

LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION PLANNING IN SELECTED INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING IN KENYA: MYTH OR REALITY?

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ABSTRACT

Leadership succession planning in institutions of higher learning is a critical but often overlooked component of organisational management. In Kenya, many universities face challenges in maintaining leadership continuity due to the absence of structured succession planning frameworks. This study sought to examine the challenges that hinder effective leadership succession planning, assess its impact on organisational stability and continuity, and propose strategies for enhancing leadership development in higher education institutions. The research was anchored on Contingency Theory, the Resource-Based View (RBV), and Institutional Theory, which together provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how succession planning influences institutional performance and governance. A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide comprehensive insights. The target population comprised university administrators, faculty members, and policymakers, with data collected through surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Findings from the study highlighted significant gaps in leadership succession planning, including inadequate leadership development programmes, weak talent retention strategies, political interference, and limited alignment between succession planning and institutional strategic goals. The study concludes that while leadership succession planning is acknowledged as essential, its implementation in Kenyan universities remains fragmented and underdeveloped. To address these shortcomings, the study proposes actionable recommendations, including the development of formalized succession planning policies, strengthened mentorship and coaching programmes, prioritization of merit-based internal promotions, and the allocation of adequate resources to leadership development. These findings not only contribute to the growing body of literature on governance in higher education but also provide practical insights for policymakers and institutional leaders seeking to ensure sustainable leadership continuity and institutional stability.

Keywords: *Leadership Succession Planning, Higher Learning*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership succession planning (LSP) has emerged as a critical variable in organizational management, particularly within institutions of higher learning. It is defined as the deliberate and systematic process of identifying, developing, and preparing future leaders to ensure stability and continuity in governance (Rothwell, 2010). In the context of universities, succession planning directly influences institutional stability, continuity, staff morale, and overall organizational performance (Atieno & Sang, 2023). Conversely, inadequate succession planning often contributes to leadership vacuums, governance crises, and the loss of institutional knowledge (Mutunga, 2017; Tunji, 2021).

Scholars emphasize that proactive succession planning not only preserves institutional memory but also fosters sustainable growth and organizational resilience (Hoque & Zheng, 2024; Rothwell, 2010). This study, therefore, examines leadership succession planning as the independent variable and its effects on organizational stability and continuity as the dependent variable, while also exploring the challenges that hinder effective succession planning and the strategies that can strengthen leadership development in Kenyan higher education institutions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Leadership succession planning is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of organisational sustainability. It refers to the deliberate and systematic effort to identify, develop, and prepare individuals to assume leadership roles as they become available (Hoque, & Zheng, 2024). In the context of higher education, where stability, continuity, and knowledge preservation are essential for maintaining academic quality and institutional reputation, succession planning plays a critical role. Yet, despite widespread acknowledgement of its importance, succession planning in many institutions remains fragmented, underdeveloped, or absent. This has led to leadership crises, policy discontinuity, and loss of institutional memory, undermining the long-term effectiveness of universities and colleges.

Globally, higher education institutions continue to grapple with challenges of leadership continuity, particularly in contexts where structured succession planning frameworks are lacking. Leadership transitions resulting from retirements, resignations, or unforeseen circumstances often disrupt governance, delay policy implementation, and erode institutional knowledge (Sipe & Frick, 2015). Such instability undermines strategic consistency and weakens the ability of universities to sustain excellence in teaching, research, and community engagement. Studies from North America and Europe reveal that institutions without structured succession planning frequently experience leadership crises that affect staff morale, diminish institutional reputation, and compromise long-term growth (Buckway, 2020; Swanson, 2018).

Conversely, higher learning institutions that have adopted systematic succession frameworks are better positioned to preserve institutional memory and maintain stability. In the United States, for example, many universities integrate mentorship programs, leadership training, and internal talent pipelines that prepare emerging leaders for administrative responsibilities (Villien, 2023). European institutions also place emphasis on structured leadership development and governance committees, which ensure smooth transitions and protect institutional integrity (Hoque & Zheng, 2024). Research from East Asia highlights additional nuances, where career paths to university leadership in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are often shaped by alumni networks and cultural norms,

yet lack formalised leadership pipelines, especially in private universities (International Perspectives on Leadership in Higher Education, 2023). Collectively, these global experiences demonstrate that while the importance of succession planning is universally acknowledged, its implementation remains inconsistent, making it a strategic imperative rather than a routine administrative concern.

Across Africa, succession planning in higher education institutions faces unique challenges, often compounded by political, economic, and institutional factors. Universities frequently experience leadership vacuums when vice-chancellors or senior administrators exit, leaving institutions destabilised due to inadequate preparation of successors. Leadership transitions are often reactive, influenced by political patronage or government intervention, rather than driven by merit and structured leadership pipelines (Atieno & Sang, 2023). This has weakened institutional autonomy, slowed policy reforms, and created uncertainty for staff and students. In environments already constrained by limited resources, rising enrolments, and global competition, the absence of systematic succession planning further threatens stability and performance.

In South Africa, for instance, faculties within Health Sciences lack clear succession pathways, leaving Heads of Department ill-prepared for leadership responsibilities and creating governance inefficiencies (Ngcamu et al., 2020). In Nigeria, tertiary institutions with structured succession practices such as transparent performance management and talent retention strategies were found to have significantly higher organisational effectiveness compared to those without (Okolocha & Anugwu, 2022). Similarly, Ugandan universities continue to suffer from leadership gaps due to the absence of mentorship structures and weak leadership pipelines, which often lead to prolonged administrative disputes. These findings highlight that across Africa, succession planning is either absent or inconsistently implemented, undermining the ability of universities to deliver on their core mandates of teaching, research, and community service. Strengthening succession planning is therefore both a managerial and strategic necessity for African higher education institutions to achieve global competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

In Kenya, institutions of higher learning are experiencing increasing leadership turnover due to retirements, attrition, and restructuring, yet succession planning remains underdeveloped. Leadership transitions are frequently handled on an ad hoc basis, with interim appointments filling immediate gaps rather than through systematic preparation of internal successors (Kinya, 2020). This reactive approach weakens organisational continuity, disrupts implementation of strategic plans, and diminishes confidence among staff, students, and stakeholders. As Kenyan universities expand enrolments, enhance research agendas, and seek global visibility, the absence of structured succession planning creates vulnerabilities that threaten long-term institutional resilience.

Available studies in Kenya illustrate both progress and persistent gaps. At Bukura Agricultural College, succession planning practices such as internal recruitment, staff training, and talent management were found to positively influence employee performance, though their application was inconsistent (Munai, 2024). Similarly, at the Kenya Civil Aviation Authority, succession planning elements such as developmental programs and performance evaluations enhanced employee motivation, yet these practices were limited in scope and lacked institutionalisation (Owino, 2023). Even in student-led organisations like AIESEC Kenya, succession planning is practised through talent pipelines and structured inductions, but such examples remain isolated and are not widely adopted across the sector (Ngugi, 2014). These findings underscore that while the value of succession planning is recognised in Kenya, its implementation in higher education

institutions remains fragmented, largely informal, and insufficiently integrated into strategic governance.

From the global, regional, and local evidence, a clear problem emerges: while leadership succession planning is widely acknowledged as critical to institutional continuity, it remains a myth rather than a reality in many contexts. Globally, best practices demonstrate the benefits of structured frameworks, but adoption is inconsistent. Across Africa, political interference, weak leadership pipelines, and lack of mentorship structures hinder progress. Locally, Kenyan institutions have recognised the importance of succession planning but continue to rely on reactive, ad hoc approaches that undermine stability. These gaps highlight the urgent need for a systematic, multidisciplinary approach to leadership succession planning in Kenyan higher education. Addressing these challenges will not only strengthen institutional continuity and performance but also contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable leadership in higher learning worldwide.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research was to shed light on the concept of leadership succession planning in Kenyan higher learning institutions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Examine the challenges faced by institutions of higher learning in leadership succession planning.
2. Determine the effect of succession planning on the continuity and stability of higher learning institutions.
3. Propose strategies to be used by institutions of higher learning in ensuring leadership development.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The study was anchored on Contingency theory and supported by Institutional Theory and Resource-Based View Theory (RBV)

Contingency Theory

Contingency theory originated in the 1960s as an important paradigm in organisational theory and management research. It was created by a group of scholars, most notably Fred Fiedler, whose work on leadership effectiveness provided the framework for this idea. Fiedler's Contingency Model proposed that a leader's effectiveness is determined by the match between the leader's style and the specific situational context (Fiedler, 1967). This was a shift from the previous "one best way" approach, implying that different situations need different leadership styles and organisational procedures.

According to contingency theory, the effectiveness of organisational techniques such as leadership and succession planning is determined by the specific situation in which they are applied. According to this notion, there is no single answer or best practice that applies to all organisations or situations. Strategies must be adjusted to each organization's specific environmental, structural, and cultural conditions (Park, 2020). Adaptability is essential for attaining the best results in a variety of situations.

Several scholars have built on Fiedler's original work, emphasising the complex aspect of contingency theory. According to Morton and Hu (2008), technology, environment, size, and strategy all have an impact on the efficacy of organisational structures and practices. Machuki (2011) emphasised the need for matching organisational practices with the external environment, suggesting that organisations must differentiate and integrate their structures to suit the demands of their respective settings.

