

# EMERGING ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP IN RELATION TO LIMINAL COVID-19 CONTEXTS

ROB ELKINGTON

*Faculty of Business, Trent University, Peterborough, ON Canada; robelkington@trentu.ca*  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7939-6551>

ROBYN RUTTENBERG-ROZEN

*University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Oshawa, ON Canada;*  
*Robyn.Ruttenberg-Rozen@ontariotechu.ca*  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3406-040X>

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the positive and negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Western higher education leadership, primarily as the pandemic either increased the existing challenges in higher education leadership or opened a pathway for innovation and experimentation due to the liminal environment. Understanding that leadership effectiveness centres on the tripartite elements of leader, follower and context, this qualitative study sought to understand how the liminal context of a global pandemic affected the leadership of higher education institutions. Accordingly, this qualitative study uses a phenomenological and grounded theory approach. The team facilitated semi-structured interviews, and at the height of COVID-19, when higher education leaders became less available due to the challenges posed by the emerging context, we hosted the interview questions in a Google Form and solicited written responses. Our sample included 18 higher education leaders from Canada, South Africa and USA: 5 semi-structured interviews and 13 Google Forms. The emerging issues in higher education leadership moved into sharper focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the emerging issues and the emergent leadership wisdom to address them accord well with the existing literature on skills leadership and emergent leadership in liminal contexts. The study uncovered the utility of the Polyhedron model of wise leadership as a meaningful mindset to drive effective leadership in the liminal pandemic context.

**Keywords:** *Communitas, higher education, leadership, liminality, wisdom, wise leadership, COVID-19, pandemic.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we examine leadership in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and the impact of pandemic-induced liminality on the effectiveness or failure of leadership within these liminal contexts (Wels et al., 2011; Jewkes & Laws, 2021). We believe that productive leadership in HEIs is essential to the public sector for two reasons (Dopson et al., 2019). First, HEIs are institutions that prepare people to function effectively in society. Second, HEIs intersect society at every level as innovators of new solutions and interlocutors around social justice and democratic and intellectual freedoms. As one author stated: “Leadership is arguably the central concept of interest in contemporary scholarship on educational administration” (Eacott, 2012: 91). Effective leadership is perceived as the critical difference between success and failure for most organizations (Bernstein, 2014), which is no less true of the HEI

(Drew, 2010). However, HEIs must prepare to navigate the pace and significance of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hornsby et al., 2011). Leaders are pulled from among the faculty, who generally resist being led anywhere; leading faculty is often referred to as herding cats, and faculty training often does not support those thrust into leadership roles (Blunt, 2004; Hornsby et al., 2011; Hall & Rowland, 2016).

The interest in leadership in higher education has indeed been increasing over the last decades (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016). At the outset, we distinguish leader and leadership (Dalakoura, 2010). In our approach to higher educational leadership and the emerging issues confronting higher educational leadership we thus draw a distinction between the concept of ‘leader’, which focuses on human capital and often the notion of the heroic leader, and leadership, which focuses on social capital within an organization (Vardiman et al., 2006; Grandy & Holton, 2013). This distinction between leader and leadership might help to support ideas such as distributed leadership and concertive action (Bolden, 2011; Lumby, 2013). The notion of ‘leader’ describes the leadership capacity of an individual by incorporating elements such as self-awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation. The term ‘leadership’, on the other hand, seeks to promote an organizational culture, in which leadership processes and emergence are fostered and supported, and in which leadership can emerge from surprising places in unusual circumstances (Vardiman et al., 2006). Throughout this paper, our reference is to ‘leadership’ and not ‘leader’. We understand that within HEIs, there are a multiplicity of leaders and leadership processes interconnected by the vision as culture (Wheatley, 1994) and supported by the social capital developed within that complex adaptive system (Solow & Szmerkovsky, 2006). It seems plausible, then, that there are myriad issues and problems, both tame and wicked (Grint, 2010), which confront the leadership of HEIs in these stormy times. Even before the pandemic, researchers highlighted the turbulent environment in which HEI leaders functioned (Crevani et al., 2015; Dopson et al., 2019). Part of this volatile environment pre-pandemic arose because of the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution (4IR) and its impact on outmoded curricula and learning models (Kodama, 2018). Smart Cities are one response by HEIs to 4IR (Anttila & Jussila, 2018). Still, the leadership of HEIs needs a new skill set. In our research this skill-set emerged as wisdom. This wisdom in the midst of the COVID-19 context enabled HEI leadership to respond to the complexity rooted in past issues and rapidly emerging environments (A.P. Davis et al., 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2021). Another series of challenging factors facing HEI leadership pre-pandemic relate to globalization (Goddard, 2010), status-quo thinking (Dervitsiotis, 2005, 2010; English & Ehrich, 2015), gender equity (Fitzgerald, 2003; Killingsworth et al., 2010; Hornsby et al., 2011), racial equity (Rusch, 2004; Skerrett, 2011), and funding (Jameson, 2013; B.W. Davis et al., 2015; Jusoh et al., 2015; Andrews et al., 2016). As one can imagine, these contextual challenges posed a daunting obstacle to effective HEI leadership pre-pandemic and did not dissipate with the onset of the pandemic.

