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# Leadership in Online Education: A Scoping Review

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**Abstract:** Over the last two decades, we have witnessed a growing interest in online learning. There is an increased focus on online education research due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the crisis led to online education platforms becoming a necessity for educationists and students. This article reviews online education, purely, in the context of leadership. Past reviews have focused on concepts surrounding online learning such as technology, pedagogy, and student satisfaction. However, limited attention has been drawn to leadership exclusively in relevance to online education. The scoping review analyses 63 articles published between 2002-2022 to answer two research questions. First, what are the research concepts, theories, models, and frameworks operationalized in the publications within this topic domain? Second, who are the stakeholders and leaders identified in literature? Through synthesizing alternative research perspectives in the field of leadership, education, and information and communication technology (ICT), this review identifies four categories of research literature relevant to the topic domain. Following themes emerged from the analysis of the publications: impact of leadership on online education; student experience in an online leadership programme; impact of online education on leadership development of actors in an online education setting; and perception of leadership in an online education setting. Based on the review, an agenda is proposed for future research to enhance our understanding of the role of leadership in online education and elucidate the relationship between leaders and online learning in educational institutions. A lack of focus on the key leaders in the existing literature is made apparent, and further empirical research is recommended. This review makes a theoretical contribution by consolidating existing research in leadership in online education through the synthesis categories and identifying future research pathways. The findings have practical implications for leadership in online education in educational organizations through identification of stakeholders and the entities in leadership positions.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Online learning, Scoping review, Educational leaders, Digitized education

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## 1. Introduction

*'Education is a prime target for disruption given advances in computer technology, communications platforms, and the internet, which are not currently in widespread use for baseline programs but are becoming more common by existing universities' (Friga, Bettis, and Sullivan, 2003).*

Circa start of this century, Friga et al. (2003), in their discussion of the strategic options for business schools, stated the circumstances in which technology was permeating education: as an option for innovation, and not a desperate requirement for educational institutions. Departing from the above statement, in the post-COVID era, and in a world of disruption, division and displacement (Creed et al., 2022), we find online education democratizing access to education (Razmerita et al., 2020). It is becoming a necessity for schools, colleges, and universities across the globe in times of crises, as was evident during the pandemic in the shift of emergency remote teaching in educational institutions (Crick et al., 2021). Online education has been defined as the "use of network technologies for collaborative learning" (Harasim, 2000; p 41) and curriculum delivery through online learning platforms (Singh, 2019).

Effective implementation of technology driven learning innovations entails a discussion of the leadership associated with institutional change (Garrison and Vaughan, 2013). Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison (2013) presented through their framework for adoption of blended learning, the 3S (strategy, structure, and support) indicating the relevance of leadership and its role in technology-based innovations in education. However, as Martin, Sun, and Westine (2020) pointed out, scarce attention has been given to leadership in the context of online education. A scoping review of the literature on leadership and online education is warranted for two reasons. First, to explore how leadership and online learning, as individual concepts, interact with each other in research. The paper aims to provide scholars with a deeper understanding of the current state of literature through consolidating ideas generated in published research in both these research areas. Second, to identify the stakeholders, leaders, and decision makers in adoption and implementation of online education in higher educational organizations. Ligon, Hunter, and Mumford (2008) differentiated between leaders and people as "their abilities to move beyond description of current system operations to prescriptions of a system as it could be" (p 314). This comment raises a few questions relevant to the topic domain. Who plans for online education

based on the contingencies in the organization? Who are the expert leaders (Goodall, 2010) responsible for its successful implementation?

This review allows us to gain an insight into the topic domain of leadership in online education through critical analysis and synthesis of research conducted in the past twenty years. The paper also identifies knowledge gaps to guide future research. E-leadership as a concept has initiated discourse on virtual leadership; however, it needs to be explored further in an online education context. There has been no prior attempt to conduct a scoping review on the topic of “leadership in online education”. Reviews conducted exclusively on leadership (Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber, 2009) or online learning and teaching, e-learning and distance learning (Alem et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2020; Nortvig, Petersen, and Balle, 2018) cover a broad spectrum of research and do not holistically serve our purpose of closely examining the relationship between the two concepts. This paper examines how research conducted in leadership in online education stems from various disciplines, and refers to concepts, theories, models, and frameworks from research areas which include leadership, education and ICT. This study makes an important contribution by identifying how online education and leadership interact, the stakeholders involved and by defining coding parameters for the synthesis of the literature, developing a roadmap for further interdisciplinary research in leadership in online education.

The scoping review is presented to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1. What are the research concepts, theories, models and frameworks operationalized in the research within the topic domain of “leadership in online education”?*

*RQ2. Who are the stakeholders and leaders identified in existing research literature in the topic domain of “leadership in online education”?*

## 2. Methodology

A scoping review is used as the knowledge synthesis vehicle for this study. Scoping reviews can serve the purpose of mapping the existing multidisciplinary research literature, identifying the gaps, and informing scholars of further research pathways (Munn et al., 2018). PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines were followed for reviewing and screening of articles (Tricco et al., 2018).

