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Leading Through Uncertainty: Transformational Leadership and Cultural Resonance in Vietnamese Higher Education Post-COVID-19

Le Thanh Thao* 

Can Tho University, VIETNAM

Pham Trut Thuy 

Nam Can Tho University, VIETNAM

Tran Thi Thuy 

Nam Can Tho University, VIETNAM

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Abstract: This study delves into the role of leadership in addressing disparities in higher education arising from the post-COVID-19 era, as experienced by Vietnamese lecturers. Drawing on qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with 15 university lecturers across diverse regions and institutions in Vietnam, the research aimed to capture the essence of effective leadership behaviors during this unprecedented crisis. The study is underpinned by the Transformational Leadership Theory and Sociocultural Theory. Findings underscore the significance of visionary and inspirational leadership, emphasizing a clear direction amidst adversities. The importance of empathetic and supportive leadership, active faculty engagement, flexibility, commitment to capacity-building, and transparent communication emerged as paramount. Viewed through the theoretical frameworks, the results elucidate how leadership strategies resonated with both universal leadership principles and culturally specific Vietnamese values. The implications drawn highlight the need for adaptive and culturally attuned leadership in crisis scenarios, especially in academic settings. Though the study offers a profound understanding of leadership in a post-pandemic Vietnamese educational context, it also recommends expanded, diverse, and cross-cultural investigations to provide a more holistic perspective in future research endeavors.

Keywords: *Leadership, post-COVID-19, Vietnamese higher education.*

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared by the World Health Organization in March 2020, ushered in unprecedented challenges that reverberated across various sectors, including higher education. Globally, institutions of higher learning grappled with abrupt closures, a sudden shift to remote learning, and profound uncertainties about the future (Jebbour, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2021). The pandemic not only brought about operational and logistical challenges but also accentuated existing disparities within educational systems. Within the context of higher education, these disparities manifested in terms of access to digital resources, varying quality of remote instruction, and the differentiated ability of institutions and faculty to adapt to the “new normal” (Pham & Ho, 2020).

Despite the proliferation of literature on pandemic responses across sectors, there remains a paucity of research focusing on leadership behaviors in higher education, particularly in specific socio-cultural contexts like Vietnam. This country, despite its initial success in controlling the spread of the virus, was not immune to these challenges. Its higher education sector, which had been on a trajectory of growth and internationalization, faced disruptions and inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic (Ngo & Phan, 2023). Addressing these disparities requires targeted interventions, of which leadership plays a pivotal role. Specifically, the study emphasizes the importance of understanding leadership behaviors as perceived by faculty members. The nuanced insights provided by focusing on a specific geographic and cultural context like Vietnam can unveil unique challenges and solutions that might remain obscured in broader global studies. The leadership within academic institutions, encompassing both administrative and faculty roles, has the potential to significantly influence the strategies and measures taken to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic (Antonopoulou et al., 2021). From decision-making processes to resource allocation, from policy advocacy to on-ground implementation, leadership is the linchpin that can either drive institutions towards resilience and equity or further entrench the existing disparities.

* **Corresponding author:**

Le Thanh Thao, Can Tho University, Vietnam. ✉ thaole@ctu.edu.vn



This study aims to examine the role of leadership in reducing disparities in post-COVID-19 higher education, specifically emphasizing leadership behaviors as perceived by faculty, focusing on insights gleaned from Vietnamese lecturers. By delving deep into the experiences and perceptions of those at the forefront of academic instruction, this research seeks to fill a critical gap by providing an in-depth analysis of leadership during crises in a specific cultural and geopolitical context. It contributes to the broader discourse on pandemic response in higher education and offer actionable recommendations for institutions in Vietnam and potentially, other similar contexts. Furthermore, by spotlighting the Vietnamese higher education system, this study enhances the global understanding of how leadership, cultural context, and crisis intersect, thereby broadening the horizons of the existing literature.

Literature Review

Impacts of COVID-19 on Global Higher Education

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread disruptions in the higher education sector worldwide. Altbach and de Wit (2020) detailed how institutions confronted multiple challenges including swift transitions to online teaching, research impediments, and economic strains. Importantly, the pandemic highlighted and amplified pre-existing disparities, ranging from digital divides to uneven access to quality education (Marinoni et al., 2020).

The Vietnamese Higher Education Landscape Pre-COVID-19

Prior to the pandemic, Vietnamese higher education was undergoing significant transformations. Tran et al. (2020) noted the country's strides in expanding university access, improving research capacities, and fostering international collaborations. However, systemic issues like curricular inflexibility, resource constraints, and regional disparities persisted.

