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Multi-Level Leadership and Collective Well-Being During Crisis in Higher Education

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Abstract

Multi-level leadership play a vital role in handling crises and is also crucial for the smooth recovery from crisis. This is equally significant for establishing collective well-being. So far, literature has not demonstrated how a university could approach and establish multi-level leadership in a disruptive environment; thus, authors attempted to understand the multi-level leadership attributes during a crisis. In the premise of social exchange and social learning theories, this study aims to explore multi-level leadership attributes during crisis in the context of higher education and its influence on collective well-being. This has been approached qualitatively by interviewing higher education faculty, executives, and support staff in Egypt, Estonia, India, and United Kingdom. The interview questions revolve around crisis leadership and well-being aspects that cover the interviewee themselves, their team and departments. The study concludes that higher education has shown good adaptability with considerable reactionary leadership approaches at governance-strategic, tactical and operational levels during the crisis. To build collective well-being in higher education, top-down and bottom-up approaches to leadership should work in shared or distributed leadership approaches to establish system continuity with a healthy index of collective well-being. The present study contributes firstly, by exploring multi-level leadership attributes and its influence on the collective well-being of faculty, executives, and support staff. Secondly, the study has derived a framework from the findings that shows the multi-level leadership attributes that act as enablers and a list of a matrix which could ensure collective well-being during the crisis in the context of higher education.

Keywords

Collective Well-Being, Crisis, Higher Education, Multi-Level Leadership, Qualitative Method

JEL Classification

G34, H12, I23, I31

Introduction

Governing universities is a multi-level as well as a highly paradoxical endeavour, because they are highly complex knowledge-based organisations, and their governing strategies, structures, and controls needs to be responsive to the multiplicity of demands coming from both inside and outside the organization (Frost et al., 2016). Multi-level leadership at governance-strategic-, tactical- and operational levels, refers to coordinated leadership efforts across different organisational levels that align priorities and behaviours to achieve shared goals. This equation accelerates in the crisis time, as it produces dynamic changes within the organisation, which creates the demand for multi-level leadership for any organisation (Dolan et al., 2020). In addition, the importance of change leadership increases as well (Račaitė-Samušienė et al., 2021), which perpetuate the current need of higher education. Nevertheless, ‘social capital’ and ‘social identity’ act as important bridges between individual agency and organisational structure and are widely distributed, hence higher education leadership may be best regarded as ‘hybrid’ (Bolden et al., 2008; Albers et al., 2023). This teases apart the multilayered nature of higher education

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leadership at individual, group, and organisational levels. Literature has shown the awareness to explore the multi-level phenomenon in higher education context such as e-learning (Nacheva & Jansone, 2021), education and policy (Chou et al., 2017). However, multi-level leadership exploration in higher education context signifies the void in the higher education leadership literature. On the one hand, where higher education plays an active role in the community, their role as regional agencies is critical in crisis on the other (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Apparently, creating an urgency for all the actors in the higher education to demonstrate leadership at times of crisis, as they owe considerable responsibilities towards stakeholders (Hanna et al., 2023). In addition, personal values and cultural norms appear to dominate legal rules in shaping directors' shareholderism - quasi-ideological stance towards shareholders and stakeholders (Licht & Adams, 2021; Adams & Licht, 2025). Hence, an understanding how these influences in the multi-level during the disruptive period would permits the holistic view towards higher education leadership. Therefore, scholars have discussed leadership in changing times by fostering the shift of portraying 'leadership as a position' to 'leadership as a purpose-driven process' (Clegg et al., 2021; Crevani et al., 2021), it presents a more responsibility-oriented perspective (Kempster & Jackson, 2021), authors position leadership here as the purpose-driven process, which is yet to be further explored in the several levels during a crisis period. In addition, in line with Yammarino and Dansereau (2008), authors also claim that leadership occurs at multiple levels within systems. Previous studies have explored leadership and its outcomes from a 'hybrid', multi-level perspective (Burke et al., 2007; Bolden et al., 2008), however, so far, literature has not demonstrated how a university could approach and establish multi-level leadership in a disruptive environment; thus, authors attempted to understand the multi-level leadership attributes during a crisis.

Furthermore, the mental health and well-being of students (Kirchner et al., 2020) and staff (Kolomitro et al., 2020) was a topical issue even before the advent of the pandemic as there are strong interdependencies in the systems (Jongbloed et al., 2008). Still, now that we are in the aftermath of the pandemic, there is considerable discussion on improving stakeholders' well-being in the higher education context (Nurunnabi et al., 2020). Manifestations of collective well-being are considered to be fair and equitable allocation of bargaining powers, resources, and obligations in society; inequality; universal access to high quality educational, health, and recreational facilities; affordable housing; employment opportunities; access to nutritious foods at reasonable prices; safety; public transportation; a clean environment; and peace (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007). In addition, the literature in higher education has explored well-being in segregation, where the researcher has discussed mental well-being (Capone et al., 2020) and subjective well-being (Datu & King, 2018; King et al., 2020). However, the concept of collective well-being has yet to be explored regarding its relativity and ripple effect on the individual, team, leader, and organisational roles (Inceoglu et al., 2018). This study, therefore, attempts to explore multi-level leadership attributes that could enable collective well-being. Hence, the current study aims to explore the multi-level leadership in disruptive environment in the context of higher education. It has also explored the link between multi-level leadership approaches on establishing collective well-being.

