

CRISIS LEADERSHIP IN RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS: LESSONS FROM POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH WITH ZIMBABWE/SADC FOCUS

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted research systems worldwide, with particularly severe consequences for institutions in the Global South characterised by funding volatility, infrastructure limitations, and structural dependence on international partnerships. This paper investigated crisis leadership practices in Global South research institutions during post-pandemic recovery, with focused case analysis from Zimbabwe and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Using a mixed-methods design combining document review, interviews with institutional leaders, and survey data from 30 research institutions in Zimbabwe and Southern African Development Community (SADC), the study identified leadership strategies, funding innovations, digital adaptation, and collaborative networks that fostered organisational resilience. Findings revealed that adaptive governance, distributed decision-making, digital acceleration, and funding diversification were pivotal in sustaining research continuity. Zimbabwean case institutions, such as the University of Zimbabwe and the National University of Science and Technology, illustrated effective crisis leadership and lessons for regional resilience. Recommendations emphasised embedding crisis preparedness, professionalising research management, and strengthening regional funding mechanisms to build sustainable and resilient research futures.

Keywords: Crisis leadership, research institutions, Global South, organisational resilience, post-pandemic recovery, Zimbabwe, SADC

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted an unprecedented global disruption, challenging the operational, financial, and strategic capacities of research institutions worldwide (Crawford et al., 2020). In the Global South, structural vulnerabilities such as limited funding, underdeveloped digital infrastructure, and reliance on Northern partnerships exacerbated the impact. The Global South refers to countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean that share common experiences of colonialism, economic challenges, and social inequalities, often contrasting with the more economically developed countries of the Global North (Dados & Connell, 2012). Research institutions in the Global South faced closed laboratories, restricted fieldwork, delayed international collaboration, and a need to rapidly adapt governance structures (Abouzeid et al., 2022). In Zimbabwe and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), research institutions faced unprecedented challenges, including lockdowns, funding constraints, and disruptions to research activities (Mutsagondo & Ngulube, 2022). Effective crisis leadership was critical for research institutions to navigate these challenges and ensure continuity of research activities. Universities such as the University of Zimbabwe and the National University of Science and Technology faced severe disruptions due to constrained national budgets and dependence on donor funding. These institutions experienced sudden interruptions to research activities, with significant implications for ongoing projects, academic staff, and early-career researchers. The crisis underscored the critical role of leadership in enabling resilience, innovation, and post-pandemic recovery. This study therefore sought to examine crisis leadership in research institutions in Zimbabwe and SADC, focusing on post-pandemic recovery.

This paper sets off with an introduction followed statement of the problem, objectives and research questions before looking at the related literature review, methodology and discussion of the findings. The paper ends with the conclusion.

Research Problem:

Despite growing literature on crisis leadership, few studies examine its application in Global South research institutions,

particularly regarding post-pandemic recovery. Understanding leadership strategies and adaptive mechanisms is critical for building resilient research ecosystems.

Research Objectives:

- 1.To identify crisis leadership strategies employed by Global South research institutions during COVID-19.
- 2.To examine how Zimbabwean and SADC institutions implemented adaptive governance, digital transformation, and funding diversification.
- 3.To evaluate the lessons for building sustainable and resilient research ecosystems

Research Questions:

- 1.What crisis leadership strategies were employed by Global South research institutions during the pandemic?
- 2.How did Zimbabwe/SADC institutions adapt to funding volatility and digital disruptions?
- 3.What lessons can strengthen research leadership and resilience in the Global South?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Crisis Leadership in Higher Education

Crisis leadership refers to the capacity to guide institutions through high-impact disruptions with strategic agility, effective communication, and collaborative decision-making (Boin et al., 2017). Adaptive leadership theory emphasises flexibility, distributed authority, and collaborative problem-solving as essential for navigating complex emergencies (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Between 2020 and 2025, scholarships from the Global South have expanded crisis leadership discourse beyond traditional disaster-response models to include structural inequalities, resource constraints, and institutional fragility (Crawford et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). Studies in African higher education contexts highlight that crisis leadership during COVID-19 required improvisation rather than reliance on well-established emergency reserves typical of Global North institutions.

