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Leadership in Higher Education: Transformative Roles for the Next Decade

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Abstract

Leadership in higher education is entering a decisive phase of transformation in India. The next decade will demand visionary, technology-savvy, and empathetic leaders who can navigate institutions through challenges of globalization, digitalization, and outcome-based education reforms initiated by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The conventional administrative leadership model is gradually being replaced by collaborative, transformational, and innovation-oriented leadership. This paper explores the evolving nature of leadership in Indian higher education, emphasizing the necessity of adaptive leadership styles for institutional performance, sustainability, and competitiveness.

Keywords: Higher Education Leadership, Transformational Change, Institutional Sustainability, Educational Innovation

Introduction

The Indian higher education system is among the largest in the world, with more than 1,400 universities and 45,000 colleges serving over 38 million students. As the NEP 2020 envisions an inclusive, multidisciplinary, and technology-driven academic environment, leadership has become a decisive factor shaping institutional destiny.

Traditional leadership models—hierarchical, bureaucratic, and process-oriented—are proving inadequate in an era defined by rapid digital transformation, global competition, and continuous policy reforms. The 21st-century educational leader must evolve from an administrator to a visionary change agent, capable of fostering innovation, inclusivity, and collaboration.

The success and sustenance of Indian colleges and universities in the coming decade will depend on how effectively leaders—both institutional heads and faculty leaders—adapt to these transformative demands.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine why change in leadership approach or style has become necessary in Indian higher education institutions in the context of rapid technological and policy-driven transformation.
2. To analyze how leadership transformation is related to institutional performance, sustainability, and acquisition of a competitive edge in the coming decade.

Review of Literature

Evolution of Leadership in Higher Education

Educational leadership, historically, revolved around administrative control and regulatory compliance. However, modern scholarship, such as that of Fullan (2001)^[2], argues that leadership must be transformational—empowering others, fostering collective vision, and leading through shared decision-making. In India, recent accreditation reforms by NAAC and autonomy initiatives by UGC have encouraged a more participative form of leadership where academic leaders act as mentors and innovators rather than mere administrators.

Leadership, Performance, and Technological Adaptability

According to Bass and Riggio (2006)^[1], transformational leadership enhances organizational performance by motivating individuals to transcend personal interests for institutional goals.

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In Indian higher education, technological adoption—learning management systems, AI-enabled teaching tools, and digital governance—has accelerated post-COVID. Leaders who champion these technologies, invest in capacity building, and support continuous faculty upskilling contribute significantly to institutional excellence. Studies by Rao and Menon (2021) ^[3] reveal that digitally agile institutions report better student engagement and research productivity.

The Indian Context: Sustaining through Change

Higher education leaders in India face multifaceted challenges: demographic diversity, funding constraints, and global benchmarking pressures. Research by Choudhury (2022) ^[4] emphasizes that sustainability in such contexts requires adaptive, ethical, and emotionally intelligent leadership. Several progressive universities—such as IITs, private deemed universities, and autonomous colleges—are already integrating decentralized leadership, innovation cells, and cross-functional teams to remain competitive in the knowledge economy.

Observations

1. Leadership transformation is a prerequisite for institutional survival and growth in a technologically competitive academic environment.
2. Both college managements and faculty leaders must embrace innovation-driven and learner-centric approaches to stay relevant.
3. Institutions adopting collaborative and transformational leadership models demonstrate higher resilience, creativity, and accreditation outcomes.
4. Colleges across India are already transitioning from administrative hierarchies to shared governance structures, fostering decision-making based on data, digital insight, and team collaboration.
5. Leadership development programs, faculty empowerment, and digital literacy initiatives are becoming standard strategies to strengthen institutional adaptability.

Conclusion

The next decade of Indian higher education will be shaped not merely by infrastructure or policy, but by transformative leadership. The ability of leaders to integrate technology, empathy, ethics, and innovation will define institutional sustainability. Transformational leadership—anchored in collaboration, continuous learning, and shared vision—will ensure that Indian institutions not only survive but thrive in an era of global academic competition.

Leadership, therefore, is not a position but a dynamic process of inspiring change. The challenge lies in nurturing future-ready leaders at every level—management, faculty, and student governance—who can harmonize technological competence with human sensitivity.

Suggestions

1. **Leadership Development Programs:** Establish structured programs for principals, deans, and faculty coordinators focused on transformational and digital leadership skills.
2. **Collaborative Governance:** Encourage participative decision-making involving faculty, students, and stakeholders to ensure inclusivity and accountability.

3. **Technological Empowerment:** Integrate digital tools for strategic planning, resource management, and outcome assessment.
4. **Mentorship and Emotional Intelligence:** Promote mentorship models where senior faculty guide younger academics in adapting to innovation and managing change.
5. **Continuous Professional Development:** Introduce mandatory training in academic leadership, ethics, and educational technology.
6. **Policy Alignment:** Synchronize leadership practices with NEP 2020 goals—flexibility, autonomy, and multidisciplinary excellence.
7. **Global Benchmarking:** Learn from international leadership practices to position Indian institutions as global education hubs.

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