

## Leadership Practices and Competitiveness of Private Universities in Nairobi City County, Kenya

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DOI - <http://doi.org/10.37502/IJSMR.2024.71103>

### Abstract

The study examined the influence of leadership practices on the competitiveness of private universities in Nairobi City County, Kenya. The research was driven by increasing competition in the higher education sector, which requires effective leadership strategies to improve institutional competitiveness. Using a descriptive research design, data were collected from key administrative leaders at 19 private universities, including deans and associate vice chancellors. The results of the analysis show a strong positive relationship between leadership practices and university competitiveness with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.704. Leadership practices characterized by strict supervision, clear leadership and structured reward systems have been found to have a significant impact on the competitiveness of institutions. The regression analysis also shows that 56.1% of the differences in competitiveness can be explained by leadership practices, highlighting the critical role of effective leadership. The study recommends that private universities invest in leadership development programs to foster a participatory and innovative management environment, essential to maintaining competitiveness in the evolving education landscape

**Keywords:** Leadership practices, university competitiveness, private universities, Nairobi, higher education, regression analysis.

### 1. Introduction

The developments and innovations witnessed in the education sector have facilitated changes in the teaching systems (Santos, 2024). However, universities in Kenya are experiencing a myriad of challenges such as lack of sufficient equipment for teaching, trained manpower, lack of uniformity in course contents, proliferation of courses and numbers, lack of accreditation, shortage of budgetary provision among others. Kavingi and Odollo (2022) opine that due to the high competition for universities and the increased knowledge from target customers, demand for better university education is becoming necessary. The intensity of competition has led some universities to have relatively low student enrolment as Messah (2017) notes. As a result of this, the need for universities to build competitive advantage is not in doubt calling for strategies that can make the universities to thrive and prosper (Odhiambo, 2017).

A study by Hoxby (2019) measured university selectivity by students using data from various college guides from 2000 to 2017, in Canada. The study found that the top 10 percent of private colleges in Canada had become substantially more selective. To reiterate, this phenomenon is defined, according to the methodology, by the diverging dynamics of the average aptitude of students between more and less-selective colleges. The study also found that the diverging

selectivity across colleges was equally accompanied by the growing inequality in educational resources provided at colleges, with students at more selective institutions enjoying disproportionate growth in quality of education, judging by this metric.

The sharpest increase in higher education enrollment worldwide was reported in sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of students registered was 7.5% more than the previous year (Kamau, 2018). South Africa provides a different set-up of challenges affecting the masses from changes in language policies, an increased emphasis on technology, changes in government funding transformation policies, changing student profiles mergers, globalization to increased competition (Whyte, 2017). Moreover, according to UNESCO (2020) report, the enrolment rate in university education in sub-Saharan Africa is very slow. In 2020, the gross tertiary education enrollment ratio was 9.4%, which is well below the global average of 38%. The demand and supply of the same education is of great significance in provision of the required highly skilled manpower. However, the gross enrolment ratio for university education varies across different African countries for example, Niger is 4.4%, Ghana is 15% and Mauritius 40% is highest of the top countries.

According to Oketch (2019) the number of private universities in Kenya have notably increased in the recent past owing to the growing demand for higher education and a subsequent strain on public universities to handle this demand. According to Aidi (2020), currently, there are 74 universities, out of which 31 are public chartered universities, six (6) public constituent colleges, 18 private chartered institutions, five (5) private constituent colleges, and 14 institutions with letters of interim authority (LIA). The environment is therefore becoming more competitive than it was a decade ago. The survival of universities will thus entirely depend on how well they strategically position themselves in the market.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The growing competition in the global market of educational services poses a challenge for higher education institutions looking for the ways to increase their competitiveness (Kireeva, Slepenskova, Shipunova, & Iskandaryan, 2018). They further point that higher education institutions throughout the world are undergoing considerable functional and structural changes as they adapt to meet the needs of a global and knowledge-based economy. There is an urgent call for them to be equipped with a well-defined and implanted globalization strategy to tap and provide useful and simple planning tools to utilize global resources effectively. As higher education globally is being adjusted to meet stakeholders' expectations, the local institutions of higher learning need result-based management practices in order to compete effectively and this aspect cannot be underscored (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2018)

