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Strategic Leadership for Resilience in a Business School in South Africa

在南非商学院中的战略领导与韧性

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Abstract :

Background: Strategic leaders play a pivotal role in navigating organisational crises; however, limited research has examined how such leaders in South Africa's business schools foster academic resilience, particularly during complex and prolonged crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study aimed to investigate how strategic leadership in a selected South African business school influenced institutional activities and strategic direction during the pandemic, with the goal of sustaining academic continuity and resilience.

Methods: This descriptive study employed a qualitative research design, drawing on an interpretive, subjective approach to capture participants' lived experiences. Six experienced academic leaders from a South African business school were purposively selected. Data were collected through semi-structured virtual interviews and analysed thematically.

Results: Findings indicate that strategic leadership shaped institutional activities and strategic direction through several mechanisms: strategic thinking, a holistic transition of teaching and learning from face-to-face to online

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, Resilience, South Africa, COVID-19, Academic Leaders.

关键词: 战略领导力, 韧性, 南非, 新冠肺炎, 学术领导者。

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modalities, agile resource mobilisation and utilisation, transparent strategic communication, and fostering multi-level strategic commitment during the COVID-19 crisis.

Conclusion: Overall, resilience manifested primarily as reactive, with strategic leaders facilitating coping and adaptive capacities rather than proactive measures prior to the pandemic. The study underscores that effective crisis response depends on strong strategic leadership, reinforced by the commitment of tactical and operational leadership. Moreover, the findings highlight the critical role of internal and external stakeholders in managing crises and safeguarding organisational resilience during and beyond such events. It is recommended that leadership development practitioners adopt an integrative approach to cultivate the multidimensional influences of strategic leaders and strengthen three key resilience capabilities—anticipation, coping, and adaptation—to proactively enhance academic resilience in business schools during times of crisis. Directions for future research are also identified.

摘要：

背景：战略领导在组织危机应对中发挥关键作用，但关于南非商学院战略领导者如何在复杂且长期的危机（如新冠肺炎疫情）中影响学术韧性的研究仍然有限。本研究旨在探讨南非某商学院战略领导在COVID-19期间对学校活动与战略方向的影响，以塑造学术连续性与学术韧性。

方法：本研究采用定性研究方法，属于描述性研究。研究基于解释性与主观性取向，旨在从主观视角如实呈现研究对象的经验与见解。通过目的性抽样，选取南非某商学院六位具有丰富经验的学术领导者作为研究对象。数据通过半结构化虚拟访谈收集，并采用主题分析法进行处理与归纳。

结果：研究表明，战略领导对商学院在COVID-19期间的活动与战略方向产生了多方面的影响，具体体现在战略思维、教学与学习模式由面对面线上教学的整体性转型、资源的敏捷调动与高效利用、战略沟通的透明化，以及多层次战略承诺的落实等方面。

结论：总体而言，学术韧性主要表现为反应性，即战略领导能够提升组织的应对与适应能力，但难以前置性地推动危机前的主动应对措施。研究进一步指出，有效的战略领导与战术及操作层领导的协同承诺，是组织成功应对危机的重要因素。此外，内部与外部利益相关者在危机治理和组织韧性保障中的支持作用亦不可或缺。研究建议领导力培养实践者应采取综合性发展路径，以系统性提升战略领导的多维度影响力，并培育预判、应对与适应三阶段韧性能力，从而在危机情境下主动增强商学院的学术韧性。未来研究方向亦在文中提出

1. Introduction

After dealing with the immediate effects of COVID-19, the minds of scholars are now turning to the medium and longer-term implications for strategic leadership and resilience of business schools in many parts of the world, including South Africa. Business schools and university leaders are grappling to understand the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) related tasks and strategic leadership competencies necessary to realize the goal of continuing teaching, learning, and research and

increased employee productivity and performance during a complex and prolonged organisational crisis (Maome, Usadolo, and Mbinda, 2024). For researchers of strategic leadership, the question of what it takes to prepare and build individual and organisational-level resilience to cope and adapt to disruptive change is pivotal in pursuing long-term direction and proactive resilience (Irtaimah, 2018). Kising'u (2017) posit that effective strategic leadership requires strategic thinking, vigilance, shared values, and a clear vision to achieve much-needed alignment.

Schaedler, Graf-Vlachy and Konig (2022:1) admit that “recent reviews on organizational crises acknowledge the importance of strategic leaders in crisis situations, yet these reviews address the topic only peripherally or adopt a narrow scope and focus only on specific facets”. Researchers of strategic leadership in a crisis need to find answers to what strategic leaders do and how they influence organisational continuity and resilience. There is growing scholarship on the impact of strategic leaders in crisis situations (Kanyangale and Njoloma, 2019). However, the pitfall is that literature is highly fragmented, posing a huge obstacle to developing parsimonious theories and practically useful insights for strategic leaders in contexts such as business schools in private and public universities (Schaedler et al., 2022:1).

