

# Student-Centered Leadership in Higher Education: Rethinking Administrative Practices for 21st-Century Learners

*Nirmal Das, Research Scholar, Dept of Education, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur  
Dr Mamta Dixit, Professor, Dept of Education, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur*

## ABSTRACT

Instability in basic learning assumptions, technological disruption and the requirement for productive managing style are prompting universities and colleges to integrate student centered leadership designs. In this research, student centered leadership is investigated as an alternative, change focused administrative approach in which the student voice and participation is placed as the center of institutional governance. This research is based on contemporary literature and analyses how leadership styles, governance frameworks and institutional culture impact on student participation and learning outcomes. A qualitative methodology for data gathering was used in collecting data through semi structured interviews with university leaders, faculty, and student representatives in five institutions. The results show that though student centered leadership increases faculty members' academic engagement, innovation, and the creation of democratic learning environments, its usage has been constrained by structural inertia, the fact that faculty never received the needed training, and tokenistic approaches. Finally, this paper makes recommendations for higher education leader and policymakers to incorporate authentic, inclusive, and sustainable student-partnered leadership practices.

**Keyword:** - *Student-centered leadership, higher education, shared governance, inclusive administration, student voice, participatory leadership, educational reform, 21st-century learners*

## 1. Introduction (Expanded)

Higher education in the 21st century is an age of rapid change. Other factors like globalization, massification of higher education, globalization, technological innovation and evolving student expectations are redefining how universities operate, and their engagement with stakeholders. The need to be more inclusive, flexible and responsive to the very diverse digital student population has put institutions under increasing pressure. As universities face such shifts, traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic models of governance have been criticized as rigid and incapable of fostering innovation, collaboration and empowerment of students (Kezar and Holcombe, 2017).

In this regard, student centered leadership is emerging as a new progressive and necessary way of leading. In contrast to traditional forms of administrative models, wherein students are seen as mere recipients of goods/knowledge or customers of institutional services, student centered leadership envisions students as co generators, collaborators, and integral members in shaping the academic and administrative bedrock of their institutions. Based on this model of leadership, dialogue, inclusivity, shared governance, and holistic student development are given priority, and it deals with the issue of education as a transactional exchange, instead of as a transformative partnership.

Student centered leadership rests on the conceptual bases of transformational leadership theory, which focuses on empowering, motivating, and aligning the goals of the individuals and the institutions (Bass & Avolio, 1994), and distributed leadership theory, which underscores the collaborative and decentralized leadership exercises throughout all levels of the organization (Spillane, 2006). The idea that these frameworks espouse is that leadership of higher education should be adaptive, participatory and responsive to the voices of its most important constituents, its students.

Furthermore, this leadership approach sits very well within the current mainstream educational frameworks, such as the constructivist pedagogy, the democratic classroom, and 'Students as Partners' movement. These models promote student engagement in learning, in planning of institutional programming, design of curriculum, and governance structures.

In this study, the goal is to see what it is, how it is implemented, its effect, and barriers to student centered leadership in higher education. The purpose of the study is to answer some key questions in relation to key questions as in how are student centered leadership practices being implemented in institutions? What kind of outcomes do they produce among students and the institutional culture? What obstacles prevent the use and sustainability? This research responds to these questions and joins a developing body of research on educators' learning to change educational leadership in more democratic, inclusive, and future oriented ways.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Defining Student-Centered Leadership**

Leadership in higher education is student centered and, on an overall level, is a multi-dimensional construct that includes pedagogical, administrative and governance dimensions. Despite being chiefly linked to teaching and learning practices that center the student as the primary unit of regard, it additionally encompasses all institutional arrangements that engage the student in strategic decision making and policy development in addition to being involved in quality assurance (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

The basic principle behind student centered leadership is that of shared responsibility. While it also acknowledges that students have an understanding of learning and care experiences, they need structured opportunities to affect institutional decisions that impinge on their learning and care. It is a leadership style where power is shared, there is relational trust, empathy, co creation, mutual learning and mission achieving. It allows students to see governance happen, call for transparency instead of secrecy and engage as learners, stakeholders, leaders and agents of change.

Rather than relying on more typical modes of leadership based on top down decision making and efficiency, student centered leadership centers dialogic practices, deliberative practices and ethical responsiveness. It requires a revision of the way power and authority are distributed in institutions and how student voices are amplified in powerful, sustainable ways.

### **2.2 Theoretical Foundations**

#### **Transformational Leadership**

The basis of student centered leadership is transformational leadership theory which was developed by Burns (1978) and adapted by Bass and Avolo (1994). Transformational leaders are those leaders who provide inspiration, motivation and empowerment to their followers to do beyond ordinary things in order to fulfill the broader vision through alignment of their short term goals with the broader vision. Over time, transformational leadership has been employed in the setting of the higher education institution where it is applied for the purpose of innovation, to build trust and create working environments in which both students and faculty can live such that they can actualize their potential.

