership focuses on the creation of meaning and purpose for the organisation.”

Regarding time orientation, strategic leaders spend less of their time on the present as they focus much on the long-term, strategic and overall organisational-level activities and outcomes. The seminal work by Hambrick and Mason (1984) is explicit that the Upper echelons theory is the theoretical foundation of strategic leadership. Samimi et al. (2020) demarcate strategic leadership in terms of individual and group levels (e.g. TMT diversity) and the dyadic internal interface between CEO-TMT, which reveal relational dynamics. Thus, strategic leadership at the top is not just about the individual but also the collective, which may be homogenous or heterogeneous (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000).

When scholars attempt to specify or unpack the constitutive elements of strategic leadership, they disagree on the nature, variety and number of characteristics, functions, activities or roles of strategic leadership. For example, Amos (2010) claims that there are seven functions of strategic leadership, which differs from Samimi et al.(2020), who identifies eight functions: making strategic decisions; engaging with external stakeholders; performing human resource management activities; motivating and influencing; managing information; overseeing operations and administration; managing social and ethical issues, and managing conflicting demands. The scope and dynamic interactions of these functions and activities at the highest level of an organisation underscore that strategic leaders require a bird's eye view of the firm. These leaders also require a good understanding of internal and external environments.

**Ontology of leadership**

There are two types of ontology for leadership, namely the tripod and Direction, Alignment and Commitment (DAC), which are salient to capture the essence and complexity of strategic leadership. The tripod ontology of leadership asserts that:

"in its simplest form, [leadership] is a tripod - leader or leaders, followers, and a common goal they want to achieve" (Bennis 2007: 3) ... "this is not a definition of leadership, but something much more fundamental: it is an expression of commitment to the entities (leaders, followers, common goals) that are essential and indispensable to leadership and about which any theory of leadership must therefore speak” (Drath, McCauley, Palus, Velsor, O'Connor & McGuire, 2008:635).

The tripod ontology underscores a leader's hierarchical and dyadic influence on followers. In short, the lateral influence of peers at the same leadership level is less emphasised in the tripod ontology (Drath et al., 2008). On the other hand, the DAC ontology is distinctive because it focuses on three leadership outcomes (Drath et al. 2008:636). First, direction as a leadership outcome is
characterised by widespread agreement on overall aims, mission and objectives in a collective. Second, alignment as a leadership outcome refers to the organisation and coordination of knowledge and work in a collective. Lastly, commitment as a leadership outcome underscores the feeling of obligation, emotional attachment and willingness of the members of a collective to subsume their interests and to benefit within the collective interest (Drath et al. 2008:636).

Given the above conceptual clarity on the level and ontology of strategic leadership, it is timely to situate this phenomenon in the university context. Figure 1 attempts to surmise the generic challenges and shed light on the corresponding skill sets necessary for university strategic leadership.

![Figure 1: The key challenges and skill requirements of university strategic leaders; Source: Dogson and Gan (2019)](image)

The following section focuses on the methodology used in this literature analysis.

**Research Methodology**

This paper acknowledged the critical reviews and positions of the literature concerning the dimensions and frameworks of strategic leadership in the context of developed and developing countries in several journal articles and research work.

**Literature search and article selection**

The search for articles was limited to the following peer-reviewed journals: Africa Virtual University Resources, Springer eJournals, Emerald Management, ZOU online Journals and Taylor and Francis Journals as these are relevant to scholarship of strategic leadership. The keywords Zimbabwe, universities, higher education, and strategic leadership and strategic leadership framework were used in searching for articles. To link strategic leadership and turbulence in Zimbabwe, the search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles and other research work published between 2010–2022. This duration is relevant because the turbulence in Zimbabwe started to intensify in 2010 and continues to affect organisations' economy and strategic leadership in different ways. This literature analysis covers a decade's relevant frameworks of strategic leadership to delineate a pattern of commonalities and nuances in the dimensions. The search focused on articles published in English during the ten years. The search resulted in 138 articles that were related to strategic leadership frameworks. At this stage, a thorough and deep read of the abstracts of all 138 was conducted. As a result of the screening and filtering process, a total of 33 articles were selected for further analysis.

