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### Engaging Senior Leadership in Sustainable Pedagogical Reform: The TESCEA Steering Group Model at Gulu University

Gloria Lamaro<sup>1\*</sup>, Beatrice Abonga Ajok<sup>1</sup>, Ricky Richard Ojara<sup>1</sup>, Elly Kurobuza Ndyomugenyi<sup>1</sup> & George Ladaah Openjuru<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gulu University, P. O. Box 166, Gulu, Uganda.

\* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID; <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3984-9523>; Email: [g.lamaro@gu.ac.ug](mailto:g.lamaro@gu.ac.ug)

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Sustainable pedagogical reform in higher education requires committed and structured engagement of senior leadership. This qualitative case study examines the TESCEA (Transforming Education for Social Change in East Africa) project's Steering Group model at Gulu University, Uganda, as an approach to actively engage institutional leaders in guiding curriculum transformation. Using semi-structured interviews with 12 strategically selected stakeholders and analysis of 18 institutional documents, the study explores how the Steering Group fostered collaborative governance, aligned reforms with institutional priorities, mobilized resources, and ensured institutional ownership. Findings indicate that embedding leadership engagement within formal governance structures enhances the effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of pedagogical reforms, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. The study highlights operational challenges, including competing responsibilities and bureaucratic delays, and suggests practical strategies for strengthening leadership engagement. This paper contributes to literature on higher education leadership, institutional governance, and reform implementation in sub-Saharan Africa, offering actionable insights for universities seeking transformative educational change.

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## INTRODUCTION

Global higher education is undergoing transformative shifts driven by labor market evolution, technological advancement, globalization, and societal expectations. Graduates are increasingly expected to demonstrate critical thinking, innovation capacity, digital literacy, and social responsibility (Brew & Boud, 2019; Kezar, 2018). In response, HEIs worldwide are revising curricula, adopting learner-centered pedagogies, and strengthening faculty development initiatives.

In African contexts, however, these global trends intersect with systemic challenges, including limited resources, bureaucratic complexity, hierarchical institutional cultures, and underdeveloped research and teaching infrastructure (Teferra & Altbach, 2020; Mfum-Mensah et al., 2021). As a result, pedagogical reform in sub-Saharan Africa faces structural and operational barriers, leading to fragmented implementation and limited sustainability.

Leadership is pivotal in navigating these challenges. Senior leaders—Vice Chancellors, Deans, and Heads of Departments—possess both formal authority and symbolic influence, crucial for mobilizing resources, legitimizing innovation, and sustaining institutional change (Kezar & Holcombe, 2020). Yet, engagement is often reactive, episodic, or limited to endorsement rather than strategic participation in design, implementation, and monitoring of reform.

The TESCEA Steering Group at Gulu University represents a structured approach to embedding leadership engagement in sustainable pedagogical reform. Unlike ad hoc committees, the Steering Group integrates senior leaders into formal governance structures, linking strategic oversight to curriculum transformation, resource allocation, faculty development, and institutional policy alignment.

This study addresses the following research question: How does the TESCEA Steering Group model facilitate senior leadership engagement in sustainable pedagogical reform at Gulu University? Examining this model contributes to scholarship on higher education leadership in African contexts and provides practical insights for universities aiming to achieve sustainable reform in resource-constrained environments. It also anticipates measurable outcomes, including improved teaching quality, enhanced faculty capacity, policy alignment, and student learning gains.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Leadership and Pedagogical Reform in Higher Education**

Effective leadership underpins successful pedagogical reform. Leaders provide vision, legitimize innovation, create structural support, and foster environments conducive to reflective teaching practices (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2019). Fragmented or absent leadership, by contrast, often results in reform fatigue, fragmented implementation, and eventual policy failure (Bryman, 2007).

Transformational leadership inspires stakeholders toward a shared vision and mobilizes intrinsic motivation, while distributed leadership leverages expertise across academic and administrative units, fostering collective responsibility (Spillane, 2012; Harris, 2021; Kezar & Holcombe, 2020). Both leadership models are complementary in enabling sustainable reform: transformational leaders provide overarching direction, whereas distributed leadership ensures operationalization and engagement across institutional layers.

