



**Strategic Leadership in a crisis: digital adaptation, resilience, and service continuity in
South Africa's academic library during the COVID-19 Pandemic.**

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Declaration

I, Lindiwe O. Gumede, hereby declare that the research work presented in this dissertation is my original work and has not been previously submitted in its entirety or in part for a degree in any other university. I also declare that this research work does not violate the right of others, as all the sources cited or quoted are indicated and acknowledged by means of a comprehensive list of references towards the end of this document.

04 June 2024

Lindiwe O. Gumede

Date

Approved for final submission:

Dedications

To my late grandmother, Edith kaMadondo Gumede, this is for you. I am who I am because of you. You were my biggest supporter and always believed in my dreams. I still feel your love, and your prayers are still guiding and protecting me. I will keep making you proud. Thank you, “Nomakhisimusi”.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented crisis that significantly disrupted essential services and leadership practices within academic libraries worldwide. This study explored the strategic leadership of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Library during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis, focusing on how senior management navigated the challenges to sustain library services. Using a qualitative exploratory design, purposive sampling was employed to select eight members of the top management team—senior managers and departmental heads—with direct leadership responsibilities during the pandemic. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analysed thematically, employing open coding and constant comparison techniques to identify emergent themes relating to leadership styles, practices, and challenges. Findings reveal that strategic leaders at UKZN Library demonstrated agile and adaptive leadership, employing crisis management meetings, resource provision for remote work, and proactive communication to manage service disruptions effectively. Leadership styles were characterized by empathy, collaboration, and accountability, which were critical in maintaining staff morale and operational continuity. However, leaders faced significant challenges, including poor internet connectivity, inadequate digital leadership training, work-life balance difficulties, and resistance to change. The study highlights the importance of strategic leadership competencies such as digital literacy, flexibility, and emotional intelligence in navigating complex crises in academic libraries. This research contributes to the limited literature on academic library leadership during crises, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive leadership frameworks that address the unique challenges faced in digital and uncertain environments. Recommendations include enhanced leadership development programs focusing on digital skills, change management, and wellbeing support to better prepare academic libraries for future disruptions. This research offers valuable insights for current and aspiring library leaders, policymakers, and scholars interested in strategic leadership in higher education settings during times of crisis.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The digital technology changes and COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need for new skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of leadership and followership in the organisation such as the academic library to resonate with the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) of the digital environment (Mustika, Firmansyah and Ilhami, (2024). While flexible working arrangements have been around for decades, Covid-19 made them mainstream.

The world is presently in the digital era, where analogue is obsolete and replaced by digital; the world is becoming smaller as it is easier and more convenient to engage globally. It is easier to locate and find information due to the internet and robotics, where machines perform the work that humans conventionally do. Singhal (2020) revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic forced many organisations to change their ways of operating. Singhal (2020) further indicated that various organisations went digital by providing their services online, and it became no different to libraries. This current era, which is predominated by self-driving cars, self-learning robots and technological innovations that can perform human functions and engage with humans, refers to the fourth industrial revolution as the era of smart machines (Caetano and Charamba, 2017).

According to Zareef and Ahmad (202), the digital revolution and Covid 19 have affected different types of organisations, including the academic library, raising questions such as what types of leadership styles and competencies are appropriate to lead academic libraries in a world increasingly lived online by students and researchers. These library users can fulfil some of their information needs from an academic library (Sehar and Shahid, 2020). Leadership played a crucial role in Academic libraries' response to the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) in South Africa. Verma, Deori, and Verma (2022) revealed that some of the challenges that came into existence during the COVID-19 outbreak included lockdowns, where people were forced to remain indoors and not allowed to go out; others included deaths and shocking statistics of infections. This triggered a fundamental need to rethink how libraries can establish innovative ways to continue providing user services.

Academic leaders of libraries have experienced a transition from print to electronic collections. Singh, Kataria, and Dey (2021) stated that academic libraries in South Africa must make use of the digital space. Similarly, Zunino, Matsuda, Matsuda, and Gonzáles (2024) indicated that as information seems to be unreservedly and generally accessible on the web, the question of the library's relevancy is an issue for

Academic leaders of libraries. Other scholars have revealed that libraries suffer from budget cuts (Aslam, 2019). Leading a public university library is key to the success of academics, students, researchers and the entire university (Aslam, 2019). It is, therefore, interesting to explore the leadership of top leaders in a digitised, networked, and rapid change of higher education. This study focuses on leadership manifested by those at the upper echelon of the University of KwaZulu-Natal during the Covid-19 crisis.

1.2 Background of the study

Leadership is regarded as one of the crucial aspects of an organisation. However, the reviewed literature revealed that few studies have focused on effective leadership in academic libraries. Aslam (2019) asserted that practices in academic libraries have often concentrated on management, administration, and library service rather than leadership and leadership development. Similarly, Sharma, Gupta, and Saxena (2021) stated that readings on the general leadership of libraries and academic libraries in the digital era are particularly scarce. Darling-Hammond, Michaels, Allen, Chae, Thomas, Nguyen, Mujahid, and Johnson (2020) revealed that academic libraries are unique as they support higher education teaching, learning and research. Commonly, academic libraries have rigid hierarchical structures, clearly defined organisational roles, and hierarchical rank (Staninger, 2016). Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) further indicated that these libraries tend to employ library assistants, student workers, administrators, and librarians, each with specific responsibilities. However, Ocholla (2019) also indicated that many academic institutions are aware of the need for academic library services to be remotely and conveniently accessed by users.

Panahi, Ghorbanpour, Moradi, Eidy, and Amjadian (2024) revealed that to develop the leadership competencies of academic library leaders, it is key to understand the variety of problems they face in leading a library. Le (2014) conducted a survey in the USA to point out the core five significant difficulties of university library leaders. In a different study in the USA, Aslam (2019) also viewed the perspective of academic leaders regarding the challenges faced by leadership and academic libraries. The results of the study conducted by Aslam (2019) revealed that a key to academic library leadership is a shared vision. Panahi et al. (2024) indicated that developing skills for library leadership at all levels in the backdrop of the shrinking budget for private and public institutions is a crucial challenge. Rezapour and Elmshaeuser (2022) assert that the top five essential attributes for academic library leadership include vision, uprightness, the executives' aptitudes, cooperation, and relational abilities. Mentorship, leadership development programs, practical library leadership experience, opportunities to exercise leadership roles,

and self-awareness are essential to develop leadership skills (Mancini, Chapman, Kadir, Model, and Prati, 2024).

According to Dahal (2023), academic library leaders who become successful are those who motivate and encourage their followers to exceed expectations. Robertson (2023) indicated that they boost the confidence of their employees as they support a high level of standards and values. In organisational terms, successful leaders can develop a strategic plan and support subordinates to achieve the library's mission (Romero, Miranda, Montero, Sepulveda, and Valero-Amaro, 2023). When change comes, these leaders demonstrate flexibility and different styles of leadership to lead themselves and others (). O'Conner (2014) asserted that library professionals also need a solid tech-savvy background along with traditional skills and qualifications.

Fought and Misawa (2016) indicated that a set of innovative skills is required for successful leadership, which includes managing team members, having concrete communication skills, having change management skills, and the ability to adapt. Academic librarians of the 21st Century need networking to stay in touch with their colleagues, current clients, and potential clients (Fought and Misawa, 2016). Developing and strengthening the relationship is a vehicle for marketing library services and opening up opportunities to teach students information literacy skills in a university. According to Ocholla (2019) academic libraries in 4IR will need smart jobs and smart policies (adaptable, responsive, sensitive, ethical/social justice).

This study focuses exclusively on academic libraries to understand the leadership that was manifest by the senior managers during the Covid-19 crisis. The population will be based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Library, one of the departments that offers professional support to teaching and learning in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The university has 4246 staff and 444592 students. It is a product of the merger of the University of Natal and Westville University. It consists of five campuses: Pietermaritzburg, Edgewood Campus, Westville Campus, Howard Collage Campus, and Medical School.

1.3 Problem Statement

There is limited literature that focuses on the leadership of academic libraries during a crisis (Ortega, 2019). This is worrisome for two key reasons; firstly, the leadership of an academic library is a place for study. Research is critical for the success of students, academics, and researchers in a university (Aslam, 2019). Secondly, Edition (2020) revealed that limited research on leadership in academic libraries is a

problem in South Africa and globally. A quantitative study conducted by Le (2014) focused on the challenges and leadership skills of academic library leadership in the digital age in the USA. This study comes close to the current research but differs in two ways. Firstly, the present study is qualitative and not quantitative. Secondly, the current study focuses on a South African academic library, not the USA. Within South Africa, the study of leadership styles of senior librarians in a public library in Cape Town is slightly similar to the current study but different also in two ways (Denton, 2013). Notably, the current study focuses on academic and not public libraries.

Furthermore, the study conducted by Denton (2013) is old, limited to leadership style, and excludes leadership effectiveness and practices. Libraries are evolving, digitalising services, and offering online library services to library users (Gruenewald, Schroettner, von Bonin, Pallesen, Rosengarten, Schubert, Lohmann, Machetanz, Spieth, Koch, and Bornstein, 2021). The current challenge for library leaders is to adapt and lead others, especially during times of disruptions such as Covid 19 pandemic. While there is research on toxic leadership in the library, there is a gap in research focusing exclusively on how to become an effective strategic leader in an academic library and how to lead the academic library during a crisis. In light of the above, the current qualitative study seeks to explore not only the leadership practices and effectiveness of leadership styles but also challenges faced by strategic leaders of an academic library during a crisis in South Africa.

1.4 Research Aim

This study aims to explore the strategic leadership practices adopted by senior library leaders at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the objective of understanding how leadership styles, decision-making approaches, and institutional challenges influenced the library's crisis response and digital transformation.

1.5 Research Objectives

The main research objective of this qualitative study is to explore strategic leadership of the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis.

There are three specific objectives of this exploratory study which are as follows:

- 1.4.1 To investigate practices utilised by strategic leaders of the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Covid-19 crisis.
- 1.4.2 To explore the effectiveness of leadership styles of strategic leaders of the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis.

1.4.3 To examine the challenges experienced by strategic leaders in leading the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis.

1.6 Research Questions

The research objectives stated above have the following corresponding key research questions:

1.5.1 What are the practices of strategic leaders of the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Covid-19 crisis?

1.5.2 How effective are the leadership styles of strategic leaders of the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis?

1.5.3 What are the challenges experienced by strategic leaders in leading the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Covid-19 crisis?

1.7 Significance of the study

This exploratory study on the practices, styles and challenges of strategic leaders of an academic library is valuable to current and future leaders as it uncovers what they think as strategic leadership and what they practice as strategic leaders during a crisis to ensure continued provision of library services. This is also helpful to upcoming strategic leaders in the library as it has the potential to provide insights into what works or not in the academic library. Finally, the findings on strategic leadership style, strategic leadership practice, and strategic leadership effectiveness are key for leadership development practitioners to consider when designing training to develop the competences of strategic leaders in the academic library.

1.8 Delimitations of the study

The delimitations of this study focus on strategic leaders of the University of KwaZulu-Natal Library. Only employees in the leadership and upper-echelon positions making strategic decisions participated in this study as they can reflect on their strategies of leading the long-term direction of the academic library during the Covid 19 crisis. This study is purely qualitative and exploratory, therefore it focuses on the decisions and strategies the strategic leadership made during the changes that arrived with the coronavirus 2019 crisis to continue to offer the services that the library is meant to offer.

The second delimitation is that the study was done only with strategic leaders from five University of KwaZulu-Natal Libraries, which are in Durban Howards College, Westville, Medical School, Edgewood

and Pietermaritzburg. The third delimitation is that the study only focused on the University of KwaZulu-Natal, it doesn't take other universities or other economic sectors into consideration.

1.9 Structure of the dissertation

This current dissertation on the exploration of strategies employed by strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Coronavirus disease 2019 crisis includes five chapters. Each of these chapters is briefly explained below.

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter presented the background and the significance of this study. The research problem and the aim, objectives, and research questions were also outlined. This chapter concluded by providing delimitation and the structure of this thesis before summary.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter presented a brief description of the origin and evolution of strategic leadership, as well as differences and similarities in definitions of strategic leadership. It continued by discussing the nature of strategic leadership and challenges in the library environment. Strategic leadership practices were deeply explained in the process, and the theories that support the current study were based on strategic leadership. These theories included the upper echelon theory and its criticism. The existing framework of strategic leadership was also incorporated. This framework included the cynefin framework, which applies to decision-making in ordered and unordered situations.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter discussed research methodology used in this qualitative study. Research paradigms were also elaborated. This included postpositivist, constructivism, transformative, and pragmatism. The research methodological approaches were deeply explained, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. This chapter concludes with sampling and its techniques and the data collection and analysis, which will be conducted in chapter four of this study.

Chapter Four: Presentation of results

This chapter present the results of this qualitative study on exploring strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Coronavirus disease 2019 crisis. These results presented reveal the themes on practices of strategic leaders, effectiveness of leadership styles used by strategic leaders,

challenges experienced by strategic leaders in leading the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Covid-19 crisis.

Chapter five: Discussion of Results

The chapter will provide an in-depth discussion of the study's findings. The findings will be discussed in relation with existing studies done by others and relevant existing theories, draw conclusions and discuss the implications of the results.

Chapter six: Conclusion and recommendation

This chapter concludes this study by providing an in-depth discussion of the analysis and recommendations on the exploration of strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Coronavirus disease 2019 crisis. This chapter also suggests new ideas for future research on improving leadership strategies, especially during times of need.

1.10 Chapter Summary

This introductory chapter has provided a background which unpacked the variety of changes and disruptions in the world and academic libraries triggered by Covid 19. The research problem, aim, objectives, and questions were also presented in this chapter to introduce the entire study. Lastly, the chapter has presented the delimitation and the structure of this thesis before presenting a chapter summary. The next chapter will discuss and review the relevant literature in this study on strategic leadership practices, styles and challenges faced during Covid 19 crisis. Thereafter, the chapters discuss the upper echelon theory,

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The aim of the current chapter is to discuss relevant literature on strategic leadership relevant to academic library. The chapter starts by unpacking the origins, definition, and nature of strategic leadership before focusing on strategic leadership practices. Thereafter, the chapter delves into Upper echelon theory and cynefin framework of five decision-making contexts for leadership. Lastly, the chapter discusses previous studies on academic library leadership within and outside South Africa before presenting a summary.

2.2 Origin and Evolution of Strategic Leadership

According to Samimi, Cortes, Anderson, and Herrmann (2022), leadership traits set the scene for the historical development of leadership theory. It is the precursor of the origins of leadership theory, emphasising how a leader's approach and functioning make a difference to followers (Samimi et al., 2022). The reviewed literature shows evidence of leadership being a traceable discourse to ancient Egyptian and Arabian Cities. Schaedler, Graf-Vlachy, and König (2022) revealed that, by extension, ancient scholars and philosophers of Greek and Egyptian descent have had significant interest and influence on the development and study of leadership. These developments prevailed from the 1940s until the end of the twentieth century (Avolio, 2009). A broader framework called the complete leadership theory was the outcome of scholars' and practitioners' efforts to study and integrate different leadership models (Almohaimed and Saleh, 2024). Golensky and Hager (2020) revealed that leadership is the most studied and least understood topic. Proponents of the *Great Theory* believe leaders are born, endowed with heroic ability and potential, had the exclusive advantage of becoming leaders (Golensky and Hager, 2020). Inevitably, this stance changed with the emergence of evidence from recent studies proving the unpredictability of leadership effectiveness based on known traits. Researchers (Hill and Jones, 2021) shifted their perspective to a leader's behaviour, style, development, and effectiveness. It follows that different leadership styles impact organisational vision, goals, mission, culture, structure and rules, which are also related to the strategic management of the organisation (Nwachukwu and Vu, 2020).

A survey of 15 South African academic libraries presented a summary of key academic libraries' strategic priorities as follows:

- Dynamic teaching and learning support
- Enhancing research and innovation

- Strategic partnerships and collaborations
- Sustainability (financial, environmental, institutional) through good governance, leadership, and management
- Enabling access to relevant and appropriate resources for academic success
- Attracting, nurturing and retaining staff of high calibre

A survey from Luciano, Nahrgang, and Shropshire (2020) revealed that all libraries had the same governance and reporting structure and that all library directors report to a university executive member i.e. Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC). In addition, 85% indicated the existence of a Senate-appointed Library Committee, which meets annually or quarterly. This Committee, most often chaired by the DVC and comprising representatives of the various faculties, related research support departments and student structures, consults with the Library Director and advises the University Senate on library policies, plans and strategies, funding, and future developments.

2.3 Differences and similarities in definitions of strategic leadership

Agarwal, Braguinsky, and Ohyama (2020) revealed that a common thread among strategic leadership definitions focuses on leading a group towards a goal. Leaders play an essential role in achieving organisational goals by creating a climate influencing employee attitudes, motivation, and behaviour. Pietraszewski (2020) stated that strategic leadership is about understanding yourself and your goals. Pietraszewski (2020) further indicated that it is about understanding the situation, considering options, and deciding. It's also about getting the best out of people, the best out of the problem, so the organisation does well. Leaders who lead strategically have done the inner work necessary to lead with integrity, vision, and purpose (Mahdi and Nassar, 2021). A review study conducted on different definitions of strategic leadership researched by various authors is depicted below in Table 2.1

Table 2.1 Different definitions of strategic leadership

Author	Year	Focus	Strategic Leader	Definition	Main Conclusion
Ireland and Hitt	2023	The role of strategic leadership in	Leaders who anticipate,	Strategic leadership is the ability to	Strategic leadership influences

		achieving competitiveness	envision, and empower	anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, and empower others to create strategic change as necessary.	organisational culture and long-term goals.
Boal and Hooijberg	2021	Developing absorptive and adaptive capacity in leadership	Leaders with managerial wisdom and adaptability	Strategic leadership involves creating and maintaining absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and managerial wisdom to sustain organisational success.	Strategic leadership enables organisations to thrive in complex environments.
Rowe	2021	Combining transformational and managerial leadership	Leaders who inspire and motivate	Strategic leadership combines a leader's ability to inspire and	Strategic leadership integrates long-term vision with operational management.

				motivate employees with a focus on achieving long-term strategic goals.	
Hart and Quinn	2023	Roles of leaders in aligning vision and operations	Vision setters, motivators, analysts, and taskmasters	Strategic leadership fulfills roles as vision-setters, motivators, analysts, and taskmasters to ensure alignment between vision and operations.	Strategic leadership ensures alignment between strategic vision and operational efficiency.
Schoemaker, Krupp, and Howland	2023	Decision-making under uncertainty	Leaders with adaptability and foresight	Strategic leadership is the ability to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, adapt to complex	Effective strategic leaders adapt to complex environments and seize opportunities.

				environments, and position the organisation to seize emerging opportunities.	
Mahdi and Nassar	2021	Aligning organisational goals with external environments	Leaders with integrity, vision, and purpose	Strategic leadership is about understanding oneself, the organisation's goals, and the external environment to foster alignment and resilience.	Strategic leadership fosters resilience and competitiveness.
Samimi et al.	2022	Systematic review of strategic leadership functions	Top management team (TMT) members	Strategic leadership involves making strategic decisions, managing stakeholders, overseeing operations, and driving	Strategic leadership involves making decisions, managing stakeholders, and driving ethical practices.

				ethical practices.	
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Barring different perspectives of these definitions, in the context of this study, strategic leadership can be described as a process that transforms the organisation, or at least provides leadership that achieves this standard, into a thriving organisation through the right strategies. Esen, Bellibas, and Gumus (2020) highlighted that strategic leadership's responsibility is to motivate and inspire employees in the organisation to work together an agreed direction, alignment and commitment in an organisation. The nature of strategic leadership and challenges in the library environment.

