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E-Leadership for Growth and Sustainability at Universities in South Africa: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract:

Leadership in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa is increasingly undergoing transformation using modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The study aimed at determining the role of e-Leadership in the management, growth, and sustainability of selected universities in South Africa. A systematic literature review (SLR) was deemed an appropriate methodology to adopt, and 20 relevant studies were reviewed to gain insight into the role of e-leadership in the management, growth, and sustainability of selected universities in South Africa between 2000 and 2025. A qualitative approach was adopted using an SLR aligned with Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The main findings indicate a limited body of literature on e-Leadership in South African HEIs, with the concept still poorly understood. The review revealed that many academic strategic leaders lacked sufficient real-time adoption and optimal use of modern ICTs, thereby constraining effective e-Leadership practices. This highlights a gap in the comprehension and implementation of e-Leadership within the sector. Practical implications include the need to evaluate and strengthen e-Leadership practices across universities, enhance the digital competence of academic leaders, and develop technological tools that support real-time decision-making, address emerging student and staff needs, and anticipate future institutional requirements.

Keywords:

E-Leadership, ICTs, Higher Education Institutions, Management, Growth and Sustainability

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Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa play a critical role in economic development and poverty reduction. Students and lecturing staff are expected to contribute meaningfully to institutional goals, and effective leadership is central to achieving these outcomes. Previous studies highlight that organisational success is closely linked to leadership quality, yet technology-mediated leadership in higher education remains underexplored (Haddouch, 2017:15; Twum-Darko, 2020:84; Jameson et al., 2022). With rapid technological advancements, students and staff increasingly rely on strong Academic Strategic Leadership (ASL), who themselves require support from senior management to ensure successful outcomes (Nită et al., 2023).

In recent decades, ASL in many South African HEIs have faced growing pressure to maintain managerial efficiency, enhance enrolment and throughput, and ensure long-term institutional sustainability (Brown, 2010:196; Pramjeeth et al., 2023; DHET, 2020:19). The OECD (2019:1) reports that tertiary achievement in South Africa is among the lowest across OECD and partner states, with similarly low completion rates at bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. Persistent issues such as limited access, inconsistent quality, and low throughput further highlight the need for improved institutional management (Antonopoulou et al., 2019; Dlamini & Dlamini, 2024).

These challenges are compounded by frequent protest actions, which strain strategic leadership and hinder the ability of ASL to address institutional concerns (Wangenge-Ouma, 2021). Additionally, the sector faces risks such as brain drain, where highly qualified staff leave due to ineffective leadership or insufficient support (Govender, 2024; Gurmessa et al., 2019:4). Structural and contextual constraints in HEIs further complicate sustainability efforts (Hassan & Ahmad, 2025; Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020:3).

The expansion of geographically dispersed campuses has reduced opportunities for face-to-face interaction between ASL and their followers (Rossouw & Goldman, 2023; Ogren, 2016; Alward & Phelps, 2019). Staff on remote campuses often experience isolation and decreased trust in leadership, leading to reduced productivity and higher attrition (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024). This occurs when remote staff feel inadequately supported or led (Ogren, 2016; Alward & Phelps, 2019).

Similar issues affect HEIs across Africa. Reports indicate persistent challenges related to access, quality, and relevance of education (Caerus Capital, 2017:12). Although Africa's labour force is growing rapidly, education systems are struggling to meet labour market demands. Higher education participation in sub-Saharan Africa remains extremely low at approximately six percent, compared to the global average of 26 percent (Africa-America Institute, 2015; Daniel et al., 2019:5). Projections suggest further strain as Africa's youth population expands (International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016).

Against this backdrop, ASL in South Africa are increasingly turning to modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to respond to management, growth, and sustainability challenges (Katuna, 2019 cited by Antonopoulou et al., 2019). This shift has given rise to a leadership paradigm known as Electronic Leadership (e-Leadership), which emphasises the effective use of ICTs to support innovation, strengthen communication, and enhance institutional capability (Palladan et al., 2016:3).

For this paper, institutional e-leadership refers to the ability to implement leadership goals through ICT-mediated processes across virtual campuses and distributed academic environments. E-leadership is conceptualised as a social influence process enabled by technology to effect changes in attitudes, behaviours, and performance at individual and organisational levels (Avolio et al., 2000). ICT plays a central role in mediating leadership actions, institutional processes, and decision-making (Aurangzeb & Mazhar, 2019:4). As digital technologies continue to reshape higher education, ASL must navigate management, growth, and sustainability issues within increasingly virtual academic settings.