### 2.1 Literature Search

Peer review articles were identified from the following data bases: ProQuest RefWorks, Sage Journals online, Academic Search Ultimate, Taylor & Francis Online, Elsevier, and Google scholar was employed as a search engine. The keywords used were: “leadership” and “online learning” OR “online teaching” OR “online education” OR “online programme”. The initial search yielded a total of 110 articles. Table 1 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

**Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

| Included Publications                  | Excluded Publications                             |
|--|---|
| Primary research articles              | Books, systematic reviews, conference proceedings |
| Published in English                   | Not published in English                          |
| Published in past 20 years (2002-2022) | Not published in past 20 years (2002-2022)        |

Based upon the above criteria in Table 1, 13 articles were removed as they did not meet the above inclusion criteria. 1 article was removed as it was a duplicate article. Through forward/backward search of the above articles, and secondary database search, 20 more articles were identified which had relevance to the topic. As a part of the further refinement process, articles which did not have an explicit discussion of online learning and leadership, or any synthesis of the relationship between the two concepts were excluded from the study (n=53) leaving us with the remaining 63 articles. Figure 1 is the diagrammatic representation outlining the selection procedure for articles selection for the study.

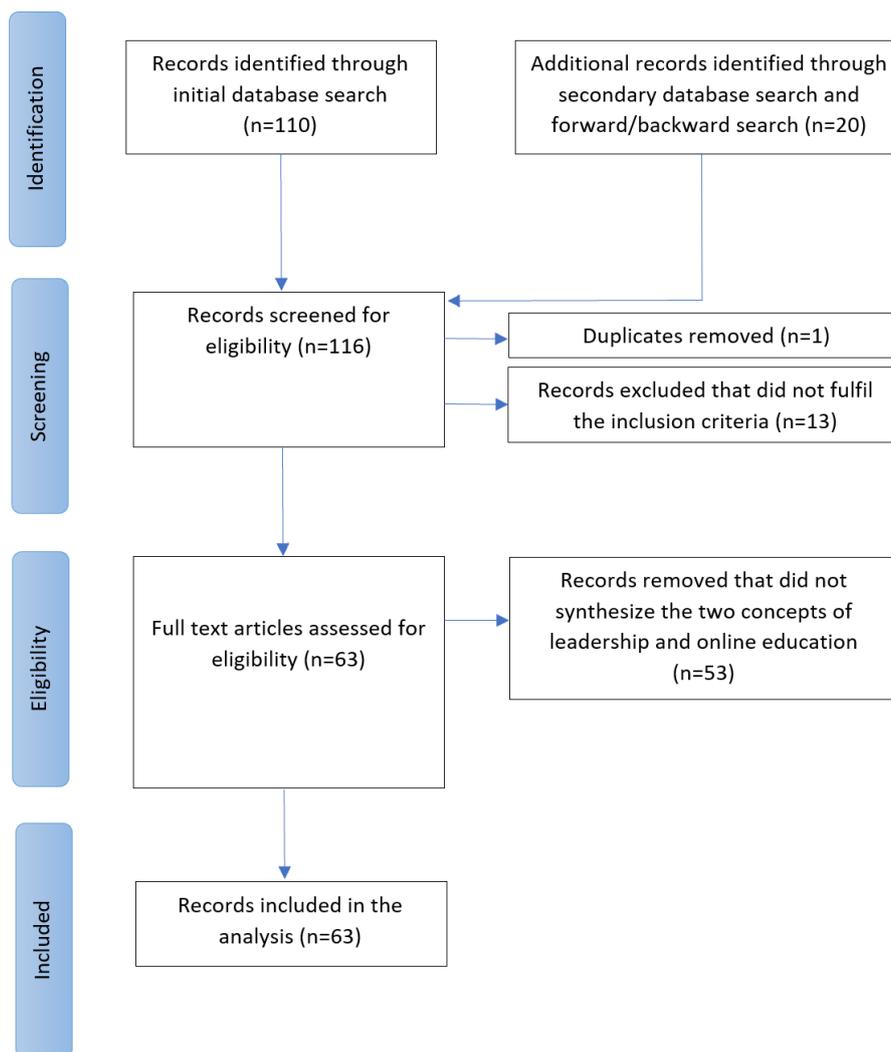


Figure 1: Flow diagram of searched, included/excluded, screened and selected articles (adapted from Tricco et al. (2018))

## 2.2 Defining Coding Parameters

The articles included for this study were coded through the coding parameters presented below in Table 2.

Table 2: Coding Parameters

| Parameter            | Details   |
|----------------------|---|
| Foci                 | Individual, group or organizational level   |
| Research methodology | Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methodology  |
| Study specifics      | Case study/essay, longitudinal or cross-sectional, location   |
| Level of education   | K-12 school, college, higher educational institution (undergraduate or postgraduate), diploma, or programme |
| Concept or theory    | The theoretical framing of the study in the context of the topic domain of leadership in online education.  |

| Parameter          | Details   |
|--------------------|---|
| Synthesis category | Impact of leadership on online education<br>Student experience in an online leadership programme<br>Impact of online education on the leadership development of actors (students, faculty members, administrative staff, and heads of departments) in an online education setting.<br>Perception of leadership in an online education setting |

The focus for each publication was identified as individual, group, or organizational level based on the unit of analysis in the study. Research methods adopted were coded under methodology and study specifics. The level of education at which the particular study is conducted was documented. Given the topic domain, it is not surprising that the research was conducted across k-12 schools, colleges, and universities. However, due to the fact that online leadership development programmes have been on the rise during the past two decades, a proportion of the articles were also based on these being offered to participants. Theoretical framing in Table 2 documents the concepts, theories, models, and frameworks which were referred to in each publication, leading us towards broader research areas such as education, leadership, and ICT (Figure 3). This signifies an interdisciplinary approach in the research previously conducted in the topic domain and highlights the potential of future research across a spectrum of research domains in the context of leadership in online education.