Contingency theory can provide significant insights into succession planning, especially for higher education organisations (Keerio et al., 2022). Effective succession planning in these institutions entails preparing for leadership changes by identifying and nurturing potential leaders within the organisation. The contingency method recommends that these plans be context-specific, taking into consideration the local environment's particular difficulties and opportunities.

Applying contingency theory to the setting of Kenyan higher education institutions, good succession planning must take into account a variety of local conditions. These may include the unique organisational culture, dominant leadership styles, and the external environment in which the institutions function. For example, institutions must fit their succession plans with Kenyan society's cultural norms and values, which may emphasise community involvement, hierarchy respect, and communal decision-making. Additionally, the leadership style prevalent in Kenyan higher education, which might lean towards more relational and collaborative approaches, should be considered when developing succession plans. External environmental factors, such as governmental policies, economic conditions, and societal expectations, also play a crucial role in shaping effective succession strategies (Bozer, Levin & Santora, 2017); (Chung & Luo, 2013).

Contingency theory makes succession planning more relevant and effective by customising it to the specific demands and constraints of Kenyan higher education institutions. This method enables organisations to tailor their strategies to meet local obstacles such as limited resources, political instability, or cultural differences, increasing the possibility of effective leadership transitions (Chung & Luo, 2013). Contingency theory provides a solid foundation for understanding the intricacies of organisational activities, such as succession planning. Its emphasis on how contextual adaptation makes it especially valuable for Kenya's higher education institutions, where a variety of dynamic elements influence organisational success. Institutions can build more relevant and effective succession plans by taking into account the particular environmental, structural, and cultural variables, resulting in smooth and successful leadership transfers (Keerio et al., 2022).

For this study, Contingency Theory is particularly relevant to Objective 1 (examining challenges) and Objective 2 (determining the effect of succession planning on stability and continuity). It underscores the importance of tailoring succession strategies to the distinct institutional environments of Kenyan universities. By doing so, institutions can enhance the likelihood of smooth leadership transitions, reduce governance crises, and strengthen long-term organizational stability.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory emerged as a prominent framework in organisational studies during the late 20th century. It primarily draws on the works of sociologists and organisational theorists such as John Meyer and Brian Rowan, who emphasized the role of formal structures and institutional environments in shaping organisational behaviour (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Another key contributor, Paul DiMaggio, along with Walter Powell, further developed the concept by

introducing the idea of institutional isomorphism, which describes the process by which organisations become similar over time due to external pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Institutional theory focuses on the influence of institutional norms, values, and regulations on organisational practices. It posits that organisations are not only technical systems designed for efficiency but also social systems influenced by the broader institutional environment in which they operate. This environment includes formal regulations, cultural norms, societal expectations, and accreditation requirements (Santos, 2021). Organisations adapt their structures and practices to gain legitimacy, conform to societal expectations, and ensure survival within their institutional contexts.

The theory suggests that organisational practices, including succession planning, are shaped by these external pressures. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that organisations adopt formal structures and practices to appear legitimate and align with institutionalised norms and values, even if these structures do not directly contribute to technical efficiency. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) highlighted three mechanisms of institutional isomorphism: coercive (pressure from regulations and laws), mimetic (imitation of successful organisations), and normative (influence from professional standards and education).

Institutional theory provides a valuable lens for understanding succession planning in higher learning institutions. Succession planning involves preparing for leadership transitions by identifying and developing potential leaders within the organisation. According to institutional theory, these practices are heavily influenced by external institutional pressures.

In higher learning institutions, succession planning is often shaped by accreditation requirements, societal expectations, and regulatory frameworks. Accreditation bodies may set standards for leadership qualifications and succession planning processes, compelling institutions to adopt specific practices to maintain their accreditation status. Societal expectations, such as the demand for diversity and inclusion in leadership roles, also play a crucial role in shaping succession strategies. Additionally, regulatory frameworks, including government policies and educational regulations, influence how institutions design and implement their succession plans (Viennet & Pont, 2017).

Applying institutional theory to Kenyan higher education institutions indicates the enormous influence of external forces on succession planning. Accreditation criteria from agencies such as Kenya's Commission for University Education (CUE) dictate specific standards for leadership and governance, which influences how institutions plan for leadership transitions (Commission for University Education, 2019; Wangai, 2022). Societal expectations in Kenya, such as the emphasis on community involvement and representation, also influence succession procedures, urging institutions to prioritise diverse and inclusive leadership development (Ruben et al., 2023; Oanda, Chege, & Wesonga, 2009).

Regulatory frameworks, such as national education policies and governmental directives, also play a critical role. These regulations may specify criteria for leadership appointments and succession planning processes, ensuring that institutions comply with national standards and expectations. By aligning their practices with these external pressures, Kenyan higher learning institutions can gain legitimacy, enhance their reputation, and ensure their long-term sustainability (Wangai, 2022; Ruben et al., 2023).

Institutional theory underscores the importance of aligning succession planning with external institutional pressures. By doing so, higher learning institutions can ensure that their practices are relevant, legitimate, and effective. This approach allows institutions to respond to societal demands, regulatory requirements, and accreditation standards, thereby enhancing their ability to successfully manage leadership transitions and maintain their institutional integrity (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017).

Institutional theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how external factors influence organisational practices, including succession planning (Struckell et al., 2022). In Kenyan higher education institutions, this idea emphasises the need to connect succession plans with accreditation standards, public expectations, and regulatory frameworks. Institutions that adapt their procedures to these external demands can assure legitimacy, relevance, and efficacy in their succession planning processes, allowing for seamless and successful leadership transfers.

For this study, Institutional Theory is most relevant to Objective 2 (determining the effect of succession planning on continuity and stability) and Objective 3 (proposing strategies). It provides a lens to understand how external pressures from regulatory frameworks, accreditation standards, and societal norms both constrain and enable effective succession planning. By aligning succession practices with these institutional demands, universities can strengthen legitimacy, ensure compliance, and secure smoother leadership transitions.

Resource-Based View Theory (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm is a strategic management framework that emphasizes the role of internal resources in achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. It was popularized by Jay Barney, who argued that a firm's unique resources and capabilities are the primary determinants of its competitive position (Barney, 1991). This perspective marked a significant shift from industry-based theories, which focused on external market conditions as the main sources of advantage.

RBV posits that organizations achieve long-term success by developing and leveraging internal resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). These resources include tangible assets such as financial capital and infrastructure, as well as intangible resources such as skills, knowledge, organizational culture, and leadership capacity (Wernerfelt, 1984; Santos, 2021). Amit and Schoemaker (1993) expanded the RBV by highlighting capabilities—the bundles of knowledge and routines that allow organizations to coordinate resources effectively.

The theory has been widely applied in management and organizational studies, with particular attention to human capital as a strategic resource. When human capital meets the VRIN criteria, it provides a competitive edge that is difficult for competitors to replicate (Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr, & Ketchen, 2011). In higher education institutions, leadership talent and intellectual capital represent core intangible resources that drive institutional reputation, performance, and sustainability (Bryson, 2018).

Applied to succession planning, RBV underscores the importance of developing internal leadership pipelines. By systematically identifying, nurturing, and retaining talented individuals, institutions can ensure smooth leadership transitions and preserve institutional knowledge. Effective succession planning thus becomes a means of securing continuity while safeguarding long-term competitiveness (Collis & Montgomery, 2008).

For Kenyan higher education institutions, RBV emphasizes the importance of prioritizing human capital development as a succession strategy. Universities can achieve this by investing in structured leadership development programs, mentorship initiatives, and professional growth opportunities (Muriithi, 2020). Creating clear career progression pathways for academic and administrative staff helps build a pool of leaders who are prepared to assume critical roles when transitions occur. Furthermore, fostering a culture of continuous learning and innovation strengthens adaptability to external changes, including policy shifts, technological disruption, and evolving societal demands (Kinyanjui, 2021).

By leveraging their unique internal resources, Kenyan universities can establish resilient and adaptable leadership pipelines. This involves identifying high-potential staff early, offering training opportunities, and aligning succession planning with institutional goals. Such an approach not only ensures stability during leadership changes but also enhances organizational resilience, allowing institutions to maintain legitimacy and competitiveness in a dynamic environment.

In this study, RBV directly informs Objective 1 (examining challenges) by explaining the risks of underutilizing internal talent, and Objective 3 (proposing strategies) by emphasizing the strategic value of investing in leadership development. By applying RBV, Kenyan higher education institutions can strengthen their human capital, secure leadership continuity, and build a sustainable competitive advantage.

The use of multiple theoretical perspectives, Contingency Theory, Institutional Theory, and the Resource-Based View (RBV), is justified in this study because leadership succession planning in higher learning institutions is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical lens. Each of these frameworks highlights a different yet complementary dimension of organisational life, and when combined, they provide a more holistic understanding of the dynamics influencing succession planning. Together, these theories provide a synergistic framework: Contingency Theory ensures succession planning is context-sensitive; Institutional Theory ensures succession planning aligns with external legitimacy requirements. RBV ensures succession planning leverages internal talent for long-term sustainability.

By integrating these perspectives, the study acknowledges that effective succession planning in Kenyan higher education institutions is not solely dependent on either context, external pressure, or internal resources, but rather on the interplay among all three. This integrated approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of both the challenges and opportunities in leadership succession planning. It provides a strong theoretical foundation for developing practical recommendations tailored to Kenya's higher education sector.

GENERAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Succession Planning

Leadership succession planning is a deliberate and systematic process designed to identify, develop, and prepare individuals to assume key leadership roles within an organisation. It ensures continuity of leadership, protects institutional knowledge, and maintains organisational stability (Addison, 2020). Effective succession planning requires aligning leadership development with strategic objectives, establishing talent pipelines, and addressing both current and future organisational needs (Siambi, 2022).

In higher education, succession planning is particularly critical due to the cyclical nature of academic leadership, often shaped by retirements, fixed-term contracts, and career mobility

(Atieno & Sang, 2023). The absence of structured plans in many institutions frequently leads to leadership disruptions, loss of institutional memory, and weakened governance structures. Conversely, role-model institutions worldwide demonstrate that succession planning, when deliberately implemented, strengthens resilience, stability, and long-term performance.

Globally, institutions such as Harvard University and the University of Oxford have established structured leadership development frameworks that include mentorship programmes, administrative training, and leadership rotations. These initiatives ensure that senior leadership transitions are seamless and grounded in the institutions' core values and strategic vision (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). In North America, studies show that universities with formalized succession frameworks are better equipped to maintain institutional reputation, safeguard research continuity, and enhance staff morale (Hoque & Zheng, 2024). Similarly, in Australia, the University of Melbourne has invested in leadership academies and internal talent pipelines that prepare mid-career academics for future administrative roles, thus reducing leadership vacuums (Scott et al., 2008).

Regionally, in sub-Saharan Africa, the problem of weak or absent succession frameworks is more pronounced. Many universities are heavily dependent on external appointments or ad hoc arrangements when senior administrators exit, which often disrupts institutional operations (Omae et al., 2024). However, the University of Cape Town in South Africa provides a positive case where structured leadership transition policies—backed by performance management and leadership development initiatives—have sustained its global ranking despite leadership turnover (Van Zyl, 2016). Similarly, the University of Ghana has introduced faculty development and mentorship programmes aimed at grooming internal candidates for leadership, although challenges remain in ensuring inclusivity and gender equity (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014).

In Kenya, succession planning in higher learning institutions remains inconsistent, with leadership transitions frequently marred by political interference, governance disputes, and lack of clear succession policies (Odhiambo et al., 2014). While some universities, such as the University of Nairobi and Strathmore University, have begun exploring leadership training and mentorship as part of strategic management, these initiatives remain fragmented and inadequately institutionalized (Tunji, 2021). Consequently, institutions risk operational disruptions and the erosion of institutional memory when experienced leaders exit without well-prepared successors.

The comparative global evidence demonstrates that higher education institutions with robust succession planning mechanisms not only achieve leadership continuity but also foster innovation, staff retention, and governance stability. The contrast with many African and Kenyan universities underscores the urgent need to design context-specific succession planning frameworks that address the realities of resource limitations, governance challenges, and cultural dynamics.

Challenges of Succession Planning

Succession planning has increasingly been recognized as a strategic tool for ensuring leadership continuity, but institutions across the globe face persistent challenges in implementing it effectively.

Globally, higher learning institutions often lack structured systems for leadership continuity. Swanson (2018) notes that in many universities in North America and Europe, leadership succession is treated as an administrative event rather than a strategic priority, leaving institutions vulnerable to governance disruptions. For instance, leadership transitions at Harvard University

and Oxford University have sometimes been criticized as personality-driven rather than grounded in structured succession planning (Bolden, Gosling, & O'Brien, 2014). Additionally, Santora, Sarros, and Cooper (2011) highlight resistance to change, insufficient mentoring programs, and overreliance on external recruitment as common barriers to establishing effective leadership pipelines.

In Africa, succession planning challenges are often compounded by systemic governance weaknesses and resource constraints. Ngcamu, Mutambara, and Msweli (2020) observed that political interference and inadequate funding undermine succession practices in several African universities. For example, Makerere University in Uganda has experienced leadership disputes and governance breakdowns due to a lack of transparent succession structures (Mushemeza, 2019). Similarly, Mokgatle and Lethoko (2019) found that South African universities such as the University of Cape Town and the University of the Free State encountered instability during leadership transitions because of unclear policies, poor mentorship, and internal divisions. These studies highlight that institutional and environmental pressures make succession planning fragile in African higher education.

In Kenya, succession planning remains largely informal and inconsistent, with several universities facing leadership crises. Oanda, Chege, and Wesonga (2009) emphasized that politicized appointments undermine institutional autonomy and stability in public universities. More recently, Wangai (2022) confirmed that most Kenyan universities lack formalized succession planning frameworks, instead relying on interim or temporary appointments that disrupt continuity. High-profile examples include leadership transitions at the University of Nairobi and Moi University, which were marred by delays, government interference, and contested appointments (Daily Nation, 2021). Egerton University and Kenyatta University have also faced instability, attributed to weak succession pipelines and inadequate mentorship structures (Munai, 2024).

Overall, the literature shows that succession planning challenges are both organizational (weak mentorship, poor policy frameworks, lack of training) and contextual (political interference, financial constraints, governance weaknesses). For Kenyan higher education institutions such as the University of Nairobi, Moi University, Egerton University, and Kenyatta University, these challenges underscore the urgent need for structured, transparent, and context-sensitive succession planning frameworks. This directly links to the study's first objective: to examine the challenges faced by institutions of higher learning in implementing leadership succession planning in Kenya.

Effect of Succession Planning on Continuity and Stability

Succession planning is widely regarded as a key determinant of institutional continuity, stability, and long-term effectiveness. By preparing future leaders and ensuring smooth transitions, institutions are able to safeguard their strategic goals, maintain stakeholder trust, and avoid governance crises.

Globally, succession planning has been linked to institutional resilience and legitimacy. Bolden, Gosling, and O'Brien (2014) found that universities in the United Kingdom with structured leadership pipelines such as Cambridge University and University College London, experienced smoother transitions, allowing them to maintain academic excellence and global rankings. Ruben, Gigliotti, and Goldthwaite (2023) also argue that well-prepared succession strategies enhance stakeholder confidence by signaling organizational preparedness and continuity. Conversely, institutions that neglect succession planning often face reputational risks; for example, Swanson

(2018) notes that sudden leadership exits in some U.S. universities disrupted policy implementation and strategic initiatives.

In Africa, the role of succession planning in stability is equally evident. Okolocha and Anugwu (2022) reported that Nigerian universities with succession systems in place managed leadership transitions without disruption to academic calendars or institutional operations, while those without such systems faced prolonged administrative paralysis. At Makerere University in Uganda, Mushemeza (2019) noted that succession planning gaps contributed to recurring leadership disputes, undermining governance and staff morale. In contrast, the University of Cape Town in South Africa demonstrated that deliberate leadership grooming and inclusive succession processes promoted smooth transitions, reinforcing institutional legitimacy (Mokgatle & Lethoko, 2019).

In Kenya, succession planning has had a direct impact on university stability and continuity, though outcomes vary significantly. At Strathmore University, a private institution, leadership development and mentorship programmes have supported stable transitions, allowing the university to retain its reputation for strong governance and academic performance (Kinya, 2020). In contrast, public universities have frequently faced leadership crises linked to poor or absent succession mechanisms. The University of Nairobi experienced a prolonged governance stalemate in 2021 following contested appointments of the Vice-Chancellor, which disrupted policy implementation and institutional stability (Daily Nation, 2021). Similarly, Moi University has repeatedly struggled with interim leadership and political interference, which undermined continuity in academic reforms (Wangai, 2022). At Egerton University, weak succession systems and inadequate talent development have been linked to declining staff morale and performance (Munai, 2024).

Taken together, these cases highlight that succession planning has a profound influence on the stability of higher education institutions. Where succession systems are structured, transparent, and inclusive, institutions maintain continuity, safeguard legitimacy, and achieve smooth leadership transitions. Where such systems are absent or undermined by politics, resource constraints, or weak governance, universities face instability, stakeholder mistrust, and stalled reforms. This reinforces the study's second objective: to evaluate the effect of succession planning on the continuity and stability of higher learning institutions in Kenya.

Strategies for Strengthening Succession Planning and Leadership Development

Given the persistent challenges associated with leadership transitions, scholars and practitioners have recommended a range of strategies to enhance succession planning and leadership development. These strategies focus on institutionalizing leadership pipelines, aligning succession with strategic goals, and creating inclusive systems that reflect the cultural and governance realities of higher education institutions.

Globally, succession planning is most effective when embedded into long-term institutional strategy. Rothwell (2010) emphasizes the need for systematic leadership development, including mentorship, job rotation, and formal leadership training programs, to prepare successors across all levels of management. Collis and Montgomery (2008) further argue that linking succession planning with strategic vision ensures that institutions maintain competitiveness and continuity. Universities such as Stanford and Cambridge have implemented structured mentorship programs and leadership development academies that have helped prepare internal candidates for senior roles (Bolden et al., 2014).

In Africa, strategies for strengthening succession planning often focus on addressing governance and systemic weaknesses. Viennet and Pont (2017) emphasize the role of accreditation frameworks and governance reforms in enhancing legitimacy and institutional stability. For example, the University of Cape Town introduced leadership fellowship programmes to build internal capacity and ensure smooth transitions (Mokgatle & Lethoko, 2019). Similarly, Makerere University in Uganda has sought to institutionalize mentorship and leadership training, although political interference still undermines its effectiveness (Mushemeza, 2019). Ngcamu, Mutambara, and Msweli (2020) recommend structured mentorship, faculty development programs, and professional training as key strategies for addressing succession gaps in African universities.