Accordingly, this paper recognises the growing importance of e-leadership in higher education and its relevance to strategic management, institutional growth, and long-term sustainability (Filho et al., 2020:2). Academic e-leadership involves influencing staff and students to achieve desirable outcomes in digital and virtual environments (Aurangzeb & Mazhar, 2019:11). Academic e-leaders operate at various organisational levels, including Heads of Departments, Faculty Managers, Deans, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, and Vice-Chancellors, and are responsible for ensuring effective management, promoting growth in enrolment and throughput, and meeting the present and future needs of institutional stakeholders (Mensah, 2019:5).

Previous research (Twum-Darko, 2020; Alward & Phelps, 2019; Antonopoulou et al., 2019; Arnold & Sangrà, 2018) emphasised e-leadership in the corporate sector and in educational technology. In addition, many studies on e-Leadership in higher education have placed emphasis on teaching and learning. However, little is known around the preponderant role that e-leadership plays in the management, growth, and sustainability of HEIs. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to report on an exploratory literature review conducted by the researchers on the role of E-leadership in management, growth, and sustainability in an academic setting. As an attempt to effectively address the purpose of this endeavour, a systematic review of the existing literature is deemed to be the right methodology to be adopted based on the following questions:

1. *What is the role of e-Leadership in the management of a higher education institution in South Africa?*
2. *How does e-Leadership contribute to institutional growth in the South African context?*
3. *How does e-Leadership support sustainability in South Africa HEIs?*

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4. *What academic e-Leadership model can guide effective university management, growth, and sustainability in South Africa?*

The above questions were formulated following the Population or Problem, Interest, and Context (PICO) framework (Khaw et al., 2022). The "Problem" component looked at which role e-Leadership plays in the management, growth, and sustainability of a higher education institution in South Africa. The "Interest" component focused on university management, growth, and sustainability. The "Context" component" was based on higher education institution in South Africa.

Methods and Data

The exploratory literature review was deemed to be the most suitable method for this study since previous studies on e-leadership are not easily understood and empirical research on the phenomena under study is scarce (Hallinger, 2013, cited by Peia & Piawa, 2018). Therefore, this study adopted the systematic review methodology proposed by Hallinger (2013) and corroborated by Walker and Hallinger (2015) and Peia and Piawa (2018). The conceptual framework proposed by Hallinger (2013) for systematic reviews of literature clearly enables one to cover a wider spectrum of the phenomenon under study. The study equally followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The systematic review of literature was undertaken to understand the role of e-leadership in management, growth and sustainability in academia.

Table 1 below depicts the Eligibility Criteria.

Eligibility Criteria

Criteria	**Included**	**Excluded**
Population/Context	Studies focused on South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (universities, colleges).	Studies on corporate e-leadership or non-HEI settings; studies outside South Africa without disaggregated SA data
Phenomenon of interest	Phenomenon of interest: E-leadership, digital leadership, ICT-mediated leadership in academic management, growth, and sustainability.	Studies that do not address leadership, or focus only on traditional leadership without ICT context

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Outcomes	Institutional management effectiveness, growth (enrolment, throughput, research output, innovation, partnerships).	Studies with no discussion of management, growth, or sustainability outcomes
Study type	Empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods), conceptual paper, and reviews	Conference abstracts without full text, commentaries, opinion pieces, non-scholarly sources
Language: English only	Study type: Empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods), conceptual paper, and reviews in English	Non-English studies (without available English translation).
Timeframe: 2000-2025	Timeframe: 2000-2025	Studies published before 2000

Table 1: Eligibility Criteria

Search strategy

This search strategy was based on the PRISMA diagram as illustrated below and included four main steps mainly the identification of studies via databases and other methods, screening, eligibility, and included.

The identification of studies via databases and other methods

Data searches were conducted by reviewing academic e-leadership for growth and sustainability related articles and thesis both on national and international platforms using five major databases selected for their relevance to the study and these include Google scholar, ERIC, EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, and SABINET. These are some of the largest abstract and citation databases of peer-reviewed research literature in today's academic arena. The search covered publications from 2000 to 2025. The "Title/Abstract/Keywords" search procedure was used to find pertinent articles. Therefore, intensive exploratory searching was undertaken employing singularly and the combination of search terms notably ("e-leadership" OR "digital leadership" OR "electronic leadership") AND ("university" OR "higher education") AND ("Management" OR "Growth" OR "Sustainability") AND ("South Africa" OR "South African").