However, it is not all darkness and gloom. The participants in our study also expressed hope and articulated sense-making by drawing deeply on wisdom forged

**Table 1.** The profile of Higher Education leadership participating in this study. The institution size is defined as large (approx. 21,000–40,000 students), mid-size (approx. 11,000–20,000 students) or small (approx. 2,000–10,000 students).

Institution approximate size	Role of HEI Leader interviewed at this institution
Mid-size	President
Large	President
Small	Dean
Large	Faculty Director
Small	Associate Dean
Small	(former) Associate VP
Mid-size	Faculty Director
Large	Faculty Director
Large	Deputy Dean
Large	Associate Dean
Mid-size	Department Chair
Mid-size	Faculty Director
Mid-size	Associate Dean

by past experiences, knowledge and insights gained from collaborative discourse. Wisdom as a mechanism for navigating liminal *vu jādè* contexts emerged as the important insight and theme in our research. Our HEI leadership sampling comprised mid to senior level academic and administrative HEI leadership (Table 1). This paper aims to analyse the intersection of HEI leadership’s pre-COVID-19 context with their COVID-19 liminal experience and how this liminal experience crystallised as wisdom to address the complex issues that existed pre-pandemic. Furthermore, we intend to add to earlier studies that position HEI leadership as transformational (Crevani et al., 2015).

## 2. HEI LEADERSHIP PRE-PANDEMIC

HEI leadership has been under stress for a while (pre-pandemic), with seven significant challenge areas emerging in the literature (Table 2; Elkington, 2019). We expand upon these in the paragraphs following.

### 2.1. The issue of ‘Status Quo’ thinking or inertia in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous (VUCA) context

The pandemic highlighted that HEIs are not immune to the forces of *Terra Incognitae* (Lagadec, 2009) and *vu jādè* (Day & Harrison, 2007). *Terra Incognitae*, as used by Patrick Lagadec following the enormous challenges posed by Hurricane Katrina (Lagadec, 2009), refers to the notion that we are in uncharted territory, a world unknown. Another term that is helpful in describing the disorientation of the pre-pandemic (and mid-pandemic) situation is *vu jādè* (Day & Harrison, 2007), which

**Table 2.** Issues and challenges facing Higher Education leadership pre-pandemic.

<p><i>Globalization</i> (Andersson &amp; Osman, 2008; Derven &amp; Frappolli, 2011; Ang et al., 2015; Goddard, 2015; Ng &amp; Bloemraad, 2015; Andrews et al., 2016)</p>	<p>The rapid and massive movement of people around the world exposes countries to new cultures, practices and economies.</p>
<p><i>Status Quo thinking</i> (Dervitsiotis, 2005; Fallon &amp; Paquette, 2014; Angelo, 2015; Carpenter &amp; Diem, 2015; English &amp; Ehrich, 2015; Suransky &amp; van der Merwe, 2016; Andrews et al., 2016)</p>	<p>Due to longstanding policy and structural limitations within HEIs, this challenge highlights the potential incapacity of HEI leadership to develop the agility to address turbulent contexts.</p>
<p><i>e-Leadership</i> (Fallon &amp; Paquette, 2014; van Outvorst et al., 2017; Arnold &amp; Sangrà, 2018; Pratama &amp; Susanto, 2019; Sathithada &amp; Niramitchainont, 2019; Van Wart et al., 2019; Espina-Romero et al., 2023)</p>	<p>E-leadership is a process of social influence mediated by technology to produce various changes in attitudes and actions in an individual or organization. E-leadership is not only about extending leadership but is a fundamental change in how leaders and followers relate to one another in HEIs and between HEIs, and HEIs and society.</p>
<p><i>Mentorship</i> (Grogan &amp; Crow, 2004; Christman &amp; McClellan, 2008; Mariani &amp; Patterson, 2015; Sheridan et al., 2015)</p>	<p>The need to formalize and standardize mentorship programs in HEIs. There is also a need to provide novel mentorship modes.</p>
<p><i>Gender equity</i> (Fitzgerald, 2003; Shackleton et al., 2006; Killingsworth et al., 2010; Harris &amp; Leberman, 2011; Hornsby et al., 2011; Sperandio, J. 2010; Taylor et al., 2017; Burkinshaw et al., 2018)</p>	<p>Women are (still) significantly underrepresented in HEI leadership.</p>
<p><i>Racial equity</i> (Hurtado, 2007; Taylor et al., 2017)</p>	<p>The lack of racial integration and representation within higher education leadership is apparent.</p>
<p><i>Funding</i> (Killingsworth et al., 2010; Jameson 2013; A.P. Davis et al., 2015; Jusoh et al., 2015; Kalinski et al., 2015; Andrews et al., 2016).</p>	<p>As the global economy slows and 4IR alters the nature of work, the delivery models of education, traditional mechanisms and funding sources are under strain.</p>