Transformational leaders, in the student centered context, partner with their students by exhibiting inclusivity, provide openness to dialogue, and creating a sense of shared purpose. They strive to foster a culture that welcomes and actively solicits and responds to the student feedback. Contrary to transactional forms of leadership that are commonly based on compliance, control, and that impose authority hierarchically, this model relies on the identification with the leader.

#### **Distributed Leadership**

The concept of distributed leadership contradicts a leadership of a few, and stresses the idea of leadership being a collaborative effort. Distributed leadership is described as more than one actor—students, faculty, staff—is involved in the shaping of institutional practice (Spillane, 2006). Most importantly, it is especially relevant in those institutions that are freely student centered organization, where students are encouraged to take part on leading roles, governance committees, curriculum development and peer – led initiatives.

The value placed here in this model is that everyone is interdependent than everyone has their own authority and so this can be a really good way to get people to be involved and participatory cultures. It helps also with building capacity and ownership by all stakeholders including students, through distributing leadership responsibilities across the institution.

### **Student Engagement and Voice**

There has been a growing influence in higher education upon the notion of student engagement, and especially through the framework of “Students as Partners” (SaP). Co-creation of learning and institutional processes has value, as SaP emphasizes reciprocity, mutual respect between students and staffs who co-create learning (Bovill et al., 2016). Traditional power dynamics are challenged, and in it, students involve themselves in designing, delivering and even policy development and governance at the institutional level.

For example, Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1992) and Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), are generally used to measure the level and validity of students’ engagement in institutional settings. These models assist defining tokenistic engagement from authentic relationship with genuine partnership being crucial in student centered leadership.

### **2.3 Empirical Evidence**

There is an extensive body of studies that prove student centered leadership practice in higher education has positive results. Based on these examples, institutions that have embedded student voice in governance have also experienced improvements such as:

- Satisfying students (Kuh et al., 2005)
- Academic performance and retention (Healey et al., 2014)
- Innovation in curriculum design and delivery (Bovill, 2020)
- Responsiveness to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) concerns (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013)

For instance, initiatives about curriculum design co creation between students and faculty to develop course content and assessments have been associated to higher student engagement and deeper learning (Bovill et al., 2011). Processes of participatory budgeting incorporating students in the resource allocation process have been found to increase transparency and increase trust in institutional decision making process.

Yet, the literature has also identified major problems and constraint on the application of QM. A recurring theme is tokenism; that is, participation of students is only superficial and is to validate the chosen decisions (Trowler, 2010). It is a distrustful act that curves up hierarchies of power. Other challenges are the absence of existing institutional frameworks for student participation; lack of time on the part of students and staff for such engagement; and lack of training or support for students in such leadership positions.

In addition, research highlights the equity and the representation of student leadership. Planned strategies to ensure that underrepresented student populations, like firstgeneration students, international students and students with disabilities, are included in studentcentered leadership without reproducing present inequalities (Zepke, 2018).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

In conducting this study, proceeding from a qualitative, multiple case study design was used to investigate the practices, the perceptions, and the institutional dynamics surrounding student led student centered leadership in higher education. An advantage of qualitative methods is that they are particularly suited to answering complex, context dependent, phenomena such as leadership and governance because it exploits in depth knowledge of lived experiences, institutional cultures and philosophies of leadership (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Multiple case study was adopted to obtain variations in practices from those leading in different institutional settings and cultural contexts. The research, by attempting to get insights from five universities across three countries – India, United Kingdom and Australia, would try to unearth similarities as well as context specific variation in the implementation and experience of student centered leadership.

#### 3.2 Sample and Participants

Five universities reputed for the involvement in the student partnership initiatives were selected in the study. In selecting these institutions, publicly available reports, rankings, and the inherent documented commitment to participatory governance or the “Students as Partners” framework were used.

A total of 30 individuals, specifically, were purposely sampled and divided into the following:

- 10 senior administrators (e.g., Deans, Vice-Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors)
- A total of 10 faculty members in various capacities of governance, curriculum planning, and student engagement
- 10 representatives of the student leaders: Rectorial Boards, Student Union Presidents, Peer mentors, and members of the Academic boards.

Participants were drawn to ensure a balanced distribution of perspectives with regards to leadership tiers and to represent different roles within their institutions for the purpose of both shaping and experiencing student centered leadership practices.

