



Triad of Leadership, Internationalization, And Innovation in Enhancing the Performance of University Managers in Kenya

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Abstract

The contemporary higher education environment is characterized by intense global competition, rapid technological advancement, growing international collaborations, and increased demand for quality education and research productivity. In Kenya, university managers are increasingly confronted with complex institutional, financial, technological, and governance challenges that require dynamic leadership approaches and strategic institutional transformation. This study examines the interrelationship between leadership, internationalization, and innovation and how these dimensions collectively enhance the performance of university managers in Kenyan universities. Specifically, the study explores how leadership practices influence institutional effectiveness, the role of internationalization in strengthening academic competitiveness and global visibility, and the contribution of innovation to research productivity, teaching effectiveness, and administrative efficiency. The study adopts a mixed-methods research design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to university managers drawn from selected public and private universities in Kenya, alongside semi-structured interviews with senior administrators, deans, directors, and departmental heads. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that visionary, transformational, and adaptive leadership significantly influence institutional performance by fostering collaboration, strategic decision-making, accountability, and organizational resilience. Internationalization emerged as a critical factor in improving institutional rankings, research collaborations, student diversity, and academic visibility. Similarly, innovation in pedagogy, research, digital learning systems, and institutional management positively contributed to operational efficiency and competitiveness. The study further established that leadership acts as the driving force that integrates internationalization and innovation into institutional strategic frameworks, thereby enhancing managerial effectiveness and overall university performance. The study concludes that Kenyan universities that strategically align leadership, internationalization, and innovation are better positioned to compete globally and achieve sustainable institutional growth. The paper recommends strengthening leadership development programs, enhancing international partnerships, investing in digital and research innovation, and increasing policy and financial support for higher education transformation initiatives.

Keywords: Leadership, Internationalization, Innovation, University Managers, Higher Education, Kenya, Institutional Performance

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I. Introduction

Higher education institutions across the world are undergoing significant transformation due to globalization, technological disruptions, changing labour market demands, and increasing competition for students, funding, and academic reputation (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Universities are no longer confined to traditional teaching functions but are increasingly expected to become centers of innovation, research excellence, entrepreneurship, and global engagement. Consequently, university managers are required to provide strategic leadership capable of navigating these rapidly evolving academic environments.

In Kenya, the higher education sector has experienced tremendous expansion over the past two decades. The establishment of new public and private universities, increased student enrolment, growing demand for quality education, and heightened pressure for international competitiveness have significantly transformed university management practices (Commission for University Education [CUE], 2023). However, despite this expansion, many universities continue to face challenges such as inadequate funding, infrastructural deficits, governance concerns, brain drain, declining research output, political interference, and limited global visibility.

The emergence of global university rankings, cross-border education, international research collaborations, and digital learning ecosystems has further intensified pressure on university leaders to adopt innovative and internationally oriented management approaches. Universities such as University of Nairobi, Moi University, Kenyatta University, Strathmore University, and United States International University-Africa have increasingly embraced internationalization and innovation strategies in efforts to strengthen academic competitiveness and institutional sustainability.

Leadership remains central in guiding universities through these transformations. Effective university leaders are expected to formulate strategic visions, mobilize resources, promote innovation, strengthen international collaborations, and ensure institutional accountability and performance (Bolden et al., 2012). Equally, internationalization has become a major strategic priority for universities seeking to enhance global engagement through student exchange programs, collaborative research, international partnerships, and faculty mobility (Knight, 2004). Innovation in teaching, research, administration, and digital transformation is also increasingly recognized as a key driver of institutional effectiveness and competitiveness.

This study therefore examines how leadership, internationalization, and innovation interact to influence the performance of university managers in Kenya. The study contributes to the growing discourse on higher education transformation and institutional competitiveness in developing economies.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Leadership in Higher Education

Leadership in higher education institutions differs significantly from leadership in corporate organizations due to the collegial, decentralized, and knowledge-driven nature of universities. University leaders operate within complex institutional environments characterized by multiple stakeholders, competing interests, and academic autonomy (Bolden et al., 2012).