refers to the sense that many in leadership feel that they have ‘never been here before’ and that they are traversing new and uncharted territory for which there exists no map or guideposts. These volatile, uncertain and complex environments call for a different mindset and skill set for leadership within HEIs (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Newswander, 2012). HEIs are complex systems, living organisms continually adapting and changing based upon external internal pressures (Chan, 2001; Blomme, 2012; A.P. Davis et al., 2015). With respect to the dynamism of organizations as complex adaptive systems, the bid by leadership to maintain the status quo can be devastating (Dervitsiotis, 2005).

The notion that holding things steady in this period of rapid change might prove disastrous is also true for the leadership of HEIs (English & Ehrich, 2015).

## **2.2. The issue of globalization**

HEI leadership, like most organizations, has been impacted by the forces of globalization (Goddard, 2015). Globalization has resulted in the increased complexity of the leadership role in the HEI environment (Drew, 2010). While the context in which HEIs must function has changed dramatically in the face of globalization and VUCA, the leadership of those institutions may lack the agility necessary to adapt to the imposing challenges of globalization and of VUCA (English & Ehrich, 2015). It seems plausible then that there are multiple issues and problems that confront the leadership of HEIs.

## **2.3. The issue of mentorship**

Mentorship is valuable as a leadership development tool within HEI settings (Sheridan et al., 2015), and is perceived in most sectors as beneficial to the development of talent and an attribute of effective leadership (Schafer, 2009; Reyes et al., 2014). Individuals within HEIs that receive mentorship have greater satisfaction in the workplace and a more precise direction for scholarly endeavours, contributing to higher engagement, retention and recruitment (Sheridan et al., 2015). Mentorship also supports networking and socialization for minority faculty moving toward leadership in HEIs (Sheridan et al., 2015). However, with these benefits in mind, there is also a concern that in the mentoring process, atrophy is passed from experienced leadership to emerging leadership, or as Grogan and Crow (2004: 463) refer to it: “Old Wine in New Bottles.” There is also a need to formalise and standardise the mentorship process within HEIs (Grogan & Crow, 2004; Johnson & Ridley, 2008; McWilliams & Beam, 2013).

## **2.4. The issue of gender equity**

Mentorship and succession planning is tied to the looming issue of gender equity within HEI leadership. Both affect women leadership in general, and women leaders in HEI in particular (Shields & Cassada, 2016; Gipson et al., 2017). Some HEI researchers suggest that gender inequity is subsumed in education leadership preparation, like mentorship and succession planning (Killingsworth et al., 2010). Gender equity emerges as a universal and global problem (Fitzgerald, 2003; Hornsby et al., 2011).

Transformational learning around the issues of gender and leadership needs to occur at various levels as an intentional intervention if this problem is to be addressed and ultimately leveraged for HEI leadership to thrive (Young et al., 2006).

## **2.5. The issue of racial (in)equity**

Closely tied to the issue of gender equity within HEI leadership is another issue of diversity and leadership, namely the inequity of racial integration and the lack of multi-ethnic representation within HEI leadership (Fitzgerald, 2003; Rusch, 2004). Some researchers suggest that the historical trajectory places HEI leadership and education policy in a mono-cultural paradigm that seeks standardization as the supposed protection of higher education standards (Skerrett, 2011). Longstanding

stereotypes further support this mono-cultural paradigm developed early on in the education process and perpetuated, sometimes unconsciously, in the structure of HEI leadership choices and HEI leadership structures (Fitzgerald, 2003; Niesche & Keddie, 2011; Ward, 2013). It is useful when thinking about gender inequity and racial inequity within HEI leadership to grasp the nuances and layers of this type of discrimination within many HEIs globally. Women are disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts, but then it appears that women who are not of the preferred racial grouping are even further disadvantaged to take on formal leadership roles within HEIs. The privilege in North America, for example, might thus be constructed as white male first, white female second, non-white male third, non-white female fourth with the representation of each stratum in leadership lessening along the trajectory from white male to non-white female (Fitzgerald, 2003).

### **2.6. The issue of e-Leadership**

Current HEI leadership continually evolves around the advance of technology, and this evolution leads to another challenge confronting the leadership of HEIs, namely e-Leadership (Jameson, 2013; Avolio et al., 2014). Jameson suggests that as part of a natural progression of education technology research, considerably more attention needs to be focused on research and development in e-Leadership and the related fields of e-Management and e-Governance applied to education technology. What type of leadership is best suited to facilitate e-Leadership? It appears that e-Leadership poses a significant challenge and that more empirical research into effective modalities of e-Leadership is needed (De Freitas & Routledge, 2013).

