



## Higher education leadership and uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

The impact of the pandemic on higher education activities is a major concern around the world. Higher education is obliged to carry out the necessary measures of adaptation, innovation, and management change, which are promoted by leaders at various levels. The leadership is further committed to encouraging transformative changes to meet students' most critical needs. Leadership is expected to be able to use all resources in the organization, even in limited conditions due to pandemic impacts. The crisis condition during pandemic become the main approach in implementing higher education leadership. First, the leader develops effective multi-directional communication to mediate and respond to actual needs and changes, especially involving parties impacted or affected by policy changes. Second, the leader develops a cooperation network to support mutually one another to form productivity. It is necessary to network with all interests to formulate the best solution to reduce the adverse impacts of the pandemic. Third, the leader develops empathy to encourage the work environment, increase productivity, and combine efforts to promote health on their personal and professional sides. Fourth, lecturers develop an own set of heuristics for managing their classes using technology as the main work in the new normal situation.

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### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken place for more than one year starting in early 2020. Pandemics affect human life around the world, not only in the aspects of public health but also in the economic and social sectors in various activities (Nugroho, 2020). Various adjustments and anticipations have been conducted with the purpose of not enabling the pandemic to spread an adverse impact. The government, the business sector, and the community are making

various efforts and working hard by implementing measurable health protocols. It is encouraging that vaccination has started in some countries, areas, and communities. This synergy is expected to find the goal of stopping the transmission of the virus comprehensively.

The impact of the pandemic on higher education activities is a major concern around the world. The impact is very significant, including the closure of educational institutions, fundamental management

changes, shifting organizational culture, impact on the lives of students (Khan et al., 2021; Sá & Serpa, 2020), and budgeting disorders in the university (Kruse et al., 2020). Educational activities also conform to health protocols, namely maintaining distance, preventing crowds, and reducing physical activity. At present, learning and student activities generally use online media, research activities have decreased in volume, and campus management activities are directed to the online assignment (Batez, 2021; Cameron-Standerford et al., 2020).

Indonesian government also anticipates the impact of the pandemic on higher education. The concept of Independent Campus (*Kampus Merdeka*) is relevant for dealing with learning activities during a pandemic (Directorate General of Higher Education, 2020). This concept is providing the higher education institutions with freedom and autonomy, i.e. freedom of bureaucratization as the lectures are freed from bureaucracy and students are free to choose their preferred field (Prahani et al., 2020). The government is also supporting the digital platform system for inter-university online learning by providing more than 3000 modules for students and lecturers. Institutional grants for curriculum development, scholarships for students, mobile package assistance, and other facilities are provided to strengthen higher education and protect it from the impact of the pandemic.

By the same token, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has created an unprecedented crisis in Ethiopian higher education institutions. Following this, the Ministry of Education of Ethiopia developed a 'Concept Note for Education Sector COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan' on 3 April 2020 (Ethiopia Ministry of Education, 2020). The objective of the response plan is to ensure the continuity of general education which was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and to contribute to the effort of containing the spread of the virus. With relatively little precaution, higher education institutions abandoned face-to-face instruction starting from March 2020 and shifted rapidly to online learning. However, the most serious challenge affecting online or e-learning were insufficient internet connectivity, limited information and communication technology skills, lack of incentives, and insufficient time for online interaction. In addition, downloading the assignments requires internet access and that is not always easy for higher education students. The data connection offered by the internet provider on mobile phones is often

expensive, very slow, and expired before the students finish the homework. Also taken into consideration the limited access to devices availability especially in the rural agrarian communities, economically disadvantaged segments of the society, as well as persons with disabilities and students with non-literate families as major constraints in mitigating the negative impact of COVID-19 on quality education.

Under conditions of high uncertainty, an individual has no time to analyze all the information and has to find ways to reduce the complexity of the environment (Gigerenzer, 2008). Students face a situation when they have to not only develop new skills but also correctly apply the existing ones. Usually, we assume that students analyze and select the best fitting leadership technique to the situation. COVID-19, however, made several skills obsolete while some skills became more demanded. For instance, live communication allowed for a better analysis of facial expressions. Being able to recognize true and fake smiles allows an individual to adopt the way of communication to the channel of communication with a high or low psychological distance (Bogodistov & Dost, 2017). Due to home-office and blended learning both lecturers and students among each other do not see facial expressions or see them in low quality. This does not allow to indicate the facial muscle movements (Ekman & Rosenberg, 2005) and, thus, increases the issues of communication.