The contribution of the study is threefold. Firstly, by exploring multi-level leadership attributes and its influence on the collective well-being of faculty, executives, and support staff, it has collective well-being in the higher education. Hence contributing to the discourse of well-being in the higher education context. Secondly, the study has derived a framework from the findings that shows the multi-level leadership attributes that act as enablers. It has highlighted the strategic, tactical and operation attributes that acts as an enabler. Hence, collating a practical perspective for higher education practitioners. Thirdly, it has contributed the list of a possible matrix which could ensure collective well-being during the crisis in the context of higher education. The list has been proposed based on the sustainable and well-being orientation. It informs the managers and higher education administrator as a reference point while establishing the status quo on institutional well-being.

The paper proceeds as follows. Further section reviews social exchange and social learning theories, multi-level leadership in higher education during crisis, and collective well-being and higher education. Section 3 outlines the research methodology used. Section 4 delivers the technical findings presenting the themes that have emerged during the analysis. Section 5 considers the results of research. Followed by the implications and conclusion in section 6. Some limitations and future research directions are introduced.

State of Research

Social Exchange and Social Learning

Homans (1958) social exchange theory has been quite utilised while studying the workplace behaviours (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002; Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Meira & Hancer, 2021; Pham, et al., 2024). Its seven decades of development in social exchange theory, where some scholars claiming its worth in investigating the work relationship (Cropanzano et al., 2018) while other has given the claims of ambiguity in the concept (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018) have been quite interesting. Although, Homans (1958) suffices the theory premises with exploring human behaviour at work and connotes that two person interacts with each other with certain act in a silent hope of future return. Whereas Blau (1968) further defined this hope as social exchange and claimed that the human relation at work explores economic and social exchange; economic as cost and social as represent

tangible or intangible rewards. This happens through interpersonal interactions in social settings, interactions that are interdependent and often produce a sense of obligation and reciprocation (Emerson, 1976).

As the social exchange theory propagates the social ties at work which further establishes the social working relationship where two parties make the relationship in the expectation of positive net value where intangible rewards are often being perceived more valuable than invested cost (Cortez & Johnston, 2020). During the crisis period where people seek high interdependencies and often quickly adopt and learn by observation, therefore the implication of social exchange and social learning theory would support the exploration of the multi-level research, especially in the context of higher education. In addition, the Rotter and Bandura social learning theory gives premises of adaptability and at times of adversity adaptability plays an important role and is claimed as strategic capability (Bandura, 2005; Gîrneaţă, 2014). Since the social learning theory that promotes learning to one another through observations, imitations, and modelling. The present research is looking forward the in-depth link on multi-level leadership traits that enable collective well-being. And, as leadership and learning both are viewed as process phenomena (Fischer et al., 2017) the premise of social learning theory will support the research in exploring the behaviour at various levels during the crisis like pandemic. The context of higher education again flows with mutual learning and knowledge sharing experience as we are exploring the multi-level behavioural research. The conceptual background of social exchange and social learning theory will apprise our research.

Multi-level Leadership in Higher Education During Crisis

Leadership acts as a relational aspect between follower, leader, and context (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Tseng & Levy, 2019), with the complex interplay of intangible and tangible aspects of systems. It is a goal-oriented social influencing process within a system where the leaders' core produces the direct and indirect influences on each level of the organisation in various event cycles (Eberly & Fong, 2013) that often produce various "alternative channels of influence" (Fischer et al., 2017). Therefore, authors' positioning here addresses leadership as a process, not a position. In the past, the literature has shown multi-level research on leadership (Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008; McCarley et al., 2016; Vermeulen et al., 2022; Pham et al., 2024) where they have emphasised their influence at the unit, dyads, group and organisational level.

When reviewing leadership processes in higher education and exploring the literature that has addressed how leadership impacts different levels during periods of dynamic change and crisis, it becomes clear that the higher education literature has focused on shared leadership (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Wu et al., 2020) and distributed leadership (van Ameijde et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2012). Shared leadership involves involving various individuals within an organization in leadership decision-making, rather than limiting leadership to a single individual. Distributed leadership, on the other hand, is based on distributing leadership responsibilities among various levels within the organization. This means that a single leader is not responsible for all decisions, but rather, individuals share in bearing leadership responsibilities. Although these two leadership styles differ, they both reflect the principle of collaboration among various actors within the organization. This means that they indirectly represent a multi-level leadership approach, where individuals at various levels of the organization share in bearing leadership responsibilities during times of crisis and dynamic change.

The crisis is inevitable; however, higher education across the globe have observed a homogeneous environment with consistent challenges of sustainability of the programmes and research outputs, consistent chase to get higher ranking and renowned accreditation (Blackmore, 2024), which reflect the consistent adoptions and changes, and this eventually affects the stakeholders (Stensaker et al., 2018; Esangbedo & Xue, 2025). Consistent demand for change is not aligning with the existing leadership approaches as they are rather more traditional or in some places being observed in the corporate approaches without reflecting on fit (van Ameijde et al., 2009), as the social, cultural and political environment will affect the process and functionality (Spring, 2018). Hence, it is important to look at how leadership occurs at these levels (Figure 1) and how they respond in a crisis.