**Dimensional focus and analysis**

To identify commonalities and differences in the relevant and necessary dimensions of existing strategic leadership for possible inclusion in the proposed framework, the following was done:

i. Every model or framework and its dimensions were broadly classified under generic frameworks of strategic leadership if it did not focus on a particular context.

ii. The models and frameworks that focused on a specific context were categorised under context-specific frameworks of strategic leadership.

iii. Constant comparison of each identified dimension with other dimensions in all the generic strategic leadership models was done to synthesise and classify similar dimensions and avoid overlaps. Constant comparison and classification were vital...
in avoiding repetition and ensuring that no dimension was classified into two groups. The comparison also helped capture every property or nuance related to the dimensions of a strategic leadership framework.

iv. The principle of “mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive” (MECE) was used to compare the constitutive dimensions in all the generic models of strategic leadership so that they are as exhaustive as possible, inclusive and without any overlaps or repetition of relevant and necessary dimensions.

v. Constant comparison of the dimensions found in the context-specific frameworks of strategic leadership was also done to avoid repetition and to capture every property or nuance related to the dimension.

vi. The dimensions considered relevant and necessary in the context of HEI in Zimbabwe are included in the proposed framework of strategic leadership.

Given the above steps, the dimensions proposed to constitute the framework of strategic leadership in a university in Zimbabwe in turbulent times result from constant comparison techniques and the use of the MECE principle. The literature analysis informs dimensions identified as constitutive of the proposed integrative strategic leadership of the following twelve extant frameworks produced by different scholars between 2010-2022.

i. Five generic frameworks of strategic leadership analysed are (1) Competences and tasks of strategic leadership (Amos,2010); (2) Strategic leadership framework (Samimi et al.,2020), (3) Developing strategic leadership competence (Norzailan, Yusof and Othman,2016), (4) Interfaces of Strategic Leaders (Simsek, Heavey and Fox,2017), and (5) Integrative framework on strategic leaders and technological innovation (Kurzhals, Graf-Vlachy and König, 2020).

ii. Seven context-specific frameworks of strategic leadership analysed are (1) Strategic leadership framework for SMEs(Svotwa,2019); (2) Developing a model for strategic leadership in schools (Davies & Davies,2010); (3) Strategic leadership and organisational resilience in hospitality (Ho, Lam, and Law,2022); (4) Integrative framework of local strategic leadership in SMEs (Kanyangale, 2017); (5) Strategic leadership in a federal government (Farhan,2021) and (6) Interaction effect of strategic leadership behaviours and organisational culture on Information Systems-Business strategic alignment (Shao,2019) and (7) Strategic leadership capability in building sustainable competitive advantage in an academic environment (Mahdia & Almsafir, 2014).

Results

The results have revealed thirteen dimensions of strategic leadership evident in different generic frameworks and seven delineated from context-specific frameworks. Initially, the different dimensions identified from the generic framework are presented. The findings on generic frameworks are followed by the dimensions delineated from the context-specific strategic leadership framework.

Seven common dimensions in generic strategic leadership frameworks

The following are the seven common dimensions of strategic leadership deciphered in five context-free frameworks.

Setting organisational direction

The task of setting organisational direction is expressed in different ways in all five context-free frameworks of strategic leadership by Amos(2010), Samimi et al. (2020), Norzailan et al. (2016), Simsek et al.(2017) and Kurzhals et al. (2020). For example, the framework by Amos(2010) uphold that strategic leaders set the organisational direction through clear strategy and vision. Samimi et al. (2020) posit that strategic leaders decide on strategic changes and the firm’s overall direction. The significance of long-term direction, strategic goals and sense of destiny are decipherable in the framework by Norzailan et al. (2016). Simsek et al., 2017 underscore that long-term organisational direction relates not only to the variety of interfaces of strategic leaders (e.g. inter-organisational interface, inter-functional interfaces, business-government interfaces, R&D/Marketing interface, resource interfaces, alliance interfaces) but also a range of distal consequences. Kurzhals et al. (2020) specify how strategic leaders pursue long-term orientation and connection of innovation with firm-related performance.