In a pandemic situation, higher education is obliged to carry out the necessary measures of adaptation, innovation, and change management, which are promoted by leaders at various levels. They work by relying on speed, flexibility, and leadership who are committed to making transformative changes to meet the most critical needs of students (Baer & Duin, 2020). The education sector is rapidly transforming itself from conventional to remote forms of work, and regards virtual skills, autonomous work, and effective communication as the most important skills for the workforce during and post-pandemic (Al-Youbi et al., 2020). The decision to use online classes and their various implications are the main points that must be mapped. This requires strong, decisive, and courageous leadership to manage higher education and respective problems (Marshall et al., 2020).

This article describes the actual issues of leadership in higher education in a pandemic situation. Leadership is expected to be able to use all resources in the organization, even in limited conditions due to

pandemic impacts. However, it is hoped that this will be able to produce quality decisions by complying with the operational standards of higher education through a transformed learning process according to the situation. All stakeholders in higher education must move in the same rhythm for a better future of higher education.

## ISSUES RELATED TO LEADERSHIP

Higher education service activities have been dealing with student education services, management financing, research development, increased marketing, student admission, and continued globalization. The higher education leadership paradigm requires a competency framework to assist leadership development, and leadership capabilities to carry out quality management of higher education (Black, 2015).

Leadership in the context of higher education is principally universal regardless of the condition of the nation or organization. Leadership challenges come from the effectiveness and style of leadership. Leadership effectiveness is a factor that depends on how well the follower relates to the leader. Meanwhile, leadership is influenced by how leadership style is translated into leadership effectiveness (Hassan et al., 2018).

Higher education leadership has categories at the institution, faculty, and students. Institutional leadership needs to strengthen itself so that it becomes more adaptive and increases leadership capacity. At the faculty level, leadership develops support system strengthening efforts to minimize gaps and limitations among stakeholders. Leadership at the student level is directed at fostering stronger student learning outcomes through the use of the IT platform (Colpitts et al., 2020).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are complex systems. During a pandemic, higher education is more vulnerable to external environmental factors that can convert organizational workflows. This vulnerability occurs at various levels of the system, how organizational members perform tasks, how processes and power structures are related, and what operational structures are designed to support work. Pandemics also lead to dilemmas and conflicts regarding policy and institutional changes and reduced and limited resources. At the same time, leadership must ensure fair access and distribution of resources

to students, faculty, and staff. They must adhere to a public ethical procedure that promotes social justice and equality in any part of the university (Kruse et al., 2020). Justice is a sensitive issue because the impact of the pandemic has increased inequality (Directorate General of Higher Education, 2020; Marshall et al., 2020).

Effective higher education leadership will be instrumental in transforming systems, but policymakers, development partners, and civil society organizations, among others, will need to support and empower them to effect meaningful change and create more equitable, resilient, and responsive systems for our future when these kinds of disaster risk and uncertainty occur.

HEI leadership is facing a more serious problem during a pandemic. Pandemics have a systematic impact on the activity of teaching and learning, research and innovation, decision-making structures, and barriers to delivering visions to the academic community (Samoilovich, 2020). Colpitts et al. (2020) revealed the inability of the Japanese higher education system to adapt to widespread unexpected disruptions at the beginning of the pandemic.

UNESCO-IESALC (2020) reported that many chancellors and presidents of higher education acknowledge that the pandemic creates an unexpected crisis circumstance. Results of the survey conducted at the start of the pandemic showed that 9 out of 10 institutions paid immediate primary attention to the health and socio-emotional well-being of students and workers, and lecturers. At the same time, only 2 in 10 institutions immediately implemented specific measures in online teaching with adequate pedagogical support and resources. Leaders also expressed concern about retaining students to take online courses. This is likely to cause the loss of students who no longer return to the class.

In Indonesia, online learning faces inequality in terms of infrastructure or online platforms as well as in the ability of students who access them. Lecturers are also not ready for online learning and are urgently required to take initiative and quickly make adaptations. In Indonesia, private HEIs are the most affected during the pandemic. This problem is due to the financial difficulties of most students' families in the midst of a pandemic, while private HEIs depend on a large part of the income from the student body (Directorate General of Higher Education, 2020).