Organizational governance and strategic leadership are concerned with the purpose and aim of an organization; tactical leadership explains how to achieve organizational goals through establishing procedures; operational leadership ensure what is needed to be done to achieve organizational objectives. For example, during the disruptive period, leadership at an operational level must reflect attributes such as clear, frank, and prompt information-sharing and giving a positive response, supporting high inter-team dependence and collaboration, quick and transparent decision-making, fair prioritisation and trust, which eventually supports the capacity first to resolve and then evolve in the crisis (Kim, 2021). Further, at the tactical level, authors found that shared leadership largely promotes team leadership, which supports the team behaviour during a crisis. For example, shared mental models (Mathieu et al., 2000), shared purpose (Laloux, 2016), shared support and voice, team heterogeneity, maturity and size, intergroup trust, and task interdependence (Wu et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the literature also discusses team effectiveness with implicit and explicit coordination (Rico et al., 2019), group potency and interpersonal trust (Pavez et al., 2021), learning and collaborative thinking (Gardner & Matviak, 2020), team sensemaking and task interdependence (Talat & Riaz, 2020), creative adaptability, collective decision-making abilities, and resources (Vera et al., 2017). It is observed that leadership style has direct contribution to collaboration.

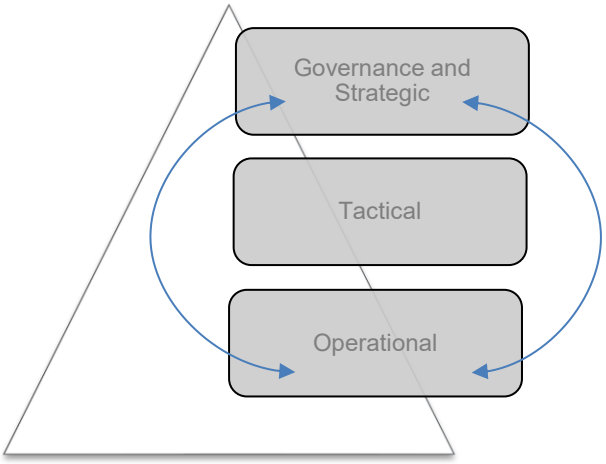

Fig. 1. Organizational governance and multi-level leadership.
Source: own work

Furthermore, at organizational governance and strategic levels, it is indeed important to establish the communication channel across all levels and put in place a crisis communication principles, flexibility and agility across operations, strategic planning, preparedness, and community-building exercises to address the crisis, together with digital adaptability and resource facilitation, an emergency response system and resilience leadership (Dohaney et al., 2020). In addition, a focus on building organisational ambidexterity, which helps an organisation to maintain longer adaptability and sustain viability, is an essential feature of organisational adaptability and crisis response mechanisms (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Further, leadership literature in the higher education context also has evidence of fair discussion on challenges at every level, such as the tactical level (Maddock, 2023) and governance level (Jones et al., 2012) in higher education; however, how the leadership emerges in crisis or disruptive environment has not been effectively explored in the past, hence understanding the possible favourable attributes that help in the establishment of multi-level leadership behaviour during disruptive environment is critical.

Collective Well-Being and Higher Education

While exploring the collective well-being literature, authors found that well-being is a topical issue in the higher education context (Putwain, 2019) and is coined as a holistic, multidimensional, collective, and subjective phenomenon (Durmush et al., 2021). The concept of 'well-being' focuses on individual psychological satisfaction for more meaningful life achievements with the five dimensions of well-being such as: physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and financial well-being (Tuzovic et al., 2021). However, the concept of collective well-being represents the link of individual well-being to community well-being (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007). While studying the literature on the well-being in organisations, authors focused on the literature that has discussed the faculty, executives, and support staff level, academic departments as a team, and higher education at an organisational governance level. Authors found that creating engaging learning experiences (Boulton et al., 2019), student and faculty partnerships with research-focused teaching and vocational training (Davis & Parmenter, 2020), promoting mindfulness, self-compassion and resilience, building interventions in teaching and learning processes are five beneficial ways that ensures well-being. Further indicators include connections through linking the learning process, content, and learning community, actively incorporating physical exercise, taking notice with a personal reflection on the curriculum, content and community interface, and giving learning to the community (Aked et al., 2008). However, while looking at materialistic indicators of well-being, authors found that the academic infrastructure mainly consists of six elements: comfort, health and safety, access and quality of amenities, space provision and adequacy, participation and inclusiveness interaction, which are reportedly linked with student well-being (Muhammad et al., 2014). However, to see the psychological indicators, authors found that maintaining faculty' emotions (Woods, 2010), giving them autonomy to create innovation in pedagogies so that they enhance their competency and developing more relatedness to students and society (Averill & Major, 2020), and more life-giving quality to work (Cherkowski et al., 2020) are all important. At the operational level, though, authors found that in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, the collective agency has also been reported as significant for faculty' well-being as this provided the opportunity to adopt new technology and collectively offered a good learning experience to students (Fu & Clarke, 2021). This reflects that collective participation enhances harmony, further contributing to the team's health.