### 2.3 Publication Trend

Figure 2 is indicative of the interest in the topic domain in the review timeline. Two specific peaks are apparent, signifying two eras when the relevant conversations in research and practice were transpiring, in the context of leadership in online education.

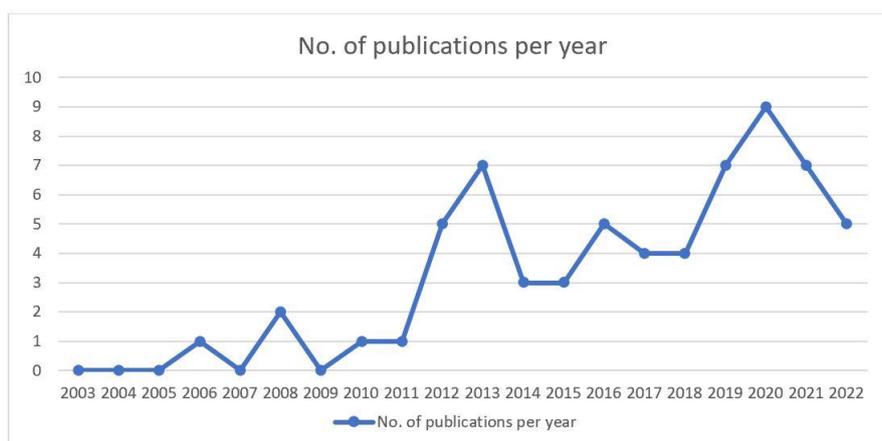


Figure 2: Number of publications per year (2003-2022)

Around the start of the century, growing ease of communication and acceptance of social media tools and online communication paved the way for progress in development of online education platforms (Redpath, 2012). As Proserpio and Gioia (2007), predicted the “virtual generation of students” (p 69) to be the future recipients of education; scholars, practitioners and leaders prepared for the challenges of imparting education to this generation of students. The growing interest in massive online open courses (MOOCs), and the possibility of conducting trainings from participants across the globe, also triggered the development of online leadership programmes for students, faculty members, educators and professionals from various backgrounds and disciplines (Passarelli, 2014)

The second era of interest in research on this topic was during the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges faced by the global community became the impetus for research scholars to redirect research (Muzio and Doh, 2021) and seek solutions to overcome the impact of the pandemic on education. This was an era when academic leadership was steering the way into the unknown territory of emergency remote teaching and learning (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020). Closures of educational institutions across the world forced scholars to take stock of leadership research during the crisis, in the political, social, and organizational aspects (Bailey and Breslin, 2021). For educational researchers, the digital disruption in pedagogy provided an opportunity to evaluate the outcome of integration of technology with the curriculum in schools, colleges, and universities (Watermeyer et al., 2021).

Presented below is the analysis of the review based on the synthesis categories identified in Table 2.

### 3. Analysis and Synthesis Categories

Categorization of the papers revealed the following four emergent themes synthesized through analysis of the articles. Seven articles were categorized in more than one category.

#### 3.1 Impact of Leadership on Online Education

Critically analyzing the research on educational technology research, Jameson (2013) comments on the need of the strategic alignment of leadership with technology research in higher education. This is a deviation from the predominant practice of primarily focusing only on research on the online classroom and technology driven instructional design and pedagogy. Digital leadership (Tigre et al., 2022) and e-leadership (Avolio et al., 2014) are concepts arising from the discussions on the rise of technology and its implementation in organizations. In the field of educational research, the research on these concepts has been extended to explore the role of leadership in adoption and implementation of these technologies in educational institutions (Chua and Chua, 2017, Garrison and Vaughan, 2013, Chang and Lee, 2013). During the pandemic, the role of academic leadership shifted towards management of the crisis, and effective implementation of the emergency remote teaching and learning (Fernandez et al., 2021, Borup et al., 2020). With this notion that leadership has played a pivotal role in the adoption of technologies in educational institutions, and continues to do so, the 17 papers of this category are summarized in Table 3, and discussed below.

**Table 3: Summary of articles reviewed in the category of “Impact of leadership on online education”**

| Publication                      | Focus   | Methodology  | Study specifics                      | Level of education | Theory/ concept  |
|----------------------------------|---|--------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--|
| Otte and Benke (2006)            | Organization  | -            | Essay                                | -                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic leadership</li> </ul>   |
| Brigance (2011)                  | Group   | -            | Essay                                | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative leadership</li> <li>Learning agility model</li> </ul>                                 |
| Ashbaugh (2013)                  | Organization and individual ( <i>instructional designer</i> ) | Qualitative  | Case study<br>Canada<br>US           | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership competency</li> <li>Strategic leadership</li> <li>Learner satisfaction theory</li> </ul> |
| Chang and Lee (2013)             | Group   | Quantitative | Case study<br>Taiwan                 | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership style: Transformational/ transactional</li> </ul>  |
| Holt et al. (2013)               | Organization, education sector                                | Qualitative  | Longitudinal case study<br>Australia | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distributed leadership/ shared leadership</li> </ul>  |
| Kahai, Jestire, and Huang (2013) | Individual ( <i>student</i> )                                 | Quantitative | Case study<br>US                     | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership style: transformational/ transactional</li> <li>Collaborative learning</li> </ul>        |
| Garrison and Vaughan (2013)      | Organization  | Qualitative  | Two case studies<br>Canada           | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative leadership</li> <li>Inquiry through blended learning (ITBL)</li> </ul>                |