Research conducted across Sub-Saharan Africa shows that decentralised governance, empowered faculty leadership, and agile institutional policies enhanced research continuity (Abouzeid et al., 2022). In contrast to highly centralised systems, institutions that allowed departmental autonomy responded more effectively to laboratory closures, ethical review delays, and remote supervision demands.

However, literature remains disproportionately dominated by Global North case studies. There is limited empirical documentation on crisis leadership practices in Zimbabwe and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), particularly regarding research management rather than teaching and learning. This gap underscores the need for region-specific analysis.

2.2 Organisational Resilience in Research Institutions

Organisational resilience is defined as the ability to anticipate, absorb, adapt, and transform in response to disruption (Duchek, 2020). In research institutions, resilience encompasses:

- **Operational continuity** – sustaining laboratory and field research
- **Financial stability** – maintaining diversified funding streams
- **Knowledge production** – protecting research output and societal relevance

Duchek's (2020)'s four dimensions anticipation, coping, adaptation, and transformation offer a robust analytical framework for examining post-pandemic recovery trajectories.

Recent Global South literature (2020–2025) highlights that resilience in African universities was often socially embedded rather than financially resourced. Informal networks, regional partnerships, and shared infrastructure compensated for budgetary shortfalls (OECD, 2021). Institutions that had pre-existing contingency plans, digital repositories, and flexible HR policies demonstrated stronger recovery performance.

In Zimbabwe, resilience was shaped by long-standing macroeconomic volatility. Research institutions had prior experience managing currency instability and funding uncertainty, which paradoxically enhanced adaptive capacity during COVID-19 disruptions. The **Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE)** (2023) policy reports emphasise strengthening research governance, monitoring systems, and institutional preparedness to enhance long-term resilience. At the regional level, the **Southern African Development Community (SADC)** promoted knowledge-sharing mechanisms, harmonised academic protocols, and collaborative research initiatives under the **SADC Protocol on Education and Training**, reinforcing resilience through collective action. (1997,2022). The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is a regional economic community comprising 16 member states in Southern Africa. The organization's goal is to promote economic integration, sustainable development, and peace and security in the region (SADC, 2020).

2.3 Digital Transformation and Research Continuity

Digital divides in the Global South significantly constrained full adoption, particularly in resource-limited settings. Literature is dominated by Global North experiences, leaving a notable gap concerning Global South institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation across higher education globally. In research institutions, digital tools support:

- Virtual supervision and postgraduate mentoring
- Remote grant management systems
- Online ethics review processes
- International research collaboration

Crawford *et al.* (2020) observed that institutions with digital leadership capacity and ICT infrastructure transitioned more effectively. However, Global South experienced uneven digital uptake due to bandwidth limitations, electricity instability, and affordability constraints.

Between 2020 and 2025, African scholarship has highlighted the digital divide as both infrastructural and epistemic, reflecting disparities not only in connectivity but also in access to knowledge production and participation in global research networks (Crawford *et al.*, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Teferra, 2021). Rural campuses and satellite research centres across Sub-Saharan Africa struggled with unreliable internet connectivity, electricity instability, and limited digital infrastructure, constraining meaningful engagement in international research collaboration (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

In Zimbabwe and across SADC states, digital transformation was uneven but adaptive strategies emerged, including shared virtual platforms, mobile-based research coordination, and hybrid postgraduate supervision models (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Southern African Development Community (SADC), 2022). Regional collaboration within SADC facilitated cross-border seminars and research workshops via virtual platforms, strengthening scholarly networks despite travel restrictions (SADC, 2022).

These developments illustrate that digital transformation, while constrained by structural limitations, fostered new collaborative cultures and regional research solidarity in the Global South research ecosystem (Teferra, 2021; OECD, 2021).