Extant research on strategic leadership in a crisis has not specifically focused on what strategic leaders of a business school do and how they influence organisational crisis-related outcomes when there is a complex disruption of work, the worker and the workplace, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Arguably, the variety of desired outcomes in a crisis in a business school includes academic continuity, financial recovery, restoration of reputation, business school survival and meaningful organisational learning.

Schaedler et al (2022:1) assert that “an organisational crisis is an event perceived by organisation members and stakeholders to be highly salient, unexpected, and a potentially disruptive threat to the organisation and its stakeholders”. Crisis events may be construed as episodes with a beginning and an end or may turn into a chronic state if the events unfold with systemic interlinkages or a series of unpredictable events. Clarity of crisis attributes requires understanding perceived or actual crisis origin, severity and consequences.

There are two key reasons why leadership scholars are still interested in the COVID-19 pandemic, which ended years ago. First, the complexity, scale, and prolonged nature of the COVID-19 crisis and the severity of its long-term effects on various spheres of organisational life have the potential to advance our understanding of the nature and competencies of resilient strategic leadership in future crises. Second, COVID-19 manifested characteristics of the black swan event (e.g. being undirected, unpredictable, consequential and rare), which invokes exciting questions about how strategic leaders may proactively prepare for unforeseen events which do not have clear cues and what competencies are critical before, during and after black swan events in business school setting (Taleb, 2007).

Key leadership lessons from studying COVID-19 as a unique crisis are not yet exhausted. For example, the abrupt closure of business schools in the world due to COVID-19 continues to invoke fundamental

questions regarding what type of strategic leadership competencies are critical in a business school to demonstrate resilience in its academic programs (e.g., MBA, Postgraduate diplomas), research and administrative support services when students, support staff, academics and the workplace are all disrupted.

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the influence of strategic leadership of a selected business school in South Africa on activities and strategic direction during COVID-19 to ensure academic continuity and resilience.

This qualitative study on strategic leadership in a crisis and the resilience of a business school is significant in two key ways. First, it sheds some light on what business school leadership do and how they navigated the complex and rapidly evolving crisis of COVID-19. Second, the study provides valuable insights into how to develop strategic leadership competencies for future proactive academic resilience. First, the article begins by focusing on the evolution and nature of strategic leadership before focusing on what strategic leaders do in an organisation. Thereafter, the article delves into strategic leadership's challenges in the business school and the concept of organisational resilience. Second, the article presents the methodology used in this study, the results and the discussion. Lastly, the conclusion, recommendations, implications and area for future research are discussed.

2. Literature Review

The literature review in this article delves into the Upper Echelon Theory, roles and functions of strategic leadership and organisational resilience.

2.1 Upper Echelon Theory and Nature of Strategic Leadership

The Upper Echelon theory, as the seminal work on strategic leadership, asserts that “organisational outcomes – both strategies and effectiveness – are viewed as reflections of the values and cognitive bases of powerful actors in the organisation” (Hambrick & Mason, 1984:193). Strategic leadership research – the study of the most senior leaders in the upper echelon of an organization who have overall decision-making responsibility for the entire organisation has a long, rich history in organizational scholarship. The focus on those at the top marked a clear shift and distinction from focusing on supervisory micro-level leadership “within” an organisation to a concentration on overall leadership “of” the entire organisation (Kanyangale, 2017). In essence, “strategic theories of leadership are concerned with leadership 'of' organisations... and are marked by a concern for the evolution of the organisations, including its changing aims and capabilities. In this regard, strategic leadership brings clarity to the issue of the level and scope of responsibility in leadership work” (Samimi, Cortes, Anderson and Herrmann, 2020:1). The external environment continuously evolves and requires capable

leaders with advanced strategic leadership skills. According to Kanyangale (2017), there are a number of unique skills that lead to excellent performance, such as strategic thinking, remaining flexible and empowering individuals to bring innovative ideas within the organization. Samimi et al. (2020) define strategic leadership as the ability to anticipate, predict, strategically plan and inspire others to formulate innovation that supports the organization's sustainability. Therefore, strategic leaders are critical in setting the organisation's long-term goals and realising its vision.

From a process perspective, Asif ., Basit, and Review(2021) advocate that strategic leadership is the process of clearly communicating the organization's common values and vision to lower-level employees so they make decisions with minimal supervision.