Disparities in Vietnamese Higher Education during COVID-19

The pandemic laid bare the disparities in the Vietnamese higher education system. Liu and Dang (2019) found that institutions in urban centers like Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi had a relatively smoother transition to online teaching compared to those in rural areas, owing to better digital infrastructures. Furthermore, Pham and Ho (2020) pointed out challenges related to uneven digital literacy among faculty, and disparities in students' access to online learning resources.

Leadership in Times of Crisis: A Global Perspective

Leadership's role during crises is paramount. Patel (2021) asserted that effective leadership could help navigate uncertainties, make timely decisions, and marshal resources appropriately. Specifically in the context of education, Chang et al. (2011) emphasized the need for leadership to be adaptive, facilitating trust, communication, and a sense of community during disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Leadership and Higher Education in Vietnam

Leadership in Vietnamese higher education has been characterized by hierarchical structures and top-down decision-making (Bush, 2022). However, recent trends indicated a gradual shift towards more participative and decentralized leadership models in some institutions (Tuan et al., 2022). The pandemic presented an opportunity to test the efficacy and adaptability of these leadership styles in real-time crisis scenarios.

Insights from Faculty: A Crucial Perspective

Faculty, being on the frontlines of academic instruction, have unique insights into the efficacy of leadership strategies. Studies from other contexts, such as by Williams et al. (2017), have demonstrated the significance of faculty perceptions in shaping institutional responses and resilience during disruptions. In sum, the existing literature underscores the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education globally and specifically in Vietnam. While leadership's role in navigating crises is well-established, there is a clear gap in understanding how leadership in Vietnamese higher education institutions, as perceived by faculty, influenced the responses to the challenges and disparities exacerbated by the pandemic. This study aims to bridge this gap by drawing insights from Vietnamese lecturers.

Methodology

Research Design

The chosen approach for this research is qualitative in nature, specifically deploying semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. This approach is ideal for exploring complex and nuanced perspectives, providing depth and richness to the insights garnered (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Semi-structured interviews, in particular, offer the flexibility needed to probe deeper into specific topics while allowing participants the freedom to share experiences, perceptions, and stories beyond the constraints of a fully structured format (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

Underpinning the study are two key theoretical frameworks. Firstly, the Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) (Bass & Avolio, 1993) posits that effective leaders inspire, motivate, and stimulate intellectual thinking, catalyzing positive change in their followers. The choice of TLT is significant because of its emphasis on the capability of leadership to bring about change, especially during crises. Given the unprecedented challenges brought about by the pandemic, understanding how transformational leadership styles can drive effective responses is crucial. Indeed, literature on transformational leadership during crises, such as the works by Caldwell et al. (2012) and Turner and Müller (2005), have underscored the value of this leadership style in navigating challenges and fostering resilience. Specifically, during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, transformational leaders have been noted to be particularly effective due to their ability to provide clear vision, instill confidence, and galvanize collective action. Within the context of this study, this theory will be instrumental in examining how leadership within Vietnamese higher education institutions might have facilitated adaptive changes during the pandemic. Key aspects to be explored include how leaders may have provided vision, fostered trust, and encouraged faculty to rise to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Secondly, the Sociocultural Theory (ST) (Vygotsky et al., 1978) emphasizes the crucial role of social interactions and cultural contexts in shaping individual learning and development. The rationale for including the ST lies in its relevance to understanding the influence of societal norms, values, and interactions on individual behaviors and perceptions, especially in a culturally-rich context like Vietnam. Given that leadership perceptions and actions are often influenced by the surrounding culture, it is vital to comprehend how Vietnamese sociocultural factors impacted academic experiences during the pandemic. Leveraging this framework, the study will delve into the sociocultural dynamics surrounding the experiences of Vietnamese lecturers during the pandemic. Specifically, it will examine how the broader cultural and institutional milieu influenced their perceptions of leadership and their ability to adapt to the shifting educational landscape.

Participants

The study engaged a purposive sample of 15 university lecturers drawn from two different institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. This selection was deliberate to encapsulate a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, ensuring that the research insights are both rich and diverse. The participants represented various academic disciplines including humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, and business, providing a multidisciplinary lens to the study's inquiry.

Ensuring ethical integrity was paramount throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the methods involved, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw at any stage without any repercussions. Informed consent was obtained in writing from each lecturer prior to the commencement of the interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed; pseudonyms are used in any reporting or publication related to this study to protect the identities of the participants. All data collected, including audio recordings and transcriptions, are securely stored in encrypted formats with access restricted only to the research team.