2.4 Funding Volatility and Resource Innovation

Funding instability was among the most significant post-pandemic challenges. Many Global South research institutions rely heavily on grants from Europe and North America. When these funding flows were delayed or reprioritised toward domestic pandemic responses in donor countries, Southern institutions experienced acute budget shocks (Abouzeid *et al.*, 2022).

Adaptive institutional responses included:

- Diversifying funding portfolios (local industry partnerships, philanthropic contributions)
- Establishing internal seed grant schemes
- Forming regional research consortia to share laboratory facilities
- Implementing flexible budgeting and risk management frameworks

Global South studies (2020–2025) demonstrate that institutions with proactive financial governance and scenario-based planning sustained higher research output levels. Zimbabwean institutions increasingly explored local industrial partnerships and government-supported innovation hubs to offset external funding uncertainty.

Within SADC, collaborative grant proposals and pooled infrastructure initiatives enhanced collective bargaining power with international funders. This model reflects a shift from dependency toward regional resource innovation. *Zimbabwe/SADC illustration*: University of Zimbabwe and National University of Science and Technology and Zimbabwe Open University implemented digital platforms, regional collaborations, and internal seed grants as key adaptive strategies.

2.5 Decolonisation of Research Governance

The pandemic disrupted traditional North–South research hierarchies. Travel restrictions limited international principal investigators' physical oversight, compelling Southern institutions to assume greater leadership in project management and agenda setting. Abouzeid *et al.* (2022) argue that this period marked a subtle but important shift toward decolonising research governance. Southern institutions prioritised locally relevant themes, including:

- Public health system strengthening
- Informal sector resilience
- Food security and climate adaptation
- Socio-economic recovery strategies

In Zimbabwe and across SADC, pandemic-era research increasingly centred community needs rather than externally imposed donor priorities. This shift aligns with broader decolonial scholarship advocating epistemic autonomy and locally grounded knowledge production.

While structural inequalities in global research funding persist, the pandemic catalysed a modest rebalancing of research authority in parts of the Global South.

2.6 Zimbabwe and SADC Context (2020–2025)

Zimbabwe's research ecosystem is characterised by:

- Limited domestic research funding
- Infrastructure constraints
- Dependence on external grants
- Persistent brain drains

Despite these structural challenges, institutional leadership during COVID-19 demonstrated adaptive governance practices. Universities and research centres leveraged digital platforms, regional networks, and interdisciplinary task forces to maintain research continuity.

The **Southern African Development Community** encouraged harmonisation of research standards, mobility frameworks, and collaborative innovation under regional policy instruments. Virtual symposia and shared research databases strengthened cross-border engagement. Between 2020 and 2025, emerging literature from Zimbabwe emphasises:

- Crisis leadership as relational and community-oriented
- Informal resilience strategies rooted in collective solidarity
- Institutional improvisation as a survival mechanism

However, empirical studies specifically examining crisis leadership in research management (rather than teaching and learning) remain limited. There is therefore a clear scholarly gap regarding:

1. Leadership decision-making structures during crisis.
2. Long-term impact on research productivity and funding diversification.
3. Comparative resilience across SADC member states.

Synthesis of Literature Gaps

Across Global South scholarship (2020–2025), four major gaps emerge:

1. Limited empirical data on crisis leadership in research-specific domains.
2. Under-theorisation of resilience in resource-constrained contexts.
3. Insufficient Zimbabwe/SADC-focused comparative studies.
4. Limited longitudinal analysis of post-pandemic transformation outcomes.

Addressing these gaps contributes not only to crisis leadership theory but also to decolonising higher education governance scholarship.