In addition, higher education well-being reflects the two-dimensional well-being indicators in literature, i.e., internal, and external. Internal indicators represent the well-being mainly of the operational, tactical and strategic levels (Lawrence & Herrick, 2020) and social interactions (Putwain, 2019). And external indicators represent the link between higher education to its local, national, and global development (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021) and

creating collaborative opportunities that lead to sustainable transitions (Hoinle et al., 2021). In addition, how higher education holds integrity and accountability towards its ecosystems during the crisis plays a crucial role in sustaining it (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020) and eventually establishing higher education well-being. Whilst the literature discusses the several indicators, this could not reflect the segregations of the well-being which could ensure collective well-being. Henceforth, exploring collective well-being in the higher education context is crucial. In line with Roy et al. (2018), collective well-being is observed in five domains: vitality, opportunity, connectedness, contribution, and inspiration. Authors attempted to understand the leadership indicators that could help establish the collective well-being of higher education' stakeholders during a crisis.

Methodology

The present study uses qualitative method to understand the multi-level perspectives on leadership attributes during and after the pandemic. This is because qualitative method has been widely accepted in leadership research over three decades and there is the tendency for many researchers not to build sufficiently on the studies of leadership conducted by others (Bryman, 2004). The multi-level perspective informs this research by allowing a meaningful understanding of the systems and transitions observed during the crisis (Burton-Jones & Gallivan, 2007), enabling a perfect fit to research strategy. The perspectives were obtained through every level in the higher education, mainly universities. Participants' profiles include faculty, executives, and support staff. The three criteria were observed while selecting the participants. First, there should be participation from each level, and second, they all should have at least three years of association with the higher education organisation. Further, it has also been ensured that the participants should represent both public and private type organisations. Researchers of the current study are geographically disbursed and have access to higher education in their countries; the data have been collected from Egypt, Estonia, India, and United Kingdom. As this research is part of a large project on crisis leadership, all the participants have taken part in the previous study of the project and given their consent for participation in this study. Hence, they were approached through email while keeping the selection criteria on the front. The purposeful sampling technique in qualitative studies helps establish sample acuteness and ensures robust participation. As mentioned by Patton (2015, p. 264) "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study and information-rich cases yield insights and in-depth understanding". Hence, authors purposefully selected respondents with a certain level of experience in the context of this study. The participant information is provided in Table 1 below, indicating their case number, role, position, gender, organisation, and association with their type and country.

Table 1. Participants' details. Source: own work

Case number	Role	Position	Gender	Organisation	Type	Country
1	executive	Director	male	University of Northampton	public	United Kingdom
2	administrative staff	Chief Specialist	female	Tallinn University of Technology	public	Estonia
3	faculty	Lecturer	female	Tallinn University of Technology	public	Estonia
4	faculty	Associate Professor	female	Sagar Institute of Science and Technology	private	India
5	faculty	Associate Professor	male	Indian Institute of Management Shillong	public	India
6	executive	Director	male	Pune Institute of Business Management	public	India
7	faculty	Associate Professor	male	American University in Cairo	public	Egypt
8	faculty	Professor Emeritus	female	Tallinn University of Technology	public	Estonia

The study sample included eight participants (n = 8) from higher education organisations of Egypt (12.5%), Estonia (37.5%), India (37.5%), and United Kingdom (12.5%), where they have been taken as individual cases to explore the study objectives. There were five academic faculty members (62.5%), two executives (25.0%), and one support staff member (12.5%). There were four male (50.0%) and four female (50.0%) participants in the study. They represent both the public (87.5%) and private (12.5%) sectors of higher education organisations.

As authors intended to study how the leadership in crisis impacted their collective well-being at various levels, they recognised the participants as 'social actors'. Therefore, the design of the interviews acknowledges elucidating meanings from those participants on their understanding of leadership in crisis in higher education at each respective level. Consequently, authors put great emphasis on how individuals interpret their social world,

supporting the argument of Kelemen and Rumens (2011, p. 28) “social objects are not given in the world, but are constructed, negotiated, managed, reformed, exchanged and organised by human beings in their attempts to make sense of what is happening around them”.

Thus, authors take use of the case study research strategy, they conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants, as it combines structure with flexibility (Roulston et al., 2003). The interview questions (see Appendix: Interview Guidance) were prepared by the authors based on literature review. The open-ended questions revolve around crisis leadership and well-being aspects, which cover the interviewee themselves, their team and departments, and lastly, their more prominent organisation. Considering the geographical location, these were conducted online via MS Teams lasting from 45 to 60 minutes, which allowed authors to explore the issues sufficiently (Guest et al., 2006). The interview was administered on a team basis, where one person observed the notetaking and minute observation on the case. Authors received data saturation after eight interviews, the threshold is obtained and there is no further addition (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Researchers (Glaser & Strauss, 2010; Miles et al., 2019) highlight that the goal of qualitative research is to reach saturation, meaning that sampling continues until no new significant information emerges, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. All the participants were provided with the consent form before participation. They were given brief information about the project with the assurance that confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed. Authors have as well followed strict adherence to research ethics.

The analytical approach in the current study is the multi-level perspective while analysing individual cases, as this is suitable when the study is intended to conduct the organisational issue and limited research resources (Fox-Wolfgramm, 1997). Each participant has experienced the context in the required depth and facilitated understanding of diverse cultural contexts. In addition, having multiple case studies has helped ensure the comparison and in-depth analysis of each case (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview transcripts were coded by following the content analysis given by King and Horrocks (2010), three steps to thematic analysis, where authors first approached the descriptive coding by reading which has been done thoroughly to each transcript. In the second stage, authors went for interpretative coding, to make meaningful interpretations. Furthermore, thirdly, it has further been reviewed again in overarching themes and drives key themes. Therefore, a robust review of the content was made to drive into the themes and saturation was reached. Before making the inter-case comparison, no new codes emerged after cross-checking exercises (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Then, the final themes emerged and were further used for framework development.

