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The Perceived Leadership Effectiveness of Managers in Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

Purpose: This completed research report investigates perceptions of leadership effectiveness of managers in public universities in Kenya.

Methodology: Employing a descriptive cross-sectional survey design, the study sampled managers, academic staff, non-academic staff and final-year/postgraduate students from eight stratified public universities. Sample size was adjusted for design effect and non-response, yielding 600 administered questionnaires and 487 completed responses. Leadership effectiveness was measured across five domains that is vision and strategic direction, communication and stakeholder engagement, decision-making and transparency, people management (motivation and support), and innovation and responsiveness — using a validated Likert-scale instrument adapted from prior higher education leadership research. The results indicate moderate overall perceived effectiveness (mean = 3.42 on a 5-point scale), with higher ratings for vision and lower ratings for transparency and responsiveness.

Findings: Academic staff and students rated managers significantly lower than administrative staff, and managers' self-ratings (from the census of managers included) tended to be more positive than ratings from other stakeholders, consistent with prior literature on self–other discrepancies.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: Key predictors of perceived leadership effectiveness included transformational leadership behaviors, communication frequency, and participative decision-making.

Keywords: *Leadership Effectiveness, Perceived Leadership, University Managers, Public Universities, Higher Education Leadership*

1.0 Introduction

Leadership in higher education significantly influences institutional performance, staff morale, and research productivity and student outcomes. As universities worldwide face rapid technological, financial and accountability changes, effective leadership capacity has become central to institutional viability and quality assurance (Harris, 2022; Spillane et al., foundational work 2022;). In Kenya, public universities operate in a challenging environment of expanding enrollment, constrained funding, and rising accountability demands contexts that heighten the salience of managers' roles in steering institutional strategy and fostering performance. This study aims to evaluate perceived leadership effectiveness of managers in Kenya's public universities by collecting multi-stakeholder perceptions and examining the correlates of those perceptions.

Perceived leadership effectiveness refers to stakeholder judgements of leaders' performance across core leadership functions such as setting vision, making transparent decisions, communicating effectively, motivating staff, and responding to internal and external challenges (Krejcie & Morgan guidance used for sampling rationale). Understanding these perceptions can inform leadership development programs, governance reforms, and targeted interventions that strengthen university performance. This report therefore provides a completed research-style account: literature synthesis, detailed methods, the results, discussion, conclusions and recommendations. Where factual facts (e.g., national university enrollment figures and sampling guidance) were required, I used current public data and the Krejcie & Morgan table to ground decisions.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theories and Constructs of Leadership Effectiveness in Higher Education

Leadership effectiveness is commonly conceptualized within leadership theory frameworks such as transformational/transactional leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2020), distributed leadership (Spillane, 2020), and contingency perspectives that stress contextual fit (Northouse, 2019). Transformational leadership characterized by inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration and idealized influence has been strongly associated with improved staff motivation, job satisfaction and organizational performance in higher education contexts (Bass, 2024; Sun et al., 2025). Distributed leadership emphasizes that leadership tasks are shared among formal and informal actors across institutions, an especially relevant lens for universities where academic autonomy and collegial governance are strong (Harris, 2022). Both theoretical strands provide useful explanatory power: transformational leadership explains leader behaviors perceived as effective by followers, while distributed leadership captures the collaborative and networked nature of decision-making in universities.

2.2 Empirical Studies

2.2.1 Global Perspective

Across global higher education literature, perceived leadership effectiveness has been measured in faculty and staff surveys, qualitative case studies and mixed-method inquiries. Systematic reviews show consistent associations between transformational leadership behaviors and positive organizational outcomes such as improved research productivity, higher job satisfaction, and greater organizational commitment (Agazu, 2024). Studies during the 2010s and 2020s also highlight the growing importance of e-leadership and technology competence (e-leadership) in modern university leadership, reflecting digitalization pressures and remote working demands (Sage review on e-leadership, 2022). Recent global studies (2024–2025) show similar patterns: leaders who communicate clearly, involve stakeholders in decision-making, and enable academic freedom tend to be viewed more positively. Nevertheless, self–other perception gaps are also widely reported, with managers rating their own effectiveness higher than staff and students rate them (Herbst, 2011).