Committee of Higher Education Libraries of South Africa (2021) revealed that libraries in South Africa and other parts of the world faced various challenges due to conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A common thread throughout as an attempt to respond to the prevailing crisis circumstances, libraries saw the redesigning of web pages, reassigned human and financial resources and implemented online offerings (Chisita, 2020).

2.4 Adaptation to work from home model

Library staff had to adapt to working from home, and most employees and staff experienced a sense there was a sense of overburden due to continued connectivity and lacking formal standard operating procedures and a working policy addressing the new working routines (Dadhe and Dubey, 2020). In less developed countries, university librarians felt that the digital divide, lack of digital literacy skills, and slow internet speed were the significant barriers in their transition from physical to online mode and less use of the library's online resources and web portals (Chisita, 2020). A study conducted in Nigeria reveals that it is unclear whether African libraries are conducting document delivery by scanning or through courier services. This is an effort to avoid direct contact due to social distancing health protocols. Challenges that are likely to fuel the pandemic and inhibit the transition of libraries into the 4IR era include lack of change management, ICT literacy, inadequate ICT infrastructure, lack of technological support, lack of clear policies, power cuts and financial issues.

These findings imply that library leaders in developing countries have had to contend with additional socio-economic issues imposed by prevailing developmental and political conditions. European and American libraries faced similar challenges but with less impact due to advanced overall skills and infrastructural developments (Kosciejew, 2021). The challenges and ways of handling academic libraries

in the United States and Europe are similar (Kosciejew, 2021). Slight differences can be observed in budget changes as well as the freedom of the directors to make decisions, which are related to the structure and funding policies of different academic systems (Ale, 2020).

Most of the already mentioned literatures in developed and developing countries share a similar development regarding social media platform use, for either communicating with librarians or conducting day-to-day library transactions (Ale, 2020). Another commonality is the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype to provide virtual reference services.

2.5 New role of disseminating authentic information of Covid 19

Librarians also went the extra mile to ensure dissemination of authentic COVID-19 information by collating and verifying information sources for their patrons (Mehta and Wang, 2020). This in response to the social distancing health and safety protocols imposed by prevailing government and institutional regulations. Libraries further introduced creative means of collecting physical library materials by using the curbside method (Bhati and Kumar, 2020). A report on South African libraries reveals that similar challenges reported elsewhere were also prevalent. These are the adaptability of staff to a changed way of working within a personal context, the use of technologies, web-based platforms and associated skills and competencies.

Libraries had to change the way they operate by integrating technology to ensure service availability and manage health risk while supporting and university continuity plans. Virtual operations or virtual services plans for enhanced academic support and cloud-based access to resources. Library directors and senior managers were instrumental in ensuring this outcome (Meng, Hua, and Bian, 2020). Furthermore, quicker response and significantly effective functioning posed an operational advantage. The same experience of utilising technological platforms is shared with libraries in Western and African countries with the exception of WhatsApp Groups, as well as Instant Chat/Chatbots/Libchats and LibraryApps (Rafiq, Batool, Ali, and Ullah, 2021). Communication with users also took place via email, scheduled online sessions with a librarian, and telephonic support. Educational and research support services were achieved through online consultation and browsing, online research support tutorials and events as well as learning support services, including remote and online support via guides, online training, information literacy training, and webinars (Ashiq, Jabeen, and Mahmood, 2022).

According to Meng et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need to focus on occupational health and safety management. Meng et al. (2020) further indicated that health and safety are applied to physical and mental health, a similar reality in global libraries. Proven to be effective are individual and group counselling services with a focus on emotional impact and managing grief and loss under COVID-19 (Bhati and Kumar, 2020). The development of relevant staff and management skills served the need to meet basic skills in managing time and stress under lockdown conditions and supporting staff for deceased or ill family members (Guo, Yang, Yang, Liu, Bielefield, and Tharp, 2021). A limitation is that some surveyed libraries showed no evidence of an active program geared towards supporting staff health and wellbeing. The implication is that more should be done in this important area to provide an operational environment that cares for staff and library patrons, operating and responding to institutional values founded in the current strategic framework of the academic library.

Adeyemi et al. (2014) provided the following challenges academic libraries face when attempting to apply strategic planning to an academic library.

- The revealing of institutional weaknesses for which there may be no easy remedy.
- The investing of considerable time and energy at high opportunity costs with little gain if the strategic planning process is not successfully completed.
- The short-term introduction of high levels of uncertainty and anxiety into the life of an organisation.
- The potential loss of programs and staff whose contribution may no longer be justified within a new or re-defined institutional mission.

However, an organisation can take action to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks associated with strategic planning. This includes

- Meet basic prerequisites for strategic planning before starting the process.
- Plan a carefully coordinated process of participation and inclusion, particularly of external stakeholders.
- Collect sufficient information and allow time for processing this information.
- Provide adequate resources to carry out the process of strategic planning.

Adeyemi et al. (2014) further point out that well-conceived strategic plans can end in failure for various reasons. Some of these reasons are listed below.

- Lack of resources is one reason why libraries may be reluctant to engage in strategic planning.

- The stability of the environment and sufficient control over it ensures the attainment of organisational objectives, hence strategy formulation.
- Publicly funded service organisations have a relationship with the environment, which is often characterised by turbulence, unpredictability, and the imposition of short-term objectives and structures that bear little relation to the dependent organisations' circumstances.
- The weight of tradition, vested interests and corporate expectations affect strategy's success in libraries.

2.6 The Upper Echelon

Hambrick and Mason (2024) introduced the upper echelons perspective to bolster the importance of leadership by focusing on influential people at the top of the entire organisation. The focus on those at the top marked a clear shift from focusing on supervisory leadership within an organisation to to emphasis on overall leadership of the entire organisation (Kanyangale, 2018). The Upper echelon theory, as the seminal work on strategic leadership is clear that organisational outcomes – both strategies and effectiveness – are viewed as reflections of the values and cognitive bases of powerful actors in the organisation (Hambrick and Mason 2024). In short strategic theories of leadership are concerned with leadership 'of' organisations... and are marked by a concern for the evolution of the organisations, including its changing aims and capabilities. In this regard, strategic leadership brings clarity to the issue of the level and scope of responsibility in leadership work (Samimi, Cortes, Anderson and Herrmann, 2022). Strategic leadership theory focuses on the dominant coalition or top executives who have overall responsibility for an organisation, their characteristics, what they do, and how they affect organisational outcomes. (Samimi et al., 20221). Strategic leadership is sometimes used broadly to refer to either a type of leadership style or to leadership at the top levels of the organisation (Beckos, 2023).

Neely, Lovelace, Cowen, and Hiller (2020) indicated that the upper echelon model sets this theory apart from other leadership theories since it focuses on the inter-relationships among four key concepts: of strategic situations, the characteristics of top managers /upper echelon top managers' characteristics, strategic choices, and organisational performance as depicted in Figure 2.1 below.

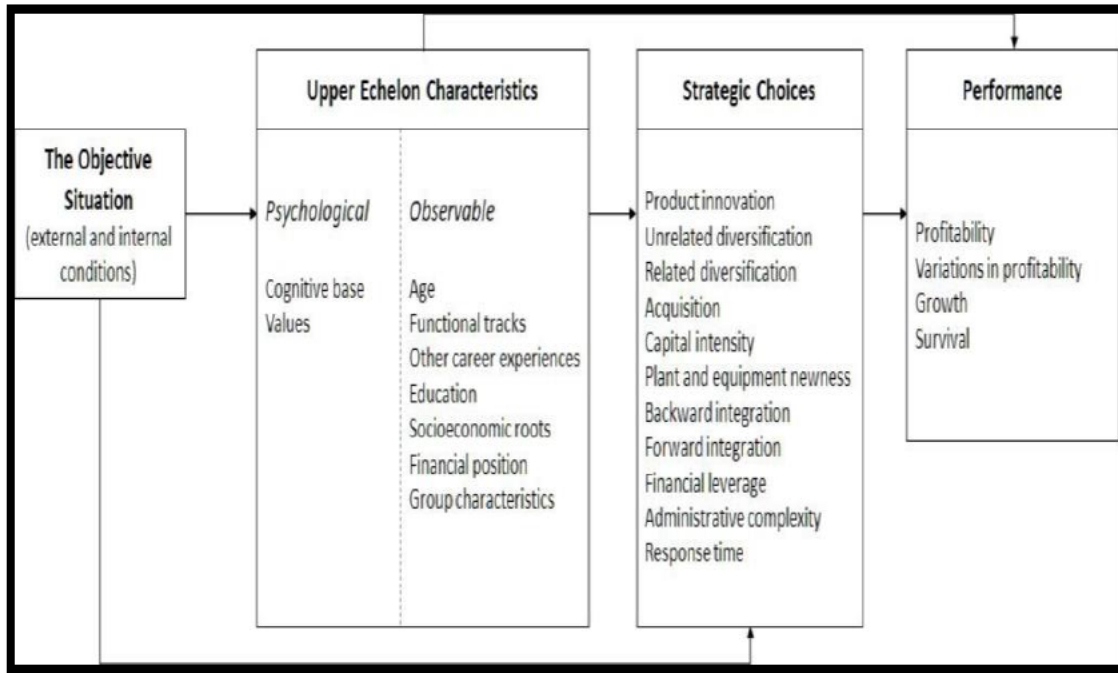


Figure 2. 1: The upper echelon theory and its constitutive elements

Dalvi-Esfahani, Ramayah, and Nilashi, 2017, p. 583

Beckos (2023) revealed that the upper echelons perspectives are based on three primary ideas, which are presented below. namely : (1) top managers’ cognitive base and values become reflected in strategic outcomes; (2) observable demographic characteristics are reliable indicators of executives’ cognitive frames and, as a result, can be used to predict strategic outcomes; (3) studying the characteristics of a firm’s upper echelons as a whole (i.e., entire top management team) yields stronger predictions of strategic outcomes than focusing on the chief executive officer (CEO) alone. In essence, strategic theories of leadership are concerned with leadership 'of' organisations... and are marked by a concern for the evolution of the organisations, including its changing aims and capabilities. In this regard, strategic leadership brings clarity to the issue of the level and scope of responsibility in leadership work (Samimi, Cortes, Anderson and Herrmann, 2022). Understanding strategic leadership involves shedding light on what effective strategic leaders are doing to produce an organisation focused on strategy and desirable strategic results. In this study, top leaders or members of the TMT in the academic library are viewed as strategic leaders because they are leaders of the entire academic library, make strategic and long-term decisions. Strategic decisions involve considerable organisational change. Many strategic leaders including those in academic libraries in South Africa need contextualised frameworks and models to guide them in their work in the machine or digital era.

2.6.1 Criticism of the Upper Echelon Theory

A summary of criticism levelled at the Upper Echelon Theory is as follows: Questionable aspects or limitations of the Upper Echelon theory start with studies questioning the ability of the Upper Echelon Theory to properly articulate whether decisions made by leaders rely solely on their demographics and orientation, and not under the influence of environmental or organisational factors. And the latter is the main reason that influences the decisions leaders make when called upon to lead specific strategic situations. Secondly, review studies further call for the examination of behavioural manifestations of leaders or executives. That is, how behaviours influence relationships, motivations and actions of various stakeholders that ultimately shape the outcome of an organisation (Madi-Odeh and Obeidat, 2023).

Future direction based on the above findings draws from some progress in understanding how UET results vary depending on an assortment of individual, group, organisational or environmental conditions. The implication is that leaders are not immune to external influence imposed by the prevailing environment, which may have a far-reaching impact on decisions or when implementing strategic leadership efforts. A further appeal for future studies of UET is the more detailed theorising about the cognitive and relational processes that underlie predictions and coupling this with more accurate data on cognition and relationships. It is further emphasised that scholars should keep pace with the challenges relevant to strategic leaders today (e.g. machines substituting humans in the workplaces, e-leadership) and produce research findings that inspire confidence in the validity of the inferences. With clarity of the issues of strategic leadership practices, level and scope of leadership evident in the Upper Echelon theory, it is important to understand the variety of ordered and disordered contexts in which a strategic leader may be challenged to make and give sense of the prevailing and emerging reality. This is important especially that Covid 19 presented as very volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment for library strategic leaders, workers and users.

2.7 Strategic Leadership Practices

As this study is about practices of strategic leaders, it is crucial to focus on the notion of practice which is very elusive (Alayoubi, Al Shobaki, and Abu-Naser, 2020). It is important to initially draw the meaning of practices from the scholarship of strategy-as- practice where researchers have focused on three central issues of who is the strategy practitioner, but also the link between practice, praxis and practitioners. It is useful to underscore that the notion of practice enables academics to participate in an open discussion with practitioners. Practice encompasses the different tools, routines, and processes of activities, from

strategy models such as Porter's Five Forces to strategic planning procedures as for instance strategy workshops (Chevalier and Buckles, 2019). Practice theory also brings into the fore the notion of praxis which is key for strategy-as-practice research. The term praxis (activity) refers to actions engaged by strategists to ensure that strategy is understood and enacted (Thakhathi, Roux and Davis, 2019). In this regard, the term practice refers to certain elements of praxis such as routines, ideas, technology etc. In a study of strategic leadership practice, it is important that a study clarifies who are the strategic leaders, (e.g. those who form part of TMT, traditionally labelled as the strategic leaders of the organisation, and are involved in translating the strategy content into results in the organisation) (Silva and Goncalves, 2016). Some of the advantages of this activity-based method places emphasis on uncovering the action in the process (Goncalves and Campos, 2018). This not only encompasses an in-depth analysis into what is happening but also ascertaining which actors are involved in the various activities and processes as part of strategic leadership.

Research on the strategic leadership content seeks to uncover what these leaders do in terms of strategy and leadership (Wolf and Floyd, 2023). Practice emphasises on micro-level tasks and interrelationship to understand the dimensions of strategic leadership content (the what) and how (process) strategic leadership overtime (e.g. nature of strategic leadership, process of linking the macro and micro aspects of strategic leadership, time and change) (Kouame and Langley, 2018). Samimi, Cortes, Anderson, and Herrmann (2022) and Alayoubi et al. (2020) agree that practitioners' are those who do the actual work-in this case, those who do the leading; while 'practices' are the routinised types of behaviour drawn upon in the concrete doing of leadership.

Jarzabokowsk and Wilson (2022) assert that practices are the ingrained habits or little of tacit knowledge which comprise the activity system. Practices both shape and are shaped by practice (Jarzabokowsk and Wilson, 2022: 356). Borrowing from this, one can decipher that there are practitioners of academic library strategic leadership at the top of the library hierarchy. The ingrained habits or ways of leading are practices that comprise leadership practice (e.g., influencing, directing, inspiring) (Ali and Anwar, 2021). This recognition of strategic leadership as a practice requires diving deep into organisations to engage with people's activity of leading in all its intimate detail but also deal with the challenge of combining all this activity into a more significant phenomenon of strategic leadership (Ateş, Tarakci, Porck, van Knippenberg, and Groenen, 2020).

Leadership practices refer to the processes by which individuals influence others to achieve a common goal (Northouse, cited in Cowden, Cummings, and Prefetto-McGrath 2021). Wang, Devine, Molina-

Sieiro, and Holmes (2024) indicated that there are no set of prescribed leadership practices in place; they vary according to organisations and according to the nature of the working environment and the leader. Using the study conducted by (Waters and Marzano, cited in Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, Reeves 2012) as an example that was based on leadership practices of effective rural superintendents identified six leadership practices, positively linked to improved student achievement. These include superintendents providing defined autonomy to principals within clearly defined operational boundaries; (b) aligning board support for the district's non-negotiable goals; (c) continuous monitoring of the district's progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals; (d) aligning board support for the district's non-negotiable purposes; (e) collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district's relevant stakeholders; (f) effectively utilising resources to support the accomplishment of district goals.

Fernandez and Shaw 2020 review three leadership best practices for academic leaders dealing with a crisis. These best practices are connecting with people as individuals, establishing mutual trust, distributing leadership throughout the organisation, and communicating clearly and often with all stakeholders (Northouse, 2021). It takes time to connect with people, establish mutual trust, and transition to a shared leadership pattern. Therefore, leaders must prioritise these responsibilities immediately upon assuming the position rather than waiting for a crisis to arrive (Basir, Puspitasari, Aristarini, Sulastri, and Ausat, 2023). This background demands leaders to actively seek, learn and apply these best practices and be at an advantage during challenging times similar to a pandemic to be well-paced to rise to the challenge of being bold and decisive leaders (Basir et al., 2023). Newman (2020) also supported the view that a crisis, whether a pandemic or any other emergency or disaster, creates an opportunity to learn new ways of leading or readily adapt existing good practices.

A study conducted by Dadzie et al. (2020) introduced an online or digital best practice imposed by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic; this scenario exposed leaders to migrating physical and manual operations to an online or digital format. This transition affected global institutions, changing the face of academic research, learning and teaching. In the Caribbean, immediate priorities in this regard were sourcing online resources and e-books (Newman 2020). Institutions were also concerned with long-term budgeting as well as continued maintenance of such changes and management of related databases, digital resources, online resources and other associated costs (Dirani, Abadi, Alizadeh, Barhate, Garza, Gunasekara, Ibrahim, and Majzun, 2020). In this case, however, the leadership had adopted a progressive approach before the pandemic, adopting and pursuing a digital transformation, albeit self-paced. Only

during the pandemic was this development aligned with prevailing priorities and evolved more into a matter of urgency than a priority.

A common thread among global academic libraries in developing and developed nations is that libraries designed more responsive library websites, adopted blended librarianship models, and used social networks. (Ifijeh and Yusuf, 2020). Ifijeh and Yusuf (2020) further revealed that academic libraries learned and adopted the dissemination of information through interactive online services such as social media to provide real-time services to patrons. The suggested supporting practice is that library managers should focus on change management, thus enabling employees to adapt to digital transformation practices, which is expected to boost productivity. Adequate ICT training is required, along with providing necessary ICT resources to enable librarians to complete their duties without hindrance. Lastly, it is recommended that African leaders recognise the need to support libraries and transform them into knowledge hubs that will create knowledge economies by harnessing the 4IR technologies.

Mindful of the complexity and challenges in the library environment, there has been effort to identify elements that are important for excellent service in the academic library. The Committee for Higher Education Libraries of South Africa (CHELSA) in partnership with 15 educational institutions from various provinces developed a set of guides to assist in library services standards. Table 2.2 depicts the final South African higher education LIS context and best practices and what is desirable as outcomes in the library sector.

Table 2.2 South African higher education LIS context and best practices

The purpose of the framework	Serve as a guiding document to achieve the following:
Provide an evaluation mechanism and benchmarking tool for South African academic libraries; Assist in planning, design and development of library services;	Eradicate the resource and facility disparities amongst academic libraries; Set the standards for academic librarianship and library practices, including strategic planning, good governance, advocacy, and accountability;
Assist in determining whether resources are adequate	Ensure an equitable and quality user experience across all libraries;
Assist in determining whether resources are adequate	

Serve as a tool to identify strengths and select areas for strategic and operational

Advance the role of academic libraries as partners in teaching, learning, and research endeavours of South African higher education institutions;
 Ensure best practice, introduce benchmarking for continuous improvement,
 Equitable access and services across all academic libraries.