In Kenya, scholars emphasize the need for a cultural and structural shift to strengthen succession planning in higher education. Muriithi (2020) argues that universities should integrate leadership development into human resource policy by establishing mentorship frameworks and leadership training academies. Kinyanjui (2021) highlights the importance of aligning succession planning with the Commission for University Education (CUE) standards, ensuring transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in leadership appointments. Strathmore University offers a positive example, where structured leadership development programmes and mentorship initiatives have facilitated smoother leadership transitions and enhanced institutional stability (Kinya, 2020). Conversely, public universities such as the University of Nairobi and Moi University have been urged to adopt transparent appointment procedures, systematic talent identification, and career development pathways to avoid leadership vacuums and politicized appointments (Wangai, 2022; Daily Nation, 2021).

The literature demonstrates that strengthening succession planning requires a combination of internal capacity building and external governance reforms. For Kenyan universities, strategies such as mentorship, transparent governance frameworks, and alignment with CUE standards are especially critical in ensuring smooth transitions, institutional legitimacy, and long-term stability. This aligns directly with the study's third objective: to recommend strategies for strengthening leadership succession planning in higher learning institutions in Kenya.

Empirical Literature Review

The empirical literature on succession planning provides evidence-based insights into how institutions across different contexts approach leadership continuity, the challenges they encounter, and the effects of succession practices on organisational performance and stability. This section synthesizes findings from studies conducted in religious, educational, and nonprofit institutions, aligning them with the objectives of this study.

Challenges of Succession Planning

Several empirical studies confirm that succession planning faces organisational, structural, and contextual barriers. Omae, Oginde, and Njoroge (2024) examined succession in Evangelical churches in Nairobi and found that while mentoring was the most widely used model, it was often implemented in isolation, limiting its overall effectiveness. Similarly, Hassan (2022) studied succession management practices among technical education officers in Nairobi and reported significant challenges, including inadequate leadership training, lack of clear frameworks, and poor alignment between talent development and performance.

In higher education, Kiboily and Wosyanju (2022) highlighted that Kenyan universities suffer from systemic challenges such as corruption, ethnic biases, unplanned growth, and political interference,

all of which weaken governance structures and succession planning processes. Regionally, Mokgatle and Lethoko (2019) found that South African universities without structured succession systems experienced frequent disputes and stalled reforms, while Ngcamu, Mutambara, and Msweli (2020) identified resource limitations and governance weaknesses as major constraints in African higher education. Collectively, these studies indicate that succession planning challenges are both internal (weak mentorship, lack of training) and external (political interference, systemic governance weaknesses).

Effect of Succession Planning on Continuity and Stability

Empirical research consistently links effective succession planning with institutional stability and performance. Hassan (2022) reported a significant positive relationship between succession planning practices and employee job performance in Kenya's technical education sector, though he noted that talent development alone did not guarantee improved performance. Omae et al. (2024) demonstrated that mentoring and other succession models contributed significantly (18%) to church stability, suggesting that succession planning can be a stabilizing factor when implemented holistically.

Globally, Hoque and Zheng (2024) conducted a systematic review of succession planning in higher education and found that institutions with deliberate succession strategies experienced smoother leadership transitions, better institutional resilience, and higher competitiveness in the global education market. In Kenya, Kinya (2020) reported that Strathmore University's investment in mentorship and leadership development programs enhanced continuity and minimized governance disruptions. Conversely, leadership transitions at the University of Nairobi and Moi University were marred by contested appointments and political interference, undermining stability and weakening stakeholder trust (Daily Nation, 2021; Wangai, 2022). These findings confirm that succession planning, when effectively implemented, fosters stability, while its absence contributes to organizational crises.

Strategies for Strengthening Succession Planning

Empirical studies also provide recommendations on strategies for improving succession planning and leadership development. Ahmad, Ming, and Sapry (2020), in a study at University A, found that applying Rothwell's seven-pointed model provided a systematic framework for identifying key positions and preparing successors, though the study noted a lack of coverage for middle and lower management levels. Odhiambo, Njanja, and Zakayo (2014) showed that effective succession planning enhanced internal business processes and organizational growth among NGOs in Kenya, but did not significantly impact stakeholder expectations, suggesting that strategies must balance both internal and external needs.

In the Kenyan higher education context, Wangai (2022) emphasized the importance of aligning succession planning with Commission for University Education (CUE) standards to ensure transparency and accountability. Muriithi (2020) recommended embedding leadership development programs and mentorship initiatives into university governance structures to cultivate a strong pipeline of future leaders. Internationally, Hoque and Zheng (2024) highlighted the need for inclusive succession frameworks that address gender disparities and talent scarcity, while Viennet and Pont (2017) underscored the role of accreditation and governance reforms in strengthening succession practices.

Empirical studies show that while succession planning is widely acknowledged as essential for ensuring continuity and stability, it remains a persistent challenge across religious, educational, and nonprofit institutions due to barriers such as political interference, resource constraints, and weak institutional frameworks. When implemented effectively, succession planning enhances organizational performance and resilience, but its success depends on holistic strategies that integrate mentorship, leadership training, transparent policies, and alignment with governance and accreditation standards. However, research focusing specifically on Kenyan public universities is limited, with existing studies offering fragmented insights that fail to capture the full influence of politicization, cultural dynamics, and governance weaknesses. This gap highlights the importance of the present study, which seeks to provide context-specific evidence on the challenges, effects, and strategies of succession planning in Kenyan higher learning institutions.

Summary of Knowledge Gap

The reviewed literature highlights significant scholarly contributions to the study of leadership succession planning across various sectors. Both theoretical and empirical evidence confirm that succession planning is vital for ensuring leadership continuity, institutional stability, and long-term sustainability. However, several gaps emerge from the general and empirical literature, which this study seeks to address.

First, most global studies on succession planning focus on developed contexts in Europe and North America (Santora, Sarros, & Cooper, 2011; Swanson, 2018; Bolden, Gosling, & O'Brien, 2014). While these studies provide useful insights, they emphasize challenges such as resistance to change, inadequate mentorship, and reliance on external recruitment in resource-rich environments. Their applicability to the Kenyan higher education context is limited, given the distinct governance structures, cultural expectations, and resource constraints in developing countries. This leaves a gap in context-specific knowledge on succession planning in African and, particularly Kenyan universities.

Second, regional studies within Africa (Mushemeza, 2019; Mokgatle & Lethoko, 2019; Ngcamu, Mutambara, & Msweli, 2020) highlight challenges such as political interference, resource shortages, and fragile governance systems. While these studies shed light on systemic constraints, they provide limited empirical evidence on the specific strategies higher education institutions can adopt to overcome these barriers. This creates a gap in practical, evidence-based recommendations tailored to African higher education institutions.

Third, in Kenya, existing research has largely concentrated on succession planning in religious institutions (Omae, Oginde, & Njoroge, 2024), NGOs (Odhiambo, Njanja, & Zakayo, 2014), and selected professional sectors such as technical education (Hassan, 2022). Although these studies confirm the relevance of succession planning for organizational performance and stability, their findings cannot be fully generalized to universities due to the unique governance, cultural, and political dynamics in higher education. Studies specifically targeting public universities remain limited, fragmented, and outdated.

Fourth, while some empirical work (e.g., Wangai, 2022; Kiboij & Wosyanju, 2022) has begun to explore governance and leadership issues in Kenyan universities, the focus has often been on broad governance reforms rather than systematic succession planning frameworks. Consequently, little is known about how succession planning practices or the lack thereof directly influence continuity, stability, and staff morale in Kenyan higher learning institutions.

Finally, both the general and empirical literature agree that strategies such as mentorship, leadership training, and alignment with accreditation standards are critical for strengthening succession planning (Rothwell, 2010; Viennet & Pont, 2017; Hoque & Zheng, 2024). However, the extent to which Kenyan universities have institutionalized these strategies, and the contextual barriers they face in doing so, remain underexplored. This gap makes it difficult for policymakers, regulators, and university administrators to design evidence-based, context-sensitive succession frameworks.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study seeks to illustrate the relationships between the key variables: independent variables (challenges in leadership succession planning and leadership development strategies), dependent variables (organisational stability and organisational continuity), and mediating/moderating variables (organisational context and external environment). This framework will provide a structured approach to understanding how effective leadership succession planning can ensure stability and continuity in higher learning institutions.