Engaging with external and internal stakeholders

Engagement with external stakeholders is a crucial function for strategic leaders according to three of the five generic frameworks of strategic leadership by Samimi et al. (2020), Simsek et al. (2017) and Norzailan et al. (2016). Managing the firm-stakeholder relationships in the environment affects organisational performance and reputation. The Strategic Leaders Interface (SLI) model by Simsek et al. (2017) asserts that the interface is the purposive contact point where the different worlds of internal and external stakeholders intersect, constraining or facilitating the transfer of influence, information, and resources.

Strategic thinking

Strategic thinking as competence of strategic leaders is evident in two of the five strategic leadership frameworks. The two are the frameworks by Norzailan et al.(2016) and Amos(2010). These frameworks uphold that strategic leaders look into the future and consider different scenarios, foresight and insights. They engage in various aspects of strategic thinking. Strategic leaders engage in a strategic reasoning process of four mental or cognitive activities: identifying and diagnosing the problem, conceiving and realising
the solution (Amos, 2010). However, the competence of strategic thinking is not an overt element in the frameworks of strategic leadership by Samimi et al. (2020) and Simsek et al. (2017). Instead, Samimi et al. (2020) allude to strategic leaders making strategic decisions and transitioning from a more operational-focused mindset to a more strategic outlook. In a slightly different vein, Simsek et al. (2017) allude to the scope and strategic nature of the impact of interfaces, creating a complex web of relationships between executives and other parties.

Performing human resource management activities

The human resources activities, vital for strategic leadership, are delineated in three of the five frameworks. According to Amos (2010), staffing the organisation is about the right people with the right skills at the right time to work actively towards strategy execution. Developing and aligning competent people is critical to translate strategy into action. In a different vein, the frameworks by Samimi et al. (2020) specify personnel selection and dismissal, setting compensation and incentives, and personnel evaluation and development as key human resources activities for strategic leaders. Changing organisational structure, seeking firm efficiency, and cost reductions in the long term are also key HR-related activities of a strategic leader. However, the framework by Simsek et al. (2017) does not explicitly isolate human resources activities by strategic leaders. Instead, this framework alludes to managing interdependence, mutual reliance and influence on people and activities as critical for cross-functional coordination and performance in a complex organisation.

Building social capital

The task of building and using bonding, bridging and linking social capital by strategic leaders is delineated from three strategic leadership frameworks by Amos (2010), Simsek et al. (2017) and Kurzhals et al. (2020). First, Amos (2010) reveals that a strategic leader uses social capital to identify opportunities and access resources available within one’s interrelationships and social network. Simsek et al. (2017) refer to access to existing and prospective resources (e.g. intellectual, financial, cultural) available to an actor via his or her interfaces and relationship network with different stakeholders. In managing interfaces, strategic leaders focus on social ties or relationships as effective channels through which necessary tangible and intangible resources are secured for specific purposes (Simsek et al., 2017).

Motivating and influencing

The task of motivating and influencing organisational members is evident in two frameworks of strategic leadership. Samimi et al. (2020) posit that strategic leaders are role models who influence others, shape the organisation’s culture, and communicate the vision. Strategic leaders cascade influence to followers at lower levels of management with whom there is little direct interaction. According to the framework by Simsek et al. (2010), strategic leaders motivate but also coach and reward members of the TMT and delegate responsibilities to others. More importantly, strategic leaders serve the role of “disturbance handler” to avoid situations of strategic polarisation in an organisation.

Lead and manage change

The capability of leading and managing change in a dynamic environment is highlighted in two generic frameworks by Amos (2010) and Norzailan et al. (2017). Amos (2010) posits that strategic leaders identify the elements that need to change, the type of change required, and those elements to remain the same in the organisational architecture. Change sticks when it becomes the way of doing things around here. Strategic leaders manifest adaptive capacity by being open to and accepting change. The generic framework of strategic leadership competencies by Norzailan et al. (2017) recognises three critical activities in change management skills, namely communication to make a case for change and mobilise co-workers’ support for the change, monitoring and assessing the impact of change efforts to institutionalise changes.

Six dimensions not commonly shared in generic strategic leadership frameworks

Six dimensions are identified as necessary but least common in the generic frameworks of strategic leadership. These dimensions of strategic leadership are predominantly evident in the two conceptual frameworks by Amos (2010) and Samimi et al. (2020).

