Strengthening institutions of higher education through disruptive leadership

Abstract
The intensifying COVID-19 calamity has caused massive pressure on institutions of higher learning across the globe. Most institutions of higher education closed down in order to protect students and staff from the deadly pandemic. However, it is important to understand that combined efforts by key stakeholders could inform future perspectives on higher education cognisant of the new normal. In view of these developments, this study sought to evaluate how positive disruptive leadership can have an important role in strengthening the higher education system in the face of COVID-19. The study used a case study approach applying a qualitative research design. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents from a private university operating in Zimbabwe. Virtual interviews were used to gather data from the University Board, University Executive, teaching staff and students, referred to as key stakeholders in this study. To overcome the challenges related to the unintended shift from face-to-face to online learning, disruptive approach to issues by these stakeholders has created a resilient institution that can survive during times of uncertainty where drastic changes are necessary as a result of external forces. The study noted that the key stakeholders exhibited positive disruptive leadership roles in their unique ways. The key challenges cited include limited accessibility to internet and lack of affordability in terms of data bundles and other ICT affordances to allow effective learning to take place. The study adds to knowledge different leadership roles played by the University Board, University Executive, academic staff and students to build a resilient and innovative institution in the face of COVID-19.

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has redefined the world’s educational, political and socio-economic order (Rumbley, 2020). This has exposed leadership in institutions of higher learning across the globe in terms of dealing with crises. The closure of most institutions of higher learning and failure to find immediate solutions to the plight of students, parents, staff and other stakeholders has signalled the extent of the challenge. The leadership role of each stakeholder is assessed against the level of accessibility to ICT affordances, level of ICT infrastructure, affordability and learning outcomes. In this study, positive disruptive leadership is viewed as a shared responsibility by all stakeholders that is key in worst-case scenarios like that presented by COVID-19. This study explores different leadership roles played by the University Board, University Executive, teaching staff and students.

Contextualising disruptive leadership in the context of COVID-19
This paper explores disruptive leadership in a positive way, in times of uncertainty, like the one presented by COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented challenges to
institutions of higher education across the globe. Leadership in institutions of higher education are in quandary on how to proceed with teaching and learning and maintain quality and credibility if they decide to go online. This has caused leadership in institutions of higher education to rethink and refocus on their strategic acumen in order to build resilient institutions that can survive in times of uncertainty. Given the challenges posed by the pandemic, disruptive leadership becomes important in making sure that there are minimum disturbances to teaching and learning. Disruptive leadership is concerned with moving away from the traditional ways of doing business by promoting innovative minds to avert a crisis. It is about taking advantage of a crisis to innovate and survive. Disruptive leaders motivate and inspire people towards the new normal. Disruptive leadership critiques its systems against the operating environment with the view of matching market changes leading to sustainable innovations and survival. Disruptive leadership has no place for personal ambition, ego or blind devotion but is guided by accountable behaviours cognisant of the capacities and limitations of institutions (Igbaekemen, 2014). Disruptive leadership deviates from the norm in positive way in order to remain in business. This type of leadership is critical for sustaining higher education institutions as a result of dwindling funding and the shifting needs of students and the corporate world as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (van Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, van Meurs, 2009).

The importance of leadership is felt in times of a crisis. What is required is to lead people towards a new form (Druguş, Landoy, 2014). Pearce and Robinson (2007) note that leadership is multi-faceted since it engages others to increase the chances of sustainability and growth. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) found that higher education leadership in the United States of America moved swiftly to go online, whilst Africa is still pondering on how to proceed in the face of the novel virus. Institutional leadership should frequently meet to create and share insights which is critical for action and decision-making. There is a belief that the type of leadership style plays a critical role in influencing the performance and survival of institutions of higher learning (Khajeh, 2018). Leadership is important for the development of universities through creativity and innovations (Dopson, Ferlie, Mcgivern, Fischer, 2016). It is therefore, critical to create and maintain vibrant and viable entities that are creative during unprecedented times (Bolden, 2004). The traditional forms of leadership have failed to lead the call for the re-orientation and re-focusing of mind-sets in order to survive (Blaschke, Frost, Hattke, 2014).