Conceptual Framework Diagram

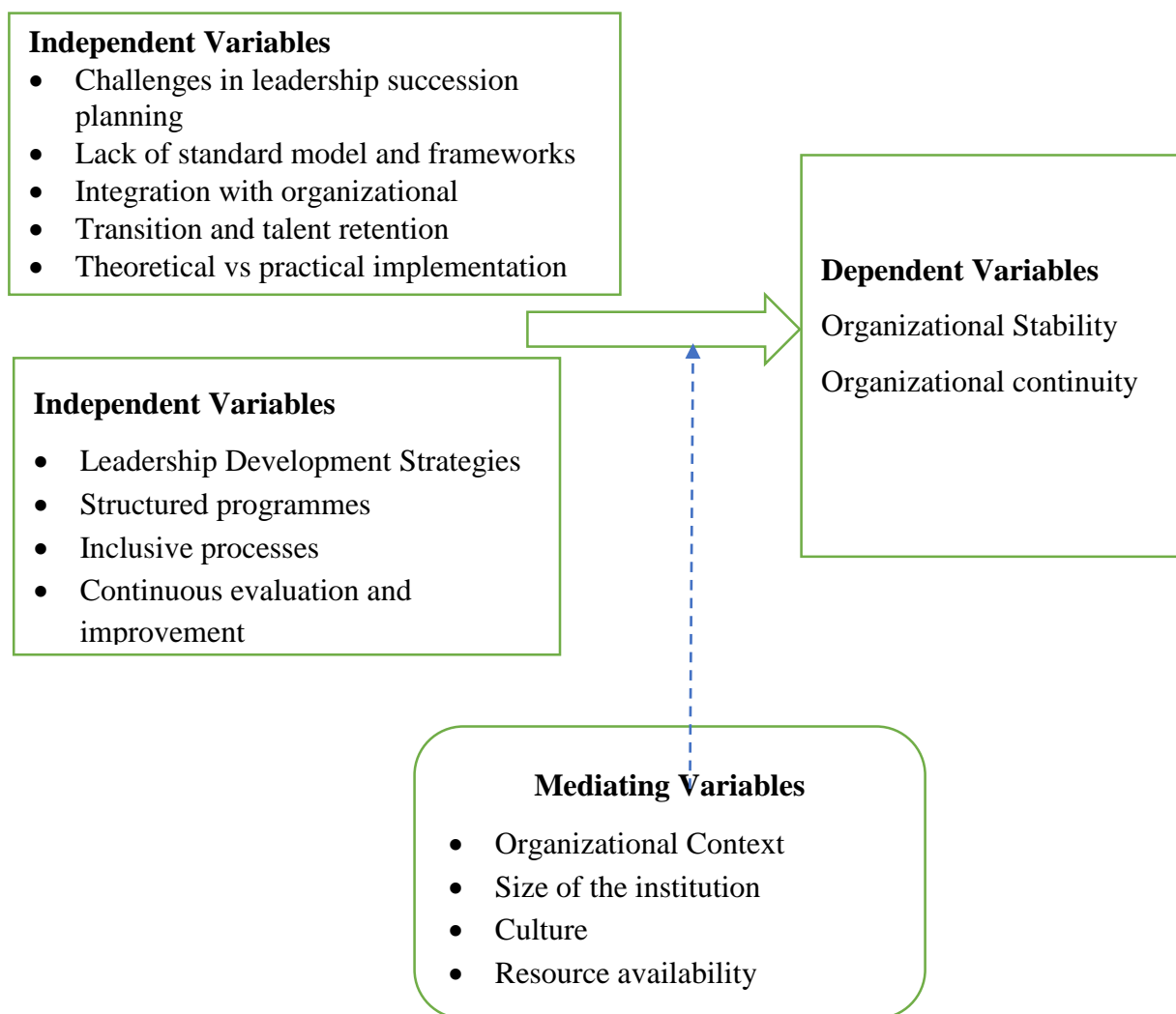


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was grounded in pragmatism, a paradigm that emphasizes problem-solving, flexibility, and the production of contextually relevant knowledge (Ayiro, 2023). Unlike paradigms confined to either positivist or interpretivist traditions, pragmatism integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches, making it well-suited for addressing complex real-world challenges. In this research, pragmatism enabled examination of both measurable outcomes and lived experiences, ensuring findings were actionable and policy-relevant (Creswell, 2013; Ayiro, 2023). The paradigm's compatibility with mixed methods further justified its selection. Quantitative data revealed measurable trends in succession planning, while qualitative data provided nuanced insights into stakeholder experiences. This integration produced a comprehensive understanding of leadership succession in Kenyan universities, capturing both systemic and human dimensions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009; Ayiro, 2023).

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. The quantitative phase used structured questionnaires to test hypotheses and examine relationships between succession planning and institutional stability, analysed through descriptive statistics (Dubey & Kothari, 2022). The qualitative phase comprised semi-structured interviews to capture stakeholders' experiences, challenges, and perceptions (Ayiro, 2021). The integration of both strands ensured breadth, depth, and practical applicability of findings (Creswell, 2013).

The study targeted universities in Nairobi County, purposively selecting six (three private and three public) from the 20 institutions in the region. The estimated target population was 5,200, comprising administrators (1,200), academic staff (3,500), and policymakers (500). Stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportional representation across subgroups (Singh & Masuku, 2013). Guided by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, the final sample comprised 180 respondents, with 30 drawn from each university across three strata: administrators, academic staff, and other stakeholders.

Primary data were obtained using structured questionnaires for quantitative measures and semi-structured interviews for qualitative insights (Kothari, 2014; Krosnick, 2018). Questionnaires addressed leadership development, succession practices, and institutional stability, while interviews targeted policymakers and senior administrators to explore challenges, best practices, and policy implications. Secondary data were sourced from journals, reports, and official documents (Dubey & Kothari, 2022). Necessary approvals were secured from NACOSTI, institutional authorities, and ethics review boards. Three trained research assistants supported data administration. Questionnaires were distributed and collected within two days, with assistance provided where necessary. Key informant interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience, lasting 10–30 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed with consent.

A pretest involving 10% of the sample refined the instruments (Blumberg et al., 2014). Content validity was ensured through expert review, while reliability of the quantitative tool was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.70). Inter-rater reliability for qualitative coding was achieved through collaborative analysis (Cortina, 1993). The primary unit of analysis was individual faculty and staff members, supplemented by institutional context as a secondary unit. This dual focus allowed exploration of both personal experiences and organisational influences on succession practices,

offering insights into enablers and barriers to effective leadership transitions (Creswell, 2014; Fitzgerald et al., 2020).

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS v26. Descriptive statistics summarised demographic and perceptual trends, while inferential tests (correlation and regression) examined relationships among succession variables (Field, 2018). Qualitative data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following coding, theme development, and iterative refinement. Triangulation of findings produced a holistic understanding of succession planning, yielding both generalisable trends and context-sensitive insights.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Response Rate

Out of the 180 distributed questionnaires, 147 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of 81.7%. Additionally, 10 out of the 12 scheduled key informant interviews were completed, yielding an 83.3% qualitative response rate. This response rate is within the acceptable threshold 70% for social science research (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003), and thus provides a valid basis for analysis.

Table 1: Response Rate Summary

Instrument	Administered	Returned	Response Rate
Questionnaires	180	147	81.7%
Key Informant Interviews	12	10	83.3%

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Understanding the demographic characteristics of respondents provides critical context for interpreting the findings of this study on leadership succession planning in Kenyan higher education institutions. The data captured respondents' age distribution, gender, and positions within their institutions.

Table 2: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Under 25	18	12.2
25-34	42	28.6
35-44	48	32.7
45-54	25	17.0
55 and above	14	9.5

Table 2 shows that the majority of respondents were in the 35–44 age category (32.7%), followed closely by those aged 25–34 years (28.6%). Respondents aged 45–54 years accounted for 17.0%, while 12.2% were below 25 years. Only 9.5% were aged 55 years and above. This distribution

indicates that most of the respondents were relatively young to mid-career professionals, with a significant proportion falling within the active working and leadership grooming age bracket (25–44 years). This demographic is critical for succession planning as it represents the pool from which potential future leaders are likely to emerge. The presence of senior respondents (55 years and above), although smaller, provided valuable insights into institutional history, leadership experiences, and perceptions of succession planning effectiveness.

Table 3: Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	83	56.5
Female	64	43.6

As presented in Table 3, the study sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender, with 56.5% male respondents and 43.6% female respondents. The gender composition highlights ongoing efforts toward gender inclusivity in Kenyan higher education, though a slight male dominance persists. This is consistent with national patterns where leadership roles in universities are still more frequently occupied by men than women. The inclusion of non-binary respondents, albeit minimal, reflects growing recognition of gender diversity in academic institutions. Gender representation is particularly relevant to leadership succession planning, as inclusive systems ensure broader participation and equitable access to leadership opportunities.

Table 4: Position in the Institution

Position	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Faculty Member	74	50.3
Administrator	52	35.4
Support Staff	17	11.6
Other	4	2.7

Table 4 indicates that the largest group of respondents were faculty members (50.3%), followed by administrators (35.4%). Support staff constituted 11.6%, while 2.7% fell into the “other” category. This distribution shows that the majority of responses came from academic staff, who are directly engaged in teaching, research, and departmental leadership, making them central to discussions on leadership development and succession planning. The significant proportion of administrators also ensured that perspectives on governance, policy enforcement, and institutional management were well represented. Although fewer in number, support staff and other respondents provided important complementary views on how leadership succession affects broader institutional operations beyond academics.

Perceptions of Leadership Succession Planning

This section presents the findings regarding respondents’ awareness, experiences, and perceptions of leadership succession planning (LSP) within their institutions of higher learning.

