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American Inspirations for Management and Human-Centered Leadership in Higher Education Institutions

Introduction

In the rapidly changing landscape of the 21st century, not only business, political, and communication trends require continuous adaptation, but also leadership styles must evolve. Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of sectors such as politics, business, education, and social initiatives. Within this context, Human-Centered Leadership (HCL) has emerged as a transformative approach that addresses the complex challenges faced by both established institutions and grass-roots organizations. This leadership paradigm prioritizes people—students, faculty, and staff—placing them at the core of institutional strategy and decision-making. It emphasizes empathy, collaboration, and meaningful relationships as the key drivers of success.

An exemplary application of Human-Centered Leadership can be seen in the Nanovic Institute for European Studies at the University of Notre Dame. Founded in 1992, the Institute has developed into a vibrant interdisciplinary hub within Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs. Through its diverse programs, cross-cultural initiatives, and unwavering commitment to

fostering both personal and professional development, the Nanovic Institute illustrates how prioritizing human connections can lead to academic excellence and institutional impact.

This study explores how the principles of Human-Centered Leadership and Management are implemented at the Nanovic Institute. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do the management and communication strategies at the Nanovic Institute reflect Human-Centered Leadership and the concept of human dignity? Furthermore, How can this case study serve as a model for other higher education institutions? The research delves into key aspects, including management models, decision-making structures, collaboration methods, external communication of values, and factors that contribute to the success of Human-Centered Leadership strategies. The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide valuable insights for European higher education institutions that seek leadership approaches that are both effective and deeply attuned to the human element in academia.

Literature Review

In recent years, goal-oriented management styles and charismatic leadership, intended to inspire others, were promoted¹. However, the contemporary world, along with the challenges related to mental health and well-being, requires the adoption of more flexible and adaptive leadership styles, especially in higher education institutions, which impart knowledge and develop skills related to sustainable development and the use of digital skills. The third decade of the 21st century presents a dizzying pace of industrial change related to the automation of processes and services, and also makes us realise how much change AI has already brought and how much more it will bring. In addition to Industry

¹ R. Gittel, *Leading Higher Education Redesign*, in: *Challenges in Higher Education Leadership*, Routledge 2017, 63–69.

4.0, there is also a drive towards Society 5.0, which aims to ensure well-being through technological and scientific advances and increased self-awareness and emotional intelligence². In this context, approaches to human resource management and linking emotional intelligence with the pursuit of performance improvement are extremely important. As research indicates, leaders who adopt a person-centered approach create work environments that respect the values and needs of employees, leading to better collaboration and engagement³. Furthermore, a person-centered approach can help increase engagement among both academic and administrative staff, as well as students, which is crucial for achieving research and developmental goals⁴.

Human-Centered Leadership (HCL) is a transformative approach that prioritizes the dignity, humanity, and potential of individuals within organizations. Based on the science of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), HCL shapes cultures of care, excellence, and trust by managing complexity through collaboration, self-awareness, and shared responsibility⁵. In this model, leaders take on the roles of guides, coaches, and mentors, who not only manage but also effectively communicate their decisions to the team, thereby creating a supportive environment that encourages personal and professional development. This approach is particularly useful in today's dynamic and unpredictable job market, where human capital and its effective use play a key role in

² Cf. B. Mydłowska, "Tranzycje karier w kontekście nowych wyzwań rynku pracy", *Edukacja Ustawiczna Dorosłych*, 2020, no 3, 59–66.

³ R. N. Al-Dossary, *Leadership in Nursing*, in: *Contemporary Leadership Challenges*, IntechOpen 2017, 128–134; B. L. Marquis, D. C. Huston, *Leadership Roles and Management Functions in Nursing: Theory and Application*, LWW, Philadelphia 2020, 68–70.

⁴ S. Bach, P. Haywood, "Leadership in higher education: A study of the impact of leadership styles on employee engagement", *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40:2018, vol. 2, 148–156; R. Keeling, *Learning Reconsidered: A Practical Guide to Implementing a Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*, Washington, D.C. 2004, 24–34.

⁵ K. Kennedy, S. Campis, L. Leclerc, "Human-Centered Leadership", *Nurse Leader*, 2020, vol. 18, no 3, 227–229.

overcoming challenges and driving innovation. In the context of the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI), which offers immense possibilities for automation and process optimization, human involvement in programming and overseeing AI remains essential. Despite its potential, AI requires proper programming and training to deliver content and materials that improve research processes. These challenges highlight the importance of creating supportive and innovative workspaces that foster employee creativity and encourage them to achieve ever-better results. For a person to be creative and effective in their profession, they need a safe and supportive environment, led by a human-centered leader.

