

Exploring Leadership Development in Transformative Education: Leading self, leading community and leading institutions and society

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Introduction

Across Africa, universities are being asked to do much more than produce graduates and publish papers. They are expected to catalyse inclusive, climate-resilient transformation of agriculture and agri-food systems, create decent work for a rapidly growing youth population, and contribute directly to national and regional development agendas. Within the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) network, this ambition is codified in Vision 2030 (AHESI)¹ and operationalized through flagship programmes such as Transforming African Agricultural Universities to meaningfully contribute to Africa's Growth and Development (TAGDev 2.0 Programme). Delivering on this agenda requires a particular kind of leadership. It is not enough to manage existing structures efficiently; leaders in universities, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, communities and student cohorts must be capable of re-imagining systems, brokering multi-stakeholder partnerships, and holding together competing demands for excellence, equity and accountability. We reflect on how RUFORUM is conceptualizing transformative leadership, drawing on lessons learnt from previous models such as the *'Stables Approach'* and using this to design and re-model the Leadership Capacity Development for African Universities through our emerging Governance, Leadership and Management Academy (GLEMA).

RUFORUM's Vision and the case for developing leadership in Transformative education

AHESI presents a clear aspiration; vibrant, transformative universities catalyzing sustainable, inclusive agricultural development to feed and create prosperity for Africa. The mission that underpins this vision is to strengthen a network of African universities so that the knowledge and innovations they generate are relevant to, and used by, smallholder farmers and other value-chain actors. Strategic objectives emphasize enhancing the relevance, legitimacy and viability of RUFORUM and its members; building human resources and capacity through networks of specialization; facilitating collaboration and structural change in agricultural higher education; and ensuring that knowledge products are used by value-chain actors for inclusive and environmentally sustainable transformation. Implicit in these objectives is a demanding leadership profile. Leaders must be systemic, being able to see beyond their own institution and cultivate collaborations across countries and value chains. Further, the African University leader is relational and accountable, attentive to legitimacy, equity and the quality of relationships with farmers, youth and

¹ RUFORUM Vision 2030: The African Universities Agenda for Agricultural Higher Education, Science and technology and Innovation.



partners. They must also be use oriented, ensuring that research outputs are translated into practical solutions and enterprises, inclusive and youth centered, recognizing that young women and men are both beneficiaries and agents of transformation. Transformative leadership in the RUFORUM sense therefore combines strategic acumen, ethical grounding and an orientation to real world impact. We imagine leaders that would create universities that are a ‘go to’ space for young people not only for knowledge, but also for skills that would catapult them to creating value into the economy.

From Stables to GLeMA: Evolving a leadership pipeline

1. The ‘Stables Approach’ as a way for developing emerging science leaders

RUFORUM’s thinking on leadership is rooted in an earlier experiment known as the ‘Stables Approach’. Originating in the 1990s under the Rockefeller supported FORUM and later the Bill & Melinda Gates funded RUFORUM programmes, the *Stables approach* responded to an identified shortage of leaders in agricultural research and higher education. Promising early and mid-career scientists were placed in strong institutions such as Makerere University, Uganda, the University of Nairobi, Kenya, the University of Zimbabwe and CGIAR Centers, which functioned as stables where talent could be nurtured. The design was simple but powerful. Small research grants initially around US\$ 3,000 and later scaled up to Graduate Research Grants of about US\$ 65,000 were awarded not only to generate scientific outputs, but explicitly to teach young scientists how to handle money, build partnerships and account for results. Reporting templates asked unusual questions for the time, viz; What leadership attributes have you gained? What have you learned about handling money? What do you take forward for further research? The stables were, in effect, safe spaces where emerging leaders could learn, fail and learn again while being closely mentored. Two decades later, the long-term effects are visible across the continent. Many of the leaders of National Agricultural Research Institutes (NARIs) and universities in countries such as Uganda and Kenya are alumni of this approach, including several Directors of Research of the NARIs. The Stables model thus demonstrated that carefully designed, practice-based leadership development embedded in real research and financial responsibilities can create a pipeline of competent and confident leaders for African agriculture and higher education on the continent.