Table 5: Perceptions of Leadership Succession Planning

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std Dev
My institution has a formal leadership succession planning framework.	28 (19.0%)	31 (21.1%)	38 (25.9%)	34 (23.1%)	16 (10.9%)	2.85	1.22
The leadership succession planning process in my institution is effective.	33 (22.4%)	40 (27.2%)	30 (20.4%)	28 (19.0%)	16 (10.9%)	2.68	1.26
I am familiar with the leadership succession planning process at my institution.	31 (21.1%)	39 (26.5%)	31 (21.1%)	29 (19.7%)	17 (11.6%)	2.74	1.25
Faculty and staff are actively involved in succession planning discussions.	34 (23.1%)	37 (25.2%)	36 (24.5%)	26 (17.7%)	14 (9.5%)	2.65	1.23
The leadership succession planning practices in my institution are transparent.	38 (25.9%)	35 (23.8%)	39 (26.5%)	24 (16.3%)	11 (7.5%)	2.56	1.22

The findings from this section reveal generally low to moderate levels of awareness, familiarity, and trust in the leadership succession planning (LSP) processes among staff in the selected institutions of higher learning. When asked whether their institution had a formal leadership succession planning framework, only 34% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, while a larger portion (40.1%) disagreed. The mean score of 2.85 indicates that many respondents were either unaware of such a framework or doubted its existence or functionality. This finding suggests that succession planning, if present, is either poorly communicated or inconsistently implemented across institutions.

These quantitative findings were further substantiated by qualitative responses from key informant interviews. A recurring sentiment among interviewees was a lack of visibility or knowledge of any formal succession policy. One administrator noted, *“We mostly deal with leadership transitions when they arise... there is no written succession document that I know of.”* Such statements point to the reality that succession planning, in many cases, is reactive rather than proactive and lacks formal institutional anchoring.

Furthermore, perceptions about the effectiveness of the succession planning processes were similarly pessimistic. Nearly half of the respondents (49.6%) disagreed that the processes in their institutions were effective, while only 29.9% affirmed their effectiveness. The mean score was a low 2.68, indicating that succession planning is largely perceived as dysfunctional or inadequate. This perception was echoed in interview narratives. A faculty member stated, *“Succession feels more political than strategic. It’s about who is next in line by influence, not necessarily capacity.”* This reflects a lack of trust in the meritocracy of succession mechanisms and underscores the need for performance- and policy-based processes.

When respondents were asked whether they were familiar with the succession planning process in their institution, the results showed a general lack of awareness, with 47.6% expressing

unfamiliarity. The mean score of 2.74 suggests that many academic and administrative staff are not sufficiently informed or involved in discussions surrounding leadership transitions. This is concerning, considering that effective succession planning should involve a wide pool of stakeholders to ensure transparency and long-term institutional stability.

This lack of familiarity correlates with another critical finding: low faculty and staff involvement in succession planning discussions. Only 27.2% of the respondents agreed that they were actively involved in such conversations, while nearly half (48.3%) disagreed. A senior academic interviewed for the study remarked, *“Most decisions on leadership are top-down; even senior faculty are rarely consulted.”* This suggests that succession decisions are often made in isolation by top administrators, limiting institutional learning and stakeholder ownership.

The final perception item dealt with the transparency of succession planning practices. With a mean score of only 2.56 the lowest in the section this item revealed deep-seated concerns about how leadership transitions are handled. A combined 49.7% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the processes were transparent. These results reflect the widespread perception that succession in higher education institutions is shrouded in secrecy or is influenced by informal power dynamics rather than clearly defined procedures. This finding was reinforced by a comment from a key informant who said, *“It’s hard to know how leaders are selected. There’s a lot of secrecy and speculation.”*

The findings from this section point to a critical gap between the theory and practice of leadership succession planning in Kenyan higher education institutions. The majority of staff are either unaware of or excluded from the process, view the mechanisms as ineffective, and perceive them as lacking transparency and fairness. These results indicate a need for institutions to develop, document, and communicate clear succession planning frameworks while ensuring inclusive and transparent participation from all levels of staff.

Challenges in Leadership Succession Planning

The study sought to examine the major challenges facing leadership succession planning in institutions of higher learning in Kenya. Respondents were presented with several statements addressing known challenges, and their responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The quantitative data is presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Perceived Challenges in Succession Planning

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std Dev
There is a lack of clear leadership succession policies in my institution.	11 (7.5%)	17 (11.6%)	18 (12.2%)	51 (34.7%)	50 (34.0%)	3.76	1.15
Resistance to change affects leadership transitions in my institution.	10 (6.8%)	15 (10.2%)	29 (19.7%)	53 (36.1%)	40 (27.2%)	3.67	1.11
Political interference influences leadership succession planning.	13 (8.8%)	18 (12.2%)	28 (19.0%)	49 (33.3%)	39 (26.5%)	3.57	1.16
Leadership development programs are inadequate in my institution.	9 (6.1%)	20 (13.6%)	19 (12.9%)	54 (36.7%)	45 (30.6%)	3.72	1.14

There is a lack of mentorship and coaching for upcoming leaders.	12 (8.2%)	22 (15.0%)	25 (17.0%)	49 (33.3%)	39 (26.5%)	3.55	1.18
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The findings reveal that respondents perceive multiple structural and cultural barriers hindering effective leadership succession planning in their institutions. A lack of clear policies emerged as the most pressing challenge, with 68.7% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. The mean score of 3.76 was the highest in this section. This finding reflects the absence of documented and institutionally embedded succession planning policies in many higher education institutions. During interviews, several participants echoed this sentiment, with one administrator stating, *“We don’t have a written succession policy. Sometimes transitions happen suddenly, without clear guidelines.”* This absence of formal documentation leads to confusion and inconsistent practices during leadership transitions.

Resistance to change was another major obstacle, identified by 63.3% of respondents as a problem. The mean score of 3.67 confirms its strong presence. Resistance is often attributed to entrenched cultures and fear of losing influence or disrupting power dynamics. In one interview, a faculty member observed, *“Some leaders hold onto positions until the very last moment and don’t prepare anyone to take over. It’s like succession is a threat to their legacy.”* This kind of resistance undermines strategic planning and stalls leadership development initiatives.

Political interference was also highlighted as a significant concern, with a combined 59.8% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it influences succession planning. The mean score of 3.57 reflects its prominence. Respondents described instances where leadership appointments were influenced by external stakeholders, such as government officials or boards, rather than through merit-based or internal processes. A key informant remarked, *“Sometimes decisions come from outside the university, and you find people imposed on us with no proper vetting or preparation.”* This undermines institutional autonomy and demotivates qualified internal candidates.

The inadequacy of leadership development programmes was another key challenge, with 67.3% of respondents expressing concern. The mean of 3.72 suggests that respondents perceive a lack of investment in growing future leaders. Several interviewees noted that leadership development efforts are either sporadic or non-existent. One respondent stated, *“There are no structured leadership training programmes. People are promoted based on loyalty or tenure, not capacity.”* This finding aligns with literature that links succession challenges to weak or absent talent pipelines in public institutions.

Lastly, the lack of mentorship and coaching was cited by 59.8% of respondents as a persistent problem. With a mean score of 3.55, the data indicated that mentoring is underutilized as a succession tool. Interview participants described mentorship as informal, inconsistent, or reserved for a select few. One academic shared, *“There’s no structured mentorship programme. If you’re lucky, a senior leader might guide you. But it’s not institutionalized.”* This points to a missed opportunity for institutions to intentionally groom future leaders through systematic coaching and exposure.

Table 7: Additional Perceived Challenges in Succession Planning

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std Dev
The recruitment and selection process for leadership roles is not transparent.	15 (10.2%)	21 (14.3%)	23 (15.6%)	49 (33.3%)	39 (26.5%)	3.52	1.23
Leadership succession is often reactionary rather than proactive.	11 (7.5%)	19 (12.9%)	26 (17.7%)	52 (35.4%)	39 (26.5%)	3.61	1.16
Budgetary constraints limit the implementation of leadership succession programs.	10 (6.8%)	18 (12.2%)	27 (18.4%)	54 (36.7%)	38 (25.9%)	3.63	1.13
The current leadership does not prioritize talent development.	13 (8.8%)	20 (13.6%)	22 (15.0%)	50 (34.0%)	42 (28.6%)	3.60	1.21
There is a high turnover rate among leadership positions in my institution.	12 (8.2%)	21 (14.3%)	30 (20.4%)	45 (30.6%)	39 (26.5%)	3.53	1.18
Succession planning is often influenced by favoritism rather than merit.	11 (7.5%)	17 (11.6%)	25 (17.0%)	49 (33.3%)	45 (30.6%)	3.68	1.18

In addition to the previously discussed challenges, the study revealed further barriers that undermine effective leadership succession in institutions of higher learning in Kenya. A major concern highlighted by respondents was the lack of transparency in the recruitment and selection process for leadership roles. With a mean score of 3.52, and more than 59% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, the data suggest that many staff perceive the process as opaque and potentially biased. This aligns with interview findings, where a respondent observed, *“Leadership roles seem to be filled through informal networks. There's very little clarity on what qualifies someone for promotion.”* Such perceptions reduce trust in institutional leadership and discourage potential candidates from engaging in succession pipelines.

Closely linked to this issue is the view that succession planning is often reactionary rather than proactive. A combined 61.9% of respondents agreed with this statement, reflected by a mean score of 3.61. Rather than being a structured, forward-looking process, leadership transitions are often handled urgently and unpredictably usually in response to crises, retirements, or external pressure. A university administrator noted in an interview, *“We only start thinking about a replacement when someone resigns or retires unexpectedly. There is no continuity plan.”* This reactive approach undermines institutional stability and preparedness.