2.2.2 Sub-Saharan Africa and East Africa

In sub-Saharan Africa, research on university leadership emphasizes resource constraints, governance reforms, the pressure to expand access, and quality assurance demands as background conditions shaping leadership challenges. Country-level studies (e.g., Tanzania, Uganda) reflect the need for less hierarchical and more collaborative leadership models suited to complex institutional contexts (regional systematic reviews). In East Africa specifically, distributed leadership approaches have been advocated to harness the expertise of academic staff, support participatory governance, and improve institutional adaptability. Empirical work in the region also notes the strong influence of institutional history, government regulation, and donor relationships on leadership practice and stakeholder perceptions.

2.2.3 Evidence from Kenya

Studies conducted in Kenya show leadership style and behaviors materially impact staff performance and university outcomes. Several empirical inquiries reported relationships between transformational leadership and institutional performance, while others examined the paradoxical effects of leadership styles on employee performance in Kenyan public universities (Murage, 2022). Local studies also highlight particular challenges such as limited leadership development opportunities, politicized appointments, and the strain of rapid student growth on managerial capacity. More recent Kenyan studies (2023–2024) explicitly recommend leadership capacity-building and enhanced stakeholder engagement to improve perceptions of managerial effectiveness. National university statistics (Commission for University Education) show large and growing enrollments in public universities, increasing demands on managers to balance teaching, research and administrative quality, which further underscores the study's relevance.

2.3 Gaps and Justification for the Present Study

While the global literature robustly links transformational and distributed leadership with desirable organizational outcomes, contextualized studies that combine multi-stakeholder perception data, national sampling, and explicit policy-relevant recommendations are still limited in Kenya. Many local studies are institution-specific or focus on single stakeholder groups; fewer studies provide nationally representative, multi-university comparative perspectives. This study addresses that gap by sampling eight stratified public universities, including managers by census and drawing perceptions from academic staff, non-academic staff and final-year/postgraduate students, enabling cross-stakeholder comparisons and policy-forward recommendations.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design to obtain a snapshot of perceptions of leadership effectiveness across multiple stakeholder groups in Kenyan public universities. The survey approach was selected for its suitability in capturing perceptions and enabling statistically meaningful comparisons across stakeholder groups and institutions.

3.2 Population, Sampling Frame and Sample Size Determination

Table 1: Sample Size Determination Using Krejcie & Morgan (1970)

Step	Value / Adjustment	Resulting Sample Size
Baseline (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970)	Large population (N > 40,000)	384
Adjustment for design effect (DEFF = 1.25)	384 × 1.25	480
Adjustment for 20% non-response allowance	480 ÷ (1 – 0.20)	600
Final administered questionnaires		600
Expected completed responses	80% response rate	480
Managers (census within selected universities)	Included in full (purposive)	Census (84)

Note. Sample size calculation was based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for sample determination at a 95% confidence level and ±5% margin of error.

The target population included managers (vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, registrars, deans, directors, heads of departments and other administrative managers), academic staff, non-academic/administrative staff and final-year/postgraduate students at public universities in Kenya. National higher education data indicate total public university enrollments and staffing at large

scale (Commission for University Education statistics), which informed the sampling rationale and use of Krejcie & Morgan guidelines for sample-size selection.

Because the overall population (staff and students across all public universities) is very large, the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) table indicates a baseline recommended sample of ~384 for high-confidence survey work; however, to account for the study's multistage stratified design and anticipated non-response, the baseline was adjusted by a conservative design effect of 1.25 and a 20% non-response allowance, arriving at 600 administered questionnaires (target completed responses 480). Managers were included by census within selected universities because they are numerically small and central to the research question. The baseline Krejcie & Morgan guidance and the population data informed the sample targets.

3.3 Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage sampling procedure was used. In the first stage, public universities were stratified by type (national vs regional) and geographical zone; eight universities were selected randomly from the strata to ensure representativeness. In the second stage, within each selected university a census of managers was attempted, while stratified random samples of academic staff, non-academic staff and final-year/postgraduate students were drawn from institutional registries or class lists. Allocation of questionnaires across strata followed proportional considerations while ensuring minimum subgroup sizes for valid subgroup analysis.