#### 3.3 Data Collection

Two main methods were used to collect the data over a four month period:

##### a) Semi-Structured Interviews

An individual interview lasting 30 to 60 minutes took place with each of the participants where either a face-to-face or video conferencing platform were used. Interviews were conducted semi structured, such that I could go deeper into emerging themes and there was consistency on core topics. Guiding questions focused on:

- The definition and understanding of student-centered leadership
- Practical experiences and examples of student involvement
- Institutional enablers and barriers to student-centered practices
- Changes in perceived outcomes and in the culture of how things are governed

## b) Document Analysis

A document review, to complement the interviews, was then carried out, which reviewed institutional:

- Strategic plans
- Governance charters
- Student engagement policies

These documents gave context, triangulated participant accounts, and were used to evaluate how much students' influence on their education was formalized into institutional structures.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

To carry out the data analysis, the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed. The process involved six phases:

- i. Transcripts were read multiple times to familiarize during which initial impressions were identified.
- ii. Reverse codes: Text was systematically coded and segments coded using NVivo software.
- iii. Codes were grouped into broader categories that we considered emerging themes.
- iv. Refining, merging and discarding themed: reviewing themes was not a cut and dry activity, and themes were treated as iterative: refined, merged, or rejected based on how relevant and also how prevalent a theme seemed.
- v. Clear definitions of and names for themes: Each was defined with accompanying quotations and contextual information.
- vi. The production of the report: Conclusions were drawn relating to the research questions posed in the study by organizing the themes.

To improve credibility, data triangulation (interviews + document review) was used and member check conducted with five participants to enhance the interpretations.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and institutional documents resulted in four major themes that describe how student-centered leadership is interpreted, enacted, and experienced within different institutional environments.

#### 4.1 Theme 1: Leadership Mindset and Institutional Culture

The importance of leadership philosophy emerged as a foundational factor. Participants emphasized that institutional commitment to student-centeredness begins with senior leadership and is embedded in the institution's core values.

Administrators who practiced transformational and relational leadership were more successful in promoting inclusive governance. These leaders prioritized “leading with empathy,” “valuing student voice,” and modeling collaboration across departments. Faculty members also noted a shift from compliance-based leadership to value-driven, participatory leadership.

“We’ve moved from managing students to learning with students. That shift in philosophy changed everything.” – Vice-Chancellor, Australian University

Conversely, institutions with rigid hierarchies and risk-averse cultures reported limited or symbolic student engagement. Several participants acknowledged that institutional inertia and fear of devolving power remain significant barriers to change.

“There’s an unspoken fear that if we involve students too much, we lose control. That mindset is deeply embedded.” – Dean, Indian University

#### 4.2 Theme 2: Platforms for Student Voice

Successful institutions had created formalized structures and consistent opportunities for students to engage in leadership and governance. These included:

Joint student-faculty advisory councils

Student representation on academic and quality assurance boards

Curriculum co-design workshops

Participatory evaluation of teaching and learning

These platforms went beyond symbolic participation and allowed students to co-create solutions, shape academic policies, and contribute to institutional planning.

“Having a seat at the table is empowering—but being heard is what really counts.” – Student Union Leader

Student participants reported increased motivation, ownership, and confidence when their contributions influenced institutional policies related to diversity, sustainability, curriculum relevance, and mental health services.

Notably, some institutions embedded student voice mechanisms into their governance policies, ensuring continuity across academic years and leadership transitions.

#### 4.3 Theme 3: Barriers to Authentic Engagement

Despite encouraging practices, several obstacles hindered the consistent application of student-centered leadership.

##### a) Tokenism

Participants from three universities admitted that student involvement was often limited to advisory roles with little decision-making power.

“They invite us to meetings, but the real decisions are made before we walk in.” – Student Representative, UK University

b) Time and Resource Constraints

Student leaders struggled to balance academic responsibilities with governance roles. Faculty and administrators also cited the extra time required for participatory processes as a challenge, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

c) Lack of Training

Both students and staff emphasized the need for capacity-building to equip participants with leadership, communication, and negotiation skills.

“Just giving students a seat on the board isn’t enough—they need to understand how systems work to make real impact.” – Governance Officer, Australian University

#### 4.4 Theme 4: Impact on Learning and Institutional Agility

All institutions that had implemented student-centered leadership practices reported positive changes in student engagement and institutional culture. These included:

Enhanced trust between students and administration

Improved curriculum relevance due to co-design

Faster institutional response to student needs and crises

“When students help shape their learning journey, they become more invested in it.” – Academic Dean

One Australian university described how its collaborative governance model helped it adapt more effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic, using student feedback to redesign online delivery models, assessment structures, and support services.

Moreover, faculty participants reported that student involvement had positively influenced teaching practices, prompting greater reflection, flexibility, and alignment with real-world needs.