| Publication   | Focus  | Methodology  | Study specifics      | Level of education | Theory/ concept   |
|---|--|--------------|----------------------|--------------------|---|
| <b>Gallego-Arrufat, Gutierrez-Santiuste, and Campana-Jimenez (2015)</b> | Organization and individual ( <i>teacher</i> ) | Qualitative  | Case study Spain     | K-12 school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distributed leadership</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Hilliard (2015)</b>  | Organization and individual ( <i>student</i> ) | -            | Essay                | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blended learning</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Mirriahi et al. (2015)</b>   | Organization                                   | Qualitative  | Case study Australia | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic leadership</li> <li>Constructivism theory</li> <li>Principles of adult learning</li> </ul> |
| <b>Makina (2016)</b>  | Organization                                   | Qualitative  | Conceptual           | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connectivism theory</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Kranzow (2013)</b>   | Individual ( <i>student</i> )                  | Qualitative  | Conceptual           | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intrinsic motivation</li> <li>Community of inquiry framework</li> </ul>                              |
| <b>Alward and Phelps (2019)</b>   | Group  | Qualitative  | Case study US        | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership traits</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Cheng, Hwang, and Lai (2020)</b>                                     | Individual ( <i>student</i> )                  | Quantitative | Case study Taiwan    | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group leadership</li> <li>Collaborative learning</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Fernandez and Shaw (2020)</b>  | Organization and individual ( <i>leader</i> )  | Qualitative  | Essay                | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shared leadership</li> <li>Servant leadership</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Bebbington (2021)</b>  | Organization and education sector              | Qualitative  | Essay                | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic leadership</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Rahman and Subiyantoro (2021)</b>                                    | Individual ( <i>principal</i> )                | Qualitative  | Case study Indonesia | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic leadership</li> </ul>  |

Otte and Benke (2006) proposed institutional transformation through strategic planning at all levels of the organization, instead of online education remaining an isolated function of the educational institution. This resonates with the discussion by Brigance (2011) on collaborative leadership and “shared vision” (p 43) between university management, faculty members and instructional designers. Ashbaugh (2013) explored leadership competencies required by instructional designers. Collaborative leadership was also considered in a case study by Garrison and Vaughan (2013) of two Canadian universities, to gauge the impact of leadership on online education through the *inquiry through blended learning* (ITBL) approach (Garrison et al., 2010). Meanwhile, strategic leadership was the focus of publications by Bebbington (2021) and Rahman and Subiyantoro (2021), during the pandemic.

Leadership styles, transformational/ transactional, were used for the theoretical framing of case studies in the discussion of impact of leadership in case studies by Chang and Lee (2013) and Kahai et al. (2013). Alward and Phelps (2019) focused on perceived leadership traits and competencies required to effectively lead virtual teams in higher education. Contrary to the discourse of individual leader style and traits theories, distributed leadership

was used as the lens for research by Gallego-Arrufat et al. (2015), Holt et al. (2014), and in an essay by Fernandez and Shaw (2020). Fernandez and Shaw (2020) also indicated the relevance of servant leadership, a concept that was visited earlier by van de Bunt-Kokhuis and Sultan (2012) where the authors advocated the case for servant leadership in online learning communities.

### 3.2 Student Experience in an Online Leadership Programme

Leadership talent is a key component in the constitution of an organization's human capital (Avolio, Avey, and Quisenberry, 2010). Hence, "strategically relevant" (p 129) leadership development programmes can play a pivotal role in an organization's contingency planning and growth (McCall Jr, 2004). Technology has also facilitated access to leadership development opportunities in the form of online leadership development programmes being offered. This paper reviews 31 articles in which the student experience is the theme of the study conducted in an online leadership programme. The findings are summarized below in Table 4.

**Table 4: Summary of articles reviewed in the category of "student experience in an online leadership programme"**

| Publication                                  | Focus   | Methodology  | Study specifics      | Level of education                    | Theory/ concept  |
|--|---|--------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Krieger and Stockton (2004)</b>           | Individual ( <i>educational group leader</i> )                    | Qualitative  | Case study US        | Training programme for educators      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developmental theory</li> </ul>                                 |
| <b>McCotter (2008)</b>                       | Individual ( <i>student</i> )                                     | Quantitative | Case study US        | University                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communities of inquiry</li> <li>Intrinsic motivation</li> </ul> |
| <b>Moore (2008)</b>                          | Organization  | Qualitative  | Case study US        | University                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reel leadership</li> <li>Learning communities</li> </ul>        |
| <b>Phelps (2012)</b>                         | Individual ( <i>student</i> )                                     | -            | Essay                | College and university                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>e-Leadership</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Powell et al. (2012)</b>                  | Individual ( <i>course leads in a medical college programme</i> ) | Quantitative | Case study UK        | Higher education                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Medical leadership competency framework</li> </ul>              |
| <b>van de Bunt-Kokhuis and Sultan (2012)</b> | Individual ( <i>educational leader</i> )                          | -            | Essay                | -                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Servant leadership</li> </ul>                                   |
| <b>Haber-Curran and Tillapaugh (2013)</b>    | Individual ( <i>student</i> )                                     | Qualitative  | Case study US        | Undergraduate leadership minor course | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adaptive leadership</li> </ul>                                  |
| <b>Passarelli (2014)</b>                     | Organization  | -            | Essay                | International leadership programme    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership development</li> </ul>                               |
| <b>Mirriahi et al. (2015)</b>                | Organization  | Qualitative  | Case study Australia | Higher education                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic leadership</li> </ul>                                 |
| <b>Curtin (2016)</b>                         | Individual ( <i>student</i> )                                     | Qualitative  | Case study US        | University                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership theory (broad range)</li> </ul>                      |