Alignment of pedagogical reforms with institutional missions, accreditation standards, and national policies is essential. Without alignment, innovations risk remaining peripheral, resulting in limited institutional impact (Leisyte &

Dee, 2020). Governance mechanisms, such as steering groups, formalize leadership engagement and bridge strategic oversight with academic execution, enhancing legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

### **Leadership Engagement in Higher Education**

In HEIs, reform faces additional constraints, including underfunding, political interference, bureaucratic rigidity, and traditional hierarchical structures (Adeyemi & Ogunsanya, 2021; Naidoo, 2019). Senior leaders may recognize the importance of reform, yet competing administrative, research, and external engagement responsibilities often limit sustained involvement (Teferra & Altbach, 2020). Traditional separation between academic and administrative leadership further fragments reform initiatives.

Empirical evidence shows that governance models integrating senior leadership across institutional levels can enhance sustainability. Initiatives such as TESCEA demonstrate that formalized steering structures enable leaders to actively guide reform, ensuring alignment with institutional priorities, resource mobilization, and policy integration (Mfum-Mensah et al., 2021).

Despite recognition of leadership importance, few studies provide practical models operationalizing leadership engagement in African contexts. Key gaps include: Limited documentation of governance mechanisms facilitating leadership involvement. Scarce evidence on resource mobilization by senior leaders for pedagogical reform. Lack of insights into mechanisms promoting the sustainability of reform in resource-constrained environments.

Previous studies have highlighted the critical role of leadership in the success or failure of higher education reforms across different contexts. Bryman (2007), in his study of UK higher education institutions, emphasized that fragmented leadership can significantly hinder the implementation of pedagogical reforms. His findings suggest that without cohesive and committed leadership, reform initiatives often struggle to gain traction and fail to achieve

sustainable impact. The TESCEA Steering Group model addresses this challenge by formally integrating senior leaders into the governance of pedagogical reform, ensuring that strategic oversight and decision-making authority are consistently applied throughout the reform process.

Similarly, Bolden, Petrov, and Gosling (2019) explored distributed and transformational leadership models in a global higher education context, highlighting how leadership can promote reflective practice and foster environments conducive to pedagogical innovation. Their study underscores the importance of combining strategic vision with participatory, collaborative approaches that engage multiple stakeholders. The TESCEA model reflects these principles by balancing hierarchical authority with collaborative governance, allowing senior leaders to guide reform while actively involving faculty and project coordinators in decision-making.

In the African higher education context, Teferra and Altbach (2020) examined systemic institutional challenges, noting that bureaucracy, underfunding, and resource limitations often constrain reform initiatives. Their analysis illustrates how structural and operational barriers can impede sustainable change, despite recognition of the importance of pedagogical innovation. The TESCEA Steering Group directly responds to these challenges by embedding reforms within formal governance structures, aligning initiatives with institutional priorities, and leveraging leadership authority to secure resources and facilitate implementation.

Mfum-Mensah, Owusu, and Agyemang (2021) studied the role of steering groups in Ghana and Uganda, highlighting that while these structures have potential to support reform, empirical evidence on their operational mechanisms remains limited. Their work points to a gap in understanding how leadership can be systematically engaged to ensure sustainability and institutional ownership. The TESCEA model contributes to filling this gap by providing a documented operational framework in which

steering group processes, leadership engagement, and institutional alignment are clearly articulated, demonstrating how formalized governance structures can effectively guide pedagogical reform in resource-constrained contexts.

The TESCEA model addresses these gaps by documenting governance structures, decision-making processes, and leadership strategies in a resource-constrained African university.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to explore how senior leadership engagement was operationalized through the TESCEA Steering Group (Yin, 2018). Case study methodology allows in-depth exploration of governance dynamics and reform processes within the university context.

