

Visionary Leadership and Social Innovation in Public Universities in Tanzania

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Abstract

Visionary leadership is increasingly seen as a key factor in fostering social innovation in higher education, especially in contexts where universities are expected to support national development. In Tanzania, public universities are crucial for tackling challenges such as unemployment, poverty, gender inequality, and environmental issues. Drawing on values-based and transformational leadership theories, this study examined the relationship between visionary leadership and social innovation in Tanzanian public universities. A convergent mixed-methods approach was used, combining survey data from academic and administrative staff with interviews involving university leaders and stakeholders. Results showed a strong, significant positive correlation between visionary leadership and social innovation ($R = 0.742$), with leadership practices accounting for 55.5% of the variance in social innovation outcomes. Factor analysis identified five key aspects of visionary leadership: strategic direction, inspiration and motivation, commitment to institutional values, creativity, and fostering innovation, with factor loadings ranging from 0.712 to 0.751. Qualitative results illustrated how visionary leaders implement ethical and institutional values through innovation hubs, community projects, and collaboration platforms aligned with national goals, including Tanzania's Vision 2050. However, challenges like leadership inconsistency and resource shortages hinder the growth of social innovation efforts. The study suggests that strengthening visionary, values-focused leadership is vital for boosting the social innovation capacity of Tanzanian public universities and positioning them as drivers of sustainable social change.

Keywords: *Visionary leadership, values-based leadership, social innovation, Public Universities, Tanzania*

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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are expected to take on a more active role in tackling complex social and economic issues. In addition to their traditional roles of teaching and research, universities are now viewed as drivers of innovation and social change, especially in developing economies. Leadership has become a key factor in shaping how universities meet these higher expectations, particularly in settings with limited resources and diverse stakeholder demands (Tadesse et al., 2024).

In leadership studies, values-based leadership (VBL) highlights ethical behaviour, shared principles, and societal responsibility. A key aspect of VBL, closely linked with transformational leadership, is visionary leadership, which centres on creating a compelling, future-focused vision that motivates collective effort and innovation (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). Leaders with a vision inspire followers by connecting organisational objectives to higher moral values, promoting creativity, and encouraging active participation in societal issues.

In higher education, visionary leadership closely connects with social innovation, which entails creating new solutions to societal challenges through collaboration, inclusivity, and active institutional participation (Fulford & Coleman, 2021). University-based social innovation efforts commonly include innovation hubs, entrepreneurship programmes, community consulting services, and applied research projects that address local and national development goals (Mwantimwa et al., 2021; Mrema, 2024).

In Tanzania, public universities function within a policy framework that prioritises development-focused education and innovation. While many have created innovation hubs and community engagement projects, their success and durability differ significantly (Kadikilo et al., 2024). Although leadership is often recognised as vital to success, empirical research on how visionary leadership affects social innovation outcomes in Tanzanian public universities remains limited.

This study addresses this gap by empirically investigating how visionary leadership impacts social innovation within a values-based leadership framework. Using a mixed-methods approach, it offers both quantitative data and contextual insights into how leadership vision influences innovation practices in public universities.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite growing recognition of visionary leadership as a vital force for innovation, Tanzanian public universities continue to struggle with transforming their leadership visions into sustained social impact. Innovation hubs and community programmes often face challenges related to scaling, ongoing operation, and alignment with societal demands (Mwantimwa et al., 2021; Kadikilo et al., 2024). These issues are primarily linked to leadership practices, particularly how leaders embed values, motivate stakeholders, and provide strategic direction.

Research on visionary leadership in Tanzanian higher education is limited and rarely examines its role in social innovation. Without insights into how leadership visions and values shape innovative outcomes, universities might not reach their full potential as agents of social change. This study investigates the influence of visionary leadership on social innovation within Tanzanian public universities and offers insights to inform leadership strategies and policy-making.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership theory serves as a fundamental framework for understanding visionary leadership. It views leadership as a process where leaders inspire followers to go beyond personal interests to achieve common goals (Burns, 1978). Bass (1985) expanded on this by highlighting four essential elements: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Together, these elements stress ethical role modelling, transparent vision sharing, fostering creativity, and promoting follower growth.

