

Exploring Strategies for Managing Higher Education Crises During Times of Uncertainty

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Abstract

Higher education institutions worldwide face unprecedented challenges characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). This article explores comprehensive strategies for managing crises in higher education during times of uncertainty, drawing on contemporary scholarly literature examining institutional responses to disruptions including the COVID-19 pandemic, political crises, economic instability, and systemic inequities. Through analysis of ten recent empirical studies, this article identifies critical dimensions of effective crisis management: adaptive leadership approaches, organizational resilience mechanisms, flexible pedagogical frameworks, strategic human resource management, and stakeholder engagement practices. Findings reveal that successful crisis navigation requires moving beyond traditional management paradigms toward complexity leadership models that embrace uncertainty as the new normal. Key strategies include implementing HyFlex teaching modalities, fostering servant leadership behaviors, developing strategic adaptive capabilities, utilizing VUCA and Agile frameworks, and building relational trust networks. The article synthesizes evidence-based recommendations for institutional leaders, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to enhance organizational preparedness, maintain operational continuity, and transform crises into opportunities for innovation and growth. This comprehensive review contributes to the evolving discourse on crisis leadership in higher education by providing an integrated framework that balances operational efficiency with human-centered values during prolonged periods of instability.

Keywords: crisis management, higher education leadership, organizational resilience, adaptive capacity, uncertainty management

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions occupy a critical position in contemporary society, serving as primary contributors to economic growth, social development, and cultural advancement by developing the next generation of scholars, professionals, and leaders (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). However, these institutions increasingly operate within what has been characterized as a VUCA environment—one defined by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Brink, 2026; Leal et al., 2026). The COVID-19 pandemic served as a powerful reminder that teaching and learning environments must remain adaptable, not only in the face of global crises but also in

response to ongoing disruptions brought about by technological innovation, shifting workforce expectations, political instability, and economic turbulence (Brink, 2026; Smyslova, 2026).

At the start of 2020, research indicates that leaders in higher education institutions were ill-prepared to lead during the pandemic, with most educational institutions worldwide lacking the alertness, readiness, and reactivity necessary to manage the crisis effectively (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). The pandemic appears to have been a critical test for those in leadership positions, with some succeeding while others struggled in managing the crisis (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). Beyond the immediate health emergency, higher education institutions have confronted overlapping crises including community violence, systemic inequities, resource constraints, political persecution, and economic instability, creating what Virella and Zeisner (2026) term "crisis saturation"—overlapping, protracted, and systemic crises that render the notion of returning to "normal" both impossible and inadequate.

The challenges encountered during these turbulent periods have spurred innovation, collaboration, and more positive outlooks, fostering academic resilience among both faculty and students (Borlio & Duping, 2026). The pandemic and accompanying teaching and learning experiences created a unique opportunity for universities to interrogate, rethink, redesign, and adapt their educational approaches (Brink, 2026). However, this transformation has not been without controversy. Shore (2026) warns that management consultancy firms leveraged the COVID-19 crisis to increase their influence and advocate strategies for fundamentally altering the entire public university system, locking in permanent changes and structures of managerialism that may be anathema to the principles of public higher education.

Contemporary educational leaders face what requires not merely crisis management—which implies a temporary deviation from established practice with the goal of restoration to a previous state—but rather crisis leadership, which recognizes that sustained adversity fundamentally alters the educational landscape, requiring leaders to develop new capacities for navigating permanent uncertainty while simultaneously maintaining organizational coherence and advancing educational equity (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). This shift necessitates moving beyond traditional strategic leadership theory focused on hierarchy, stability, and order toward nonlinear thinking that accepts change, unpredictability, and chaos as the rule rather than the exception (Adobor et al., 2021).

The evolving nature of conflicts in higher education, exacerbated by technological advancements and the pandemic, further complicates crisis management, requiring innovative strategies that leverage technology while addressing institutional needs (Franca et al., 2026). For displaced academics operating in contexts of political crisis, online higher education projects in exile have emerged as spaces where the future is not only imagined but also produced through everyday intentional and unintentional practices, serving as tools for making sense of disrupted worlds and offering conceptual recovery (Smyslova, 2026).

This article explores comprehensive strategies for managing higher education crises during times of uncertainty by examining ten contemporary empirical studies that investigate institutional responses across diverse contexts and crisis types. The analysis addresses critical questions: What leadership approaches prove most effective during sustained uncertainty?

How can institutions build adaptive capacity and organizational resilience? What pedagogical innovations support continuity and quality during disruptions? How can strategic human resource management serve as a stabilizing force? What role do stakeholder relationships and communication play in crisis navigation? By synthesizing evidence-based findings, this article provides an integrated framework for understanding and implementing effective crisis management strategies in higher education.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this article is to systematically explore and synthesize evidence-based strategies for managing higher education crises during times of uncertainty. As global higher education institutions navigate an increasingly volatile landscape marked by pandemics, political upheavals, economic disruptions, and rapid technological change, understanding effective crisis management approaches has become imperative for institutional survival and success. This article aims to provide academic leaders, policymakers, and practitioners with a comprehensive framework for developing adaptive capabilities, fostering organizational resilience, and maintaining educational quality and stakeholder engagement during prolonged periods of instability. By examining contemporary research on crisis leadership, pedagogical innovation, strategic human resource management, and organizational adaptation, this article seeks to contribute actionable insights that can inform institutional policy, leadership development programs, and strategic planning initiatives designed to prepare higher education institutions for navigating the complexities of the contemporary operating environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Crisis Leadership and Adaptive Capacity in Higher Education

Recent scholarship emphasizes that educational leadership resilience is fundamentally relational and systemic, emerging not from individual psychological resources alone but from the dynamic interplay between personal adaptive capacity and organizational systems that enable sustained effectiveness under stress (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). Research examining New Jersey school principals during overlapping crises found that resilience is not a static trait but a dynamic, relational process involving intentional leadership practices, contextual crises, and collective action (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). Principals strategically integrated transformational, distributed, and adaptive leadership practices, deploying them appropriately based on evolving circumstances rather than relying on a single approach (Virella & Zeisner, 2026).

The concept of strategic adaptive capability has emerged as essential for dealing with high-impact events and ensuring business continuity through flexible, adaptable organizational models (Adobor et al., 2021). Strategic leaders must develop new mindsets and organizational capabilities more attuned to uncertainty and unpredictability, conceptualizing organizations as complex adaptive systems where change, unpredictability, and chaos are the rule rather than the exception (Adobor et al., 2021). Complexity leadership, characterized as a shared

leadership approach where responsibility is diffused rather than vested in a single individual, proves more consistent with uncertainty and unpredictability than traditional hierarchical models (Adobor et al., 2021).