In terms of demographics, the participants comprised 8 females and 7 males. Their ages ranged from 32 to 58 years, with an average age of 45. The distribution across academic ranks was as follows: 5 assistant professors, 7 associate professors, and 3 full professors. Geographically, 7 lecturers hailed from urban universities located in Can Tho city, a major city in Vietnam, while the remaining 8 were from institutions situated in more rural or semi-urban areas. This diversity in demographic and professional backgrounds enriched the depth of insights, offering a comprehensive understanding of leadership's role in addressing disparities in the higher education landscape of Vietnam during the post-COVID-19 era.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary tool for data collection in this study. This format was chosen for its versatility, enabling the research team to probe deeper into specific areas of interest while also allowing participants the latitude to share their experiences, perceptions, and narratives freely. Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted with two lecturers not included in the main study. This pilot aimed to test the clarity, appropriateness, and flow of the interview questions. Based on feedback from the pilot participants and reflections from the research team, several questions were revised for clarity and relevance.

Some sample interview questions after the revisions included:

- How would you describe the leadership response at your institution during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- In what ways, if any, did institutional leadership facilitate the transition to remote teaching and learning?
- How do you perceive the role of leadership in addressing disparities in educational access and quality during the pandemic?

- Can you share specific instances where leadership decisions directly impacted your teaching approach during this period?
- Drawing from your cultural and social experiences, how do you think the broader Vietnamese societal context influenced leadership actions and decisions during the pandemic?

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, ensuring that participants had ample time to articulate their experiences and perspectives. The interviews were predominantly conducted in quiet, private rooms within the respective universities of the participants, ensuring a conducive environment for open dialogue. In instances where face-to-face meetings were not feasible due to logistical or health concerns, online platforms were utilized. Given the comfort and fluency of the participants, Vietnamese was used as the primary language for all interviews. This choice ensured that the lecturers could express themselves with ease and nuance, capturing the depth and richness of their experiences.

Ethical considerations remained at the forefront during the data collection process. Apart from the informed consent obtained prior to the interviews, participants were reminded of their rights at the beginning of each session. They were reassured that they could choose not to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with and could terminate the interview at any point. Additionally, participants were made aware that their responses would be anonymized in subsequent analyses and publications, ensuring their privacy and confidentiality. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim. These transcriptions served as the primary dataset, capturing the intricacies of the participants' narratives and offering a foundation for in-depth analysis in the subsequent stages of the research.

Data Analysis

The data derived from the transcribed interviews underwent a systematic process of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun et al. (2023). This method was chosen for its ability to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning (or "themes") within qualitative data, making it particularly apt for the rich narratives captured in the interviews.

The analysis commenced with a familiarization phase where the research team immersed themselves in the data by reading and rereading the transcriptions. This initial engagement enabled the researchers to get acquainted with the depth and breadth of the content, noting down initial ideas and impressions. Following this, a systematic approach to generating initial codes from the data was undertaken. These codes represented the most salient and recurrent ideas mentioned by the participants, capturing key elements related to leadership roles, disparities in education, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Vietnamese higher education landscape. Once the data was comprehensively coded, the next step was to search for themes. Here, codes were collated into potential themes by identifying overarching patterns and connections. The researchers actively considered how different codes could combine to form a central idea or theme, ensuring that the emerging themes were grounded in the data. Subsequently, the identified themes were reviewed and refined. This involved checking the themes against the dataset to ascertain if they accurately represented the participants' narratives. Some themes were further subdivided, while others were amalgamated, ensuring that each theme was coherent, distinctive, and had a clear scope. Upon finalizing the themes, they were then defined and named. Each theme was given a descriptive label, and its significance in the context of the study's research objectives was detailed. This phase provided clarity on the narrative and the story that the data was revealing about leadership's role in addressing educational disparities in the post-COVID-19 Vietnamese higher education sector. Lastly, the results of the thematic analysis were reported, weaving the analytical narrative with pertinent quotes from the participants, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the insights, experiences, and perspectives of the Vietnamese lecturers on the study's focal points.

Findings

Visionary and Inspirational Leadership During Crisis

A significant majority of the participants (n=12 out of 15) highlighted the pivotal role played by institutional leaders who demonstrated visionary and inspirational attributes during the onset and progression of the pandemic. Mr. Thanh, an assistant professor from a rural university, shared,

"Our dean constantly emphasized the larger goal of ensuring uninterrupted education for our students. Despite the challenges, her speeches always centered around innovation and finding solutions, making us believe that we can overcome the crisis together."

Similarly, Dr. Lan, an associate professor from an urban institution, reflected,

"Our rector often spoke of the pandemic as a turning point, challenging us to adapt and evolve. His regular communications not only updated us on logistical matters but also instilled a sense of purpose and direction. It was motivating to feel that we were part of a bigger mission."