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The screening stage

After the identification of studies was conducted via databases and other methods, the screening stage followed. With 165 identified records of which the researchers conducted title screening manually, 34 records were removed due to duplication. 38 irrelevant articles were eliminated through screening by title and abstract. Afterwards, 39 records were excluded due after assessing full-text articles for eligibility. 34 other studies were removed as they were not the focus of literature and for other reasons. A total number of 20 articles were chosen for the full-text screening stage. Figure 1 below depicts the PRISMA Approach on article identification from the selected databases.

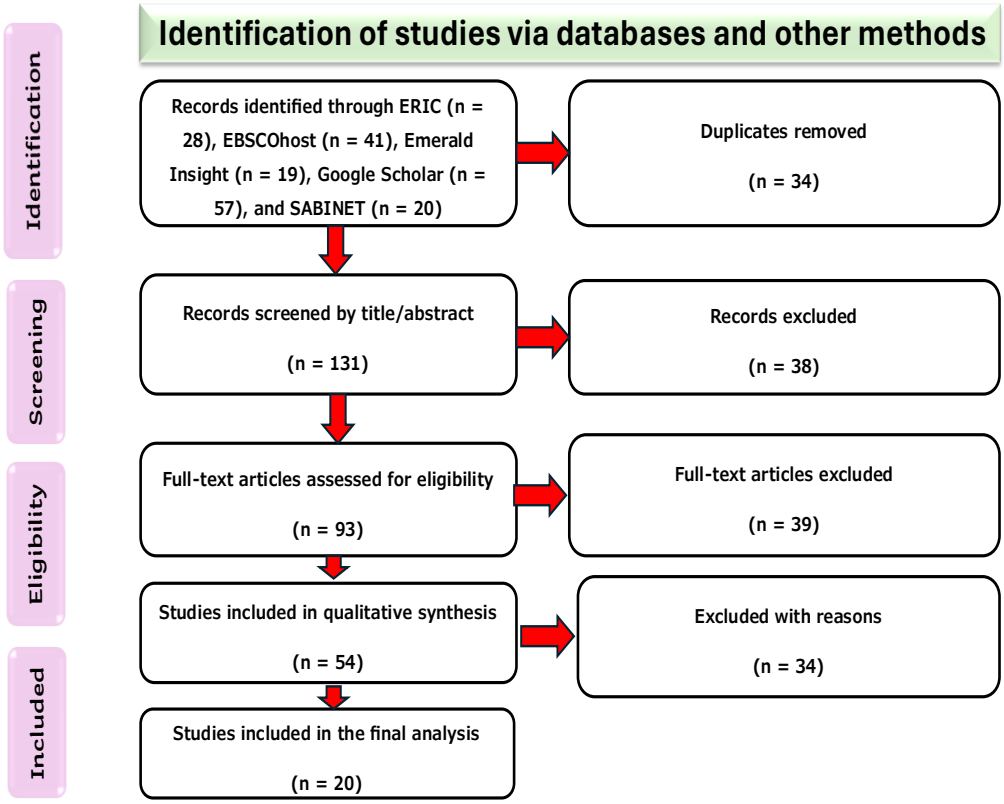

Figure 1: PRISMA Approach on article identification from the selected databases

Table 2 illustrating the search findings on e-Leadership in higher education management, growth, and sustainability is located at the end of this manuscript.

Results and Discussion

This paper reports on a thorough, systematic, exploratory review of prior research around e-leadership in the higher education strategic management and leadership particularly focusing on its role on

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institutional management, growth and sustainability. After the systematic procedure of screening articles, 20 full-text articles were selected for data analysis. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and themes that were formulated were informed by the four research questions. The results reported in Table 2 are interpreted and discussed below:

E-Leadership in Higher Education and Institutional Management

Searching 'E-Leadership' or 'electronic leadership' or 'digital leadership' in combination with 'institutional management' or 'leadership' using the above indicated databases, several results were discarded due to their irrelevance to the subject matter. However, after the skimming and screening process, the findings show a limited number of prior studies discussing e-leadership in higher education management and leadership.

The findings also show a plethora of irrelevant search results, which can be attributed to the notion that the E-Leadership in academia is not well comprehended, and this, in turn, can be attributed to the lack of real-time adoption, appreciation, and optimal use of modern ICTs by academic strategic leaders. E-leadership is, as stated by Sathithada & Niramitchainont (2019), a kind of leadership in which groups or individuals are geographically separated, and in which collaboration is done by means of ICTs. In an academic setting, it is critically important to note that the understanding of the distance between academic leaders and their followers is essential to e-leadership. As it was stressed in the introductory section of this paper, with the expansion of HEIs in South Africa resulting in geographically dispersed campuses across the country and/or the region, the physical contact between current academic strategic leaders and their followers is increasingly becoming a rarity.