According to Samimi et al. (2020) Strategic leadership requires specific competencies to effectively assimilate new information and ideas through different learning processes and apply this knowledge to solve complex situations in the external business environment. These kinds of competencies enable strategic leaders to be flexible and re-adjust the organization in the face of uncertainty. Some researchers define strategic leadership not as a process but as a set of practices that include defining the organisation's long-term goals, making the most of its resources, managing human resources, social responsibility, creating an organizational culture that is sustainable and emphasizing ethical values to support the company's long-term success (Samimi et al., 2020). This definition by Samimi et al., (2020) is relevant for the current study as it hinges on the skills, characteristics and functions needed for strategic leadership in crisis times in a business school in pursuit of resilience.

Scholars of strategic leadership have not focused much on the strategic leadership of business schools during prolonged and unforeseen crises such as Covid 19. There are many excellent comprehensive reviews of strategic leadership and research which already exist (e.g., Samimi et al., 2022), but little reveals a focus on how strategic leadership of a business school deals with organisational crisis in South Africa.

2.2 Levels and Scope of Responsibility for Strategic Leadership

In strategic leadership, the level and scope of responsibility can differ depending on the position within an organization and specific context. According to Alalfy (2014), there are three levels of leadership in an organisation. These are strategic leadership, tactical leadership, and operational leadership.

First, strategic leadership is about top management or the upper echelon, holding the highest level of overall responsibility for setting the organisation's overall vision, mission, and long-term strategic direction (Al Thani & Obeidat, 2020). Strategic leadership theory focuses on the dominant coalition or

top "executives who have overall responsibility for an organisation, their characteristics, what they do, and how they affect organisational outcomes" (Finkelstein & Hambrick 1996:4). Lastly, strategic leaders also perform relational work, such as engaging with internal and external stakeholders (e.g. employee shareholders, investors, partners, and regulators). Samimi et al. (2022:3) share the hierarchical and exclusive view of strategic leadership in terms of "the functions performed by individuals at the top levels of an organization (CEOs, TMT members, Directors, General Managers) that are intended to have strategic consequences for the firm. Strategic leadership also performs symbolic and ceremonial work of representing the organisation (Hambrick & Mason 1984:193-195). Supervisory leadership is about leading, and overseeing a team or teams based on preexisting organizational goals and guidelines. Tactical leadership focuses on daily, short-term goals and day-to-day activities to get the job done rather than the big picture. Tactical leadership emphasizes action while supervisory leadership provides immediate guidance, support, and feedback to team members.

There are recent calls for the conceptualization of strategic leadership to be broader and more inclusive. In this regard, strategic leadership demonstrates leadership skills or style across organisational levels. With this conception of strategic leadership, the focus is not just on the upper echelon but on value creation by people in the organisation. Nickerson and Zenger (2022:1) argue that strategic leadership is better thought of as "the task of envisioning and organizing the composition of value". This alternative and broad approach treats strategic leadership as "a skill or capability demonstrated by individuals across all ranks of an organization, suggesting that most effective organizations are filled with individuals demonstrating strategic leadership". Nickerson and Zenger (2022:1). Mindful of the new and broader conception of strategic leadership, it is prudent to clarify that this upholds that strategic leadership of a business school focuses on the leadership of those in the upper echelon of the school. The scholarship of strategic leaders in a business school needs to focus on the overall responsibility for the school or programmes, characteristics of these leaders at the top, what they do, how they do it, and particularly how they affect schools' outcomes.

For the purpose of this study, strategic leadership adopts the upper echelon theory and focuses on the functions performed by individuals at the top levels of an organization that are intended to have strategic consequences in an organization.

2.3 The Roles and Functions of Strategic Leadership

Functions are what people do in terms of duties, while roles relate to the part played or behaviours of a person in a particular situation or position (e.g. mother at home, lecturer at the university). Strategic leadership plays several important roles within the organizations to

steer towards success and sustainable growth (e.g. pathfinder, vision setter, and strategic thinker) (Al Thani and Obeidat, 2020). If one is to decipher the three main and broad functions of strategic leaders, these could embrace creating Direction, Alignment and Commitment (DAC). Direction entails creating and sustaining a reasonable level of agreement in the collective about the aim, vision, mission and values. Alignment is about the organisation and coordination of knowledge and work so that there is coherence in the work of individuals at different hierarchical levels and across groups, achievable through planning, structure, budgeting, supervisory control, and performance reward systems. Commitment is about creating the willingness of individual members to subsume their efforts and benefits within a collective effort to achieve shared goals (Auer, 2021).