### **2.7. The issue of funding**

Funding for HEIs is under stress globally. In the authors' home province of Ontario, funding to HEIs has been cut by 10 % (Jones, 2019). Funding for HEIs is uncertain (A.P. Davis et al., 2015) since governments change, and so do funding priorities. So too globalization and the interconnectedness of geopolitical factors upon HEI funding have an impact on the sustainability of these institutions. Take, for instance, the result of President Trump's visa policies upon foreign student enrolment in the USA (Silman, 2020) or Canada's recent diplomatic falling out with Saudi Arabia and the Saudi withdrawal of over eight thousand students from universities and colleges across Canada (Chase, 2018). No less poignant is the recent impact of student activism upon funding for South African universities in the #FeesMustFall movement, the activism alone costing universities in the tens of millions of dollars (South African currency is Rand) (Fihlani, 2019). The pressure to attract and retain students in HEI programmes is intense as funding issues become more and more acute, and students also advocate better quality education for a lower cost (Kalinski, 2015).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Our research into emerging issues in HEI leadership is a qualitative study of leadership (Klenke, 2016). We were interested in exploring the lived experiences of these leaders within the context of COVID-19 and the ways in which the vagaries of the pandemic affected their leadership, and thus blended a Phenomenological approach (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013) with a Grounded Theory approach (Goulding, 2002) to the research. We used Grounded Theory because there is not much literature articulating HEI leadership in liminal pandemic contexts, and Phenomenology because we wanted to “know about the very structures of consciousness” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013: 213) experienced by HEI leadership in the pandemic. By HEI leadership we mean people in higher education formally appointed to academic leadership roles in faculties (e.g., deans), departments (e.g., associate dean of graduate studies) and universities (e.g., vice president research). We used purposeful and snowball sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) to identify our participant pool. We initially sent recruitment emails through our networks (purposeful sampling), and then we asked those interested to recommend other HEI leaders who they thought might be interested in participating in our project (snowball sampling).

We conducted a qualitative two-phase research project with HEI leaders in Canada, South Africa and USA. In the first phase we conducted semi-structured (Beebe, 2014; Coe et al., 2017) interviews over Zoom to understand how pre-pandemic and mid-pandemic factors shaped the leadership praxis of HEI leaders. We began a second phase mid-pandemic in response to the changing needs of our participants. As the pandemic progressed, and leaders expressed interest in our project, but could not schedule in time for an interview, we began our second phase. In the second phase, we modified our interviewing protocols to make the project accessible to leaders. In this phase we used a Google Form through which we posed the same questions used in the live semi-structured interviews. Klenke (2016: 136) terms this method of asynchronous interviewing “internet or e-interviews.”

Unstructured interviews are beneficial in grounded theory when little is understood about the research topic, like in our case. However, we decided not to use unstructured interviews. We knew that our potential participants for our study, the higher education leaders, would feel more comfortable seeing the questions prior to our interviews. We, therefore, chose to use semi-structured interviewing as a method. Since our study used semi-structured and not structured interviews (where the questions are pre-determined and scripted), we knew we would have to explain to our participants the goal of our study together with the Delphi survey (Elkington, 2021) and literature review that formed a backdrop to our semi-structured interview questions.

Our first phase of research began just as COVID was emerging as a global pandemic. We conducted semi-structured online interviews with five HEI leaders from Canada and South Africa. We hoped to conduct more semi-structured interviews with HEI leadership, but, unfortunately, the pandemic added a layer of complexity



to our ability to secure interviewees because many HEI leaders were immersed in the challenges posed by COVID-19. As we pivoted to the e-interviews, we had responses from 13 HEI leaders in Canada, South Africa and the USA. Once we had transcribed the live semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom and recorded for transcription or transferred the e-interviews into a Word document, we uploaded this data to the Delve® coding tool for “Open and Axial” coding (Klenke, 2016: 182). Due to the unusual nature of pivoting from in-person semi-structured interviews to written interviews through Google Forms we include below the questions from each phase of interviewing. The reader will notice that the questions for both forms of interviewing remained the same for consistency.

### **The questions posed in the semi-structured interview and in the Google Form typed interview**

Please feel free to respond with as much or as little information as you feel comfortable and necessary.

Please share and discuss any of the issues or ideas that you see emerging within this particular area, as follows:

1. Strengths during COVID-19.
  1. What strengths have emerged in your leadership team during COVID-19?
    - How, if at all, does this compare to pre-COVID-19?
  2. Have you, and in what ways have you reached out to other Higher Education leaders to collaborate?
  3. If you have reached out what results have emerged from the collaboration?
  4. What were your motivations for reaching out to other Higher Education leaders?
2. E-Leadership.
  1. Do you feel that Higher Educational leaders are effectively equipped for the IT and E-leadership demands of the current context?
  2. How do you feel that Higher Educational leaders might be better equipped for the IT and E-leadership demands of the current context?
3. Equity.
  1. How do you feel issues of gender equity intersects with leadership of Higher Educational institutions?
    - How might leadership develop or support strategies to address these issues?
  2. How do you feel issues of racial equity intersects with leadership of Higher Educational institutions?
    - How might leadership develop or support strategies to address these issues?
4. Unlisted issue/s.