Meanwhile, [UNESCO-IESALC \(2020\)](#) revealed that non-teaching staff is the most vulnerable in terms of the possible reduction in the number of jobs in private universities due to possible financial downturns caused by fee cancellation or reduction in student enrollment. This is believed to be happening in many developing countries with more limited resources and technology, particularly information technology infrastructure. In general, this problem can be said to be related to leadership performance ([Hassan et al., 2018](#)).

## MANAGE UNCERTAINTY

Times have changed fast. The adjustment of higher education activities during the pandemic has led to various innovations. The innovation aims to make higher education's mission fulfill its goals. However, the demand for innovation is an absolute necessity during a pandemic ([Baer & Duin, 2020](#); [Samoilovich, 2020](#)), because innovation can fill gaps and become potential and solutions to problems that arise during a pandemic in university life itself, as well as economic activity and society.

Leadership also works in conjunction with a learning process that transforms according to conditions at the higher education institution. This also pledges that learning activities can be done anywhere and can use a variety of methods and approaches. In Indonesia, the policy of Independent Learning: Independent Campus (*Merdeka Belajar: Kampus Merdeka*) provides student learning solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Directorate General of Higher Education, 2020](#)). Various grants or facilities from the Merdeka Belajar program can be accessed by higher education institutions, lecturers, and students. Thus, it provides benefits to develop learning autonomy.

The management and leadership are now able to adapt and transform the university activities during the pandemic. Higher education institutions' (HEI's) socio-economic life and online pedagogy are already underway with various situations following measurable health protocols. HEIs make adjustments to the curriculum and academic calendar, with the support of technology infrastructure, as guided by UNESCO ([UNESCO-IESALC, 2020](#)). They subsidize cell phone prepaid packages for students and lecturers to access online learning. Students can access webinars or online activities once a week outside the curriculum. HEIs allocate their resources according to needs, by

taking turns employing 50 percent of their staff employees, to prevent transmission of the virus. Financial assistance and necessities are provided to personnel who have confirmed the transmission of the virus. Most recently, HEI managements also implement a vaccine program for all lecturers and staff.

However, uncertain condition in pandemic or post-pandemic will probably continue to arise ([Directorate General of Higher Education, 2020](#); [Kruse et al., 2020](#)). Pandemics always trigger new medical findings that are constantly being anticipated. As long-term economic, social, and academic effects manifest around the world, there is a need to anticipate significant changes in higher education ([Cameron-Standerford et al., 2020](#)). The dynamics of this epidemic need to be closely watched by the leadership and management of those institutions. Therefore, the crisis condition during this pandemic should be the main approach to implementing higher education leadership, as described below.

## Develop Communication

Any leader needs to develop a climate and culture of communication, especially during a pandemic. Effective multi-directional communication will function to mediate and respond to actual needs and changes, especially involving parties impacted or affected by policy changes ([Odegard-Koester et al., 2020](#)). This is also to ensure that their rights are not reduced or negotiable without downgrading the standard of educational services, such as for students or education staff. This effort is to ensure the right to higher education for all within a framework of equal opportunities and non-discrimination ([UNESCO-IESALC, 2020](#)).

Sensitive matters that have financial or welfare implications need to be communicated with all university parties. Various parties need to understand the fiscal decline in the campus and that adjustments will be made by taking into account the priorities and needs of the university organization. Each leader has the responsibility of disseminating the adjustment policy and strives to deliver messages regularly to faculty and staff regarding the ongoing fiscal process. Leaders at the faculty level communicate with students and lecturers about online learning formats and coordinate the provision of instructional materials for faculty with various implications ([Kruse et al., 2020](#)).

Truthful communication among people within a higher education institution can be used to map the impact of a pandemic. Communication is also important for leaders to carry out job analysis and measure the extent to which HR is working. The leader by the level of the structure can conduct analysis, measure the potential of resources, capabilities, and human resource commitment, to formulate choices or alternative solutions to problems. The capacity of leaders to understand the scope of the impact of a pandemic will enrich decision-making choices and help make quality decisions ([Hassan et al., 2018](#)). According to [Marshall et al. \(2020\)](#), communication is also a way in which leaders acquire support for their vision and the direction that the organization has set, especially in crisis situations.