2. Traditional Leadership Development for Higher Education

University leaders have generally been drawn from senior professoriate; a reserve for the upper echelon of academia. The leaders were and are drawn from a narrow pool of senior academics who have climbed the professorial ladder, sometimes joined by politically connected civil servants or clergy in faith-based institutions. This traditional pipeline has offered continuity and institutional memory, but it is increasingly misaligned with the complex governance, financial, digital, and societal demands now facing African higher education. In most public universities, Vice Chancellors, Rectors and their deputies are selected from full professors who have served as Heads/Chairs of Departments (HODs/CODs), Deans or Directors. Faith-based and private universities often follow similar patterns, though some appoint clergy-academics or individuals with mixed public sector, NGO and business backgrounds, especially where growth and fundraising are priorities. **Leadership preparation** for this pool remains largely informal with aspiring leaders learning on the job through committee work, acting roles and ad hoc workshops, rather than through structured, long-term development pathways that deliberately build strategic, financial and change-management capability.

Drawing University leaders from senior professoriate is important, because first and foremost the University leader must have strong grip of their scientific and academic training. However, this traditional



model has several limitations. *Firstly*, it assumes that outstanding research and teaching automatically translate into effective institutional leadership. Yet contemporary university leaders must manage massification, performance-based funding, digital transformation, labour relations and global competition. These tasks require specialized leadership and management training, not only academic excellence. *Secondly*, the pathway overwhelmingly favours certain disciplines and marginalises professional staff with expertise in finance, HR, legal affairs and innovation management, thereby narrowing the range of perspectives at the top and reinforcing institutional conservatism. *Thirdly*, the traditional pipeline reproduces exclusion. Women and other marginalised groups remain significantly underrepresented in senior roles, despite growing numbers in the academic workforce. Expectations of long, uninterrupted careers, high mobility and reliance on informal, male-dominated networks systematically disadvantage many potential leaders. *Fourthly*, in systems where governments retain a decisive role in appointing Vice Chancellors and Councils, politicization can distort promotion criteria, reward loyalty over competence, and weaken institutional autonomy and accountability.

Leadership development initiatives such as national and institutional academies, short courses and fellowships do exist. However, these are fragmented and unevenly distributed across countries and institutions. Many emerging leaders therefore rely on personal initiative and externally funded programmes, creating a patchwork of capabilities rather than a coherent leadership pipeline for the sector. Reimagining leadership development for African higher education requires broadening both who is considered leadership material and how they are prepared. This means designing transparent, competency-based succession plans that deliberately nurture middle-level academics and professional staff, embedding gender transformative policies and mentoring to dismantle structural barriers, and developing regional leadership academies and peer-learning platforms that bring together actors from universities, government, industry and civil society. It also requires protecting institutional autonomy in appointments while insisting on rigorous, independent search processes that balance academic legitimacy with managerial competence. Moving from *accidental to intentional*, evidence informed leadership development is essential if African universities are to drive knowledge economies, digital innovation and inclusive development in the decades ahead.

3. The Governance, Leadership and Management Academy (GLeMA)

Blending the stables approach and the traditional way of growing leaders in an institution, RUFORUM is now designing a Governance, Leadership and Management Academy (GLeMA) as a more systematic, network-wide leadership pipeline. GLeMA is envisioned as a four-pronged Academy comprising: (i) Executive governance, leadership and management strengthening for Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Principals, Deans and Directors; (ii) Strategic management, resourcing and accountability for mid-level academic and non-academic leaders in Higher Education; (iii) Science leadership training for researchers and scientists including professors, lecturers and post-doctoral fellows and (iv) a ‘Golden Fish Pond’ for the next generation leaders drawn from both PhD and MSc. students and young scientists. Several design choices echo and deepen the Stables philosophy. *First*, GLeMA is envisaged as an integrated component of RUFORUM’s Digital Academy, allowing leadership courses to be delivered virtually and thus reach leaders across the continent at reduced cost. *Second*, baseline assessments of leadership gaps across the network are a core, ensuring that the curriculum responds to real needs rather than generic templates. *Third*, the Academy intends to leverage existing intellectual resources from across RUFORUM network universities as co-developers of curricula, turning the network’s accumulated knowledge into structured learning programmes. University governance, change management including mind shift change, financial sustainability, digital transformation and internationalization form part of the basket of competencies that



are required for executive leaders if universities are to become transformative institutions rather than merely teaching factories.