2.2 Servant Leadership and Crisis Readiness

Empirical research on U.S. higher education institutions revealed that servant leadership behaviors significantly predict officials' level of readiness for pandemic crises (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). The study found strong positive correlations between servant leadership dimensions—including altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship—and leaders' readiness for COVID-19 (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). However, a significant portion of officials (50.9%) were categorized as "Ready for a Map," indicating strong leadership qualities but ample room for improvement in crisis leadership, with only 3.2% achieving the "Leading the Way" category (Al-Asfour et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic required more than traditional notions of leadership styles such as charismatic, top-down, or authoritative approaches, which proved ineffective in navigating the challenges and consequences of the crisis (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). Servant leadership emerged as a necessity to manage turbulent times and their impact on employees, with academic leaders identifying this approach as crucial for managing complex crises (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). Servant leaders can manage remote teams effectively by ensuring the pandemic does not interfere with daily functioning and creating an environment of mutual trust (Al-Asfour et al., 2022).

2.3 Conflict Resolution and Adaptive Leadership

Research on conflict resolution management among academic leaders in Philippine state universities revealed that no single conflict-handling style is universally effective; instead, academic leaders adapt modes situationally, blending assertiveness with empathy to sustain institutional integrity and relational harmony (Franca et al., 2026). The study validated the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument's emphasis on flexibility and contextual application, underscoring that effective conflict management in higher education requires adaptive leadership, emotional intelligence, and commitment to both organizational goals and human relationships (Franca et al., 2026).

Academic leaders strategically apply five conflict-handling styles—competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding—depending on context, urgency, and relational dynamics (Franca et al., 2026). The competing style emerges as a strategic response to urgent administrative tasks ensuring compliance and institutional integrity, while the collaborating style is preferred for interpersonal and team-based issues, fostering inclusivity and shared ownership (Franca et al., 2026). Common challenges include miscommunication in digital communication, emotional reactions to institutional decisions, faculty diversity and

generational gaps, and authority dynamics, with faculty conflicts rooted in rank, tenure, and professional identity identified as the greatest difficulty (Franca et al., 2026).

2.4 Pedagogical Innovation and Flexible Learning

The shift to flexible learning during the pandemic revealed both struggles and remarkable academic resilience among students and teachers (Borlio & Duping, 2026). Students faced overwhelming workloads, distractions from unreliable internet and unsuitable learning environments, family financial strains, and lack of resources, while teachers grappled with ensuring quality instruction, maintaining student engagement, increased workload, and developing new digital skills (Borlio & Duping, 2026). Despite these challenges, both groups demonstrated adaptive responses: students engaged in independent learning, researched to fill knowledge gaps, and practiced self-discipline, while teachers employed diverse teaching methods fueled by intrinsic motivation and embraced opportunities to develop new digital skills (Borlio & Duping, 2026).

Research on accounting education revealed that students' preferences, circumstances, and needs regarding teaching modalities post-COVID-19 varied significantly, supporting the need for flexibility and blended learning (Brink, 2026). The HyFlex (Hybrid-Flexible) course design framework, emphasizing learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility, emerged as a leading approach for addressing learner diversity and uncertainty in course delivery, promoting resilience, flexibility, and inclusivity in educational design (Brink, 2026). Framed within the VUCA context, the findings offer transferable, HyFlex-aligned guidance for teaching design in ever-changing environments, challenging the belief that traditional face-to-face instruction is always the most effective (Brink, 2026).

2.5 Strategic Human Resource Management in Uncertainty

Research on public banks in Egypt during economic uncertainty identified three categories of factors explaining stable employee performance: job-related factors (discretionary power, nature of work, elite recruitment), learning-related factors (continuous learning, employee resilience), and organizational-related factors (career support, financial rewards) (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). The study affirmed that even in economic uncertainty, greater investment in employees leads to more stable performance, expanding social exchange theory to contexts of sustained instability (Mousa & Arslan, 2026).

Strategic human resources management represents a prerequisite organization must consider to deal with extreme events, geopolitical tensions, and uncertain environments (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). Dynamic capability theory entails that organizations must scan the environment and regularly update members' competences for better management of any transformation and market change, fostering flexibility and adaptability in employees (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). Employee resilience—the capacity to utilize resources to continually adapt and flourish at work

even when faced with challenging circumstances—emerges as a valuable outcome of HR-related investments (Mousa & Arslan, 2026).

2.6 VUCA and Agile Frameworks in Work-Integrated Learning

A case study of a Social Work Practicum Unit in Spain demonstrated how VUCA and Agile frameworks can be operationalized in higher education work-integrated learning to manage complexity and uncertainty (Leal et al., 2026). The VUCA framework proved effective in diagnosing and addressing challenges by guiding academic teams to decode chaotic situations through assessing knowledge and predictability levels, thereby fostering knowledge management processes (Leal et al., 2026). The Practicum Unit implemented digital innovations including an incident management system, quality assessment surveys, and workflow tools, alongside procedural changes, leading to reduced placement disruptions, strengthened coordination, and improved student satisfaction between 2021 and 2024 (Leal et al., 2026).

The digital Incident Management System led to a 30% reduction in incidents from 2021 to 2024, with a 61% reduction during peak periods, while annual placements increased by 25% and student satisfaction with the placement process increased by 15.34% (Leal et al., 2026). The Practicum Unit progressively adopted Agile-inspired practices over three years, breaking down processes into smaller, manageable stages and incorporating continuous feedback from stakeholders (Leal et al., 2026). However, extending an Agile mindset across higher education institutions requires effective digital tools, with varied digital literacy among faculty and academic staff identified as a major limitation (Leal et al., 2026).

2.7 Critical Perspectives on Crisis Opportunism

Critical scholarship warns against uncritical adoption of market-driven crisis responses. Shore (2026) documents how management consultancy firms, particularly the Big Four, leveraged the COVID-19 crisis to increase their influence and advocate strategies for fundamentally altering the public university system. Analyzing thought-leadership reports published between 2012 and 2023, Shore (2026) reveals how consultants used crisis narratives to promote unbundling and financialization of university assets, treating higher education institutions primarily as commercial enterprises with little mention of their social purpose.