| Publication                               | Focus   | Methodology  | Study specifics               | Level of education                   | Theory/ concept  |
|---|---|--------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Jenkins (2016)                            | Individual (participants of a leadership programme) | Quantitative | Case study<br>International   | Higher education                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instructional learning theory</li> </ul>            |
| Sweetman (2018)                           | Individual (participant of leadership programme)    | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US              | Post-graduate program                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transformative learning theory</li> </ul>           |
| McRay, Goertzen, and Klaus (2016)         | Individual (student)                                | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US              | Higher education                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community of inquiry framework</li> </ul>           |
| Purcell (2017)                            | Organization  | -            | Essay                         | Education sector                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community engaged pedagogies</li> </ul>             |
| Manning-Ouellette and Black (2017)        | Individual (student)                                | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US              | Higher education                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiential learning</li> </ul>                    |
| Könings et al. (2018)                     | Individual (participant of leadership course)       | Quantitative | Case study<br>The Netherlands | Professional Public Health programme | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Problem-based learning</li> </ul>                   |
| Bowden, Guignard, and Davis (2019)        | Organization  | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US              | University                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership competencies</li> </ul>                  |
| Goertzen and Squire (2019)                | Individual (student)                                | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US              | University                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Action learning</li> </ul>                          |
| Moldoveanu and Narayandas (2019)          | Organization and individual (leader)                | -            | Essay                         | Executive education                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership development</li> </ul>                   |
| Shah et al. (2019)                        | Individual (student)                                | Qualitative  | Data analysis                 | Health care professional programme   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership development</li> </ul>                   |
| Cathro (2020)                             | Individual (participant of course)                  | Qualitative  | Case study<br>International   | Professional training programme      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiential learning</li> </ul>                    |
| Curtindale, Krylova, and Minyurova (2020) | Individual (student)                                | Quantitative | Case study<br>International   |                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative learning</li> </ul>                   |
| Haber-Curran and Cooper (2020)            | Individual (student)                                | Qualitative  | Case study<br>International   | Higher education                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotionally intelligent leadership model</li> </ul> |
| Hayes and Irby (2020)                     | Individual (principal)                              | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US              | University                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instructional leadership</li> </ul>                 |

| Publication                                   | Focus   | Methodology  | Study specifics         | Level of education                           | Theory/ concept  |
|---|---|--------------|-------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Fernandez et al. (2021)</b>                | Individual<br>( <i>participant of leadership course</i> ) | Quantitative | Case study<br>US        | Healthcare professionals' leadership program | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership development</li> </ul>                                       |
| <b>Greenleaf and Goertzen (2021)</b>          | Individual<br>( <i>student</i> )                          | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US        | University                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theory of service learning</li> <li>• Collaborative learning</li> </ul> |
| <b>Vito and Schmidt Hanbidge (2021)</b>       | Individual<br>( <i>student</i> )                          | Qualitative  | Case study<br>Canada    | University                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theory of service learning</li> </ul>                                   |
| <b>Whitehall, Bletscher, and Yost (2021)</b>  | Individual<br>( <i>student</i> )                          | Quantitative | Case study              | Post-graduate leadership course              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authentic leadership</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Zhu, Shek, and Chan (2021)</b>             | Individual<br>( <i>student</i> )                          | Quantitative | Case study<br>Hong Kong | University                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service leadership model</li> </ul>                                     |
| <b>Guthrie, Batchelder, and Purita (2022)</b> | Organization  | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US        | Leadership programme for college students    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership development</li> </ul>                                       |
| <b>Klaus, Mcray, and Bourgeois (2022)</b>     | Organization  | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US        | University                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student learning outcomes</li> </ul>                                    |

Action research conducted by McCotter (2008) observed the role of intrinsic motivation and operationalized the communities of practice concept (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002), in a study of an educational leadership program. In the context of learning experience of students in online leadership classes, learning communities were discussed by Moore (2008), and by Phelps (2012) in an essay highlighting the need for the development of students' digital literacy and e-leadership skills.

Leadership development through online leadership programmes remained the focus of publications by authors in the areas of executive education (Passarelli, 2014; Moldoveanu and Narayandas, 2019), professionals in healthcare (Shah et al., 2019; Fernandez et al., 2021), students (Guthrie et al., 2022), and education leaders such as principals and instructional designers (Hayes and Irby, 2020). Haber-Curran and Cooper (2020) observed the participant outcomes of a hybrid, global leadership programme through the lens of *emotionally intelligent leadership model* (Levy Shankman, Allen, and Haber-Curran, 2015). Similarly, service-learning, as a concept, was used to guide research in studies by Greenleaf and Goertzen (2021), Vito and Schmidt Hanbidge (2021), and Zhu et al. (2021). Klaus et al. (2022) conducted a comparison between face to face, hybrid and an online leadership programme and observed student outcomes in a US university.