First, the task of creating organisational alignment is only overt in the framework by Amos (2010). Organisations comprise a variety of interacting components which need to be aligned to operate as a cohesive whole. Organisational alignment is critical in the integration of short and long-term goals. Second, the strategic leader’s task of building and using core organisational competencies is illuminated only in the framework by Amos (2010). Strategic leaders focus on core organisational competencies as the activities in which an organisation performs exceptionally well and may result in competitive advantage (Amos, 2010). Third, the task of creating an organisational culture and values supportive of the strategy is highlighted in the framework by Amos (2010). The way strategic leaders of the organisation conduct themselves and respond to critical incidents, act and think give cues for what the organisation wants and counts. These become the unwritten game rules that members adopt as norms in an organisation.

Fourth, the function of managing social and ethical issues is clarified in the framework by Samimi et al. (2020). This task entails steering the firm’s moral behaviour and controlling illegal behaviours. The reinforcement and modelling of ethical values and standards are critical for strategic leaders, especially when employees have considerable discretion on various social or ethical issues, diversity, compliance, governance and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Fifth, strategic leaders’ tasks in managing information
are highlighted only in the framework by Samimi et al. (2020). Strategic leaders require the capability of processing strategic information and distributing it to the organisation's different areas and hierarchical levels. Lastly, managing conflicting demands is a crucial function of strategic leaders, illuminated only in the framework by Samimi et al. (2020). Strategic leaders reconcile and pursue conflicting goals and directions for the firm, such as exploration and exploitation or long- and short-term goals.

**Seven common dimensions in context-specific strategic leadership frameworks**

Literature analysis has revealed seven common dimensions of strategic leadership delineated from seven context-specific frameworks focusing on SMEs (Svotwa, 2019), SMES (Kanyangale, 2017), school (Davies & Davies, 2010), hospitality (Ho, Lam, and Law, 2022), the federal government (Farhan, 2021), Information system (Shao, 2019) and academic environment (Mahdia & Almsafir, 2014). The dimensions are as follows:

*Direction setting*

Setting and executing of strategic direction is a crucial component evident in five of the seven context-specific frameworks of strategic leadership for SMEs by Svotwa (2019), Integrative frameworks of strategic leadership for ESMEs by Kanyangale (2017), frameworks of strategic leadership for Schools by Davies and Davies (2010), strategic leadership and organisational resilience for the hospitality and tourism industry by (Ho et al., 2022), and strategic leadership for the federal government during a crisis by Farhan (2021). Svotwa (2019) discuss long term-direction in terms of strategic intent, which embraces the vision, mission statement, and strategic plans. At the federal level, Farhan (2021) underscore that strategic leaders bring people together around a shared purpose and common values and motivate them to create value for everyone. Davies and Davies (2010) underscore that direction setting in a school hinges on the interaction between the visioning process and defining moral purpose, which clarifies where the organisation needs to be in the future. The work of Davies and Davies (2010) in a school context integrates an organisation's moral purpose and values ('why we do what we do) and vision (where we want to be) in the strategic context, while strategy links broad activity to shorter-term operational activities.

*Translating strategy into action*

The capability of translating strategy into action is explicitly expressed in two frameworks: strategic leadership for ESMEs by Kanyangale (2017) and strategic leadership framework for Schools by Davies and Davies (2010). In SMEs, strategic leaders are involved in reading situations and creative combinations of resources to align priorities with resources to achieve strategic outcomes. Entrepreneurial resilience depicts the ability of strategic leaders to successfully retain focus on a course of action and obtain results despite going through adversity and threats to enterprise survival. The framework by Davies and Davies (2010) contextualises strategic leadership in a school and posits that translating strategy involves a four-stage process. These stages include the (1) articulation of vision, (2) building of a common understanding, (3) creating a shared conceptual or mental map of the future of the strategy through dialogue, and (4) the need to define desired outcomes.