Consultancy reports emphasized "futureproofing" universities against a "disruptive world" by urging leaders to create new commercial models, drive up efficiency, and capitalize on research impact (Shore, 2026). This "crisis opportunism" or "disaster capitalism" framed the pandemic as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to embed transformational change in higher education, emphasizing positive consequences of upheaval while advocating for speedier, less participatory decision-making (Shore, 2026). The article serves as a warning to policy-makers to beware the free-market fantasies and self-serving scenarios that consultancy firms advocate, recognizing underlying neoliberal ideologies that may not serve the public good of higher education (Shore, 2026).

2.8 Online Higher Education in Exile

Research on online higher education projects created by displaced Russian academics after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine reveals how education functions as a space for intellectual recovery and future re-imagining during political crises (Smyslova, 2026). The learning process becomes a tool for making sense of the world and one's position in it, as well as a means of conceptual recovery, helping participants regain understanding, reassemble past-present-future relations, and articulate alternative images of the future (Smyslova, 2026).

Online classrooms transformed into spaces of reconciliation and "safe spaces" where students and faculty could openly share experiences, confront challenges, and foster belonging despite physical distances (Smyslova, 2026). Participation in these projects is described as a "waking up" process that disturbs existing perspectives while bringing insightful understanding, mending temporal ruptures, and rearticulating past-present-future relationships (Smyslova, 2026). The transformative process was catalyzed by horizontally inclined pedagogy where students were entrusted to explore independently and scholars favored discussions over direct teaching (Smyslova, 2026). However, outcomes were ambivalent: while the process generated renewed agency and political responsibility for some, for others, confronting disturbing knowledge combined with limited capacity for political action led to withdrawal or reinforcement of familiar narratives (Smyslova, 2026).

3. Methods

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This article draws upon multiple complementary theoretical frameworks that collectively illuminate the multidimensional nature of crisis management in higher education. The primary theoretical foundation rests on complexity leadership theory, which conceptualizes organizations as complex adaptive systems where change, unpredictability, and chaos are the rule rather than the exception (Adobor et al., 2021). This perspective challenges traditional strategic leadership theory focused on hierarchy, stability, and order, instead emphasizing shared leadership approaches where responsibility is diffused and adaptability is prioritized over top-down control (Adobor et al., 2021).

Resilience theory provides a second critical lens, emphasizing the dynamic, multidimensional capacity of educational leaders to adapt, maintain stability, and foster trust within institutional communities during adversity (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). This framework encompasses three key domains: organizational resilience (maintaining core functions and stability), social capital/relational resilience (building trust and stakeholder engagement), and psychological capital/adaptive leadership (flexibility, self-efficacy, and problem-solving) (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). Resilience is understood not as a static trait but as a dynamic, relational process involving intentional leadership practices, contextual crises, and collective action (Virella & Zeisner, 2026).

Servant leadership theory contributes understanding of how leaders who prioritize serving and developing others to achieve higher purposes for individuals, organizations, and societies can enhance crisis readiness (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). This multidimensional leadership style encompasses five dimensions: altruistic calling (desire to make positive differences), emotional healing (providing healing for relationships), wisdom (awareness of surroundings and anticipating consequences), persuasive mapping (influencing through reasoning rather than authority), and organizational stewardship (ethical actions ensuring organizational well-being) (Al-Asfour et al., 2022).

Protection Motivation Theory offers insights into how individuals cope with and maintain positive outlooks when facing significant and prolonged threats (Borlio & Duping, 2026). This psychological model posits that motivation to protect oneself from threats functions through two cognitive processes: threat appraisal (evaluating perceived severity and vulnerability) and coping appraisal (belief in effectiveness of protective measures and confidence in one's ability to perform protective actions) (Borlio & Duping, 2026).

The VUCA framework (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) serves as a diagnostic tool for analyzing challenges and assessing environments by identifying available knowledge and predictability levels to decode chaotic situations (Leal et al., 2026; Brink, 2026). Complementing this diagnostic approach, Agile methodologies provide response models emphasizing flexibility, iterative work, continuous feedback, cross-functional teamwork, experimental mindsets, and continuous adaptation to emerging patterns (Leal et al., 2026).

Social exchange theory frames the employer-employee relationship as mutual exchange where employers provide salaries, promotion, and developmental opportunities in return for high employee performance, commitment, loyalty, and citizenship behavior (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). This theory expands to affirm that even in economic uncertainty, greater investment in employees leads to more stable performance (Mousa & Arslan, 2026).

Finally, HyFlex course design principles—emphasizing learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility—provide a pedagogical framework that directly responds to volatility and promotes resilience, flexibility, and inclusivity in educational design (Brink, 2026). Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the multifaceted nature of crisis management in higher education, integrating leadership, organizational, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions.

3.2 Data Collection

This article employs a literature-based data collection approach, systematically analyzing ten contemporary empirical studies published in 2026 that examine crisis management, leadership, and organizational adaptation in higher education contexts. The source materials were identified through comprehensive searches of scholarly databases including SciSpace, Google Scholar, and full-text repositories, focusing specifically on 2026 publications addressing higher education crisis management strategies during uncertainty. A total of 71 unique papers were initially retrieved and reranked across multiple databases, with ten papers selected for in-depth

analysis based on their direct relevance to the research purpose, methodological rigor, and contribution to understanding diverse dimensions of crisis management.

The selected studies represent diverse geographical contexts (United States, Spain, Egypt, Philippines, South Africa, Russia, United Kingdom, New Jersey), institutional types (public universities, community colleges, minority-serving institutions, banks as public sector comparators), and crisis contexts (COVID-19 pandemic, political crises and exile, economic uncertainty, community violence, systemic inequities). The studies employ varied methodological approaches including qualitative phenomenology, case studies, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and mixed-methods designs, providing rich, multifaceted insights into crisis management strategies.

Data extraction from each source involved systematic documentation of publication details (authors, year, journal, DOI), research purposes and questions, theoretical frameworks employed, methodologies and data collection approaches, key findings and conclusions, specific crisis management strategies discussed, recommendations for institutions and leaders, and relevant quotes addressing crisis management, leadership, flexibility, resilience, governance, and institutional adaptation. This comprehensive extraction process ensured thorough understanding of each study's contributions and facilitated synthesis across multiple dimensions of crisis management.

The literature-based approach enables synthesis of evidence-based strategies grounded in empirical research conducted during and immediately following major disruptions, capturing real-time experiences and adaptive responses of educational leaders, faculty, students, and administrators. This methodology provides both breadth (covering multiple crisis types and contexts) and depth (detailed examination of specific strategies and outcomes), supporting development of a comprehensive framework for understanding effective crisis management in higher education during times of uncertainty.