Another key barrier identified was budgetary constraints that limit the implementation of succession planning programmes. With a mean of 3.63, the data indicate that respondents believe

financial limitations hinder efforts to train, mentor, and prepare future leaders. This finding resonates with comments from interviewees, one of whom remarked, *“There are many good ideas for leadership development, but they remain on paper due to lack of funds.”* This reveals a disconnect between strategic planning and actual resource allocation, affecting the sustainability of any succession initiatives.

The study also found that the current leadership often fails to prioritize talent development, as reported by over 62% of respondents. The mean score of 3.60 shows that many believe there is a lack of institutional commitment to identifying and nurturing future leaders. Interview narratives reinforced this view. One faculty member said, *“There’s no deliberate effort to invest in people. Promotions are based on survival, not growth.”* This perception suggests that leadership development is not institutionalized, but left to chance or political maneuvering.

Another commonly cited challenge was the high turnover rate among leadership positions (mean = 3.53), which many respondents associated with poor succession mechanisms and internal instability. Frequent leadership changes disrupt strategic continuity and institutional memory, making it difficult to implement long-term visions. A senior lecturer pointed out, *“We have seen three deans come and go in five years. Each comes with a new agenda, and nothing gets completed.”* Such instability can undermine staff morale and performance.

Finally, and perhaps most concerning, was the view that succession planning is influenced more by favoritism than by merit. With a high mean of 3.68 and over 63% of respondents in agreement, this finding highlights a widespread perception of unfairness and nepotism. Interviewees frequently referenced internal politics and favoritism as major barriers. One administrator lamented, *“Merit doesn’t always count. It’s who you know, not what you can do.”* This not only erodes institutional credibility but also discourages capable individuals from aspiring to leadership roles.

The findings from both tables reveal a wide range of interconnected structural and cultural challenges affecting leadership succession planning. These include lack of transparency, ad hoc processes, underfunding, neglect of talent development, leadership turnover, and favoritism. Together, these challenges paint a picture of institutions that struggle to establish reliable and equitable leadership pipelines. Addressing these issues requires not only formal policies but also a cultural shift towards transparency, meritocracy, and proactive leadership development.

Effects of Succession Planning on Institutional Stability and Continuity

Leadership succession planning plays a crucial role in ensuring institutional stability, strategic continuity, and overall organisational effectiveness. The findings from this section demonstrate that respondents widely recognise the value of effective succession planning in contributing to the smooth operation and sustainability of higher education institutions in Kenya. The results are presented in Table 8 and discussed in detail below.

Table 8: Impact of Succession Planning on Institutional Stability

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std Dev
Effective succession planning enhances organisational stability.	6 (4.1%)	8 (5.4%)	21 (14.3%)	56 (38.1%)	56 (38.1%)	4.00	0.99
Poor leadership succession planning disrupts institutional operations.	8 (5.4%)	10 (6.8%)	23 (15.6%)	52 (35.4%)	54 (36.7%)	3.91	1.04
Proper succession planning improves staff retention and morale.	7 (4.8%)	11 (7.5%)	25 (17.0%)	53 (36.1%)	51 (34.7%)	3.88	1.03
A structured leadership pipeline minimizes governance crises.	9 (6.1%)	12 (8.2%)	21 (14.3%)	54 (36.7%)	51 (34.7%)	3.86	1.06
Lack of proper succession planning leads to loss of institutional knowledge.	6 (4.1%)	10 (6.8%)	22 (15.0%)	55 (37.4%)	54 (36.7%)	3.96	1.01

The strongest consensus among respondents was found in the belief that effective succession planning enhances organisational stability, with a mean score of 4.00. More than 76% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This suggests widespread recognition that structured succession systems foster continuity, reduce uncertainty, and support institutional growth. Interview participants reinforced this perception, with one administrator commenting, *“When there’s a clear transition plan, everyone knows what to expect. It reduces tension and ensures projects continue.”* This reflects the stabilizing effect that proactive succession planning can have on staff confidence and institutional culture.

Closely related to this was the acknowledgment that poor leadership succession planning disrupts institutional operations. With a mean score of 3.91, nearly 72% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that inadequate succession planning leads to confusion, operational inefficiencies, and setbacks. Interview responses highlighted specific examples of such disruption. One faculty member noted, *“When our former dean retired suddenly, it took months to appoint a successor. There was a leadership vacuum, and everything stalled from budgets to academic reviews.”* This highlights the operational risks institutions face when succession planning is neglected.

Furthermore, respondents strongly agreed that proper succession planning improves staff retention and morale, yielding a mean score of 3.88. More than 70% of respondents indicated that when institutions actively prepare and promote internal talent, staff feel valued and are more likely to stay committed to their roles. In the interviews, one staff member explained, *“If people see a path for growth, they stay longer and work harder. When there’s no plan, good people leave.”* This finding emphasizes the importance of linking leadership development to broader human resource strategies that motivate and retain high-performing employees.

Respondents also acknowledged the role of structured leadership pipelines in minimizing governance crises, as reflected in a mean score of 3.86. A clear majority (71.4%) agreed or strongly agreed with this view. This suggests that when institutions invest in identifying and training future leaders, they are better equipped to handle unexpected leadership transitions and avoid conflicts during succession. A senior manager remarked, *“Without a succession plan, power struggles emerge when top positions fall vacant. It affects not just governance but the entire academic and support structure.”*

Lastly, a significant concern was the loss of institutional knowledge due to poor succession planning, with a high mean of 3.96. Approximately 74.1% of respondents recognized that when leaders leave without grooming successors, valuable institutional memory, networks, and experiences are lost. This challenge was particularly emphasized in interviews. A former department head recounted, *“When I took over, there was no handover. I had to start from scratch because the previous chair left abruptly and no documentation was shared.”* Such losses disrupt continuity, slow down progress, and require new leaders to invest time rebuilding knowledge and systems.

The findings underscore the critical role of effective succession planning in sustaining organisational performance and resilience in higher education institutions. Participants widely acknowledged that good succession practices contribute to operational stability, improved morale, reduced governance crises, and the preservation of institutional knowledge. Conversely, poor succession practices are seen to create instability, lower staff morale, disrupt workflows, and diminish institutional memory. These insights demonstrate the strategic importance of embedding succession planning within institutional governance structures to ensure long-term sustainability.

Strategies for Leadership Development and Succession Planning

To understand how institutions of higher learning in Kenya are currently preparing future leaders, the study explored the strategies in place for leadership development and succession planning. Respondents were asked to indicate which strategies were being used in their institutions, with multiple selections allowed. The results are presented in Table 9 and discussed below.

Table 9: Current Strategies Used for Succession Planning (Multiple Responses Allowed)

Strategy	Frequency (N=147)	Percentage (%)
Leadership development programmes	71	48.3%
Mentorship and coaching	64	43.5%
Job rotations and leadership exposure	56	38.1%
Internal promotions and talent grooming	52	35.4%
No structured leadership strategy	59	40.1%

The most commonly reported strategy was the use of leadership development programmes, selected by 48.3% of respondents. This indicates that nearly half of the institutions in the study have at least some form of structured training or development programmes aimed at preparing staff for leadership roles. However, the fact that this figure is below 50% also reveals that a significant

number of institutions either lack such programmes or have not institutionalized them. During interviews, several respondents mentioned attending occasional training workshops, but emphasized that these were neither consistent nor part of a deliberate succession pathway. As one administrator noted, *“We do have leadership seminars from time to time, but there is no long-term leadership track for staff.”*

Mentorship and coaching were also reported by 43.5% of respondents. This suggests that informal or semi-formal mentoring is practiced in many institutions. However, as the data also show, this means that more than half of the respondents do not experience structured mentorship. Interview data confirmed that most mentorship occurs on an ad hoc basis. One academic stated, *“If you’re lucky, a senior leader might guide you, but it depends entirely on personal relationships rather than an institutional framework.”* This suggests a missed opportunity to institutionalize mentorship programmes as a systematic part of leadership succession planning.

Another relatively common approach was job rotations and leadership exposure, cited by 38.1% of respondents. These practices can be valuable for grooming staff by allowing them to gain diverse administrative experience. However, the percentage suggests that the practice is not widespread. Some interviewees noted that staff are often left in the same roles for years without opportunity for growth. One participant remarked, *“Only a few people are rotated or exposed to leadership tasks. The rest remain stuck in routine roles.”* This limits the talent pool for future leadership roles and undermines succession planning.

Internal promotions and talent grooming were reported by 35.4% of respondents. This indicates that while internal promotions do occur, they are not always linked to intentional grooming or performance-based progression. This finding aligns with previous concerns about favoritism and political influence discussed in Section 4.5. In interviews, some respondents emphasized that promotions were often based on seniority or informal criteria, rather than a clearly defined merit-based system.

A striking finding was that 40.1% of respondents stated their institutions had no structured leadership development strategy at all. This is concerning, as it reflects a significant institutional gap in preparing and transitioning leadership. These respondents suggested that leadership succession was often unplanned or left to chance. One interviewee noted, *“There is no leadership pipeline here. Leadership positions are filled based on convenience or crisis.”* This not only hinders institutional continuity but also demoralises staff who might otherwise aspire to leadership roles.

The findings from this section suggest that while some institutions have begun to implement leadership development strategies such as training, mentorship, job rotation, and internal promotions, these efforts are often inconsistent, informal, or inadequately resourced. Alarming, a significant portion of institutions have no structured leadership development framework in place. The qualitative responses reinforced this reality, emphasizing the ad hoc nature of leadership grooming in many institutions. To improve leadership succession planning, institutions must move

beyond sporadic training efforts and invest in formal, systematic strategies that align with long-term institutional goals and ensure continuity.