In higher education, transformational leadership promotes organisational cultures that encourage innovation, collaboration, and stakeholder involvement (Mudd-Fegett & Mudd, 2024). Building on this foundation, visionary leadership emphasizes future-oriented thinking, inspiration, and creativity, making it especially relevant for universities aiming to address societal challenges through innovation.

2.2 Visionary Leadership and Social Innovation

Empirical research consistently shows that visionary leadership boosts innovation by aligning organisational values with strategic goals. In higher education, leaders who communicate clear visions and inspire stakeholders foster environments that promote creativity and social impact (Belcher et al., 2022). Additionally, visionary leadership is associated with enhanced collective creativity and interdisciplinary teamwork, both of which are crucial for developing socially responsive innovations (Huang et al., 2022).

Within a values-based leadership framework, visionary leadership promotes social innovation by combining ethical considerations with strategic actions. Fulford and Coleman (2021) contend that leadership rooted in shared values builds trust, encourages collaboration, and ensures lasting societal impact. Likewise, Müller and Drescher (2022) show that leaders who emphasise values are better able to balance organisational goals with social responsibility.

In the context of African higher education, studies emphasise the increasing importance of universities in community engagement and fostering innovation. Research from Tanzania shows that innovation hubs and entrepreneurship initiatives serve as platforms to tackle societal challenges, though their effectiveness largely depends on strong leadership and clear strategic goals (Mwantimwa et al., 2021; Fussy, 2024). Despite these findings, there remains a lack of substantial empirical evidence directly linking visionary leadership to social innovation outcomes in Tanzanian public universities.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Philosophy and Design

This study adopts a pragmatist research philosophy, acknowledging that complex organisational phenomena such as leadership and social innovation are best understood by combining various types of evidence. Pragmatism endorses methodological pluralism and emphasises the practical usefulness of results, making it suitable for studying leadership practices in higher education institutions.

A convergent mixed-methods design was used, allowing the concurrent collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. This method enabled the study to explore statistically significant links between values-based visionary leadership and social innovation, while also providing contextual insights into how leadership values are practised in Tanzanian public universities. The findings were integrated during the interpretation phase to improve understanding and facilitate triangulation.

The design was based on Values-Based Leadership theory, emphasising ethical behaviour, shared values, and moral purpose, as well as on social innovation theory, which focuses on collective problem-solving, inclusivity, and the transformation of institutions.

3.2 Study Context and Population

The study was conducted at public universities in Tanzania, which are responsible for promoting national development through teaching, research, and community engagement. These universities were chosen for their important role in addressing societal issues such as

unemployment, poverty alleviation, gender equality, and sustainability. The target population included academic staff, students, and key external stakeholders. Academic staff were involved because of their crucial roles in leadership, governance, and innovation. Students served as both beneficiaries and active contributors to innovation, while stakeholders provided perspectives on universities' societal engagement and impact.

3.3 Sampling Procedures and Sample Size

All ten operational public universities in Tanzania were included via an institutional census approach. Academic staff were chosen through stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation across universities. For students, a disproportionate stratified sampling method was used to account for variations in enrollment sizes. The quantitative sample comprised 357 academic staff and 390 students, selected using the Krejcie and Morgan sampling framework to ensure statistical validity. For the qualitative part, 15 key informants, including senior administrators, innovation coordinators, employers, NGO representatives, and community leaders, were purposively selected for their direct involvement in leadership and innovation initiatives.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data were gathered through a self-administered structured questionnaire rated on a five-point Likert scale. This instrument assessed aspects of visionary leadership, including inspiration, motivation, strategic clarity, and creativity, as well as social innovation indicators such as collaborative innovation outputs, hub-generated social solutions, and community-co-created innovation. The measurement items were adapted from well-known leadership and innovation scales and tailored to the higher education context in Tanzania.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to elaborate on leadership values, decision-making processes, and innovation practices. This method enabled deeper exploration of how ethical and visionary leadership is translated into socially innovative outcomes.