A key element of HCL is the belief that employee well-being directly impacts organizational outcomes. Leaders who prioritize the psychological, emotional, and professional development of their teams create work environments that inspire employees to achieve the best results⁶. By focusing on intrinsic motivators such as job satisfaction, a sense of belonging, and personal growth, leaders go beyond traditional external incentives, such as financial rewards.

Ethical behavior is the foundation of HCL. Leaders should act in accordance with principles of honesty, fairness, and responsibility – not only for the benefit of the organization but also for the well-being of their teams and society as a whole⁷. Ethical leaders

⁶ O. E. Amah, „Examining leaders’ emotional intelligence as a distal antecedent of employee engagement: “The role of employee voice and trust in direct leadership”, *Africa Journal of Management*, 2023, vol. 9, no 2, 126–129; T. Islam, A. Khatoon, A. U. Cheema, Y. Ashraf, “How does ethical leadership enhance employee work engagement? The roles of trust in leader and harmonious work passion”, *Kybernetes*, 2024, vol. 53, no 6, 2093–2104; P. S. Koeswayo, H. Haryanto, S. Handoyo, “The impact of corporate governance, internal control and corporate reputation on employee engagement: A moderating role of leadership style”, *Cogent Business & Management*, 2024, vol. 11, no 1, 20–26.

⁷ J. Junaidi, „The role of ethical leadership to employees work engagement: A social learning theory perspective”, *International Journal of Social Economics*, 2024, vol. 51, no 7, 886–896.

inspire others through trust, respect, and cooperation, rather than generating pressure through reward systems and regulations. They create an organizational culture based on shared values, ultimately encouraging everyone to act in line with these principles and a sense of shared responsibility. Human-Centered Leadership assumes that a leader performs three key roles: Defender, Awakener, and Connector⁸. Each of these roles contributes to building a culture of care, excellence, and trust. The Defender recognizes the needs of others, creating safe and supportive environments conducive to growth. Leaders in this role focus on empathy and understanding when addressing challenges⁹. The Awakener stimulates and inspires individual development, aligning organizational goals with personal values, creating environments in which individuals can thrive. The Connector strengthens organizational communities by building trust, collaboration, and participatory decision-making processes that encourage individuals to take responsibility for solutions. This approach may seem overly psychological, but nothing generates creativity more than meeting needs, inspiring, and demonstrating agency in team actions.

The principles of HCL are effectively applied in various sectors, including healthcare, as demonstrated by a case study of a hospital unit where the leader of the department implemented HCL, empowering the nursing management board to collaborate in problem-solving in an atmosphere of mutual respect¹⁰. Through organized collaboration and innovative problem-solv-

⁸ S. Campis, L. Leclerc, "Inspiring and Nurturing Human-Centered Leaders: The Vital Role of Mentorship", *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, 2024, vol. 55, no 6, 276–278.

⁹ D. Mortimore, „Moving beyond human-centric organizational designs”, *Journal of Organization Design*, 2024, vol. 13, no 2, 69–72.

¹⁰ F. Dal Mas, E.-M. Bagarotto, L. Cobianchi, *Soft Skills Effects on Knowledge Translation in Healthcare: Evidence from the Field*, in: *Soft Skills for Human Centered Management and Global Sustainability*, United Kingdom 2021, 95–99; K. Kennedy, S. Campis, L. Leclerc, „Human-Centered Leadership”, op. cit., 227–231.

ing, nurses identified barriers to effective care and implemented new solutions. This case demonstrates how HCL creates an environment where individuals feel valued, trusted, and motivated to innovate. By focusing on human relationships within the team and the sector, leaders can inspire shared responsibility for challenges and solutions.

The principles of HCL also prove extremely useful for academic institutions¹¹. Universities are complex systems, and HCL provides a framework for addressing challenges such as digital transformation, declining student demographics, and increasing demands for inclusivity. In the academic context, leaders can take on the roles of defenders, creating supportive environments for students, faculty, and staff; as Awakening leaders, fostering intellectual enthusiasm and development; and as Connectors, building interdisciplinary communities that prioritize collaboration and seek faster and more effective solutions.

The Nanovic Institute for European Studies at the University of Notre Dame is an excellent example of the application of HCL in academic institutions. Through its interdisciplinary programs, leadership development initiatives, and focus on intercultural understanding, the Institute demonstrates how academic institutions can integrate human-centered approaches into management practices, creating environments that support both professional excellence and personal well-being. Human-Centered Leadership practiced at the Institute not only supports its continuous development but also aligns with the paradigm of respect for human dignity and the personalist approach¹².