Recommendations for Improving Succession Planning

To explore ways in which leadership succession planning can be strengthened, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with several proposed strategies for improving succession practices in institutions of higher learning. Table 10 presents the findings, which show broad support for more structured, resourced, and inclusive leadership development systems.

Table 10: Recommendations for Improving Succession Planning

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std Dev
Institutions should adopt structured succession planning frameworks.	5 (3.4%)	8 (5.4%)	15 (10.2%)	59 (40.1%)	60 (40.8%)	4.10	0.96
Leadership training should be mandatory for potential successors.	6 (4.1%)	9 (6.1%)	17 (11.6%)	58 (39.5%)	57 (38.8%)	4.03	1.00
Internal promotions should be prioritized over external recruitment.	7 (4.8%)	10 (6.8%)	22 (15.0%)	59 (40.1%)	49 (33.3%)	3.90	1.05
Universities should allocate more resources for leadership development.	6 (4.1%)	11 (7.5%)	20 (13.6%)	56 (38.1%)	54 (36.7%)	3.96	1.03

The highest-rated recommendation was that institutions should adopt structured succession planning frameworks, with a strong mean score of 4.10. Over 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This reflects a clear consensus that formal policies are needed to guide leadership transitions, minimize ambiguity, and promote institutional stability. Qualitative data supported this view, with one participant stating, *“Without a structured plan, transitions are chaotic and often political. We need clear guidelines anchored in policy.”* This sentiment aligns with earlier findings that many institutions lack formal succession frameworks, which creates gaps in continuity and performance.

The recommendation that leadership training should be mandatory for potential successors was also strongly endorsed, with a mean of 4.03 and nearly 78% agreement. Respondents recognized the importance of capacity-building and skills enhancement for individuals who may assume future leadership roles. A senior administrator noted, *“Leadership isn’t automatic just because someone has served long. We need training programmes tailored to real institutional needs.”* This highlights the need to professionalise leadership development and equip emerging leaders with both administrative and strategic competencies.

Another key recommendation was that internal promotions should be prioritized over external recruitment, which received a mean score of 3.90. A total of 73.4% of respondents supported this

view. While institutions may sometimes need to recruit externally to bring in new expertise, many respondents emphasized the value of recognizing and promoting internal talent. This strategy was seen as a way to boost staff morale, retain institutional knowledge, and ensure smoother transitions. However, as one interviewee cautioned, *“Internal promotions are good, but only if based on merit and performance, not favoritism.”* This underscores the need to balance internal development with transparent and objective evaluation criteria.

Finally, the recommendation that universities should allocate more resources for leadership development was also widely supported, with a mean score of 3.96. Nearly 75% of participants agreed or strongly agreed. Many interviewees pointed out that while leadership development is often discussed in strategic documents, funding and implementation remain weak. One participant explained, *“Budget is the biggest challenge. We have ideas, but no funding to support staff development in leadership.”* This finding reinforces earlier concerns about budgetary constraints and calls for a stronger institutional commitment to investing in succession initiatives.

The responses in this section demonstrate a strong consensus among stakeholders on the need for reform and investment in leadership succession planning. Key recommendations include developing structured policies, mandating leadership training, prioritizing internal talent, and allocating sufficient resources. These findings suggest that stakeholders are not only aware of the current weaknesses in succession planning but are also eager for practical, evidence-based strategies to strengthen leadership continuity in Kenyan higher education institutions.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study investigated the status, challenges, and effectiveness of leadership succession planning (LSP) in Kenyan higher learning institutions, guided by Contingency Theory, Institutional Theory, and the Resource-Based View. The findings highlight that succession planning remains fragmented, underfunded, and highly vulnerable to organizational and political constraints.

A lack of formal succession policies emerged as the most significant barrier, reported by 68.7% of respondents (Mean = 3.76). This has left many institutions reliant on undocumented and ad hoc transitions, a pattern consistent with global literature that treats succession as administrative rather than strategic. Resistance to change was another key issue, with 63.3% of respondents (Mean = 3.67) indicating that entrenched leaders often avoid preparing successors for fear of losing influence. Political interference was also prominent (59.9%, Mean = 3.57), with respondents citing government or board-imposed appointments that undermined institutional autonomy and legitimacy. Budgetary constraints (Mean = 3.63) further weakened succession initiatives, leaving leadership development and mentorship largely unfunded.

Human capital development gaps were equally significant. Inadequate training opportunities were reported by 67.3% of respondents (Mean = 3.72), while 59.8% (Mean = 3.55) noted weak or inconsistent mentorship. Leadership grooming was described as informal and dependent on individual goodwill, rather than embedded in institutional frameworks. Relatedly, concerns around favoritism (Mean = 3.68), opaque recruitment (Mean = 3.52), and reactionary succession processes

(Mean = 3.61) undermined confidence in leadership selection. Interview narratives reinforced these findings, describing appointments as politically motivated, divisive, and disruptive to continuity.

The study also established that succession planning significantly influences institutional stability and continuity. Where succession planning was absent or poorly structured, transitions were reactionary, triggered by retirements, resignations, or political directives. This contributed to frequent leadership turnover (Mean = 3.53), disrupted governance, and abandoned strategic projects. Politicized appointments in particular generated mistrust, with informants noting that externally imposed leaders often lacked internal legitimacy, leading to stalled reforms. Conversely, institutions with deliberate investments in leadership pipelines - such as Strathmore University - reported smoother transitions, continuity in governance, and stronger stakeholder confidence. These findings align with international evidence that structured mentorship, transparent recruitment, and leadership academies promote resilience and safeguard institutional memory.

Finally, the study identified practical strategies for strengthening succession planning. Respondents emphasized the institutionalization of formal succession policies, structured mentorship, and continuous leadership training through academies and professional development programmes. Transparent, merit-based recruitment was widely viewed as critical to reducing favoritism and political interference, while adequate budgetary allocation was deemed essential to sustain training and mentorship initiatives. Importantly, respondents called for alignment with Commission for University Education (CUE) standards to ensure accountability and standardization across the sector. Taken together, these strategies suggest that effective succession planning in Kenya requires a dual approach: internal reforms to build leadership pipelines and external governance frameworks to safeguard autonomy, transparency, and stability.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that leadership succession planning (LSP) in Kenyan universities is, at present, more myth than reality. Although succession planning is widely recognized in theory as a strategic imperative for stability, continuity, and governance, it is not consistently embedded within institutional policies or daily practices. Many higher education institutions continue to operate without formal succession plans, leaving leadership transitions to be determined through ad hoc processes that are frequently influenced by politics and favoritism, often at the expense of merit and institutional needs.

The absence of well-defined and transparent succession strategies compromises institutional performance, erodes staff confidence, and undermines the long-term sustainability of universities. Without clear pathways for leadership growth and development, potential successors are frequently overlooked or discouraged, resulting in talent drain, leadership vacuums, and the gradual loss of institutional memory. These gaps ultimately affect not only governance but also the academic quality, staff morale, and operational stability of institutions.

Despite these challenges, the study also revealed that LSP is not entirely a myth. Isolated practices, such as leadership training, mentorship, and internal promotions, indicate that the reality of succession planning exists in fragmented and underutilized forms. These practices, if formalized and scaled, could provide a solid foundation for transitioning from myth to reality. This underscores the need to move away from reactive and informal approaches toward structured, inclusive, and future-focused models of succession planning.

The study concludes that institutions must prioritize leadership development as a strategic investment by embedding it into policies, resource allocation, and talent management systems. This requires establishing formal leadership pipelines, strengthening mentorship and coaching programmes, mandating leadership training for emerging leaders, and aligning succession planning with institutional strategic goals. Equally, to build legitimacy and trust, succession planning must be merit-based, transparent, and shielded from political interference through governance reforms and institutional accountability.

In essence, leadership succession planning in Kenyan universities is currently a myth in practice, but a reality in potential. For LSP to move from rhetoric to reality, deliberate reforms and sustained commitment are required. Without such efforts, universities risk leadership crises, stagnation, and the erosion of institutional excellence. With them, higher education institutions can secure stability, foster resilience, and ensure a sustainable future of effective leadership continuity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, several measures are proposed to strengthen leadership succession planning in Kenyan higher education institutions. First, universities should develop and institutionalize formal succession planning policies to replace the ad hoc and reactionary approaches that currently dominate leadership transitions. Alongside this, transparent and merit-based recruitment procedures must be implemented to curb nepotism, favoritism, and opaque appointment practices, thereby ensuring fairness and credibility in leadership appointments.

Second, succession planning should be embedded within institutional strategic plans to safeguard continuity and preserve organizational memory. In addition, universities need to adopt mechanisms that minimize leadership turnover, thereby promoting stability in governance and supporting the successful completion of long-term projects. These steps would foster confidence among stakeholders while strengthening institutional resilience during leadership transitions.

Finally, deliberate investment in leadership development is essential. Universities should institutionalize structured mentorship and coaching programmes to systematically groom future leaders and ensure a pipeline of competent successors. Complementing this, institutions should establish leadership academies and training initiatives that provide continuous professional development in governance, management, and financial stewardship. By integrating these measures, higher education institutions will be better positioned to achieve stability, continuity, and sustainable leadership.

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