### Participant Selection

Twelve stakeholders were purposively selected to provide a representative sample of individuals directly involved in the TESCEA project and capable of offering rich insights into leadership engagement and pedagogical reform. The selection deliberately included senior university leaders, faculty members actively participating in curriculum transformation, and project coordinators, ensuring coverage across both academic and administrative perspectives. Criteria for inclusion were based on leadership role, level of involvement in TESCEA activities, representation across faculties and administrative units, and demonstrated capacity to provide informed and reflective perspectives on governance, reform processes, and the institutionalization of pedagogical innovations. The sample size of twelve was deemed sufficient for achieving depth of understanding, allowing for comprehensive exploration of complex dynamics while maintaining manageability for in-depth qualitative analysis, consistent with best practices in case study research (Yin, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Data Collection

Primary data: Semi-structured interviews (45–75 minutes) explored participants' roles, perceptions of Steering Group effectiveness, and encountered challenges.

Secondary data: 18 institutional documents, including Steering Group terms of reference, meeting minutes, implementation plans, and monitoring reports, were analyzed to triangulate findings and enhance credibility.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software facilitated coding and management of transcripts and documents. Codes were iteratively developed around leadership engagement, decision-making, resource mobilization, and institutionalization of reform. Inter-coder reliability was ensured via peer debriefing and consensus discussions. Emergent themes were refined until saturation.

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking with participants to validate interpretations, and maintaining a detailed audit trail of coding decisions and theme development. Reflexivity was applied throughout to minimize researcher bias.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Gulu University's Research Ethics Committee. Participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and data were stored securely.

### TESCEA STEERING GROUP MODEL

The TESCEA Steering Group was deliberately structured to integrate senior leadership across both academic and administrative units alongside senior project staff, enabling comprehensive cross-functional oversight of pedagogical reform initiatives at Gulu University. Its composition ensured that strategic perspectives from university administration, faculty management, and project

coordination were represented, fostering holistic decision-making and alignment between institutional priorities and reform objectives. Operating under formally approved terms of reference, the Steering Group reported directly to the Senate and Council committees, thereby conferring authority and legitimacy that extended beyond the influence of ad hoc project committees and ensuring that decisions carried formal institutional recognition. The inclusion of the Vice Chancellor provided overarching strategic oversight and facilitated resource allocation, while Deans contributed to curriculum alignment and faculty engagement. Project coordinators were responsible for implementation support and monitoring, and Heads of Departments ensured that reforms were integrated at the departmental level, providing guidance and support to academic staff. This composition allowed for the coordination of efforts across organizational layers, embedding reform processes into the university's structural and operational frameworks.

Operationally, the Steering Group convened on a quarterly basis, with additional meetings arranged when critical decisions or urgent issues arose. Agendas were collaboratively developed to ensure that priorities reflected both institutional needs and project-specific objectives. Meetings were chaired by the designated TSG chairperson, and minutes were meticulously recorded to track action points, follow-up tasks, and accountability measures. The Steering Group's operations exemplified a careful balance between hierarchical authority and participatory governance. While senior leaders possessed formal decision-making power, iterative discussions, inclusive participation, and transparent reporting processes fostered a collaborative environment that encouraged faculty input and project coordinator perspectives.

Communication and decision-making within the Steering Group followed a structured workflow that integrated multiple stakeholders. Faculty submitted curriculum proposals to the Steering Group, which reviewed the submissions and provided recommendations to the Senate for

formal approval. Upon approval, resources were allocated to support implementation, and the Steering Group monitored progress to ensure fidelity to reform objectives. Continuous feedback loops between faculty, project coordinators, and senior leadership allowed the Steering Group to make responsive adjustments, address emerging challenges, and maintain alignment with institutional policies and strategic priorities. This workflow not only enhanced the efficiency of decision-making but also reinforced a culture of accountability, collaboration, and institutional ownership, ensuring that TESCEA initiatives were effectively embedded within Gulu University's governance and academic systems.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### Strengthened Leadership Commitment and Ownership

Analysis of both interview data and institutional documents indicated that the TESCEA Steering Group enhanced visible leadership commitment to pedagogical reform. Faculty and project coordinators consistently reported that senior leaders' active participation encouraged wider engagement. One faculty member noted,

*"When senior leaders walk the talk and attend meetings, it makes the reform everyone's business. We feel our work is recognized and supported."*

Meeting minutes confirmed this engagement, showing that Vice Chancellors and Deans regularly attended quarterly meetings, actively participated in curriculum review discussions, and followed up on action items. Project reports highlighted that leaders often communicated reform priorities to their faculties, reinforcing institutional commitment.