¹¹ T. Bush, „Middle leadership in higher education: Challenges and opportunities”, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, 2022, vol. 50, no 5, 737–739; J. Elo, M. Uljens, *Multilevel Pedagogical Leadership in Higher Education: A Non-Affirmative Approach*, Cham 2024, vol. 25, 97–110; R. Gittel, *Leading Higher Education Redesign*, op. cit.

¹² Alford, “The practical wisdom of personalism”, op. cit., 697–705; Crosthwaite, *New Evangelization*, op. cit., 1133–1136; *Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 2024, no. 36–62; *Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace*, 2006, no. 164

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study was a structured qualitative case study approach designed to explore the application of Human-Centered Leadership (HCL) principles at the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, University of Notre Dame. This methodology allowed for an in-depth examination of how leadership and communication strategies align with key principles such as human dignity, empathy, and inclusivity. The qualitative nature of the study was particularly suited to capturing the complex and dynamic processes of leadership within a real-world academic setting.

The research design was both exploratory and descriptive, focusing on the Nanovic Institute as a model for HCL in higher education. By concentrating on a single institution, the study aimed to uncover detailed insights into organizational leadership practices, including decision-making processes, communication strategies, and the integration of human-centered values into daily operations. This contextualized approach also sought to identify patterns and practices that could be adapted by other institutions while emphasizing how leadership values are embedded in the Institute's culture. The study was conducted at the Nanovic Institute, which serves as a hub for interdisciplinary research and academic collaboration. Participants were drawn from various levels of the Institute's structure to ensure diverse perspectives on leadership and communication.

To gather data, the study employed multiple methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics. Institutional documents such as mission statements, strategic plans, and event reports were analyzed to identify how HCL principles were reflected in policies and communications. Structured interviews with key stakeholders explored how leadership practices fostered respect, empathy, and collaboration. Participant observation during events such as lectures, team meetings, and workshops offered direct insights into interpersonal dynamics and decision-making processes.

Data analysis involved thematic exploration to identify patterns across various sources while ensuring validity through triangulation. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how HCL principles are operationalized in academic settings while offering actionable insights for other institutions seeking to implement similar strategies.

Results

FINDINGS FROM DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

The analytical section of this study is based on an extensive review of institutional materials from the Nanovic Institute for European Studies at the University of Notre Dame. This includes an analysis of foundational documents such as the institute's mission statement, strategic plans, annual reports, and publicly available information shared through its website and social media platforms. These resources provide a comprehensive understanding of the institute's organizational priorities, operational strategies, and its commitment to advancing European studies within a global academic framework.

The mission statement of the Nanovic Institute emphasizes its dedication to enriching Notre Dame's intellectual culture by fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among students, faculty, and visiting scholars. It highlights the institute's focus on exploring the evolving ideas, cultures, traditions, beliefs, and institutions shaping Europe today. This foundational vision serves as the basis for its strategic goals and initiatives.

The 2021-2026 Strategic Plan outlines four key goals that guide the institute's activities: fostering student education and formation, elevating its research profile and academic visibility, maintaining and expanding strategic collaborations, and building a vibrant intellectual community¹³. Each goal reflects a deliberate

¹³ *The Nanovic Institute's 2023–24 Year in Review*, The Nanovic Institute for European Studies, Notre Dame 2024.

effort to integrate human-centered leadership principles into the institute's operations. For instance, the emphasis on "bridge-building" in undergraduate education underscores the institute's commitment to fostering meaningful connections between students and Europe. Similarly, its focus on interdisciplinary research projects demonstrates a collaborative approach aimed at addressing complex global challenges.

Annual reports provide detailed accounts of the institute's achievements in research, teaching, and community engagement¹⁴. These reports highlight initiatives such as the Ukrainian Studies Hub, which exemplifies the institute's responsiveness to current geopolitical challenges while maintaining a focus on human dignity and resilience. The reports also showcase collaborations with European institutions through partnership programs like CUP, which fosters intellectual exchange and mutual support among higher education institutions in post-communist Europe.

The institute's digital presence further reinforces its mission by sharing updates on events, publications, and ongoing projects. Social media platforms serve as tools for engaging with diverse audiences, promoting interdisciplinary research, and highlighting student experiences. These communication strategies align with human-centered leadership principles by prioritizing transparency, inclusivity, and accessibility.