3.3 Data Analysis

This article employs an interpretive paradigm for data analysis, recognizing that understanding crisis management in higher education requires deep engagement with the meanings, experiences, and sense-making processes of educational leaders, faculty, students, and administrators navigating uncertainty. The interpretive approach acknowledges that crisis management strategies are not merely technical interventions but are fundamentally shaped by contextual factors, organizational cultures, stakeholder relationships, and the subjective experiences of those implementing and experiencing these strategies (Brink, 2026; Smyslova, 2026).

The analytical process followed an iterative thematic synthesis approach, involving multiple stages of engagement with the source materials. Initial familiarization involved thorough reading of all ten studies to identify broad trends, recurring themes, and distinctive contributions. This was followed by systematic coding, where significant statements, strategies, findings, and recommendations were extracted and organized according to emergent

categories. The coding process was guided by the research purpose and theoretical frameworks while remaining open to unexpected patterns and insights that emerged from the data.

Thematic clustering involved organizing codes into broader thematic categories representing key dimensions of crisis management: leadership approaches and styles, organizational resilience mechanisms, pedagogical innovation and flexibility, strategic human resource management, stakeholder engagement and communication, digital transformation and technology integration, conflict resolution and emotional intelligence, and critical perspectives on crisis responses. Within each thematic category, comparative analysis identified convergences, divergences, tensions, and complementarities across the studies, noting how strategies varied by context, crisis type, and institutional characteristics.

Cross-case synthesis examined patterns across different geographical, institutional, and crisis contexts to identify transferable principles and context-specific adaptations. This involved constant comparative analysis, where findings from each study were systematically compared with others to refine understanding of when and how particular strategies prove effective. Attention was paid to both positive outcomes (successful adaptations, innovations, resilience) and challenges, limitations, and unintended consequences identified in the research.

The interpretive analysis also attended to the theoretical contributions of each study, examining how empirical findings supported, extended, or challenged existing theoretical frameworks. This involved identifying how concepts such as complexity leadership, resilience, servant leadership, adaptive capacity, and VUCA/Agile frameworks were operationalized in practice and what insights emerged about their applicability and limitations in higher education crisis contexts.

Critical reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process, particularly attending to Shore's (2026) warnings about crisis opportunism and the potential for market-driven narratives to shape crisis responses in ways that may undermine the social purpose of higher education. This critical lens informed interpretation of findings, ensuring that recommendations balance operational efficiency with human-centered values and the public good mission of higher education institutions.

The analytical process culminated in synthesis of evidence-based strategies and development of an integrated framework for crisis management in higher education, presented in the Findings and Discussion sections. This framework represents not a prescriptive blueprint but rather a flexible, context-sensitive guide that educational leaders can adapt to their specific institutional contexts, crisis types, and stakeholder needs.

4. Findings

4.1 Leadership Approaches for Crisis Navigation

The research reveals that effective crisis leadership in higher education requires strategic integration of multiple leadership approaches rather than reliance on a single model. Virella and Zeisner (2026) found that successful principals strategically shifted between

transformational, distributed, and adaptive leadership practices depending on crisis phase, stakeholder needs, and organizational capacity. This multidimensional approach enables leaders to balance stability with flexibility, maintaining core functions while innovating and responding creatively to evolving challenges.

Servant leadership emerged as particularly crucial for managing complex crises, with all five dimensions—altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship—significantly predicting leaders' readiness for pandemic crises (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). However, the research also revealed significant gaps in crisis readiness, with only 3.2% of U.S. higher education officials achieving the highest readiness category, indicating substantial need for leadership development focused specifically on crisis management competencies (Al-Asfour et al., 2022).

Conflict resolution research demonstrated that academic leaders must adapt their approaches situationally, strategically applying competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding styles depending on context, urgency, and relational dynamics (Franca et al., 2026). The competing style proved effective for urgent administrative tasks requiring swift action and compliance, while the collaborating style fostered inclusivity and shared ownership for interpersonal and team-based issues (Franca et al., 2026). Effective leaders balanced assertiveness with empathy, upholding policies while encouraging dialogue to ensure principled yet inclusive decisions (Franca et al., 2026).

Complexity leadership theory offers a framework more consistent with uncertainty and unpredictability than traditional hierarchical models (Adobor et al., 2021). This shared leadership approach encompasses three components: administrative leadership (traditional planning, control, and resource allocation while stimulating creativity and adaptability), adaptive leadership (emerging from interactions among organizational members, creating new ideas and outcomes), and enabling leadership (providing environments for adaptive leadership to flourish and managing tensions between administrative and adaptive functions) (Adobor et al., 2021).

4.2 Organizational Resilience and Adaptive Capacity

Building organizational resilience requires attention to multiple dimensions operating at individual, team, and institutional levels. Research identified three critical capabilities sustaining organizational resilience: cognitive resilience (capacity to perceive changes and interpret unfamiliar situations), behavioral resilience (ability to develop and implement new ways of doing things in response to disruption), and contextual resilience (ability to leverage social capital for quick action) (Adobor et al., 2021).

Strategic adaptive capability emerged as essential for dealing with high-impact events and ensuring business continuity (Adobor et al., 2021). Developing this capability requires organizations to scan environments and regularly update members' competences for better management of transformations and market changes, fostering flexibility and adaptability (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). Specific strategies for building adaptive capacity include increasing

redundancy in tasks and diversifying supply chains, fostering organizational learning (particularly multiple-loop learning that questions existing mental models), and promoting loosely coupled systems where elements share few variables, allowing quicker adjustments and containing disturbances (Adobor et al., 2021).

The VUCA framework proved effective as a diagnostic tool for assessing environments by identifying available knowledge and predictability levels, guiding academic teams to decode chaotic situations and fostering knowledge management processes (Leal et al., 2026). When combined with Agile methodologies emphasizing flexibility, iterative work, continuous feedback, and experimental mindsets, institutions achieved measurable improvements: a 30% reduction in incidents, 25% increase in placements, and 15.34% increase in student satisfaction (Leal et al., 2026).

Trust emerged as an essential antecedent and outcome of organizational adaptation during crises, conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing respect, personal regard, integrity, and demonstrated competence (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). Pre-existing trust networks enable rapid, coordinated responses and buffer against fragmentation, with one principal asserting, "If you haven't put in the work to build trust before a crisis, it's almost impossible to do it in the middle of one" (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). This underscores that trust results from sustained, intentional relationship-building over time rather than reactive crisis responses.