What other issues do you see on the horizon that will challenge the leadership of Higher Educational institutions?



4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Emerging issues in Higher Education leadership in the pandemic

Several themes emerged in our in-person semi-structured interviews and typed interview responses on Google Forms. We thematically diagrammed the results of Open and Axial coding of respondent answers (Fig. 1). The two most vital themes that emerged centre on issues of racial and gender equity. Innovation, collaboration and e-Leadership also occurred as strong themes within HEI leadership in the pandemic context. A further significant emergent issue tied to responses concerning innovation is relevance. We discuss these themes in-depth in the following paragraphs. At the outset, we highlight the hopeful tone of innovation and relevance tied to the liminal context of the pandemic. The intersection of innovation and liminality is well-documented in the literature, and its significance for HEIs in a VUCA world is further discussed below. However, together with the hopeful tone of innovation, is the unfortunate reality of the persistence of gender and racial inequity in HEIs. However, in the face of these challenging issues that continued and sometimes intensified through the pandemic, it appears that wisdom emerged as a crucial leadership mindset and skill set for a pandemic and post-pandemic leadership milieu.

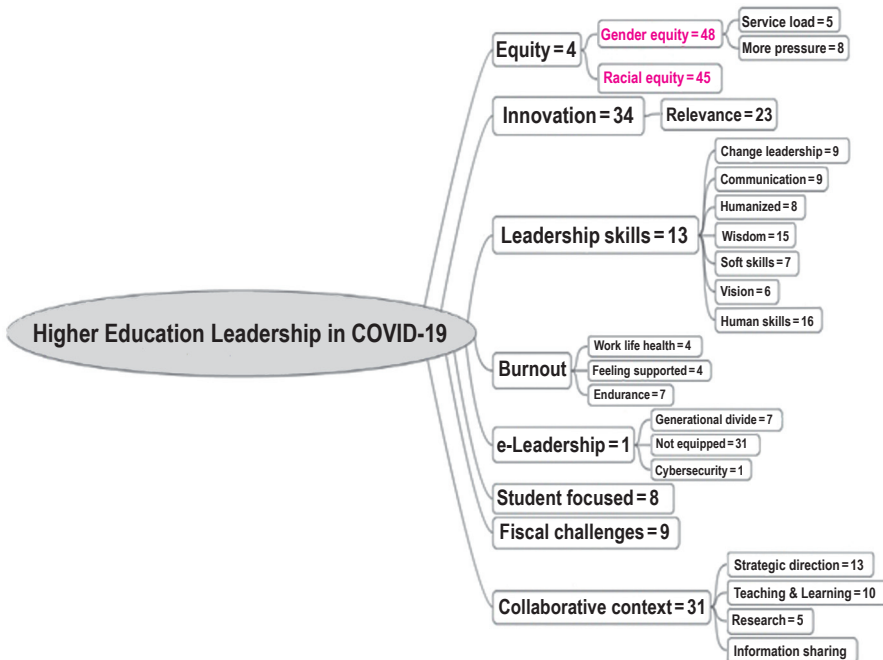


Figure 1. Emergent themes from open and axial coding of interview responses.

#### 4.1.1. Encountering *vu jàdé*: Leadership – Wisdom required

The pandemic has been disorienting across many sectors globally. However, the pandemic was one of several tectonic global surges that profoundly shook societies and HEIs in the last decade. These surges included the #MeToo movement, the George Floyd murder and subsequent international protests, BREXIT, the climate crisis, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and the many intense natural disasters such as the bushfires in Australia. This jarring experience of cataclysmic events and the aftermath might be described by institutional leadership as generating a context that is *vu jàdé* (Day & Harrison, 2007). Day and Harrison (2007: 362) see *vu jàdé* as a threat response in which a person feels: “I’ve never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me.” It is suggested that in these moments of *vu jàdé*, leadership needs to use wisdom to navigate the intense confusion, liminality and uncertainty (Olivares, 2011). Wisdom is a human characteristic that involves experience-driven cognitive and emotional development, resulting in a beneficial life for oneself and others (Zacher et al., 2014). Ludden (2013: 1) supplies the following detailed definition of wisdom:

“Wisdom is a dynamic process a leader uses to apply knowledge, experience, and virtue to seek truth that subsequently governs the leader’s actions and decisions. Wisdom engages a person’s cognitive, affective, and conative abilities for personal, interpersonal, community, societal, and global improvement. Wisdom is manifested by continuously seeking more knowledge, experience, and virtuosity to achieve these ends.”