Findings

This section presents six themes that have emerged during the content analysis and are being addressed at governance-strategic-, tactical- and operational levels.

Crisis Leadership Attributes That Enable Psychological Well-Being

Authors found the different leadership attributes across cases and levels. At the strategic level, authors found that ‘availability and continuous affirmations of leaders’ presence’ are positive attributes during a crisis. “What I can say is that they always made themselves available. You know what? I can all they were always communicating with us. They were always telling us if you need anything, we’re always there, you know.” (Case 7) Nevertheless, At the tactical level, authors found that ‘collegiality and creating collaborative space’ supported the social afford-ness during the pandemic, which, in turn, supported the social well-being at work as reflected in Case 6 response “Leaders should demonstrate during the crisis flexibility and understanding… His style is I would say, collaborative whereby you know, sometimes, of course, he goes a little bit off the handle. Also, in the meetings… mix of leadership styles.” In contrast, however, operational level has shown mainly ‘self-reliance and distributed leadership’ as many in this study has observed distributed leadership during the crisis as they expect that each level should show their leadership to face the uncertain demands of several ambiguities during crisis. This somehow affected their psychological well-being. “He gave me complete autonomy to do whatever I wanted. No, there have not been any support meetings during the pandemic. We were free and dealing with our challenges individually.” (Case 3)

Support to Establish a Social Well-Being

The crisis often produces uncertainty with demands of quick responses, generating the need for solid support and networking within systems. Hence, while exploring the dimensions of Lawrence and Herrick (2020) and Aked et al. (2008) five ways of supportive well-being i.e. connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give, authors found mixed results across cases and levels. At the operational level, frustration was observed, as stated in the Case 1 response below. “There’s no support, in short… There was almost no communication from the senior leaders during the pandemic, and… that frustrated me and appalled me really at a time when you need strong leadership, and you know, leadership that communicates in a time of crisis… We didn’t get anything from our senior team within the faculty, particularly.” However, in contrast, the connection was observed more in the tactical level investigation, as peer support was high during the pandemic, and connecting through social media and virtual

meetings was reported by every respondent. “With peers, the team collaboration is good. We used to be as we’ve used to be in teams earlier. Also, we used to work together. We used to help each other earlier also, as in small organisation being into the team and being together is very important because otherwise the big people will get you out of the organisation... We make a small bound bonding during pandemic times we help each other. Record of the all the work every day you use… We have made a Google form… I had Moodle issue, so I talk to my friend … and we share our experiences and solve the issue together.” (Case 2) Frequent changes without considering policy and infrastructure created undue pressure on faculty, and administrative staff. Policies stayed during the crisis as they were before, but they did not fulfil their tasks anymore. However, some took the chance, used collective wisdom instead of power, were flexible, and learned “They (executives) started changing everything every now and then. We used to ask to change this do this change this do that, so they were also learning, and we were also learning.” (Case 3)

Communication to Establish a Psychological Well-Being

Crisis communication should provide information and empowerment; without information, imagination, and worst-case scenarios rush in (Wu et al., 2020). The culture of silence remained a limiting factor in any attempt to support staff within higher education during the crisis at the strategic level, which created ambiguity and occupational stress and did not support good psychological well-being at work. “I mean in times of uncertainty, ambiguity, and chaos; we need our top leaders to step up to the plate even more and to communicate and communicate. Communicate like never before because although you know it was a time of change, it was not a time of intended change. One of the aspects which really did frustrate me and barely always has really, but particularly over the pandemic, was the university management, total silence that I experienced, and many of us experienced.” (Case 1) On the contrary, much strong horizontal communication was reported with effective use of online communication and social media, which has strengthened social well-being. “We always make ourselves available. And it’s much easier to make ourselves available online. I mean, face to face; you have to be on campus. You have to be available. You have to be free. But we found ourselves much more easily available online.” (Case 4), this reflect that communication strategies during crisis were more reactive.

Trust to Ensure Social Well-Being

People are often perplexed by events occurring during crisis and hence trust plays a crucial role in helping them cope with ongoing problems as they are asked to share responsibility for complex decisions. However, authors found that employees are not being trusted by their managers much as this influences the social well-being. For example, “I don't trust them because they're still screwing up behind my back.” (Case 8) And “He should be trusting us and of course be careful about us all the time. He should take time to spend with us… We should trust his employee. If the person is working for longer period of time in the organisation, then he is not there to have fun and he is not there to waste their money. He is working hard and it’s not that we should always prove ourselves.” (Case 3) Authors found that participants were more positive about their team culture and cohesiveness as observed in Case 5 response “I think there’s very high level of trust and respect and collegiality… Trust between members, also depends on the individual’s personality.” It reflects that significant role of trust in establishing social well-being during crisis situation.