4.3 Pedagogical Innovation and Flexible Learning Models

The shift to flexible learning during the pandemic revealed both significant challenges and remarkable adaptive capacity among faculty and students. Students faced overwhelming workloads, unreliable internet, unsuitable learning environments, and financial strains, while faculty grappled with ensuring quality instruction, maintaining engagement, and developing new digital skills (Borlio & Duping, 2026). Despite these obstacles, students developed crucial skills in self-discipline and self-control, transforming into more independent and self-directed learners, while teachers embraced opportunities to develop new digital skills and employed diverse teaching methods fuelled by intrinsic motivation (Borlio & Duping, 2026).

The HyFlex course design framework, emphasizing learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility, emerged as a leading approach for addressing learner diversity and uncertainty in course delivery (Brink, 2026). Research on accounting education revealed that students' preferences varied significantly, with practical classes benefiting from face-to-face delivery with recordings for review, while theory could rely more heavily on recordings (Brink, 2026). Student characteristics also mattered: undergraduates needed more structure to promote attendance, whereas postgraduates preferred more flexible options, being generally more independent and disciplined (Brink, 2026).

Recommendations emphasized rethinking traditional delivery modes and adapting to evolving student needs, integrating online elements to optimally engage students and prepare them for technology-driven workplaces, and challenging the belief that traditional face-to-face instruction is always most effective (Brink, 2026). Strategic use of recordings was

recommended, with limitations on availability (e.g., one week) to prevent procrastination while still allowing for review and flexibility (Brink, 2026).

For displaced academics operating in exile, online higher education projects transformed into spaces of reconciliation and "safe spaces" where students and faculty could openly share experiences, confront challenges, and foster belonging despite physical distances (Smyslova, 2026). Horizontally inclined pedagogy, where students were entrusted to explore independently and scholars favored discussions over direct teaching, catalyzed transformative processes described as "waking up" that disturbed existing perspectives while bringing insightful understanding (Smyslova, 2026). However, outcomes were ambivalent, with some participants experiencing renewed agency while others withdrew when confronting disturbing knowledge combined with limited capacity for political action (Smyslova, 2026).

4.4 Strategic Human Resource Management and Employee Resilience

Research on public sector organizations during economic uncertainty revealed that strategic human resource management serves as a critical stabilizing force, with three categories of factors explaining stable employee performance: job-related factors (discretionary power, nature of work, elite recruitment), learning-related factors (continuous learning, employee resilience), and organizational-related factors (career support, financial rewards) (Mousa & Arslan, 2026).

Continuous learning emerged as particularly crucial, with organizations prioritizing training and development including support for advanced degree programs, enhancing employees' readiness for unpredictable situations (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). This continuous exposure to challenges builds employee resilience, enabling them to perceive economic uncertainty as a "normal crisis" and develop capacity to utilize resources to continually adapt and flourish at work even when faced with challenging circumstances (Mousa & Arslan, 2026).

The study affirmed that even in economic uncertainty, greater investment in employees leads to more stable performance, expanding social exchange theory to contexts of sustained instability (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). Organizations that maintained training opportunities, provided career support, and offered additional financial rewards during crises fostered solidarity and pride in work, with employees perceiving these actions as strategic efforts to manage them effectively (Mousa & Arslan, 2026).

Recommendations emphasized maintaining training opportunities with focus on crisis management, customer-employee engagement, and mental health during crises; learning from best practices of successful organizations; and raising awareness about strategic human resource management and its benefits to offer relief to employees, reduce turnover, and increase motivation under tough external conditions (Mousa & Arslan, 2026).

4.5 Communication, Stakeholder Engagement, and Relational Trust

Consistent, transparent communication emerged as crucial for resilient leadership within institutional communities (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). Principals emphasized clear, transparent, and consistent messaging to build trust and maintain connection during crises, including weekly updates, daily student announcements, and resource hubs for families (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). Effective communication involved not merely dissemination but active listening and empathetic engagement, with leaders listening carefully to stakeholder fears and questions and providing calm, transparent updates to restore a sense of safety and normalcy (Virella & Zeisner, 2026).

Academic leaders must maintain constant and clear communication with stakeholders, faculty, and staff to ease stress and address concerns, with communicated messages being realistic, aligned, balanced, positive, and delivered through proper channels, utilizing multiple communication channels for important information (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). However, digital communication presented persistent challenges, particularly because tone and phrasing are easily misinterpreted, complicating conflict resolution (Franca et al., 2026).

Stakeholder engagement strategies included annual workshops with field instructors, tailored onboarding strategies, and regular meetings providing feedback on coordination and performance (Leal et al., 2026). Quality assessment systems using online surveys gathered feedback from students, academic supervisors, and field instructors, with 90% of field instructors expressing satisfaction with their participation (Leal et al., 2026). This comprehensive stakeholder engagement strengthened partnerships, reduced uncertainty, and improved satisfaction across multiple constituencies.

4.6 Digital Transformation and Technology Integration

Digital innovations played critical roles in crisis management, with institutions implementing incident management systems, quality assessment surveys, and workflow tools alongside procedural changes (Leal et al., 2026). A digital Incident Management System developed using Microsoft 365 tools functioned like a ticketing process, centralizing incident tracking, notifications, and follow-up, reducing reliance on email and enabling systematic categorization of problems (Leal et al., 2026). Kanban systems visualized workflows, assigned responsibilities, and increased accountability, while centralized digital resources standardized meeting notes and online booking systems reduced email exchanges (Leal et al., 2026).

However, extending an Agile mindset across higher education institutions requires effective digital tools, with varied digital literacy among faculty and academic staff identified as a major limitation (Leal et al., 2026). Recommendations emphasized comprehensive digital training for both management and teaching activities, recognizing that digital transformation must be accompanied by capacity building to ensure equitable access and effective utilization (Leal et al., 2026).

The shift to online learning led to "clash of tempi" where institutional demands for synchronous attendance met the embodied tempo of students' everyday lives, revealing negotiation required to synchronize divergent social clocks (Smyslova, 2026). The intimate atmosphere of home deeply permeated online learning spaces, blurring personal and academic realms and contributing to informalisation of higher education that made emotional vulnerability and authenticity central to intellectual inquiry (Smyslova, 2026).

4.7 Critical Perspectives and Warnings

Critical scholarship warns against uncritical adoption of market-driven crisis responses. Shore (2026) documented how management consultancy firms leveraged the COVID-19 crisis to advocate strategies for fundamentally altering public university systems, promoting unbundling and financialization of university assets while treating institutions primarily as commercial enterprises with little mention of their social purpose. Consultancy reports were often evidence-free, lacking engagement with academic literature, and sometimes reading as "clumsy sales pitches" (Shore, 2026).