The assortment of issues endemic to HEIs pre-pandemic seemed somewhat intractable and embedded as part of the culture and context of HEIs (Lumby & Foskett, 2011). However, the liminality of COVID-19 and related events opened a pathway for new paradigms to emerge. These new leadership paradigms required wisdom (Foldy et al., 2008) because pre-pandemic ontology and praxis appeared inadequate to thrive in and beyond the pandemic era. In the responses we garnered from HEI leadership during the pandemic, it became evident that this HEI leadership was leveraging wisdom and innovation to effect sense-making (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Colville et al., 2012; Thiel et al., 2012) to thrive in this unprecedented context, and to address some or all of the seven issues highlighted above (Table 2). In our Open and Axial coding (Howell, 2013), ‘wisdom’ was not numerically intensive, with just 15 occurrences. However, we believe that wisdom is thematically significant (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014) because it describes the mindset HEI leadership imbibed to navigate the complexities of the pandemic together with the tectonic and cataclysmic events occurring before and during the pandemic. As the concept of wisdom emerged, we realised that we could build on ground-breaking discourse on liminality and *communitas* introduced by Victor Turner in 1960s and 1970s (Wels et al., 2011).

Since leadership wisdom within the liminal *vu jàdé* context of the pandemic emerged as the sense-making mechanism for the leadership we searched for a model

of wise leadership that could reframe our Open and Axial coding of the data procured through the semi-structured interviews. As Goulding (2002: 78) suggests:

“Once a concept has been identified, its attributes may be explored in greater depth, and its characteristics dimensionalised in terms of their intensity or weakness. By using axial coding the researcher develops a category by specifying the conditions that gave rise to it, the context in which it is embedded, and the action/interactional strategies by which it is handled, managed, and carried out. . . . Moreover, evolution is an important aspect in the generation of theory.”

We undertook a survey of the literature to uncover material on leadership wisdom in liminal contexts to provide a meaningful framework to the pivotal theme of wise leadership emerging and evolving in our coding of the respondent data. Further, Goulding discusses the use of literature in Grounded Theory research to enhance theoretical sensitivity (2002: 70). We felt that literature focused on wise leadership within liminal contexts might assist in enhancing theoretical sensitivity to the respondent data and thereby help us surface instances of wisdom or wise leadership on the part of our respondents. We located several articles discussing wise leadership (Küpers & Statler, 2008; Edwards et al., 2013; Haver et al., 2014; Conroy et al., 2021; White, 2021), but the most helpful was a systematic literature review developed by Karami et al. (2020): “A Polyhedron model of wisdom: A systematic review of the wisdom studies in psychology, management and leadership, and education”. We used the seven categories associated with wisdom in this article namely:

1. *Knowledge management*, which involves applying appropriate knowledge (factual, procedural, conceptual, tacit and meta-knowledge) in a given situation.
2. *Self-regulation*: Recognizing, embracing and employing emotions constructively and creatively is a benchmark of wisdom.
3. *Altruism and moral maturity*: Altruism is marked by pro-social behaviours, feelings of empathy and sympathy, compassion, insight and advice. Moral maturity entails integrity, mindfulness, ethical conduct and a sense of justice.
4. *Openness and tolerance*: Openness to experience and tolerance for uncertainty and differences is based on the idea that the validity of human information itself is limited.
5. *Sound judgement & decision making*: Involves purposeful judgement, which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference, as well as explanation of the elements supporting that judgment.
6. *Intelligence and creative thinking*: To be wise, one must be intelligent and creative because wisdom draws upon intelligence and creativity in the formulation of solutions.
7. *Dynamic balance and synthesis translated into action*: Wisdom involves actions rather than theories or ideas. Wisdom is a fusion of various traits that produce something greater than the sum of its elements.

We employed these seven categories as our codebook for the respondent data and conducted a second round of coding. The results of this evolution in our understanding and coding of the data yielded a rich tapestry of wise leadership deployed by HEI leaders for sense-making and thriving during the global COVID-19 pandemic. We highlight these outcomes below.

#### 4.1.2. Encountering *vu jàdé*: *Wise leadership in HEIs in the pandemic*

4.1.2.1. Polyhedron model of wisdom Theme 1, Knowledge Management: Wise leadership expressed through knowledge management, which involves applying appropriate knowledge (factual, procedural, conceptual, tacit and meta-knowledge) in a given situation. This theme was the densest in the coding regimen, with 72 occurrences. Some examples of wisdom through knowledge management are included in the following *in vivo* quotes.