Crisis Response Strategies to Ensure Collective Well-Being

The analysis revealed that crisis response strategies usually are more reactive than proactive across all levels. Authors found that the crisis response at every level was different; at the operational level, more awareness of creating good physical and psychological well-being was observed, and respondents took their own strategies in strategizing the social and physical well-being. For example, “We have our plans at home, so we enjoy with kids and my husband taught some technical skills to me so I could manage the delivery.” (Case 3) And “I started to walk in the mornings… Things that keep your emotions up already in the morning… So, I have had today the training at 7:20… indoor cycling 25km... I have lovely family members and friend; we did ice skiing and enjoying our lives with travel adjustments and really do fun activities… So, I can bake cakes or do something like small little, things that to keep emotions up.” (Case 2) More attempts to connect socially and technologically was observed as strategies to strengthening the social ties and collective well-being. “There was no regular meeting, but we had dinner at the end of the pandemic where I could meet all my mates and colleagues, and I needed this. Some online events happened but they were not so good.” (Case 3) The establishment of centralised support systems and collaborative community was observed in few Universities but again need some intervention to make these support systems more approachable as observed. “We do have psychological support given be psychology department, but I thought that it is for students, may be this is working for staff as well.” (Case 3)

Technological Adoption and Advancement to Ensure Institutional Well-Being

Universities should have a robust teaching and learning system in a digitally competent environment. Authors found that scarcity of supportive technological resources was common across nations. Beside terminological confusion, the technique and technology that enables teaching and learning in distance mode was one of the major challenges presented by participants, it has impacted their emotional well-being due to ambiguity and uncertainty. “We have

been given Zoom but we were not trained on it, though we learned and somehow managed the show and now we are doing pretty good, I have taken the seminar on virtual teaching from another institution, not from this one." (Case 3) Furthermore, it is also found that technology adoption is not aligned with resource and available competence. Hence, authors found a lack of learning agility, specifically concerning technical competence. "Not well prepared for the technical changes and advancements earlier, however, they are now become more technologically aware and bringing new rooms and audio and video equipment to make more advancement." (Case 4) On the contrary, some people and even whole organisations just went with their work online and to the extent they managed to do it without losing money. As observed in Case 8 "We have just ended a big World Congress where we appeared with a poster." These new practises have changed our mobility behaviour "I think they'll stay, because they're comfortable for people… But face-to-face meetings, are still necessary." (Case 8) Hence, higher education needs more adaptable strategic orientation that welcomes the innovative ways of approaching teaching and learning through advancement in technological interfaces.

Discussion

The current study has aimed to deliver a better understanding about the link between leadership attributes and their influence on collective well-being. Authors aim to understand how these attributes have supported the establishment of well-being at operational, tactical, strategic and governance levels. Authors found that distributed leadership is best served when living in the academic freedom of faculty and where students can be taught, study, and pursue knowledge, skills and research without unreasonable interference. The findings support the claims of distributive leadership from Fernandez and Shaw (2020) and positive leadership from Sommer et al. (2016), as both found relatedness to employee well-being. In addition, supportive and engaging leadership was observed at the tactical and innovative leadership at the operational levels. In line with (Lacerda, 2019), this study also found that executives were engaging and adaptive during the pandemic crisis but mostly were reactive in approaches.

Furthermore, the tactical level was supported by participative leadership, which merged with a sense of support, trust, empathy, vulnerability, self-awareness, and agility occurring during this crisis (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021). An individual relates more with self-reliance and solution-finding attitudes during a crisis, aligning with the views of Averill and Major (2020) and Cherkowski et al. (2020) as they promote autonomy in creating pedagogical innovativeness and more life to work. This partially supports the findings on self-reliance leadership attributes at the operational level. Furthermore, higher education leadership has shown more adaptive leadership with multiple changes introduced; however, support was observed with mixed notions. Also, higher degrees of trust at the operational (trustor and trustee) and tactical levels (structure and processes) were associated with attitudinal and performance outcomes, such as the quality of group decisions (Sapp et al., 2019). In line with El Baroudi et al. (2019), the study found a link between lack of trust and people feeling unconfident to act, eventually affecting productivity and emotional well-being. Furthermore, communication is a strong enabling factor for well-being (Kim, 2021). In line with Thornton (2021), authors promote the strong need for both vertical and horizontal communication in a fast and transparent manner as an important factor for well-being during a crisis. Furthermore, authors found trust as another enabling theme that promotes psychological well-being. In addition, technological advancement is a necessary component in bringing resilience and support mechanisms during a crisis. In addition, technological advancement is a necessary component in bringing resilience and support mechanisms during a crisis. Like Meishar-Tal and Levenberg (2021), authors support that during the pandemic faculty, executives, and support staff experienced considerable challenges and emotional breakdowns at the start, but later displayed more confidence in handling the crisis with technological adoption, adaptation and advancement. The crisis response strategies supported the notion of Liu (2018), who define higher education staff well-being as a collective phenomenon that includes autonomy, goal orientation, professional efficacy, personal health and positive collegial relationships at work, institutional support and continuous professional development opportunities. If people have a perspective and concrete opportunities for professional development, career progression, and evaluated for their work in a way that is commensurate with the quantity and quality of the work they perform, it is expected that they deliver long-term, high-quality performance (Hitka et al., 2023). Furthermore, the results did not show any differences between the eastern and western higher education regarding support during the pandemic.

Implications and Conclusion

Based on the findings from this research and literature review, authors conceptualise the collective well-being enablers and outcome indicators as matrixes at three levels of higher education as a model to look upon the ensuring collective well-being and a robust structure that enables adaptability and resilience in higher education. Drawing upon the relevant theoretical principles from well-being, resilience and organizational adaptability literature (dynamic capabilities theory, organization ambidexterity and resilience theory) authors give 4 enablers at the operational level, five at the tactical level and seven at the governance-strategic level (Figure 2).