2.8 Function: What do strategic leaders do?

Generally, functions are the basis of understanding what is needed or done to be competent and how it is done (e.g. styles). However, there is a lack of consensus on strategic leaders' nature, variety and number of functions (Samimi et al., 2022). A cursory look into the work of different scholars such as Ireland and Hitt (2025), Boal and Hooijberg (2020), Hart and Quinn (2023), Kanyangale (2021), Samimi et al. (2022), Richardson (2024)' and Covey, (2022) is fruitful to gain some insights into the nature and variety of functions of strategic leaders. Table 2 shows selected views on what scholars conceive as what strategic leaders do. Without being exhaustive, table 2 exemplifies the diversity of functions of what strategic leaders do.

Table 2.3: Selected views on the variety and number of functions of strategic leadership

Author(s)	Number of functions	Strategic leaders' functions
Ireland and Hitt (2025)	Five different functions	Defining strategic direction, investing strategic capabilities, developing human capital, promoting organisational culture with ethical practices, implementing balanced organisational control

Boal and Hooijberg (2020:516-518)	Three functions	Create and maintain absorptive capacity; Create and sustain adaptive capacity; Demonstrate managerial wisdom.
Hart and Quinn (2023).	Four competing functions	Vision setter, Motivator, Analyser, Taskmaster.
Kanyangale (2021)	Three organisational-level functions	Strategically iterate between humanising and commodifying organisational members; align priorities and resources to create value; shape and exploit competitive advantage; and promote entrepreneurial culture.
	Four different Individual level functions	Display opportunity-seeking wisdom; build appropriate social capital; entrepreneurial resilience; and curiosity and practice-led learning
Samimi et al. (2022).	Eight different functions	Making strategic decisions, engaging with external stakeholders, performing human resource management activities, motivating and influencing, managing information, overseeing operations and administration, managing social and ethical issues, and managing conflicting demands.

Richardson (2024).	Eight roles/functions	(a) classical administrator, (b) design school planner, (c) role-playing manager, (d) political contingency responder, (e) competitive positioner, (f) visionary transformer, (g) self-organising facilitator, (h) turnaround strategist, (i) crisis-avoider
Covey (2022)	Four basic roles/functions	(a) pathfinding, (b) aligning, (c) empowering and (d) modelling.

Source: own

For this study on strategic leadership of the university library during Covid 19, the functions proposed by Samimi et al. (2022) are adopted because of two reasons. First, these functions of strategic leaders are relatively new and were conceived after systematic literature after the disruptions by Covid 19. The eight functions by Samimi et al. (2022) are recent and embrace most functions highlighted by other scholars such as Ireland and Hitt (2025). The question of what strategic leaders do was vital in identifying functions in the systematic literature review by Samimi et al. (2022). Lastly, the functions are more refined to capture the complexity and variety of what strategic leaders in the academic library do. The next section focuses on the way strategic leaders make decisions in different contexts.

2.9 The Cynefin Framework of five decision-making contexts for leadership

The Cynefin Framework, developed by Snowden (2021) and later elaborated by Snowden and Boone (2023), offers an approach to decision-making by categorising contexts into five domains: simple, complicated, complex, chaotic, and disorder. Recent studies underscore its relevance in leadership, particularly for navigating uncertainty and complexity in dynamic environments (Smith and Lewis, 2021; Chen et al., 2023). However, critics argue that while the framework provides a useful heuristic, it risks oversimplification by categorising fluid, overlapping realities into discrete domains (Miller and Irwin, 2020). This criticism points to potential rigidity in application, especially in fast-evolving situations where leaders may need to operate across multiple domains simultaneously rather than sequentially.

Despite these concerns, the framework's emphasis on situational awareness and adaptive leadership remains valuable for guiding leaders in volatile contexts.

A significant strength of the Cynefin Framework lies in its facilitation of context-sensitive leadership approaches, enabling leaders to tailor their decision-making strategies to the nature of the problem at hand (Brown and Osborn, 2022; Patel and Hart, 2021). For instance, the simple and complicated domains encourage reliance on best practices and expert analysis, respectively, whereas the complex and chaotic domains require experimental and rapid-response leadership. This differentiation encourages leaders to resist the temptation of one-size-fits-all strategies. Nevertheless, several scholars argue that the framework underestimates the emotional and political dimensions of decision-making, which can influence leader behaviour beyond situational logic (Nguyen and McCarthy, 2020; Ortega et al., 2022). Hence, while Cynefin promotes cognitive adaptability, it may benefit from integrating a more holistic view of leadership factors.

Empirical research exploring the Cynefin Framework's application in crisis leadership, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights both its practical utility and limitations (Jackson and Turnbull, 2021; Lee and Cho, 2023). Leaders who successfully applied the framework were able to shift between domains as situations evolved, for example moving from chaotic to complex as initial disorder was managed. However, the dynamic nature of crises often challenges the neat transitions implied by the framework, with leaders facing overlapping or ambiguous contexts that are difficult to categorise distinctly (Ahmed and Fisher, 2024). This has led to calls for a more fluid interpretation of the framework that recognises the hybrid and emergent nature of real-world problems, suggesting that decision-making in practice is less linear and more iterative than Cynefin may portray.

The conceptual underpinning of the Cynefin Framework in complexity theory allows it to bridge traditional leadership models with the realities of the 21st-century organisational environment characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) (Morris and Taylor, 2022; Gupta and Kumar, 2023). This makes the framework particularly suited for digital-era leadership where information flows rapidly and decision-making must be responsive to changing data patterns. However, some critics caution that the framework's reliance on leader sense-making presupposes a level of cognitive capacity and organisational support that may not be universally present (Williams and Anderson, 2021; Smith et al., 2023). In organisations with hierarchical rigidity or limited resources, leaders might struggle to enact the flexible and reflective practices the framework demands, potentially limiting its effectiveness in such contexts.

Finally, integrating the Cynefin Framework with other leadership and organisational theories may enhance its explanatory power and practical applicability. Recent interdisciplinary studies advocate for combining Cynefin with emotional intelligence frameworks, transformational leadership, and stakeholder theory to capture the full complexity of leadership challenges (Hernandez and Roberts, 2020; Zhao and Lin, 2024). Such integrations address Cynefin’s gaps regarding affective and relational dimensions of leadership, emphasising that decision-making is as much about managing people and emotions as it is about situational analysis. This convergence suggests a future research direction to develop hybrid models that leverage Cynefin’s situational acuity while embedding the social and psychological realities of leadership. According to Nachbagauer (2021), the framework was developed using the principles of complexity theory to help leaders know not only how to identify the context they are working in. It is a powerful framework for navigating the complexities and uncertainties inherent in decision-making contexts such as those of Covid 19 disruption of the academic library. The framework operates on the premise of five main domains in which cynefin relates are summarised in table 2.4 below.

Table 2.4 Description of five domains in the cynefin framework

Decision -making domain	Defining characteristics
Clear domain	<p>This domain represents the known knowns.</p> <p>Rules are in place (or best practice).</p> <p>The situation is stable, and the relationship between cause and effect is clear</p>
Complicated domain	<p>It is called the known unknowns. The relationship between cause and effect requires analysis or expertise; there are a range of right answers</p>
Complex domain	<p>Depicts the unknown unknowns. Cause and effect can only be deduced in retrospect, and there are no right answers. Instructive patterns emerge</p> <p>Reductionist approach not appropriate, take-it-apart-and-see-how-it-works approach cannot help, because your very actions change the situation in unpredictable way.</p>

Chaotic domain	cause and effect are unclear. Events are too confusing to wait for a knowledge-based response. Any action is the first and only way to respond appropriately
Confusion	there is no clarity about which of the other domains apply (this domain has also been known as disordered in earlier versions of the framework. The approach is to break down the situation into constituent parts and assign each to one of the other four domains.

Source: Own adaptation from Snowden and Boone (2022:72-78)

The table 1.4 illuminates that cynefin framework is helpful to realise that all situations are not created equal and that there is a need to understand that different situations require different responses to successfully navigate them. The figure 2.2 of Cynefin Framework below shows the different domains, how decision making is constrained but also the decision-making model that is appropriate

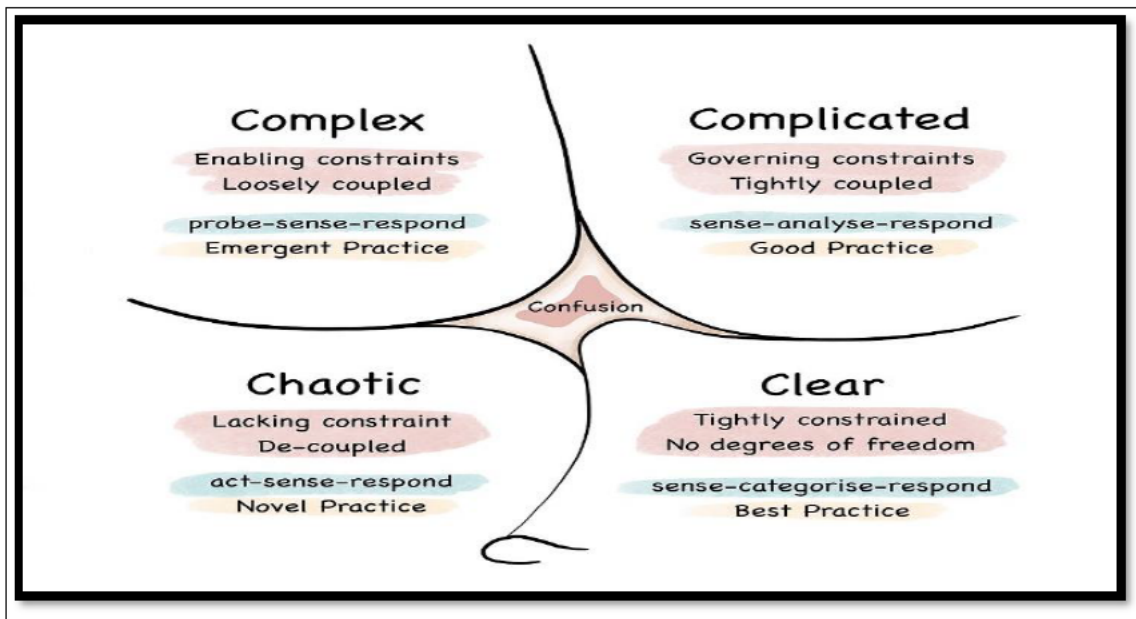


Figure 2. 2: Cynefin Framework

Source: Snowden and Boone (2022)

The proponents of Cynefin framework point out that the cyclical nature is suited to problems with an evolving nature and encourages transitions between domains because problems are ever-evolving. Through reflection on their experiences during the pandemic, library leaders can utilise the framework’s tenets to make decisions which match the context. Critics of cynefin framework point out the oversimplification evident in the clear-cut domains which do not capture the messy reality of most

situations. There is also the possibility of misapplication or using the framework blindly which may lead to misdiagnosis and inappropriate actions. Lastly, cynefin primarily focuses on situational awareness, neglecting the emotional and political aspects of decision-making.

The cynefin framework provides a guide, but the real world is far more complex. It is important that leaders use it as a lens to see situations more clearly, not as a rigid rulebook. The study further reflects that if library leaders had implemented the Cynefin framework at the beginning of the pandemic, adjusting or transitioning to new protocols could have been less turbulent. This observation implies that the application of the elements of this framework, the competencies of this particular leadership framework, and the challenges faced may have had a limited effect on the main library management aspects. The Cynefin framework's effectiveness has been tested in other studies related to health promotion, ergonomics, electronic records management, HIV/AIDS risk reduction, and biomedical research. Library leadership application is the exception.

As previously stated, the Cynefin framework, endowed with new and logical approaches to respond to and manage the library strategic and operational environment, post the Covid pandemic and associated lessons relevant for digitally intensive and unpredictable library operations, cannot be in isolation from the framework outlined above. Therefore, in the final analysis, it is incumbent on leaders and decision-makers to consider the integration of these separate but complementary frameworks to preserve the South African policy and operational realities and to import, embed, and apply the tenets of the Cynefin framework.

2.10 Previous studies on leadership in Academic Libraries

While there is a variety of research on leadership in the academic library, there is a dearth of leadership research which adopts strategic leadership. The table 2. 5 below depict the variety of research objectives, and key insights in previous studies on leadership which may inform future research.

Table 2.5: Selected previous studies on leadership in the academic library

Previous studies on leadership in South African libraries				
Author	Objective of the study	Method used	Main result	Key insight(s)
Kwanya, Tom	To investigate and compare the	Quantitative research	The study found that democratic	Leadership styles significantly

	leadership styles of academic and research librarians in Kenya and South Africa.		<p>leadership styles were most prevalent among academic and research librarians in both Kenya and South Africa.</p> <p>Such styles contributed significantly to achieving organisational goals and enhancing staff performance.</p> <p>It also highlighted that effective leadership is essential for addressing challenges like limited resources and aligning with institutional strategies</p>	<p>influence the ability of libraries to meet strategic objectives. The study emphasises the importance of democratic leadership in fostering collaboration, improving staff morale, and addressing organisational challenges in resource-constrained environments.</p> <p>Effective leadership aligns staff efforts with institutional goals, demonstrating the value of participatory approaches in academic settings.</p>
Kunene, Nokuphiwa	To analyse transformational leadership traits in academic libraries in	Quantitative research	Transformational leadership traits such as talent identification,	Transformational leadership is critical for adapting to

	Gauteng province, South Africa.		<p>succession planning, and leadership responsibilities scored highly among participants. Leadership practices that emphasised adaptability, learning from best practices, and innovative thinking were viewed positively. However, the study noted moderate adoption of transformational practices and identified gaps in team building and coaching, especially for next-generation leaders</p>	<p>change and ensuring future sustainability. Leaders who prioritise talent development, succession planning, and scenario planning are better equipped to guide libraries through evolving challenges, including post-pandemic recovery. However, there is room for improvement in areas like team building and motivating next-generation leaders.</p>
Marquard, Chanell	To explore how leadership traits and	Exploratory case study	The research identified specific	Public library leadership must

	<p>styles in South African public libraries stimulate innovation and creativity among employees.</p>		<p>traits such as vision, charisma, and effective communication as crucial for driving innovation in public libraries. Transformational and charismatic leadership styles were strongly associated with fostering innovative thinking and adaptability among staff. The study emphasised the importance of equipping library leaders with these traits to navigate challenges, particularly in rigid and highly regulated environments</p>	<p>focus on fostering innovation to maintain relevance in a technology-driven world. Transformational and charismatic leadership traits such as vision, communication, and decisiveness are essential for stimulating creativity among staff and overcoming the rigidity of traditional systems. Leadership development initiatives should emphasise these traits to support library modernisation and adaptability.</p>
<p>Kunene, Nokuphiwa</p>	<p>To evaluate how transformational</p>	<p>Quantitative research</p>	<p>Transformational leadership traits</p>	<p>Transformational leadership fosters</p>

	leadership traits are adopted in Gauteng libraries and their impact on staff performance and innovation.		like vision and talent development were moderately adopted, enhancing staff motivation and innovation. However, gaps in team-building and succession planning were noted.	innovation and enhances staff engagement. However, its adoption requires consistent focus on team-building and succession planning.
Nkondo, Christina	To examine how leadership education programs address challenges in library management and equip leaders for socio-economic changes.	Qualitative research	Leadership education improved adaptability and problem-solving in library management but highlighted the need for more inclusive training programs tailored to local challenges.	Leadership education equips library leaders to handle socio-economic challenges, but localised, inclusive approaches are vital for greater impact.
Makgahlela, Florence	To explore how library leaders use competitive intelligence to	Mixed methods approach	Effective use of competitive intelligence helped leaders	Competitive intelligence strengthens decision-making

	navigate organisational challenges and enhance decision-making.		anticipate changes and maintain relevance, though resource limitations affected its implementation.	and adaptability, though resource constraints limit its broader application.
Mabula, Anthony	To analyse the influence of leadership styles on strategic planning and achieving long-term academic library goals.	Case study analysis	Leadership styles significantly influenced the success of strategic plans, with collaborative and transformational styles yielding better alignment with institutional goals.	Collaborative and transformational leadership styles effectively align strategic plans with institutional goals, driving library growth.
Dlamini, Sipiwe	To investigate how library leadership integrates Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into strategic planning and community engagement efforts.	Qualitative research	Library leadership effectively integrated SDGs into plans, emphasising inclusivity and innovation, but faced challenges in resource allocation and	Libraries can integrate SDGs into strategic planning through inclusive leadership, despite hurdles in resource allocation and impact measurement.

			measurable impact tracking.	
Previous studies on leadership in academic libraries outside South Africa				
Author	Objective of the study	Method used	Main result	Key insight(s)
Dhiman, Satunder	To analyse the leadership strategies and practices in academic libraries within higher education institutions worldwide, focusing on challenges posed by globalisation, technology, and diverse user needs. The study aims to identify effective leadership models that can be applied across cultural and institutional contexts.	Comparative case study	The study found that successful strategic leadership in higher education libraries often involves adapting leadership styles to meet local institutional needs while maintaining alignment with global trends. Effective library leaders in different countries prioritised digital innovation, resource management, and fostering partnerships both within the	A significant takeaway from this study is the importance of contextual adaptation in leadership. While global trends in higher education libraries emphasise digital transformation, library leaders must tailor their strategic approaches to fit local institutional needs, resources, and cultural contexts. The study underscores the role of collaborative

			<p>university and with external stakeholders. A key finding was the increasing importance of collaborative leadership and distributed decision-making to address the dynamic challenges posed by globalisation and technology.</p>	<p>leadership and distributed decision-making as crucial in navigating the complexities of global trends while maintaining the local relevance of library services.</p>
<p>Calhoun, Karen</p>	<p>To explore how library leaders can strategically guide their organisations through the transition from traditional to digital services. The study examines the required skills, strategies, and challenges faced by leaders in adapting to rapid technological advancements.</p>	<p>Qualitative research</p>	<p>The research revealed that library leaders who successfully navigated the digital transformation had a clear vision for the future, which they communicated effectively across all levels of their institutions. Key strategies included investing in staff</p>	<p>The study highlights that successful digital transformation in libraries is heavily reliant on a clear, forward-looking vision and organisational adaptability. Leadership that fosters an innovative culture, invests in continuous staff training, and</p>

			<p>training, embracing new technologies, and fostering an organisational culture that supports continuous innovation. Additionally, it was found that strategic foresight and adaptability were critical in overcoming challenges such as resource constraints and resistance to change.</p>	<p>embraces new technologies can navigate challenges such as budget constraints and resistance to change. A central insight is the necessity for library leaders to integrate strategic foresight into their leadership practices to keep pace with rapid technological shifts.</p>
Woodsworth, Anne	<p>To investigate how academic library leaders formulate and implement strategic visions to address evolving challenges. This includes analysing leadership approaches to innovation, resource</p>	Mixed methods approach	<p>The study concluded that library leaders who developed and implemented a strategic vision were more successful in aligning library services with broader</p>	<p>A core finding from this research is that academic libraries with a strong, clearly communicated strategic vision are better positioned to align their services with evolving</p>

	management, and the integration of emerging technologies in library services.		institutional goals, particularly in times of change. Libraries with a strong strategic vision demonstrated greater resilience and were able to adapt to external pressures such as budget cuts and technological advancements. A key finding was the importance of stakeholder engagement in the vision-building process to ensure that library services remain relevant and effective.	institutional priorities and external pressures. Engaging stakeholders in the vision-building process ensures libraries remain relevant and can adapt to external challenges, such as technological advancements or financial constraints. The study underscores that resilience and stakeholder collaboration are vital to maintaining the library's strategic direction during times of change.
Andrew M. Cox and Suvodeep Mazumdar	To analyse emerging trends in academic libraries, focusing on leadership roles in fostering innovation and addressing student	Literature review and case studies	Effective leadership prioritises innovation (e.g., makerspaces) and addressing mental health challenges	Leadership in libraries must adapt to evolving technologies and prioritise holistic student support.

	needs post-pandemic.		through strategic collaboration.	
Fiona Bradley	To assess how strategic leadership drives competition and operational success in university libraries.	Analysis of strategic plans and interviews	Successful libraries implement adaptable strategic plans aligned with institutional missions.	Visionary leadership ensures libraries can address institutional goals and changing demands.
Mohammad Hosseini and Kristi Holmes	To explore effective leadership models and development practices in academic libraries.	Systematic literature review	Emphasises emergent leadership styles and the importance of training programs for new leaders.	Continuous professional development is essential to build leadership capacity in libraries.
Aileen B. Houston and Edward M. Corrado	To outline adaptive leadership principles applicable to academic library challenges.	Theoretical exploration with case examples	Adaptive leadership allows libraries to respond effectively to complex issues like budget constraints and technological changes.	Flexibility and stakeholder collaboration are critical for navigating uncertainties in academic libraries.

