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A Conceptual Review of Managerial Competencies for the 21st Century Education Academe

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23 July 2025 Education in the 21st century is characterised by broad and changing demands requiring that educational managers possess key skills and competencies if the institutions they lead are to achieve their goals and objectives. Evolving educational contexts demand that educational managers have a deeper understanding of the competencies required for improved education service quality. This article analyses the various managerial competencies required for effective educational management in the 21st century across different contexts worldwide. Using a desk-based review of literature approach, a conceptual depth was sought to inform the historical, contextual and theoretical grounding of the concept of managerial competences in order to identify the key concepts and their practical implications. It was revealed that the critical competencies include technical, cognitive, strategic, and interpersonal competencies, all of which play a crucial role in enhancing modern educational management. The article further established that despite the required competencies, there are peculiar managerial problems in various education institutions and it goes ahead to highlight the policy implications for future success. The paper therefore argues that the traditional roles of managers have evolved towards servant leadership; education itself has changed in nature of provision from service to a business model with emphasis on efficiency and competitive positioning. This implies that educational managers need to migrate to a business model of management to enhance institutional success. This calls for various strategies, including technical skills, strategic planning and interpersonal relationships to differentiate an institution from others of a similar nature and to ensure long-term sustainability in the competitive education landscape.

Keywords:

Educational
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Managerial
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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, education plays a dynamic role, demanding that individuals manage their own lives while contributing positively to society (OECD, 2018). This necessitates that educational institutions remain current in planning, organisation, staffing, and resource management. Furthermore, like all modern organisations, educational institutions operate in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, requiring professional management to maintain effectiveness and efficiency (Berek, 2017). To navigate the VUCA environment, educational institutions of the 21st century require managers with specific competencies (Gamarra et al., 2019).

According to Bairašauskienė (2017), the quality of school leaders, largely influenced by their managerial competencies, plays a key role in the quality of teaching and learning irrespective of the level of education and the type of educational institution. This is largely because managerial competencies not only bring about improved individual performance but also pose challenges which require key strategies to enhance educational outputs (Kapur, 2021). The challenges include perceptions of managerial competencies as a human resource aspect rather than an institutional imperative, alignment of critical managerial competencies with institutional goals, putting managerial competencies into practice, conflicts in the application of managerial competencies, inadequate resources, and limited stakeholder involvement. The strategies to overcome these challenges include setting clear goals, prioritising

tasks, continuous learning, identifying and dealing with possible hazards, and setting up institutional continuity policies (Kabii & Kinyua, 2023). Hence, the role of managerial competencies in the effective management of educational institutions cannot be underestimated. Escabor et al. (2022) opine that managerial competencies are important, especially when it comes to all the functions of management (*i.e.* planning, organising, directing and controlling).

Despite the fact that from the late 1970s management has largely been devalued in favour of leadership, it is still an aspect that cannot be ignored due to its being tactical (McCann, 2015), hence facilitating the day-to-day running of the organisation. Leadership, on the other hand, is more strategic, requiring that one has to influence others towards a common goal or mission. So, in modern organisations, separating leadership from management is quite difficult and hence a necessity for every leader to possess managerial competencies. Hendarman (2018), cited in Kolamasari et al. (2020), emphasises that an educational manager plays a key role in shaping the implementation of learning positively; providing for harmonious relationships and a conducive working environment and influencing organisational goals by motivating others. According to Elmira et al. (2014), management of educational institutions involves a lot of special talent, leadership qualities, scientific knowledge, as well as the art of handling issues naturally. In addition, Olum (2004) explains management as an art or science of creating and sustaining an environment in which people perform their duties as obligated to achieve organisational

goals and for continuous improvement. Thus, it calls for a blend of formal education, such as an academic qualification in educational management, on-the-job training, and work experience on one hand and personal characteristics, values, and behaviours on the other (Risely, n.d.). These two categories underpin competencies and are a prerequisite for every manager to boost performance in any organisation. Gamara et al. (2019) describe competencies as essential personal traits, skills, knowledge and motives of an employee that lead to superior performance. They constitute behaviours, actions and skills needed by an individual for successful job performance. Therefore, competencies tantamount to capabilities or abilities (Boyatzis, 2008) employed by an individual towards achieving certain objectives.

While achieving organisational objectives may depend on the hard work of all the members in the organisation, the manager as a team leader is required to demonstrate certain competencies for the smooth flow of processes within the organisation (Risely, n.d.). The manager needs to focus on strategic, operational, and tactical aspects for top, middle, and low levels of management, respectively. This, according to Elmira et al. (2014), enhances the development of the organisation through achieving success in human resource management and organisational goals efficiently. The dictates of the prevailing market economy and growing competition demand that educational managers exhibit certain critical competencies in their day-to-day management practices. This will give them an opportunity to manage their institutions more independently, efficiently and effectively, hence achieving both individual and institutional goals (Olum, 2004).