Through this analysis of institutional documents and communication materials, it becomes evident that the Nanovic Institute embodies a holistic approach to leadership that prioritizes collaboration, intellectual growth, and community-building. By integrating these values into its strategic goals and daily operations, the institute serves as a model for academic institutions seeking to promote sustainable development while remaining deeply attuned to human dignity and global interconnectedness.

¹⁴ 2023–24 *Research Report of the Nanovic Institute for European Studies*, The Nanovic Institute for European Studies, Notre Dame 2024.

OBSERVATIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

As part of the framework, institutional practices were observed across a range of formal and informal meetings within the Nanovic Institute for European Studies. These observations provided valuable insights into how human-centered leadership principles are enacted in daily operations, academic programming, and public engagement.

One key aspect of the observation involved daily work and internal communication within the Institute. Communication was open and dialogical, with leadership figures often assuming facilitative rather than directive roles. This approach fostered a sense of psychological safety and collective ownership, characteristic of human-centered leadership. Informal interactions between staff also reflected mutual respect, attention to individual contributions, and a strong ethic of care.

In addition, the author of this article attended selected lectures given by external guests, which offered a different perspective on the Institute's organizational culture. These events highlighted the Institute's commitment to intellectual diversity, dialogue across disciplines, and engagement with global perspectives. The atmosphere of these lectures emphasized not only academic excellence but also accessibility, with guests encouraged to connect with students and faculty beyond formal presentations. Leadership roles during these events – often distributed among faculty, administrative staff, and students – reflected a flat organizational hierarchy and an inclusive approach to academic community building.

The Second Undergraduate Research Conference at the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, held on March 28, 2025, perfectly demonstrates how the personalist paradigm connects with intellectual and organizational development. The Institute creates a space where young researchers can present their ideas, feeling respected and supported. Care for students and their intellectual growth goes hand in hand with fostering collaboration and mutual respect. Through organizing this conference, the

Nanovic Institute shows how care for young researchers and students is intertwined with the personalist paradigm, which supports their intellectual and organizational development. This approach fosters a culture based on trust, inclusivity, and collaboration, where every individual feels part of a larger project.

INSIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS

Interviews with key representatives of the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, including the director, executive director, research program manager, and communications program director, provided invaluable insights into the Institute's operations and leadership strategies. These conversations allowed for capturing the core principles of human-centered leadership that permeate the daily functioning of the institution. The analysis of these interviews reveals how the Institute combines collaboration, adaptability, and mission, prioritizing trust, inclusivity, and professional growth, while also addressing challenges such as limited resources and faculty engagement.

The Nanovic Institute for European Studies at the University of Notre Dame stands out among other academic institutions by adopting a participatory leadership style that promotes inclusivity, collaboration, and a shared sense of responsibility. Conversations with key representatives of the Institute reveal that this strategy is based on a flattened hierarchy, where decisions are made collectively, ensuring that all voices within the team are heard. This organization fosters trust, values diverse perspectives, and strengthens team cohesion, which is a fundamental element of human-centered leadership.

The Institute places particular emphasis on the autonomy of experts in their respective fields. This allows employees to make independent decisions, reducing micromanagement and encouraging creativity. Such an approach also enables the recognition of specialized knowledge and the appreciation of each individual's contributions, which is crucial for supporting professional development within a holistic context, where both professional achievements and personal milestones are celebrated. In the

Institute, successes such as publications or conferences are actively celebrated, as well as significant personal life moments, such as birthdays, which enhances the sense of support within the team.

The Director of the communications program actively relies on the support of students, who eagerly engage in media activities and the promotion of the Institute. As a result, students not only develop their skills in marketing and communication but also have the opportunity to participate in real projects related to the institution's image. The Research Program Manager, on the other hand, supports continuous learning among research teams, which aligns with Dal Mas et al.'s (2021) research on "the effects of soft skills on knowledge translation."

The Institute's activities are deeply rooted in its mission to promote interdisciplinary European studies, with research conducted in alignment with ethical frameworks that ensure the practices are not exploitative of communities. A significant part of this mission also involves taking into account employees' personal circumstances, such as family needs and work-life balance. Flexibility in work organization helps reduce the risk of burnout and supports the long-term development of the institution. The work environment at the Institute is one of mutual respect, where diversity of perspectives is not only tolerated but actively supported.

A key value of the Institute is investing in the development of its staff, both in terms of skill-building and mentorship. This approach allows the Institute to nurture talent while also building its capacity for adaptation and growth as an organization. Retreats and workshops serve as spaces for reflection and evaluation, enabling continuous improvement at both individual and institutional levels.