Interpreting these experiences through the lens of the TLT, it is evident that leaders who embodied visionary and inspirational qualities truly resonated with the faculty. Drawing directly from the components of TLT, such leaders display "Inspirational Motivation" by articulating a clear and compelling vision and "Intellectual Stimulation" by encouraging innovative thinking. Such leaders inspire and motivate their followers by articulating a clear vision, fostering

trust, and challenging them to approach problems with innovative solutions. The emphasis on adaptability, innovation, and collective mission, as shared by the participants, directly mirrors the tenets of this theory. Additionally, the ST offers a deeper understanding of this leadership approach's contextual relevance. The testimonials suggest an alignment with Vietnamese cultural values, emphasizing community, collective well-being, and resilience. As ST underscores the role of social interactions and cultural contexts in shaping behavior, linking back to ST's notion of the "Zone of Proximal Development", it can be inferred that these leaders were effectively acting within the zone where they could most influence and uplift their faculty's spirits and capacities. It is plausible that the leadership messages, grounded in these cultural tenets, resonated profoundly with the faculty, motivating them to navigate the challenges collaboratively.

Empathy and Supportive Leadership Amidst Adversities

Overwhelmingly, 13 out of 15 participants underscored the importance of leadership demonstrating empathy and supportive behavior during the challenging times of the pandemic. These leaders were not just task-oriented but also showed genuine concern for the well-being and emotional states of their faculty members. Illustrating this, Ms. Phuong, a lecturer from a semi-urban university, recounted,

"Our department head frequently checked on us, not just about our teaching progress, but genuinely inquiring about our well-being, our families, and our mental health. Such gestures made us feel valued and not just mere cogs in the institutional machinery."

Another poignant reflection came from Dr. Minh, a full professor from an urban institution, who shared,

"I remember a time when I was struggling to balance remote teaching with taking care of my ailing parent. The understanding and flexibility offered by my dean, allowing me to adjust my schedules, was invaluable. It was not just about managing tasks; it was human-centric leadership in action."

Examining these testimonials through the TLT highlights the "individualized consideration" aspect. This component, one of the four 'I's of transformational leadership, specifically delves into leaders recognizing and attending to the individual needs and growth of their followers. Leaders who exhibit individualized consideration treat followers as distinct individuals, offering personalized encouragement and support. The emphasis on understanding personal circumstances, emotional well-being, and mental health, as shared by the participants, aligns perfectly with this dimension of transformational leadership. The ST further enriches this understanding. Given the collectivistic nature of Vietnamese culture, where community and interpersonal relationships are deeply valued, leaders who provide emotional support and actively inquire about personal lives are acting in harmony with deeply embedded societal expectations. ST emphasizes how social interactions and relationships profoundly influence behavior and perceptions. In the context of this study, the sociocultural fabric of Vietnam perhaps accentuated the importance of empathetic leadership, making it not just an appreciated trait but a deeply valued and expected one.

Active Engagement and Collaborative Decision-making

A significant number of participants (n=11 out of 15) emphasized the importance of leadership that prioritized active engagement with faculty and incorporated their input into decision-making processes during the crisis. Rather than top-down decisions, collaborative approaches were cherished and seen as beneficial for the broader university community. For example, Mr. Quan, a young lecturer from a metropolitan-based university, remarked,

"Our leadership initiated frequent virtual town-hall meetings, creating platforms for us to voice our concerns, share our challenges, and propose solutions. This collective brainstorming felt empowering and built a sense of camaraderie among us."

Complementing this perspective, Dr. Mai, an experienced faculty member from a rural university, shared,

"Our institution established cross-departmental committees during the pandemic. These committees, comprising representatives from different faculties, were instrumental in shaping decisions related to online teaching, assessment strategies, and student engagement. Being part of this, I felt our voices were genuinely heard and considered."

Interpreting these observations through the TLT, the "participative leadership" dimension emerges prominently. This facet is directly related to the "intellectual stimulation" component of transformational leadership. By encouraging open discussions, fostering creativity, and valuing diverse viewpoints, transformational leaders promote an environment where followers feel encouraged to think critically and contribute actively. This dimension signifies leaders' ability to engage followers in the decision-making process, fostering a democratic and inclusive environment. By actively soliciting feedback, involving faculty in discussions, and ensuring their perspectives were integral to the decision-making processes, the leaders, as described by the participants, showcased hallmarks of participative leadership. Furthermore, the ST once again offers nuanced insights. The Vietnamese cultural context, with its emphasis on community, mutual respect, and collective harmony, likely accentuated the appreciation for collaborative decision-making. Leaders who facilitate dialogues, honor collective wisdom, and prioritize inclusivity align closely with the values that the Vietnamese

society holds dear. Social interactions are central to shaping behaviors and perceptions. In this context, the participatory leadership approach resonated deeply with the faculty's cultural expectations, facilitating not only better decisions but also enhancing faculty's sense of belonging and commitment.

