# SUSTAINABLE HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP: A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH FROM THE FUNCTIONALIST PARADIGM FOR HIGHER INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING

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## Abstract

**Propose of the study:** This paper intends to explore the concept of sustainable higher education leadership and to develop a propose conceptual approach of leadership for higher institutions of learning from the perspective of the functionalist paradigm.

**The Methodology:** The paper critically analyzed the concept of sustainable higher education leadership, explore the functionalist paradigm, and their relevance in leading higher institutions of learning. The paper have methodologically selected the three main concepts of the paradigm and link them with higher institutions of learning and work out a plan and modalities on how they could be applied in practice.

**Main Findings:** The main findings and the contribution of the paper were identified in the two main sections. The first, explore the definitions and features of various functionalist paradigm and its dimensions within the cycle of leadership. While the second part of the paper synthesized the theories and discuss their relevance with sustainable leadership in higher education and systematically come up with a framework/model that is practically applicable within the context of higher educational institutions of learning.

**Applications of this study**: This research can be applicable to the higher institutions of learning including Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges as well as Moto-technics.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** This research paper has critically analyzed the functionalist paradigm with a specific focus on leadership and systematically come up with a framework/model on how such can be applied in the leadership of higher educational institutions of learning.

*Keywords: Sustainability, Higher Education, Leadership, Functionalist, Framework, Higher Institutions.*

## INTRODUCTION

The functionalist paradigm is important to a conceptual understanding of educational organizations, particularly in studying the various concepts and theories in educational leadership and management. This is primarily because the functionalist theory is one of the three basic paradigms that are used in studying educational leadership and management alongside the interpretive paradigm and the new social theory-postmodernism. What is interesting about the functionalist paradigm is the fact that it encompasses a diversity of many if not all the theoretical approaches. In a recent development, (Salihu, 2019) have synthesized various leadership theories and propose a framework for their application in higher education leadership.

As stated by Morgan, (1980), the functionalist paradigm is mainly *"based on the assumption that every society has a concrete, real existence, and a systemic character which are oriented to produce an ordered and regulated state of affairs".* What is interesting about Morgan's viewpoints on the functionalist paradigm is the fact that it emphasizes on the specific roles that human beings play in the society, that is in the development and continuous growth of a specific society and further seeks to understand the specific roles and behaviors of individuals are affected by the society they are involved in. Also, another interesting fact about the functionalist perspective is its aim of understanding the entire society as a whole and how it specifically generates empirical knowledge. In the context however of understanding the nature and ways of working of organizations, the functionalist perspective according to Morgan, (1980) emphasizes how organizations and all its members may be able to orient and direct their actions and behavior to the achievement of their future states. As it was stated in the journal article "In the functionalist paradigm, behaviour is always seen as being contextually bound in a real-world of concrete and tangible social relationship…… (p. 608)."

For instance, with regard to the ontological assumptions of the functionalist paradigm, the main assumption is that both the organizational and social world is considered an objective phenomenon, that is, it exists as a material and a concrete entity that is external to an individual. Reality then is determined or found in the specific relationships and concrete behavior that exists among these various parts. With regard to the assumptions about human nature, the functionalist paradigm is at the extreme objectivist end of the dimension wherein the nature of man is conceived in terms of stimulus-response terms, and man is seen as a product of certain forces in the environment. And finally, with regard to the assumptions about the society, the functionalist paradigm states that the society is "*a system made up of parts each of which performs a particular function in the operation of the whole*" Macions, (1989). In the context therefore of an organizational society, the

functionalist paradigm views that a society is a specific structure that is characterized with an orderly set of social structures (Morgan, 1980).

The functionalist paradigm is focused too much on the functional integration of all the individual members of specific structures as well as their specific roles. Basically, the functionalists or the advocates of the functionalist paradigm as better when it comes to identifying and describing specific patterns and structures than in explaining their significance as well as how they contribute for instance to the success and growth of an organization or a specific society. If we were to be critical of the functionalist theory therefore, it lacks a deeper explanation on the significance of each of the functions and members of a specific structure that other theories such as the interpretive paradigm are capable of explaining (Holmwood, 2005).