Transformational leadership theory provides an important framework for understanding effective university management. Transformational leaders inspire followers through vision, motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In Kenyan universities, transformational leadership has become increasingly important in managing institutional reforms, academic quality assurance, and organizational change.

Research by Kipkebut (2010) observed that effective leadership in Kenyan universities significantly influences staff morale, organizational commitment, and institutional performance. Similarly, Waweru and Ngugi (2018) found that university leaders who embrace participatory decision-making and strategic management practices tend to achieve higher institutional effectiveness and employee satisfaction.

University managers in Kenya are also expected to demonstrate adaptive leadership capabilities in response to emerging challenges such as digital transformation, funding constraints, and global competition. Adaptive leadership enables institutional leaders to navigate uncertainty while fostering resilience and innovation (Heifetz et al., 2009).

2.2 Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization refers to the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the functions and delivery of higher education (Knight, 2004). The internationalization agenda has become increasingly prominent due to globalization, cross-border education, technological advancements, and international academic mobility.

Kenyan universities have progressively embraced internationalization strategies through collaborations with foreign institutions, international student recruitment, faculty exchanges, joint research initiatives, and participation in global academic networks. According to the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA, 2022), universities in East Africa are increasingly prioritizing internationalization to improve research productivity, academic quality, and global visibility.

Institutions such as Strathmore University and United States International University-Africa have established strong international partnerships that have enhanced curriculum development, research collaboration, and global competitiveness. Similarly, Egerton University and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology have strengthened international research collaborations in agriculture, technology, and innovation.

Despite these gains, internationalization in Kenya faces challenges including inadequate funding, visa restrictions, limited infrastructure, insufficient international networks, and weak policy frameworks (Onsongo, 2007).

2.3 Innovation in Higher Education

Innovation in higher education encompasses the introduction of new teaching methodologies, research practices, administrative systems, and technological solutions aimed at improving institutional effectiveness and educational outcomes (O'Shea et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated innovation adoption in Kenyan universities, particularly through e-learning platforms, virtual classrooms, digital libraries, and blended learning models. Universities rapidly adopted technologies such as Moodle, Google Classroom, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams to ensure continuity of learning.

Research by Mukhwana et al. (2016) indicates that innovation enhances research productivity, improves teaching effectiveness, and promotes institutional competitiveness. Innovative universities are better positioned to attract funding, foster interdisciplinary research, and respond to changing labour market needs. Innovation also extends to administrative systems including digital admissions, financial management systems, student information systems, and performance management frameworks. Universities that embrace innovation tend to demonstrate greater operational efficiency and institutional responsiveness.

2.4 Linking Leadership, Internationalization, and Innovation

Leadership plays a critical role in integrating internationalization and innovation into institutional strategic priorities. Effective university leaders create enabling environments that encourage creativity, collaboration, research excellence, and international engagement (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Transformational leaders are more likely to champion innovation and international partnerships by fostering strategic vision, institutional flexibility, and organizational learning. In Kenya, universities with proactive leadership structures have demonstrated greater success in securing international grants, enhancing research visibility, and implementing technological transformation initiatives. The synergy between leadership, internationalization, and innovation therefore creates a competitive advantage for universities and enhances the effectiveness of university managers.

III. Research Objectives

The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

1. To assess how leadership styles and practices influence university management performance in Kenya.
2. To examine the role of internationalization in improving academic reputation, research productivity, and student diversity.
3. To investigate the impact of innovation on administrative effectiveness, curriculum development, and research outputs in Kenyan universities.
4. To explore the interrelationship between leadership, internationalization, and innovation in enhancing university managers' performance.

IV. Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy and Research Paradigm

This study was anchored on the pragmatism research philosophy, which supports the integration of both quantitative and qualitative approaches in understanding complex social and organizational phenomena. Pragmatism was considered appropriate because the study sought to generate practical and policy-oriented insights regarding leadership, internationalization, innovation, and university managerial performance within the Kenyan higher education sector.

The study adopted a mixed-methods research paradigm to enable triangulation of findings and enhance the validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness of the study. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches facilitated a deeper understanding of institutional leadership experiences, innovation practices, and internationalization strategies in Kenyan universities.