3.5 Pilot Testing, Reliability, and Validity

A pilot study was carried out at a non-participating public university to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the research tools. Feedback from this preliminary test helped improve the questionnaire items. Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.70 indicating acceptable reliability. The validity of the instruments was confirmed through expert review, content and face validity assessments, and exploratory factor analysis, supported by the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Only items with adequate factor loadings were kept for further analysis.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed with SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarised respondents' characteristics and the distribution of variables, while Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses explored the relationship between values-based visionary leadership and social innovation. A moderation analysis was performed to evaluate the influence of entrepreneurial orientation.

Qualitative data were analysed thematically through systematic coding and categorisation. Emerging themes related to leadership values, innovation processes, and institutional culture were identified and integrated with quantitative findings to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the results.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the appropriate regulatory bodies. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained, and anonymity preserved throughout the research. Data privacy was maintained by using the information solely for academic purposes, and no personal identifying details were collected.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

4.1.1 Descriptive statistics on visionary leadership

Respondents indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with five statements related to different aspects of visionary leadership. The results show that the university has a well-defined and inspiring strategy for its future ($M=4.2880$, $SD=0.77545$). It motivates and empowers students toward a shared organisational goal ($M=4.2135$, $SD=0.69348$). The university's values, mission, and strategic plans are closely aligned ($M=4.2521$, $SD=0.74766$). It fosters creativity and critical thinking among academic staff ($M=4.1719$, $SD=0.75316$) and ($M=4.1338$, $SD=0.79312$). Data from Tanzanian universities indicate broad agreement on the institution's role in encouraging creative thinking, providing clear guidance, aligning with strategic goals, and fostering innovation. Since all standard deviations are below 1.0, responses show minor variation, reflecting general agreement, consistent with other research (Belcher et al., 2022). Studies have shown that structured, visionary leadership can drive innovation performance. However, research on Value-based Leadership (VBL) suggests that the impact of visionary leadership on organisational performance can be inconsistent (Sambu et al., 2021).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Visionary Leadership

Statement	Frequency and Percentage (%)					Mean	Standard Deviation
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
The university articulates a clear, compelling strategy for the organisation's future.	2 (0.3)	18 (2.6)	72 (10.3)	291 (41.7)	315 (45.1)	4.2880	.77545
The university inspires and empowers students towards the organisation's shared goal.	2 (0.3)	9 (1.3)	70 (10.0)	374 (53.6)	243 (34.8)	4.2135	.69348
The university aligns with the values, mission, and Strategic direction of the organisation	2 (0.3)	13 (1.9)	78 (11.2)	319 (45.7)	286 (41.0)	4.2521	.74766
The university encourages creativity and critical thinking among academic staff.		13 (1.9)	109 (15.6)	321 (46.0)	255 (36.5)	4.1719	.75316
The university encourages innovative ideas to help achieve the mission of the organisation	1 (0.1)	25 (3.6)	97 (14.0)	329 (47.3)	243 (35.0)	4.1338	.79312
Average						4.2122	.55080

4.1.2 Descriptive statistics on Social Innovation

The findings show a moderate institutional commitment to addressing societal challenges ($M = 3.12$), with strong emphasis on community engagement and external partnerships, particularly in research targeting societal problems (Fussy, 2024; Mrema, 2024). However, interdisciplinary research support and innovation infrastructure remain limited, reflecting ongoing challenges related to funding and scalability within universities (Kadikilo et al., 2024; Mwantimwa et al., 2021). Although a basic social innovation ecosystem is evident through high community participation and leadership engagement, greater coherence, visibility, and impact are required, especially through enhanced collaboration, stronger industry and international linkages, and more effective translation of research into societal outcomes, as emphasized in studies on transformational and values-based leadership in higher education (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Fulford & Coleman, 2021; Huang et al., 2022; Belcher et al., 2022; Mudd-Fegett & Mudd, 2024; Nafal et al., 2024; Tadesse et al., 2024).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on Social Innovation