As such, these leaders should adopt and implement modern technologies that will bridge the physical distance between them and their followers. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) particularly good digital leading skills are required to exploit innovation opportunities needed for organisational growth (Katuna, 2019, cited by Antonopoulou et al., 2019). Academic E-leaders must be equipped with skills that enable them to grow and effectively manage and lead institutions with the help of modern ICTs (Avolio et al., 2009). As indicated in the UNESCO-IESALC report on higher education (Vieira do Nascimento et al., 2020), countries of the developing world continue to lag, with 10% in access to higher education compared to the 77% of the higher income sector. Online academic leaders in HEIs in developing countries require a combination of adequate leadership and technological acumen to curtail the management conundrum in higher education virtual spaces.

In addition, the role of ICT-enabled leaders in the growth and sustainability in African academia needs to be explored intensively. The availability of these leaders is of critical importance since they can significantly contribute in a professional ICT-enabled leadership environment. If Africa is to grow, and

sustain institutions, it must be in a position of addressing the current scarcity of people with the capability of leading the innovative initiatives required to capitalise on ICT. Modern ICTs are a key running engine for growth and sustainability fueled by innovative ideas of academic e-leaders. For the selected HEIs to ensure effective management, growth and sustainability, they must be equipped with people in academic leadership positions who can lead the digital innovation and transformation of African universities.

E-Leadership and Institutional Sustainability

A search combining e-leadership with institutional sustainability revealed very few relevant studies, indicating a significant gap in the literature regarding the role of e-leadership in supporting sustainable higher education institutions in South Africa. This gap highlights the need for further research to address sustainability-related challenges in South African HEIs. According to Velazquez et al (2006), a sustainable university is " *a HEI that tackles, includes and supports, on global or regional level, the mitigation of societal, economics, health, and environmental negative effects in the use of their assets in order to fulfil its main functions of teaching, research, community engagement & partnership, and responsible management among others as a way to supporting society in making the shift to sustainable modes of living*". According to Salvioni et al (2017), sustainable development is one of the key principles for sustainable higher education and sustainability is an opportunity to enhance the quality of higher education. Institutional sustainability requires that academic strategic leaders (ASL) possess e-Leadership competencies that enable timely decision-making, efficient management of resources, and the implementation of innovative strategies to maintain the institution's long-term viability.

E-leaders must effectively leverage ICT to support institutional processes, streamline administrative functions, and enhance stakeholder engagement. By adopting digital tools, ASL can ensure that institutions remain responsive to current and future academic, operational, and societal demands. Sustainable management also involves integrating ICT-based strategies across teaching, learning, research, and student support functions to strengthen institutional resilience.

However, sustainability can be achieved when e-leaders are equipped with adequate digital competencies to produce excellent performance for their institutions, employees, and stakeholders. To ensure sustainable institutions, university e-leaders in South Africa should adopt a culture of change and consider modern technological advancements as an opportunity to experiment and innovate to meet evolving needs of all students regardless of their geographical locations Moonsamy et al. (2022).

E-Leadership and Institutional Growth

Institutional growth in HEIs is characterized by key metrics such as Undergraduate Throughput Rate (UTR), Quality of Degree Output Rate (QDOR), and Research Output Rate (ROR). E-leadership plays a critical role in fostering growth by enabling academic leaders to identify and exploit innovative

opportunities, design effective business models, and maximize the use of ICT for operational efficiency. Strong e-leadership skills empower ASL to make prompt decisions that improve student outcomes and research productivity.

In African academia, ICT-enabled leadership is essential to improving UTR, increasing graduate outputs, and preparing students for postgraduate study and economic development (Letseka & Maile, 2008). E-leadership also supports research management by enhancing the quality and quantity of scholarly outputs, including journal articles, books, technical reports, and student supervision (South African Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018). Collaboration with Student Affairs units, which provide research-based evidence on student success challenges, further enables ASL to capitalize on ICT for effective student administration and institutional growth (Moja et al., 2014).

In discussing the E-leadership role on institutional growth, it is vitally important for academic strategic leaders in collaboration with Students Affairs to capitalise on ICTs to improve the students' administration for institutional growth.

