

**ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP: BRIDGING PRACTICES WITH CONTEXT  
FOR SUSTAINABLE OUTCOMES IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION  
SYSTEM**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper discussed the role of adaptive leadership in advancing sustainable outcomes within the Nigerian education system. The literature review centered on the usefulness and imperatives of adaptive leadership in strengthening work and partnership ties, enhancing trust and collaboration, and fostering shared commitment and responsibilities toward developing sustainable behaviour in the Nigerian education system. The path-goal theory was adopted in demonstrating the responsibility of the leader in ensuring involvement and in effectively channelling the capacities of institutions toward addressing existing gaps in the curricula and content of tertiary institutions, particularly such concerned with the sustainability behaviour of these institutions; that way enhancing the relevance and value of related institutions within their societies and context. The reviews served is a premise for affirming that adaptive leadership enhances the systemic behaviour of tertiary institutions – increasing learning, collaboration, and receptivity toward change and facilitating sustainable outcomes.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, adaptive leadership, path-goal theory, collaboration, learning, inclusivity

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Sustainability is considered a growing concern for organizations today. Not only does it address issues related to the context and behaviour of institutions, its interest borders primarily on the survival and future of institutions (Oyeshola, 2012). In Nigeria, the topic of sustainability has garnered much support from groups and professionals, mostly in the oil and gas sector. Such interest owes to the documented and well-reported impact of the activities of oil and gas firms on the environment and ecosystem of most Nigerian communities (Akintoye & Opeyemi, 2014; Amadi & Ajie, 2020). The focus on the oil and gas industry has for decades relegated the sustainability concerns of other sectors of the country, especially

education. Oyeshola(2012) described sustainability behavior by higher institutions as involving the creation of knowledge and awareness about social and environmental issues and the management of operations and campuses in ways that do not negatively impact the ecosystem of related contexts.

Studies (Biko, 2016; Ogundele &Eguniimi, 2016) point to the significance of education in sustainability outcomes. Jimah and Unigbokhai(2014) argued that in Nigeria today, there is a glaring omission of the education sector in matters of sustainability; with emphasis within these institutions placed more on funding and government interventions. A United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report (2014) identified education as the key to the development of character, attitudes, and values imperative to shaping sustainable futures; however, as Chukwukaike and Nwosu (2018) observe, there is a substantial gap in terms of behaviour and the environmental expectations of most tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This owes to features such as the obsolescence of curricula, the impracticality of adopted theories, and the ritualization of learning processes – all of which have led to a lack of creativity or innovation within the system. This lack of content that directly recognizes and aligns with the challenges of its environment continues to impact the relevance and value of these institutions in Nigeria (Chukwukaike & Nwosu, 2018).

Agi (2017) argued that when it comes to the refocusing and adapting of institutions in line with the challenges of their context, the leadership of the organization is always considered integral. This view is corroborated by previous studies (Abali &Suanukordo, 2015; Akintoye & Opeyemi, 2014) which consider the leadership of institutions, to be essential to their survival and success. Leadership sets the tone of institutional progress and clarifies its vision and purpose (Grissom & Condon, 2021). Yet still, leadership approaches and styles differ substantially, such that when it comes to the issue of change (or sustainability), such could either be a source of effectiveness or a deterrent to sustainability goals. Adaptive leadership, according to Nelson and Squires (2017) describes a form or approach to administration or management which advocates learning and knowledge development for improved functionality and value. This follows Yukl and Mahsud's(2010) perspective that adaptive leaders are often practical in their approach and that way are dynamic as actions are attuned to the changes and emerging realities of their context.

Yukl and Mahsud (2010) affirm that the institution's leadership is central to the development of decisions hinged on modifying and improving its core values. With regard to sustainability, Jimah and Unigbokhai(2014) state that much of the required transformation and advancement of sustainability values are tied to the orientation of the institution's leadership and the extent to which such are able to inspire and at the same time enforce the required compliance and adherence to sustainable practices and standards at all levels. While previous studies (Nelson & Squire, 2017; Beauchamp et al, 2021) acknowledge adaptive leadership as crucial in enabling the required linkage between institutions' behaviour and the realities of their environment, there is however, a paucity of content addressing the role of adaptive leadership in the sustainability of tertiary institutions. This paper contributes as it reinforces the role of adaptive leadership in bridging tertiary institutions' practices with the challenges of its context for improved outcomes, such as sustainability in the Nigerian education system.