It is the role of strategic leadership of a business school in a university to demonstrate DAC by providing direction and ensuring that the level of understanding and the alignment of the strategy is realized in pursuit of strategic goals and visions (Gore and Kanyangale, 2022). VUCA necessitates that university strategic leadership rely on collaborative sense-making and envisioning through a network of distributed leaders and various stakeholders to establish DAC during disruptive change within the university. Environmental turbulence makes it difficult for a strategic leader on his or her own to anticipate the future or make confident decisions about the institution's future. Sammi et al. (2020) have identified eight functions of strategic leaders. Table 1 provides descriptions of each of the functions and roles as identified by Sammi et al. (2020) and supported by other scholars, which are presented in Table 1

Table 1: Eight functions of strategic leaders

Identified function	Description of the function
Making strategic decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shaping the direction of an organization to navigate uncertainties, capitalize on opportunities, and mitigate risks to ensure the organisation's long-term success. Leaders excel in this function by combining analytic insight, visionary thinking, and the ability to navigate uncertainty (Wang., Wu, Xie and Zhang, 2023). Strategic leaders make organisation-wide decisions with strategic and long-term impact.
Engaging with external	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Representing the firm and managing relationships

stakeholders	<p>between the firm and both public and private entities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying external stakeholders proactively through a well-informed formal assessment process to evaluate their suitability and potential contribution to the organisation's success.
Performing human resources management human activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making decisions regarding personnel selection and dismissal, setting compensation, and personnel evaluation and development(Vaiman, Vaiman, Cascio, Collings and Swider, 2021; Coolen, Van Den Heuvel, Van De Voorde, and Paauwe, 2023)
Motivating and influencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivating organizational members, establishing follower trust and a unified workforce, serving as a role model, shaping the firm's culture, and communicating a vision(Kanyangale, 2017).
Managing information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processing strategic information and distributing it to the different areas and hierarchical levels of the organization(Kanyangale, 2017)
Overseeing operations and administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing the development and implementation of structure and procedures, monitoring different areas, and delegating (Kanyangale,2017; Choi, Wallace and Wang, 2018)
Managing social and ethical issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Steering the firm's moral behaviour and controlling illegal behaviours of the firm (Kabetu and Iravo,2018)
Managing conflicting demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attending to conflicting needs of different internal and external stakeholders and resolving conflicting strategic issues(Doz and Kosonen,2010) .

Source: Adapted from Sammi et al. (2020).

2.4 Challenges and Skills Requirements of Strategic Leadership in Universities

Caviglia-Harris., Hodges., Schulte-Moore., Helmuth., Bennett., Galvin., Krebs., Lips., Lowman, and Schulte (2021) acknowledge that the shift to remote and online learning necessitated rapid digital

transformation, requiring university strategic leaders to navigate technological challenges and ensure the quality of virtual education. The economic impact of the pandemic affected university finances, requiring strategic leaders to deal with budget constraints, secure funding, and re-prioritize strategic resources (Ibeawuchi et al., 2021). The pandemic also affected the mental health and well-being of many members of the business school community, including students, support staff and academics (Al Lily et al., 2020). University leaders needed to implement support systems for both students and faculty to address issues of isolation and burnout (Aslan et al., 2020). The ability of some university leaders to make strategic decisions during the VUCA context became critical in dealing with the identified challenges (Kezar, 2018). Figure 1 depicts university strategic leaders' key challenges and skill requirements in a dynamic and complex landscape.

KEY ISSUES	Multiple stakeholders	Staff, students, alumni, governors, governments, funders and philanthropists, corporate and research partners, start-ups, local communities	Communicating, empathizing, aligning	KEY SKILLS
	Complex and diverse issues	Education, research, external engagement, fund-raising, capital expenditure, impact	Foreseeing, prioritizing, simplifying problem-solving	
	Multiple timescales	Short-, medium- and long-term expectations; delivering operational efficiencies and major new initiatives; safeguarding historic reputation	Inspiring, balancing, motivating	
	New technologies	AI, blockchain, data science, robots: the new scientific infrastructure for education, research and administration	Systems-thinking, risk-taking, implementing	
	Multiple geographies	Local, regional, national, international	Connecting, synergizing, marketing/branding	

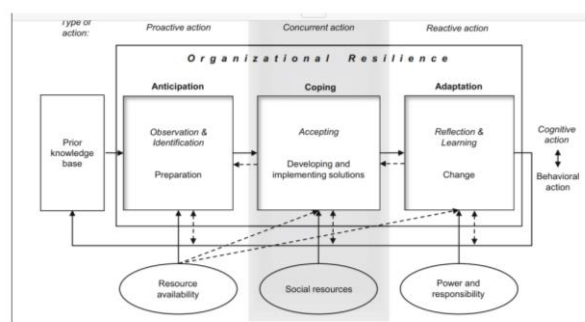
Figure 1: The key challenges and skill requirements of the University Strategic Leader
Source: Dogson and Gan (2019:2)

The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed the significance of technology literacy and tech-savvy as key competencies for university leaders to successfully lead digital transformation and collaborate with stakeholders to drive strategic results (Ndukwe and Daniel, 2020). As COVID-19 also triggered mental health challenges, strategic leaders with high emotional intelligence navigated empathetically and compassionately through the disruptive times (Brown and Nwagbara, 2021).