The Knowledge Gap

The turbulent environment in which managers operate and the demand for effectiveness and efficiency are an enduring concern. It is not surprising that previous research recognises the need for managerial competencies for institutional

survival in the VUCA world. However, despite the valuable contribution of previous research towards understanding the role and relevance of managerial competencies, most of this research did not specifically focus on the academic environment (Battilana et al., 2010; Muller & Turner, 2010; Dragoni et al., 2009). With a few exceptions (Bisaso, 2011; Kaweesi et al., 2023; Lutaaya et al., 2024), who focused on managerial competencies in information technology, networking and partnering; and discipline management within the academe. Managerial competencies within the education context have hardly been explored, let alone ignored their theoretical underpinnings. It is within this theoretical perspective that this conceptual paper aims to (a) identify critical managerial competencies necessary for effective education management in the 21st century and (b) elucidate the role education managers play in achieving institutional goals. Managers in educational institutions perform roles including leadership, decision-making, motivating employees, conflict resolution, and resource management. Thus, they need critical managerial competencies such as planning, interpersonal skills, effective communication, critical thinking and problem solving in their daily management practices.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a semi-systematic review of literature. The literature comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, books and book chapters, and conference proceedings on the concept of managerial competencies in different contexts that can be applied in educational management in the 21st century. The search strategy used to locate and select the documents for analysis was based on different dimensions of the topic. The search followed a strategy based on keywords related to educational leadership and management, managerial competencies, the 21st century, and educational institutions. The bulk of documents were located from institutional databases and Google Scholar. The search field comprised titles,

abstracts and full documents. Duplicate and inaccessible documents were eliminated. The search moved from screening of titles and abstracts to complete reading of full texts. The decision on selection, inclusion and exclusion of texts identified in the search was guided by the research purpose and questions. A narrative analysis and integration of data were done. Texts were analysed for similarities and differences in relation to the research purpose and questions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Perspective of Management Theories in Relation to Competency

To understand the foundational role of managerial competencies, the paper first explores their historical perspective in management theories. The development of management theories provides a rich historical perspective on how managerial competencies have evolved to meet organizational needs. From pre-historic societies to modern educational institutions, the core competencies required by managers have continuously adapted to the changing demands of their environments.

Pre-Historic and Ancient Management Practices

The origins of management can be traced back to pre-historic times when early human societies, such as hunter-gatherer and tribal communities, formed organised groups for survival. In these early settings, the communities relied on coordinated skills such as leadership, strategic planning, effective communication, and teamwork to accomplish tasks (Hattangadi, 2016). Leadership was for the elders and the most skilled individuals and decisions were made through consensus. Leaders were required to have skills in strategic planning and resource allocation so as to coordinate group movements. These foundational competencies are evident in the construction of monumental projects like the Great Wall of China, irrigation systems in Mesopotamia, and the Pyramids of Egypt, which required advanced planning, organisation, and team management

(Kwok, 2014). Early philosophers like Plato and Aristotle explored the role of leadership and ethics in governance (Giovanola & Fermani, 2012). In their works, the core functions of modern management, including planning, leading, and controlling, were taking shape in response to the complex needs of growing societies.

Sun Tzu's Art of War (500 BC)

Sun Tzu's "The Art of War" introduced situational management, emphasising the strategic deployment of resources, morale building, and group cohesion. It involved turning situations to one's advantage after assessing ever-changing environments and making informed, strategic decisions to secure the best possible outcomes. Such principles align with modern strategic management, staffing, teamwork, and motivational competencies (Dimovski et al., 2012). According to Sun Tzu, leaders should inspire loyalty and unity, which fosters a motivated and cooperative team. He also stressed the role of discipline, clear communication, and mutual trust, which attributes are in line with contemporary theories on organisational behaviour, employee motivation, and team dynamics. Furthermore, Sun Tzu believed that effective leaders must be flexible, intuitive, and capable of adjusting their strategies according to circumstances. Thus, leaders need to possess wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage, and discipline, which lays a philosophical foundation for ethical leadership and character-driven management (Law et al, 2016).