Flexibility and Adaptability in Leadership Approaches

Of the participants, 10 out of 15 particularly appreciated leadership that showcased flexibility and adaptability, emphasizing the ability to pivot strategies and approaches in response to the evolving challenges posed by the pandemic. Illustrating this sentiment, Ms. Huong, a lecturer from a provincial university, reflected,

"When online teaching initially seemed overwhelming, our leadership was quick to realize that a one-size-fits-all approach was not viable. They offered alternative solutions, ranging from hybrid models to asynchronous learning, catering to varied needs."

Elaborating on this theme, Mr. Khoi, a senior lecturer from a central university, mentioned,

"As the pandemic progressed, our institution's initial plans had to be frequently adjusted. Our leadership demonstrated resilience, always ready to adapt, re-strategize, and offer support wherever needed."

From the perspective of the TLT, the aspect of "adaptive leadership" comes to the fore. This quality resonates strongly with the "intellectual stimulation" element of transformational leadership, where leaders challenge the status quo, encourage creativity, and are unafraid to venture into uncharted waters. Leaders exhibiting this trait are not rigid in their approaches but display a readiness to innovate, adjust, and shift directions as necessitated by circumstances. The narratives of the participants underscore how transformational leaders, by embracing adaptability, were able to navigate the uncertain terrains of the pandemic effectively. The ST provides additional layers of understanding. The Vietnamese ethos, characterized by resilience, perseverance, and adaptability, especially in the face of adversities, likely influenced the leaders' flexible approaches. Within the ST framework, the leadership behaviors can be perceived as a reflection of the broader sociocultural norms and values, where flexibility in approach and continuous adaptation have been historically essential for survival and progress. The cultural backdrop and shared experiences of the community can significantly shape responses and strategies. Hence, leadership flexibility, aligned with the broader Vietnamese cultural narrative, was both an intuitive and effective response to the pandemic's challenges.

Commitment to Professional Development and Capacity Building

A notable 9 out of 15 participants accentuated the importance of leadership focusing on professional development and capacity-building initiatives, especially given the new modalities of teaching and learning that the pandemic introduced. Ms. Binh, a mid-career lecturer from a suburban university, highlighted,

"When we transitioned to online teaching, there were obvious gaps in our expertise. However, our leadership promptly organized workshops and training sessions, bringing in experts to help us adapt to this new normal."

In a similar vein, Dr. Tuan, who teaches in a prestigious metropolitan institution, shared,

"Our leadership proactively collaborated with international universities to facilitate webinars on best practices for online pedagogy. This not only enhanced our teaching methods but also broadened our global perspectives."

Viewed through the lens of the TLT, this emphasis on professional development aligns with the component of "intellectual stimulation." Such leaders prioritize the continuous evolution of their followers, recognizing the importance of equipping them with relevant skills and knowledge to meet emerging challenges. Transformational leaders encourage followers to explore new ways of doing things and challenge them to improve and innovate. By providing training opportunities and fostering an environment conducive to continuous learning, the university leaders reflected this integral facet of transformational leadership. Supplementing this with insights from the ST, the commitment to professional development can be seen as a reflection of the Vietnamese cultural value placed on education, learning, and self-betterment. In Vietnamese society, there is a strong emphasis on continuous growth and elevating one's knowledge and skills as a means to contribute more effectively to the community. Given ST's emphasis on the interplay between individuals and their social contexts, it is conceivable that the leadership's push for professional growth was not only a pragmatic response to the pandemic's challenges but also a culturally resonant initiative that deeply aligned with the participants' intrinsic values.

Transparent Communication and Information Dissemination

A substantial number, 8 out of 15 participants, emphasized the pivotal role of clear, transparent, and consistent communication from leadership during the tumultuous times of the pandemic. This was seen as essential in alleviating anxieties, ensuring all faculty were on the same page, and fostering a sense of unity. Ms. Dao, a lecturer from a remote university, reflected,

“The regular updates from our department head, detailing not just the plans but the rationale behind decisions, helped reduce the ambiguity and made us feel more secure.”

Echoing this sentiment, Mr. Vinh, a senior faculty member from a city-based institution, shared,

“One of the strengths of our leadership during this time was the transparency in communication. Even when the news was not favorable, they were honest about it, ensuring we were always informed.”