*Motivating and influencing*

Motivating and influencing people is a crucial task of strategic leaders, evident in three context-specific frameworks: Strategic leadership by Ho et al. (2022), Farhan (2021) and Davies and Davies (2010). More specifically, the framework for federal leadership by Fahan (2021) talks about attracting people to be followers, motivating followers to work together and overcome current challenges, and working with followers to become pioneers and entrepreneurs, making change and creating a difference during a crisis. In a slightly different vein, the framework by Davies and Davies (2010) hinges on motivation to understand the necessity for change of strategy, culture, and behaviour in a school. The framework by Ho et al. (2022) emphasises humane-oriented behaviour through encouraging mutual trust and team building for resilience enhanced by strategic leadership in the hospitality industry.

*Organisational culture*

Organisation culture is highlighted in various ways in the four context-specific frameworks of strategic leadership by Kanyangale (2017), Svotwa (2019), Farhan (2021) and Shao (2019). Kanyangale (2017) illuminate the creation and maintenance of entrepreneurial and resilient culture in ESMEs as critical tasks of strategic leaders. Strategic leaders have entrepreneurial insight that deals with uncertainty, risk and ambiguity, reinforcing a more disciplined use of their resources and exploiting newly created products or services. The framework of strategic leadership for SMEs by Svotwa (2019) underscores that strategic leaders seek to create and sustain an influential organisational culture and emphasise sound ethical practices. Farhan (2021) alludes to how federal leadership promotes an organisational culture, including the social ability to construct a shared vision, work towards establishing teams, and believe in team achievement and shared responsibility. The work of Shao (2019) reveals how idealised influence and inspirational motivation behaviours of strategic leaders are more effective in flexibility-oriented culture but less effective in control-oriented culture when aligning information strategy and business strategy in an organisation.

*People management*

People skills for strategic leadership are expressed in various ways in five context-specific frameworks of strategic leadership. First, the framework by Kanyangale (2017) delves into how strategic leaders are ambidextrous to iterate between two patterns of strategic orientation – the humanising and commodifying of the relationship with internal organisational members. The commodifying of
relationships with people is opportunistic, divisive, and adversarial and devalues others. In contrast, humanising the relationship with all employees in an ESME creates cohesion and values people for collective creativity and effort necessary to deal with external threats to business (Kanyangale, 2017).

Second, Svotwa (2019) emphasises that strategic leaders' task is to ensure that there are skilled staff, productive internal relations and employment opportunities to succeed. Employees are encouraged to show initiative in developing new and creative ways of performing their duties in SMEs. Third, Ho et al. (2022) highlight the role of human resource management.

Fourth, Davies and Davies (2010) underscore that a school's strategic leaders develop people's strategic capabilities to deliver the strategy. Lastly, Mahdi et al. (2021) affirm the significance of strategic leaders' human and social capital capabilities in private universities in achieving organisational goals and improving sustainable competitive advantage.

**Stakeholder engagement**

The only context-specific framework which explicitly identifies stakeholder engagement as key for strategic leaders is by Ho et al. (2022). In this framework, collaboration among all the industry stakeholders is essential to navigating current crises and future disasters. Strategic leaders can act proactively, manage and communicate well with different stakeholders and help the industry make sense of chaos by balancing the various stakeholders' interests.

**Managing social and ethical issues**

The framework for SMEs in Zimbabwe by Svotwa (2019) has illuminated the issue of ethical culture. Strategic leaders communicate ethical standards to employees, customers and stakeholders. They encourage the use of ethical practices in day-to-day organisational activities.

**Proposed Framework of University Strategic Leadership in Times of Turbulence**

The article proposes an integrative framework of university strategic leadership in turbulent times in Zimbabwe based on commonalities and insights derived from extant generic and context-specific frameworks. The proposed integrative framework brings together six different components, namely (1) leading self, (2) organisational capabilities, (3) inclusive envisioning of the future, (4) sense-making of dynamic reality in a VUCA and interfaces with key stakeholders to collectively shape and re-shape (5) DAC in a (6) context of the university. Each of these components is briefly discussed below as follows:

**External and internal context of the university**

University strategic leaders in Zimbabwe work in international systems, national systems outside the university in Zimbabwe, various sub-systems within the university and diverse stakeholders (Garwe & Thondhlana, 2019). University strategic leadership is exercised in a competitive arena (e.g. public, private, and international universities). Strategic leadership also responds to macro-environmental changes triggered by broad factors that impact many organisations, industries and sectors to a greater or lesser extent. University leaders need to balance global and unique local drivers when responding to the influence of macro and micro environments and stakeholder expectations (Bekele & Ofoyuru, 2021).