Ntombura, Baimwera, and Munga, 2020 established that dynamic and competitive environment the biggest challenges of private universities, how to increase the student's population, remain financially viable, create sustainable revenue streams, staff retention, and to provide quality service which includes the development of relevant programs, teaching, and efficiency in service delivery. Is on this background that this research sought to establish how leadership practices can offer a competitive advantage to private universities.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The research objective was to examine the influence of leadership practices on the competitiveness of private universities in Nairobi City County, Kenya.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Public value theory was first introduced by Mark Moore in 1995, suggesting that the aim of managerial work in the public sector is to create public value (Naidoo & Holtzhausen, 2020). At its core, public value theory is concerned with meeting the needs of citizens while ensuring that public goods and services offered by the government are valuable both to individuals and the community. Meynhardt (2017) emphasizes that public managers have the crucial responsibility of generating public value, which is achieved not only through outcomes but also through processes that foster fairness and trust.

Public value management, as Strathoff (2017) explains, draws on private sector management models, with a focus on efficiency, individualism, and resourcefulness, while also emphasizing objectivity, democracy, equality, and justice (Bryson, Crosby & Bloomberg, 2015). Public value is thus seen as a complex structure that emerges from communal engagement. Herder (2017) identifies effectiveness, quality, and legitimacy as core components of public value, arguing that collaboration and stakeholder engagement are key to its realization in institutional settings.

Recent leadership theories have evolved to address the unique demands of higher education institutions. In particular, distributed leadership has emerged as an influential model in this sector. According to Bolden, Petrov, and Gosling (2009), distributed leadership in universities involves the delegation of leadership roles across a wide range of stakeholders, fostering collective ownership of institutional vision and goals. This model contrasts with traditional hierarchical leadership, promoting inclusivity and shared decision-making.

Similarly, Bush (2019) emphasizes the role of transformational leadership in higher education, where leaders are seen as change agents who inspire and motivate their teams to engage in continuous improvement and innovation. Bush notes that transformational leaders in universities can promote a culture of excellence by encouraging professional development and adapting to changing educational needs.

Recent studies have also addressed the role of leadership in promoting institutional competitiveness. A study by Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe (2021) highlights the link between leadership practices and the global competitiveness of African universities, emphasizing the importance of leadership styles that foster adaptability, innovation, and inclusivity in an increasingly competitive global education landscape. This study is particularly relevant for private universities in Kenya, where competition for student enrollment is rising, and leadership must adapt to rapidly evolving market conditions in this current demands.

### **Empirical Review**

In addition to public value theory, leadership practices in private universities are increasingly influenced by evidence-based approaches. Hanoum and Nabawi's (2020) study on leadership in the oil and gas industry highlights the positive impact of both transformational and transactional leadership on organizational performance, a finding that resonates with leadership practices in higher education. Their use of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess the relationship between leadership variables and performance can serve as a methodological model for similar studies in academic settings.

Further, the work of Segers, Chadwick, and Shyamsunder (2018) on leadership development practices (LDPs) in India underscores the importance of investing in leadership development for improving organizational outcomes. Their findings, which link leadership development to both human and social capital, suggest that leadership programs in universities must not only focus on skills development but also on fostering relationships and networks that can enhance institutional performance. This is especially relevant for private universities in Kenya, where leadership programs could play a critical role in enhancing competitiveness by equipping leaders with both technical and interpersonal competencies. The study results showed a statistical and positive influence of leadership practices on organizational performance with these leadership tools -Distributed Leadership (Bolden et al., 2009): This model supports decentralized decision-making and collective leadership roles, which can enhance engagement and innovation in academic institutions.

Transformational Leadership (Bush, 2019): Focusing on motivating and inspiring staff, transformational leadership is particularly effective in fostering a culture of continuous improvement and responding to challenges in higher education.

Global Competitiveness (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021): Leadership practices that emphasize adaptability, inclusivity, and innovation are vital for African universities competing in the global education market.

Leadership Development Programs (LDPs) (Segers et al., 2018): Effective leadership programs must build both human capital (leadership skills) and social capital (professional networks), which can lead to improved organizational outcomes.