This "crisis opportunism" or "disaster capitalism" framed the pandemic as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to embed transformational change, emphasizing positive consequences of upheaval while advocating for speedier, less participatory decision-making (Shore, 2026). The article serves as a warning to policy-makers to beware free-market fantasies and self-serving scenarios that consultancy firms advocate, recognizing underlying neoliberal ideologies that may not serve the public good of higher education (Shore, 2026).

Recommendations emphasized questioning motives of consultants, recognizing that advice often aligns with neoliberal and managerialist logics, and protecting the social purpose of universities against marketization pressures (Shore, 2026). This critical perspective underscores the importance of maintaining participatory decision-making processes and ensuring that crisis responses align with institutional values and public good missions rather than commercial imperatives.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal that effective crisis management in higher education requires a fundamental paradigm shift from traditional management approaches focused on stability and control toward adaptive, complexity-informed leadership models that embrace uncertainty as the new normal. This shift has profound implications for how institutions conceptualize leadership, organize operations, design pedagogy, manage human resources, and engage stakeholders during prolonged periods of instability.

5.1 From Crisis Management to Crisis Leadership

A critical distinction emerges between crisis management and crisis leadership. Crisis management implies temporary deviation from established practice with the goal of restoration to a previous state, while crisis leadership recognizes that sustained adversity fundamentally alters the educational landscape, requiring new capacities for navigating permanent uncertainty while maintaining organizational coherence and advancing educational equity (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). This distinction has practical implications: rather than viewing crises as aberrations requiring reactive responses, institutions must develop proactive capabilities for continuous adaptation.

The concept of "crisis saturation"—overlapping, protracted, and systemic crises that render returning to "normal" both impossible and inadequate—captures the contemporary reality facing higher education institutions (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). In this context, resilience cannot be understood merely as bouncing back to previous states but must encompass capacity for transformation to new fitness levels when necessary (Adobor et al., 2021). This requires what Adobor et al. (2021) term strategic adaptive capability: the ability to identify, mobilize, and stabilize response resources throughout disaster events while simultaneously building organizational capacity for ongoing adaptation.

5.2 Multidimensional Leadership Integration

The research demonstrates that no single leadership approach suffices for navigating complex, sustained crises. Instead, effective leaders strategically integrate multiple approaches—transformational, distributed, adaptive, servant, and complexity leadership—deploying them appropriately based on evolving circumstances (Virella & Zeisner, 2026; Al-Asfour et al., 2022; Adobor et al., 2021). This multidimensional integration requires what might be termed "leadership repertoires": the capacity to recognize which approach fits particular situations and the flexibility to shift between approaches as circumstances evolve.

Servant leadership's significant predictive relationship with crisis readiness (Al-Asfour et al., 2022) suggests that people-centered approaches prioritizing employee development, emotional healing, and organizational stewardship prove particularly valuable during uncertainty. However, the finding that only 3.2% of higher education officials achieved the highest crisis readiness category indicates substantial gaps in leadership development, suggesting urgent need for targeted training interventions focusing specifically on crisis management competencies (Al-Asfour et al., 2022).

The strategic application of conflict-handling styles—competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding—demonstrates that effective leadership requires not only multiple approaches but also discernment about when each proves most appropriate (Franca et al., 2026). This situational adaptability, blending assertiveness with empathy to sustain both institutional integrity and relational harmony, represents a sophisticated form of emotional intelligence essential for crisis leadership.

5.3 Pedagogical Transformation and Student-Centered Flexibility

The pandemic-driven shift to flexible learning revealed fundamental tensions in higher education pedagogy while also demonstrating remarkable adaptive capacity. The HyFlex framework's emphasis on learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility offers a principled approach to pedagogical flexibility that respects student diversity while maintaining educational quality (Brink, 2026). However, implementation requires careful attention to student characteristics, with undergraduates needing more structure while postgraduates benefit from greater flexibility (Brink, 2026).

The finding that students transformed into more independent, self-directed learners through necessity (Borlio & Duping, 2026) suggests that crises can catalyze positive developmental outcomes when supported by appropriate scaffolding. However, this transformation came at significant cost—overwhelming workloads, financial strains, mental health challenges—underscoring that flexibility must be accompanied by robust support systems addressing equity gaps and student well-being.

The ambivalent outcomes of online higher education in exile (Smyslova, 2026) highlight important limitations of pedagogical innovation during crises. While horizontally inclined pedagogy fostered transformative "waking up" processes for some participants, others withdrew when confronting disturbing knowledge combined with limited capacity for action. This suggests that pedagogical flexibility must be accompanied by emotional support, recognition of trauma, and acknowledgment of constraints rather than assuming that innovative approaches universally produce positive outcomes.

5.4 Strategic Human Resource Management as Stabilizing Force

The research on strategic human resource management during economic uncertainty (Mousa & Arslan, 2026) offers important insights transferable to higher education crisis contexts. The finding that greater investment in employees leads to more stable performance even during uncertainty challenges assumptions that crises necessitate resource retrenchment. Instead, maintaining training opportunities, providing career support, and offering recognition and rewards during difficult times fosters employee resilience, solidarity, and sustained performance.

The three-factor model—job-related factors (discretionary power, elite recruitment), learning-related factors (continuous learning, resilience), and organizational-related factors (career support, rewards)—provides a framework for understanding how human resource practices contribute to organizational stability during instability (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). Particularly noteworthy is the role of continuous learning in building employee resilience, enabling individuals to perceive uncertainty as "normal crisis" and develop adaptive capacity through repeated exposure to challenges.

This suggests that higher education institutions should view professional development not as discretionary expense to be cut during crises but as strategic investment essential for building adaptive capacity. Training should focus specifically on crisis management, emotional intelligence, digital literacy, and adaptive pedagogies rather than assuming that general professional development suffices for crisis contexts.

5.5 Digital Transformation: Opportunities and Limitations

Digital innovations proved essential for crisis management, enabling incident tracking, quality assessment, workflow visualization, and stakeholder communication (Leal et al., 2026). The measurable improvements achieved—30% reduction in incidents, 25% increase in placements, 15.34% increase in student satisfaction—demonstrate that well-designed digital systems can enhance operational efficiency and stakeholder satisfaction during uncertainty (Leal et al., 2026).

However, the research also reveals significant limitations. Varied digital literacy among faculty and staff represents a major constraint on extending Agile mindsets across institutions (Leal et al., 2026). The "clash of tempi" between institutional demands for synchronous attendance and students' embodied everyday rhythms (Smyslova, 2026) highlights tensions inherent in online learning that cannot be resolved through technology alone. The informalisation of higher education through blurring of personal and academic realms (Smyslova, 2026) raises questions about boundaries, privacy, and the nature of educational relationships in digital spaces.