**Sense-making of dynamic reality and interfaces with key stakeholders**

In turbulent times, agility in making and giving sense is salient to identify the drivers of VUCA and delineate current and future strategic options and necessary shifts in interactions with stakeholders. Strategic leaders use context-setting agility to scan their environment, anticipate significant changes and decide what initiatives to take next. As events in turbulent times unfold quickly and unpredictably, situational awareness and a sense of purpose guide strategic leaders in managing interfaces and empowering others in pursuit of collective sense-making and distributed leadership.

**DAC: Long-term perspective, holistic and systemic balance of multiple stakeholder needs**

Strategic leaders in a Zimbabwean university must ensure clarity of direction evident through a reasonable level of understanding and agreement in the collective regarding the aims, mission, and goals in turbulent times. The pace and complexity of change compel strategic leadership to rely on quick and collective sense-making and envisioning by a network of distributed leaders and diverse stakeholders to create DAC in the university.

The inclusive envisioning of the future

The environmental turbulence in Zimbabwe undermines the visibility of the future or attempts to foresee the future with certainty. As such, envisioning which involves different stakeholders is pivotal to clarify roles repetitively and functions the organisation wants to fulfil to survive the turbulence. In a university facing turbulent times, envisioning entails interaction with stakeholders of a university and actors to engage in visionary thinking to ensure academic and operational resilience.

**Leading self-competence**

The proposed framework asserts that there are four competencies of leading self which are critical for university strategic leadership:
Strategic thinking competencies

As the university is complex, strategic leaders need a variety of strategic thinking competence in turbulent times (Liedtka, 1998). Systems perspective as a strategic competence is helpful to see the inter-connectedness, interdependencies, and patterns in the various components over time. Additionally, intent-focused or vision-driven thinking is a crucial competence in turbulent times. As turbulence creates a VUCA, it is critical for strategic leaders to also engage in hypothesis-driven thinking. University strategic leaders in Zimbabwe must demonstrate these various aspects of strategic thinking to lead through turbulent times. Figure 2 depicts the different components of the proposed integrative framework of university strategic leadership, which centralises DAC typified by the long-term, holistic and systemic balance of multiple stakeholder needs.

![Figure 2: A proposed integrative framework of university strategic leadership; Source: Own](image-url)

Building personal social capital and networking

University strategic leaders use personal social capital to bond with people like them, bridge into different networks of other people and link up with influential people to access resources. Social capital is not the network structure itself but the potential and actual intangible and tangible products or resources within the network that individuals, groups, and communities can attain by forming relationships (Claridge, 2018). Strategic leaders also need to use organisational social capital to get collective resources shared between members of the organisation or university. Social capital underscores that leadership occur in both formal and informal contexts.

Demonstrating ethical competence

As leaders and employees in the university in Zimbabwe face ethical dilemmas in disruptive times, they must make conscious and ethical decisions and actions in a situation of responsibility. Ethical competence of leaders and employees is critical as a person who confronts a moral problem can choose the right way to handle the problem at hand (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2011). Moral awareness is critical as existing norms and rules cannot always cover and resolve the unfamiliar and unprecedented challenges which arise in dynamic and disruptive times.

Organisational-level capabilities

Five organisational capabilities of university strategic leadership in turbulent times are as follows:

Set and pursue the direction

Setting the strategic direction of a university during turbulent times requires sense-making and anticipation of the impact of plausible and divergent scenarios as part of strategising and navigating into the future in an ever-changing environment. How a university sets and clarifies its desired future state and determines the cohesive ways to ensure internal integration, respond and adapt to environmental turbulence is critical for its survival in turbulent times. In Zimbabwe, clarity of strategic intent and moral purpose of a university shared by all key stakeholders is pivotal as the dynamic road map for every key player to individually and collectively respond to environmental turbulence.