Triangulating these findings across interviews and documents suggests that formalized leadership engagement strengthens legitimacy and promotes institutional ownership. Visible commitment signals to faculty that reforms are a priority, helping reduce resistance and encourage active participation (Kezar & Holcombe, 2020).

### Policy and Institutional Alignment

The Steering Group played a central role in ensuring reforms aligned with national qualification frameworks and internal quality assurance standards. A Dean stated,

*"Before we approve any curriculum changes, we check that they meet national requirements and the university's internal standards. The Steering Group ensures that our reforms are not just innovative but also institutionally legitimate."*

Document analysis of curriculum approval reports and Steering Group meeting minutes confirmed that all TESCEA curriculum proposals were cross-referenced with national and institutional standards before approval. Reports also indicated that recommended modifications were incorporated into faculty programs to maintain alignment.

The convergence of interview insights and document evidence shows that formal governance structures help embed reforms within institutional and national frameworks. Alignment ensures that innovative practices are integrated into core academic operations, enhancing sustainability (Leisyte & Dee, 2020).

### Resource Mobilization and Institutionalization

Interviews revealed that Steering Group members leveraged institutional authority to secure funding and integrate TESCEA initiatives into strategic planning. A Head of Department explained,

*"The Steering Group has helped us access funds and prioritize TESCEA activities in our budget. Without their support, some initiatives would have stalled."*

Supporting documents, including budget allocation records and strategic planning reports, confirmed that TESCEA activities were incorporated into university budget lines and annual operational plans. Progress reports also indicated that resources were allocated to faculty training, infrastructure, and monitoring activities.

The triangulated evidence demonstrates that leadership engagement is instrumental in translating reform plans into actionable and sustainable initiatives. Institutionalized resource allocation ensures that reforms are not dependent solely on external project funding (Naidoo, 2019).

### Operational Dynamics and Collaborative Governance

The Steering Group maintained structured meetings, combining hierarchical authority with participatory decision-making. A faculty participant noted,

*"Even though the group includes senior leaders with authority, there is room for dialogue. We can present ideas, discuss challenges, and influence decisions collaboratively."*

Minutes and action-tracking documents confirmed that agendas were collaboratively developed, feedback loops were maintained between faculty and leadership, and action points were monitored at subsequent meetings. Project coordination reports highlighted iterative adjustments based on faculty input, demonstrating responsiveness in decision-making.

Triangulating interviews with document evidence illustrate how formal governance can balance top-down authority and participatory processes. This alignment of hierarchical oversight with collaborative mechanisms enables distributed leadership, maintaining strategic control while incorporating stakeholder input (Spillane, 2012).

### Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite its effectiveness, the Steering Group faced operational challenges. A Dean stated,

*"Sometimes it is hard to attend all meetings due to other commitments, which slows some decisions."*

A project coordinator noted,

*"Bureaucracy can delay approvals, but dedicated administrative support and clear processes help keep things moving."*

Document review corroborated these observations, showing occasional delays in action implementation and approval timelines. Steering Group records also included recommendations for strengthening administrative support, integrating departmental-level initiatives, and conducting periodic external reviews.

Triangulated findings indicate that even structured governance models require operational capacity to function effectively. Leadership engagement must be supported by administrative systems, clear delegation, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure timely decision-making and sustained reform outcomes.

## DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of structured senior leadership engagement in advancing sustainable pedagogical reform at Gulu University. The TESCEA Steering Group model demonstrates that embedding leaders within formal governance mechanisms not only strengthens institutional ownership but also enhances legitimacy and promotes active faculty engagement.