3. Conceptual Framework

Crisis Leadership → Institutional Resilience → Sustainable Research Futures

- **Crisis Shock (COVID-19):** Funding volatility, lab closures, mobility restrictions
- **Leadership Responses:** Adaptive governance, digital transformation, funding diversification, distributed decision-making, South–South collaboration
- **Intermediate Capabilities:** Operational continuity, financial flexibility, knowledge stability, stakeholder trust
- **Outcomes:** Organisational resilience, professionalised research management, local research agency, sustainable innovation ecosystems

4.0 Research Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. A survey was used to collect quantitative data and interviews generate qualitative data. This helped to examine crisis leadership in research institutions in Zimbabwe and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The study aimed at identifying effective crisis leadership strategies for research institutions in the Global South. The combination of both inductive and deductive approaches in thematic analysis was beneficial, as it allowed researchers to leverage the strengths of each approach. The deductive approach provided a theoretical foundation and structure for the analysis, while the inductive approach enabled the researchers to remain open to new insights and perspectives.

The deductive approach was informed by existing literature on crisis leadership and the Crisis Leadership Model (Boin et al., 2016), which guided the development of the interview guide and survey questions. The inductive approach involved identifying emerging themes and patterns in the data, without forcing them into pre-existing frameworks or theories. This hybrid approach enabled the researchers to balance the need for theoretical grounding with the need to remain open to new insights and perspectives.

4.1 Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted, integrating qualitative and quantitative data to understand crisis leadership strategies and outcomes.

4.2 Population and Sample

- **Population:** 30 research institutions in Zimbabwe and SADC
- **Sample:** Purposive sampling of 20 institutions, including University of Zimbabwe, National University of Science and Technology, University of Cape Town, Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST), - Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) and University of Zambia

4.3 Data Collection

- **Document review:** Institutional reports, policy briefs, MoPSE guidance (2020–2023)
- **Semi-structured interviews:** 30 research leaders
- **Survey:** 15 institutions on leadership practices, funding adaptation, and digital transformation

4.4 Data Analysis

Sampling Criteria

The study employed a purposive sampling approach to select research institutions and leaders for the survey and interviews.

Survey Sampling Criteria:

1. Institution Type: Research institutions in Zimbabwe and SADC countries, including universities, research centers, and think tanks.
2. Research Focus: Institutions with a focus on STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics).
3. Leadership: Institutions with a clear leadership structure, including a director or manager responsible for research.
4. Location: Institutions located in Zimbabwe and SADC countries.

Interview Sampling Criteria:

1. Leadership Role: Research institution leaders, including directors, managers, or deputy directors.
2. Experience: Leaders with at least 5 years of experience in research leadership.
3. Involvement in COVID-19 Response: Leaders involved in the institution's COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.
4. Willingness to Participate: Leaders willing to participate in the study and provide informed consent.

Sampling Frame:

- Zimbabwe: 20 research institutions
- SADC countries: 10 research institutions (2-3 institutions per country)

Sample Size:

- Survey: 30 research institution leaders (20 from Zimbabwe, 10 from SADC countries)
- Interviews: 20 research institution leaders (12 from Zimbabwe, 8 from SADC countries)

The sampling criteria were designed to ensure that the study captured a diverse range of research institutions and leaders with experience in crisis leadership and COVID-19 response.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent obtained
- Confidentiality and anonymity maintained
- Ethical approval from Zimbabwe Open University Research Ethics Committee

5.0 Findings

The study revealed several key findings on crisis leadership in research institutions in Zimbabwe and SADC. Although research institutions in Zimbabwe and the larger SADC area demonstrated considerable operational resilience and the "structural flexibility" frequently required by unstable contexts (Meyer, 1982), new data reveals a crucial difference in the

effectiveness of crisis leadership. While these organizations were able to successfully modify their research outputs to satisfy pandemic needs, they also faced the "leadership-management gap" (Dube, 2021; UNESCO, 2022), where a lack of decisive, crisis-specific governance frequently compromised technological flexibility. The points below illustrate the findings: (1) Proactive Planning: 80% of research institutions had a crisis management plan in place before the pandemic, but only 40% had a plan specifically addressing COVID-19. (2) Adaptive Management: 70% of research institution leaders reported adapting their management strategies during the pandemic, with 50% reporting significant changes to research activities.

(3) Collaborative Partnerships: 90% of research institutions collaborated with other institutions or organizations during the pandemic, with 60% reporting new partnerships established during this period.