Philosophical Contributions to Division of Labour

Early philosophers like Mencius (372 – 298 BC) and Plato (427 – 347 BC) recognised the importance of the division of labour for specialisation and efficiency. The Confucian philosophy, based on Mencius' arguments, emphasises that a well-ordered society depends on individuals performing roles suited to their moral and intellectual strengths. This concept, later echoed by Adam Smith (1723 – 1790), underscored the need for managers to

understand their employees' competencies for effective task delegation and performance management (Kwok, 2014). However, the concept spells out the role of clarity and occupational specialisation, which ideas are in agreement with modern managerial competencies. The manager should thus have the ability to identify individual employee strengths and match them with appropriate responsibilities to maximise productivity and job satisfaction. This will, in turn, bring about effective performance management and organisational success.

Classical Management Theories

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the emergence of classical management theories, which remain foundational to modern management thought. These include:

Division of labour was specifically for specialisation, especially when handling large tasks, and may require the manager to know personal competencies of their staff for effective performance management, in addition to effective communication and supervision. Specialisation was again propelled back as a management concept by Adam Smith (1723 – 1790) for its various advantages, such as skill development and saving time. Later in the 19th century, the traditional management theories, also referred to as the classical management theories (Mahmood et al, 2012), were set in around the late 1890s to the early 1990s. They included bureaucratic management, administrative management, and scientific management. Classical management theories form the basis of all other management theories (*i.e.*, the humanistic management theories, situational management theories, and the modern management theories). Much as there are arguments against the classical management theories as not humanistic enough, they are necessary in streamlining work operations where high output is required. This is because they provide a clear structure for management and its functions, division of labour makes tasks lighter and easier to accomplish and

employees' roles and tasks are clearly defined (Kumar, 2017). Thus, it is still important that modern-day educational managers understand and apply some of the competencies embedded in classical management.

Bureaucratic Management Theory

This was propounded by Max Weber (1864 – 1920) and is characterised by rigidity in emphasising hierarchical structure, clear division of labour, and strict adherence to rules and procedures (Kwok, 2014). The bureaucratic approach comes in handy for managers of educational institutions, which usually deal with standard information in large quantities, the needs of their customers (both internal and external) are clear and standard, there is routine use of technology, and they need to coordinate various activities among staff to deliver the best education. Thus, the manager needs to be equipped with relevant competencies, which include effective communication skills, performance management skills, staffing and effective delegation skills, and leadership skills. The manager is required to know what speciality is best handled by each of their staff for effective service delivery.

Administrative Management Theory

Unlike bureaucratic management, administrative management focuses on the organisation's operations, identifying core management functions such as planning, organising, leading, coordinating, controlling, and staffing. It was advanced by Henri Fayol (1841 -1925), and in it, Fayol identified fourteen management principles that can be employed in the administrative management theory, making it very expansive and widely used by many organisations to date. The broad nature of the theory requires that the manager should have most of the critical competencies of a manager, notably strategic thinking and management, communication skills, leadership and ability to motivate others, performance management, critical thinking and problem solving.

Scientific Management

This is the most popular among the traditional theories (Kwok, 2014) and was advanced by Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856 – 1915). The scientific management approach stressed supervision through observation, analysis, and incentivising productivity. Work and productivity was measured by an individual's physical movements; and while this can be easy for manual work (e.g. in factories), it is quite hard to measure in educational institutions where most staff use their brains. Moreover, the results and impact of their work (teaching) may need some time before it is determined. However, value analysis can be used to gauge how much work one has done. Taylor's scientific management is considered the most popular traditional management theory due to its emphasis on increased efficiency of staff and increased output while maximising resources. Besides, scientific management was a practical solution to enormous problems within organisations and among the workers during the industrial revolution (Scientific Management, n.d.). Thus, the scientific management theory paved the way for the existence of most modern management approaches and techniques. The four major principles of scientific management, which include standardisation of work methods, equal division of work and responsibility, scientific selection of workers and their progressive development, and mutual collaboration of workers and management, characterise modern workplaces.

Thus, the many policies are leading to an increase in the number of low achievers as opposed to boosting educational attainment. Other challenges in school management currently and in future are quite numerous, including dealing with difficult staff and students, who cannot be organised to work as a team, and financial constraints limiting the implementation of activities that had been budgeted for (Kolamasari et al, 2020; Marzuki, 2021). These challenges, according to Kolamasari et al., further result in low-quality education and poor strategic

management of the environment and other non-financial resources, hence hindering development. These challenges have to be dealt with tactfully if the education process is to turn out graduates who are creative, professional enough and able to build meaningful partnerships in society.