### Strengthened Leadership Commitment and Ownership

Analysis of interview data and institutional documents indicates that the Steering Group fostered visible leadership commitment, which significantly influenced faculty engagement and reform adoption. Faculty and project coordinators consistently emphasized that the presence and active participation of senior leaders, such as Vice Chancellors and Deans, signaled institutional prioritization of pedagogical reform. One faculty member remarked, *"When senior leaders walk the talk and attend meetings, it makes the reform everyone's business. We feel our work is recognized and supported."* Meeting minutes and quarterly reports corroborated these accounts, showing regular attendance, active participation in curriculum reviews, and consistent follow-up on action items.

This finding aligns with Kezar and Holcombe (2020), who argue that visible leadership

engagement enhances legitimacy and reduces resistance to institutional change. However, Bryman (2007) cautions that leadership presence alone may not guarantee reform adoption if hierarchical authority stifles faculty initiative. The TESCEA model appears to counter this limitation by combining formal authority with participatory decision-making, suggesting that structured engagement can simultaneously convey strategic oversight and foster ownership among stakeholders.

### Policy and Institutional Alignment

The Steering Group ensured that curriculum reforms were aligned with both national qualification frameworks and internal quality assurance standards, reinforcing their legitimacy and sustainability. A Dean highlighted, *"Before we approve any curriculum changes, we check that they meet national requirements and the university's internal standards. The Steering Group ensures that our reforms are not just innovative but also institutionally legitimate."* Document analysis confirmed systematic cross-referencing of TESCEA proposals with institutional and national policies, and adjustments were incorporated into faculty programs to maintain alignment.

These findings resonate with Leisyte and Dee (2020), who emphasize that misalignment with institutional policies and national standards often jeopardizes reform sustainability. In contrast, Teferra and Altbach (2020) note that in many African HEIs, reforms are often implemented in isolation from policy frameworks, limiting their impact. The TESCEA Steering Group mitigates this challenge by embedding alignment into formal governance structures, demonstrating that leadership-mediated oversight can successfully integrate innovation into core academic processes.

### Resource Mobilization and Institutionalization

The study found that the Steering Group was instrumental in mobilizing resources and institutionalizing reforms. Leaders leveraged their authority to secure funding and prioritize TESCEA initiatives in university budgets, while documents confirmed integration of these

activities into strategic planning and operational plans. A Head of Department noted, *"The Steering Group has helped us access funds and prioritize TESCEA activities in our budget. Without their support, some initiatives would have stalled."*

These findings corroborate Naidoo (2019), who highlights that sustainable reform in African HEIs requires leadership involvement in resource allocation. Bolden et al. (2019) argue that leadership often struggles to ensure consistent funding for pedagogical innovations, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. The TESCEA model demonstrates that embedding reform initiatives in institutional planning and budgetary frameworks mitigates overreliance on external funding, thereby enhancing long-term sustainability.

### **Operational Dynamics and Collaborative Governance**

The Steering Group maintained structured operations that balanced hierarchical authority with participatory processes. Faculty participants reported that despite the presence of senior leaders, there were opportunities to contribute ideas, discuss challenges, and influence decisions. One participant noted, *"Even though the group includes senior leaders with authority, there is room for dialogue. We can present ideas, discuss challenges, and influence decisions collaboratively."* Documented agendas, action points, and feedback loops confirm that faculty input was actively incorporated into decision-making.

This operational dynamic illustrates principles of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2012), demonstrating that hierarchical oversight and collaborative governance can coexist. However, Harris (2021) cautions that distributed leadership may be difficult to sustain in hierarchical institutions. TESCEA's success suggests that intentional governance design, clear processes, and structured communication pathways enable effective distributed decision-making even in traditionally hierarchical contexts.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

Despite its successes, the Steering Group faced operational challenges, including competing responsibilities and bureaucratic delays. A Dean reflected, *"Sometimes it is hard to attend all meetings due to other commitments, which slows some decisions,"* while a project coordinator noted, *"Bureaucracy can delay approvals, but dedicated administrative support and clear processes help keep things moving."* Triangulation with meeting minutes and Steering Group records confirmed occasional delays in decision-making and highlighted recommendations for stronger administrative support, departmental integration, and periodic external reviews.