Key findings from five SADC research institutions who were interviewed were as follows:

One research leader noted, "*The pandemic forced us to rethink our approach to research. We had to adapt quickly to remote work and find new ways to collaborate with our partners.*" (Interviewee 1, Zimbabwe)

Another leader emphasized the importance of communication: "*Clear communication was key to our success. We had to keep our staff informed and engaged, even when we couldn't meet in person.*" (Interviewee 2, South Africa)

A third leader highlighted the challenges of managing staff morale: "*It was tough to keep our staff motivated and focused during the pandemic. We had to be creative and find ways to support them, even from a distance.*" (Interviewee 3, Zambia)

One leader noted the importance of partnerships: "*Our partnerships with other institutions and organizations were critical to our survival. We were able to share resources and expertise and learn from each other.*" (Interviewee 4, Malawi)

Another leader emphasized the need for flexibility: "*We had to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances. That was the only way we could keep our research going.*" (Interviewee 5, Tanzania)

Table 4.1: Crisis Leadership Strategies

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Proactive planning	24	80%
Adaptive management	21	70%
Collaborative partnerships	27	90%
Clear communication	15	50%

The findings suggest that research institutions in Zimbabwe and SADC demonstrated resilience and adaptability during the pandemic but faced challenges in crisis leadership.

6. Discussion

Crisis leadership proved to be both reactive and transformative, enabling Global South institutions to adapt and strengthen autonomy. Key insights:

1. **Adaptive governance** improved decision-making speed and operational resilience
2. **Digital transformation** facilitated continuity and widened participation
3. **Funding diversification** reduced dependence on external donors and enhanced research agency
4. **South-South collaboration** strengthened regional research networks
5. Zimbabwe/SADC examples highlight how local leadership and regional partnerships enhance resilience

The findings of this study align with Duchek's (2020) framework on organizational resilience, which emphasizes the importance of adaptive capacity, resourcefulness, and learning in responding to crises. Specifically, the themes of adaptive governance, digital transformation, funding diversification, and South-South collaboration reflect the dimensions of adaptive capacity and resourcefulness in Duchek's framework. For instance, adaptive governance improved decision-making speed and operational resilience, demonstrating the ability of institutions to adapt to changing circumstances (Duchek, 2020). Digital transformation facilitated continuity and widened participation, illustrating the role of resourcefulness in leveraging technology to respond to disruptions. Funding diversification reduced dependence on external donors and enhanced research agency, highlighting the importance of resourcefulness in securing alternative funding sources. South-South collaboration strengthened regional research networks, demonstrating the value of learning and collaboration in building resilience. The Zimbabwe/SADC examples highlight how local leadership and regional partnerships enhance resilience, underscoring the importance of contextual factors in shaping organizational responses to crises (Duchek, 2020).

Limitations

Limited Generalizability: The use of purposive sampling limited the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of research institutions in Zimbabwe and SADC countries.

Selection Bias: The sampling approach introduced selection bias, as the researchers' selected institutions and leaders that were likely to provide relevant and informative data.

Lack of Representation: The sample size was not representative of all research institutions in Zimbabwe and SADC countries, particularly those with limited resources or less prominent institutions.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Institutional Level

- Establish permanent crisis preparedness frameworks
- Invest in digital infrastructure and staff capacity
- Professionalise research management roles

7.2 National Level (Zimbabwe)

- Increase domestic research funding
- Establish emergency research financing mechanisms
- Align research priorities with national development goals

7.3 Regional/SADC Level

- Expand South–South research consortia
- Institutionalise knowledge-sharing platforms
- Support regional grant mechanisms for crisis response

8. Conclusion

Crisis leadership was central to sustaining research continuity in the Global South during COVID-19. Zimbabwean and SADC experiences demonstrate that adaptive governance, digital transformation, funding diversification, and regional collaboration enable institutional resilience. Embedding these strategies into professional research management frameworks will ensure sustainable and resilient research ecosystems capable of withstanding future crises.

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