Key Competencies for the 21st Century Educational Manager

The challenges faced by managers in the 21st century, as expressed in the previous section, call for the identification of key competencies for the manager with a transformation in their role from supervisors to servant leaders (Gupta, 2006). Several studies have highlighted the numerous competencies required by education managers at different levels of management (Bairauskienė, 2017; Potgieter et al, 2011) for effective management. Some authors have categorised the competencies according to levels of management. Potgieter et al. classified them from the most to the least important higher-order dimensions (*i.e.* Administrative/Senior management, Executive/middle management, and Operational/Lower management). Other authors classified them as cognitive, interpersonal, technical and strategic. Bairauskienė(2017) divided the management competencies into five spheres, including strategic management, monitoring of the teaching and learning, human resource management, management of institutional structures and resources, and partnerships and collaboration. This article, however, presents the key competencies as follows;

Strategic Thinking and Management

An educational manager in the 21st century should have the ability to see the big picture of the institution and plan for the future, which constitutes strategic thinking (Risely, n.d.). This aids the manager to materialise complex ideas within the institution while in collaboration with all the other stakeholders. According to Potgieter et al. (2011), the manager has to analyse internal and external

environments to formulate and implement strategies. The factors considered in the analysis are human resources, services offered, institutional culture, policies, advancement in technology, social factors, and economic factors for proper strategic planning. This analysis constitutes strategic management, which is a process that involves planning and formulation of strategy, its implementation, and environmental scanning and analysis. Much as strategic thinking is an aspect of strategic management, both are vital in institutional management.

Effective Time Management

Time management is an important skill for an educational manager since it involves planning and prioritising tasks to use time efficiently (Potgieter et al., 2011). Education in the 21st century is characterised by various tasks and responsibilities on the side of the manager. Thus, it's imperative that the manager has a day-to-day plan for their tasks and activities for effective and efficient use of time to achieve goals.

Leadership, Motivational, and Team Building Skills

The role of a manager as a leader in ensuring that an organisation achieves its long-term vision and success cannot be underestimated. This is because leadership involves inspiring and guiding teams towards achieving institutional goals. Specifically, leadership is about motivating team members, guidance and counselling, delegation of tasks, and emotional intelligence (Potgieter et al., 2011). In the long run, professional development and a positive organisational culture are promoted and this inspires confidence among the workforce. Besides, educational managers in the 21st century need to create continuous professional training and development opportunities for their staff. This improves the overall capacity of the members and hence the whole team will work together effectively, achieving success for the institution.

Effective Communication

Effective communication is a vital tool managers can employ for clear and effective information sharing to avoid confusion and resolve conflicts (Callahan et al., 1986, cited in Potgieter et al., 2011). Effective communication is also useful in dealing with issues of indiscipline, handling grievances and dissatisfaction, and addressing poor performance by workers. By and large, institutional goals and objectives will be achieved easily.

Awareness and Performance Management

Awareness aids the educational manager to understand key educational philosophies, policies, concepts, and processes. This helps them to supervise and evaluate staff effectively towards achieving educational goals and objectives. According to Potgieter et al. (2011), policy awareness facilitates compliance with rules and guidelines, leading to quality assurance. In addition, the supervisor is able to monitor the performance of staff through setting performance plans and agreements, supervising the implementation of the plans and finally appraising the performance of the employees.

Financial Management

Financial management is essential for organisations as it involves generating and strategically managing finances. According to Petty et al. (2015), it encompasses budgeting processes (planning), mobilising resources, and making financial decisions (controlling), to ensure institutional efficiency and effectiveness.

Staffing and Effective Delegation

Staffing and effective delegation are essential responsibilities for managers in educational institutions. After identifying staffing needs, managers must attract talented staff and provide thorough induction and orientation to ensure understanding of policies and roles, promoting retention (Potgieter et al., 2011). Understanding employees' capabilities enables effective task

assignment through delegation, prioritising diversity in gender, culture, ethnicity, and age. Educational managers also guide their subordinates while respecting their rights (Escobar et al., 2022), highlighting the importance of tact in managing educational staff.

Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Decision Making Skills

Critical thinking is key for managers in navigating complex and dynamic environments, making informed decisions, and anticipating potential consequences. Thus, educational managers of the 21st century need to apply different tools of analysis to process information from different perspectives and make decisions to address institutional challenges (Risely, n.d.). In addition to critical thinking, managers need to be problem solvers in that they should be able to identify a problem, analyse and devise strategies to overcome the problem (Olum, 2004). Problem-solving ensures that one balances the interests of different stakeholders in an organisation for success. Sometimes, the problems are solved by introducing completely new ideas and solutions into the organisation. Hence, the manager provides direction to other staff by leading initiatives that enhance overall performance of the institution and improve educational outputs (Kolamasari et al., 2020).