4.2 Research Design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design. Under this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed independently, and later integrated during interpretation and discussion of findings.

The quantitative component utilized a descriptive and correlational survey design to examine relationships among leadership, internationalization, innovation, and managerial performance. The qualitative component adopted a phenomenological approach to explore lived experiences, perceptions, and institutional realities facing university managers in Kenya.

The mixed-methods design was suitable because it enabled the study to capture both measurable institutional trends and contextual experiences that could not adequately be explained through numerical analysis alone.

4.3 Study Area and Context

The study was conducted in selected public and private universities in Kenya. The institutions were selected from different geographical regions including Nairobi, Rift Valley, Western Kenya, Coast Region, and Central Kenya in order to ensure regional representation and capture diverse institutional experiences.

The universities targeted included established public universities such as University of Nairobi, Moi University, Kenyatta University, and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, as well as private institutions including Strathmore University, United States International University-Africa, and Mount Kenya University.

The Kenyan university sector provided an appropriate context due to ongoing reforms in governance, digital transformation, internationalization initiatives, and increasing pressure for global competitiveness and quality assurance.

4.4 Target Population

The target population comprised university managers occupying strategic and administrative leadership positions in public and private universities in Kenya. These included:

- Vice Chancellors
- Deputy Vice Chancellors
- Registrars
- Deans of Schools and Faculties
- Directors of Academic and Administrative Units
- Chairpersons of Academic Departments
- Directors of International Programs
- Directors of Research and Innovation
- Senior Administrative Officers

These categories of respondents were considered appropriate because they are directly involved in institutional leadership, policy formulation, innovation management, and implementation of internationalization strategies.

4.5 Sample Size Determination

The study utilized a sample size of 100 respondents for the quantitative survey and 20 participants for the qualitative interviews.

The sample size was considered adequate based on recommendations by Creswell (2014), who argues that mixed-methods studies require sufficient representation to ensure meaningful statistical and thematic analysis.

The sample distribution was as follows:

Category	Number
Deans and Directors	35
Departmental Chairpersons	30
Senior Administrative Officers	20
Registrars and Deputy Registrars	10
Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors	5
Total	100

Additionally, 20 senior university managers participated in in-depth interviews.

4.6 Sampling Techniques

The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques.

4.6.1 Stratified Random Sampling

Stratified random sampling was used to categorize universities into public and private institutions. Further stratification was undertaken according to managerial roles to ensure adequate representation of different leadership levels.

4.6.2 Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was utilized in selecting senior university managers for qualitative interviews. The selection criteria included managerial experience, involvement in institutional internationalization initiatives, and participation in innovation and policy implementation.

Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to obtain rich and information-intensive data from experienced respondents.

4.7 Data Collection Instruments

4.7.1 Structured Questionnaires

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires containing both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions. The questionnaire was divided into the following sections:

- Demographic Information
- Leadership Practices
- Internationalization Strategies
- Innovation Practices
- Institutional Performance Indicators
- Challenges Facing University Managers

The Likert-scale items ranged from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

4.7.2 Semi-Structured Interview Guides

Semi-structured interview guides were used to collect qualitative data from selected university managers. The interviews focused on:

- Leadership experiences
- International collaboration initiatives
- Innovation management
- Institutional challenges
- Policy and governance issues
- Strategies for improving institutional competitiveness

The interviews allowed flexibility for probing and obtaining deeper insights into institutional realities.

4.8 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in one selected university not included in the final study sample. The purpose of the pilot study was to assess the validity, reliability, clarity, and consistency of the research instruments.

The pilot study involved 10 university managers.

4.8.1 Validity of Research Instruments

Content validity was established through expert review by scholars in higher education management and research methodology. Supervisors and research experts assessed the instruments for relevance, adequacy, clarity, and alignment with study objectives.

4.8.2 Reliability of Research Instruments

Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The study achieved the following reliability coefficients:

Variable	Cronbach Alpha
Leadership	0.84
Internationalization	0.81
Innovation	0.87
Institutional Performance	0.85

The coefficients exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70 recommended by Nunnally (1978), indicating acceptable internal consistency.