### Leadership for sustainability in higher education

There was the number of concerns with regards to the concept of higher education leadership in reference to considering the importance of higher education institutions in nation-building (UNU, 2007). However, the concept of sustainable leadership in higher education has been summarized in two main points, thus challenging the status quo Hopwood et al. (2005), Sustainability leadership through the "institutional middle" In accordance with this, Salihu & Ramendah (2015) further indicated the need for global educators which are expected to be from universities covering the transmission of knowledge which will aid increase in political consciousness for sustainable development nation-building.

### The Theoretical Underpinnings of the Functionalist Theory

According to Martindale, (1965), the functionalist theory in the context of the management of educational institutions is concerned with the ways by which universal education is able to cater to the needs of the society. One of the best advantages of the functionalist paradigm in the field of educational management is its contributions in specifically identifying the role and importance of education in each of the individual members of the society. In a simplistic way, the functionalist paradigm considers education in the manifest role which includes conveying the basic skills and knowledge to the next generation.

In addition, Stocking, (1984) states that another basic foundation of the functionalist theory or paradigm revolves around the basic idea of education being an important transmitter of the core and moral values to the society as well as any organization. In Australia, it's that the basic characteristics of the economic and political systems of the country are what fuel the further growth of education. The specific values set in place and exercised by the individual members of the society also influence the management of the educational institutions including the basic moral precepts of these institutions of learning and the basic role of the functionalist paradigm is to explain how this process of transmission is facilitated.

Based on the functionalist perspective, educational organizations and its accompanying structures are treated and understood as existing exclusively for the benefit of its members as well as the pursuit of a particular purpose. In a typical functional paradigm, each organizational member operates more or less within the specified rational bounds and is characterized by single-minded uniformity which is solely intended for the achievement of certain organizational goals (Putnam, 1983).

As educators and teachers, we view the functional paradigm and its theoretical underpinnings as important as there is no other theory or paradigm that gives enough focus on the functional role of every structure, system, and the individual member of an organization other than this paradigm contestable. In addition, its focus on the causal relation, behavioral inputs, sensory inputs and the mental states of these elements comprising an organization has also proven to be quite important as even in the everyday context, the functionalist paradigm is capable of explaining how a system must perform its specific function in order to attain its objectives. Nevertheless, the functionalist paradigm and its basic foundational ideas may somehow be limiting because it is not only the function and the causal relationships among the specific elements in an organization which are important but also the implications of such functions and the significance of every element comprising it.

### The Three Theoretical Appearances within the Functionalist Paradigm

Morgan, (2006), identifies three distinct theoretical approaches that fall within the functionalist paradigm and these are the rational-technical approaches, organic approaches, and the political science approaches.

**The rational-technical approaches** The rational-technical approaches trace its major theoretical sources from the ideas of Weber and Taylor One of its most practical examples is the machine analogy in organizational science wherein the machine was thought to be the "concept of the organization" With regard to managing educational institutions on the other hand, the rational technical approach has two elements which include scientific management and classical management theory, the paper has taken the brief discussion of the element and related which is relevant to his practice.

1. Classical management: - The classical management theory developed from efforts to find the "one best way" to perform and manage tasks. This school of thought is made up of two branches: classical scientific and classical administrative. Classical management, however, was an idea that turned in favour of work specialization, a belief that management should be the one to organize work according to specific skills of each individual worker thereby reducing

the amount of time and effort needed. it, however, paid little consideration to the human needs and condition of its workers. There were indeed subsequent developments of efficiency within the product line, but classical management almost seemed to "dehumanise the practice of management".