2.11 Synthesis of literature review

This review has traced the evolution of strategic leadership from its early trait- and behaviour-based roots (Pietraszewski, 2020; Northouse, 2021) through contemporary complexity frameworks (Hernandez &

Roberts, 2020; Zhao & Lin, 2024), highlighting how definitions have converged on the need for agile, human-centred, and technologically savvy approaches. Studies of academic libraries show leaders swiftly adapting to work-from-home arrangements (Ashiq, Jabeen & Mahmood, 2022) and stepping into authentic information-dissemination roles during COVID-19 (Sehar & Shahid, 2020). At the same time, Upper Echelon Theory has been used to examine how top-management attributes shape strategic choices (Hambrick & Mason, 2024; Neely et al., 2020), while the Cynefin framework has guided decision-making across ordered and unordered contexts (Snowden, 2021; Snowden & Boone, 2023).

However, key gaps remain. Although agile and adaptive leadership is well documented, few studies investigate how South African academic library leaders negotiated infrastructure inequities and socio-cultural resistance during rapid digital transformations (Adeyemi et al., 2014). Similarly, while we understand the influence of executive attributes, there is limited research on how continuous capacity-building and well-being support contribute to long-term strategic resilience in crisis settings (Bhati & Kumar, 2020; Guo et al., 2021). Finally, much of the existing work focuses on broad best practices rather than on the lived experiences of leaders as they enact specific practices, evaluate the effectiveness of different styles, and confront real-world challenges (Samimi et al., 2022; Richardson, 2024).

These lacunae justify the present study. By exploring the specific practices strategic leaders employed (Objective 1), assessing the effectiveness of their leadership styles (Objective 2), and examining the challenges they faced (Objective 3) during the COVID-19 crisis, this research will generate context-sensitive insights and actionable recommendations for UKZN Library and similar institutions. In doing so, it will enrich the literature on crisis leadership in academic libraries, foreground under-studied South African perspectives, and directly inform leadership-development programmes tailored to the uncertainties of the digital era.

2.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed relevant literature on strategic leadership starting the origins, variety of definition, and nature of strategic leadership. There is also a discussion on strategic leadership practices. As this study focused on members of the TMT, the Upper echelon theory has been helpful to clarify not only the level but also scope of strategic leadership responsibilities. The cynefin framework illuminates that there are five decision-making contexts which are categorised into ordered and disordered and affect how strategic leadership is exercised in an organisation especially sense making and sense giving. The

chapter has finally discussed previous studies on academic library leadership within and outside South Africa before ending with a summary. The next chapter will focus on research methodology used in this exploratory qualitative study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter identified and discussed the relevant studies from the literature that were used in this exploratory qualitative study. This chapter provides an in-depth explanation of the methodology, including the process that followed to select participants, gather and analysed and follow research quality and ethics in this study. The chapter starts by discussing research paradigms, before shifting to methodological choice, target population and sampling technique used to identify and select research participants in this study. The chapter also discusses data collection and analysis, research quality and ethical considerations in this study prior to providing a chapter summary.

3.2 Research Paradigms

Kumatongo and Muzata (2021) revealed that the establishment of research is philosophical presumptions, which impact how research is done. A research paradigm is a philosophical framework that guides research and consists of beliefs, ideas, values, or habits that form the basis for the way of thinking about the world. In each research paradigm, there are three pillars of a research which are called ontology, epistemology and methodology (Schwandt, 2023). Ontology is about the nature and structure of reality and addresses the question what is reality (Schwandt, 2023). It allows the researcher to clarify the assumptions about the kind and nature of reality, what exists and what we can know about it (e.g. objective or subjective reality, single or multiple constructions of meanings by the actors, or reality exists independent of the researcher). In short, ontology concerns our beliefs about the kind and nature of reality and the social world (what exists) (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2022). Epistemology is the study of knowledge and is concerned with the question of, how is knowledge gathered and from what sources (Saunders et al., 2021).

Lastly, methodology involves the system in which the researcher choose to investigate, measure, and analyse the research's aims and objectives (Schwandt, 2021). It answers the how questions regarding sampling, data collection, analysis, research quality and ethics. In other wods, methodology is the process of studying how research is done in a scientific manner. With these three pillars in mind, Kumatongo and Muzata (2021) agree that research philosophy helps a researcher to determine or understand the nature of a study and the research methods that will be in line with the ontology or nature of reality being researched. There are many paradigms; however, for this thesis only four will be addressed: *postpositivist, constructivism, transformative, and pragmatism*. According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2021),

every researcher needs to fully comprehend these components since they contain the fundamental suppositions, convictions, standards, and qualities that every worldview holds. A research paradigm is determined by the nature of the research beliefs a researcher has, the philosophical assumptions underlying the ontology, epistemology and research methodology (Huang, Kong, Wang, Ju, Zhang, Zhu, Gong, Zhang, Yu, Zheng, and Bu, 2023).

3.2.1 Postpositivist

Musa and Aldiabat (2024) indicated that studies conducted by postpositivists look into the causes that influence the results. Young and Ryan (2020) revealed that in this approach, all factors must be considered to determine information, and empirical tests, experiments, and measures must be used to deduce results and outcomes. Young and Ryan (2020) further indicated that some laws and guidelines govern the world, and they must be refined, verified, and tested to understand the world. In this way, in the scientific method, the accepted way to deal with postpositivist research, an individual begins with a theory, refutes the theory or collects data that either and then creates essential amendments before extra tests are made (Pathak and Thapaliya, 2022). This study did not follow this paradigm and methodology as it did not measure or quantify but explored strategic leadership practices, effectiveness of styles and variety of challenges encountered.

3.2.2 Constructivist

Sarita (2017) revealed that constructivism is a paradigm which emphasises how individuals actively construct their own understanding of reality through their cognitive processes. It recognises that there are multiple realities and highlights the co-construction of knowledge between researchers and participants. It says that people construct their understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Sarita, 2017). As such, it does not entertain the assumption that there is pre-existing reality which is independent of the researcher and the participant (Saunders et al., 2017). Constructivism has roots in philosophy, psychology, sociology and education. However, while it is important for educators to understand constructivism, it is equally important to understand the implications of this view in research on strategic leadership. Ugwu, Ekere, and Onoh (2021) indicated that constructivism's central idea is that human learning and knowledge is constructed and that participants build new knowledge in social interactions with each other's (Bogna, Raineri, and Dell, 2020).

3.2.3 Interpretivism

This paradigm is mainly to understand the world of human experience Munyoro (2024). Interpretive researchers tend to rely upon the participants' views of the subject being studied (Creswell, 2003:8). The interpretivism researcher uses mainly naturalistic methods (interviews, observations, and document analysis/review) (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2018). These methods allow interaction between the researcher and respondents within social settings, allowing for the mutual collaborative construction of multiple valid claims to knowledge based on social reality (Cohen and Crabtree, 2023). Fact is, therefore, socially constructed through language, consciousness, and shared meanings (Myers, 2019). This study adopted the interpretivism paradigm to allow the researcher and the participant to interact through interviews to understand leadership practice, effectiveness, and styles from the participants' viewpoint.

3.4 Research Approach

Research approach refers to whether the study will adopt an inductive or deductive approach (Schwandt 2007). Inductive approaches entail generating theories from research, rather than starting research with a theory as a foundation. Deductive approaches, on the other hand, begin with a theory and aim to build on it (or test it) through research Saunders et al., 2017).

An inductive approach could be used in the study of an otherwise unknown phenomenon where there is very little knowledge (Saunders et al., 2017). On the other hand, a deductive approach would be taken when investigating changes in the physical properties of animals over time, as this would likely be rooted in the theory of evolution. In other words, the starting point is a well-established pre-existing body of research (Saunders et al., 2017).

Schwandt (2017) describes methodology as the procedures used to research an issue, a research question, or a hypothesis. There are three approaches a researcher can use for their research, depending on the type of study they are embarking on. According to Creswell (2019), a decision to select a research design should be influenced by the data collection method, analysis, and the researcher's worldview assumption that is brought to the study. The decision is also influenced by the study's research problem and population or audience. Various methodologies have been used to explore social sciences, and there are many ways to classify these methodologies. Various designs within each of these methodologies may be loosely termed research approaches.

3.4.1 Quantitative Approach

According to Ryser (2021), quantitative research aims to prove something and seeks to understand objective reality which is external and independent of individual perceptions. Quantitative approach disapproves subjective reality which is internal and shaped by personal experience. For example, a quantitative study on library usage investigates the number of users in the library, usage statistics, and headcount of users inside the library at peak and off-peak hours. These are undisputed facts that are not up for debate. Quantitative approach examines variables to prove or disapprove a hypothesis. Creswell (2019) expresses that a quantitative approach incorporates testing objective hypotheses by examining the relationship among variables. In this manner, these variables can be estimated conventionally on instruments so that quantified data can be separated using statistical techniques (Arrigo, Aragona, Parodi, and Bandello, 2023). Studying numbers or amounts of variables is a characteristic of quantitative research (Rahman, 2020). Variables are measured in a numerical method by a researcher; alternatively, a researcher measures carefully designed measures of behaviour or philosophical aspects (Leedy and Ormrod, 2023).

Quantitative research aims to test theory as it tends to be confirmatory, while qualitative research is useful for questions that focus on how rather than how many (Rahman, 2020). Conversely, quantitative research is characterised by amount and numbers instead of value (Parahoo, 2021). Although it is possible to gather and collect data from a massive sample in quantitative research, it is difficult to reach the depth of data provided by qualitative research (Ahmadian, Lim, Cho, and Bora, 2020). Quantitative work focuses on the collection of measurable information and statistics. To thoroughly study the sampled or selected cases, drawing a sample that will represent a massive population is the aim of quantitative research. The current study will not adopt a quantitative approach as it seeks to explore rather than quantify styles, challenges or practices of strategic leadership.

3.4.2 Qualitative Approach

Kumar (2021) states that the fundamental emphasis in qualitative research is to comprehend, clarify, investigate, find, and explain a group of individuals' circumstances, feelings, attitudes, perspectives, values, and encounters. Similarly, Leedy & Ormrod (2023) indicated that all qualitative approaches have two similarities. They focus on phenomena that occurred previously or are currently occurring in a natural

setting, which is addressed to the real world. They also study the phenomenon and its complexity. Qualitative research uses interviews and observations, and researchers hardly attempt to make observations simple (Borgstede and Scholz, 2021). They perceive that the studied issue has numerous layers and try to depict it in its multidimensional structure (Borgstede and Scholz, 2021). Qualitative research can study artefacts of an area, languages, religion, and ethnicity in a manner that is up for discussion (d'Iribarne, Chevrier, Henry, Segal, and Tréguer-Felten, 2020). This is supported by Vivar (2007), for whom qualitative research is, in general, the dynamic, all-encompassing, and each part of the experience of human, and it endeavours to catch those perspectives completely, inside the setting of the individuals who are encountering them. Qualitative research is not intended to predict and control, but it is designed to describe and to comprehend. The qualitative approach assists with the description and documentation of experiences of those dealing with a phenomenon. Qualitative research is typically used when variables cannot be easily pointed out, if there are no available theories to translate participants' behaviour, and if they require development (Creswell, 2028).

Qualitative research must also be adopted when less is known about a phenomenon or when theories must be revised (Morse and Field, 2023). Qualitative researchers pay less attention to a representativeness of sample or to specific ways of selecting a probability sample. Instead, qualitative researcher look at how the sample of cases, units, or activities of social life reveal multiple understanding of reality. The main purpose of sampling is to collect certain events, actions, or cases that can deepen clarify and provide diverse understanding. The primary concern is to discover instances that will improve other researchers' procedures of social life in a particular context. The questions asked in qualitative research do not aim to have a hypothesis; they are not intended to predict anything but to engage and understand society better. A qualitative approach was utilised in this study to explore strategic leadership in an academic library.

3.4.3 Difference between Qualitative and Quantitative methodological choices

Below is a table depicting differences between the qualitative and quantitative methodological choices to research.

Table 3. 1: Comparison of qualitative and quantitative methodological choices

Qualitative methodological choice	Quantitative methodological choice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reality is constructed through interactions between a researcher and the participants • Tolerant to different and subjective views on an issue • Close relationship and interaction between researcher and participant to get multiple and subjective perspectives • Specific, well-structured, seeks trustworthiness through credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability • Ask questions that deal with how and why to get in-depth understanding. • More open-ended questions. • The data collected is broken into themes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reality is objective, pre-exists and is independent of the researcher • Seek objective reality on an issue. • Arm’s length relationship between the researcher and participants to get objective, unbiased perspectives • It is less specific and has no structural depth. • Pursue validity and reliability Questions asked are how, what, and what. • More closed questions. • The data collected is broken into statistics and numbers.

Sources: Adapted from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill. (2007) and Babbie and Mouton (2001)

3.4.4 Mixed Method

The mixed methods research approach adapts both qualitative and quantitative approaches to have mixed methods approaches. According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2024), it is the third research revolution, a movement that moves beyond the worldview wars by providing an informed and viable alternative. Philosophically, the system of philosophy and pragmatic method is used by mixed research (Strijker, Bosworth, and Bouter, 2020). Its logic of inquiry involves the abduction (uncovering and relying on the best of a set of explanations for understanding one's results), deduction (testing of theories and hypotheses), and the use of induction (or discovery of patterns) (Dawadi, Shrestha, and Giri, 2021).

The mixed-methods approach provides better insight into the problem being researched than one method (Proudfoot, 2023). It is more time-consuming as it involves merging, building, and embedding data. It is used when aiming to provide an alternative perspective in a study. A wide range of methodologies has been used to investigate social sciences, and there are many ways to classify these methodologies (Proudfoot, 2023). There are various designs within each of these methodologies. Mixed method was not used in the current study. Instead qualitative research approach was employed in this study as it depends on human perspectives, experiences, and contributions. . Kumar (2021) states that the main emphasis in qualitative research is to comprehend, explore, discover, clarify, and explain situations, experiences, values, perceptions, feelings, and perceptions of a group of people.

3.5 Target Population

Michael Willie (2023: 7) defined target population in a study as group of individuals or subjects who meet specific criteria for inclusion in the research. Careful consideration of various factors, including demographic characteristics, and the specific research objectives is required when defining target population. This study ensured that the findings of the study are applicable to the intended field and can be used to inform decision-making. The target population of this study were members of the library top management team (TMT) who have more than 2 years of working experience at University of KwaZulu-Natal libraries.

3.6 Sampling

Berndt (2020) defines sampling as a process of choosing a small number of people from a large group to represent that group. In the majority of cases, the total population of people of interest to be researched about is too large that it is not possible to collect data from individual people or entities; as a result, it is acceptable scientifically to draw a sample from the entire population and generalise the findings, as representative of the whole population (Tang, Jin, Wang, Liu, Liu, Wang, and Cao, 2020). According to Neil (2022), samples should be selected to represent the population in a way that maximises the likelihood of the whole population representation; the aim is to have the sample being the mirror image of the population. In the qualitative study, it is important that the study does not generate generalisable findings from a representative sample, but rather generate findings that are trustworthy and transferable to similar context as they are based on views of relevant participants and data saturation.

Probability sampling is when every element in the population has an equal chance of being selected to be in the sample (Wu and Thompson, 2020). Leedy and Ormrod (2025) state that in probability sampling, the sample is chosen from the overall population by the random selection; that is, it is selected in such a way that each member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen, at the point when a random sample is chosen, the researcher can expect that the qualities of the sample estimated the features of the total population.

Non-probability sampling is where representatives in the population do not have a chance of being selected to be in the sample, this is where the probability of being selected cannot be accurate. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2025), the researcher has no way of predicting or guaranteeing that each population element will be represented in the sample. Furthermore, some population members have little or no chance of being sampled. Non-probability sampling methods involve accidental, snowball, quota, convenience, and purposive (Alzubaidi, Hasan, Meegahapola, and Rahman, 2021).

This study employed purposive stratified sampling because only the intended population will be selected, which will be strategic leaders (senior managers and departmental heads) of public university libraries. Another reason is that enough information is known to distinguish attributes that may impact how the phenomenon is shown, so it might make sense to utilise a purposive stratified sampling approach. In purposive sampling, researchers depend on their experience, resourcefulness, or past research discoveries to choose respondents who appear to fit the research project (Mason, 2024). The selection criteria for

purposive sampling used in this study was that participants should have : (1) not less than two years as a member of the top management team of a library, (2) willing and able to openly discuss his or her leadership experiences and practices to explore practices, styles, and effectiveness of strategic leadership and (3) was working in academic library during the Covid 19 era.

A sample of eight members of the UKZN libraries TMT were purposively selected to participate in the study. From these eight, the minimum years of experience working in the libraries for the participants was 11 years and the minimum experience in a leadership role was 2 years. The table below shows the roles and number of years working in the TMT for University of KwaZulu-Natal libraries of those who participated in the study.

Table 3.2: Study Participants

Member of TMT and identity as participant	Years in current leadership position	Years in academic libraries
Strategic leader SL1	3 years	20 years
Strategic leader SL2	2 years	11 years
Strategic leader SL3	19 years	43 years
Strategic leader SL4	7 years	34 years
Strategic leader SL5	15 years	15 years
Strategic leader SL6	11 years	35 years
Strategic leader SL7	5 years	22 years
Strategic leader SL8	11 years	>30 years

Source: Compiled by Author

3.7 Data Collection

This study employed qualitative data collection methods to gain in-depth insights into the strategic leadership practices within the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) library during the COVID-19 crisis. Data were collected through individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight senior members of the library's top management team who held leadership roles during the pandemic. These interviews were guided by an interview schedule (see attached Appendix B) designed to elicit detailed information about leadership strategies, effectiveness, and challenges faced. The interview guide was pilot tested in March 2023 with two senior managers from a comparable academic library to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions. Participants were purposively selected based on their leadership experience and willingness to participate. These pilot participants had similar leadership responsibilities and experience to the actual study participants, ensuring relevance and applicability of the feedback.