Cumberbatch (2020) concurs with Druguş and Landoy (2014) that people seek guidance and direction in times of uncertainty and despair and he proposes the following:

- Unite: Focus on things that bind people and that demonstrate how and why we are all in this together;
- Connect: Generate trust and give people the opportunity to express their feelings;
- Inform: Communicate early and frequently to give clarity and manage expectations; and
- Guide: Give direction and share concrete actions and steps.

As online learning gathers momentum, issues of accessibility, affordability, equity and equality become critical (Santamar’a, 2012). Online teaching and learning has become the immediate option, after noting that COVID-19 is nowhere near coming to an end (Mukeredzi, Kokutse, Dell, 2020). Leadership in institutions of higher learning should have the rationalisation of individual thinking, a vision that is clear and an inclination towards succeeding during challenging times.

Even though the African continent is perceived to have been less affected by the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other continents, Africa still lags behind in terms of preparedness by higher education institutions (HEIs) to quickly adopt to the virtual learning mode of teaching and learning. The traditional modes of instruction such as face-to-face are no longer feasible, as social distancing...
has become important in reducing the spread of the pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 have brought the leadership in higher education institutions on the spotlight (Chandler et al., 2002). What is worrisome is that most parts of the world are now in the third wave of COVID-19 that is more deadly than the second and first waves (Pedro, et al., 2020). Disruptive leadership is decisive and quick in making decisions in the face of uncertainty (McNulty & Marcus, 2020). Leadership that embraces disruptive innovations is bound to survive the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and future crises. In order to achieve this, transparency and persuasive communication befits disruptive leadership.

**Objective of the study**

To assess the level of preparedness by leadership in institutions of higher learning in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data was gathered around the following five areas:
- Institutional ICT infrastructure;
- Level of accessibility to ICTs;
- Affordability of ICTs;
- Leadership influence; and
- Learning outcomes.

**Methodology**

The qualitative research methodology was applied. There are twenty registered universities in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was used to come up with one private university. The University was chosen because it is the only institution of higher learning that continued teaching and learning at the pick of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. An unstructured interview guide was used to solicit responses virtually, since all stakeholders were working remotely because of COVID-19. Interviews are important in qualitative research because they discover experiences, views, motivations and beliefs on intricate matters (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, Chadwick, 2006). Virtual interviews allowed the researcher to get in touch with respondents in various locations across the globe. The researcher also observed the state of institutional ICT infrastructure and the level of internet accessibility. Inductive coding was used since it is rigorous and creates broad balanced themes (Chandra & Shang, 2019). The thematic approach was used to present the data and the narrative approach was used for discussion and it showed clear complimentary leadership roles played by the Board, the Executive, teaching staff and students. The thematic approach is also rigorous and produces insightful and trustworthy results (Nowell, Norris, White, Moules, 2017). Two University Board members, two University Executives, ten students and ten lecturers participated in the study. The sample of the study was therefore 24.

**Findings and discussion**

Findings and discussion are presented on the following:
- Level of ICT infrastructure;
- Level of accessibility to ICT affordances;
- Affordability;
- Leadership influence; and
- Learning outcomes.