2. Scientific management: - A theory that suggests that there is a 'best' way to perform work tasks or the administration of a business or industry based on experimental studies of efficiency, it also seems like the application of the principles of the scientific method to managing a business, Taylor, (1911)

However, in respect of current relevance the scientific management fall in the university which the author's selected to relate this theory as a case of the following reason,

1. The selected institution always adopts scientific methodologies while planning its curriculum, implementation and it is supervision.

2. The selected institution always use scientific element while setting its objectives to replace the old rule-of-thumb objectives.

3. The selected institution selects the scientific method of training and development of its workers instead of them choosing their own tasks and train themselves as best they could.

4. The selected institution develop a spirit of hearty cooperation between workers and the management to ensure that work would be carried out in accordance with scientific devised procedures.

5. In the selected institution there is Self-evident in its philosophy as the organizations are arranged in a hierarchy, systems of abstract rules and impersonal relationships between staff

**The Organic Approaches**

In the second approach within the functionalist paradigm, Morgan, (2006b) states that the basic ideas with the organic approaches are six different elements which includes open system theory, human recourses theory, socio-technical theory, contingency theory, loose coupling, organization culture and population ecology. This paper will take a look at two of the element in brief and relate which is are related to practice.

1. Open system: - the interactions between parts in the system become more complex and variable, under the element of an organic approach, the open system seems in relevance with the selected institution because its "multi-cephalous: many heads are present to receive information, make decisions, direct action, Individual and subgroups form and leave coalitions. Boundaries are amorphous, permeable, and ever-changing. But the system recourses exchange resources with the environment to survive. The selected institution also engages in two main sets of system processes. Morphstasis processes in organizations tend to preserve the systems given form through socialization and control activities. Morphogenesis processes elaborate or changes the system, often by becoming more complex or differentiated.

2. Loose coupling: - This refers to patterns of action that are distinct, or separate from each other, yet are still responsive to each other in some fashion (Orton & Weick, 1990). Loose coupling is a dialectic concept offering an alternative to both tightly coupled or decoupled system concepts. Loose coupling is applicable to multiple levels and units of analysis (technical, conceptual, social, and organizational, supra-organizational) and can be used in support of multi-level theorizing, and as a dependent and independent variable (Orton & Weick 1990). While the idea of loose coupling is implied in many classics of the organization theory (e.g., Gouldner 1956; Blau & Scott 1962; Thompson 1967; Lawrence & Lorsch 1967).

In the context of managing higher educational institution, on the other hand, Sergiovanni, (1995) provided a very vivid link between an institution's culture and its excellence as he stated that "*All schools have cultures, but successful schools seem to have strong and functional cultures aligned with a vision of quality institution..*" In this paper's interpretation, this implies that culture as a main attribute of the organization serves a very significant functionalist role in the success of managing educational institutions.

**Political Science Approaches**

Finally, in the third functionalist theory approach which is the political science approach which has four-element comprises of power and authority, conflict, pluralism and decision making the author of this paper has taken a look into two of the element into practice.

1. Power and authority: - Organizational structure is a means of facilitating the achievement of Organizational objectives such structures are not static, but dynamic. They reorganize in response to changing conditions that occur in the environment, new technology, or organizational growth. Organizational structures are dependent upon the employees whose activities they guide. Supervisors rely upon power and authority to ensure that employees get things done.

However the practice of power and authority in the educational organizational picture has full relevance with the selected institution and it's expected to be relevant in every organization because once power and authority are not in presences

then there will not be management , in the selected institution power is given to those in a high position within the institution in order to influence the organization towards achieving its goal in general, i.e Campus Director, Campus Director academic, Campus Director administration, register and deans of various faculties. Also, there is an authority which is given to some people called supervisor i.e programme coordinators and head departments whom received the command from those in the position of power, their main function in respect of the Campus Director is to give direction to subordinates in discharging their responsibilities i.e the teachers, laboratory technicians among others.