These findings align with Teferra and Altbach (2020), who highlight that African HEIs often face structural and operational constraints that hinder leadership engagement. The study emphasizes that leadership presence alone is insufficient; effective reform requires administrative capacity, clear delegation, and robust monitoring mechanisms to maintain momentum and ensure sustained outcomes.

Overall, the findings indicate that the TESCEA Steering Group model successfully enhances leadership commitment, aligns reforms with institutional priorities, mobilizes resources, and facilitates participatory governance. By triangulating data from interviews, meeting minutes, and institutional reports, the study provides strong evidence that formal governance mechanisms can effectively operationalize leadership engagement in pedagogical reform, overcoming common challenges observed in African higher education contexts.

### **CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study examined the TESCEA Steering Group model at Gulu University, Uganda, as a framework for engaging senior leadership in sustainable pedagogical reform. The analysis demonstrates that structured leadership engagement through formal governance mechanisms significantly enhances institutional

ownership, legitimacy, and the sustainability of educational innovations.

First, the study concludes that visible leadership commitment is pivotal for fostering faculty engagement and ensuring that reform initiatives are recognized as institutional priorities. Active participation of senior leaders in meetings, curriculum reviews, and follow-up actions signals the importance of reforms, reduces resistance, and promotes a culture of shared responsibility.

Second, alignment with institutional and national frameworks is critical for legitimacy and sustainability. The Steering Group successfully integrated TESCEA curriculum reforms with national qualification standards and internal quality assurance policies, ensuring that innovative pedagogical practices were embedded within core academic and administrative processes.

Third, resource mobilization and institutionalization of reform emerged as essential for long-term impact. Leadership involvement in budgeting and strategic planning facilitated access to funds, faculty development, and infrastructure support, mitigating overreliance on external project funding. This underscores the importance of leadership not only in strategic oversight but also in enabling tangible, sustainable reform outcomes.

Fourth, the study concludes that collaborative governance within a hierarchical framework enables distributed leadership. While senior leaders maintained strategic authority, participatory mechanisms allowed faculty and project coordinators to contribute to decision-making, providing iterative feedback and ensuring responsiveness to practical challenges.

Finally, operational support and administrative capacity are necessary to address challenges such as competing responsibilities, bureaucratic delays, and gaps in departmental integration. Structured governance alone is insufficient; dedicated administrative support, clear processes, and monitoring mechanisms are essential to maintain reform momentum and effectiveness.

In sum, the TESCEA Steering Group model provides a practical and replicable framework for engaging senior leadership in African higher education. By integrating visible commitment, policy alignment, resource mobilization, collaborative governance, and operational support, the model demonstrates how institutions can institutionalize pedagogical innovation, enhance teaching and learning quality, and foster sustainable educational transformation in resource-constrained contexts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Policy Makers

Policymakers should promote formal governance mechanisms, such as steering groups, to embed senior leadership engagement in pedagogical reform across higher education institutions. National guidelines and accreditation frameworks should require alignment of curriculum reforms with national qualification standards and institutional strategic priorities to enhance legitimacy and sustainability. Additionally, policymakers can provide incentives, including funding support or recognition awards, to institutions that demonstrate effective leadership-driven reform, thereby reinforcing accountability and motivating systemic adoption of innovative teaching practices.

### Policy Implementers

University leaders and administrators should institutionalize leadership roles within dedicated governance structures to ensure consistent engagement in pedagogical reform. They should prioritize resource mobilization by integrating reform initiatives into strategic planning and budgeting, allocate funding for curriculum development, faculty training, and infrastructure, and strengthen administrative support to track action points and monitor progress. Furthermore, leaders should foster collaborative governance by combining strategic oversight with participatory decision-making, ensuring faculty and project staff have meaningful input while maintaining institutional direction and accountability.

## Future Research

Future research should investigate the long-term impact of leadership-engaged governance models on student learning outcomes, faculty development, and overall institutional performance to provide empirical evidence of effectiveness. Comparative studies across diverse higher education institutions can examine the adaptability and scalability of models like TESCEA in varying governance and cultural contexts. Additionally, research should explore the operational effectiveness of resource allocation, policy alignment, and faculty experiences in leadership-driven reforms to refine strategies for sustainable pedagogical transformation.

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