Statement	Frequency and Percentage (%)				SA	Mean	Std dev
	SD	D	N	A			
The university research Initiatives emphasise addressing societal challenges.	34 (4.8)	72 (10.3)	232 (33.2)	178 (41.8)	182 (25.5)	3.1917	.86969
The University encouraged faculty and students to participate in interdisciplinary Research that addresses social issues	14 (2)	80 (11.5)	234 (33.5)	201 (28.8)	169 (24.2)	3.1681	.82001
The university has established incubation hubs that support socially impactful startups.	46 (6.6)	108 (15.5)	217 (31)	188 (26.9)	139 (20)	3.1103	.83546
The university provides funds to help students and entrepreneurs turn their ideas into social ventures.	17 (2.4)	80 (11.5)	242 (34.7)	194 (27.8)	165 (23.6)	3.1738	.83154
The university innovation and incubation hubs have led to the effective formation of projects for social impact	16 (2.3)	77 (11.1)	263 (37.8)	177 (25.4)	163 (23.4)	3.0475	.84558
The university is aggressively involved in community outreach programs that address crucial societal challenges	6 (0.9)	91 (13.1)	257 (36.9)	206 (43.8)	137 (34.0)	3.0689	.85155
The university students and faculty frequently participate in community service, service-oriented leadership and social development initiatives	12 (1.7)	105 (15)	226 (32.4)	220 (31.6)	135 (19.3)	3.0645	.88028
The university community engagement and creativity have led to an improvement in the local community	18 (2.6)	111 (15.9)	243 (35)	195 (28)	128 (18.4)	3.1117	.80821
Average						3.1239	

4.2 Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis indicates that visionary leadership is strongly and positively associated with social innovation in Tanzanian public universities, underscoring its key role in fostering socially responsive and innovative outcomes. The significant relationship ($r = .742, p < .01$) suggests that when university leaders communicate a clear, inspiring vision of the future, they enhance the institution’s ability to develop innovative solutions to societal issues. This supports the idea that visionary leadership creates strategic coherence by connecting long-term goals with shared values and public service, which is vital for promoting social innovation in higher education (Fulford & Coleman, 2021; Tadesse et al., 2024).

Table 3: Correlation Results

		Visionary Leadership
Visionary leadership	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000
Social Innovation	Pearson Correlation	.742**
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000

4.3 Regression Analysis

This study explored the link between visionary leadership and social innovation in Tanzanian public universities. The regression analysis shows an R value of 0.742, indicating a strong correlation between observed and predicted social innovation levels, and a positive relationship between visionary leadership and social innovation. The R-squared is 0.555, indicating that 55.5% of the variation in social innovation is explained by visionary leadership, while the remaining 44.5% is attributable to other factors not included in the model. The adjusted R-squared is 0.741, confirming that visionary leadership explains about 55.5% of the variance, even after accounting for the constant. The standard error of the estimate is 0.35541, representing the average deviation of social innovation from the predicted line.

Table 4: Model Summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
0.742	.555	.741	.35541

The model presents a summary of an analysis of variance, showing the sum of squares, degrees of freedom, and mean square for two sources of variation: regression and residual. For the explained variation, the mean square (calculated as the sum of squares divided by the degrees of freedom) is 163.527, with 1 degree of freedom. Conversely, the residuals—indicating variation not explained by the model—have the following values: sum of squares of 131.116, 680 degrees of freedom, and a mean square of 163.527. The F statistic, which is the regression mean square divided by the residual mean square, is 888.244. The overall relationship was statistically significant ($F(1, 680) = 888.244, p < 0.05$). The significance level is 0.000, suggesting an almost zero probability that the results are due to chance. This indicates that the linear regression model fits the data well and can be used to predict the impact of visionary leadership on social innovation in Tanzanian public universities.