### 3.3 Impact of Online Education on the Leadership Development of Actors in an Online Education Setting

Lord and Hall (2005) proposed learning beyond training and emphasized the significance of leadership development at a deeper, cognitive level. In the context of youth leadership development, early developmental factors include early learning experiences such as education. In an online education setting, this experiential learning can be translated to peer-interaction, teamwork related to online learning, and the required motivational drive for academic progress (Murphy and Johnson, 2011). Whereas, in the context of the teacher and educational administrative staff leadership development through experience, prior research has emphasized the development of technology leadership, and a higher teacher morale during the technology-education integration activities of schools (Baylor and Ritchie, 2002). Below, Table 5 summarizes the articles

reviewed of the synthesis category of the impact of online education on leadership development of the actors in an online education setting.

**Table 5: Summary of the publications reviewed in the category of “impact of online education on the leadership development of actors in an online education setting”**

| Publication                        | Focus                   | Methodology  | Study specifics         | Level of education | Theory/ concept  |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|--------------------|--|
| Moore (2008)                       | Group                   | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US        | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reel leadership</li> <li>• Learning communities</li> </ul>      |
| Ellis, Polizzi, and Rushton (2017) | Individual<br>(teacher) | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US        | K-12 school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher leadership</li> </ul>                                   |
| Xie et al. (2018)                  | Individual<br>(student) | Quantitative | Case study<br>US        | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative learning</li> </ul>                               |
| Shelton and Archambault (2019)     | Individual<br>(teacher) | Qualitative  | Case study<br>US        | K-12 school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher leadership</li> </ul>                                   |
| Xie et al. (2019)                  | Individual<br>(student) | Quantitative | Case study<br>US        | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative learning</li> </ul>                               |
| Cheng et al. (2020)                | Individual<br>(student) | Quantitative | Case study<br>Taiwan    | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative learning</li> </ul>                               |
| Downing (2020)                     | Individual<br>(student) | Quantitative | Case study              | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active learning</li> <li>• Experiential learning</li> </ul>     |
| Kim, Lee, and Wang (2020)          | Individual<br>(student) | Qualitative  | Longitudinal case study | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership style: transformational and transactional</li> </ul> |

Moore (2008), in a study of American university students’ leadership development through online book discussions, emphasized the significance of ‘fostering a sense of community’ (p 34). Similarly, in an analysis of group discussions in an online collaborative learning course, Xie et al. (2018) focused on team leadership and the development of leadership skills of students. Collaborative learning is further discussed by Xie et al. (2019) and by Cheng et al. (2020) in this category. Meanwhile, Downing (2020) presented a case for facilitation of relational leadership development through active learning. Analysis of online group discussion of an online course identified students as emerging leaders (transformational or transactional) in the longitudinal study by Kim et al. (2020).

### 3.4 Perception of Leadership in an Online Education Setting

In this review, 11 articles have been identified that focus upon the perception of leadership in an online educational setting. These are presented below in Table 6.

**Table 6: Summary of articles reviewed in the category of “perception of leadership in an online education setting”**

| Publication                      | Focus | Methodology  | Study specifics      | Level of education | Concept/ theory   |
|----------------------------------|-------|--------------|----------------------|--------------------|---|
| Bogler, Caspi, and Roccas (2013) | Group | Quantitative | Case study<br>Israel | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transformational leadership</li> <li>• Passive leadership</li> </ul> |

| Publication                                 | Focus  | Methodology       | Study specifics                    | Level of education | Concept/ theory  |
|---|--|-------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|--|
| <b>Pacios and Bueno de la Fuente (2013)</b> | Group  | Mixed methodology | Case study Spain                   | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Team leadership</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Holt et al. (2014)</b>                   | Organization                                   | Qualitative       | Case study Australia               | Higher education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distributed leadership</li> </ul>   |
| <b>LaFrance and Beck (2014)</b>             | Individual ( <i>teacher</i> )                  | Qualitative       | Case study United States           | K-12 school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Modes of learning</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Gallego-Arrufat et al. (2015)</b>        | Organization and individual ( <i>teacher</i> ) | Qualitative       | Case study Spain                   | K-12 school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distributed leadership</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Holland and Piper (2016)</b>             | Individual ( <i>teacher</i> )                  | Qualitative       | Essay                              | K-12 school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching leadership</li> <li>Student leadership development</li> <li>Technology integration education (TIE)</li> <li>High trust leadership</li> </ul> |
| <b>Chua and Chua (2017)</b>                 | Organization                                   | Qualitative       | Case study US                      | K-12 school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>e-leadership</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Xie et al. (2019)</b>                    | Individual ( <i>student</i> )                  | Quantitative      | Case study US                      | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative learning</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Azukas (2022)</b>                        | Individual ( <i>principal</i> )                | Qualitative       | Case study US                      | K-12 school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Virtual leadership</li> <li>Contextual leadership</li> <li>Professional standards for educational leadership</li> </ul>                               |
| <b>Lee (2022)</b>                           | Organization                                   | Quantitative      | Multiple case studies<br>Hong Kong | K-12 school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic leadership</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Luo et al. (2022)</b>                    | Individual ( <i>student</i> )                  | Quantitative      | Case study China                   | University         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative learning</li> <li>Student leadership development</li> </ul>   |

Nworie et al. (2012) examined the leadership positions in online educational programmes in higher educational institutions to reveal that “distance education leaders are not managers who oversee specific programs but rather educational leaders” (p 196). Extending the debate towards academic leadership, Holt et al. (2014) conducted senior leadership interviews to gain insight in the perception of distributed leadership in the quality management of online learning environments in higher educational institutes.