The study hence highlights the economic impact of investing in leadership development and the mechanisms underlying the relationship between LDPs and organizational performance in a learning institution.

### **3. Methodology**

The study utilized a descriptive research design focusing on the 19 private universities located in Nairobi City County, Kenya. The targeted respondents included two deans from various schools within each university, along with key administrative figures such as the Deputy Vice Chancellor in charge of Academics (DVC – AA), the Deputy Vice Chancellor in charge of Administration, Planning and Finance (DVC – FPA), and the Head of ICT at each institution. This approach resulted in a total sample size of 95 respondents (calculated as 19 universities multiplied by 5 targeted roles), which was deemed sufficiently representative according to recommendations by Vasileiou et al. (2018).

The study adopted a Likert structured questionnaire as the main tool to collect primary data. The research instruments and data was tested reliability and validity

Descriptively, the quantitative data collected was analysed to determine general tendencies to make deductions, interpretations, conclusions and possible recommendations. Means and standard deviations were generated and presented using tables and charts. For inferential statistics, correlation and regression analyses was used to show both strength and direction of study variable relationships. Regression analysis was carried out to determine the causal relationship between independent and the dependent variables. The study adopted a regression model in the form

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + e$$

Where;

Y= Competitiveness of Private Universities

$\beta$  = Regression constant

$\beta_1$  = Change in Y with respect to a unit change in X1

e = Error term

#### 4. Data Analysis Findings and Interpretation

The survey involved 95 participants from 19 institutions, with 90 respondents completing and submitting the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 94.7%. The gathered data was examined by descriptive statistics, encompassing relative frequencies for multiple-choice questions and mean scores obtained from Likert scale evaluations to measure perceptions and experiences of management techniques.

##### Descriptive Statistics

This part sought to assess the impact of leadership techniques on the competitiveness of private universities in Nairobi City County. Participants were requested to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with multiple statements concerning leadership practices and their influence on university competitiveness, utilizing a Likert scale where 1 denoted "Strongly Disagree," 2 indicated "Disagree," 3 signified "Neutral," 4 represented "Agree," and 5 represented "Strongly Agree." Mean scores ranging from 1.0 to 2.0 denoted disagreement ( $1.0 \leq D \leq 2.0$ ), and scores from 2.1 to 3.0 represented neutral replies ( $2.1 \leq N \leq 3.0$ ). Scores ranging from 3.1 to 5.0 signified agreement ( $3.1 \leq A \leq 5.0$ ). A standard deviation below 1.0 signifies a robust consensus among respondents regarding the impact of leadership strategies on the competitiveness of private universities.

**Table 1.1. Leadership practices on the competitiveness of private universities**

	Mean	Std Dev
Employees are supervised closely in order to do their work.	4.27	0.747
Employees are always part of the decision-making process.	3.86	0.678
Leaders offer guidance without pressure	4.19	0.680
As a rule, employees must be given rewards or punishments in order to achieve organizational objectives	4.13	0.600
Most employees feel insecure about their work and need direction	4.19	0.621
Supervisors are assigned to coach new employees	4.07	0.729
Leaders give orders and clarify procedures	4.28	0.630

The findings indicated that respondents generally agreed that employees are closely supervised in order to perform their work effectively, as reflected by a high mean score of 4.27 (SD = 0.747). Similarly, respondents agreed that leaders provide guidance without applying excessive pressure, evidenced by a mean of 4.19 (SD = 0.680). The idea that employees need direction and feel insecure about their work also saw a strong consensus, with a mean of 4.19 (SD = 0.621). Moreover, the view that rewards or punishments are necessary to achieve organizational

objectives scored 4.13 (SD = 0.600), indicating general agreement. The notion that leaders give clear orders and clarify procedures received the highest mean of 4.28 (SD = 0.630), emphasizing its importance in leadership practices. Additionally, the statement that supervisors are assigned to coach new employees garnered a mean of 4.07 (SD = 0.729), also reflecting agreement. Lastly, although employees were somewhat involved in the decision-making process, the mean score was slightly lower at 3.86 (SD = 0.678), indicating a moderate level of agreement. These results suggest that leadership practices in private universities tend to be directive, with an emphasis on supervision, guidance, and structured rewards systems, which align with previous studies emphasizing the need for strong leadership to enhance organizational competitiveness.

### Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was performed to test the association between the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Correlations		Y	X1
Y	Pearson Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	90	
X1	Pearson Correlation	.704**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	90	90

Key: Y = Competitiveness of Private Universities; X1 = Leadership Practices

The Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) assesses the strength and direction of the linear relationships, with values ranging from -1 to +1. A coefficient of 0.704 for the correlation between Y and X1 suggests a strong positive relationship, indicating that improved leadership practices are associated with increased competitiveness of private universities.

### Linear Regression

The study shown below sought to establish the correlation between Leadership practices on the competitiveness of private universities in Nairobi Kenya and the total variation of competitiveness of private Universities in Nairobi, Kenya that could be explained by the Leadership practices

**Table 1.2 Simple Regression for Credit Scoring**

<b>Model Summary<sup>b</sup></b>					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.604 <sup>a</sup>	.561	.591	.201	1.067
<b>a. Predictors: (Constant), Competitiveness of private Universities</b>					
<b>b. Dependent Variable: Leadership practices</b>					

From the findings presented in the model summary, the R-squared value is 0.561, indicating that 56.1% of the variance in the dependent variable (Leadership Practices) is explained by the competitiveness of private universities. The adjusted R-squared is 0.591, suggesting that the model's explanatory power remains consistent when considering the number of predictors included. This indicates a relatively strong fit for the model in understanding the relationship between leadership practices and competitiveness in private universities

#### **Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)**

<b>ANOVA<sup>a</sup></b>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.671	1	3.671	136.98	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	2.354	88	.0268		
	Total	10.820	89			
<b>a. Predictors: (Constant), Leadership Practices</b>						
<b>b. Dependent Variable: Competitiveness of Private universities</b>						

From the ANOVA findings, the p-value obtained was 0.00 which is less than 0.05, an indication that the model was significant. The findings also show that the F- calculated value 136.98 is greater than the F-critical value (F<sub>1,89</sub>=3.844). Since the F- calculated value is greater than the F-critical value it demonstrates that the model is reliable

#### **Regression Coefficients**

To understand the influence of leadership on the competitiveness of private universities in Kenya.

**Table 4: 15 Regression Coefficients**

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.126	.021		1.672	.069
	Leadership Practices	.654	.060	.604	9.659	.000

**a. Dependent Variable: Competitiveness of Private universities**

Source: (Research Survey, 2024)

From the coefficients table, the following model was fitted;  $Y = 0.654 + 0.126$

Where  $X_1 = \text{Leadership Practices}$

From the equation above, when Leadership Practices is held to a constant zero, Competitiveness of Private universities will be at a constant value of 0.654. The findings also show that a unit increase in leadership practices will lead to a 0.126 unit increase in the competitiveness of private universities in Nairobi Kenya. The findings also show that the t-statistic 9.659 has a p-value = 0.000 which is less than the selected level of significance 0.05. Hence leadership practices have a great influence on the competitiveness of private universities in Nairobi City County, Kenya.

In summary, these analyses together show that strong leadership practices directly and positively affect the competitiveness of private universities, and the results are both statistically significant and reliable

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings indicate a strong positive relationship between leadership practices and the competitiveness of private universities. A notable pattern is the high mean score associated with leadership practices, reflecting a general consensus among respondents that effective leadership significantly enhances competitiveness. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that leadership practices that prioritize guidance and support are particularly influential, suggesting that leaders who foster an inclusive and participative environment may be better positioned to drive their institutions' competitiveness

The study recommends that private universities should invest in leadership development programs to enhance the capabilities of their management teams. This investment will empower leaders to foster a collaborative and innovative environment, which is critical for enhancing competitiveness.

Future studies could explore how leadership shapes institutional culture and drives innovation or conservatism. Researchers can also investigate how leadership practices vary across different cultural contexts within Africa and how these differences impact the competitiveness of universities. This research could explore whether cultural nuances affect the success of certain leadership strategies.



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