2.5 Organizational resilience

Organizational resilience is a critical issue which involves preparing before the event, accepting flexibility in operations, using coping strategies during the event and adjusting to changing environments after the crisis (Acciarini, Boccadelli, Vitale and Policy, 2021). Resilient organisations can respond quickly and efficiently to disturbances and minimise the impact on

operations and stakeholders (Agasisti, Avvisati, Borgonovi and Longobardi, 2018). Acciarini et al. (2021) developed an action-focused resilience framework comprising three sequential resilience action phases: before (anticipation action), during (coping action), and after (adaptation). The framework highlights that resources and capabilities must be available at every phase to support behavioural and cognitive behaviours that lead to organizational resilience (Sapeciay, Wilkinson, Costello and Adnan, 2019). Similarly, Ducheck (2020) uphold organisational resilience as a capability evident in anticipation capabilities, which are proactive actions before the crisis, coping capabilities as concurrent actions, and reactive actions in the form of adaptation after the adverse event. Figure 2 focuses on the three stages of resilience, time and competencies necessary to ensure organisational resilience.



Source: Ducheck (2020:224).

Figure 2 shows that organizational resilience is a multidimensional dynamic capacity built on interdependency and connection between anticipatory competencies, coping competencies and adaptation competencies (Wills and Hofmeyr (2019). In a slightly different vein, Ho, Lam, Law, . and Insights (2022) assert that an integrated dynamic model of organizational resilience comprises three levels: organisational, group, and individual. These levels depict contextual, cognitive, and behavioural resilience. A concise understanding of organisational resilience reveals two key strands in the literature, which uphold that resilience is the desired organisational quality, while another view focuses on resilience as an outcome. According to Jia, Chowdhury, Prayag and Chowdhury (2020), resilience as a desired organizational quality is reflected in a range of attributes such as strong leadership, engaged employees, and quick decision-making. As such, the focus is on the process of building resilience. The second strand proposes that some organizations are resilient, and others are not, viewing resilience as an outcome, and what is critical is to identify the drivers of resilience. The primary goals of these studies are to quantify organizational resilience and pinpoint the behaviours that enhance it.

Another interesting aspect of organisational resilience is proactive and reactive organisational

resilience. Proactive organisational resilience is about anticipating an adverse event before they occurs. Organizations engage in four important organizational activities related to resilience: self-assessment of impact, developing prevention capability, planning, and emergency preparation to become proactively resilient (Pitas and Ehmer, 2020). In a slightly different vein, reactive organizational resilience refers to an organizations ability to respond and bounce back from unexpected events effectively (Wills and Hofmeyr (2019). In a reactive approach to organizational resilience, the focus is on responding to and managing the immediate impact of a disruption rather than proactively preventing it. This type of resilience is often necessary when facing a sudden and unforeseen event such as a natural disaster. With the above understanding of resilience as a multi-dimensional, reactive and proactive phenomenon, this study seeks to discover how strategic leaders influenced the direction and activities of the selected business school in leading through disruptive times to ensure academic resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Methodology

This section describes how academic leaders as strategic leaders of a business school were selected and how data were collected and analysed.

3.1 Research paradigm

This inductive and qualitative study adopted a phenomenological research design to gain multiple and subjective experiences of strategic leaders at the selected business school regarding academic resilience as they worked during COVID-19.

3.2 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify six strategic leaders who were key and involved in making strategic decisions about the academic activities and operations of the selected Business school during COVID-19. The selection criteria were that (i) one had to be an academic leader; (ii) one served in an academic leadership position during the COVID-19, (iii) one had responsibility over a programme or strategic portfolio such as teaching and learning, research, school operations, head of school and (iv) willing to share experiences of how they led the school in time of disruptions triggered by COVID-19.

The strategic leaders of the selected business school were the Head of the School, Operations Manager, Head of Doctoral Research, Academic Leaders for Research and Academic Leaders of Teaching and Learning on the MBA, Master of Commerce Leadership Studies, Postgraduate Diploma in Business Management and Postgraduate Diploma in Leadership. The participants had a minimum of 3 years and a maximum of 15 years of academic leadership experience within the business school.

3.3 Data collection

A total of six audio-recorded, in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic leaders at the business school who were strategic leaders. Data were collected through ZOOM and semi-structured interviews lasting around 45 to 60 minutes. An interview guide was used to help academic leaders, as strategic leaders, to reflect on how they were influencing the strategic direction of activities, the positive and negative consequences of their activities, and how the school was building resilient staff, students and curriculum to enhance survival or thriving in COVID-19 disruptions. The interview guide also focused on exploring whether and how strategic leaders used different resilience practices to anticipate, cope and adapt to COVID-19 disruptions in the school and its activities.