The Influence of Digitalisation on Academic Strategic Leadership

Digitalisation is drastically changing the leadership systems in organisations and a new way of leading is required. It fosters dissemination of information and knowledge, eluding geographical limitations and making information and knowledge more accessible (Granlund & Mellström, 2019:41). Digital transformation is revolutionising organisations by wiring them and many human interactions are mediated by technology. It plays a critical role in maintaining efficient powerful management and administration (Moses, 2014:20). ICT is an essential infrastructure and a powerful tool for economic development. It has pervasive impact on the full range of human activities, from personal life, civil society to business and government. With the emergence of ICT, strategic leaders in academia are becoming e-leaders especially when dealing with virtual work arrangements in geographically dispersed university campuses. However, Moonsamy et al. (2022) contend that, from an academic perspective, the discussion on how leadership has been affected by ICTs has so far not been adequately developed and the academic contribution to the field is still limited.

For African academia to ensure institutional growth and sustainability, selected HEIs in South Africa need to be equipped with people in leadership positions who can lead the digital innovation and transformation of universities. Strategic leadership is one's ability to ensure the anticipation and envisioning of the future, maintaining flexibility, thinking in a strategic way and making changes that will engender a competitive edge for the organizational future (Theodore, 2014). Leaders who can combine strategic vision with service delivery are the future of a country (Mbeki, 2000:3). Strategic leadership needs to take cognizance of issues facing organisations and the role of ICT in the growth and

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sustainability of institutions. Despite the long history of research around leadership, only recently did strategic leadership started to be singled out as a focus of attention by organisation behaviour scholars (Narayanan & Zane, 2009:380). Modern ICTs are key as engines for growth and sustainability fuelled by the innovative ideas of academic e-leaders.

Antonopoulou et al. (2019, citing Lighton, 2018), Jenkins and Andenoro (2016), Bolden et al. (2008) emphasised that for effective e-leadership to take place, the digital skills needed are centred around Mobility, Cloud Computing, Big Data Analysis, Social Media Technologies, Enterprise Resource Planning Systems and Internet of Things. However, for the purpose of this study, in addition to this list, there are other applications in HEIs in South Africa such as E-mail Applications and other systems that are used particularly by academic strategic leaders. Irakoze (2015) indicated that over and above the Microsoft Office packages which were used and updated frequently, telephone and video conferencing facilities, a number of South African Selected HEIs in South Africa were equally utilising ERPs such as ITS and People Soft. It is equally of utmost importance to determine specific applications and systems that work much better and contribute a great deal to growth, sustainability and effective strategic management.

A Proposed Model of E-Leadership for Effective Academic Management, Sustainability, and Growth.

Figure 2 below illustrates a conceptual framework describing how academic leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs) evolves into academic e-leadership through the mediating role of information and communication technologies (ICTs). It proposes a sequential and influence-based pathway that ultimately leads to effective academic management, sustainability, and institutional growth.

The framework begins with academic leadership, which is transformed into academic e-leadership when mediated by the adoption and utilisation of ICTs. This suggests that technology is not merely a tool but a catalyst that reshapes traditional leadership functions into digitally enabled leadership practices. At the centre of the framework is a set of determinants namely e-Collaboration, e-Trust, e-Decision-making, and e-Adaptability. e-Collaboration is an online process that includes all pertinent contributors in developing a collective insight into an issue, possible solutions and resources, and subsequent execution (Woodbury, 2023). e-Trust exists when a worker feels secure to accept risks, communicate openly, and participate in innovation using online settings. e-Decision-making is the potential to contribute to decision making via online settings. e-Adaptability is an online team or organization's capacity to change and obtain new abilities when faced with changing factors, situations, or surroundings that may be inside or outside. Other important determinants influencing academic e-leaders include emotional intelligence, technological and academic operational acumen, valuing and

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accommodating diversity, fairness, equity, respect, support, transformation, partnership and internationalisation (Salvioni et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2024; Ratajczak, 2022).

These determinants exert an influencing effect on the development of an effective academic e-leader, demonstrating that e-leadership is shaped not only by technological competence but also by relational, ethical, and strategic competencies.

The framework concludes by linking the emergence of an effective academic e-leader to effective academic management, sustainability, and growth. This final output underscores the theoretical claim that digitally competent leadership enhances institutional performance, responsiveness, and long-term viability. Overall, the figure presents a coherent, linear, and determinant-driven model showing how ICT-mediated leadership competencies interact to influence effective e-leadership outcomes within HEIs. It also highlights that successful e-leadership depends on a balanced integration of technological capacity and human-centred leadership attributes.

Figure 2 below illustrates a proposed model of e-leadership for effective academic management, sustainability, and growth.