4.9 Data Collection Procedures

The researcher obtained research authorization from relevant university authorities and ethical clearance from the appropriate institutional review bodies.

Questionnaires were distributed physically and electronically through institutional emails and online survey platforms. Interviews were conducted physically and virtually depending on respondent availability.

Respondents were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation throughout the study.

4.10 Data Analysis Procedures

4.10.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The following statistical techniques were utilized:

- Frequencies and percentages
- Means and standard deviations
- Correlation analysis
- Multiple regression analysis

Regression analysis was used to determine the influence of leadership, internationalization, and innovation on university managerial performance.

The regression model adopted was:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + \varepsilon$$

Where:

- Y = University Managerial Performance
- X1 = Leadership
- X2 = Internationalization
- X3 = Innovation
- β_0 = Constant
- β_1 – β_3 = Regression coefficients
- ε = Error term

4.10.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The researcher transcribed interview responses, coded emerging themes, categorized patterns, and interpreted findings based on study objectives.

Themes generated included:

- Transformational leadership
- Institutional innovation culture
- International collaborations
- Resource constraints
- Governance challenges
- Digital transformation

4.11 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research principles including:

- Informed consent
- Voluntary participation
- Confidentiality
- Anonymity
- Academic integrity
- Protection of respondent information

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

V. Results and Discussion

5.1 Response Rate

Out of the 100 questionnaires distributed, 91 were successfully completed and returned, representing a response rate of 91%. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate above 70% is considered adequate for social science research.

The high response rate was attributed to effective follow-up mechanisms, institutional support, and the relevance of the study topic to university management.

5.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The study analyzed respondents' demographic profiles including gender, age, educational qualifications, years of managerial experience, and institutional category.

The findings revealed that:

- 63% of respondents were male while 37% were female.
- Majority of respondents (58%) possessed doctoral qualifications.
- Most respondents had managerial experience exceeding five years.
- Public universities accounted for 65% of respondents while private universities represented 35%.

The findings indicate that the respondents possessed adequate academic and managerial experience necessary for providing reliable information concerning university leadership and institutional performance.

5.3 Leadership and University Managerial Performance

The study established that leadership significantly influences institutional effectiveness and managerial performance in Kenyan universities.

Respondents strongly agreed that visionary leadership contributes to:

- Improved institutional planning
- Better staff coordination

- Enhanced accountability
- Improved research productivity
- Effective policy implementation

The mean score for leadership effectiveness was 4.21, indicating strong agreement among respondents regarding the importance of leadership in institutional performance.

Interview findings further revealed that transformational leadership practices such as participatory decision-making, strategic communication, and staff empowerment positively influenced organizational commitment and institutional stability. These findings corroborate Bass and Riggio (2006), who argue that transformational leadership enhances organizational effectiveness and employee motivation.

However, respondents identified several leadership challenges including:

- Political interference
- Leadership succession conflicts
- Financial constraints
- Resistance to institutional reforms
- Inadequate leadership training

Public universities were particularly affected by political influence and bureaucratic governance structures.

5.4 Internationalization and Institutional Competitiveness

The findings revealed that internationalization significantly enhances institutional visibility, research collaboration, and academic competitiveness.

Respondents identified the following major internationalization strategies:

- Student exchange programs
- Joint academic programs
- International conferences
- Collaborative research
- Faculty mobility initiatives
- International accreditation programs

Universities actively engaged in internationalization reported:

- Increased research funding
- Improved global rankings
- Enhanced academic reputation
- Greater cultural diversity
- Improved curriculum quality

Respondents cited institutions such as Strathmore University and United States International University-Africa as examples of universities that have successfully leveraged internationalization for institutional growth and visibility.

Regression analysis revealed that internationalization positively and significantly influenced university performance ($\beta = 0.417$, $p < 0.05$).