3.4 Data analysis

Transcribed data were subjected to member checks and analysed using open coding and constant comparison. Key categories were induced from data and were subsequently developed into dominant themes revealing strategic leadership influence, which shaped the resilience capabilities and practice of the school during COVID-19. The thematic analysis in this study also involved using a checklist as shown in table 2 below.

Table 2: Fifteen-point checklist of criteria for proper thematic analysis

Process	No	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for accuracy.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead, the coding process has been thorough, inclusive, and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of - rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.

	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.
	10	A right balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis is explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what the researcher claims to do, and what the researcher shows to be done – i.e., the described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just emerge.

Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006:36)

4. Results

The exploratory study reveals multiple influences of strategic leadership of the business school on activities and strategic direction through strategic thinking, holistic redesigning of teaching and learning from face-to-face to online, agile resource mobilization and utilization, transparent strategic communication, and the pursuit of multi-level strategic commitment during the COVID-19 crisis. Table 3 presents these findings, which are subsequently reported in detail.

Table 3: Themes on strategic leadership influence on direction and activities during disruptive times to ensure academic resilience

Strategic leadership influence on activities and direction	Frequency
1. Strategic thinking	5
2. Holistic redesigning of teaching and learning	6
3. Agile resource mobilization and use	6
4. Transparent strategic communication	5
5. Pursuit of multi-level strategic commitment	5

Source: Authors composition

4.1 Strategic thinking

Five participants indicated that the complexity of the shift from face-to-face to online forced strategic leaders and employees to reactively consider the various challenges of online teaching for different stakeholders and the need for lecturers to adapt quickly

and envision themselves teaching effectively online and addressing student-related problems. Participant 2 revealed that strategic thinking by strategic leaders was manifest by not just generating unique insights about how to continue with teaching and learning online, envisioning students' learning and assessment in a digital environment, but also emphasising urgency, adaptability, and critical capabilities for continued academic activities and operations:

We were forced by the crisis to shift to an online mode of delivery of academic programs. Academics and staff were not yet experienced in online delivery. We had to think of how to quickly capacitate staff, academics and students to cope with an online mode of delivery. The Dean of the school at that time gave guidance on how to compile an online teaching module template and how to go about online teaching using ZOOM. She gave valuable information about asynchronous and synchronous modes of delivery online. Lecturers and staff were quickly ready with resources to support students and deal with online problems from students (Participant 2)

Strategic thinking during the crisis by strategic leaders also involved analyzing critical factors for academic continuity as VUCA unfolded. Participant 5 illustrated the urgency of providing professional development opportunities for lecturers and administrative staff at the business school to acquire requisite digital skills to cope with the disruption of academic activities in the school, as evident below:

We needed to ensure that academics swiftly transition to online delivery. The urgency of strategic leaders to identify capability gaps and respond to change was so important to cope during that time. So that was the important role the top leaders played during COVID-19. The strategic leaders rolled the blade to ensure our school continued to operate even when the environment had changed. (Participant 5).

4.2 Holistic redesigning teaching and learning

Participants underscored that strategic leadership was also evident in how academics were influenced and supported to urgently and holistically redesign teaching and learning from face-to-face to online learning without any prior experience. Strategic leaders of the business school identified the students' specific needs and supported lecturers to explore and implement new teaching methodologies, online templates and pedagogical approaches. Participant 2 illustrated the holistic but reactionary redesigning of teaching and learning in the quote below:

Firstly, the business school has been in a traditional learning institution where face-

to-face classes occur. So then, during that time, we had to go to online teaching and learning, which we had never done before. And then, looking at our competitors within the industry of business schools, most of them were already doing certain activities online. [name of business school] or the University were lagging on. So, COVID-19 assisted us in catching up with the other institutions in teaching and learning online and offering online courses. We were just that traditional institution for a long time. We were comfortable doing it like that, and as much as we knew that the market was going towards online momentum. We were not catching up. But then, the pandemic pushed us to achieve online teaching and learning very fast (Participant 2).

Strategic flexibility and holistic thinking of strategic leaders were evident in agility in responding to unforeseen challenges, adjusting to an ever-changing environment, and capitalizing on emerging opportunities and technologies to ensure academic resilience. Below is what Participant 5 had to say regarding holistic thinking of the various types of support, the implications of change on staff and students, and the necessity to sustain employee engagement to get results.