*Institutional ICT infrastructure*
The author observed that the ICT infrastructure in the University under study was above average and that the internet on campus was stable. Students, the University Executives and teaching staff concurred with what the researcher had observed. Interviews with the executive and staff revealed that they got support from their partners to put in place state of the art ICT infrastructure. It was further noted that the University had already prepared going online well before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. One Executive had this to say: “We are the only accredited university in Zimbabwe to offer online degree programmes. When COVID-19 struck, we were not much affected because we had already prepared our students and teaching staff for online teaching and learning.” Further inquiries with students and teaching staff on the same revealed that the University had already started online programmes before COVID-19. Teaching staff indicated that they received in-house training on how to conduct lectures and examinations online using Moodle. It was noted that University accommodation in town had access Wi-Fi points. Further to that, Wi-Fi in University accommodation in town was heavily subsided by the service provider, courtesy of the Executive and the University Board initiatives. The University was also proving internet data to all teaching staff and this made working from home a huge success and exciting in the pertaining environment. One member of the teaching staff had this to say: “We are very grateful to the University management for providing us with subsided data. This has made our work much easier. Our students have access to us anytime of the day.” It was also noted that the University Board played a critical role in approving the setup of smart classrooms and the procurement of data for students and teaching staff when COVID-19 struck. Students also arrived at the same conclusion. Students indicated that they had to put their resources together and purchased computers and data for those who could not afford. One student had this to say: “When COVID-19 hit us unexpectedly, we did not know how to react. We came together as students and started supporting each other, when the University advised us that lectures were going to continue online. We provided data and laptops to those who could not afford.” On the onset of the pandemic, most international students in the University had to travel back to their respective countries as result of uncertainty around their college life and safety. The prompt decision by University Executive to go online was a welcome move by all stakeholders. This allowed students from different locations to continue with their studies with minimum disruptions. Working together by all key stakeholders within their varied capacities resonates well with tenants of positive disruptive leadership.

What became evident is that the Board, the University Executive, teaching staff and students were playing their leadership roles in their own small or big ways in making sure that teaching and learning continued with minimum disruptions and that no one was left behind. It is interesting to note that students had already developed leadership skills as shown by their initiative to share electrical gadgets and other resources with those who could not afford. The Board was also playing a significant role by providing strategic direction and financial support to the University in the face of COVID-19. Initiatives by teaching staff to create various online learning platforms to assist students is commendable. This is supported by Igbaekemen (2014) who avers that good leadership benefits everyone. The same supports disruptive leadership in the University. What is worrisome is the lack of development of rural areas across the African continent where the majority of students come from. Such under-developed communities may affect students who come from such communities since most areas do not have electricity let alone internet connectivity. Governments in Africa need to develop rural areas in terms of infrastructure so that no one is left behind. The findings of this study concur with Mukeredzi, Kokutse and Dell (2020) who noted that most remote areas do not have electricity. Even though the ICT infrastructure in the
University is commendable, it difficult for students who are not on campus to get similar services. It is encouraging to note that, the University was the only University in the country that continued teaching and learning at the pick of the pandemic.

Accessibility

On the issue of accessibility, it was noted that students who remained on campus when COVID-19 struck, had no problems in accessing the internet at no cost. However, students who went back home faced challenges pertaining to the cost of data and power outages. One student had this to say: “As much as it is a good idea to go online, has management ever thought about those who live in remote rural areas with no electricity and internet connectivity? I have to travel to the nearest town in order to have access to an internet café and this has proved to be costly. Most of these places are not conducive for learning purposes. This has become expensive, and those from poor backgrounds may drop out of college. Our governments in Africa need to develop rural areas so that no one is left behind when it comes to education.”

An interesting view from another student was “I wonder if this works for students who are enrolled in engineering, medicine and other related areas to do their studies online. In most science areas, students learn through doing. I feel this works for certain fields such as social sciences, management and many others. I say so because some areas need specialised equipment that is not readily available on the internet.”

Interviews with the University Executive revealed that they managed to avail data to most of the students but could not continue doing so as it was not budgeted for considering the number of students affected. One Executive member said: “We got financial support from our Development Office in the United States of America and we used the funds to purchase data for our students and staff.” It is interesting to note that students also came together and formed groups to assist those who could not afford data bundles. Their initiatives went beyond assisting other students and provided foodstuffs to poor communities within the vicinity of the University. Even though this item is not related to this study, it shows how students are ready to serve their communities, showing leadership initiatives.