### **Develop A Network**

The Covid pandemic drives HEIs to innovate and optimize resources to work in organizations. They cannot work alone, and it is necessary to network with all related interests to formulate the best solution. A strong rhythm of cooperation will mutually support one another to form a productive and beneficial cooperation network. As a result of the imposition of physical distancing rules, it has even prompted certain leaders to be more determined to collaborate with various parties more efficiently and effectively ([Marshall et al., 2020](#)). Leaders in departments or faculties can collaborate with alumni, practitioners, or experts to give online seminars, lectures, or workshops.

Leaders in career development have a greater responsibility during a pandemic. They must be more active and creative in carrying out activities offering apprenticeships, job placements or tracer studies in the midst of the situation where the economy and the job market are likely to decline. This effort is expected to not only maintain a sustainable relationship between HEIs and the job market but also to be able to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the economy ([Al-Youbi et al., 2020](#)). This also needs to be done by the HEI unit that manages new student registration, including the admission of foreign students, to maintain sustainability and international recognition. Research and publication collaboration can also be carried out by researchers by utilizing resources, competencies, and laboratories without having to physically visit.

Most HEIs have a special COVID-19 task force to carry out planning, promotion, prevention, and caring of Covid-infected patients. This new assignment was quickly recognized by the HEI personnel. This new unit is encouraged to network with local COVID-19 offices to coordinate and execute necessary actions, including patient treatment and vaccinations. The institutions through the COVID-19 task force unit can also provide financial subsidies for cases of virus infection.

### **Develop Empathy**

Inequality and justice are sensitive issues, and their incidence tends to increase during pandemic periods. The decrease in the institutions' budget is something that cannot be prevented and it has an impact on reducing or losing welfare rights, especially for lecturers and staff. Students were also found to have problems with online learning or decreasing financial condition. A leader needs to show empathy for the conditions that are happening in their work unit of the organization. Empathy is then expressed by making correct and non-discriminatory decisions accompanied by periodic socialization to lecturers, employees, and students to adjust to the development of the pandemic. Budgeting policies are implemented transparently by paying more attention to those affected during the pandemic. This has a positive impact on building commitment and satisfaction of human resources in the organization ([Khan et al., 2021](#); [Hassan et al., 2018](#)).

Empathy will emerge through genuine collaborative activities between leaders and members, working to support each other, channels to express mutual concerns, and feelings of friendship to discuss unknown things together. Leaders encourage the work environment, to increase productivity and combine efforts to promote health on their personal and professional sides ([Odegard-Koester et al., 2020](#)). To ensure the physical and mental well-being of students and faculty, it is necessary to maintain a sense of togetherness and common purpose. In the community, the leader lets the individual feel at home. The leader encourages that the community is protecting, preserving, and respecting each individual. It takes into account people's needs, including emotional needs. The foundation of a caring culture is how people share common and unified goals ([Samoilovich, 2020](#)).

### Propose Simple Rules

In the situation, the uncertainty is growing – leaders receive less information and need to “guess” what kind of emotions are experienced and what parts of the crucial information is communicated but not received by the recipient. Coping with this level of environmental complexity might become an issue (Gigerenzer, 1991).

To overcome this issue, lecturers at higher educations have to emphasize tools for coping with uncertainty, such as heuristics (Gigerenzer, 1991, 2008, 2010). Proposing to students a set of simple rules (Bingham & Eisenhardt, 2014; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) as well as explaining how to understand their intuition (Hodgkinson et al., 2008, 2009; Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004) might help them in their attempts to become good leaders.

We have to keep in mind that there are two levels of heuristics: universal heuristics, e.g. fluency heuristic or one-clever-clue heuristic, and idiosyncratic heuristics, e.g. individual rules such as “If you have a bad feeling after a conversation with your employee, although there are no logical explanations for this, arrange an individual zoom-call and clarify” (Bogodistov & Moormann, 2019). Including topics on heuristics and why they work (Gigerenzer, 2008) as well as developing an own set of heuristics for leadership classes is a challenge that lecturers in the field of leadership have to face. Here, technology might help (Bogodistov & Moormann, 2020); yet, the main work has to be performed in class and is, thus, the “new normal” for those who teach leadership.

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