Academics were given a lot of training on ZOOM and a new online module template by the School Leadership to persevere with this new mode of delivery. We quickly had our programs supported by staff upskilled very quickly.....aided with the information on how to deliver online mode, doing synchronous and asynchronous engagement with students. The teaching and learning committee also meet online to discuss teaching and student matters and prepare for the semester. I had to quickly stipulate to staff the arrangements for how we would engage to get work done during that time and how our emails would provide as many details as possible at the bottom to guide students with queries (Participant 5).

Strategic leaders were busy not only identifying but also clearing potential obstacles to the successful execution of the redesigned teaching and learning in the business school. Participant 6 highlighted that digital skills capacity building for academics, staff and students was pivotal to ensure resilience:

To capacitate everyone in terms of working with technology, we were training and retraining colleagues and everybody in terms of the use of technology. Some

colleagues are still finding it difficult to utilize some of the technology. So, we tried to clear obstacles for our staff, students and academics to perform their work remotely (Participant 6).

In a different vein, Participant 1 highlighted the level of adaptive motivation characterized by self-efficacy as academics believed they could do university work well and master re-designed teaching and learning online:

There was a lot of motivation and self-efficacy as we knew we would master online and redesign teaching and learning to solve the problem. There were unofficial sessions where people just talked so that we could maintain our beliefs, relationships and motivation. While we redesigned teaching and learning, we also migrated from paperwork to what you call "online base". Yeah, that was another difficult thing that we had to do. It sounds so easy when you say it, but moving to paperless online platforms becomes very difficult when you are a paper-based university. It greatly helps us to be resilient during COVID-19 (Participant 1).

4.3 Agile resource mobilisation and use

The findings from the participants reflected that the strategic leadership of the business school were agile in mobilizing resources that academics, support staff and students required to ensure successful online teaching and learning. One participant illustrated the agility in resource mobilization and dynamic re-prioritisation to enable continued work by staff shown below:

We had to ensure the connectivity of our staff. I stopped everything and quickly procured laptops for the professional services staff to use and engage with academics, peers and students. Laptops and the data were priorities for me. I ensured they were provided before our campus departure or a week into our departure, not even a week (Participant 2).

Participant 3 reflected that strategic leaders were also agile in focusing on critical tasks of allocating data and building new competencies vital to pursuing academic excellence online and operational continuity in the school, as shown in the quote below:

At the start of COVID-19, the school lacked experience and resources for online delivery. The digital skills of academics and staff were critical to move to excellence in online teaching. It had never been done before. We wanted to ensure that the value of our

lectures would not be lost because we changed our mode of delivery. The school leadership gave the academics a lot of assistance, such as numerous workshops, to excel in this new mode of delivery. Staff and academics acquired a new set of skills that we use even beyond COVID-19. The pandemic opened a new direction for us, and the direction was excellence in online teaching and learning (Participant 3).

Participant 6 added how technology was quickly evaluated and chosen as an enabling asset key for academic work and resilience:

There was no time to prepare and get ready for COVID-19. Integrating technology into remote work, teaching and learning occurred fast. It made us see how best to utilize technology as an asset in a crisis time. After COVID-19, we continued teaching, learning and research through the virtual platform as a digital tool for our resilience as a business school (Participant 6).

4.4 Transparent strategic communication

The findings revealed that it was critical for strategic leaders to be transparent, quick and authentic during the pandemic in communicating contingent plans, new decisions and expectations to multiple stakeholders such as staff and students. Participant 4 revealed how increased frequency, respect for multi-level hierarchy and speed of aligned communication were critical in managing a variety of expectations in the crisis:

Frequent and transparent communication was one of the main activities to ensure resilience. Communicating more often and transparently was fundamental to ensure we were on the same page with colleagues, students and the government. We took the lead from the university as a school. The university informed the college, and then the college informed our schools within the college. We would then have internal meetings or sessions on how to deal with the new developments. Then we would see what we could do better as the business school. Transparent communication was important because most of our students are employed, so we also needed to develop plans aligned with them. Decisions were taken by the country, and everything that the university was doing in response to the pandemic was from the National Department of Higher Education. From that, we developed strategies that we deployed. We had to constantly go back and update the students

and staff through established platforms as quickly as possible (Participant 4).

Participant 2 reflected on school-level information sharing, which focused on staff and students accessing updates and school decisions to aid the shift to online teaching and learning platforms swiftly.

There was the sharing of information within the schools. There was also liaison with the students to ensure we informed them about whatever we came up with and got their buy-in. It was important that we communicate with them about whatever decisions we had taken as a school. Updated them that this is the decision that we have taken and that this is how we will proceed online during COVID-19 (Participant 2).