The pilot testing aimed to verify that the interview questions elicited the required data, were clear and unambiguous, and comprehensively covered all aspects of the research objectives. Following the pilot test, several refinements were made: some questions were rephrased to improve clarity and flow, particularly those related to crisis response strategies, which initially led to confusion due to overlapping terminology. Additionally, the sequence of questions was adjusted to enhance the logical progression, starting from general leadership roles to specific COVID-19 response actions. These changes ensured a smoother interview process and increased the potential for richer data collection during the full study. Prior to data collection, informed consent (see attached Appendix A) was obtained from all participants after providing them with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, confidentiality assurances, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. This ethical process ensured that participants were fully aware of their involvement and consented voluntarily, with confidentiality and anonymity strictly maintained throughout the study. Audio recordings of the interviews were made only with the participants' consent, and transcripts were shared for member checking to validate the accuracy of the data collected.

3.8 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of shared meaning (themes) within the interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2024). In this study, thematic analysis of data involved breaking data into codes and always comparing them to put similar

codes together and build broader themes reflecting practices, challenges and styles of strategic leadership during Covid 19 pandemic (Marks & Yardley, cited in Ibrahim, 2012). Table 3.2 depicts the fifteen-point checklist for thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2023), which was used in this study.

Table 3.3: Fifteen-point checklist of criteria for proper thematic analysis

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for accuracy.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of - rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.
	10	A right balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.

Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis is explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what the researcher claims to do and what the researcher shows to be done – i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just emerge.

Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2023: 96)

3.9 Trustworthy

The quality of research in this study was guided by Guba’s model of trustworthiness (Schwandt, 2025). This model has four trustworthiness features which are credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability. First, credibility refers to the issue of the inquirer ensuring that the respondents’ views fit with the inquirer’s reconstruction and representation (Schwandt, 2025). Credibility asks the How congruent are the findings with reality? Credibility is ensuring that research findings are plausible and trustworthy. Credibility creates a high level of conformity between the expressions of the participants and their interpretations by the researcher.

In this study, a member-checking strategy was used to ensure the credibility of the interview data. Furthermore, detailed and direct quotes from academic library strategic leaders reported in this study reflect their views and choice of words in expressing themselves. This is important for the credibility of the study. Dependability is checked by presenting an auditable trail for any researcher to understand how the research was conducted (Schwandt, 2025). Second, dependability means that data revealed should be consistently linked with results and that findings should reflect the meaning portrayed and intended by participants (Schwandt, 2025). Dependability also addresses the fact that the research context is open to change and variation (Schwandt, 2025). In this study, the researcher has clearly described the context and details of the processes followed. This is important for dependability in this study.

Third, confirmability according to Polit and Beck (2018), is the extent whereby the results are entirely the product of the respondents as well as a state of the study; and they're not impacted by the scholar's favouritism. The study has included actual quotes from participants under themes and maintain an audit log to ensure that the research findings can be independently verified. Member check was also used as participants were allowed to check the transcript and verify that it was a true reflection of their views collected during the interviews. Lastly, transferability implies that research results can be transmitted to similar contexts and situations beyond the scope of the study context. Transferability pertains to the degree to which the research findings can be extrapolated to alternative contexts or situation. Transferability comes about when the reader seeks to transfer the interpretation of the findings from one context to another similar context. Transferability requires researchers' thick descriptions that would include contextual information about the field work site, the sampling methods used and the criteria for participant selection which would assists readers in determining whether the findings might be applicable or transferable to similar populations or settings outside the study context. In this study, the researcher has provided adequate details of the higher education sector, academic libraries, geography, the nature of research participants, and the research process for anyone to judge transferability. Providing direct quotes from interview data and a clear description of the research process provide transparency in the conduct of this study. This is also relevant to ensure that the findings mirror the data provided by the participant and not that of the researcher. Table 3.4 below provides the criteria, together with the means, practices, and methods through which the quality aspects and excellence of research were pursued in this research.

Table 3. 4: Eight big-tent criteria for excellent qualitative research

Criteria for quality (end goal)	Various means, practices and methods through which to achieve excellent qualitative research
Worthy topic	The topic of research is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant • Timely • Significant • Interesting
Rich rigour	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate and complex <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretical constructs

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data and time in the field • Sample(s) • Context(s) • Data collection and analysis processes.
Sincerity	<p>The study is characterised by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher • Transparency about the methods and challenges.
Credibility	<p>The research is marked by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thick description, concrete details, explication of tacit (non-textual) knowledge and showing rather than telling • Triangulation or crystallisation • Multivocality • Member reflections
Resonance	<p>The research influences affect or move particular readers or a variety of audiences through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetic, evocative representation • Naturalistic generalisations • Transferable findings
Significant contribution	<p>The research provides a significant contribution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptually / theoretically • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically
Ethical	<p>The research considers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) • Situational and culturally specific ethics • Relational ethics

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing research).
Meaningful coherence	<p>The study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieves what it purports to be about • Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals • Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings and interpretations with each other.

Source: Adapted from Tracy (2010: 840)

3.10 Ethical considerations

This exploratory qualitative study adhered to the ethical procedures established by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Appendix C-Ethical clearance). Prior to commencing the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of UKZN (Appendix C-Ethical clearance). Research ethics refers to the principles of right and wrong that guide researchers in their work (Brynard and Hanekom, 2016). This exploratory qualitative research followed proper ethical standards and responsibilities (Quinlan 2021). The following ethical principles, as identified by Babbie and Mouton (2001), were applied in this study:

- **Voluntary Participation:** Participants were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary. They were thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives and, how they were selected for the study and why, and also assured that they could withdraw at any time without facing any consequences. This transparency was crucial for fostering trust among the police managers involved in the research.
- **Right to Withdraw:** The participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any legal repercussions. This assurance allowed them to feel more comfortable sharing their insights on the styles, challenges and critical components that are necessary to be part of strategic leadership in the academic library of UKZN.

- **Safety and Protection of Participants:** The researcher assured participants that their safety would be prioritised throughout the study. Measures were taken to ensure that participation would not result in any harm or negative repercussions for them, especially given the sensitive nature of law enforcement work.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Confidentiality and anonymity were paramount in this study. Participants were informed that only the researcher and the research supervisor would have access to the recordings and transcripts of the interviews. To protect their identities, no personal identifiers were recorded alongside their responses. Instead, code names will be used when reporting findings, ensuring that names, or job titles would not be disclosed in the research report.
- **Ethical Clearance:** Prior to commencing the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of UKZN (as attached in appendix 1). Gate keepers letter was also obtained from UKZN also to access and use the library as context of this study. By securing this clearance, the researcher ensured compliance with all necessary ethical standards and practices throughout the study.

3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed research methodology used in this qualitative study to that are normally utilised in research and indicated the methodology that will be utilised in this study. Research paradigms were also elaborated. This included postpositivist, constructivism, transformative, and pragmatism. The research methodological approaches were deeply explained, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. This chapter has also clarified the sample and sampling technique, data collection and analysis, research quality and ethical considerations in this study of strategic leadership of a university library during Covid 19 at UKZN. The next chapter focuses on results.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of this exploratory qualitative study and the analyses, which were done following the Braun and Clarke six-step framework for the thematic analysis approach. The researcher chose the thematic analysis approach as the preferred approach to analyse qualitative data collected in the study titled Exploring Strategic Leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal Libraries during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 crisis. The researcher administered semi-structured interviews with the study participants to help fulfil the following research objectives.

- To investigate practices utilised by strategic leaders of the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Covid-19 crisis.
- To explore the effectiveness of leadership styles of strategic leaders of the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis.
- To examine the challenges experienced by strategic leaders in leading the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis.

4.2 Participants Demographics

Table 4.1: Participants Demographics

Participant	Role	Year in current position	Years employed in the library
SL 1	Acting LIASA manager in the library	8	15
SL 2	Manage the Main Library,	7	34
SL 3	Principal Librarian	15	15
SL 4	Principal Librarian Circulation	11Years	35 years
SL 5	Principal Librarian for Circulation on the Howard College Campus.	5 years	32 years
SL 6	Director of Library Services	3	20
SL 7	senior manager	19	43
SL 8	Principal Librarian	11	30

4.3 RESULTS FROM INTERVIEWS

In response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting national lockdown, the University of KwaZulu-Natal library management swiftly implemented a range of strategic measures to ensure continuity of services and support for library users. These interventions aimed to adapt traditional operations to the constraints of remote work and social distancing, while maintaining access to essential information resources. The following table summarises the key themes identified from data on the various actions taken by the library leadership during this period. These themes are drawn directly from the interview data, coding structure, and thematic analysis, reflecting both practices, leadership effectiveness, and challenges faced by UKZN library strategic leaders during COVID-19. Each theme reflects a distinct strategic response designed to address the immediate needs of users and staff, highlighting the leadership’s focus on communication, resource allocation, and technological adaptation in the face of crisis.

Table 4.2: Themes emanating from Primary data

Objective 1	Investigate practices utilised by strategic leaders during COVID-19
Theme 1	Crisis Management Meetings to Shape Strategic Direction
Theme 2	Provision of Remote Work Resources
Theme 3	Communication with Stakeholders
Theme 4	Service Adaptations (e.g., Blanket Renewals)
Objective 2	Objective 2: Explore the effectiveness of leadership styles of strategic leaders during COVID-19
Theme 1	Agile and Adaptive Leadership
Theme 2	Strategic Planning and Preparedness
Theme 3	Empathetic and Supportive Leadership
Theme 4	Collaborative and Accountable Leadership
Objective 3	Examine challenges experienced by strategic leaders during COVID-19
Theme 1	Poor Internet Connectivity and Lack of Equipment
Theme 2	Negative Adaptation to Change
Theme 3	Work-Life Balance Issues
Theme 4	Lack of Training and Development in Digital Leadership Skills

The broad themes identified from the primary data (Table 4.2) provide an overarching framework of strategic leadership practices, leadership effectiveness, and challenges experienced by the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis. To facilitate a more focused analysis, these broad themes are further broken down into specific sub-themes that align with each research objective. Table 4.3 presents the detailed themes emerging specifically from Objective 1, which investigates the concrete practices employed by strategic leaders in managing the library’s response to the pandemic.

4.3.1 Objective 1: Investigate practices utilised by strategic leaders during COVID-19

Table 4.3: Themes from Objective 1

	Theme	Frequency
1	Crisis Management Meetings to Shape Strategic Direction	
2	Provision of Remote Work Resources	
3	Communication with Stakeholders	
4	Service Adaptations (e.g., Blanket Renewals)	

4.3.1.1 Crisis Management Meetings to Shape Strategic Direction

Regular crisis meetings were held with stakeholders to adapt quickly and monitor library operations during lockdown. The use of crisis management meetings as a strategic practice during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals both the strengths and limitations of traditional leadership mechanisms when faced with unprecedented uncertainty. While frequent meetings facilitated rapid decision-making and ensured that leaders remained responsive to evolving conditions, they also exposed potential risks of over-centralisation and meeting fatigue. In contexts where speed and adaptability are critical, reliance on hierarchical meetings may delay agile responses if not well-structured. However, these meetings served as a critical platform for collaborative sense-making, highlighting the importance of inclusivity and multi-stakeholder engagement in crisis leadership. This suggests that strategic leaders who effectively balance structured oversight with decentralised empowerment can better navigate volatile environments like a pandemic.

In response to the rapidly evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the leadership recognised the critical need for constant monitoring and timely decision-making. They understood that regular and

structured engagement would enable them to remain informed and agile in their responses. The following excerpt confirms that weekly leadership meetings were foundational to adapting service delivery efficiently during this time.

“We convened weekly leadership meetings to evaluate the rapidly changing situation brought by the pandemic. These meetings were critical for adjusting our service delivery models to meet new restrictions and user needs efficiently.”
(Participant SL 1)

Maintaining alignment on priorities and resource allocation was essential for navigating the complexities introduced by the lockdown restrictions. Leadership emphasised continuous communication to keep all stakeholders apprised of urgent challenges and required strategic shifts. The next excerpt confirms how regular crisis briefings played a vital role in this alignment and coordination effort.

“Regular crisis briefings enabled the leadership team to align resources and set clear priorities. This continuous communication ensured everyone was aware of the urgent challenges and strategic responses required.” (Participant SL 5)

Given the unpredictable nature of government regulations and institutional policies during the pandemic, leaders had to exercise agility in their decision-making processes. Constant review of guidelines was necessary to ensure compliance while maintaining service continuity. The following excerpt confirms that this approach enabled the leadership team to stay responsive and adapt strategies quickly.

“The leadership team had to remain agile in decision-making by constantly reviewing government regulations and institutional policies. This helped us to quickly adapt our strategies to comply with evolving health guidelines.”
(Participant SL 7)

Recognising that the library’s challenges were part of a broader institutional crisis, strategic leaders prioritised interdepartmental collaboration. Coordinated efforts with other university units were crucial to sustaining academic support services despite widespread disruptions. The subsequent excerpt confirms how these meetings facilitated such collaboration and unified response.

“Collaboration with other university units was facilitated through these meetings, ensuring a coordinated approach to maintaining academic support services despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic.” (Participant SL 4)

4.3.1.2 Provision of Remote Work Resources

Acquisition and distribution of laptops, internet data bundles, and online platforms enabled staff to work from home effectively. The strategic deployment of resources such as laptops and internet data to enable remote work represents a vital adaptation in ensuring operational continuity during lockdowns. However, this practice underscores deeper systemic inequalities that hinder effective implementation—inequitable access to technology and digital infrastructure among staff limits the potential impact of resource provision. This reveals the necessity for strategic leaders to not only allocate resources but also anticipate and address structural barriers that could impede technology adoption. Merely providing hardware without addressing underlying digital literacy or connectivity issues risks superficial compliance rather than transformative change. Thus, the efficacy of this practice depends on an integrated approach combining resource allocation with capacity building and infrastructure development.

To maintain library operations during the sudden shift to remote work, leadership prioritised equipping staff with the necessary technological tools. Providing laptops and reliable internet access was a strategic response to ensure that staff could fulfil their duties from home. The following excerpt confirms that this provision was vital for operational continuity throughout the lockdown.

“The management prioritised equipping every staff member with laptops and stable internet access to enable them to work remotely. This provision was vital for maintaining continuity of library operations during lockdown.” (Participant SL 1)

Connectivity challenges posed a significant barrier to remote work, prompting management to explore solutions that would bridge this gap. Supplying data bundles and secure VPN access helped staff connect to the library’s digital resources safely and consistently. The next excerpt confirms the importance of these resources in enabling uninterrupted service delivery.

“To overcome connectivity barriers, data bundles and VPN access were supplied, allowing staff to securely access library systems from their homes. This ensured uninterrupted service delivery and data protection.” (Participant SL 7)

With face-to-face interactions restricted, reliance on virtual communication platforms became essential for collaboration. Strategic leaders recognised the need to provide appropriate software licenses to facilitate effective online meetings and daily operations. The following excerpt confirms how tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams formed the backbone of virtual engagement.

“We procured necessary software licenses for video conferencing and collaboration platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These tools became the backbone of our virtual meetings and daily communication.” (Participant SL 5)

Without timely deployment of technological resources, the transition to fully online library operations could have faced significant setbacks. Leadership foresaw this risk and acted swiftly to minimise disruptions. The subsequent excerpt confirms how the availability of technology prevented delays and supported the new mode of operation.

“Without these technological resources, the abrupt shift from physical library operations to a fully online environment would have faced significant setbacks and delays.” (Participant SL 4)

4.3.1.3 Communication with Stakeholders

Use of emails, telephonic assistance, and online meetings to keep staff and users informed and engaged was being adopted by library management. The emphasis on communication as a strategic practice during COVID-19 highlights its dual role as both an operational necessity and a tool for building trust and resilience. While digital platforms enabled continued engagement with staff and users, the reliance on virtual communication exposes challenges such as digital fatigue, message overload, and inequitable access to communication channels. Furthermore, the effectiveness of communication hinges not only on frequency but also on clarity, empathy, and feedback loops that validate stakeholder concerns. This suggests that strategic leaders must move beyond transactional communication toward more dialogic and inclusive approaches that foster genuine connection and collective ownership, especially in times of crisis marked by uncertainty and anxiety.

Effective communication channels became more critical than ever to keep staff informed during rapid changes. Leadership leveraged digital platforms such as emails and WhatsApp groups to disseminate

timely updates and policy changes. The following excerpt confirms that these tools played a key role in maintaining clarity and engagement.

“Emails and WhatsApp groups became the primary channels for disseminating timely information and updates on changing policies. This approach helped maintain engagement and clarity among staff members.” (Participant SL 8)

In addition to written communication, maintaining personal contact was crucial to support motivation and clarify roles during remote work. Leaders instituted regular telephonic check-ins and virtual meetings to sustain team cohesion. The next excerpt confirms how these interactions helped staff stay connected and focused.

“Regular telephonic check-ins and scheduled virtual meetings were crucial for keeping the team connected, motivated, and well-informed about their roles during the remote working phase.” (Participant SL 4)

Communicating clearly with library users about changes in access and services was a strategic priority to manage expectations. Multi-channel communication efforts ensured users remained informed despite limited physical access. The following excerpt confirms how leadership maintained transparent engagement with patrons.

“Maintaining transparent communication with library users through multiple platforms helped manage their expectations, especially when access to physical resources was limited.” (Participant SL 2)

With rapidly evolving responsibilities, frequent and clear communication was essential to ensure staff understood their roles. Leadership recognised this need and prioritised consistent messaging to keep everyone aligned. The subsequent excerpt confirms how this approach supported operational effectiveness during the crisis.

“Frequent and clear messaging was key to ensuring staff understood their evolving responsibilities and remained aligned with the library’s objectives during the crisis.” (Participant SL 1)

4.3.1.4 Service Adaptations (e.g., Blanket Renewals)

Implementing policies like blanket renewals to ease user access and reduce physical interaction were used during lockdown. Adapting library services through innovative policies like blanket renewals demonstrates strategic leaders' responsiveness to user needs during the pandemic and reflects a customer-centric orientation essential for service continuity. However, such adaptations must be critically assessed in terms of their sustainability and long-term implications for service delivery models. Quick-fix solutions may address immediate challenges but risk embedding reactive rather than proactive practices if not integrated within a broader strategic framework. Additionally, this theme raises questions about how digital transformation can be leveraged not merely to replicate traditional services online but to fundamentally rethink service design and user engagement. Effective strategic leadership should therefore focus on embedding innovation that enhances both agility and resilience beyond the crisis.

To reduce physical contact and adhere to social distancing protocols, leadership implemented innovative policies aimed at easing user access. One such measure was the automatic extension of loan periods to minimise the need for in-person visits. The following excerpt confirms the effectiveness of this blanket renewal policy during lockdown.

“To reduce physical contact and support users during lockdown, the library implemented a blanket renewal policy that automatically extended loan periods for all patrons, minimising the need for in-person visits.” (Participant SL 8)

Recognising the need for safe material access, leaders introduced alternative service methods that complied with health guidelines. Innovations such as curbside pickup and digital resource delivery enabled continued user support without compromising safety. The next excerpt confirms these adaptations as essential components of service continuity.