Perceptions of instructors as leaders in an online education setting is the topic of the study by Bogler et al. (2013). Transformative and passive leadership styles were discussed, with higher student satisfaction where the

instructor's leadership style was perceived as transformational. Contrarily, perception of passive leadership correlated with lower student satisfaction. Transformational leadership was also discussed by Kim et al. (2020), in their analysis of online group discussions identifying emerging leaders exhibiting either transactional or transformational leadership.

Pacios and Bueno de la Fuente (2013) observe an online higher education program and posit that team dynamics led to participants' capacity building for teamworking and leadership. Similarly, group dynamics, self-regulation, and perceived leadership are focused upon in an online learning group in a graduate program by Xie et al. (2019).

In this category, five studies were identified that were conducted in k-12 schools. LaFrance and Beck (2014) operationalize *modes of learning theory* (Norman, 1978) in their critique of educational leadership programs for k-12 school leaders. Similarly, instructional leadership in k-12 schools, and how it is perceived by students, is the topic of research by Gallego-Arrufat et al. (2015). Lee (2022) explores inclusive education in the context of leadership in schools through a relational perspective. Whereas e-leadership is the focus of a study by Chua and Chua (2017) which employs the grounded theory method to develop an e-leadership model. Furthermore, k-12 leadership perspectives through the lens of the *professional standards for educational leadership* are observed in research by Azukas (2022).

Student leadership development was focused upon by Holland and Piper (2016), through the theoretical framing of the *technology integration education* (Holland and Piper, 2014) and by Luo et al. (2022).