Leading to drive strategy and results
Translating strategy to action and results in turbulent times requires creativity and flexible pursuit of planned and emergent strategies. Ambidextrous strategic leadership combines exploiting existing capabilities, exploring new opportunities, and pursuing short- and long-term goals in disruptive times. In Zimbabwe, there is a need for university strategic leaders to be ambidextrous to better cope with different challenges arising from the economic and political spheres in times of turbulence.

Build and use human capital

Strategic leaders must align human capital to quickly adapt different aspects of planned and emergent strategy into results. Zvavahera (2021) has concluded that lack of transparency by the executive, imperfect pay policy, failure to recognise exceptional performance and lack of trust between academic staff and the executive affect industrial relations in a Zimbabwean university. Mandibaya and Khani (2020) and Chabaya (2015) concur that strategic options to enhance staff retention include a change in university strategy, the creation of income-generating strategies, the use of non-financial incentives and collective bargaining.

Promote an entrepreneurial and resilient culture

Entrepreneurial thinking in the university community in Zimbabwe is necessary to diversify streams and sources of revenues for the university. However, it is difficult to practice due to unfavourable policies which inhibit public universities from engaging in commercial activities (Chinyoka & Mutambara, 2021). Promotion of entrepreneurial culture in Zimbabwean universities will require strategic leaders to drive changes ranging from policy, institutional culture, and creation of innovation infrastructure and entrepreneurship which forms an integral part of strategic plans and policies. Integration of the formal and informal elements of the university is critical to creating and promoting an entrepreneurial climate and culture.

Leadership agility for strategic change

Leadership agility, which emphasises creative and stakeholder agility, is critical to enable Zimbabwean universities facing turbulence to adapt to changing circumstances rapidly. However, speed and flexibility as aspects of agility suffer when no resources exist. Similarly, the ability to focus on continuous improvement during turbulent times may be difficult without the government’s adequate resources, supportive mandates and stakeholder buy-in (e.g. Students, staff, regulators, employers, funders).

Implications

There are three implications for the proposed integrative framework of strategic leadership for Zimbabwean Universities.

First, university strategic leaders need stakeholder centricity and leadership agility if they are to pursue and achieve DAC in turbulent times. These two aspects are pivotal to creating and promoting DAC, which not only focuses on the long-term but is also holistic and systemic enough to balance the diverse needs of stakeholders of a university as a system. University strategic leaders need to rely on distributed leadership by allowing a network of empowered individuals to exercise leadership within the university to make sense of the context and rapidly adapt to unfolding changes in turbulent times. Instead of withholding and protecting their powers, university strategic leaders need to learn how to give power to others to institutionalise agility, collective sense-making and distributed leadership in turbulent times.

Second, university strategic leadership in Zimbabwe may create an environment for the entrepreneurial behaviour of students and academics only if there is supportive policy and collaboration between the university, government and industry as critical stakeholders. Change to embed aspects of entrepreneurial university calls for university leaders to first address restrictive policies for public universities before any entrepreneurial attempt to empower employees to diversify sources of funding in the face of dwindling support by the government.

Lastly, the proposed framework of integrative university strategic leadership is conceptual which is a limitation as it does not embrace views of strategic leaders. Future research is required to empirically validate or alter the identified components of university strategic leadership turbulent times. Future research must diversify the research sample of both participating universities and strategic leaders with real-life experiences of leading a university through turbulent times if we are to deepen our understanding of university strategic leadership in turbulent times.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper has proposed an integrative framework of strategic leadership for Zimbabwean universities in turbulent times. The paper is clear that university strategic leadership is multi-dimensional and requires holistic integration of aspects of leading self and organisational capabilities, agility in collective sense-making of the university context, and pursuit of inclusive envisioning and shaping of DAC.

Furthermore, while environmental turbulences are becoming more common, more strategic leadership models for turbulent times must be developed. As such, there is a compelling need for empirically tested and robust models to fill the gap in university strategic leadership frameworks in general and Zimbabwe, in particular, to inform leaders on how to lead themselves, lead others and the university system effectively during disruptive times.
This article is a crucial step towards a situated model of university strategic leadership in Zimbabwe and similar contexts in Africa and beyond.

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