Series 2 – Social Pillar: Education and Training – Globally competitive quality education, training and research for sustainable development

Transformational Leadership in Adopting Online Learning

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Key Messages

Effective training is a key determinant for adopting online learning in educational institutions.

Transformational leadership characteristics are important in managing change that is required in learning institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Modelling the way is a necessity in university management of online teaching and learning through COVID-19 Season

Context

More than 1.725 billion learners across the globe are currently affected due to the closure of their learning institutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF June 2020). Over 98% of the world's student population have found themselves out of school due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This population includes university students who were aspiring to complete their academic years. Schools and colleges are making every effort to ensure that teaching and learning are going on even during lockdown occasioned by COVID-19. Examples of postponed examinations include Cambridge International Examination and Kenya National Examinations. The closure of learning institutions has impacted not only the students but also the teachers and school leaders. In response to school closures, the use of online, e-learning and distance learning platforms have remained a key option available for the continuation of learning.

Until the COVID-19 pandemic threatened university education, adoption of distance education and in particular, online learning in public universities in Kenya, has been very slow. Online learning provides access to higher education without physical contact in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Distance education has experienced resistance and a lot of challenges especially in developing countries including Kenya. With the closure of schools and colleges leaders must, of necessity, change their leadership styles. Their traditional roles have to fit the ongoing emergency to ensure that the gains in the educational system thus far does not go to waste. Their roles have changed dramatically and unexpectedly without history from which to draw their experience. This kind of situation requires a new kind of leadership that will ensure that all the stakeholders are on board to carry out their normal teaching roles. Managers should adopt the transformational leadership characteristics for effective leadership that has been established through research and which puts staff member's needs first. Institutions' leaders, if well equipped with the necessary skills, will be able to address the desired change to ensure students' well-being and online teaching.

The Government of Kenya has continually urged universities to come up with innovative ways of delivering higher

education and meeting human resource needs in the country in support of the Vision 2030 Social Pillar. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this has taken on a sense of urgency as universities remain closed, at least for face-to-face teaching and learning. The management of universities have been putting measures in place in terms of necessary infrastructure and capacity building for faculty to embrace open, distance and e-learning as an innovative way to increase access and equity in higher education. Despite significant investment, this had not been taken up until COVID-19 struck which called for a paradigm shift. More university managers have been forced to lead the way to ensure learning and teaching activities in their respective academic institutions continue uninterrupted. The findings presented in this policy brief form part of earlier research conducted in selected universities and secondary schools in Kenya (Gikonyo, 2013; Ndiritu, 2013).

Study Approach and Results

The study was carried in the public universities in Kenya to investigate the extent to which managers' level of knowledge in distance education influenced their participation in distance education activities in public universities in Kenya. The sample consisted of 196 managers drawn from seven public universities. The results indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between the level of knowledge in distance education and university managers' participation in distance education activities. Training in distance education, which includes online learning and e-learning as well as training in computer application skills was found to be a major factor determining how well a manager participates in distance education activities (Gikonyo, 2012). Based on these findings, therefore, it is important to ensure that the managers are trained in distance education and its practice in adopting online learning and e-learning. With a transformational leadership approach and serving as a role model (embracing and understanding distance education), managers can ensure that no one is left behind in embracing the coveted change of online teaching and learning during this COVID-19 era and beyond. The application of the knowledge and skills gained will greatly improve access and equity in higher

education in support of county, national and international development agendas.

Research has shown that where managers adopt a transformational leadership style, the rest of the organization typically adopts the required changes. Serving as a model is one of the characteristics of transformational leadership where the leader displays the characteristic that he/she wants to see in his/her followers. For example, a study carried out with a target population of 72 principals in public schools and 139 principals in private schools indicated a positive correlation between modelling characteristic of transformational leadership and school performance (Ndiritu, 2012).

Policy Recommendations

Short-Term

- There is a need to provide in-service training periodically for all the lecturers in university management to update their skills in transformational leadership especially where there is a need for changes. This is evident during this COVID-19 pandemic where there is a need to train on the use of technology for online teaching and learning. The training should be conducted virtually or face to face. This training should take a standardized approach to the provision of leadership development. Choices of provision have to be made taking into consideration factors such as the current training and development opportunities, the availability of expertise, country governance arrangements and the current and anticipated quality and availability of leadership.
- Members should be encouraged to participate in training by giving them incentives.

Medium-Term

- There is a need to have a pool of trained personnel in transformational leadership as many leaders find themselves in leadership by default.
- There is a need therefore for succession planning in that university leaders are not elected when the positions fall vacant. These unplanned

reactions to events with little prior preparation before positions become vacant is what many ineffective leaders find themselves in. Planned succession not only propagates continuity but also brings freshness into leadership. Future leaders should be identified and trained in transformational leadership well in advance before positions fall vacant.

- There is a need to incorporate transformational leadership in all postgraduate courses. This is because most lecturers come from this cohort and therefore likely to find themselves in leadership.

Acknowledgements

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