However, it was noted that even though accessibility was improving, it was found that students studying Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Health Sciences and Agriculture degree programmes still faced challenges in accessing some learning tools from the home setup. Lecturers were equally affected by the same. Teaching staff indicated that they could not come up with simulations in such areas due to limited capacity. There was consensus from students and teaching staff that practicals could not be totally replaced by online initiatives. Medical laboratory equipment, treatment equipment, life support equipment and diagnostic equipment were given as examples. Contrary to submissions by students, the Executive indicated that it is possible to develop simulations that could be shared by students. On the same issue, teaching staff also indicated that if supported, they could come up with new innovations. Teaching staff went on to navigate how they could assist students by availing more online platforms such as Google Meet, Epic Pen and Moodle. WhatsApp groups were created to check on attendance and participation. Teaching staff took the initiative to pre-record lectures which were then shared by all students at the end of each lecture. This assisted students who could have failed to login due to various reasons.

The issue of accessibility is regarded as critical in the pertaining environment since this was affecting both teaching staff and students especially those who could not access free or subsided internet. As much as the findings are similar to those by Fernandez and Shaw (2020), the difference is that the United States of America Government took the responsibility of making sure that institutions of higher learning go online through financial support. In Zimbabwe and most parts of
Africa, the onus is on individual institutions and students. The ICT infrastructure in most institutions is basic to the extent that it does not fully support the needs of students and teaching staff. The same is supported by (Lembani, et al., 2019) who bemoan lack of ICT infrastructure in most institutions of higher education. Issues of limited access to electricity and intermittent internet connectivity need to be addressed (Mukeredzi, Kokutse & Dell, 2020; Erichsen, Bolliger, & Halupa, 2014). The uneven distribution of ICT infrastructure may affect equal access to education by all and also the quest by UNESCO to embrace technology in institutions of higher learning may not be realised (Hazemi & Hailes, 2002). What is needed is for governments to take the leading role in developing ICT infrastructure through financial support. Lack of political-will by most African governments may affect the development of the African continent in general. The Turkish government is involved in maintaining quality and credibility for their online degree programmes in the face of COVID-19 by providing strategic direction and funding.

**Affordability**

A few students bemoaned the cost of data and related gadgets. However, it was noted that the majority of the students could afford laptops and smart phones. This is because the University under the study is perceived to be for the elite. The author observed that the University had capacity to offer online learning since it had above average infrastructure with stable internet connectivity. One student had this to say: “We are Christians, our ethos are to share the little that we have. Remember, our University creates leaders and you cannot be a leader, until you start giving away. That is what we have learnt from our great mentors.” Students were sharing gadgets and assisting each other on data. The Executive indicated that they were providing subsided home internet and in some cases, free data to teaching staff. This showed commitment and seriousness by the Executive and the Board in making sure that online learning produced the intended results. One member of the Executive had this to say: “When COVID-19 struck, the University was left with no choice but to provide data to students and staff so that there could minimal disruptions in learning. This was made possible through the support from our Board. We are truly greatful for that.”

As much as some positive responses were obtained on affordability, there were some areas that needed serious consideration. The cost of data for students was found to be on the high side and those from poor backgrounds could not afford. The University should try to engage service providers so that students can purchase data bundles at concessionary rates. There is also need to support teaching staff so that they come up with innovations. Disruptive approaches being taken by the stakeholders make things happen. It was exciting to note that there was shared responsibility and governance that is central to disruptive leadership. In the same vein, teaching staff went to the extent of using WhatsApp and other less costly social platforms to share information with their students and colleagues. The author noted that every stakeholder was taking a leadership role in making sure that things happened in the University. Nonetheless, it remains critical for the University to engage local service providers and the Government so that students have access to cheaper gadgets since the cost of laptops and smart phones is out of reach for some students. A holistic approach could go a long way in making sure that Wi-Fi accessories or anything that could facilitate interactive audio-visual communication is available to both students and teaching staff. The University should continue to subside Wi-Fi for staff. The findings of the study concur with Mukeredzi, Kokutse, and Dell (2020) who found that students in South Africa, Ghana and Zimbabwe pointed to the issues of affordability. To reduce the burden on students and guardians, the
University also suspended the payment of a technology fees for all students. The current environment has created independent learners and educators.