Utilizing the framework of the TLT, such transparent communication aligns with the “idealized influence” component. Transformational leaders, by virtue of their integrity and ethical standards, often act as role models, gaining trust and respect through authenticity and consistent communication. The emphasis by participants on clarity, rationale, and honesty in leadership communication showcases the principles of accountability and ethical responsibility that are cornerstones of transformational leaders. Bringing in the lens of the ST, transparent communication gains even more importance in the Vietnamese context, where trust, harmony, integrity, and community cohesion are deeply valued. As per the ST, the societal and cultural environment influences individuals’ behaviors and expectations. Open communication, thus, becomes a reflection of the leadership’s respect for the community’s right to know and be involved. In this context, transparent communication not only met the functional need for information but also reinforced trust and cohesion in the academic community during challenging times.

Discussion

Visionary and Inspirational Leadership During Crisis

Literature on transformational leadership is replete with instances underscoring the significance of leaders articulating a clear vision (Bass & Avolio, 1993; O’Reilly & Chatman, 2020). For instance, Voina and Stoica (2023) highlighted how leaders, during challenging times, galvanize their followers by delineating a clear path forward. This aligns with the narratives of our participants who appreciated leaders’ emphasis on adaptability and innovation. However, the context of this study, set against the backdrop of a global pandemic and within the Vietnamese academic environment, illuminates a nuanced understanding. Where existing literature often delineates leadership responses to isolated or organization-specific challenges, our study explores leadership dynamics in an unprecedented, universal crisis. The recurrent emphasis on adaptability and viewing the pandemic as a ‘turning point’ is a unique perspective that this research brings to the fore. Furthermore, our work contributes by capturing the interplay between cultural elements and leadership dynamics, filling a gap that often remains unaddressed in broader leadership discourses. This depth of insight, especially when benchmarked against leadership narratives from non-pandemic contexts, underscores both the distinctiveness and the novelty of our research findings.

Empathy and Supportive Leadership Amidst Adversities

Leadership literature has previously recognized the importance of empathetic leadership. For instance, Gómez-Leal et al. (2022) in their discourse on emotional intelligence spoke of empathy as a critical leadership trait. However, the heightened significance of empathy and support, especially during the pandemic as captured in our findings, sets this study apart. While past studies have discussed empathy within the confines of regular organizational challenges, the gravity and universality of the pandemic situation demanded an unparalleled degree of emotional understanding and support. The emphasis on not just task completion but genuine concern for well-being underscores the human-centric leadership approach that was pivotal during the crisis. Furthermore, our research adds granularity to the understanding of empathetic leadership by showcasing real-world examples during an extraordinary context, thereby filling a niche that had hitherto been less explored in the literature. This not only reaffirms the relevance of foundational leadership traits but also highlights the dynamic adaptability required in unprecedented times.

Active Engagement and Collaborative Decision-making

While participatory leadership is a well-documented trait in academic settings (Polatcan et al., 2023), our findings underscore its intensified importance during the pandemic. Existing literature has, for the most part, focused on participative leadership as a democratic approach to involve various stakeholders in routine decision-making processes. However, what emerges from our study is the nuanced understanding that during disruptive events like a pandemic, such collaborative decision-making transcends its traditional role. The active solicitation of feedback and the establishment of cross-departmental committees signify an agile and responsive leadership style. This, in essence, shifted from mere involvement to a more critical engagement, where timely inputs could significantly alter institutional strategies. The study deepens the discourse on collaborative decision-making by spotlighting its crucial role in navigating unprecedented challenges like a pandemic. Moreover, our findings provide a fresh perspective on the synergy between crisis management and participative leadership, filling the gaps in literature that often treats these two in isolation. This novel confluence emphasizes that in the face of extreme uncertainties, fostering a collaborative environment is not just idealistic but strategically imperative.

Flexibility and Adaptability in Leadership Approaches

Flexibility in leadership approaches has been documented as a significant trait for successful leaders (Franken et al., 2021). In many conventional scenarios, flexibility often pertains to a leader's ability to cater to varying needs of their teams or to adjust to shifting market dynamics. However, our study illuminates how this flexibility was not just advantageous but indispensable during the pandemic. Unlike traditional challenges where leaders might have the luxury of time to deliberate and iterate, the pandemic necessitated swift action and quick course corrections. The repeated pivoting and adaptability showcased by leaders in our study emphasizes a leadership style that was both proactive and reactive, constantly evolving in response to the dynamic challenges posed by the pandemic. What our research adds to the broader discourse is the heightened level of agility required in leadership during crises of such magnitude. Furthermore, it underscores that flexibility is not just about shifting strategies, but also about being attuned to the emotional and psychological needs of the community, providing them with varied solutions tailored to diverse challenges. This nuanced perspective provides a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of flexibility, beyond what is typically captured in existing leadership literature.