### 5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this dissertation, the following recommendations are proffered to assist the successful implementation of student centered leadership in higher education institutions. These recommendations are addressed to institutional leaders, policy-makers, faculty, and student organizations, all of whom are willing to rethink their administrative structures and make administrative structures more inclusive and participatory.

i. To Create Clear Policies and Keeping Sustained Dialogue Platforms on Student Faculty Partnerships

If student–faculty collaboration is to be embedded in institutional policy frameworks for student centered leadership to become effective and sustainable, it must be embedded in it. This includes:

- Formal inclusion of students on academic boards, quality assurance committees, and strategic planning teams.

- The establishment of permanent student-faculty advisory councils that meet on a regular basis to discuss institutional problems, make curriculum revisions and to develop policy.
- Student representatives' rights, roles and responsibilities should be clearly articulated in institutional charters to avoid ambiguity and enhance accountability.
- As much as possible, support structures that take the form of support structures beyond an individual term, (e.g., rotating leadership models, staggered student appointments).

However, these policies should not only be on paper, they should be promoted with visible administrative support and regular but well facilitated dialogue.

ii. Make training programs for students and staff in skill of participatory leadership, communication and negotiation

Both students and staff need to be capacity built for authentic student participation. Few students have experience with institutional governance processes, nor do faculty tend to have the skills to act as true partners with students.

Recommended actions include:

- Leadership development, conflict resolution, meeting facilitation and strategic thinking workshops and micro credentials.
- Programs of joint training for both students and faculty as a mutual understanding and shared vocabulary.

Mentorship systems linking experienced student leaders with new representatives to provide institutional knowledge.

These programs will develop participants' confidence and competencies necessary for their fair, informed, and shared governance.

iii. Implement Co Creation Practices within Curriculum Development, Quality Assurance and Administrative Planning

The development of academic processes should be also centered on a student based leadership with co creation of learning and institutional structures being the core of governance reform.

This includes:

- Where course design and reviews are involved, by involving students in such processes, including selection of learning resources, modes of assessment and timing.
- The piloting of student managed curriculum innovation labs for students to suggest interdisciplinary or skills based modules.
- Engaging student perspectives in accreditation reviews of and institutional audits for institutions, as well as campus development planning.

The benefit of moving from consultation to co creation is to create ownership of the educational experience, make it more relevant and better attuned to the needs and ambitions of the learner.



iv. Make Leadership Adopt Accountability Mechanisms that Track Student Input's Effect on Leadership Decisions

For institutions to avoid tokenism and avoid hearing student voices without acting, the accountability will be transparent.

Examples include:

- “Institutional ‘You Said, We Did’ reports summarising student feedback and institutional response” (publications).
- Timing of recommendation implementation dashboards that keep track of and update the outcomes.
- Tools for students to evaluate their experience with participatory governance for use in continuous improvement.

These mechanisms build trust, transparency and legitimacy they enhance the value of student participation in the institution as a whole.

v. Involve Underrepresented Student Groups and Address Structural Barriers to Participation in Promote Equity Driven Leadership

Institutions are meant to be run for the benefit of all and contain it within the system will not be feasible; institutions need to take an active lead in addressing inequalities in access to leadership opportunities for all. The student voice in student- centered leadership must, therefore, be heard by the diversity of the student body that includes marginalized, underrepresented and non- traditional students.

Recommended strategies include:

- Practices of the implementation of inclusive recruitment for student leadership roles, for example in reaching out to first-generation students, international students, and students with disabilities.
- Stipends or academic credit are provided to lessen the cost of participation.
- I will make sure that meeting times, communication ways and materials are accessible and inclusive, in a multilingual and in digital format.

When equity becomes part of the principle architecture of leadership practice, not only does an institution improve representativeness but the quality and relevance of student input is improved.

## 6. Conclusion

Student centered leadership stands out as a paradigm shift in higher education governance that takes account of the students as active agents that determines how the students make their educational cruise and the environment of their institution. It is a different kind of change in the fact that it pushes away from outdated hierarchical models, where students and faculty and administrators are separated and are not held accountable to their students.

This study confirms that student centered leadership can contribute to:

- Greater student engagement and motivation
- Improved relevance of curriculum and the learning outcomes.
- Responsiveness to change and crisis on the part of institutional agility
- A more inclusive and democratic campus culture

Unfortunately none of these outcomes are automatic. The full, actualization of student centered leadership requires depth of commitment to cultural transformation within institutions. This involves rewriting paradigms for dealing with leadership roles, rethinking of how resources are allocated, and creation of structures that support the existence of students participating at the deep end in a sustained and meaningful way. Furthermore, institutions ought to create an atmosphere that does not defeat the purpose of listening to the perspective of students and enable those perspectives to be truly taken into consideration.

For those in leadership positions in higher education, the conditions for the future are characterized by increasing complexity and diversity as well as rapid change. Unsurprisingly, by embedding students in the heart of governance and strategic thinking, can not only increase their relevance and responsiveness, but also for the fact that students are prepared to lead in the world at large as engaged citizens, critical thinkers and collaborative problem solvers.

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