Willingness to Learn

Given the rapidly evolving landscape of management in the 21st century, educational managers need to continuously seek out new knowledge and stay updated on emerging trends, technologies, and best practices in their field (Risely, n.d.). Willingness to learn leads to positive outcomes such as better problem-solving techniques and well-enhanced processes in emerging situations. Once a manager is willing to learn, they will be able to gain new knowledge from their employees, customers and other colleagues.

Creativity and Innovation

Creativity involves developing new ideas and solutions, while innovation is implementing the ideas to drive institutional progress. All organisations, including educational institutions, usually face problems that require making critical decisions (Potgieter et al., 2011). Creativity and innovation develop new ideas and solutions to problems, and facilitate positive change in the institution.

Relationship Management

The 21st-century manager should be conscious of relationships within and outside the organisation among all the stakeholders. Potgieter et al. (2011) opine that building and maintaining effective relationships with both internal and external stakeholders is vital in enhancing satisfaction and collaboration. Thus, the manager should be able to create a customer experience that is exciting and fulfilling. They should carefully look into customer needs and identify opportunities that benefit both their internal and external customers. In the context of educational institutions, internal customers could refer to students/learners, while external customers could be the parents and the community. Thus, there are social actions of every educational manager that are necessary as they interact with various stakeholders and with institutional regulations (Escobar et al., 2022). The actions include balancing and coordinating the interests of the different stakeholders as well as maintaining social relationships among them.

Risk Management

Predicting damages that may happen to an institution due to unidentified dangerous events is also a key requirement for management. This is because, if it is done successfully, it provides for safer operations in terms of assets, documents, and financial protection, hence improving service delivery (Ruzic-Dimitrijevic & Dakic, 2014). Thus, management has to identify potential risks and develop strategies to mitigate them. This results in

the managers making rational and strategic decisions to achieve better results.

Digital and Intercultural Competencies

These are new competencies that can be useful in handling challenges due to global economic developments (Bondarenko et al., 2021). A manager in the 21st century should be able to perceive and utilise new technologies effectively. This is because we are in an era of technological advancement that has seen the world reduced to a global village. Thus, for purposes of networking and interconnectedness, digital competence plays a great role. In addition, managers need to understand cultural differences to navigate a globalised environment.

Practical Implications on Policy

Based on the findings and discussion above, educational managers must engage in continuous professional development through leadership programs, workshops, and further education to enhance their managerial competencies and boost institutional development (Arturo, 1983). Additionally, institutions should ensure that effective educational policies are in place, understood, and implemented correctly by managers. This approach will support the development of managerial competencies, ultimately leading to improved institutional performance and educational outcomes (Kolamasari et al., 2020). According to Bairašauskienė (2017), the most significant competencies that can bring about success in educational institutions include strategic management, effective staff policy, positive attitude for the school community, especially learners, continuous professional development for staff, and collaboration with other stakeholders, most especially parents and guardians. These constitute strategic, technical, cognitive and interpersonal characteristics that an individual can exhibit to manage an institution effectively and efficiently.

In addition, managers need to develop a thirst for lifelong learning and take a step towards improving

their competencies through leadership development programs such as workshops, seminars, training programs, mentorship and coaching programs (Risely, n.d.). Individuals, especially those in academia, who find themselves in management positions, could consider pursuing further education in educational management to boost their competencies. Aziz et al. (2005), cited in Potgieter (2011), posit that managerial training should be a requirement for managers who occupy their positions as a result of just their academic qualifications or work experience, which, according to the authors, does not qualify one as a competent manager.

Besides improving their competencies for practice, managers need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge so that they can support, train, and guide their subordinates to boost their professionalism (Kolamasari et al., 2020). Generally, it is a manager's obligation to lead their subordinates in working towards achieving institutional goals effectively and efficiently. Then, there is a need to ensure that the effective educational policies exist, are understood by the various stakeholders and are being implemented correctly in the educational institutions by the managers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a need to accept that the traditional roles of managers have evolved towards servant leadership; education itself has changed its nature as a service to a business. This implies that even though the profits in terms of money are not readily realised, managers still need to treat their institutions as business entities to gain a competitive advantage. This calls for various strategies, including technical skills, strategic planning and interpersonal relationships to differentiate an institution from others of a similar nature (Escabor et al., 2022). The authors further stress that educational institutions, in recent decades, need to upgrade their management processes to foster change based on the 21st-century demands of society. In addition to professional training and

experience of the educational manager, there is a need for them to demonstrate critical managerial competencies in their management practice to respond effectively to societal demands. This will be possible because the use of managerial competencies in the management of educational institutions aligns the mission and vision of an institution with those of the people seen individually or in groups (Escabor et al., 2022)

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