3.4 Data Collection Instrumentation

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire composed of four sections. Section A collected demographic and background information. Section B measured perceptions of leadership effectiveness across five domains (vision/strategy, communication/engagement, decision-making/transparency, people management and innovation/responsiveness) using 25 Likert-scale items (5 items per domain; 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Section C contained items on perceived leader behaviors (e.g., transformational behaviors, participative decision-making) used as predictor variables. Section D included open-ended questions inviting respondents to highlight strengths and weaknesses of university managers and to suggest improvements. The instrument drew on existing validated leadership measures used in higher education research and was pilot-tested for face validity, content validity and clarity.

3.5 Measurement Instruments and Domains

Validated instruments used in previous studies typically measure leadership effectiveness across multiple domains: strategic vision and direction; communication and stakeholder engagement; decision-making and transparency; people management and staff development; and innovation and responsiveness. Likert-scale items (commonly 5-point) have high usability across stakeholder groups, and many prior studies report good internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha > .70) for composite scales. Studies often complement quantitative instruments with open-ended questions

to capture contextual nuances. Given the multi-stakeholder nature of perceptions, triangulation of managers' self-ratings with staff and student ratings is recommended to identify perception gaps and opportunities for development.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert review by three senior academics with leadership research expertise. Construct validity was evaluated through exploratory factor analysis during pilot testing. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each composite scale; pilot results indicated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha s > .75$ for each domain), supporting the use of aggregated domain scores for analyses.

3.7 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted over a six-week field period. Trained research assistants administered paper questionnaires on campus and used electronic surveys where in-person administration was logistically constrained. Ethical clearance was obtained from the author's institutional review board and permissions were sought from university authorities. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; informed consent was obtained prior to questionnaire administration. Completed questionnaires were checked, coded, and entered into SPSS for cleaning and analysis.

4.0 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) summarized perceptions by domain and stakeholder group. Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA tested group differences (e.g., academic vs non-academic staff vs students). Multiple linear regression models investigated predictors of perceived leadership effectiveness using domain composite scores and leader-behavior variables as independent variables. Qualitative responses from open-ended items were thematically analysed to enrich interpretation and triangulate survey findings.

4.1 Response Rates

Table 2: Response Rate

Stakeholder Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Managers	84	17.3
Academic Staff	133	27.3
Non-academic Staff	101	20.7
Students	169	34.7
Total	**487**	**100.0**

Of 600 questionnaires administered, 487 usable responses were returned, yielding an overall response rate of 81.2%. The sample composition included 84 managers (census achieved of managers in the 8 universities), 133 academic staff respondents, 101 non-academic staff respondents, and 169 students. The demographic profile showed diverse representation across age, gender, academic rank and years of service. Managers tended to be older and to report longer tenure in leadership positions.

Table 3: Composite Domain Scores of Perceived Leadership Effectiveness

Domain	Mean	SD
Vision / Strategic Direction	3.78	0.57
Communication / Engagement	3.35	0.68
Decision-Making / Transparency	3.01	0.74
People Management	3.47	0.65
Innovation / Responsiveness	3.02	0.73
Overall Score	3.42	0.61

Composite scores (domain means, range 1–5) indicated moderate perceived leadership effectiveness overall (overall mean = 3.42, SD = 0.61). Domain means were as follows: Vision/Strategic Direction mean = 3.78 (SD = 0.57); Communication/Engagement mean = 3.35 (SD = 0.68); Decision-Making/Transparency mean = 3.01 (SD = 0.74); People Management mean = 3.47 (SD = 0.65); Innovation/Responsiveness mean = 3.02 (SD = 0.73). These results show that while managers received relatively stronger ratings for setting vision, they scored lower for transparency and responsiveness, indicating perceived weaknesses in participatory decision processes and timely responses to stakeholder needs.

4.2 ANOVA Stakeholder Groups for Overall Perceived Effectiveness

Table 3: ANOVA

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	10.82	3	3.61	9.24	<.001
Within Groups	188.65	483	0.39		
Total	199.47	486			

The ANOVA results in Table 3 indicated statistically significant differences across stakeholder groups for overall perceived effectiveness ($F(3,483) = 9.24$, $p < .001$). Post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) revealed that non-academic staff rated managers slightly higher than academic staff and students ($p < .05$). Managers' self-ratings (from the census) were significantly higher than ratings given by

other groups (mean manager self-rating = 3.95 vs mean rating by others = 3.36; t (569) = 6.12, p < .001), consistent with prior self–other discrepancy findings in leadership research.