“Innovative service delivery methods such as curbside pickup and digital resource delivery were introduced, allowing users to access materials safely while adhering to social distancing protocols.” (Participant SL 4)

The shift to online learning necessitated enhanced digital platforms to support students and researchers remotely. Leadership responded by redesigning library webpages and launching virtual reference services to meet evolving needs. The following excerpt confirms how these initiatives ensured sustained academic support.

“The redesign of library webpages and the launch of virtual reference services provided crucial support for online learning, ensuring that students and researchers could still access help and information.” (Participant SL 2)

The rapidly changing environment required leadership to be flexible and proactive in adapting policies and services. Swift implementation of new measures allowed the library to maintain its academic support role despite significant constraints. The subsequent excerpt confirms the success of these timely adaptations.

“Swift adaptation of policies and services enabled the library to continue fulfilling its role in academic support despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic.” (Participant SL 3)

4.3.2 Objective 2: Explore the effectiveness of leadership styles of strategic leaders during COVID-19

Following the detailed exploration of the specific practices utilised by strategic leaders during the COVID-19 crisis, the focus now shifts to evaluating the effectiveness of the leadership styles adopted throughout this period. Table 4.4 highlights themes related to Objective 2, emphasising the qualities and approaches that enabled leaders to respond dynamically to rapidly evolving challenges. These themes illuminate how attributes such as agility, strategic foresight, empathy, and collaboration contributed to sustaining operations and supporting staff and users amid uncertainty. This progression from examining concrete practices to assessing leadership effectiveness provides a comprehensive understanding of not only what was done but also how it was done and why these leadership styles mattered in navigating the crisis.

Table 4.4: Themes from Objective 2

	Theme	Frequency
1	Agile and Adaptive Leadership	
2	Strategic Planning and Preparedness	
3	Empathetic and Supportive Leadership	
4	Collaborative and Accountable Leadership	

4.3.2.1 Agile and Adaptive Leadership

Leaders rapidly adapted to unforeseen changes and made quick, strategic decisions to maintain service continuity. The demonstration of agile and adaptive leadership during the COVID-19 crisis underscores the necessity for leaders to move beyond rigid, hierarchical models towards more flexible, responsive approaches. This style enabled leaders to navigate unprecedented uncertainty by embracing experimentation, learning from rapid feedback, and adjusting strategies in real time. However, agility in leadership is challenging to sustain, especially in traditionally bureaucratic institutions like academic libraries, where entrenched processes and cultures may resist such fluidity. Moreover, adaptive leadership requires not only individual capabilities but also systemic support, including decentralisation of decision-making and empowerment of frontline staff. The pandemic thus highlighted that true strategic effectiveness stems not merely from leader agility but from cultivating organisational adaptability.

Flexibility in shifting operations was vital to maintaining continuity. Participant SL 6 emphasised rapid adaptation to remote work. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

"Leaders demonstrated agility by quickly shifting the library's operations to a remote model, responding to the urgent need for service continuity despite the disruptions caused by lockdown. The strategic leaders showed remarkable flexibility, embracing rapid changes in operational processes. This agility allowed them to maintain library services and adapt workflows even in an environment marked by uncertainty and unpredictability". (Participant SL 6)

Empowering teams to act swiftly was a key feature of effective leadership. Participant SL 4 highlighted this approach. This was confirmed by the following verbatim:

"The ability to make swift decisions without waiting for formal approval was crucial in managing the crisis effectively. The leaders empowered themselves and their teams to take immediate actions as circumstances evolved, reflecting an adaptive leadership style that prioritised timely problem-solving over bureaucratic delays". (Participant SL 4)

Continuous strategic adjustment ensured relevance in a changing environment. Participant SL 1 noted this ongoing process. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

"Adjusting strategic plans dynamically as new information emerged about COVID-19 ensured the library remained responsive to both staff and user needs. This continuous reassessment and modification of strategies enabled leaders to remain relevant and effective, mitigating the impact of the pandemic on service delivery by anticipating and addressing emerging challenges". (Participant SL 1)

Encouraging innovation fostered resilience amid disruption. Participant SL 3 emphasised the promotion of creative approaches. This was confirmed by the following quote:

"Leaders encouraged innovation in service delivery, such as expanding digital offerings and using online platforms, to align with the changing environment. By promoting creative approaches and leveraging technology, the leadership fostered an environment of resilience and proactive adaptation, which was vital to the library's ability to function during the crisis". (Participant SL 3)

4.3.2.2 Strategic Planning and Preparedness

Prior adoption of digital strategies (e.g., E-strategy) positioned the library well for lockdown challenges. The prior existence of digital strategies and preparedness before the pandemic was a critical factor enhancing leadership effectiveness, illustrating how foresight and long-term vision serve as a buffer against crisis shocks. Yet, this theme exposes the paradox of strategic planning in volatile environments: plans often become obsolete rapidly, requiring continuous revision and flexibility. Effective leaders must balance the discipline of strategic foresight with an openness to emergent opportunities and threats. Furthermore, strategic planning's value lies not just in documented plans but in the capacity to mobilise resources and stakeholders swiftly. The UKZN library's experience suggests that preparedness must be dynamic and embedded in a culture of continuous scanning and learning rather than a static exercise.

Preparedness through pre-existing digital strategies facilitated swift adaptation. Participant SL 2 highlighted this advantage. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

"Pre-existing digital strategies provided a foundation that leaders could build upon to quickly transition services online during the lockdown. The foresight to invest in digital infrastructure and strategic planning before the pandemic paid

dividends, enabling smoother shifts to virtual library operations and minimising disruption to user access". (Participant SL 2)

Ongoing monitoring ensured alignment with institutional goals. Participant SL 4 emphasised this oversight. This was confirmed by the following verbatim:

"Leadership emphasised continuous monitoring of strategic goals and progress, ensuring alignment with institutional priorities throughout the crisis. Through vigilant oversight, leaders maintained a clear vision of the library's objectives, allowing them to stay focused and adjust tactical responses while preserving long-term strategic aims". (Participant SL 4)

Scenario planning strengthened the library's resilience. Participant SL 6 noted the integration of risk assessments. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

"Scenario planning and risk assessments were integrated into leadership practices to anticipate potential challenges and develop contingency measures. These proactive planning efforts strengthened the library's resilience by preparing leaders to face various eventualities, ensuring more controlled and effective crisis management". (Participant SL 6)

Balancing immediate and long-term priorities reflected mature leadership. Participant SL 8 stressed this balance. This was confirmed by the following quote:

"Leaders' ability to balance immediate crisis response with sustained strategic thinking helped maintain service continuity without compromising future goals. This dual focus allowed leaders to navigate the pandemic's immediate demands while safeguarding the library's longer-term development, reflecting mature and effective leadership". (Participant SL 8)

4.3.2.3 Empathetic and Supportive Leadership

Leaders prioritised staff well-being, showing empathy and maintaining open communication to reduce anxiety. The prioritisation of empathy and support in leadership practices reflects an important shift toward recognising the human dimensions of crisis management. This style counters traditional command-and-control paradigms, emphasising psychological safety, well-being, and trust-building as

foundational for sustaining performance under stress. However, empathetic leadership also faces constraints, such as balancing compassion with accountability, and navigating diverse individual needs without compromising organisational goals. Moreover, there is a risk that empathy may be perceived as softness if not coupled with decisive action. Thus, effective leadership during crises requires emotional intelligence to calibrate empathy with firmness, maintaining morale while ensuring strategic objectives are met.

Prioritising staff well-being through open communication was essential. Participant SL 1 emphasised emotional support during the crisis. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“Leaders actively communicated with staff to understand their challenges and provided emotional support during the stressful lockdown period. By fostering open channels for dialogue, leaders demonstrated genuine care for their employees' well-being, which contributed to maintaining morale and productivity amid difficult circumstances”. (Participant SL 1)

Flexible arrangements accommodated diverse personal needs. Participant SL 2 highlighted this approach. This was confirmed by the following verbatim:

“Efforts to create a supportive environment included regular check-ins and flexible work arrangements tailored to individual staff needs. This approach recognised the diverse personal situations of employees, offering them the flexibility and reassurance necessary to balance work demands with personal and family responsibilities”. (Participant SL 2)

Mental health support was recognised as critical. Participant SL 7 noted encouragement of related resources. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“Leaders acknowledged the psychological impact of the pandemic and encouraged resources for mental health support and stress management. By addressing mental health proactively, leadership helped reduce burnout and anxiety, showing a holistic understanding of their staff's needs beyond just operational performance”. (Participant SL 7)

Empathy guided policy to foster trust and loyalty. Participant SL 5 emphasised this leadership style. This was confirmed by the following quote:

“Empathy was a guiding principle in decision-making, ensuring policies were human-centred and considerate of staff welfare. This people-first leadership style fostered trust and loyalty, reinforcing a positive organisational culture even during periods of crisis and uncertainty”. (Participant SL 5)

4.3.2.4 Collaborative and Accountable Leadership

Trust, transparency, and accountability were emphasised, with structured reporting and regular staff check-ins to manage remote work. Collaborative leadership during the pandemic facilitated shared responsibility, transparency, and distributed decision-making, which are essential for legitimacy and resilience in times of complexity. This approach helps to break down silos, harness diverse perspectives, and foster collective problem-solving. Nonetheless, collaboration also introduces challenges related to coordination, potential diffusion of responsibility, and slower decision-making. The theme of accountability within collaboration is crucial—without clear roles and performance monitoring, collaboration risks inefficiency. Therefore, strategic leaders must cultivate a culture where collaboration is paired with clear accountability mechanisms, ensuring that collective efforts translate into concrete outcomes, particularly when operating remotely or in virtual teams.

Transparency and inclusivity fostered organisational trust. Participant SL 1 emphasised sharing updates and inviting feedback. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“Leaders promoted transparency by sharing regular updates about decisions and inviting feedback from staff at all levels. This inclusive communication style helped build trust within the organisation, ensuring everyone was informed and engaged in the library’s strategic response”. (Participant SL 1)

Maintaining accountability required clear roles and reporting. Participant SL 5 highlighted this structure. This was confirmed by the following verbatim:

“Accountability was maintained through clear roles, responsibilities, and reporting mechanisms, even as staff worked remotely. By establishing well-defined structures and expectations, leaders ensured that operational tasks were

completed effectively and that remote work did not hinder oversight or quality”.
(Participant SL 5)

Collaborating with university stakeholders enhanced resilience. Participant SL 3 noted the importance of partnership. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“Collaboration with university stakeholders was strengthened to align library services with wider institutional pandemic responses. Strategic leaders worked closely with other departments, facilitating resource sharing and coordinated planning that enhanced the library’s overall resilience and relevance”.
(Participant SL 3)

Empowering middle managers fostered ownership and agility. Participant SL 7 emphasised delegation and shared leadership. This was confirmed by the following quote:

“Distributed leadership practices empowered middle managers and team leaders to take initiative, fostering a sense of ownership. Encouraging delegation and shared leadership reduced bottlenecks and enabled more agile decision-making, cultivating a culture of mutual responsibility and proactive problem-solving”.
(Participant SL 7)

4.3.3 Objective 3: Examine challenges experienced by strategic leaders during COVID-19

Having established the effective leadership styles that characterised the strategic response to the pandemic, the analysis proceeds to consider the challenges that impeded leadership performance during this turbulent period. Table 4.5 presents themes corresponding to Objective 3, detailing the obstacles faced by strategic leaders in adapting to the crisis, such as infrastructural limitations, resistance to change, work-life balance struggles, and gaps in digital leadership skills. By comparing the identified leadership strengths with these challenges, the study provides a balanced perspective that recognises both the capabilities demonstrated and the areas requiring further development. This holistic view informs recommendations for strengthening strategic leadership in academic libraries facing similar disruptions in the future.

Table 4.5: Themes from Objective 3

	Theme	Frequency
1	Poor Internet Connectivity and Lack of Equipment	
2	Negative Adaptation to Change	
3	Work-Life Balance Issues	
4	Lack of Training and Development in Digital Leadership Skills	

4.3.3.1 Poor Internet Connectivity and Lack of Equipment

Challenges included inadequate internet access and insufficient laptops for remote work among staff. The challenge of poor internet connectivity and insufficient equipment underscores a critical infrastructural and digital divide that strategic leaders must contend with, especially in resource-constrained academic settings. This issue highlights that leadership effectiveness is not solely determined by vision or style but is fundamentally constrained by systemic inequities that limit operational capacity. The inability to guarantee reliable technology access undermines remote work and service delivery, risking exclusion of both staff and users. It also reveals a broader challenge of digital readiness and infrastructure investment, suggesting that strategic leadership in the digital era must integrate advocacy for institutional and governmental support to bridge such gaps. Without addressing these foundational inequities, strategic initiatives risk being fragmented and ineffectual.

Poor internet connectivity limited staff access and productivity. Participant SL 7 emphasised the challenge posed by poor internet connectivity limiting access to resources and virtual meetings. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“Many staff members struggled to perform their duties remotely because of poor internet connectivity in their homes, which severely limited their ability to access online resources and participate in virtual meetings. The lack of reliable internet made it difficult for the library to maintain consistent communication and productivity during lockdown, highlighting infrastructural disparities among employees”. (Participant SL 7)

Insufficient laptops delayed the remote work transition. Participant SL 4 noted the difficulty in procuring sufficient laptops and equipment, delaying remote work transition. This was confirmed by the following verbatim:

“We faced significant challenges in procuring sufficient laptops and other technological equipment to equip all staff for remote working. This shortage of necessary devices delayed the smooth transition to home-based work, affecting operational efficiency and staff morale”. (Participant SL 4)

Reliance on personal data plans created inequities. Participant SL 2 highlighted reliance on costly and insufficient personal data plans causing work disruption. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“Some employees had to rely on personal data plans, which were often insufficient and expensive, leading to inconsistent connectivity and disrupted work schedules. This created unequal working conditions and added financial burdens on staff, undermining their ability to fully engage with their work responsibilities”. (Participant SL 2)

The pandemic exposed systemic digital inequities. Participant SL 1 stressed that the digital divide exposed systemic inequities needing urgent attention. This was confirmed by the following quote:

“The digital divide became glaringly apparent during the crisis, with some staff unable to contribute fully due to a lack of basic technological infrastructure. This exposed systemic issues that need to be addressed to improve equity in future remote working arrangements”. (Participant SL 1)

4.3.3.2 Negative Adaptation to Change

Resistance or difficulty adapting to rapid digital transformation reveals the complex socio-cultural dynamics within organisations that challenge strategic leadership during crises. Change is inherently disruptive, but negative adaptation reflects deeper issues such as fear, uncertainty, lack of skills, and attachment to traditional routines. Leaders face the dual task of managing technological transitions while also addressing psychological and emotional barriers among staff. This challenge exposes the limits of purely technical solutions and points to the need for holistic change management that includes communication, training, and participatory leadership. Failure to effectively manage resistance risks

slowing innovation, diminishing morale, and exacerbating stress, ultimately undermining the library's ability to fulfil its mission in a transformed environment.

Resistance to new digital tools was common due to insufficient training. Participant SL 6 emphasised resistance to new digital platforms due to insufficient training. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“Several staff members found it difficult to adjust to new digital platforms and workflows that were rapidly introduced without sufficient training. Resistance to change was a common challenge, as some employees preferred traditional methods and struggled to embrace the accelerated digital transformation”.
(Participant SL 6)

Reluctance to abandon face-to-face interactions slowed innovation. Participant SL 4 highlighted reluctance to move away from face-to-face interactions hindering innovation. This was confirmed by the following verbatim:

“There was a noticeable reluctance among some to move away from face-to-face interactions, making virtual collaboration and communication less effective initially. This reluctance slowed down the adoption of new practices and impeded the library's ability to innovate during the crisis”. (Participant SL 4)

Anxiety and uncertainty complicated policy adaptation. Participant SL 1 noted anxiety and resistance caused by sudden shifts to remote services and new policies. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“The sudden shift to remote services caused anxiety and uncertainty, leading some employees to resist new policies and procedures. Emotional stress related to the pandemic compounded difficulties in adapting to operational changes, affecting overall staff engagement”. (Participant SL 1)

Digital literacy gaps affected readiness. Participant SL 3 emphasised the challenge of varied digital literacy among staff affecting readiness. This was confirmed by the following quote:

“Adapting to rapid changes was particularly challenging for those who were less digitally literate or lacked previous exposure to remote working. The varying

levels of digital competence among staff created a gap in readiness that leadership had to manage alongside ongoing service demands”. (Participant SL 3)

4.3.3.3 Work-Life Balance Issues

Staff struggled to maintain productivity while managing personal responsibilities during lockdown. The challenge of maintaining work-life balance during lockdowns highlights the blurred boundaries that remote work imposes on employees, revealing strategic leaders’ need to consider human factors beyond productivity metrics. The pandemic intensified demands on personal and professional fronts simultaneously, leading to burnout and diminished well-being. This theme critiques leadership approaches that may overly prioritise operational continuity without sufficient attention to staff welfare and sustainable work practices. Effective strategic leadership requires reframing productivity to include well-being as integral to performance, promoting flexible policies and supportive cultures. Ignoring these aspects risks attrition and long-term organisational decline, emphasising that leadership during crises must be both people-centred and strategically aware.

Participant SL 5 emphasised difficulties staff faced separating work and personal life, leading to burnout. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“Many staff reported difficulty in separating work responsibilities from personal life while working from home, leading to longer working hours and burnout. The blurring of boundaries between home and work environments caused fatigue and stress, reducing productivity and job satisfaction”. (Participant SL 5)

Participant SL 3 noted the added pressure on employees juggling caregiving and work responsibilities. This was confirmed by the following verbatim:

“Employees with caregiving responsibilities faced added pressure trying to juggle professional duties with family needs during lockdown. This dual burden heightened the emotional and physical strain on staff, challenging leadership to find ways to support them adequately”. (Participant SL 3)

Participant SL 4 highlighted inconsistent work patterns and time management issues due to blurred boundaries. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“The lack of a clear distinction between office hours and personal time led to inconsistent work patterns and challenges in time management. Without traditional workplace structure, many struggled to maintain discipline and balance, affecting overall team cohesion”. (Participant SL 4)

Participant SL 1 stressed mental health concerns due to prolonged isolation and constant connectivity. This was confirmed by the following quote:

“Mental health concerns emerged as a significant issue, as prolonged isolation and constant connectivity caused stress and anxiety.” This highlighted the need for leadership to prioritise wellbeing initiatives and flexible working arrangements to sustain staff morale”. (Participant SL 1)

4.3.3.4 Lack of Training and Development in Digital Leadership Skills

Gaps in necessary skills for digital strategic leadership and effective remote supervision were evident. The gap in digital leadership competencies among strategic leaders points to a significant vulnerability in the capacity to lead effectively in rapidly evolving technological landscapes. This challenge exposes the often reactive nature of leadership development, where skill-building lags behind emergent demands. The pandemic served as a stress test, revealing that digital literacy, remote supervision, and virtual collaboration skills are no longer optional but essential. This theme calls for a proactive, continuous learning approach embedded within leadership development frameworks to build resilience and adaptability. Without intentional investment in upskilling, leaders risk being ill-equipped to manage crises and harness opportunities presented by digital transformation, undermining strategic goals and organisational agility.