Commitment to Professional Development and Capacity Building

While the importance of continuous professional development in academia is well-documented (Amhag et al., 2019), it often focuses on the routine evolution of pedagogical skills or keeping abreast of advancements in specific fields. Our study highlights the intensified focus on capacity-building during the pandemic, a scenario where educators were plunged into a whirlwind of digital transitions, pedagogical shifts, and novel challenges almost overnight. The collaborations with international universities, webinars, and workshops are not just strategies for skill enhancement but are testament to the proactive measures taken to bridge the emergent skill gaps and adapt to the 'new normal'. Beyond just equipping faculty with tools for online teaching, these initiatives likely served as morale boosters, reassuring faculty of institutional support in these trying times. The unique contribution here is the leadership's foresight in recognizing the immediate need for such initiatives, and not just planning, but swiftly actioning them. This approach went beyond traditional professional development, underscoring the importance of agility in leadership and immediate capacity building in the face of unforeseen challenges. The proactive nature of these efforts showcases a leadership that is not only reactive but anticipatory in its approach, adding a fresh dimension to the literature on academic professional development.

Transparent Communication and Information Dissemination

Transparency in communication is recognized as a hallmark of good leadership (Jiang & Shen, 2023; Winkelmes et al., 2019). Traditionally, this transparency has been linked to ensuring clarity of vision, alignment of objectives, or managing stakeholder expectations in organizational contexts. However, the context of the pandemic, with its uncertainties and anxieties, elevated the significance of transparent communication. The findings of our study underline how, more than ever, clarity, honesty, and consistency in communication became the bedrock of trust and cohesion within academic institutions. This heightened importance underscores the unique interplay between crisis communication and leadership in instilling confidence and mitigating concerns. The openness in sharing both positive news and unfavorable developments, as reflected in our findings, showcases a leadership ethos that values and respects its community by ensuring they are informed, prepared, and united in their response. Thus, while transparency remains a constant theme in leadership narratives, the dimensions it assumed during the pandemic and its direct implications for community morale and unity offer fresh insights into its evolving nuances in crisis scenarios.

In sum, while the traits highlighted by our participants resonate with established leadership paradigms, their manifestation during the extraordinary circumstances of a global pandemic offers a fresh perspective. The nuances of the Vietnamese academic environment, the unique challenges posed by the pandemic, and the intricate interplay of cultural values elucidated in our findings enrich the global discourse on transformational leadership, offering insights that are both context-specific and universally relevant. This study, therefore, stands as a significant contribution to the literature, bridging the known tenets of transformational leadership with the unique exigencies of leadership during a crisis.

Conclusion

In the backdrop of the unprecedented challenges posed by the global pandemic, the role of leadership in academic institutions became crucial in navigating the myriad obstacles and ensuring continuity in education. This study aimed to delve deep into the perceptions of faculty members from various Vietnamese universities to understand the leadership qualities they deemed most instrumental during these trying times. Utilizing qualitative methods, personal narratives of 15 participants were meticulously analyzed, offering rich insights into their lived experiences and interactions with institutional leadership.

Our findings underscored several key leadership attributes that resonated profoundly with the faculty members during the pandemic's adversities. Visionary and inspirational leadership emerged as paramount, with leaders who championed a clear vision and motivated their followers amidst adversities being especially appreciated. Empathy and supportive

behavior, demonstrated through genuine concern for the well-being of faculty members, were hailed as essential qualities, emphasizing the need for a human-centric approach to leadership. The importance of active engagement and collaborative decision-making was highlighted, with a significant number of participants valuing the inclusion of their perspectives in shaping institutional responses. Flexibility and adaptability in leadership approaches were also emphasized, recognizing the dynamic nature of the pandemic and the evolving challenges it presented. Commitment to professional development and capacity building was seen as pivotal, given the shifting landscape of teaching modalities and the need for upskilling. Lastly, transparent communication and consistent information dissemination were pinpointed as critical in fostering trust, alleviating anxieties, and ensuring collective alignment.

Drawing from the TLT and ST, these findings not only align with established leadership paradigms but also resonate deeply with the unique sociocultural fabric of Vietnam. As academic institutions globally grapple with the long-term implications of the pandemic, these insights offer a roadmap, emphasizing the leadership qualities that can facilitate resilience, adaptability, and cohesion in challenging times. This study, grounded in the Vietnamese context, contributes to the broader discourse on effective leadership during crises and underscores the need to intertwine global leadership principles with local cultural nuances for impactful outcomes.