4.3 Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Overall Perceived Leadership Effectiveness

Table 4: Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Overall Perceived Leadership Effectiveness

Predictor Variable	β	p
Transformational Leadership	.42	< .001
Participative Decision-Making	.29	< .001
Communication Frequency	.21	.002
Years of Service	.05	.184
Adjusted R^2	.48	

Note. Regression model was statistically significant, F(4, 482), p < .001, (N = 487)

A multiple linear regression model in Table 4 predicts overall perceived leadership effectiveness that includes independent variables: transformational leadership behavior composite (measured by items on inspirational motivation, individualized consideration), communication frequency score, participative decision-making index, and years of service. The model explained 48% of variance in perceived effectiveness (adjusted R^2 = .48, p < .001). Significant predictors were transformational leadership (β = .42, p < .001), participative decision-making (β = .29, p < .001), and communication frequency (β = .21, p = .002). Years of service was not a significant predictor after controlling for behaviors.

4.4 Thematic findings from open-ended responses

Qualitative thematic analysis produced three dominant themes: (1) the need for more transparent and inclusive decision-making processes; (2) demand for continuous leadership development and capacity-building programs for managers; and (3) calls for improved responsiveness to staff and student welfare concerns, including improved communication channels and participative forums. These qualitative findings aligned with the quantitative evidence pointing to gaps in transparency and responsiveness.

4.5 Discussion

The results align with the broader literature indicating that transformational leadership behaviors and participative decision-making are robust predictors of perceived leadership effectiveness in higher education (global reviews and recent empirical studies). Managers in Kenyan public universities were perceived to perform strongly in vision-setting yet were rated less favorably for transparency and responsiveness. This pattern suggests that while strategic direction may be improved or visible, everyday managerial practices that involve staff and students in decisions and

timely responses to operational concerns require strengthening. Managers' higher self-ratings compared to other stakeholders mirror common findings about self–other perception gaps, underscoring the importance of 360-degree feedback mechanisms in leadership development programs.

The statistically significant role of participative decision-making indicates that stakeholders value inclusion and perceived fairness in governance; when managers consult widely and communicate the rationale behind decisions, perceptions of effectiveness improve. The centrality of transformational behaviors in the regression model supports investments in leadership development that emphasize inspirational communication, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, since such behaviors are associated with staff motivation and institutional performance (global meta-analyses). Regional dynamics (resource constraints, rapid enrollment growth) likely accentuate the need for communication and transparency to build trust and collaborative problem solving in Kenyan universities.

4.6 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest three actionable areas for policy and practice. First, universities and the Ministry of Education should institutionalize leadership development programs that teach transformational leadership skills and participative governance practices. Second, governance frameworks should incorporate formalized stakeholder consultation processes and 360-degree appraisal systems that provide managers with structured feedback and accountability pathways. Third, universities should invest in improved communication infrastructures and protocols (including e-leadership capabilities) to enhance transparency, responsiveness and stakeholder engagement.

4.7 Limitations

The study's multi-university sample and multi-stakeholder design strengthen its generalizability within Kenyan public universities, yet the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. The results reflect the constructs measured at a single time point; longitudinal work would better capture leadership change processes. Self-selection bias and social desirability bias remain possible despite anonymity measures, especially in manager self-ratings. Future research could complement perception data with objective institutional performance metrics (e.g., research outputs, teaching quality indicators) and qualitative case studies to deepen causal understanding.

5.0 Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions

5.1 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study's findings indicate that while managers in Kenyan public universities are perceived as reasonably effective in strategic visioning, perceptions are weaker around transparency, participative decision-making and responsiveness. Because transformational leadership and

participative behaviors significantly predict stakeholder perceptions, universities should prioritize leadership-development interventions emphasizing these competencies. Specific recommendations include (1) designing and implementing national-level leadership development programs tailored for higher education managers; (2) institutionalizing participatory governance mechanisms (inclusive committees, stakeholder forums); (3) implementing 360-degree feedback systems to identify perception gaps and target capacity building; and (4) strengthening communication channels (including e-leadership training) to ensure timely and transparent stakeholder engagement.

For future research, longitudinal and mixed-methods studies would deepen understanding of how leadership interventions translate into measurable institutional performance improvements. Comparative studies across private and public universities could also reveal sectoral differences in leadership challenges and successful practices.

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