Decision making: - A major concern in management has been to understand and improve decision making. Various approaches have been proposed by educational psychologists, most based on a "divide-and-conquer" strategy. This strategy – also labelled "problem decomposition" – involves breaking a large decision problem into smaller parts. The idea is not new. There have been two approaches to management decision making in (Huber, 1980).

In line with all this information, this paper considers the functionalist theories, despite certain aspects prone to criticisms, as indeed relevant to the organization and the management of higher educational institutions because one, it raises the importance of acknowledging organizations and educational institutions as more than simple mechanical machines and are rightfully considered as one of the most significant institutions in every society due to its ability to establish strong and trustworthy relationships which other societal institutions are not capable of accomplishing. Secondly, the functionalist theories emphasize the importance of organizational culture which is deemed to be one of the major attributes/characteristics of an organization that must be regulated and adapted in order to ensure the institution's survival. Above all, it was emphasized that culture was closely linked to educational institution's success, an idea which other theories did not manage to focus on. And third, this paper considers the functionalist theories as being relevant to the organization and the management of educational institutions because it somehow lowers down the organization's expectations on decision-making as a maker of excellent decisions to merely a tool that reflects the pursuit of interests by competing groups and therefore not necessarily aimed at 'the best' decision.

**An image or metaphor that captured the authors Understanding of the Theory as it Applies to particular Practice**

The main image or metaphor which captured the author's understanding of the functionalist theory is the image of a *machine* that serves as a rational instrument for achieving pre-determined ends or specific organizational goals.
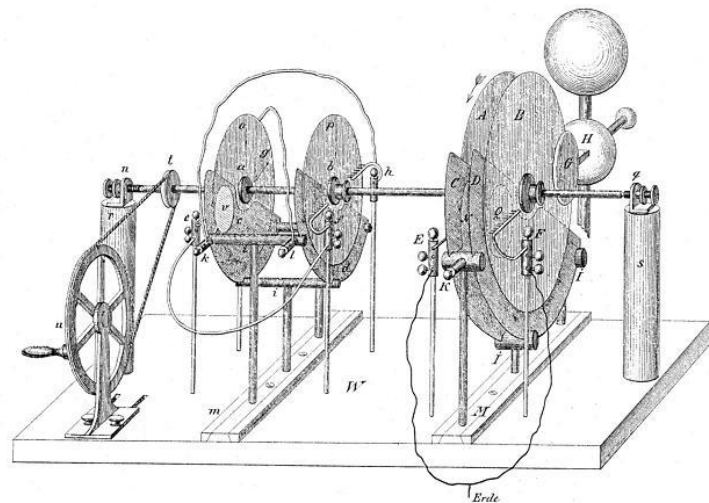


**Figure 1:** Image of a machine

Inline teaching profession, this paper considers the educational institutions part of as the machine which fulfils the specific goal of teaching and sharing knowledge to students while the role of teachers' may be considered one of the most significant attributes of the educational institution or the "machine". It's deemed necessary that teachers' contribution to the achievement of organizational goals must also be valued in instrumental terms under this metaphor

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the functionalist theory is undoubtedly an important part of the many underlying concepts in the field of educational leadership and management as it is one of the three basic paradigms that are usually tackled in studying educational management as a whole. The functionalist paradigm or theory encompasses a diversity of theoretical approaches that aim to understand the entire society as a whole and how it specifically generates empirical knowledge exactly. In the practical context of leading and managing educational originations, the functionalist paradigm also proves to play a significant role as it focuses on the functional role of every structure, system and the individual member of an organization. Also, its strong emphasis on the causal relation, behavioral inputs, sensory inputs and the mental states of these elements comprising an organization is quite helpful as well as in the everyday context as the functionalist paradigm explains how a system must perform its specific function in order to attain its objectives. There are however certain disadvantages in utilizing mainly the functionalist theory although they can be managed and strictly be limited.

## LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study was limited to the application of the analysed theory with the context of management of higher educational institutions. Consequently a similar study can be conducted on the feasibility of application of the similar theory and concepts in other context of educational settings.

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