*Respondent 1*: “We had to create a bunch of new processes and procedures as a result of COVID-19.” (procedural knowledge)

*Respondent 2*: “And so, I’ve thought about what I want to see, what I’m going to fight to see, included in that is a whole new way of thinking about international partnerships and international engagement, you know, we have to be decolonized and how we do that we have to be open to new knowledge.” (factual and meta-knowledge)

*Respondent 3*: “And, you know, I won’t have those conversations at the university unless I’m working with some of our global south partners because I think they have amazing experience, having done the Millennium Development Goals. And so yeah, we have access to I mean, the technology has given us access to different types of leadership and the opportunity to bring us together more closely within international relations, ... you know, an institutional trip to Africa happens, you know, seldom, but now, you know, we’re working more closely with African institutions ... And so, it’s an exciting time in that way.” (meta, factual, procedural and tacit knowledge)

4.1.2.2. Polyhedron model of wisdom Theme 2, Self-regulation: Wise leadership expressed through recognizing, embracing and employing emotions constructively and creatively. This theme was the least dense in the coding, with seven occurrences. Some examples of wisdom through self-regulation are included in the following *in vivo* quotes.

*Respondent 1*: “I mean, I joke just because laughter is one of the things we have in this moment, I said, you know, next time I’m asked to be a middle manager under a global pandemic, I’m gonna say no, thanks.”

*Respondent 2*: “And then you can’t be hostile because you are there not for yourself, but for the university, right?”

*Respondent 3*: “Well, I think it really starts with accepting that this, this is where we are.”

*Respondent 4*: “Yeah, we are continuously immersed in lengthy crises, political, social, and economic, playing out in poverty, inequality and unemployment.

And you have to find ways of very, very ethically and effectively dealing with that. And once again, it goes for innovation, agility, and resilience.”

4.1.2.3. Polyhedron model of wisdom Theme 3, Altruism and Moral Maturity: Wise leadership expressed through pro-social behaviours such as feelings of empathy and sympathy, compassion, insight and advice. This theme occurred 34 times in the coding, exemplified in the following *in vivo* quotes.

*Respondent 1*: “Leadership needs to balance corporatized structures and processes to recognize a human need.”

*Respondent 2*: “Another issue that must be addressed is the perceived value of a degree (and the limitations we construct on our students). Increasingly we will face the issues of transfer credits, incomplete degrees, certificates, and the entire field of e-learning (not to mention competency-based credits). We need to learn to focus on the students and the changing culture in which we serve.”

*Respondent 3*: “We have learned to communicate in new ways and I feel we have become more ‘human’ in that we have seen others in their personal settings, met their pets, and learned more about them as individuals.”

4.1.2.4. Polyhedron model of wisdom Theme 4, Openness and Tolerance: Wise leadership expressed through openness to experience and tolerance for uncertainty and differences is based on the idea that the validity of human information itself is essentially limited, and individuals have access only to select parts of reality in which the future cannot be fully known in advance. This theme occurred 24 times in the coding, exemplified in the following *in vivo* quotes:

*Respondent 1*: “I had, we had students, we had a bunch of African students who held a conference on decolonization in academia. And looking at Afro centricism, and working with them was absolute hell for me, I thought, you know, I’m, I’m African, by my identity. And they just, they’ve held that mirror up and said, look at how you putting up barriers, look at how you’re not accepting and so, you know, it opened my eyes. So there’s, there’s new, there’s new fuel to my passion this year.”

*Respondent 2*: “Again, you know, I think one of the greatest challenges we have as individuals is just accepting and managing change. I mean, our landscape is changing. And globalization is affecting it.”

4.1.2.5. Polyhedron model of wisdom Theme 5, Sound Judgement and Decision Making: Wise leadership expressed through purposeful judgment, which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference and explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual consideration upon which that judgment is based. This theme occurred 24 times in the coding, exemplified in the following *in vivo* quotes:

*Respondent 1*: “The rise of AI, to which academia is a significant contributor, means that the workplace and nature of employment, is changing rapidly. Ironically, HEIs can be slow to amend curricula in response. Other factors

include the new interests in remote operation for teaching and learning, which has resulted in ‘micro-courses’ and the MOOCs gaining traction. Large corporations are now also expending more effort in training employees, and the importance of HEIs has been reduced to them. So, there will be significantly more pressure and competition in the future just to attract and retain students. With much public attention on the student debt crisis, I believe financial viability of whole institutions will become an increasing concern. There are various solutions emerging, but that’s out of the scope of the question.”

*Respondent 2:* “So, we had a lot of debates about that we consulted with experts on this, we looked at how to mitigate it, we listened to the public health, the local public health officer’s – provincial, federal, strengthening the understanding among the group that allowed us to make a better decision, because then they’re going in with our eyes wide open.”

4.1.2.6. Polyhedron model of wisdom Theme 6, Intelligence and Creative Thinking: Wise leadership expressed through creativity and intelligence during the pandemic. To be creative, one must be intelligent at some level and “to be wise, one must be both intelligent and creative because wisdom draws upon intelligence and creativity in the formulation of solutions to problems that take into account all stakeholders’ interests over the short and long terms.” This theme occurred 61 times in the coding, exemplified in the following *in vivo* quotes:

*Respondent 1:* “And, I would say, the most important ones are, and this sounds a bit trite, but I have now experienced evidence for it, which is the idea of having some form of resilience and agility. If you have that resilient resilience, you go on irrespective and the agility to say that you go on irrespective. And while you’re going on, you are redesigning and reconfiguring your strategies, plans, and implementation.”