These findings suggest that digital transformation must be accompanied by comprehensive capacity building, attention to equity gaps in access and literacy, and critical reflection on how technology reshapes educational relationships and experiences. Technology serves as enabler rather than solution, requiring thoughtful integration with human-centered values and pedagogical principles.

5.6 Trust, Communication, and Relational Foundations

The centrality of trust as both antecedent and outcome of organizational adaptation (Virella & Zeisner, 2026) underscores that crisis management is fundamentally relational rather than merely technical. The finding that trust must be built before crises occur—that it cannot be manufactured reactively during emergencies—has profound implications for institutional leadership. This suggests that institutions should prioritize relationship-building, transparent communication, and demonstrated competence during stable periods as essential preparation for inevitable future disruptions.

The emphasis on active listening and empathetic engagement rather than mere information dissemination (Virella & Zeisner, 2026) highlights that effective communication during crises requires emotional intelligence and genuine concern for stakeholder well-being. Leaders must balance providing calm, transparent updates with acknowledging fears, uncertainties, and challenges rather than projecting false confidence or minimizing difficulties.

The challenges of digital communication—particularly misinterpretation of tone and phrasing (Franca et al., 2026)—suggest that institutions must develop explicit norms and practices for digital interaction during crises, potentially including more synchronous communication for sensitive issues and training in digital communication competencies.

5.7 Critical Vigilance Against Crisis Opportunism

Shore's (2026) documentation of crisis opportunism represents a crucial counterpoint to uncritical celebration of innovation and transformation during crises. The warning that consultancy firms leveraged the pandemic to advocate permanent changes aligned with neoliberal ideologies—unbundling, financialization, marketization—while minimizing participatory decision-making highlights risks of allowing crises to justify fundamental alterations to institutional missions and governance structures.

This critical perspective suggests that institutions must maintain vigilance about whose interests are served by crisis responses and whether proposed changes align with public good missions or commercial imperatives. The finding that consultancy reports were often evidence-free and lacking engagement with academic literature (Shore, 2026) underscores importance of grounding crisis responses in rigorous research rather than accepting market-driven narratives uncritically.

Effective crisis leadership requires balancing operational efficiency with human-centered values, maintaining participatory decision-making even when expedience tempts toward top-down control, and protecting institutional missions and social purposes against pressures for marketization. This suggests that crisis management frameworks must explicitly incorporate ethical reflection and stakeholder participation rather than treating crises as justification for bypassing normal governance processes.

6. Conclusion

This comprehensive examination of strategies for managing higher education crises during times of uncertainty reveals that effective crisis navigation requires fundamental transformation in how institutions conceptualize leadership, organize operations, design pedagogy, manage human resources, and engage stakeholders. The shift from crisis management to crisis leadership—from viewing crises as temporary aberrations requiring reactive responses to recognizing sustained uncertainty as the new normal requiring proactive adaptive capacity—represents a paradigm shift with profound implications for higher education.

The research demonstrates that no single approach suffices for navigating complex, sustained crises. Instead, effective leadership requires strategic integration of multiple approaches servant leadership, complexity leadership, adaptive leadership, transformational leadership

deployed situationally based on evolving circumstances, stakeholder needs, and organizational capacity. This multidimensional integration, combined with emotional intelligence enabling leaders to balance assertiveness with empathy and institutional priorities with relational harmony, represents sophisticated leadership competencies that must be deliberately developed through targeted training and professional development.

Organizational resilience emerges not as static trait but as dynamic, relational process involving intentional practices at individual, team, and institutional levels. Building strategic adaptive capability requires scanning environments, updating competences, fostering multiple-loop learning that questions existing mental models, promoting loosely coupled systems enabling quick adjustments, and developing cognitive, behavioural, and contextual resilience. The VUCA framework provides valuable diagnostic tools for assessing environments, while Agile methodologies offer response models emphasizing flexibility, iteration, and continuous adaptation.

Pedagogical innovation during crises reveals both remarkable adaptive capacity and significant challenges. The HyFlex framework offers principled approach to flexibility respecting student diversity while maintaining quality, but implementation requires attention to student characteristics, equity gaps, and support systems. The transformation of students into more independent, self-directed learners demonstrates positive developmental potential, but ambivalent outcomes in some contexts underscore that innovation must be accompanied by emotional support, trauma recognition, and acknowledgment of constraints.

Strategic human resource management serves as critical stabilizing force, with greater investment in employees during uncertainty leading to more stable performance. Continuous learning builds employee resilience, enabling individuals to develop adaptive capacity through repeated exposure to challenges. This challenges assumptions that crises necessitate resource retrenchment, instead suggesting that professional development represents strategic investment essential for organizational adaptation.

Trust emerges as essential antecedent and outcome of organizational adaptation, requiring sustained relationship-building before crises occur rather than reactive efforts during emergencies. Effective communication involves active listening and empathetic engagement rather than mere information dissemination, balancing transparent updates with acknowledgment of fears and uncertainties. Digital transformation enables operational improvements but requires comprehensive capacity building, attention to equity gaps, and critical reflection on how technology reshapes educational relationships.

Critical vigilance against crisis opportunism represents crucial dimension of effective crisis leadership. Institutions must maintain awareness of whose interests are served by crisis responses, whether proposed changes align with public good missions or commercial imperatives, and ensure that crisis management incorporates ethical reflection and stakeholder participation rather than bypassing normal governance processes.

The contemporary higher education landscape, characterized by crisis saturation—overlapping, protracted, systemic crises rendering return to "normal" impossible—requires

institutions to develop new capacities for navigating permanent uncertainty while maintaining organizational coherence and advancing educational equity. This article's synthesis of evidence-based strategies provides foundation for such development, offering integrated framework that balances operational efficiency with human-centered values, technical innovation with relational foundations, and adaptive flexibility with ethical vigilance.

7. Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive analysis of contemporary research on crisis management in higher education, the following evidence-based recommendations are offered for institutional leaders, policymakers, and practitioners:

7.1 Leadership Development and Organizational Capacity

Implement Comprehensive Crisis Leadership Training Programs: Institutions should develop targeted professional development focusing specifically on crisis management competencies, including servant leadership dimensions (altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, organizational stewardship), adaptive leadership practices, conflict resolution strategies, and emotional intelligence (Al-Asfour et al., 2022; Franca et al., 2026). Training should employ experiential learning including real-time simulations and role-play demonstrating qualities of wisdom, persuasive mapping, and decision-making in crisis situations (Al-Asfour et al., 2022).