## 2.0 PATH-GOAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

The path-goal leadership theory is adopted as the theoretical framework for this paper, in advancing the position of adaptive leadership as an imperative for outcomes of sustainability in the Nigerian education system. The path-goal leadership theory identifies the leadership of institutions as being responsible for motivating the employees and addressing existing deficiencies in the functionality and operations of the institution (Lussier & Achua, 2010). Developed by Robert House in 1971 and revised in 1996, the theory identifies leadership as being central to the success of institutions, and as such, expected to engage in behaviour or actions that are exemplary, motivating, and drive the goals of the institution (Northouse, 2019). Central to the theory is the fact that leaders must be adaptive as their actions must match the needs or concerns of their environment; hence leaders must be contingent and flexible in their approach to management and decision-making. This corroborates Obolensky's (2017) position on learning at the leadership or administrative level – particularly that aimed at enhancing behavioural consistency with the dynamics of the internal and external contexts of the institution.

### 2.1 The Concept of Adaptive Leadership

Leadership is a central and harmonizing factor when it comes to institutions. Its importance builds on the fact that it offers cohesion and facilitates the effective channeling of the institution's resources (human and non-human) toward its intended objectives and goals (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Zeb-Obipiand Kpakol (2018) argues that despite the evolving perceptions and theories on leadership – traits, transactional, transformational, and relational, one thing that has remained consistent is the focus on the leader's engagement and management of significant others, in the achievement of goals. The concept of adaptive leadership furthers a position on change, in line with the features of the context (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Obolensky (2017) identified traits such as inclusivity, learning, and collaboration as qualities exhibited by adaptive leaders. According to Obolensky (2017), adaptive leadership connects the institution to its environment and facilitates the effectiveness of its strategies and functions. This agrees with Yukl and Mahsud's (2010) observation that in order to thrive, the competencies and capacities of organizations must be such that emerge from the context of the institution.

Chukwukaike and Nwosu (2018) revealed that despite notable changes in businesses, science, information, and technology, most tertiary institutions in Nigeria have failed to keep up with the pace of change in their environment. According to Chukwukaike and Nwosu (2018), the lag in behaviour and practice expressed by these institutions has contributed to the decline in the quality of graduates and research. This reiterates Chuka-Onkonkwo's (2015) position that the poor adjustments of tertiary institutions to the new realities of the 21st century, stall their own effectiveness in driving and promoting the growth and well-being of their related societies; this is demonstrated by the increasing clamour for the review and updating of the existing academic curricula of these institutions, in line with recent developments and advancements in the social and business world (Akintoye & Opeyemi, 2014; Gabriel & Kpakol, 2015). These concerns are echoed in Amadi and Ajie's (2020) observation that while the existing curricula of tertiary institutions in Nigeria were substantial in addressing the challenges of the 1960s and 70s, not much has been advanced in terms of content since then.

The emphasis on adaptive leadership thus stems from the imperatives of matching the practices and behaviour of tertiary institutions with the dynamics of their environment – advancing curricula that align with the technological, political, cultural, and social factors that currently shape and impact the contexts of these institutions (Hulme et al, 2021; Solomon & Kassahun, 2021). Research (Nelson & Squires, 2017; Solomona & Kassahun, 2021; Grisson & Condon, 2021) on adaptation suggests that while it is important that institutions learn, acquire and develop knowledge, it is also critical that new knowledge is integrated within these institutions in ways that enable the actual reconfiguration of systems and the transformation of the institution. The adaptive leader is therefore one, who is able to condition through learning and collaboration, working arrangements, and designs, which are receptive, accommodating, and supportive of change, particularly in the area of sustainability. (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

## 2.2 Sustainability of Tertiary Institutions

Hodges and Gill (2014) describe sustainability as the adoption of practices that are consistent with the well-being of the ecosystem or context. It focuses on actions that avoid the depletion of natural resources – facilitating a balance between actions and context. However, the conceptualization of sustainability from the perspective of tertiary institutions addresses much more than operations and actions aligned with the well-being of the context or environment. According to Jicking and Wals (2008), sustainability from the lens of tertiary institutions involves not only its management of activities and centers in line with eco-friendly values but also the duty of creating awareness and knowledge about related sustainability concerns and that way, furthering behaviour and practices that protect and comply with the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of contexts (Jicking & Wals, 2008).

Hodges and Gill (2014) note that given the growing interest in sustainability, its conceptualization appears synonymous with that of corporate social responsibility (CSR). While some studies (Omann et al, 2002; Littig&Griessler, 2005) identify corporate social responsibility as a facet of sustainability, Hodges and Gill (2014) however argue that despite the similarities between the concepts, both are yet substantially distinct. According to Hodges and Gill (2014), while CSR borders on the externalization of behaviour with regard to addressing the interests of its stakeholders, sustainability, on the other hand, is futuristic and as such emphasizes related practices that ensure the institution or organization's alignment and balance with its context. That is to say, while CSR looks outward, toward ensuring compliance and collaboration with stakeholders, sustainability looks ahead in ensuring harmony with context as a basis for survival and continuity for all related parties (Hodges & Gill; 2014).