**Leadership influence**

The influence of leadership in the University was assessed against how it was responding to the effects of COVID-19 in relation to teaching and learning. Leadership in this study refers to the University Board, University Executive, teaching staff and students. One of the Executives said: “We were voted the most disruptive University in Zimbabwe by a local organisation in 2020. This is because of our University being the first to be accredited to offer online degree programmes in Zimbabwe and that we also continued with our business in the midst of COVID-19. We are happy with our performance. The way we have been doing business is a reflection of true disruptive leadership.” The role played by the Executive students, the Board and teaching staff showed how initiative everyone was in making sure that teaching and learning continued. One of the teaching staff had this to say: “The fact that we are working together for the same cause is a sign of disruptive leadership that gives everyone any opportunity to showcase their innovative minds towards building a resilient institution.” The fact that students were also participating and satisfied by the current setup was a great achievement for everyone.

Coming up with innovations and supporting new initiatives by both students and teaching staff highly befits disruptive leadership. Involvement of everyone in finding solutions to the current crisis is most welcome. Disruptive leadership in the University challenged conventional ways of doing business by involving the University Board, University management, teaching staff and students. Every stakeholders was instrumental in making sure that the primary business of the University continued with minimal disruptions (Blaschke, Frost, Hattke, 2014). Encouragement for reorientation and refocusing of mind sets to survive in times of uncertainty is evident in this study. Allowing honest criticism from students, teaching staff and key stakeholders allowed the institution to get honest feedback so that they could improve on the current systems and processes. Students indicated that they were given space by university leadership to come up with new ideas and innovations. Thus, this becomes true in light of different leadership roles played by the University Board, University Executive, teaching staff and students. This is a true reflection of disruptive leadership. The same is also supported by Druguş and Landoy (2014) who maintain that disruptive leadership is keen on leading people towards a new form, in this study, the new normal of transacting business virtually. It was found that the introduction of smart caller at the pick of COVID-19 became critical. This allowed the Board, the Executive, staff and students to communicate with minimum physical conduct. The idea was to make sure that administration processes continued with minimum disruptions. One of the senior executives had a conversation as follows: “The role of smart caller is to enhance the functionality of university processes by hinging on the three major processes on university admission, namely; application, acceptance and enrolment.” During the application process, smart calling takes a student’s application and assists the prospective student to identify the right College/programme to apply to by placing the application into the process link, a duty that was formerly performed by the Admissions Officer. Once a prospective College meeting the students criteria has been matched, it moves the process to acceptance, a duty that was formerly reserved for the Dean, where a formal notification is issued to the student on their successful application within the matched school of learning and this is followed by a formal request to accept an offer and follow the registration processes as stipulated by the University. Once an acceptance has been submitted, the student is handed down to enrolment where they are informed of all the necessary requirements for them to begin their
studies, mainly the registration for courses, payment of minimum fees (deposits) and requesting any other information for the purposes of making special provisions especially for physically challenged students and those with special needs.”

Leadership influence in this area led to minimum disruptions in the operations of the University. The system did not only work for the Academic Department, but it was a University-wide initiative that allowed the recording of all missed calls and voice messages among others. In the face of COVID-19, this allowed minimum human conduct thereby reducing the spread of the disease as social distancing has become of the prescriptions to minimise the spread of the virus. Because of the smart caller, the University has increased its chances of recruiting students and staff with special needs. The initiative by senior management concurs with Mukeredzi, Kokutse, and Dell (2020) who found out that disruptive leadership in the face of crisis makes a differences.

**Learning outcomes**

The level of access to technological tools and their affordability to optimise digital learning had a net effect on learning outcomes. Most of the students indicated that they were encouraging each other to attend all lectures. They further submitted that they were getting maximum support from teaching staff, the Board and the Executive. However, a few indicated that even if they missed a lecture they would catch up since most of them were pre-recorded. On the other hand, lecturers complained that some students logged in and went away. This would create an impression that everyone had attended. One lecturer had this to say, “I have realised that some students login and disappear, and this has prompted me to create WhatsApp groups where I prompt students. This allows me to know whether all students are present or not. It is encouraging to note that students have created their own platforms to discuss their schoolwork and share notes.” What was encouraging was that students sat for their examinations online and it was a huge success. At the time of the study, students were in their second semester sitting for examinations online. The graduation and matriculation were also conducted virtually and this is an indication that the University was achieving its goals with minimum disruptions. One student had this to say: “Even though we may face challenges in logging-in during examinations, the arrangement is perfectly working for us.”