Develop Leadership Repertoires: Rather than promoting single leadership models, institutions should cultivate leaders' capacity to strategically integrate multiple approaches—transformational, distributed, adaptive, servant, and complexity leadership—and develop discernment about when each proves most appropriate (Virella & Zeisner, 2026; Adobor et al., 2021). This requires moving beyond traditional hierarchical models toward shared leadership approaches where responsibility is diffused and adaptability is prioritized.

Build Strategic Adaptive Capability: Institutions must develop organizational systems promoting agility, sensing, and interpreting environmental signals, particularly those that happen infrequently (Adobor et al., 2021). This requires changing frames of reference on environmental dynamism and accepting change, uncertainty, and unpredictability as the new normal rather than aberrations (Adobor et al., 2021). Specific strategies include increasing redundancy in tasks, diversifying supply chains, fostering multiple-loop learning, and promoting loosely coupled systems (Adobor et al., 2021).

Establish District-Level or System-Level Emergency Response Teams: These teams can offer timely guidance during crises and reduce decision-making burdens for institutional leaders (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). Teams should include expertise in crisis communication, mental health support, technology integration, and stakeholder engagement.

7.2 Pedagogical Innovation and Student Support

Implement HyFlex-Aligned Teaching Frameworks: Institutions should adopt flexible pedagogical frameworks emphasizing learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility (Brink, 2026). Implementation should differentiate between theoretical and practical content, tailor modalities to student characteristics (providing more structure for undergraduates, greater flexibility for postgraduates), and strategically use recordings with limitations to prevent procrastination while allowing review (Brink, 2026).

Redesign Curriculum for Integrated Learning: Adopt more integrated and strategic approaches to curriculum design, focusing on unified task performance and interdisciplinary assignments to lessen academic load while fostering deeper learning (Borlio & Duping, 2026). This approach moves toward skill-based, problem-solving models relevant to modern workforce demands (Borlio & Duping, 2026).

Address Digital Divide Proactively: Institutions should take active roles in ensuring equitable access to technology, providing devices to less fortunate students, and forging partnerships with corporations or non-profits for donation drives and device loan programs (Borlio & Duping, 2026). This should move beyond temporary solutions to become core part of equity and inclusion strategy (Borlio & Duping, 2026).

Strengthen Mental Health and Wellness Support: Implement sustained webinars and activities on mental wellness, self-discipline, and stress management as fundamental rather than temporary measures (Borlio & Duping, 2026). Prioritize well-being of both students and employees, fostering supportive culture especially in high-needs contexts (Virella & Zeisner, 2026).

7.3 Strategic Human Resource Management

Maintain and Enhance Professional Development During Crises: Rather than cutting training during resource constraints, institutions should view professional development as strategic investment essential for building adaptive capacity (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). Training should focus specifically on crisis management, customer-employee engagement, mental health during crises, digital literacy, and adaptive pedagogies (Mousa & Arslan, 2026).

Implement Team Teaching and Workload Distribution Models: Address faculty challenges through team teaching arrangements where one instructor handles synchronous lectures while another focuses on asynchronous module creation, reducing individual workload and enhancing quality (Borlio & Duping, 2026).

Provide Career Support and Recognition During Uncertainty: Offer career support, additional financial rewards, and recognition during crises to maintain motivation and performance (Mousa & Arslan, 2026). Launch campaigns informing employees about challenges and institutional responses, fostering solidarity and pride in work (Mousa & Arslan, 2026).

7.4 Communication, Trust, and Stakeholder Engagement

Build Trust Before Crises Occur: Prioritize relationship-building, transparent communication, and demonstrated competence during stable periods as essential preparation for future disruptions (Virella & Zeisner, 2026). Recognize that trust cannot be manufactured reactively during emergencies but results from sustained, intentional relationship-building over time (Virella & Zeisner, 2026).

Implement Comprehensive Communication Strategies: Maintain constant, clear, transparent, and consistent communication with stakeholders, faculty, staff, students, and families (Virella & Zeisner, 2026; Al-Asfour et al., 2022). Communication should be realistic, aligned, balanced, positive, and delivered through multiple channels, emphasizing active listening and empathetic engagement rather than mere information dissemination (Virella & Zeisner, 2026).

Strengthen Stakeholder Partnerships: Implement regular workshops, tailored onboarding, quality assessment systems gathering feedback from multiple constituencies, and structured dialogue mechanisms (Leal et al., 2026). Ensure 90% or higher satisfaction rates among key stakeholders through responsive, collaborative approaches (Leal et al., 2026).

7.5 Digital Transformation and Technology Integration

Implement Integrated Digital Management Systems: Develop incident management systems, quality assessment surveys, workflow visualization tools (e.g., Kanban systems), and centralized digital resources using available platforms (Leal et al., 2026). These systems should centralize tracking, enable systematic categorization, reduce email reliance, and increase accountability (Leal et al., 2026).

Provide Comprehensive Digital Literacy Training: Extend Agile mindsets across institutions through effective digital tools accompanied by comprehensive training for both management and teaching activities (Leal et al., 2026). Address varied digital literacy among faculty and staff as priority rather than assuming technological competence (Leal et al., 2026).

Balance Digital Innovation with Human-Centered Values: Recognize that technology serves as enabler rather than solution, requiring thoughtful integration with pedagogical principles and attention to how digital spaces reshape educational relationships (Smyslova, 2026). Address "clash of tempi" between institutional demands and students' embodied everyday rhythms through flexible, responsive approaches (Smyslova, 2026).

7.6 Governance, Ethics, and Critical Vigilance

Maintain Participatory Decision-Making During Crises: Resist pressures for speedier, less participatory decision-making that bypass normal governance processes (Shore, 2026). Ensure

that crisis responses incorporate ethical reflection and stakeholder participation, protecting institutional missions and social purposes against marketization pressures (Shore, 2026).

Ground Crisis Responses in Rigorous Research: Base institutional responses on evidence from academic literature rather than accepting market-driven narratives from consultancy firms uncritically (Shore, 2026). Question motives of external advisors and recognize when advice aligns with neoliberal ideologies that may not serve public good of higher education (Shore, 2026).

Develop Contingency Plans with Flexibility: Every institution must have contingency plans to effectively deal with adversities posed by pandemics or other negative circumstances (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). However, plans should emphasize principles and adaptive capacity rather than rigid procedures, recognizing that specific crisis manifestations cannot be fully predicted (Adobor et al., 2021).

These recommendations collectively provide roadmap for institutions seeking to enhance crisis preparedness, build adaptive capacity, and transform challenges into opportunities for innovation and growth while maintaining commitment to educational quality, equity and the public good mission of higher education.

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