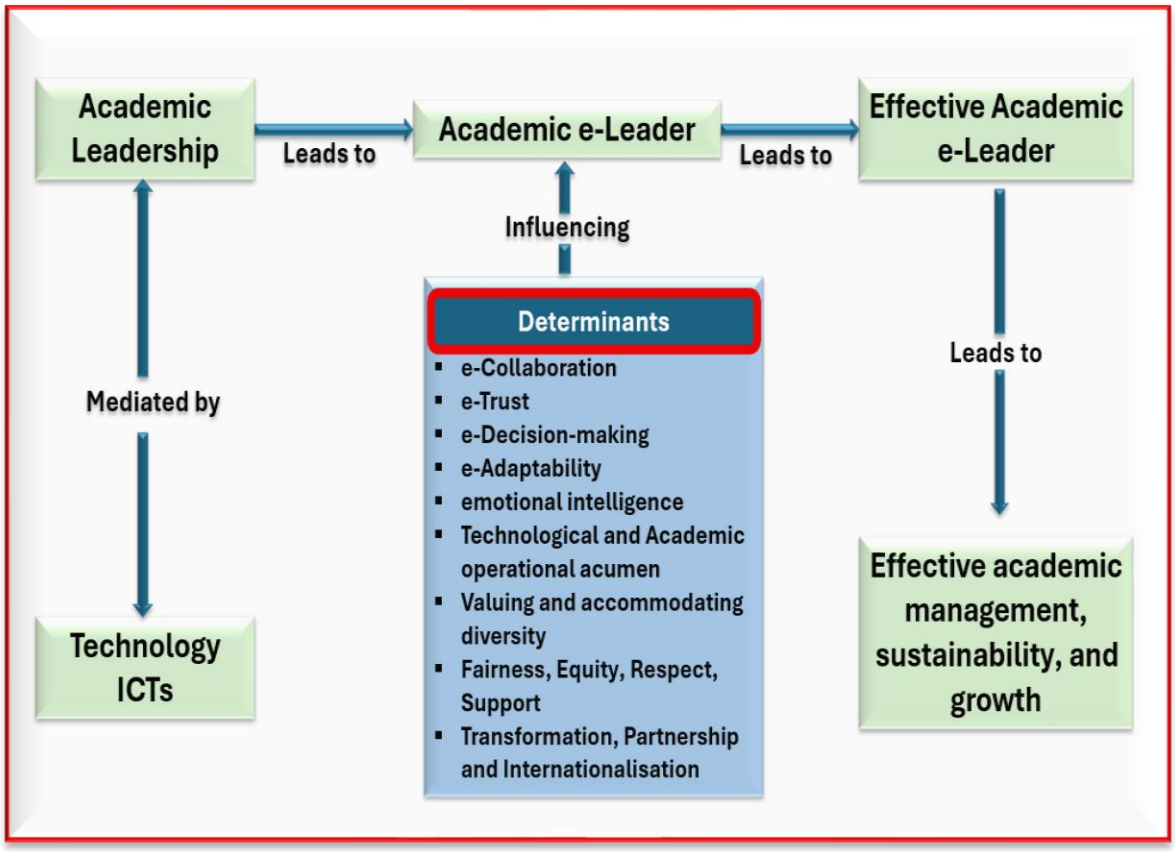

Figure 2: Proposed effective e-Leader model for academic management, sustainability, and growth

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Conclusion

Prior studies emphasise the importance of entrenching e-leadership in HEIs for institutional success. In view of the current trend in some HEIs in South Africa where one can observe the growing and phenomenal upsurge in online student learning, and where geographically dispersed campuses are increasing in number, size and scope, it is paramount for academic strategic leaders to consider these separated campuses as virtual campuses in their daily academic operations. This can be operationalised through instilling a culture of trust, respect, fairness, equity, and support through real-time adoption, appreciation, and optimal use of relevant modern ICTs by emotionally intelligent academic strategic leaders.

This technology-led leadership will enable opportunities that counteract the escalation of pressing issues and ensuring the realisation of effective strategic management, growth, and sustainability in HEIs in South Africa. This requires strategic leaders with good communication and digital leading skills; academic leaders with technological and academic operational acumen with centeredness on staff and students' satisfaction, and with the capabilities to exploit innovation opportunities in academia. Moreover, it is vitally important to highlight that strategic leaders of some HEIs in South Africa become aware that they serve not only their respective institutions, but the whole spectrum of stakeholders on a national, regional and international level through effective transformation, partnerships and internationalisation, valuing and accommodating diversity. This broadened contextual mind set will trigger their appetite for real-time adoption, appreciation, and optimal use of modern ICTs to effectively manage, grow, sustain, and gain a competitive advantage among universities.