The quality of learning outcomes is determined by the quality of delivery. From the submissions of the University Executive, students and lecturers, positive outcomes were being realised. What is important is for all stakeholders to continue work together to make sure that learning continues with minimum disruptions. Everyone was going beyond the call of duty to make sure that things happened. This supports the notion that disruptive leadership is a prerequisite for institutions of higher learning in times of uncertainty. As highlighted by Mukeredzi (2020), the issue of quality is critical as institutions of higher learning negative their way towards fully-fledged online learning.

**Conclusion**

This study was carried out to evaluate the disruptive leadership roles played by the University’s key stakeholders in strengthening their institution in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study noted that the University Board, the Executive, teaching staff and students were playing unique disruptive leadership roles in making sure that the University continued with teaching and learning with minimum disruptions. It was found that it was the only university in Zimbabwe that quickly switched to online learning in the midst of COVID-19 with minimal disruptions. The introduction of the smart caller system at the pick of COVID-19 shows the
innovative, agility and disruptive nature of the university. It is noted that moving away from comfort zones by leadership in institutions of higher learning in times of crises can go a long way in embracing the new normal. The stakeholders are encouraged to be innovative in addressing challenges related to access to internet and other ICT affordances in order to build the technical, pedagogic and leadership capacities needed to effectively adapt to the changes affecting the higher education sector in the face of COVID-19. Disruptive approaches to issues in times of uncertainty have proved to be effective. The study notes that disruptive leadership allows higher education institutions continuity in times of a crisis. It is also apparent that everyone assumes a leadership role when faced with a crisis, in this case, COVID-19. Humans become innovative beyond expectations. If given space to display their talent, individuals can beyond the call of duty to make sure that things happen. The leadership roles played by all stakeholders in this study is clear that disruptive leadership indeed, is necessary in times of uncertainty. It is felt that disruptive leadership can be applied across various forms of organisations, doing the unusual ethically, to survive the harsh turbulences. Further research can be carried out on the role of governments and the corporates in supporting online initiatives as a permanent feature in higher education.

Reference
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Зміцнення вищих навчальних закладів шляхом руйнівного лідерства

Анотація
Катастрофа, викликана COVID-19, позначилась на закладах вищої освіти в усьому світі. Більшість вищих навчальних закладів зачинились, щоб захистити студентів та персонал від смертельної хвороби. Втім, важливо розуміти, що спільні зусилля ключових стейкхолдерів можуть у майбутньому визначити перспективи вищої освіти в умовах нових реалій. З огляду на ці події, дане дослідження ставило за мету оцінити, наскільки важливу роль у зміцненні системи вищої освіти в умовах COVID-19 може відіграти позитивне руйнівне керівництво.

Дослідження базується на методі «кейс стаді», із застосуванням якісних методик обробки даних. Респонденти обирались в одному з приватних університетів Зімбабве методом цілеспрямованої вибірки. Збір даних здійснювався шляхом проведення віртуальних інтерв’ю з членами Ради університету, його керівництва, викладачів та студентів, які у даному дослідженні виступають ключовими стейкхолдерами.

Дослідження засвідчило, що ключові стейкхолдери відігравали унікальні ролі у ході реалізації позитивного руйнівного лідерства. Серед ключових викликів згадується: обмежений доступ до Інтернету та недоступність тарифних пакетів, а також інші обмеження щодо використання ІКТ, необхідних для забезпечення ефективного навчання.

Дослідження проливає світло на різні лідерські ролі, які можуть відіграти Рада, керівництво університету, науково-педагогічний персонал та студенти у створенні стійкого та інноваційного закладу в умовах COVID-19.
Ключові слова: руйнівне лідерство; ІКТ; COVID 19; стійкий / пружний; стейкхолдери; Зімбабве.

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