4. Ubuntu and the MPATAPO Leadership Framework

RUFORUM's partnership with MPATAPO adds a distinctive normative and pedagogical layer to this leadership architecture. We argue that MPATAPO well aligns with AHESTI. MPATAPO learning journeys are structured around three sequential six-month cohort programmes; (i) Empowering ourselves together, (ii) Empowering others in community, and (iii) Empowering systems and society; these map directly onto a three-level leadership framework of leading self, leading others and leading systems. Now, what is so distinct about this? At the foundation of this framework lies Ubuntu-drawn from the South African culture. We echo the recognition that an individual's humanity and flourishing are inseparable from the wellbeing of others. Empowering ourselves together focuses on self-awareness, self-regulation, growth mindset, resilience and courageous communication. Empowering others in community builds inclusive team leadership, mentoring, conflict management and trauma-informed practice while empowering systems and society develops systems thinking, strategic prioritisation, culture building, advocacy and succession planning, always from a standpoint of curiosity, non-attachment and social justice. This Ubuntu centered framework aligns closely with RUFORUM's emphasis on legitimacy, accountability and responsiveness, and is a must add on for the functionality of GLeMA. In essence, MPATAPO provides the values and behavioural foundation enriching the other RUFORUM leadership initiatives that provide the institutional and technical scaffolding; thus, a robust model for transformative education.

TAGDev 2.0 Universities as Living Laboratories of Transformative Leadership

1. Overview of the TAGDev 2.0 Programme

TAGDev 2.0, a ten-year partnership between RUFORUM, the Mastercard Foundation, the Global Confederation of Higher Education Associations for Agricultural and Life Sciences (GCHERA) and twelve African universities, is the principal arena where this leadership thinking is being operationalized. The programme's goal is to strengthen universities and TVET institutions so that they can better serve communities by skilling and empowering Africa's young people and their institutions to drive inclusive, equitable and climate-resilient transformation of agriculture and agri-food systems. The TAGDev 2.0 theory of change articulates a clear pathway from university reform to societal impact. At the goal level, Africa's young people and their institutions are expected to drive inclusive, equitable and climate-resilient socio-economic development in their societies. Key outcomes include expanded work and livelihood opportunities for young women and men, improved climate-adaptive agricultural production and productivity, and a strengthened quality of higher agricultural education. Intermediate outcomes focus on universities, TVETs and the business sector delivering transformative, inclusive and market-relevant education; youth running profitable enterprises; smallholders accessing climate-adaptive technologies and practices; youth engagement in climate action; and improved coordination among ecosystem actors. Such a transformation greatly relies on a disruptive thought leadership within the Higher Agricultural Education ecosystem.

2. Leading Self: Youth Entrepreneurship as a School of Leadership

One of the clearest expressions of '*Leading self*' in TAGDev 2.0 universities is the emergence of student and graduate led enterprises that translate knowledge into livelihoods. At Egerton University in Kenya, for



example, the *'Trendy Animal Feeds enterprise'* offers a vivid example. This enterprise was founded by a TAGDev supported student and incubated in the AGLEAD Innovation Hub at Egerton University. The business has grown from a small manual operation to a formal company with a factory, machinery, a delivery truck and a range of branded feeds for different livestock, employing several staff and supplying farmers in the wider Thika region. From a leadership perspective, Trendy Animal Feeds is more than a business success story. It represents a deliberate identity shift where the founder moves from being a scholarship beneficiary to being an employer, problem solver and value chain actor. Financial literacy, risk taking, stakeholder management and strategic planning, aspects that are central to the historical Stables model, are exercised daily through decisions about sourcing raw materials, managing cash flow, complying with standards and retaining staff. Indeed, this enterprise embodies a living leadership classroom. A second example from Egerton is a youth- led dairy enterprise in Busia County. Starting with a few cows and TAGDev support, the young entrepreneur produces milk, recycles manure into a banana plantation and employs additional workers, demonstrating in practice how climate smart, circular agriculture can underpin local livelihoods. Here, again, leading self means taking responsibility for assets, people and environmental stewardship, rather than waiting for formal employment.

3. Leading Others: Mentoring, Co-creation and Community-Based Learning

Transformative leadership can also be visible in how staff and students work with and through others. At Egerton University, the *'Kilimo Bora'* radio programme on Egerton Radio 101.7 FM as well as the platform where academics, extension officers and farmers engage in regular dialogue about production challenges, market dynamics and innovations. At the University of Eldoret, the Outreach Centre ensures continuous engagement with farmers, and the community at large. Rather than a one-way technology transfer, these initiatives encourage questions, feedback and co create solutions to the communities' identified needs. This is leadership expressed as facilitation and knowledge brokerage, expanding the reach of the university far beyond the walls of the university physical space. At Gulu University in northern Uganda, TAGDev 2.0 teams have co-designed entrepreneurship training with the National Instructors' College Abilonino, a TVET institution. University staff and students work alongside TVET instructors to introduce entrepreneurial mindsets and project-based learning into technical programmes. By positioning TVET instructors as partners and co-leaders rather than passive recipients, this collaboration models a form of horizontal leadership that is critical for system-wide change. Sifting out these systems that work, contextualizing and refining them and bringing them to scale in the RUFORUM Network provides traction on the transformative leadership journey on the continent.

4. Leading Systems: Institutional and Ecosystem Transformation

Perhaps the most demanding level of transformative leadership is leading systems - reshaping institutional cultures and wider ecosystems. Even in their infantship, the TAGDev 2.0 universities' Agri-Food Systems Research and Entrepreneurship Centres (ASEC) are testament to this. ASECs serve as hubs where researchers, students, entrepreneurs, farmers, local governments and civil society organisations co-create solutions for the agri-food system on the continent. They integrate climate adaptive research, incubation and community engagement, and position the universities not only as spaces of learning, but anchor institutions in a wider regional innovation system. Further, in TAGDev, scholarship schemes prioritise economically disadvantaged young women and men, refugees and internally displaced persons and persons with disabilities, ensuring that those who are often excluded from higher education can access programmes in agriculture, agribusiness, engineering and related fields. In this way, inclusion is not an add on but a structural feature of the programme. The Programme's approach of university policy reforms and



university-wide curriculum transformation further support system-level leadership. Training for transformation is seen as the intersection of technological innovation, business incubation, social innovation and community engagement.

System-level leadership is also evident in the design of the TAGDev 2.0 Programme itself. Fifteen universities in different regions of Africa have been selected as anchors, with explicit expectations that they will work closely with other universities within the RUFORUM Network, the research communities (NARS and NAROs), CGIAR Centres and surrounding TVETs, secondary schools, communities and private-sector actors not forgetting both the local and National governments: the ecosystem approach. This is disruptive thinking; forcing mindset shift from the academia's commonly adopted front of 'My Project' to 'Institutional Programme'. Such a mindset shift is slow, painful and not for the faint hearted. But done right, it provides immense potential for ecosystem transformation.

Looking ahead

The emerging model of transformative leadership within RUFORUM has several important implications. *First*, leadership development needs to be conceived as a long-term, multi-level journey rather than a one-off workshop. Individuals may encounter leadership learning at different stages, viz; as students in entrepreneurship courses, as early-career researchers managing research projects, as middle managers participating in GLeMA, and as senior executives in national and international governance programmes. Designing coherent pathways across these stages will be crucial. *Second*, African examples should remain at the centre of the curriculum. Lived examples and experiences from the continent provide rich material for reflection on what it means to lead self, others and systems in real African contexts. These cases also help disrupt narratives of scientific dependence by showcasing African ingenuity and initiative. *Third*, leadership outcomes should be explicitly integrated into monitoring, evaluation and learning systems. In addition to tracking numbers of graduates, enterprises or technologies adopted, this leadership model infuses tracking changes in leadership attitudes and behaviours, institutional cultures, collaboration patterns and community perceptions of universities, thus building an evidence base for the added value of investing in transformative leadership. *Fourth*, there is a need to strengthen intra-African leadership networks. Analyses of global scientific collaboration patterns have repeatedly shown that Africa collaborates extensively with external partners but relatively little with itself. Offcourse, with RUFORUM, this trend is slowly changing with TAGDev's multi-country engagement. GLeMA's envisioned baselines across dozens of universities and the RUFORUM broader network provide an opportunity to reverse this trend by designing exchanges, joint cohorts and peer-learning mechanisms that deliberately prioritize African to African collaboration.

As we look ahead, developing leadership in Transformative education in the RUFORUM ecosystem can be understood as the art and practice of enabling African universities and their partners to become engines of inclusive, climate-resilient prosperity. It is grounded in the historical experience of the stables approach, institutionalized through emerging structures such as GLeMA and the Digital Academy, deepened by the Ubuntu-centered MPATAPO framework, and demonstrated in the everyday work of the RUFORUM Network. At its heart, this leadership is multi-level: it starts with individuals who cultivate self-awareness, resilience and purpose; extends to groups that practice inclusive, accountable collaboration; and reaches out to systems where institutions, policies and markets are re-shaped to serve the common good. As the Network moves towards 2030, consolidating and scaling this model could make a substantial contribution to the broader effort of re-imagining agricultural higher education and ensuring that Africa's young people and the universities are equipped to lead the transformations their societies require and ultimately, the continent we all desire.