While e-leaders in the business sector require digital skills, business skills and strategic leadership skills, it has transpired from this study that, over and above these skills, e-leaders in academia need to be trained in order to understand e-leadership, institutional processes and policies and how they integrate within one another. There is a need for ICT facilities to assist strategic leaders in selected HEIs in South Africa to access management, growth and sustainability related data in real time to facilitate timely decision-making process. For example, integrated software that can track, in real time, statistical data on enrolment, throughput, graduate, research output, and dropout rates is essential to allow strategic leaders in selected HEIs in South Africa to implement required interventions for effective strategic management.

To summarise, it has become crucial to transform educational leadership to educational e-leadership in HEIs in South Africa to allow the much-needed growth, sustainability and effective institutional management and leadership. There is a plethora of literature around e-leadership, especially in the corporate sector. However, there is paucity of research on e-leadership in academia, particularly on its

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role to effectively manage, grow and sustain HEIs in South Africa. It is therefore recommended that scholars in this field explore e-leadership in depth.

Implications and Recommendations

Given the emergence of modern ICTs in HEIs in South Africa, academic strategic leaders should apply e-leadership and collaboration skills to managing increasingly complex academic environments. However, the concept of e-leadership in academia is not well comprehended and this can be attributed to the lack of real-time adoption, appreciation, and optimal use of modern ICTs by academic strategic leaders. This has serious implications for institutional growth and sustainability notwithstanding the existing fierce competition among universities across the globe. Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

- Entrenchment of customised e-leadership training for academic strategic leaders and managers, with the emphasis on academic digital skills and strategies for real-time adoption, appreciation, and optimal use of modern ICTs by academic strategic leaders is much needed (Khaw et al, 2022). Furthermore, there has been increasing calls for training and development in e-leadership (Jameson, 2013; McLeod, 2015; Mishra, Henriksen, Boltz, & Richardson, 2016; Sheninger, 2014, found in Brown et al., 2016; Alward & Phelps, 2019). Whilst there is a strong focus on the context in the teaching and learning process, it is of the utmost importance that institutional effectiveness in academic strategic leadership is not overlooked.
- In academic sustainability policy documents, it is vital that the e-leadership component be articulated particularly its role in sustainable higher education.
- To recommend and incorporate adequate ICTs efficiently into institutional activities, it is crucial for higher education leaders to keep well-informed of the current developments in academic leadership and management through training development programmes.
- There is a need for software that fast-tracks emerging needs of students and staff to allow academic strategic leaders to provide real-time solutions to real-time problems. This e-leadership process will make institutional sustainability possible by tackling current needs and predicting future needs of all stakeholders. The design and development of adequate systems and applications and other online tools required by academic strategic leaders and managers is recommended to ensure institutional growth, sustainability, and strategic management and leadership.

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Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, although a systematic review methodology was adopted, the evidence base on e-leadership in South African higher education remains limited and fragmented. The scarcity of empirical studies on e-leadership particularly those focused on management, growth, and sustainability restricted the depth and breadth of available findings, which may influence the comprehensiveness of the conclusions.

Second, the study was limited to publications written in English and indexed within Google Scholar, ERIC, EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, and SABINET. Relevant studies available in other languages, regional repositories, institutional databases, or grey literature may have been excluded, potentially narrowing the scope of insights. The reliance on a restricted set of databases may also have contributed to the relatively small number of eligible studies.

Third, the strict eligibility criteria focusing only on South African HEIs and excluding broader African or international comparative studies while increasing contextual relevance may reduce the generalisability of the findings. Important discussions of e-leadership in higher education elsewhere may therefore not have been captured.

Fourth, the screening and selection process involved manual judgment during title, abstract, and full-text review. Although PRISMA guidelines were followed, subjective interpretation may have led to the exclusion of studies that contained relevant but indirectly linked content.

Lastly, the study relied solely on secondary data, meaning that no primary empirical data were collected to validate or enrich the findings. As a result, the review reflects what is currently published rather than providing real-time evidence from practitioners or institutions.

Future Research

It is hoped that future researchers place a strong emphasis on evaluating the nature and effectiveness of academic e-leadership in higher education online environments in South Africa. It is equally hoped that a study be conducted to guide the development of a technological tool that will fast-track emerging needs of students and staff to allow academic strategic leaders to provide real-time solutions to real-time problems and predict future needs of institutional stakeholders.