While measuring success in humanities or social research is quite different from the natural sciences, the Institute employs a holistic approach that places greater emphasis on the values of mission, process, and collaboration, rather than solely on final outcomes. Although statistics and results are important, the

Institute prioritises cultivating the values of personalism and cooperation, which is unique and inspiring. Success is not merely measured by achieved results, but by the sense of alignment with the mission and values that guide every stage of the institution's actions.

Discussion

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The Nanovic Institute effectively integrates Human-Centered Leadership principles into its organizational culture, aligning with theoretical frameworks established in the literature. Its participatory leadership style, demonstrated through “rally” meetings and semesterly retreats, reflects the Connector role identified by Campis and Leclerc (2024). These practices foster collective ownership and psychological safety by encouraging inclusive decision-making. This aligns with Kennedy et al.'s (2020) description of “cultures of care, excellence, and trust,” which are essential for navigating complex adaptive systems. The flattened hierarchy observed in formal meetings and public events signifies a departure from traditional academic leadership models toward more collaborative approaches that value diverse perspectives.

Trust is foundational to the Institute's management philosophy, resonating with Junaidi's (2024) assertion that leaders inspire through trust rather than pressure. The executive director takes this approach, delegating considerable autonomy to subject matter experts in communication initiatives and research program management. This trust-centered leadership style reduces micromanagement while fostering innovation, reflecting Bush's (2022) findings on distributed authority as a catalyst for creativity and engagement in higher education.

The Institute also embodies the Defender role of HCL by creating safe and supportive environments conducive to growth. Leadership celebrates achievements through tangible rewards like salary increases and additional payments, complemented by

public recognition and personal acknowledgments. These practices reinforce Amah's (2023) assertion that employee well-being is intrinsically linked to organizational success. By valuing individuals beyond their instrumental contributions to institutional goals, the Institute cultivates a culture of holistic recognition.

Mission-driven activities further illustrate the Awakener dimension of HCL, aligning institutional goals with personal values to create environments where individuals thrive intellectually and professionally. Research initiatives such as peripheries studies and Ukrainian scholarship provide meaningful contexts for individual contributions, supporting Islam et al.'s (2024) claim that human-centered leadership fosters purpose-driven work environments even within increasingly digital contexts. This mission orientation is particularly evident in the undergraduate research conference, where students were empowered to pursue scholarship aligned with social justice and sustainability.

Flexible working arrangements demonstrate the Institute's commitment to accommodating personal circumstances, showcasing its holistic approach to leadership. This practice aligns with Koeswayo et al.'s (2024) findings on supportive governance structures fostering employee engagement. By recognizing the interconnectedness of personal well-being and professional effectiveness, the Institute exemplifies how HCL principles can enhance both individual satisfaction and institutional productivity.

Employee evaluations, mutual feedback, and reflection during meetings and retreats strengthen engagement in continuous improvement and the development of collaboration. Success at the Institute is measured from the perspective of "felt sense, solidarity, and alignment with mission," rather than solely by standardized indicators. This approach to assessing institutional performance reflects Gittel's (2017) call for flexible assessment methods in higher education functioning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

The Nanovic Institute serves as an example of modern academic leadership that successfully combines a personalist approach and

the principle of the common good with the practical challenges faced by contemporary educational institutions. Its participatory management model, which focuses on building relational capital, is a response to the growing expectations for transparency, collaboration, and the integration of diverse voices within the institution. In the context of the challenges faced by European universities - from extensive bureaucracy to the need to adapt to dynamic technological changes - the Nanovic Institute demonstrates that the success of an institution depends not only on the individual achievements of researchers but, importantly, on the collective engagement of the team.

Contemporary challenges in higher education, such as limited human and financial resources and changing student needs, require a flexible approach to management and development. Through strategic patience, consistency, and gradual achievement of long-term goals, the Institute offers a management model that addresses these challenges while also fulfilling developmental goals appropriate for educational and research institutions. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of European universities with which the Institute collaborates or establishes partnerships. The Nanovic Institute exemplifies how action can effectively align with the principles of sustainable development.

Equally important is the understanding that leadership based on personalism and care for individuals is a response to the growing pressure for results and the demands of standardization that still dominate academic work evaluations. Currently, many educational institutions in both Poland and Europe are dominated by quantitative methods, such as the number of publications or grants. However, the Nanovic Institute offers a more holistic perspective on the mission of an academic institution: success is not measured solely by external indicators but by the way the educational and research process impacts the individual and how collaboration and solidarity within the academic community shape its long-term development. This approach emphasizes human dignity and the common good as the foundations of justice and true social excellence.