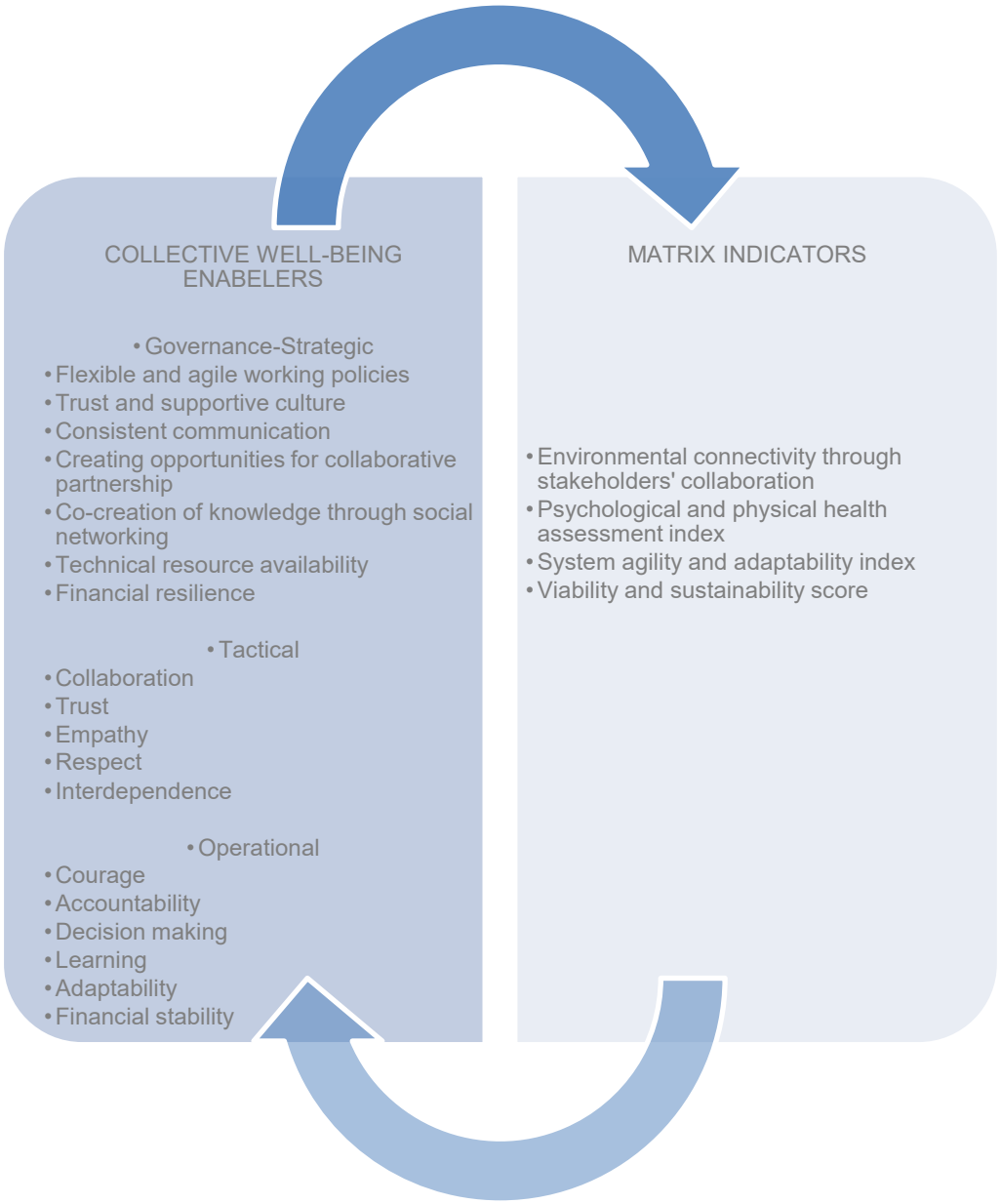

Fig. 2. Collective well-being enablers and outcome indicators at three levels.
Source: own work

At the governance-strategic level, authors claim that during a crisis, seven enables are necessary to establish. Flexible and agile organisational policies support easy adaptability (Genest et al., 2021); trust factors and a supportive culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2011) enable the employee to be accountable and responsible (Gillespie et al., 2020); consistent communication, creating opportunity for collaborative partnership, which enables adaptability and resilience (Schulze & Pinkow, 2020), the co-creation of knowledge (Woolcott & Chamberlain, 2019); Technical resource availability eventually supports organisational sustainability during a crisis period. However, while researching the tactical level and the ripple effects, authors conceptualise five enablers: collaboration, trust, empathy, respect, and interdependence, as necessary factors. These findings align with previous literature (Vera et al., 2017; Pavez et al., 2021). Furthermore, these ripple effects continued to the operational level with six well-being enablers: courage and accountability, decision-making (Varma, 2019), learning and adaptability due to the online teaching and learning process (Mishra et al., 2020), and financial stability to ensure financial well-being could support and enhance job satisfaction (Jackson & Fransman, 2018).