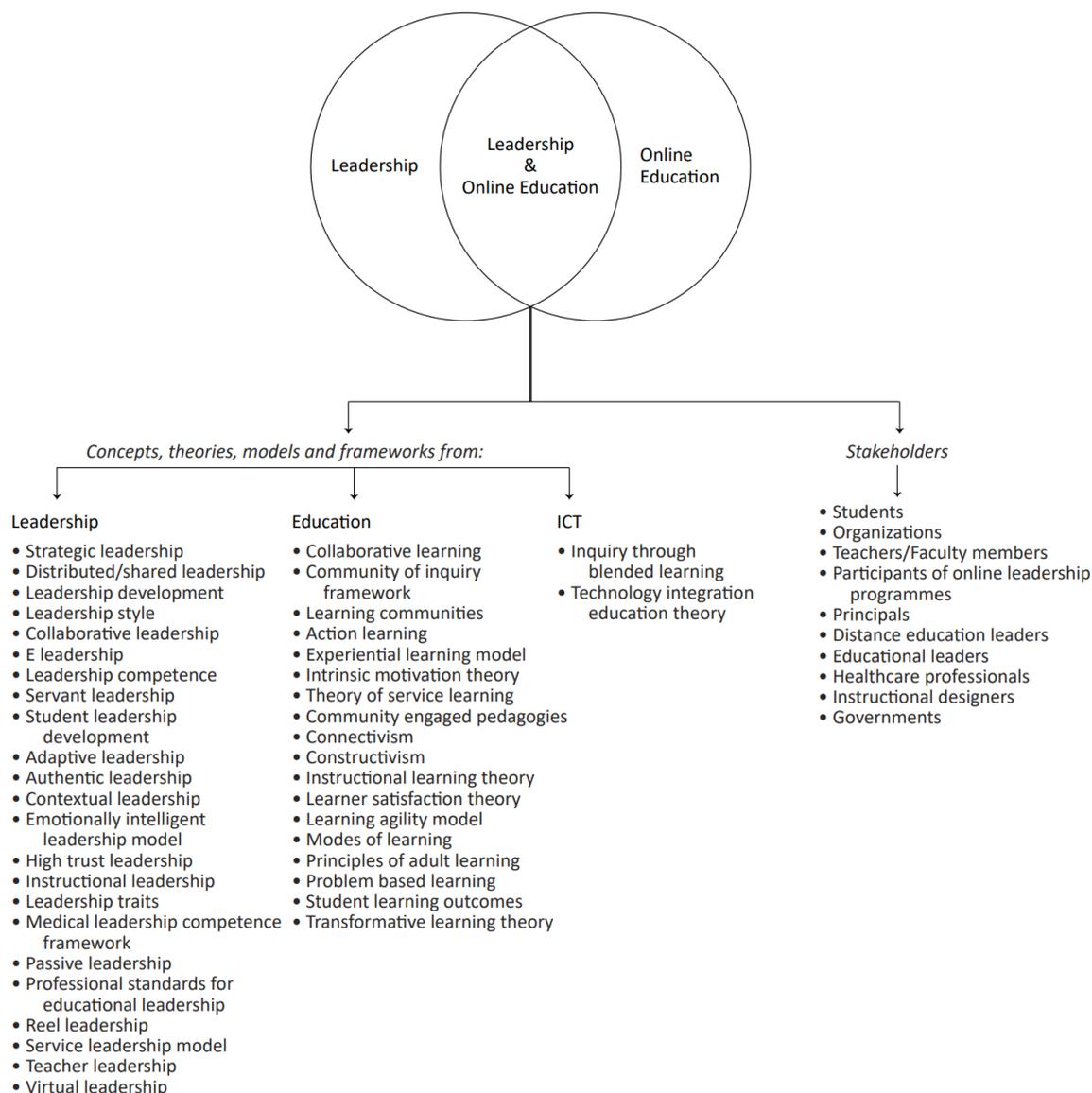
### **3.5 Stakeholders and Leaders**

This review identified various stakeholders in the existing literature in relevance to the topic domain. Distributed, shared, and collaborative leadership were predominantly discussed in most articles, hence the focus of most studies was organizational. For example, Holt et al. (2014) focused on the organization wide role of distributed leadership in universities. Therefore, several stakeholders such as academic heads, teachers, and students were mentioned. In articles focused on online leadership programmes, the primary stakeholders identified were the participants of the programmes such as students, teachers, educational leaders, and health care professionals (Fernandez et al., 2021; Hayes and Irby, 2020; McCotter, 2008). Research addressing the leadership development due to online learning and teaching focused on either group (study groups/ teams) (Moore, 2008) or individual stakeholders (students and teachers) (Ellis et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020).

While there is reasonable conceptualization of leadership in the literature, the identification of who the key leader is in an online educational setting remains limited. The role of instructional designers is acknowledged (Ashbaugh, 2013, Brigance, 2011), but only as the developers of the curriculum for online delivery. Principals, teachers, and academic leaders are mentioned in the literature as playing a pivotal part in the adoption of online education (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020; Gallego-Arrufat et al., 2015; Mirriahi et al., 2015). *However, the entity that acts as the custodian of the entire process is not revealed.* Virtual leaders (Alward and Phelps, 2019) actively lead virtual teams but it is not clear as to whether they contribute to the process through their technological expertise. Authors have gravitated towards the idea of distributed leadership in online education, yet the key question that remains: who makes the decisions regarding distribution of roles, delegation of authority, and horizontal and vertical coordination, in an online educational setting?

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Although the literature on online education has yielded important insight, further alignment of online education research with leadership research is needed. An interdisciplinary approach has been sought in analysis of the publications in this review. A subset of research area papers was identified through the coding criteria. Figure 3 encapsulates the diverse theories, models, and frameworks being operationalized across the papers selected for the review, drawing attention to the complexity of the alternative theoretical starting points for research in online education. Stakeholders and main actors have also been identified in the online educational leadership setting (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: An overview of the leadership in online education research. (The data is shared in descending order of the frequency in publications)**

Bryman (2007) identified a lack of research on evaluation of leadership effectiveness in higher education. Years later, we find this phenomenon compounded in the online education terrain. Upon reflection of the content of articles within each category, it is discovered that insufficient attention has been given to the direct impact of leadership on online education. Given the relevance of digitization of education currently (and in the future), discourse and research regarding leadership of online education is necessary. Assuming that leadership is contextual (Oc, 2018), an agenda is proposed for further research that brings together diverse streams of research to explore the role of leadership in online education adoption, implementation, and delivery in educational institutes. This research situates our understanding of online education research as an interaction point with leadership research, highlights existing themes that converge through the synthesis categories identified, and recommends further in-depth, extended research.

Additionally, this review identified the stakeholders in literature on the topic domain. Although various actors have been identified, there is limited discussion of the leaders in such a setting. For the most part, empirical research surrounding online education adoption is more process oriented with an emphasis on systems rather than people. Authors have advocated distributed leadership and shared leadership as a viable solution to the problem of successful implementation of online education (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020; Garrison and Vaughan, 2013). Yet, organisations have always existed in a state of shared leadership where tasks and functions are delegated through effective lateral and vertical coordination (Lumby, 2003). Hence, a focus should be on the

leader, who acts as the custodian of the function of online education in its state of distributed responsibilities across the organisation. Principals, academic heads, and instructional designers are discussed in few papers (Ashbaugh 2013; Azukas, 2022; Brigance, 2011; Hayes and Irby, 2020) but can these entities be called 'expert leaders' when it comes to the adoption and sustainability of online education in institutions? Nworie et al. (2012) focus upon distance education leaders, but it is an umbrella term for leadership engaged in the management of online education. Leadership for online education implementation requires technical expertise and competence (Goodall, Artz, and Oswald, 2016), experience in management of virtual teams (Kahai et al., 2017), besides the knowledge of the core function of education delivery. Individuals leading the online education function require certain skills specific to virtual environments and technology, beyond the "foundational skills traditionally associated with leadership" (Pulley et al., 2001; p. 225). These experts can work in tandem with the academic leadership of schools, colleges, and universities to successfully deliver online education. In this topic domain of leadership in online education there has been no discussion surrounding *chief information officers* or *chief digital officers* which have been known in literature for their role in digital transformation of various organisations, including educational institutes (Davison, Wong, and Peng, 2023). There is tremendous opportunity to explore through focused research on these actors in this setting. Therefore, further empirical research is recommended to observe the role of these experts in their organisations, in relevance to the success of the outcome envisioned.

In conclusion, leadership is a key topic in the online education domain that can yield important insight into how educational organisations adopt, implement, and sustain online education. However, leadership for online education is least researched upon in literature. Interdisciplinary research is proposed to expand our knowledge on how, through effective leadership, institutions navigate the challenges posed by online education. Theories extracted from diverse streams of disciplines also direct us to various stakeholders in the online education setting. As this review makes clear, there is a need to explicate leadership in these organisations to identify the integral actors engaged in the decision making, innovation and management of the online learning systems. Through relevant empirical research, further theory development is encouraged, giving due attention to the actual leaders of online education. In the world of online learning, such theory development and research can have a practical, direct impact on the quality of education.

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