Thus, in discussing sustainability and its expressions as an attribute of tertiary institutions, one finds that emphasis is placed on actions that in the same vein enrich the effectiveness, relevance, and value of the institutions as well. According to Chuka-Okonkwo (2015) while it is imperative that academic curricula are advanced in line with the current concerns of context, such also enhance the repute of the organization and reinforce its image as being in touch with the topical issues that impact and characterize its environment (Ariguzo& Nwaneri, 2018). Hence, sustainable behaviour from these narratives hoists upon tertiary

institutions the responsibility of not only acting and engaging in actions that demonstrate their value for societies or the environment but also its promotion of knowledge and the development of behavior in that same wise. That way equipping human capital with the competencies and skills required for identifying, adopting, and applying eco-friendly options in their functions and operations(Chuka-Okonkwo, 2015; Abali & Suanukordo, 2015).

### **2.3 Adaptive Leadership and Sustainable Outcomes of Tertiary Institutions**

The recognition and development of policies and frameworks that are receptive and supportive of sustainability have to be intentional and practical (Mesquita & Missimer, 2021). By intentional, Mesquita and Missimer(2021) argue that conscious effort must be channeled toward developing relationships, partnerships, or networks that reinforce and strengthen the sustainability goals of the organization. By practical, the institution's objectives must be designed in ways that allow for monitoring, measurability, and flexibility of sustainability actions. Mesquita and Missimer (2021) note that one of the most difficult aspects of advancing sustainability objectives and functions within any institution is convincing or selling related ideas to other members of the institution. This is because, most individuals, within the institution, are affiliated with various groups and identify with a wide range of socio-demographic categories which may support views that appear to conflict with those of management, or simply, are distrustful of the institution's leadership.

Similarly, Linsky and Lawrence (2011) argue that apart from constraints of distrust and opposition which may emerge, from within the institution, leadership, has also been known to face external constraints from its external stakeholders. However, in order to lead effectively, more effort has to be put into connecting with significant others, building understanding relationships, and addressing grievances. Linsky and Lawrence (2011) propose leader transparency, inclusivity, and collaboration as essential qualities of leadership in developing trust and addressing intergroup concerns and relationships at the workplace. Northouse (2019) opined that the collaboration and involvement of significant others in decision-making, enrich the extent of understanding and agreeability between members of the institution and also between leaders and subordinates. This agrees with Yukl and Mahsud's (2010) view that collaboration and the development of teams, enable cross-categorizations within the workplace, increasing the extent of the individual's involvement in other groups and their acceptance and validation across groups; thus, fostering trust and support across various levels of the institution.

In this vein, one finds that through their capacity for learning, building, and strengthening collaborative networks and inclusivity, adaptive leaders are able to condition work features and relationships in ways that focus on and support sustainable practices, policies and behaviour. Within tertiary institutions in Nigeria, this would entail the development of curricula and operational frameworks that align with the concerns of sustainability and promote such. These factors are necessary as they demonstrate the institution's support for the environment, culture, and social values of its context, enhancing the institution's relevance and future prospects (Agi, 2017; Chukwu-Okonkwo, 2015). Thus, one could therefore affirm the role of adaptive leadership as possibly enhancing the extent to which tertiary institutions in Nigeria are able to galvanize their various units, resources, and capacities in line with effectively addressing prevailing sustainability issues within their

contexts and also advancing related outcomes (Ogundele &Egunjimi, 2016; Oyeshola, 2012; Abali &Nwapi, 2017).

### 3.0 CONCLUSION

The concerns of sustainability within the frame of the Nigerian education system offer far-reaching implications on the practices and behaviour of tertiary institutions within their various locations, and also on the society at large. Practical actions involving the development of curricula and content that are specific to addressing these concerns can be challenging and frustrating especially with regard to support and implementation. However, the position presented in this paper is such that identifies adaptive leadership as crucial and useful in addressing the related challenges of change and in bridging institutional practices with the prevailing gaps in its context. As discussed, adaptive leadership provides a linkage between the institution and its environment, through the harmonization of group interests and the strengthening of collaborative networks, internally and externally, for improved focus and the implementation of actions required for sustainable outcomes. In this regard, it is affirmed that adaptive leadership is a required feature of tertiary institutions in Nigeria as it offers a systemic approach to sustainability, creating relevance and value for the institution at the same time.

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