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Appendix

Database	Combination of search terms	References of selected conducted study	Findings
ERIC, EBSCOhost, (2000-2025) Emerald Insight, (2000-2025) Google scholar, (2000-2025)	E-leadership or electronic leadership or digital leadership in higher education academic management, growth and sustainability.	Twum-Darko, 2020	Although the paper mainly focused on organisations in general, the author recommended that further studies on e-leadership be conducted for Institutions of Higher Learning in Africa to explore e-leadership competencies that emerge out of these institutions.
		Moonsamy et al., 2022	To ensure sustainable institutions, university e-Leaders in South Africa should adopt a culture of change and consider modern technological advancements as a prospect to explore and introduce new methods to satisfy shifting demands of all students regardless of their geographical locations (Moonsamy et al., 2022).
		Woodbury, 2023	For effective institutional change in HEIs, the active interaction between technology and leadership (e-leadership), team collaboration, employee engagement, trust, and empowerment are both of a pivotal importance (Woodbury, 2023).
		Ali & Amin, 2025	The authors stated that adopting e-Leadership is crucial in developing sustainable performance, knowledge sharing, and ensuring resilience and long-term success in Higher Education Institutions.

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SABINET African Journals (2000-2025)		Badru et al, 2025	Badru et al (2025) explored and described the academic e-Leadership strategies used by first-line leaders at a SA Higher Education Institution and found that effective communication, empathy, and trust appeared as significant among the leaders.
		Malagas, 2024	The author suggested that academic e-leaders could negatively influence intentions to quit because academics may be more inclined to stay if they have confidence (trust) in e-leadership.
		Yuting, Z., Adams, D., & Lee, K. C. S., 2022	The authors contend that academic e-leaders should have adequate technological knowhow, e-leadership methods, and e-skills to provide a technology-enabled learning setting, which necessitates more e-leadership studies in the future.
		Msila, 2022	In this qualitative study, Msila (2022) postulated that, to thrive in the current times of ICTs, academic e-leaders need a strong vision, collective decision making, emotional intelligence to support their teams whilst improving their institutions' performance. No theoretical grounding.
		Ratajczak, 2022.	The author conducted a systematic literature review on e-Leadership at universities and found that the considered study field is in the early growth stage and needs further examination.

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		Korua et al., 2025	The authors indicated that the impact of academic e-Leadership on organisational sustainability was apparent throughout the operational, academic, social, and financial dimensions, including deceased paper reliance, increased graduation rates, budget efficiencies, and extended engagement with overlooked populations.
		Cheng et al (2024) and Karakose et al (2022)	The authors identified the principal roles of academic e-Leaders, and these include advancing digital transformation, using digital technology, developing a digital learning culture, promoting technology-based professional development, and demonstrating digital leadership skills such as managerial abilities, technology proficiency, and personal competencies.
		Alward & Phelps, 2019	The author has identified some important and remarkable leadership attributes of e- leaders in HEIs such as emotional intelligence, trust, leadership styles, training and development, employee recognition and motivation, communication, team building, technology, and some other virtual leadership skills unique to higher education.
		Sathithada & Niramitchainont, 2019	The authors define E-leadership as “a type of leadership in which persons or groups are geographically separated, and collaboration is done by means of technology. The learning materials for developing e-leadership are relevant and

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			can prepare leaders with the ability to incorporate technology in a digital epoch successfully."
		Antonopoulou et al., 2019	The authors' findings indicate that the higher degree of transformational leadership suggests higher productivity and satisfaction for employees, and the high degree of transformational leadership co-exists with the great degree of the enactment of e-Leadership.
		Bryant, 2013	The author states that the emotional intelligence of an academic strategic e-leader plays a great role and the elements of communication and trust are indispensable.
		South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2018).	The report compels academic leaders to put in place innovative intervention strategies as academic growth in terms of research outputs is compromised and some academics are falling into unethical publications traps due to the pressure to publish.
		South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2019).	The report compels academic leaders to conduct research and data analytics to identify possible technological interventions to grow enrolments in the system in line with the requirements of the National Development Plan.

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		Abusebaa, 2023; Norris-Watson, C., 2022	The authors indicate some important determinants influencing academic e-leaders and these include emotional intelligence, technological and Academic operational acumen, valuing and accommodating diversity, fairness, equity, respect, support, transformation, partnership and internationalisation.
		Van Wart et al., 2017	The authors opined that the areas in which competence in e-Leadership were important included e-social skills, e-communication, e-team building, e-technology skills, e-change management, and e-trustworthiness.
		Salvioni et al., 2017	The authors contend that sustainability in university involve the actions and processes to be undertaken in avoiding or to reducing risks.

Table 2: Search findings on e-leadership in higher education management, growth, and sustainability