*Respondent 2:* “I think companies like Netflix and Google will continue creating their degrees to level the playing field. Traditional brick-and-mortar institutions need to get ahead to continue having students. Having leaders who are innovative and who understand that creating equity has to happen for faculty, staff, and students will help.”

4.1.2.7. Polyhedron model of wisdom Theme 7, Dynamic Balance and Synthesis Translated into Action: Wise leadership in the pandemic involves actions rather than theories or ideas. Wisdom is a fusion of various traits that produce something greater than the sum of its elements. Wise leadership expressed through action as a theme is articulated in the following *in vivo* quotes:

*Respondent 1:* “But I think it also helped us put the important questions of teaching and learning on the table because, you know, we implemented what we call remote emergency learning, emergency teaching. We gave students laptops and transported everything. And of course, students were in the rural areas; there is no network, we find a way we do print materials whatever.”

*Respondent 2:* “The other strength is that we, you know, had an online strategy,

that we were going to a blended learning strategy that would take five years to implement, and we were ‘whatever.’ But once this hit, we pressed the button and went on with it. And I guess there was nothing else to do, but we get on with it. I mean, even the idea of working from home as to what this means. I mean, we even ignored our own policy, by taking people’s desktops from their offices, to their homes, transporting desktops from offices to home, which is something that we would never have done, you know, but we couldn’t buy everyone a laptop. In terms of their work, we just took and transported them to their homes.”

*Respondent 3:* “We share confidential documents, we share strategies, we developed our pandemic plan, as a system, we started classes in July with the approval of the government because as a system we went through and we, you know reviewed in detail what we can do to ensure the safety of our employees and students. We did not just stop at the presidents. We know that our vice presidents of academic will sit down together in detail, our vice presidents of Student Affairs will sit down in detail and will agree on a certain set of principles, will agree that there may be some geographic differences from time to time, there’s differences in size, that will go together in a unified front to government. That’s an enormous opportunity to do things together.”

#### **4.2. Skilful and wise leadership to address emerging issues in Higher Education leadership in the pandemic**

We initiated this study by reviewing the key HEI leadership themes in the literature. There are seven key themes that surfaced as emerging issues in HEI leadership in a pre-pandemic context (Table 1). We used these themes as a basis for our semi-structured interviews during the pandemic context and observed other themes emerging as these interviews progressed. It is encouraging that the empirical data arising from our interviews with HEI leaders synergises with a trajectory of literature on skills-based leadership (Northouse, 2022) and wise leadership (Grint, 2007; Bernstein, 2014; Kaipa, 2014; Zacher et al., 2014; Harrison, 2017) in liminal contexts. Furthermore, it is gratifying that the open and axial coding presented consistent themes emerging from a diverse group of global HEI leadership. We encountered authentic leaders who expressed the idea of *vu jàdè* as: “I am not sure what leadership looks like in this new context. I draw on my knowledge, skill, and values (wisdom) to find the way to lead. I also draw on the knowledge, skill, and values (wisdom) of intra-organizational and inter-organizational leadership to find a way to lead innovatively in this liminal context.” What excites us in this research is the evolving understanding of contingency leadership as practice in which a complex liminal environment such as the pandemic led to HEI leadership adapting through sense-making and wisdom. This wise leadership practice surfaced more clearly when we overlaid the Polyhedron model of wisdom (Karami et al., 2020; Karami & Parra-Martinez, 2021) and observed the embeddedness (and emergence)



of each of the seven Polyhedron components of wisdom. Karami et al.'s Polyhedron model is beneficial for HEI leadership (and leadership in general) because each of the seven components of wisdom are leadership skills that can be developed in non-liminal contexts for expression and application in liminal, *vu jàdé* contexts. It is helpful that this schema of wise leadership continues and supplements the skills approach to leadership described by Northouse (2022), who highlights that these skills are developed as learned capabilities, which implies that wisdom, as a skill, can be developed for effective leadership in liminal contexts.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study into HEI leadership in liminal COVID-19 contexts is important because HEIs are essential to the public sector (Dopson et al., 2019). However, HEIs are ill-prepared to navigate the pace and significance of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hornsby et al., 2011). Due to the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic as a global phenomenon and the HEI issues and challenges as endemic to Western HEIs, future studies might build upon this thematic and preliminary research by limiting the study to a specific geographic location and a particular HEI issue. The researchers might also access a larger sample size in a less chaotic and liminal context to assess if the pandemic-initiated wisdom and collaboration affected any meaningful change in the seven areas (Table 2). Future studies might also focus on how HEI leaders leveraged wisdom for change in the pandemic and whether or not that change has been sustained once the urgency of the pandemic subsided. Another aspect requiring further research is how wisdom, using the Polyhedron model, can be developed in emerging leaders in preparation for the current liminal VUCA context (Hall & Rowland, 2016).

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