The revelations from this study hold profound implications for both academic institutions and broader organizational contexts, particularly when navigating uncertain and challenging terrains. Given the prominence of visionary and inspirational leadership highlighted by participants, institutions should invest in leadership training programs that foster these attributes. Drawing on the TLT framework, and integrating it with insights from the Vietnamese cultural milieu, training modules could be crafted with a dual focus: strategic foresight, crafting compelling visions, and effective communication techniques that inspire and galvanize followers. Such investments in leadership capacity-building can ensure preparedness for future challenges, while ensuring alignment with local cultural norms and values.

With overwhelming emphasis on empathy and supportiveness as pivotal leadership traits, institutions should review and adapt their HR policies to reflect a more human-centric approach. This could involve mental well-being programs, flexible working arrangements, or initiatives that foster deeper interpersonal bonds within teams. Informed by the ST and Vietnamese cultural context, these initiatives could emphasize the values of community, mutual support, and collective harmony prevalent in Vietnamese society. A leader's capacity to recognize and respond to personal and professional challenges faced by their team members will be crucial in fostering loyalty, commitment, and overall well-being. The valuing of active engagement and collaborative decision-making underscores the need for more democratic governance structures in institutions. Mechanisms to facilitate faculty participation in decision-making processes, such as regular town-hall meetings, feedback loops, or cross-departmental committees, can enhance overall institutional efficacy and foster a sense of collective ownership, while echoing the societal emphasis on communal decision-making and collective wisdom.

The significance attributed to flexibility and adaptability implies that rigid, top-down strategies might be less effective in dynamic situations. Institutions should, therefore, cultivate an organizational culture that values adaptability, encourages innovative problem-solving, and is receptive to mid-course corrections when necessary. Given the Vietnamese ethos of resilience and adaptability in the face of adversities, these strategies could be further enhanced by integrating local cultural narratives. The focus on professional development and capacity-building suggests a perpetual need for upskilling, especially in rapidly evolving landscapes. Institutions should prioritize regular workshops, collaborations with global institutions, and platforms for knowledge exchange to ensure their faculty and staff remain at the forefront of pedagogical and technological advancements, while also recognizing and integrating indigenous knowledge systems and pedagogies.

Given the importance of transparent communication, institutions should re-evaluate their communication protocols. Regular updates, clarity in messaging, and avenues for open dialogues can foster trust, mitigate uncertainties, and ensure alignment of all stakeholders. Drawing from the ST, there is a clear indication that leadership strategies and messages should resonate with the cultural and societal ethos of the community. This reinforces the idea that authentic communication, while universal in its appeal, is deeply influenced by the societal context in which it is practiced. Leadership training and interventions, while borrowing from global best practices, should be contextualized to the unique sociocultural fabric of the institution or region.

In conclusion, as organizations navigate the complexities of a post-pandemic world, the lessons from this study can serve as guiding principles, emphasizing the leadership attributes and organizational strategies that resonate most profoundly with stakeholders. While grounded in the context of Vietnamese academic institutions, the implications hold broader relevance, underscoring the universality of certain leadership principles while emphasizing the need for cultural contextualization, and reflecting a nuanced understanding of how theoretical frameworks and cultural contexts intersect.

Recommendations

There are several avenues for future research. It would be beneficial to expand both the sample size and its diversity, drawing from various regions and types of institutions in Vietnam. Incorporating viewpoints from a wider array of stakeholders can present a more rounded picture. Quantitative methodologies could complement the qualitative insights

of this study. Longitudinal studies might illuminate long-term impacts and adjustments in leadership strategies as crises evolve. Cross-cultural studies can delve into how leadership in the Vietnamese context compares with other cultural settings, and exploring potential unintended consequences of leadership strategies can offer a balanced understanding. In essence, while this research forms a solid foundation, the field is ripe for more extensive exploration and investigation.

Limitations

This study, while providing invaluable insights into leadership during the COVID-19 crisis within Vietnamese academic institutions, has some limitations. The sample size of 15 participants, though diverse, may not comprehensively represent the myriad experiences across all Vietnamese academic settings. The geographic locales of the participants could introduce regional biases. Furthermore, by primarily focusing on faculty members, we may have inadvertently overlooked the perspectives of other vital stakeholders, like administrative staff, students, or the leadership itself. Another possible constraint is the potential influence of social desirability bias, with participants possibly framing their narratives in a way that paints their institutions or leaders in a more positive light.

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