Table 5: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	163.523	1	163.527	888.244	.000
Residual	131.116	680	0.184		
Total	294.643	681			

The regression analysis examined the influence of visionary leadership on social innovation in public universities in Tanzania. The results indicate a positive and statistically significant relationship between the two variables. The estimated regression coefficient for visionary leadership was $\beta = 0.715$, indicating that a one-unit increase in visionary leadership is associated with a 0.715-unit increase in social innovation, holding other factors constant.

The fitted regression model was $Y = 8.56 + 0.715X + \epsilon$, where Y denotes social innovation, and X represents visionary leadership. The intercept ($\beta_0 = 8.56$) suggests that without visionary leadership, social innovation stays at its baseline level, reflecting other institutional factors. The relationship's significance is confirmed by a t-value of 10.652, well above the 1.96 threshold at the 5% level. The p-value ($p < 0.001$) indicates that the effect is unlikely to be due to chance. Consequently, the null hypothesis of no relationship between visionary leadership and social innovation is rejected. ANOVA results, with a strong overall fit ($F = 888.244$, $p < 0.001$), provide additional support, affirming that visionary leadership is a key predictor of social innovation in Tanzanian public universities. From an interpretive standpoint, these findings highlight the significance of visionary leadership marked by strategic foresight, inspiration, and creativity. Strategic thinking helps university leaders forecast emerging societal issues and align institutional goals with national development plans, including Tanzania's Vision 2050. Inspirational leadership energises academic staff, students, and external partners around common institutional aims, fostering collective efforts toward socially impactful initiatives. Creativity supports this by turning vision into action through innovative strategies such as interdisciplinary collaboration, community-driven problem-solving, and the blending of indigenous knowledge with scientific research. Collectively, these leadership qualities enhance universities' capacity to develop sustainable social innovations that address urgent challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and environmental concerns.

Overall, the empirical evidence demonstrates that visionary leadership plays a pivotal role in strengthening the social innovation function of public universities in Tanzania. Developing leaders who combine strategic orientation, inspirational capability, and creative problem-solving is therefore essential for positioning universities as effective agents of social and national development.

Table 6: Regression Coefficients

Unstandardized Coefficients			Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	8.56	.540		15.747	.000
Visionary Leadership	.715	.180	.742	10.652	.000

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that visionary leadership significantly influences social innovation in Tanzanian public universities. Leaders who articulate compelling visions, inspire stakeholders, and embed ethical values in institutional practices enhance universities' capacity to address societal challenges. Strengthening visionary, values-based leadership is therefore essential to positioning public universities as effective agents of social transformation.

6. Recommendations

- i. Strengthen Visionary Leadership Training: Provide university leaders with comprehensive training in visionary and values-driven leadership, with a focus on honing skills in strategic communication, effective stakeholder engagement, and innovative problem-solving to foster institutional excellence.
- ii. Expand Innovation Hubs: Allocate resources to develop and scale dedicated Innovation Spaces that foster interdisciplinary collaboration and enable students to devise practical solutions to pressing societal issues.
- iii. Enhance Community Engagement: Establish targeted, community-oriented initiatives, including vocational training workshops and consulting services, to tackle local challenges and drive sustainable development outcomes.
- iv. Align with National Goals: Synchronise university strategies with Tanzania's National Development Vision 2025, prioritising initiatives that advance poverty alleviation and gender equality to amplify broader societal contributions.
- v. Foster Ethical Governance: Cultivate ethical leadership practices across the institution to foster trust, enhance accountability, and secure external funding for impactful social innovation endeavours.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in the conduct and publication of this research.

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