Despite these benefits, several challenges were identified including:

- Limited financial resources
- Weak international networks
- Visa and immigration barriers
- Inadequate institutional policies
- Limited government support

Respondents emphasized that many Kenyan universities still lack comprehensive internationalization strategies.

5.5 Innovation and Institutional Effectiveness

Innovation emerged as a critical determinant of institutional competitiveness and managerial performance.

The study found that universities investing in:

- Digital learning systems
- Research innovation hubs
- Technology integration
- E-learning platforms
- Interdisciplinary research

experienced improved:

- Administrative efficiency
- Student satisfaction
- Research productivity

- Institutional responsiveness
- Service delivery

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated innovation adoption across Kenyan universities, particularly in online teaching and virtual administrative systems.

Respondents indicated that innovation improved:

- Access to learning resources
- Communication efficiency
- Institutional resilience
- Operational continuity

However, respondents identified several barriers to innovation including:

- Inadequate ICT infrastructure
- Limited research funding
- Resistance to technological change
- Insufficient staff training
- Cybersecurity concerns

5.6 Synergistic Relationship Between Leadership, Internationalization, and Innovation

The study established that leadership, internationalization, and innovation are mutually reinforcing dimensions that collectively enhance university performance.

Effective leadership was found to:

- Facilitate innovation adoption
- Promote global partnerships
- Mobilize institutional resources
- Foster organizational learning
- Encourage collaborative culture

Universities with proactive leadership structures demonstrated greater success in implementing internationalization initiatives and innovation programs.

The findings further revealed that institutions integrating innovation and internationalization within strategic leadership frameworks were more likely to:

- Secure international research grants
- Improve institutional rankings
- Attract international students
- Enhance staff productivity
- Strengthen institutional sustainability

Correlation analysis revealed strong positive relationships among:

- Leadership and Innovation ($r = 0.68$)
- Leadership and Internationalization ($r = 0.71$)
- Innovation and Institutional Performance ($r = 0.74$)

The findings therefore suggest that leadership serves as the catalyst through which innovation and internationalization are effectively operationalized in Kenyan universities.

5.7 Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that effective leadership remains central to institutional transformation and university competitiveness in Kenya. Transformational and adaptive leadership approaches are particularly essential in managing the complexities associated with globalization, digital transformation, and resource constraints.

The positive relationship between internationalization and institutional performance supports Knight's (2004) argument that global engagement enhances academic quality, institutional reputation, and research collaboration.

Similarly, the strong influence of innovation on university performance aligns with O'Shea et al. (2016), who emphasize that innovation promotes institutional sustainability and competitiveness. The study further contributes to existing literature by demonstrating that leadership acts as the integrating mechanism linking internationalization and innovation within university management systems. The Kenyan experience illustrates that universities capable of strategically aligning leadership, innovation, and internationalization are better positioned to achieve institutional resilience, global competitiveness, and sustainable academic excellence.

VI. Conclusion

The study concludes that leadership, internationalization, and innovation are critical and interconnected drivers of university performance in Kenya. Effective leadership provides strategic direction and institutional stability necessary for promoting innovation and global engagement.

Internationalization enhances institutional visibility, research collaboration, and academic competitiveness, while innovation strengthens teaching effectiveness, administrative efficiency, and institutional adaptability.

Kenyan universities that strategically integrate these three dimensions are better positioned to compete globally and respond effectively to emerging higher education challenges.

VII. Recommendations

1. Strengthen Leadership Development Programs

Universities should establish continuous leadership development and mentorship programs aimed at equipping university managers with strategic, transformational, and adaptive leadership skills.

2. Enhance International Partnerships

Universities should expand collaborations with international institutions through faculty exchange programs, joint research projects, and student mobility initiatives.

3. Promote Institutional Innovation

Higher education institutions should invest in digital transformation, research innovation hubs, interdisciplinary research, and technology-enhanced learning systems.

4. Increase Government and Institutional Funding

The Government of Kenya and university councils should allocate adequate resources toward internationalization and innovation initiatives.

5. Strengthen Policy Frameworks

The Commission for University Education and other stakeholders should formulate policies supporting international competitiveness, research excellence, and innovation ecosystems within universities.

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