Participant SL 8 acknowledged gaps in digital competencies that hindered remote team management. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“Leaders acknowledged a gap in their own digital competencies, which hindered their ability to effectively manage and support remote teams. This skill gap limited strategic decision-making and the ability to implement innovative solutions promptly during the crisis”. (Participant SL 8)

Participant SL 6 noted insufficient formal training slowed digital transition and reduced confidence. This was confirmed by the following verbatim:

“There was insufficient formal training provided to both leaders and staff on new technologies and digital tools critical for remote operations. The absence of structured development programs slowed down the digital transition and reduced confidence in handling virtual workflows”. (Participant SL 6)

Participant SL 2 emphasised the urgent need for continuous professional development in digital literacy and e-leadership skills. This was confirmed by the following excerpt:

“The pandemic revealed the urgent need for continuous professional development focusing on digital literacy and e-leadership skills. Building these competencies became crucial for sustaining library operations and preparing for future disruptions”. (Participant SL 2)

Participant SL 5 highlighted struggles in monitoring performance and maintaining accountability remotely. This was confirmed by the following quote:

“Without adequate preparation, some leaders struggled with monitoring performance and maintaining accountability in a remote work environment. This challenge underscored the importance of developing new leadership approaches suited for digital and distributed teams”. (Participant SL 5)

The challenges experienced by strategic leaders during the COVID-19 crisis at the University of KwaZulu-Natal library reveal fundamental systemic, cultural, and developmental gaps that constrained leadership effectiveness in a digitally disrupted environment. Poor internet connectivity and lack of equipment underscore deep infrastructural inequities that go beyond leadership style or intent, highlighting the urgent need for strategic advocacy and investment in digital readiness to enable equitable remote work and service delivery. Concurrently, resistance to rapid digital transformation exposes the socio-cultural complexity of change management, emphasising that successful leadership must integrate technological adaptation with psychological support and inclusive communication to overcome fear and uncertainty.

The difficulty in maintaining work-life balance further reveals that leadership effectiveness cannot be measured solely by operational continuity but must incorporate holistic employee well-being and sustainable work practices to prevent burnout and attrition. Lastly, the gap in digital leadership skills among strategic leaders illustrates a critical deficiency in continuous capacity building, revealing that preparedness for crisis management requires proactive and ongoing professional development to equip leaders with competencies essential for navigating evolving technological landscapes. Collectively, these challenges reflect that strategic leadership during crises demands a multidimensional approach that addresses infrastructural, human, and capability factors simultaneously to sustain organisational resilience and effectiveness.

4.4 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the findings from the exploratory qualitative study on strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis. Using thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, the chapter detailed the key leadership practices employed, including crisis management meetings, resource provision for remote work, stakeholder communication, and service adaptations. It also examined the effectiveness of leadership styles such as agility, empathy, strategic planning, and collaboration. Additionally, the chapter identified significant challenges like infrastructural limitations, resistance to change, work-life balance issues, and gaps in digital leadership skills. These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how leadership navigated the complex disruptions posed by the pandemic, highlighting both strengths and areas requiring further development.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of the research findings in relation to how the University of KwaZulu-Natal library's leadership practices, leadership styles, and encountered challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic align with, or diverge from, broader understandings of effective crisis leadership. It synthesises the thematic results, exploring the implications of crisis management meetings, resource provisioning, stakeholder communication, and service adaptations as practical responses to unprecedented disruptions. The discussion further explores into leadership effectiveness, emphasising the demonstrated agility, preparedness, empathy, and collaboration that sustained operational continuity. Simultaneously, it addresses significant barriers such as infrastructural inequities, resistance to rapid change, work-life balance struggles, and gaps in digital leadership capabilities that constrained leadership performance. By situating these findings within current scholarship, this chapter elucidates the multidimensional nature of strategic leadership in a digitally disrupted academic environment, highlighting lessons learned and identifying areas for future leadership development and institutional strengthening.

5.2. Discussion of Objective 1: Investigate practices utilised by strategic leaders during COVID-19

5.2.1 Crisis Management Meetings to Shape Strategic Direction

The frequent crisis management meetings held by UKZN library leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate an essential strategic practice for navigating uncertainty, allowing for timely decision-making and continuous alignment of resources with rapidly evolving demands. However, while such meetings promote collaboration and ensure that leadership remains agile, they also carry risks related to over-centralisation and decision bottlenecks, particularly in hierarchical academic library structures (Goncalves & Campos, 2018; Samimi et al., 2022). This reflects the paradox inherent in strategic leadership during crises where responsiveness must be balanced with inclusivity to harness diverse perspectives without sacrificing speed (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021). The ability of UKZN leaders to integrate interdepartmental collaboration within these meetings underscores the upper echelon theory's assertion that organisational outcomes are shaped by the cognitive frames of top management teams (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Beckos, 2023). Nevertheless, sustaining effectiveness requires avoiding meeting fatigue and ensuring that empowerment cascades beyond leadership teams to frontline staff to foster distributed leadership, which enhances organisational adaptability (Basir et al., 2023; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

This underscores a critical lesson for academic libraries: strategic direction-setting must be dynamic and participative to navigate the volatility and complexity inherent in crises like COVID-19.

5.2.2 Provision of Remote Work Resources

The UKZN library's strategic provision of laptops, internet data bundles, and virtual collaboration tools highlights the importance of resource allocation as a foundational leadership practice in sustaining operations amid lockdowns and remote work mandates. While this intervention was critical to maintaining service continuity, the findings reveal that leadership effectiveness in this domain hinges on addressing deeper systemic inequalities, such as the digital divide and uneven digital literacy among staff, consistent with the challenges documented in African and global academic libraries (Chisita, 2020; Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020). Merely distributing hardware is insufficient without complementary capacity-building and infrastructural support, affirming Wang et al.'s (2024) notion that leadership practices must be context-sensitive and adaptive to environmental constraints. Moreover, the reliance on technological tools challenges traditional academic library cultures that are often resistant to rapid digital transformation, emphasising the need for strategic leaders to foster a culture of learning and change management (Dadzie et al., 2020; Panahi et al., 2024). Thus, leadership in resource provision during crises must be holistic, combining tangible support with efforts to empower users, mitigate inequities, and institutionalise digital readiness for sustainable organisational resilience.

5.2.3 Communication with Stakeholders

Effective communication emerged as a pivotal strategic practice for UKZN library leaders in managing the COVID-19 crisis, facilitating transparency, trust-building, and coordination across internal and external stakeholders. The reliance on multi-channel digital platforms such as email, WhatsApp, and telephonic check-ins aligns with contemporary leadership theories that emphasise dialogic and inclusive communication as essential during periods of uncertainty (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Samimi et al., 2022). However, this shift to predominantly virtual communication also introduces challenges such as digital fatigue, information overload, and exclusion of stakeholders lacking reliable connectivity, highlighting ongoing inequalities that leaders must navigate (Chisita, 2020; Wang et al., 2024). The UKZN leaders' commitment to clarity and frequency of messaging resonates with research indicating that strategic leadership during crises requires not only message dissemination but also active listening and feedback mechanisms to validate stakeholder concerns and enhance collective ownership (Basir et al., 2023; Mahdi & Nassar, 2021). Consequently, this finding reinforces that communication in strategic

leadership transcends operational necessity to become a relational and trust-based practice critical for organisational resilience and effective crisis management.

5.2.4 Service Adaptations (e.g., Blanket Renewals)

The UKZN library's rapid implementation of service adaptations, such as blanket renewals and curbside pickups, exemplifies strategic leaders' responsiveness to emergent user needs and public health imperatives during the pandemic. While these measures ensured continuity and reduced physical contact, they also raise questions about sustainability and the potential for reactive, short-term fixes to become embedded as permanent practices without critical evaluation (Adeyemi et al., 2014; Mahdi & Nassar, 2021). This aligns with global literature cautioning against the uncritical replication of traditional services in digital formats, instead advocating for transformative reimagining of academic library services that leverage technology to enhance accessibility and user engagement (Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020; Newman, 2020). Strategic leadership thus requires balancing immediate crisis responses with long-term innovation and strategic foresight, embedding agility into service design to remain relevant in an increasingly digital and uncertain environment (Samimi et al., 2022; Panahi et al., 2024). This underscores the imperative for academic library leaders to transition from tactical crisis management to proactive strategic renewal, ensuring that adaptations contribute to enduring organisational resilience and enhanced user experiences.

5.3. Discussion of Objective 2: Explore the effectiveness of leadership styles of strategic leaders during COVID-19

5.3.1 Agile and Adaptive Leadership

The emergence of agile and adaptive leadership among UKZN library strategic leaders during the COVID-19 crisis reflects a necessary shift away from traditional bureaucratic models toward more flexible, responsive leadership capable of navigating volatile and uncertain environments. This agility aligns with contemporary leadership theories emphasising the importance of experimentation, rapid learning, and real-time strategy adjustments to maintain service continuity amid disruption (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021; Samimi et al., 2022). However, agility is difficult to sustain in institutions with entrenched hierarchical cultures and rigid processes, a challenge echoed in academic libraries globally (Panahi et al., 2024; Goncalves & Campos, 2018). The UKZN leaders' ability to empower teams to act swiftly highlights how distributed leadership can complement agility, fostering organisational resilience by decentralising decision-making and promoting frontline initiative (Basir et al., 2023; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Still, the pandemic revealed that true agility also demands systemic support, including digital

infrastructure and ongoing capability development, without which even the most adaptive leaders face constraints (Wang et al., 2024). Thus, strategic leadership in crisis contexts requires a balance of individual leader flexibility and organisational structures conducive to rapid, informed action.

5.3.2 Strategic Planning and Preparedness

The prior existence of digital strategies at UKZN provided a vital foundation for effective strategic planning and preparedness during the pandemic, underscoring the role of foresight and long-term vision in buffering organisations against external shocks (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021; Samimi et al., 2022). This finding corroborates existing scholarship asserting that strategic planning must be a dynamic, continuous process rather than a static document, particularly in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments like the COVID-19 crisis (Panahi et al., 2024; Adeyemi et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the rapid obsolescence of plans in such contexts requires leaders to remain flexible and open to emergent opportunities, balancing immediate crisis response with sustained strategic thinking (Beckos, 2023; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). UKZN leaders' emphasis on ongoing monitoring and scenario planning reflects mature leadership capable of integrating risk assessment into strategy execution, thus enhancing resilience (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Basir et al., 2023). These practices emphasise that strategic leadership effectiveness hinges not only on well-crafted plans but also on adaptive execution and stakeholder mobilisation in times of crisis.

5.3.3 Empathetic and Supportive Leadership

Empathetic and supportive leadership practiced by UKZN library leaders during the pandemic represents a critical human-centred approach that prioritises staff well-being amid uncertainty and stress, challenging the traditional command-and-control leadership paradigms dominant in academic institutions (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). This approach aligns with emerging views on crisis leadership that emphasise psychological safety, trust-building, and emotional intelligence as essential to sustaining morale and performance (Basir et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). However, balancing empathy with accountability remains a complex leadership challenge, requiring emotional intelligence to avoid perceptions of softness while maintaining strategic objectives (Samimi et al., 2022). The proactive focus on mental health support and flexible work arrangements observed at UKZN illustrates an integrative leadership style that recognises employees as whole persons, reflecting a shift toward more holistic definitions of organisational success (Panahi et al., 2024; Newman, 2020). This highlights the imperative for academic library leaders to embed empathy within strategic leadership to foster resilience and sustain effectiveness during crises.

5.3.4 Collaborative and Accountable Leadership

The collaborative and accountable leadership approach demonstrated by UKZN library leaders during COVID-19 underscores the importance of distributed leadership, transparency, and trust as pillars of effective crisis management (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Samimi et al., 2022). By fostering inclusivity and structured reporting mechanisms, leaders cultivated a culture of shared responsibility that enhanced coordination and resilience in a remote working environment, resonating with upper echelon theory's emphasis on the collective cognitive frames of top management teams shaping organisational outcomes (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Beckos, 2023). Nevertheless, collaboration introduces challenges such as potential diffusion of responsibility and slower decision-making, necessitating clear accountability frameworks to ensure efficacy (Basir et al., 2023; Mahdi & Nassar, 2021). UKZN leaders' efforts to empower middle managers and strengthen stakeholder partnerships demonstrate strategic balancing of collaboration and oversight, reinforcing that effective crisis leadership requires both inclusive engagement and disciplined performance management. This approach serves as a critical lesson for academic libraries navigating complex, uncertain environments requiring agile yet accountable leadership.

5.3.5 Navigating the Empathy–Accountability Tension

One of the most salient leadership challenges that emerged during the COVID-19 crisis was balancing empathy for staff well-being with maintaining accountability for service delivery. While empathetic leadership helped sustain morale under prolonged uncertainty, it risked diminishing clear performance standards and strategic momentum. To address this, leaders at UKZN Library can draw on Kotter's (1996) Eight-Step Change Model to structure interventions that honour both concern for people and the need for disciplined change:

- **Create a Sense of Urgency:** Communicate the critical importance of continued library service during the pandemic, emphasizing both human impact and institutional mission. By framing the crisis as a shared challenge, leaders can foster collective responsibility without downplaying individual hardship.
- **Form a Guiding Coalition:** Establish a cross-functional team—including HR, IT, and department heads—to co-design policies that support flexible work arrangements while setting clear remote performance metrics. This coalition becomes the locus for negotiating empathetic accommodations alongside service standards.

- **Develop a Clear Vision and Strategy:** Articulate how the library will achieve continuity of services through a combination of staff welfare initiatives (e.g., mental health check-ins) and specific operational targets (e.g., response time for remote reference queries). A unified vision aligns empathy-driven practices with accountability goals.
- **Communicate the Change Vision:** Use multiple channels—virtual town halls, email bulletins, and team meetings—to reinforce how empathy and accountability are complementary. Regularly share stories of staff resilience alongside data on service outcomes to keep both dimensions in view.
- **Empower Broad-Based Action:** Remove obstacles by providing training in digital tools and clear guidelines for remote work, and by granting managers discretion to adapt deadlines while tracking key performance indicators. Empowerment ensures staff feel supported but remain answerable for agreed deliverables.
- **Generate Short-Term Wins:** Publicly recognize teams that exemplify the empathy–accountability balance, such as those meeting emergency digitization targets while also mentoring colleagues under stress. These quick wins build momentum and demonstrate that care and results can coexist.
- **Consolidate Gains and Produce More Change:** Leverage the credibility from early successes to embed flexible policies—like staggered deadlines and peer-support networks—into standard operating procedures. Continually refine these initiatives based on feedback and performance data.
- **Anchor New Approaches in the Culture:** Institutionalize the dual commitment to empathy and accountability by incorporating them into leadership development programs, appraisal systems, and the library’s strategic plan. When these values are embedded, leaders at every level will naturally uphold both dimensions.

By explicitly mapping empathetic practices onto Kotter’s structured change steps, strategic leaders can more deeply engage with the empathy–accountability tension. This systematic approach helps ensure that staff well-being initiatives reinforce, rather than hinder, the library’s resilience and service commitments during crises.

5.4. Discussion of Objective 2: Examine challenges experienced by strategic leaders during COVID-19

5.4.1 Poor Internet Connectivity and Lack of Equipment

The challenge of poor internet connectivity and inadequate technological equipment faced by UKZN library leaders reveals the persistent infrastructural disparities that undermine the effectiveness of strategic leadership in digital transitions, especially in developing country contexts (Chisita, 2020; Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020). Despite proactive resource provision, the digital divide continues to constrain equitable access to services and hampers remote work capabilities, underscoring the complexity of leadership in environments marked by socio-economic inequality (Panahi et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). This challenge aligns with existing literature emphasising that leadership effectiveness in crises is not solely determined by decision-making skills or strategic intent but is deeply contingent on the organisational and national infrastructure that either enables or limits strategic action (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021; Samimi et al., 2022). Consequently, addressing these systemic barriers requires strategic leaders to advocate beyond their immediate organisational remit, engaging with institutional and governmental stakeholders to prioritise infrastructural investments that sustain digital equity and resilience.

5.4.2 Negative Adaptation to Change

Negative adaptation to change, such as resistance among staff to new workflows and digital tools, highlights the cultural and psychological barriers confronting strategic leaders in academic libraries during crises (Dadhe & Dubey, 2020; Panahi et al., 2024). Resistance reflects underlying anxieties related to skill deficits, uncertainty, and disruptions to established routines, which can undermine even the most well-planned strategic interventions (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). This phenomenon is consistent with change management theories emphasising the critical role of communication, training, and emotional support in facilitating acceptance and ownership of new ways of working (Basir et al., 2023; Newman, 2020). The UKZN experience underscores that strategic leadership must go beyond structural adjustments to actively engage with human dimensions of change, fostering a culture of continuous learning and psychological safety to mitigate resistance and promote innovation. Failure to address these factors risks entrenching inertia that compromises organisational agility and effectiveness in dynamic environments.

5.4.3 Work-Life Balance Issues and Lack of Digital Leadership Training

The convergence of work-life balance challenges and insufficient digital leadership training at UKZN reveals the multifaceted pressures on strategic leaders and employees during the pandemic, amplifying

the complexity of leading in a digital crisis (Guo et al., 2021; Panahi et al., 2024). The blurring of boundaries between work and personal life, exacerbated by remote work mandates and increased workloads, risks burnout and diminished productivity if not proactively managed (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). Concurrently, the shortage of formal digital leadership development limits leaders' capacity to effectively guide digital transformation, highlighting a critical gap in organisational preparedness (Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020; Samimi et al., 2022). This dual challenge reflects the broader necessity for academic libraries to institutionalise ongoing leadership development that integrates technical, emotional, and strategic competencies, enabling leaders to respond holistically to crises (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Basir et al., 2023). Strategic leadership in the post-pandemic era thus requires systemic investments in both well-being frameworks and capacity-building initiatives to sustain resilient and adaptive leadership cultures.

5.4.4 Lack of Training and Development in Digital Leadership Skills

The deficiency in formal training and development for digital leadership among UKZN library strategic leaders highlights a significant vulnerability in crisis preparedness and organisational agility. While leaders demonstrated commendable adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic, the absence of structured digital leadership development programs limits their ability to effectively harness technology, lead virtual teams, and innovate service delivery in increasingly digital environments (Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020; Panahi et al., 2024). This shortfall reflects a broader trend in academic libraries where digital transformation often outpaces leadership capacity-building, risking suboptimal utilisation of digital tools and insufficient strategic vision for long-term technology integration (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021; Samimi et al., 2022). Addressing this gap requires deliberate investment in ongoing leadership education that integrates technical skills, change management, and digital strategy, equipping leaders to confidently navigate future disruptions (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Basir et al., 2023). Ultimately, embedding digital leadership development as a core strategic priority is essential to sustain resilience and innovation in the evolving landscape of academic libraries.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the research findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks on strategic crisis leadership. It analysed how the leadership practices and styles observed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal library align with contemporary understandings of effective leadership in volatile and uncertain environments. The chapter emphasised the importance of agile, empathetic, and collaborative leadership in sustaining service continuity and staff well-being. It also explored the

challenges experienced, situating them within broader systemic and cultural contexts. By integrating empirical results with scholarly insights, the discussion illuminated key lessons for enhancing leadership resilience, strategic preparedness, and organisational adaptability in academic libraries confronting future crises.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This final chapter synthesises the key findings of the study on strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis, drawing together insights gained from the thematic analysis of leadership practices, effectiveness, and challenges. It reflects on how strategic leaders navigated unprecedented disruptions to maintain service continuity, adapt operations, and support staff and users amid rapidly changing circumstances. The conclusions highlight the critical role of agile, empathetic, and collaborative leadership styles, while acknowledging persistent challenges such as infrastructural limitations, resistance to change, and gaps in digital leadership capacity. Building on these insights, the chapter offers practical recommendations aimed at strengthening strategic leadership capabilities, enhancing digital readiness, and fostering a resilient organisational culture that can better withstand future crises. These recommendations are intended to guide both library management and wider academic institutions in refining leadership strategies that balance operational demands with human-centred approaches during times of uncertainty.