While exploring this further, authors give four important matrices of well-being that a higher education should consider while making sense of collective well-being. The first indicator is an environmental connection, representing collaborative partnerships between the stakeholders; hence, industry-community-university collaborations for the common good should be approached. Secondly, authors propose a psychological and physical health index with periodic checks to represent the health policies and resources available to the stakeholders. Thirdly, system agility and adaptability explain the flexibility and adaptive performances which can

be obtained with more planned resilience. Moreover lastly, authors propose an economic viability and sustainability score representing the university's financial well-being. Crisis management is about prevention, preparedness, response and recovery; people in universities need to know their roles and responsibilities in each phase of the crisis management cycle.

In addition to the above research implication the paper proposes several practical implications. One major implication is the higher education policy level intervention as considering the Matrix that has internal and external key indicators as regular points of check. Several studies in past have discussed the higher education in crisis context (Uleanya, 2024; Barnett-Itzhaki et al., 2025), however they have shown the strategic implication, the current model indeed offers a comprehensive perspective from formulation to execution mechanism. For example, examining crisis leadership training benefits and how leaders build institutional resilience and align public expectations with missions (Hill-Berry & Burris-Melville, 2024). The study concludes that higher education has shown good adaptability with considerable reactionary leadership approaches at governance-strategic-, tactical- and operational levels during the crisis. To build collective well-being in higher education, top-down and bottom-up approaches to leadership should work in shared or distributed leadership approaches to establish system continuity with a healthy index of collective well-being.

This study has limitations that need to be acknowledged. The study focused on a single crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the findings may not be applicable to other types of crises e.g., polycrises, armed conflicts, technological disruptions, and climate change. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a limited number of countries, requiring further research to understand the applicability of the findings to other global contexts. The present research has explored the leadership influences on collective well-being, which limits the in-depth exploration of collective well-being in the higher education context; hence, the 'Comparable Worth' (CW)- index as a comprehensive, measurable tool for the higher education sector could be explored as a scope for future research. This means to provide the same pay for jobs which have equal requirements e.g., knowledge, efforts, skills, level of responsibility, working conditions (Chang, 2023).

Future research could explore the long-term impact of multi-level leadership on well-being and resilience in higher education. This is recommended to see further which appropriate style of leadership offers best fit in the crisis time, for example responsible leadership could relate strongly with the collective well-being (Kyambade et al., 2024). More detailed empirical research on what enhances resilience of academic and professional support staff would be a beneficial line of future research, considering all the relevant stakeholders within higher education settings (Celbis et al., 2025). Considering the rising concern for student well-being (SWB) in higher education (Khatri et al., 2024; Newstead & Riggio, 2024), especially in times of flooding generative artificial intelligence (Barus et al., 2025). Furthermore, researching the effectiveness of specific interventions aimed at promoting well-being, such as mindfulness programs, stress management workshops, and peer support groups, is crucial for addressing the mental health challenges faced by students and staff and hence extension should be made to address the well-being challenges at stakeholder's level. And identifying effective support mechanisms to mitigate burnout and psychological distress (Emerson et al., 2022). Another thread of investigation is to see how genders affect the crisis leadership and its impact on university well-being outcome (Klein, 2024). Furthermore, exploring the role of technology in supporting leadership during crises, such as the use of virtual communication platforms and online mental health services, is essential for adapting to the evolving digital landscape. This directs the needs to see how digitalisation could lead towards adoptability and resilience as future scope of the research. Further it is recommended to see how several well-being indicators are governed and executed in the context of higher education. Evaluations of online educational modalities *vis-à-vis* the same educational content in offline settings is another important venue (Celbis et al., 2025). By expanding the scope of research to include diverse cultural contexts, incorporating a wider range of crisis scenarios, and embracing interdisciplinary approaches, authors can gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between multi-level leadership, well-being, and resilience in higher education during crises is prospective areas for the future research. These research arenas reflect the complexity and multi-dimensionality of leadership, well-being, and resilience in higher education in turbulent times.

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Appendix

Interview Guidance (Themes):

1. Introduction of the participants and their systems.
2. How did you feel and cope about the pandemic period in terms of work?
3. How would you describe your job daily during the Covid-19 period, how this was different from the usual routine?
4. What has your experience in the last few months with your leader regarding ongoing support (policies, financial, mental)?
5. Can you describe the leadership style during the pandemic and how this is different from before this period? Could you specify some examples for us?
6. How would you describe your leader's socialization during crisis, could you share some incidences or examples?
7. Can you tell how your team collaboration or team working keeping social distance?
8. How do you find a leader's role in team working and supporting the individual and team performance?
9. How do you describe the strength of trust between your team and your leader? /Do you feel psychologically safe in sharing your failures/mistakes and concerns?
10. What is your view about the workplace after the pandemic, your view on idea of place and time in context of higher education?
11. What are the main challenges and benefits of working during pandemic in terms of working relationships (peers, leaders and organization)?
12. How will these practices change the way in the future in terms of working relationship in HE?
13. How have you responded/cope to meet the demand of the job during pandemic with respect to personal, professional and social level?
14. How do you describe your institutional response (infrastructural/policies/financial support) during pandemic? Could you specify some examples?
15. How do you look after yourself and your family and friends during the pandemic?
16. If you want to change one thing at work in a pandemic, what will this change be?
17. What characteristics do you expect your leaders to demonstrate during the crisis or unpredictable situations?
18. What characteristics do you expect your team members to demonstrate during the crisis or unpredictable situations?