The Nanovic Institute also serves as an example of how flexible management models - such as a flattened hierarchy and shared decision-making - can foster innovation and inclusion within traditional academic institutions, which often feature rigid power structures. Universities in Poland and Europe, where traditional hierarchical models dominate, can benefit from this approach, becoming more open to diverse perspectives without compromising the quality of teaching and research.

In conclusion, the Nanovic Institute offers valuable inspiration for academic leaders who aim to manage universities effectively in today's environment. Its leadership model serves as an example for European and Polish educational institutions that must not only focus on intellectual development but also on the well-being of their staff and students, while balancing ambition with operational realities.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This case study, based on a single institution, inherently has limitations regarding the generalizability of its results to other academic contexts. The institutional culture at the Nanovic Institute, deeply rooted in the American higher education system, makes it unique and difficult to directly compare with other universities, especially in Europe, where educational systems differ significantly. However, while the results may not be directly transferable to other environments, the analysis of the Nanovic Institute offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of human-centered leadership in specific academic contexts.

Although the study involved interviews with key leadership figures at the Institute, it is important to note that detailed interviews were not conducted with lower-level staff, contractual collaborators, or administrative personnel. However, their opinions were considered through the positive feedback gathered, which indicates widespread support for the leadership principles promoted by the Institute. This feedback confirms that, despite varying positions, staff members appreciate the culture of collaboration, transparency, and trust that underpins the institution.

Additionally, the study had a cross-sectional design, meaning it captured only a specific moment in the development of the Institute without accounting for its earlier stages or future changes in leadership practices. Therefore, while the findings are valuable, they would benefit from further, long-term analysis to capture the full impact of human-centered leadership on institutional culture and academic outcomes.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the mentioned limitations, this study provides a crucial foundation for further exploration. Future research should focus on conducting comparative studies across different institutions to better understand how HCL principles manifest in various organizational cultures and disciplines. Longitudinal studies tracking the implementation of HCL over time would reveal developmental stages and assess the sustainability and long-term impacts of this approach, including its influence on faculty retention, student success, and institutional innovation.

Research should also examine how HCL can be adapted to specific cultural and historical contexts. There is a particular need for studies in post-communist countries, such as Poland, where the legacy of state-run institutions and systemic changes shapes local leadership models. In this context, examining the impact of HCL in different regions of Central and Eastern Europe will help clarify which elements of this approach are universal and which need to be tailored to local traditions and challenges.

Furthermore, focused research on contemporary issues, such as digital transformation, interdisciplinary integration, or the growing importance of online education, could provide valuable guidance for academic leaders navigating these challenges. The development of innovative measurement tools that combine qualitative narratives with quantitative metrics would also strengthen the evidence supporting the efficacy of HCL approaches in various academic environments.

Conclusion

KEY FINDINGS

This study demonstrates how human-centered leadership can shape an organizational culture that prioritizes human dignity while advancing academic excellence. The Nanovic Institute successfully implements three key HCL roles: Defenders who create safe environments, Awakeners who inspire intellectual development, and Connectors who build communities through inclusive programming and flattened hierarchies.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

In the face of unprecedented challenges facing higher education today – such as shifting student demographics, technological disruptions, and increasing globalization – human-centered leadership offers a viable framework for building resilient academic communities grounded in shared purpose and human dignity.

The Nanovic Institute demonstrates that by fostering adaptability in the face of uncertainty and addressing persistent issues such as burnout and turnover among faculty and staff through trust-based recognition practices – all while successfully integrate principles such as human dignity, solidarity, and the common good, within the context of contemporary higher education challenges. As such, it serves as an inspiration for both European and Polish educational institutions, which must focus not only on intellectual development but also on the well-being of their staff and students, carefully balancing ambition with operational reality.

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SUMMARY

This study explores the application of Human-Centered Leadership (HCL) at the Nanovic Institute for European Studies at the University of Notre Dame. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research combines document analysis, structured interviews with key stakeholders, and participant observation during events and meetings. The study examines how HCL, which emphasizes trust, collaboration, and human dignity, shapes decision-making and fosters an inclusive academic culture. While the findings are limited by the focus on a single institution, they offer valuable implications for academic leadership. Future research should include comparative and longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of HCL across different contexts.

Keywords: Management, Leadership, Higher Education, Human-Centered Approach

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