

Fostering excellence in sports, recreation, and rehabilitation: Leadership and management in Albanian higher education institutions

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Abstract: Higher education institutions specializing in Sports, Recreation, Adventure Tourism, and Rehabilitation must operate within a dynamic environment characterized by globalization, technological advancements, and piercing changes in social demand. Hence, effective management and leadership have become essential to migration across this domain. This study contextualizes leadership and management research for the SRATR fields while examining the evolution of these fields in higher education. It explores the management and leadership dilemmas within the SRATR industry characterized by diversity, globalization, and technological advancement, offering insights into present opportunities and challenges. This article calls for a flexible approach to both management and leadership; fundamentally promoting creativity, cooperation, and adaptability within the context of sports, leisure, and rehabilitation within the Albanian setting. In addition, it provides recommendations for the enhancement of student experience, diversity & inclusion, technological integration, leadership development, various management strategies, and community participation within Albanian SRATR institutions.

Keywords: *Adventure Tourism, Albania, Diversity, Higher Education, Innovation, Leadership, Management, Recreation, Rehabilitation, Sports, Technology.*

1. Introduction

Higher education schools specialized in sports, recreation, adventure tourism, and rehabilitation should play significant roles in shaping the future of these dynamic and interlinked industries. As the world becomes more globalized, and technology thwarts outdated processes, SRATR institutions require a different kind of leadership and management than ever before [1]. To further help with research on sports management, WASM was created in 2012 to provide collaborative operations between the various sports management academic stakeholders and to promote evidence-based practice whereby the academic courses will be better delivered [2]. The theory occupies a special place across various academic disciplines [3,4,5], providing insight into specific field-related most relevant aspects, and informing teaching and practice to adapt academic and vocational training. In the past decades, sports management as an academic discipline sparked the attention of many scholars in search of its legitimacy within the academic environment. More specifically, the research interest has centered on the definition of sport management about its core disciplines, the ability to generate theory from within (i.e., the sport management educational curricula, employment in the field, the characteristics of sport managers, and dynamics in sports organizations). This was a necessary endeavor to buttress the characterization of necessary foundational knowledge, relevant K/C/S, and teaching/learning methodologies and consequently elevate its state-of-the-art state [6,7,8].

The sports recreation adventure tourism and rehabilitation sector in Albania stands on the threshold of considerable growth and development. The extraordinary natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and growing interest in sports and outdoor activities of the country shall all provide immense

opportunities for the sector. But for that to happen, some conditions should be met: first specialized human resources need to complete the SRATR-qualified labor force and permanent introduction and implementation of new standards in quality.

2. Methodology

Universities specializing in Sports, Recreation, Adventure Tourism, and Rehabilitation should operate within a heterogeneous and dynamic environment marked by globalization, technological change, and acute changes in social demand. It would be difficult for these universities to deploy effective management and leadership in migration through this domain. The present paper attempts to provide a psycho-sociological survey of the areas of research on management and leadership for the SRATR sector, as well as an overview to delineate the perspective of these fields in higher education. It explores the management and leadership dilemmas within the SRATR industry characterized by diversity, globalization, and technological advancement, offering insights into current opportunities and challenges. This article calls for an adaptive approach to school management and leadership cultivating creativity, collaboration, and adaptability in a sports, leisure, and rehabilitation setting in Albania. Also, insiders' advice will be individually advanced on how to improve the student experience, diversity & inclusion, technology incorporation, leadership innovation, management diversification, and institutional community engagement in the context of Albanian SRATR agencies.

3. Hypothesis

This paper operates under the hypothesis that effective leadership and management are critical factors in the success and sustainability of SRATR higher education institutions in Albania. By adopting adaptable and innovative approaches to leadership and management, these institutions can navigate the complexities of the 21st century, foster excellence, and contribute to the health, well-being, and development of Albanian society.

3.1. Development

The Evolving Discourse: Leadership and Management in the SRATR Context

The terms "leadership" and "management" are sometimes used interchangeably, yet they refer to distinct yet complementary functions in higher education. "Management" refers to the operational features of institutions, which include resource allocation, planning, coordination, and the preservation of stability and efficiency (9). It is about maintaining the status quo, ensuring that the day-to-day operations run smoothly, and achieving organizational goals within the existing structures and systems.

"Leadership," on the other hand, is about visualizing the future, motivating people, and navigating change (10). It is about establishing a strategic direction, motivating employees, and guiding them toward a common objective. Leadership entails challenging the status quo, encouraging innovation, and instilling a culture of continual development. In the complicated and dynamic world of SRATR higher education, good leadership and administration are critical to institutional success. Management oversees day-to-day operations, whereas leadership offers the vision and direction required for adaptability and growth. Ideally, leaders and managers collaborate to complement each other's talents and keep the institution efficient and inventive.

3.2. Contemporary Leadership and Management Paradigms

Contemporary leadership research in higher education has transitioned away from traditional hierarchical models and toward more collaborative and distributed approaches (11). This trend reflects the increased complexity and interconnection of SRATR organizations. In a globalized world, these institutions must operate within a network of international partners, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Distributed leadership models, emphasizing shared governance and decision-making, have gained prominence (12). These models empower individuals at all levels to contribute to institutional goals, fostering a sense of ownership and engagement. This is particularly relevant in the SRATR context, where expertise and insights often span multiple departments and disciplines.