6.2 Summary of Research Findings

6.2.1 Findings from Literature Review

Secondary data for this research shows that strategic leadership in academic libraries during crisis situations necessitates a dynamic approach that balances visionary foresight with practical responsiveness. Recent literature underscores the increasing complexity leaders face in navigating volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mustika, Firmansyah & Ilhami, 2024; Samimi et al., 2022). The digital revolution compounded these challenges, requiring leaders to not only adapt existing leadership styles but also develop new competencies relevant to rapid digital transformation and remote service delivery (Zareef & Ahmad, 2022; Agarwal, Braguinsky & Ohyama, 2020). This evolving context calls for strategic leaders who integrate technological savvy with human-centred leadership to sustain organisational resilience and ensure continuous academic support in uncertain conditions. The literature reveals that strategic leadership is not solely about top-down decision-making but involves fostering collaboration, adaptability, and distributed leadership to effectively manage ongoing disruptions (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Wang et al., 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the integration of digital technologies within academic libraries, repositioning leadership roles to emphasise digital literacy, change management, and innovative service delivery models. Studies indicate that successful strategic leaders embraced agile and adaptive leadership styles, facilitating swift transitions to remote work and virtual service platforms such as online consultations, digital resource dissemination, and virtual reference services (Meng, Hua & Bian, 2020; Dadzie et al., 2020). However, this rapid digital shift exposed structural inequities, including uneven access to technology and digital skills among staff, which challenged leaders to simultaneously address infrastructural gaps and promote inclusive digital transformation (Chisita, 2020; Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020). Effective strategic leadership in this context thus entails balancing technological adoption with empathetic support for staff wellbeing and ongoing professional development to cultivate digital competencies critical for sustained operational effectiveness (Guo et al., 2021; Panahi et al., 2024).

The Upper Echelon Theory (UET) offers a valuable framework to understand the role of senior leadership in shaping organisational outcomes, emphasising how the values, cognitive frames, and demographics of top managers influence strategic choices and institutional performance (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Beckos, 2023). Contemporary critiques of UET highlight the need to consider environmental and relational factors that interact with leaders' characteristics, particularly in complex crisis scenarios such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Madi-Odeh & Obeidat, 2023; Samimi et al., 2022). Within academic libraries, the theory illuminates how senior managers' strategic decisions during the pandemic were shaped not only by their individual attributes but also by institutional constraints and the broader socio-technical landscape. The literature further stresses the importance of strategic leadership practices that bridge macro-level visions with micro-level actions, encompassing routines, communication strategies, and stakeholder engagement essential for navigating the unpredictability of crisis contexts (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002; Alayoubi, Al Shobaki & Abu-Naser, 2020).

Strategic leadership practices during crises are increasingly understood through the lens of praxis, highlighting the habitual, relational, and contextual nature of leadership actions. Recent scholarship advocates for a practice-oriented view of leadership that prioritises ongoing sense-making, collaboration, and communication as fundamental to effective crisis response (Wang et al., 2024; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Leaders are called upon to foster trust, distribute leadership responsibilities, and engage continuously with diverse stakeholders to sustain organisational resilience (Basir et al., 2023; Newman, 2020). Furthermore, the literature recognises that leadership effectiveness during disruption depends not

only on strategic foresight but also on empathetic engagement with staff wellbeing and work-life balance, which are critical for maintaining morale and productivity in remote and hybrid working environments (Guo et al., 2021; Romero et al., 2023). This holistic approach to strategic leadership combines technical competence with emotional intelligence to guide academic libraries through the complex demands of the digital and pandemic era.

6.2.2 Findings from Primary Research

6.2.2.1 Objective 1: Investigate practices utilised by strategic leaders during COVID-19

The strategic leaders at the University of KwaZulu-Natal library employed a range of adaptive practices to sustain operations during the COVID-19 lockdown, demonstrating a strong focus on crisis management and resource optimisation. Central to these practices were regular crisis management meetings that allowed leaders to continuously monitor the rapidly evolving situation and recalibrate service delivery in alignment with changing government regulations. These meetings not only facilitated swift decision-making but also encouraged collaboration across departments and units, highlighting the importance of inclusivity and multi-stakeholder engagement in crisis leadership. By prioritising constant communication and coordination, leaders maintained operational coherence amid uncertainty, which was vital to sustaining library services in an unpredictable environment.

In addition to collaborative decision-making, strategic leaders invested heavily in providing technological support to staff to enable remote work. This included distributing laptops, internet data bundles, and procuring licenses for digital communication platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These measures were essential to bridge the sudden transition from physical library services to a virtual environment. However, these initiatives also exposed structural inequalities, as some staff faced digital access and literacy challenges, which complicated the uniformity of implementation. The library leadership also adapted services innovatively, introducing policies like blanket renewals to minimise physical visits and curbside pickup to ensure safe material access. These measures underscored a customer-centric and health-conscious approach, reflecting an agile and responsive leadership mindset aimed at balancing service continuity with pandemic safety protocols.

6.2.2.2 Objective 2: Explore the effectiveness of leadership styles of strategic leaders during COVID-19

The leadership styles that emerged during the crisis were predominantly agile and adaptive, enabling leaders to respond rapidly and flexibly to the continuously changing pandemic context. Leaders empowered teams to make immediate decisions without bureaucratic delays, which helped sustain service continuity despite operational disruptions. This adaptive leadership style was supported by strategic foresight, particularly through the pre-existing investment in digital infrastructure and ongoing scenario planning. These factors allowed leaders to balance immediate crisis responses with long-term strategic thinking, positioning the library to not only weather the pandemic but to emerge with enhanced digital capabilities. Such strategic preparedness reflected mature leadership that could anticipate challenges and mobilise resources effectively.

Moreover, empathetic and supportive leadership was a hallmark of the crisis response, as leaders prioritised staff well-being through open communication, flexible working arrangements, and mental health support initiatives. Recognising the emotional toll of the pandemic, leaders demonstrated emotional intelligence by addressing anxiety, stress, and burnout among employees, which contributed to sustaining morale and productivity. Collaborative leadership further strengthened the response by fostering transparency, shared accountability, and trust through regular updates and inclusive decision-making processes. The combination of these leadership styles—agile, empathetic, and collaborative—proved critical in managing the complexities of the crisis and underscores the need for multidimensional leadership competencies in volatile environments.

6.2.2.3 Objective 3: Examine the challenges experienced by strategic leaders during COVID-19

Strategic leaders faced significant infrastructural challenges that hampered their ability to implement remote work and service delivery effectively. Poor internet connectivity and an insufficient supply of laptops and other digital tools exposed deep-rooted digital divides among staff members, limiting equitable participation in virtual workflows. These infrastructural barriers highlighted that leadership effectiveness is often constrained by systemic inequities beyond individual control. The dependence on personal data plans and unreliable connectivity added financial and operational strain on employees, underscoring the need for institutional advocacy and investment to bridge such divides in future crises.

In addition to infrastructural issues, leaders struggled with resistance to rapid change within the organisation. Many staff members found it difficult to adapt to new digital platforms and workflows, often preferring traditional face-to-face interactions. This resistance was compounded by anxiety and uncertainty caused by abrupt shifts in operational modalities, reflecting the socio-cultural complexities inherent in managing organisational transformation. Work-life balance also emerged as a critical challenge, as remote working blurred boundaries between personal and professional lives, resulting in burnout and reduced productivity. Finally, gaps in digital leadership competencies among some leaders underscored the urgency for continuous professional development tailored to the demands of digital and distributed work environments. Together, these challenges illustrate the multifaceted obstacles that must be addressed to strengthen strategic leadership resilience in academic libraries.

6.3 Research Conclusions

This study of the UKZN Library's leadership response to the COVID-19 crisis underscores not only the practical steps taken to preserve core services, but also yields two substantive extensions to strategic leadership theory in digital-intensive, high-uncertainty environments.

First, through the lens of **Upper Echelon Theory**, the research demonstrates how senior managers' cognitive frames and values directly shaped adaptive crisis practices. By convening rapid-response teams, empowering middle managers to make remote-work and circulation decisions, and repurposing existing staff skills for virtual service delivery, leaders translated their backgrounds and mindsets into distributed empowerment mechanisms. This enriches Upper Echelon Theory by showing that, in crisis contexts, demographic and experiential characteristics of top teams not only bias strategic choice, but can be deliberately leveraged to decentralize decision rights and accelerate organizational learning.

Second, applying the **Cynefin Framework** to the library setting reveals a clear pattern of domain shifts and sense-making routines. Pre-existing investment in VPNs and digital platforms positioned the library in the "complicated" domain, where expert analysis enabled swift platform roll-out. As unpredictable staff and user needs emerged, leaders moved into the "complex" domain—practicing empathetic listening and co-creation of mental-health support and training modules. Initial "chaotic" interventions (such as curb-side pickup and blanket renewals) then restored order, enabling iterative learning cycles. This operationalises Cynefin for academic libraries, illustrating how leaders can navigate from centralised command to collaborative experimentation under digital-crisis conditions.

Finally, the practical recommendations flow directly from and reinforce these theoretical insights.

- **Invest in digital infrastructure** (6.4.2) builds the library’s absorptive capacity—a core Upper Echelon construct—by ensuring that top teams can detect, interpret, and integrate emerging technologies into strategic responses.
- **Adopt agile, distributed leadership practices** (6.4.1) operationalises Cynefin’s prescription for shifting governance modes: from structured planning in “simple/complicated” contexts to rapid feedback and iteration in “complex” domains.
- **Embed continuous digital-leadership development** (6.4.5) strengthens leaders’ cognitive frames (Upper Echelon) and hones their sense-making skills across Cynefin domains, ensuring readiness for future disruptions.

Although this study focused on the University of KwaZulu-Natal Library, the findings hold potential relevance for similarly resourced academic libraries in the Global South. Institutions in countries with comparable digital infrastructure challenges, socio-economic constraints, and organisational structures can benefit from the adaptive leadership strategies observed. For example, strategic responses such as empathetic leadership, flexible resource reallocation, and digital upskilling can be models for peer institutions navigating post-crisis transformation in resource-constrained environments.

In summary, this research underscores that strategic leadership in academic libraries during crises is a multidimensional endeavour requiring integrated attention to infrastructural readiness, human factors, and leadership capability development. The University of KwaZulu-Natal library’s experience illustrates that sustaining service continuity amid disruption depends on the interplay of agile practices, empathetic leadership, and collaborative governance, while simultaneously addressing systemic and cultural challenges. The conclusions reinforce that effective strategic leadership cannot rely solely on reactive measures but must embed resilience through continuous learning, capacity building, and investment in digital infrastructure. These insights contribute valuable knowledge for academic institutions seeking to enhance leadership effectiveness and organisational resilience in an increasingly volatile and digital global environment.

6.4 Recommendations

Building on the insights gained from this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library and similar academic institutions facing crisis-induced disruptions:

- **Institutionalise Agile and Distributed Leadership Practices**

To enhance organisational adaptability, library management should formalise agile leadership frameworks that empower middle managers and frontline staff with decision-making authority. Regular crisis management meetings should be balanced with decentralised initiatives to prevent bottlenecks and promote timely, context-sensitive responses. Leadership development programs must include training on distributed leadership to foster a culture of shared responsibility and innovation.

- **Invest in Digital Infrastructure and Equitable Access**

Addressing the digital divide is critical to ensure equitable participation in remote work and service delivery. The university should prioritise sustained investments in reliable internet connectivity, hardware procurement, and secure virtual private network (VPN) access for all staff. Partnerships with governmental and private sector stakeholders can be explored to secure funding and infrastructure support, reducing systemic inequalities that undermine operational continuity.

- **Enhance Communication Strategies with Inclusive and Dialogic Approaches**

Leadership should develop comprehensive communication policies that go beyond one-way messaging to incorporate active listening and feedback mechanisms. Multi-channel communication platforms must be optimised to reduce digital fatigue and information overload, while ensuring inclusivity for stakeholders with limited connectivity. Regular training on empathetic and transparent communication will help leaders build trust and collective ownership during crisis and change management.

- **Embed Well-being and Work-Life Balance Support in Leadership Practices**

Given the blurred boundaries and increased stress in remote work environments, leaders should implement flexible work arrangements tailored to individual needs, promote mental health resources, and institutionalise wellness programs. Leadership training should include components on emotional intelligence and psychological safety to equip managers with the skills needed to support staff holistically, balancing productivity with well-being.

- **Establish Continuous Professional Development in Digital and Crisis Leadership**

To address gaps in digital leadership competencies, the university should develop ongoing professional development programs focusing on digital literacy, e-leadership, and remote team management. These programs must be proactive, accessible, and aligned with evolving technological trends to prepare leaders for future disruptions. Investing in such capacity building will enhance strategic agility and innovation in service delivery.

- **Foster a Culture of Innovation and Strategic Foresight**

Strategic leaders should promote a culture that encourages experimentation, scenario planning, and continuous learning. This involves integrating foresight exercises into routine strategic planning to anticipate future challenges and opportunities. Innovation labs or task forces can be created to pilot new service delivery models, ensuring that adaptations made during crises lead to sustainable organisational transformation rather than short-term fixes.

By implementing these recommendations, the University of KwaZulu-Natal library can strengthen its strategic leadership capacity, bridge systemic gaps, and build a resilient organisational culture capable of thriving in volatile and digitally complex environments. These actions will also serve as a blueprint for other academic libraries navigating similar challenges in the post-pandemic era.

6.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter concluded the research by synthesising the key findings, conclusions, and recommendations on strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the COVID-19 crisis. It highlighted how agile, empathetic, and collaborative leadership practices enabled the library to maintain service continuity and adapt to unprecedented disruptions. The study acknowledged significant challenges, including infrastructural inequities, resistance to change, work-life balance struggles, and gaps in digital leadership capacity, which constrained leadership effectiveness. Based on these insights, actionable recommendations were proposed to institutionalise agile leadership, invest in digital infrastructure, enhance communication, support staff well-being, and develop continuous professional training in digital and crisis leadership. Together, these conclusions and recommendations offer a practical framework for strengthening strategic leadership and building resilient academic libraries capable of navigating future crises in an increasingly complex and digital world.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

**APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL
For research with human participants**

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Dear

My name Lindiwe Olga Khumalo from the UKZN Graduate School of Business and Leadership. My contact details are as follows: [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and 219052887@stu.ukza.ac.za. UKZN Graduate School of Business and Leadership supervisor is Prof. Macdonald Kanyangale - kanyangalem@ukzn.ac.za

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves exploring strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal Library during Coronavirus disease 2019. The aim and purpose of this research is to investigate the practice of strategic leaders in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library when performing their functions during the Coronavirus 2019, to explore the effectiveness of practices of strategic leaders of the University of KwaZulu-Natal library when performing their functions during the Coronavirus 2019, to examine the challenges experienced by strategic leaders in leading the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Coronavirus 2019, to propose a framework of strategic leadership competencies during a crisis in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library. Interviews will continue until data saturation is reached. It will involve a semi-structured interview and a member check at the end of the process, where the transcript of the interview will be shared

with you for your approval. The duration of your participation is expected to be for a period of one year.

I do not foresee the study having any risks or discomforts. I hope that the study will contribute a framework for authentic leadership which is currently missing in the existing literature, and that it will also benefit the architectural profession.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at [REDACTED]; 219052887@stu.ukzn.a.za and [REDACTED] or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in the current research is voluntary and participants may withdraw participation at any stage. Should the participant wish to withdraw, the participants will not incur penalties or loss of treatment or other benefits to which they are normally entitled. The participant will be required to communicate their withdrawal either telephonically or through email. All data collected from the participant will remain part of the study so as not to delay or negatively impact the study.

The anonymity of the participant will be ensured at all times. All personal information, as well as data collected, will be saved on a password-protected computer to protect confidentiality. In addition, anonymisation will be utilised, and pseudonyms will be applied to research participants. Signed consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet. Data storage will happen for a reasonable time of five years and then be destroyed.

CONSENT

I have been informed about the study entitled: Strategic Leadership in Crisis: digital adaptation, resilience, and service continuity in South Africa’s academic libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic. by Khumalo, Lindiwe Olga.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at [redacted] 219052887stu.ukza.ac.za and [redacted]

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers, then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

**Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)**

Date

**Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)**

Date

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions

Objective 1: To investigate practices of strategic leaders University of KwaZulu-Natal library when performing their functions during the Covid-19.

- Please tell me about your designation and your role in the library.
- How long have you been working in the academic library/UKZN library?
- How long have you been in the current position?
- The arrival of Covid-19 was unexpected and the country went on national lockdown, please tell me about the measures you took as the library management in response to the lockdown in order to continue providing the service.
- How were these measures developed and communicated to staff?
- How were these measures received by the staff?

Objective 2: To explore the effectiveness of practices of strategic leaders of University of KwaZulu-Natal library when performing their functions during the Covid-19.

- How did you supervise staff who were working remotely to ensure they provide the service? Did these measures work to best optimal of the library management, if not what did you do to mitigate this?
- Which resources that were provided for remote working and how long it took to acquire those resources?
- How was the demand of the library, if low, how did you ensure the users continue to rely on the library for their information needs.

If high, how was it dealt with?

Objective 3: To examine the challenges experienced by strategic leaders in leading the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Covid-19.

- Were there any challenges you faced during the national lockdown and everything that came with it in for the library to continue providing the service, as senior management?

- Are there any changes introduced to the staff/the library in terms of operational and services provided?

Objective 4: To propose a framework of strategic leadership competences during crisis in University of KwaZulu-Natal library.

- Are there any elements or skills a senior management must have in dealing with a crisis?
- What were the critical elements or skills you have discovered that were crucial in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis?

What did learn as library management during Covid-19 in implementing your policies that were developed prior to Covid-19 era that governs days-to-day running of library

APPENDIX C: GATEKEEPER'S LETTER



2 August 2023

Lindiwe Olga Khumalo (SN 219052887)
Graduate School of Business and Leadership
College of Law and Management Studies
Westville Campus
UKZN
Email: 219052887@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Dear Lindiwe

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), towards your postgraduate degree, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

"Exploring strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the Coronavirus disease 2019 crisis."

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting semi-structured interviews with UKZN Library Senior Managers (Taking in account the regulations imposed during lockdown ie restrictions on gatherings, travel, social distancing etc. Zoom, Skype or telephone interviews recommended) on All five Campuses.

Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Public Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely



Mr MA TUFTS: Director Governance & Administration

Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa
Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 7971 Email: registrars@ukzn.ac.za Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

Residing Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Nashville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX D: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



11 August 2025

Lindiwe Olga Gumede (219052887)
Grad School of Bus & Leadership (Prior Restructuring)
Westville Campus

Dear LO Gumede,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003514/2021

Project title: Exploring strategic leadership in the University of KwaZulu-Natal library during the coronavirus disease crisis

Amended title: Strategic leadership in a crisis: digital adaptation, resilience, and service continuity in South Africa's academic library during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Amendment Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application and request for an amendment received on 11 August 2025 has now been approved as follows:

- Change in title

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form; Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully



.....
Doctor Shamila Naidoo (Interim Chair)

/nng

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587

Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS