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RESEARCH ARTICLE

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP, STAFF EMPOWERMENT, AND ADMINISTRATIVE EFFICIENCY: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS IN A ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Background: Achieving administrative efficacy is paramount for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly those operating in financially constrained and complex socio-economic contexts like Zimbabwe. This study critically investigates the contribution of collaborative leadership practices and staff empowerment to perceived administrative efficiency, addressing a significant empirical gap in the African HEI literature.

Methods: Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational case study design, data were gathered from a census-like sample of 334 administrative and academic staff at a selected private university. Perceptions were measured using established, high-reliability Likert scales. The analysis proceeded with Pearson correlation to establish relationships and Multiple Linear Regression to determine the unique predictive power of the independent variables.

Results: The results demonstrated that staff hold significantly positive perceptions of collaborative practices (Mean=4.12) and empowerment (Mean=3.98). A strong, significant positive association was confirmed between collaborative practices and administrative efficiency ($r = 0.732$, $p < 0.001$), and between staff empowerment and administrative efficiency ($r = 0.689$, $p < 0.001$). Regression analysis indicated that both collaboration ($\beta = 0.449$, $p < 0.001$) and empowerment ($\beta = 0.380$, $p < 0.001$) were powerful and unique predictors, collectively accounting for 61.2% ($R^2=0.612$) of the variance in efficiency perceptions. Demographic characteristics were found to be non-significant predictors.

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Conclusion: The study concludes that an organizational climate characterized by trusting collaboration and autonomous empowerment is the dominant factor driving perceived administrative efficiency. These findings

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provide compelling quantitative evidence that HEI leadership should strategically prioritize and cultivate these relational and psychological dynamics to optimize resource utilization and operational effectiveness in challenging educational environments.

Introduction:-

The contemporary higher education landscape demands not only academic excellence but also operational sophistication and financial prudence (Dugan, 2024). Efficient administrative functionality serves as the critical scaffolding that supports core institutional missions—teaching, research, and community engagement. In Zimbabwe, HEIs navigate a unique environment marked by acute resource limitations and recurrent economic volatility (Ang'ana&Ongeti, 2023a). Under these pressures, the optimization of administrative efficiency defined as the astute management of time, process, and human resources to attain objectives with maximum effect and minimum waste (Hoy & Miskel, 2017) becomes a non-negotiable imperative for institutional longevity.

Despite this pressing need, there is a paucity of context-specific empirical research identifying the internal organizational factors that truly enhance administrative efficacy within the Zimbabwean HEI setting. This deficiency constitutes a crucial knowledge gap, as institutional policy requires evidence-based solutions tailored to local realities. This research directly addresses this void by quantitatively examining two key human-centric drivers: collaborative practices and staff empowerment. Collaborative practices are understood as the pervasive system of cooperative interactions, mutual support, and seamless information flow across organizational boundaries, designed to achieve shared institutional objectives (Willems & van Houten, 2024).

Staff empowerment, on the other hand, is the deliberate provision of control, autonomy, and psychological ownership over one's professional responsibilities, enabling initiative and decentralized decision-making (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). The study operates under the guiding principle of Collaborative Leadership, which posits that a shared governance approach creates the requisite climate for both high collaboration and deep empowerment (Ang'ana&Ongeti, 2023b), ultimately translating into better administrative outcomes. Therefore, this paper aims to provide rigorous quantitative evidence by statistically investigating the associations and unique predictive power of perceived collaborative practices and perceived staff empowerment on perceived administrative efficiency within a specific Zimbabwean private university. The findings are intended to offer pragmatic, evidence-based recommendations for leadership practices in the HEI sector.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:-

Administrative Efficiency in Higher Education:-

Administrative efficiency is universally acknowledged as a determinant of institutional quality and student satisfaction (Woods & Roberts, 2018). While structural and technological elements contribute (Allen et al., 2022), the human dimension—how staff interact and are managed—often holds the key to unlocking true operational effectiveness, especially where capital investment is constrained. The focus here is on perceived efficiency, recognizing that employee assessment often dictates the lived experience and practical functioning of administrative systems.

The Role of Collaboration and Social Exchange:-

Organizational literature consistently links high levels of cooperation to superior performance (Sarkar et al., 2025). This phenomenon is theoretically grounded in Social Exchange Theory (**SET**) (Blau, 1964). SET proposes that positive workplace interactions, characterized by trust, mutual assistance, and shared goals, initiate a cycle of reciprocity, fostering greater commitment and discretionary effort among employees. In the HEI environment, this collective effort minimizes procedural bottlenecks, facilitates integrated planning between academic and administrative units, and accelerates problem resolution, directly boosting administrative speed and accuracy (Ang'ana&Ongeti, 2023a).

Empowerment, Autonomy, and Performance:-

The efficacy of staff empowerment is explained by Empowerment Theory (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). This theory suggests that granting employees autonomy and ownership satisfies fundamental psychological needs, leading to increased self-efficacy, internal motivation, and a sense of responsibility (Fawcett et al., 1995). Empowered administrative staff are less reliant on hierarchical approval, enabling them to make timely decisions, innovate on

processes, and resolve operational issues promptly, thus directly improving overall efficiency (Herin et al., 2025; Iqbal et al., 2024).

Integrated Theoretical Framework:-

This study integrates Social Exchange Theory and Empowerment Theory under the meta-framework of Collaborative Leadership. This overarching leadership style, emphasizing shared responsibility and partnership, is hypothesized to be the antecedent factor that simultaneously nurtures both high collaboration and high autonomy. This synergistic relationship then culminates in enhanced perceived administrative efficiency. Figure 1 illustrates the integrated theoretical framework that guided this study.

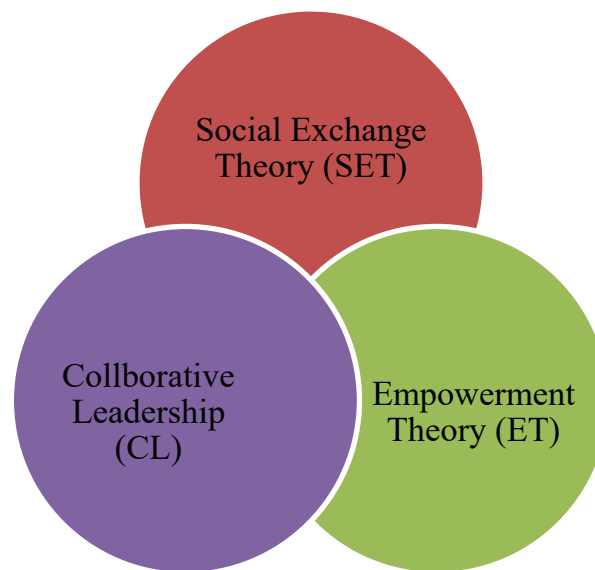


Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework

Source: Authors' Construction Based on literature (Blau, 1964; Fawcett et al., 1995)

Materials and Methods:-

Research Design, Setting, and Ethics:-

This investigation employed a rigorous quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design, executed as a single-case study at an urban-based private university in Zimbabwe. The quantitative approach was necessary for the precise measurement of perceptions and the statistical testing of relationships and predictive models (Ghanad, 2023). Ethical approval was secured from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to any data collection, ensuring compliance with all established research protocols.

Population and Sampling Strategy:-

The target population encompassed all administrative and academic staff. A stratified random sampling approach was implemented to ensure that the sample composition accurately mirrored the distribution of staff across various academic and administrative units, thereby enhancing the internal representativeness of the findings (Lee et al., 2025). A total of 334 valid questionnaires were returned from 350 distributed, achieving an outstanding response rate of 95.4%. This rate effectively minimizes the potential for non-response bias. The demographic profile (Table 1) revealed a workforce primarily holding Master's degrees (72.5%) and possessing significant institutional experience (59.9% served 5-10 years), providing a credible basis for efficiency perceptions.

Table 1. Staff Profile of Quantitative Survey Respondents (N=334)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 40	79	23.7
	40-60	148	44.3
	61+	107	32.0
Gender	Male	284	85.0

	Female	50	15.0
Highest Education	First Degree	56	16.8
	Master's Degree	242	72.5
	PhD/Doctoral	36	10.8
Years of Service	Below 5 years	34	10.2
	5-10 years	200	59.9
	11-15 years	100	29.9

Instrumentation and Measurement:-

A structured, self-administered survey was used, employing 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The measurement scales exhibited high reliability:

- **Perceived Administrative Efficiency (Dependent Variable):** Assessed perceived effectiveness, timeliness, and resource optimization ($\alpha = 0.964$).
- **Perceived Collaborative Practices (Independent Variable):** Measured inter-departmental cooperation and information sharing.
- **Perceived Empowerment and Autonomy (Independent Variable):** Captured decision-making control and ownership.

Data Analysis:-

Data were analysed using SPSS version 27.0. Statistical methods were precisely aligned with the research questions:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Computed means and standard deviations to summarise staff perceptions.
2. **Pearson Product-Moment Correlation:** Used to quantify the strength and direction of associations.
3. **Multiple Linear Regression (MLR):** Employed to assess the unique contribution (beta) of each organizational factor to administrative efficiency, controlling for demographic variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results:-

Descriptive Findings:-

Descriptive analysis (Table 2) provides a baseline understanding of staff perceptions.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Main Study Variables (N=334)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Perceived Administrative Efficiency	3.85	0.72
Perceived Collaborative Practices	4.12	0.65
Perceived Empowerment and Autonomy	3.98	0.78

Staff reported the highest mean for Perceived Collaborative Practices (Mean=4.12), indicating a deeply embedded culture of cooperation. Perceived Administrative Efficiency scored positively (Mean=3.85), suggesting that staff generally evaluate institutional operations as effective.

Correlational Analysis:-

The correlational findings (Table 3) reveal compelling associations between the core study variables.

Variable	1	2	3
1. Perceived Administrative Efficiency	1		
2. Perceived Collaborative Practices	0.732	1	
3. Perceived Empowerment and Autonomy	0.689	0.795	1

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix for Main Study Variables (N=334) $p < 0.001$

1. **Collaboration and Efficiency:** A very strong, highly significant positive correlation exists between perceived collaborative practices and perceived administrative efficiency ($r = 0.732$, $p < 0.001$).
2. **Empowerment and Efficiency:** A strong, highly significant positive correlation exists between perceived staff empowerment and perceived administrative efficiency ($r = 0.689$, $p < 0.001$).

3. **Demographics:** The analysis confirmed that demographic characteristics (Age, Gender, Education, Years of Service) showed **no statistically significant correlations** with perceived administrative efficiency ($p > 0.05$).

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis:-

The MLR model was highly significant ($F(2, 331) = 260.67, p < 0.001$) and accounted for a substantial 61.2% of the variance in perceived administrative efficiency ($R^2=0.612$).

Predictor	Standardized Beta (β)	t	Sig. (p)
Perceived Collaborative Practices	0.449	8.875	< 0.001
Perceived Empowerment and Autonomy	0.380	7.502	< 0.001

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Perceived Administrative Efficiency (N=334)

Both independent variables were confirmed as unique and highly significant predictors of administrative efficiency. Collaborative Practices emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.449$), closely followed by Staff Empowerment ($\beta = 0.380$).

Discussion:-

The study's quantitative results provide powerful, localized evidence supporting the central role of organizational human dynamics in administrative outcomes. The fact that the model explains over 60% of the variance in efficiency perceptions underscores the paramount importance of these two factors. The robust predictive power of collaborative practices validates the tenets of Social Exchange Theory within the Zimbabwean HEI context. Collaboration acts as a powerful, low-cost institutional resource, ensuring that resource limitations are effectively counteracted by the synergy of collective effort. High collaboration means fewer administrative tasks fall through departmental cracks, faster information retrieval, and more integrated solutions to student and faculty issues.

Similarly, the strong contribution of staff empowerment is consistent with Empowerment Theory. By decentralizing decision-making, HEI leadership empowers staff to act as self-regulating problem-solvers. This is crucial in environments where centralized bottlenecks can severely cripple responsiveness. Empowered staff members exhibit greater initiative and ownership, directly translating into process streamlining and improved efficiency (Herin et al., 2025). The finding that demographic variables are non-significant is highly practical, suggesting that an HEI's focus should be on transforming organizational culture and leadership behaviour, which are malleable, rather than being constrained by the composition of the workforce. The high ratings and strong predictive capability of both collaboration and empowerment suggest that the university's leadership has successfully implemented elements of a Collaborative Leadership style, which is demonstrably paying dividends in operational effectiveness.

Limitations:-

While this study offers valuable quantitative evidence, its insights are derived from a single private university in Zimbabwe. This specificity, while providing an in-depth understanding of the chosen context, naturally limits the direct generalizability of the findings to the broader, diverse landscape of Zimbabwean higher education institutions or to different national contexts.

Conclusion and Implications:-

This quantitative case study decisively demonstrates that a high level of perceived collaborative practices and staff empowerment are the most significant and independent predictors of perceived administrative efficiency in this Zimbabwean private university. For leadership across the HEI sector, this research offers a clear mandate: administrative efficiency is fundamentally a function of organizational climate and psychological dynamics, not just structural or financial resources.

Implications for Practice:-

1. **Strategic Investment in Collaborative Culture:** University policy must move beyond mere rhetoric on teamwork. Leadership should implement formal mechanisms—such as cross-functional administrative committees, joint training initiatives, and performance metrics that reward inter-departmental goal attainment—to foster sustained collaboration.

2. **Devolve Decision-Making:** To maximize empowerment, leadership should systematically review and streamline administrative protocols, delegating decision-making authority for routine and non-critical tasks to the lowest competent level. This enhances staff ownership and operational speed.
3. **Leadership Development:** The findings advocate for prioritizing Collaborative Leadership training, focusing on developing skills in consensus-building, trust creation, and shared visioning, as this style is the key enabler for both high collaboration and empowerment.

Implications for Future Research:-

While this study establishes strong quantitative associations, future research should utilize a mixed-methods design to explore the specific qualitative processes and mechanisms by which collaborative leadership behaviors foster empowerment and translate into measurable improvements in efficiency (e.g., reduction in process cycle time, cost savings). Furthermore, comparative studies across various HEI types (public vs. private) within Zimbabwe are warranted to enhance the generalizability of these vital findings

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Declaration of Interest:-

Conflicts of interest: none.

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