Likewise, management paradigms have shifted to include strategic planning, change management, and performance measurement. New concepts such as agile management and design thinking can promote innovation and responsiveness in the face of fast change. SRATR institutions face both problems and opportunities as the world becomes more globalized and technologically advanced. Leaders must adeptly navigate diverse cultural contexts, manage international partnerships, and leverage technology to enhance educational experiences and research outcomes (1, 13).

The Internationalization of higher education has brought about unprecedented opportunities for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and cultural enrichment. However, it also presents a unique set of leadership challenges. Leaders must navigate diverse cultural contexts, manage global teams, and develop strategies that are both locally relevant and globally competitive.

The rapid pace of technological advancement is transforming every facet of higher education, from teaching and learning to research and administration. Online learning, data analytics, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality are just a few examples of the technologies reshaping the educational landscape (13). Leaders must not only navigate the complexities of this digital transformation but also leverage these innovations to enhance the student experience, improve research outcomes, and streamline administrative processes.

3.3. Fostering Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are essential for good leadership and management in SRATR organizations (17). A diverse and inclusive atmosphere fosters innovation, prepares students for multicultural careers, and reflects society's shifting demographics. Leaders must aggressively recruit, promote, and mentor members of underrepresented groups, fostering a culture that embraces and celebrates diversity. By incorporating diversity and inclusion into the institutional fabric, SRATR leaders can foster a more equitable and impactful learning environment. This involves promoting diversity in curricula, research agendas, and extracurricular activities, ensuring that all students feel welcome and supported. *The Albanian Context: Tailoring Approaches.*

While the general recommendations for leadership and management in SRATR institutions are globally relevant, it's crucial to tailor these approaches to

Community Engagement: Promote active engagement with local communities, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration. This can involve organizing outreach programs, providing opportunities for volunteerism, and partnering with community organizations.

3.4. Elevating the Student Experience

Student success is paramount. Albanian SRATR institutions must prioritize strategies that enhance the student experience, fostering engagement and empowering graduates to thrive.

This involves:

Active Learning and Experiential Education: Emphasize hands-on learning opportunities, internships, and practicum placements to provide students with real-world experience and application of theoretical knowledge.

Student-Centered Support Services: Provide comprehensive academic advising, career counseling, and mental health & wellness services to support students throughout their academic journey.

Technology-Enhanced Learning: Implement blended learning approaches, utilize virtual simulations, and leverage adaptive learning technologies to personalize instruction and maximize learning outcomes.

Student Leadership and Engagement: Encourage student organizations, offer leadership development workshops, and include student representatives in decision-making bodies.

3.5. Internationalization and Global Outreach

In an interconnected world, Albanian SRATR institutions must actively pursue internationalization and global outreach. This involves:

International Partnerships: Establish partnerships with universities and organizations worldwide to facilitate student and faculty exchange programs, joint research projects, and participation in international conferences and workshops.

Attracting International Students and Faculty: Develop targeted marketing and recruitment strategies, offer scholarships and financial aid, and create a welcoming and inclusive environment for international students and faculty.

Global Curriculum and Programs:* Incorporate international perspectives and case studies into SRATR curricula, offer study abroad programs, and develop joint degree programs with international partners.

- **International Accreditation and Recognition:** Pursue international accreditation and recognition for Albanian SRATR programs, benchmark against international standards, and participate in international rankings and assessments.

3.6. *Community Engagement and Social Impact: A Cornerstone for SRATR Institutions*

Albanian SRATR institutions have a unique opportunity to serve as catalysts for positive change and community development. By actively engaging with local communities, these institutions can make a lasting impact that extends beyond the classroom and research lab.

This involves:

- **Outreach Programs and Initiatives:** Develop and implement outreach programs that promote health and wellness, sports and recreation, rehabilitation services, and educational workshops and seminars.
- **Partnerships with Community Organizations:** Partner with local schools, community centers, and NGOs to develop and implement joint programs and initiatives, provide volunteer opportunities, and conduct community-based research.
- **Advocacy and Policy Influence:** Utilize research findings to advocate for policies and programs that support the development of sports, recreation, and rehabilitation in Albania. Engage with policymakers and community leaders, and launch public awareness campaigns.

3.7. *Embracing Innovation: Key Strategies for Albanian SRATR Institutions*

In addition to the recommendations outlined above, several innovative strategies can further enhance leadership and management practices in Albanian SRATR institutions:

- **Entrepreneurial Mindset:** Establish incubators and accelerators, integrate entrepreneurship education into curricula, and foster industry partnerships to support student and faculty entrepreneurship.
- **Sustainable Practices:** Implement green initiatives, promote outdoor education and adventure tourism, and partner with local communities to develop sustainable SRATR initiatives.
- **Lifelong Learning:** Offer continuing education programs, foster alumni engagement, and establish community learning centers to promote lifelong learning in SRATR fields.
- **Research and Knowledge Exchange:** Promote collaborative research, seek international partnerships, and ensure effective dissemination of research findings.

4. Conclusion

Effective leadership and management are vital for the success and sustainability of SRATR higher education institutions in Albania. By adopting adaptable and innovative approaches, fostering collaboration, embracing technology, and promoting diversity and inclusion, these institutions can navigate the complexities of the 21st century and contribute to the health, well-being, and development of Albanian society.

The recommendations outlined in this paper, tailored to the unique Albanian context, provide a roadmap for enhancing leadership development, management practices, community engagement, technology integration, diversity & inclusion, and student experience in SRATR institutions. By implementing these recommendations, Albanian SRATR institutions can position themselves at the

forefront of leadership and management in these fields, empowering graduates to become leaders in the global SRATR arena and contributing to a healthier, more active, and inclusive Albania.

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