Participant 3 was explicit that weekly online forums for professional staff were strategic for effective employee transition, team cohesion and social resilience as people connected with others and worked together to solve problems that affected them both individually and collectively:

We had a weekly forum with the Professional Services staff to meet with them as a team. This was socially powerful as some colleagues were lonely or had lost friends or family members. Learning new technology and working remotely was not easy for some. We needed to keep spirits and emotions in check and get people to transition together to online workspaces as swiftly and productively as possible (Participant 3).

4.5 Pursuit of multi-level strategic commitment

The findings revealed that strategic leaders explicitly supported the transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning in a VUCA. Participants articulated how academic leaders at the business school provided financial resources and digital and technological support for academics and staff to ensure a successful new mode of delivery. Participant 4 focused not only on the high accessibility of leaders and staff at different levels in the school through various channels but also on willingness to make extra efforts and work longer hours, as exemplified in the quote below:

I think we were excessively accessible. If I may put it this way, there was too much accessibility, especially on the professional services side. I speak for myself and the academic leaders as well. It was common for us to work a normal day, which went until 6:00 p.m. We would be accessible either by cell phone or through Skype or

ZOOM. The funny thing is that people felt, "Well, you are working from the comfort of your home, and you are working online". I think working online and working from home made us much more accessible than we would be in an office setting, and because of that accessibility. We constantly worked and engaged in activities and tasks to support the academic enterprise. We sacrificed during these times to work outside of normal hours (Participant 4).

At the level of school staff, willingness to learn quickly, make personal sacrifices and meet regularly, depicts a strategic commitment to drive resilience and enhance skills and abilities to cope and bounce back. Participant 5 surmised the power of readiness to learn, willingness to change and voluntary support to peers when faced with obstacles for academic activities to continue during COVID-19:

It is because of our readiness to learn, respond to change, and have an emergent plan to deliver the academic program. The staff's willingness to have many meetings early in this disruption to help each other was central to continued academic activities. Staff were ready to volunteer and do what was expected during that time. If you want to know why we achieved academic resilience, the answer is that staff were willing to learn quickly, they were willing to respond to change, they volunteered to assist each other, and they were willing to make sacrifices (Participant 5).

At the school leadership level, a strong sense of obligation and leadership adaptability were key to academic resilience, as expressed by *Participant 4*:

Responding quickly and being decisive by migrating teaching and learning to online platforms is one of the key reasons the school was able to ensure continuity and adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic. One had to attend workshops and encourage others to gain online skills. Change was quick, but leaders were agile with a sense of duty, adaptability and follow-ups to see the school survive the crisis. As a member of the school's leadership, I had little time to sleep (Participant 4).

Participant 2 elaborated on the pursuit of positive and constructive actions in the administrative and teaching activities, which exemplified the organisational citizenship behaviour of those in the upper echelon reacting to the crisis as follows:

I am blowing my own horn now. I was steering the efforts to positively adapt in a way that considered many stakeholders' needs, including our students who combine work and study. I was helping co-workers without expecting anything in return. I was like, we cannot fail. After all, we need to collaborate and operate like businesses. So, you cannot afford to disappoint students and colleagues as a leader. Do you need to be proactive and graduate students, regardless of what happens? If it means working on weekends, if it means working at night, let's do that. I remember that at some point, I had a class that finished at 9:00 at night. So yes, we had to commit and be role models as leaders who also teach (Participant 2).

5. Discussion of Findings

This exploratory study reveals that the influence of strategic leadership was through strategic thinking, holistic redesigning of teaching and learning from face-to-face to online, agile resource mobilization and utilization, transparent strategic communication, and pursuit of multi-level strategic commitment, which ensured the academic continuity and reactive resilience of the selected business school in times of crisis.

First, it is salient to underline that the influence of strategic leadership of the selected business school resulted in reactive rather than proactive academic resilience. Arguably, there was very limited time for the strategic leaders of the business school to anticipate and prepare for COVID-19 disruptions. Without the anticipation stage of resilience, which involves observing internal and external developments, identifying critical developments and potential threats, and preparing for unexpected events, as far as possible, organisations are reactionary to adversity (Duchek, 2020).

It is prudent to be mindful that COVID-19 was a black swan event, which raises questions on the relevance and extent to which deliberate assessment and preparation before a crisis is realistic and pivotal as part of proactive resilience. In the current study, the strategic thinking capability of strategic leaders at the selected business school was essential and crucial, predominantly during the challenging crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the traditional thinking on proactive resilience upholds that strategic leaders of organisations anticipate and prepare before a crisis occurs (Duchek, 2020). Reactive resilience does not benefit from the anticipation stage of resilience, as the focus is on responding to and managing the immediate impact of disruption rather than proactively preventing (Wills and Hofmeyr (2019). In this regard, it is important that leadership development practitioners in the university design programmes to build the three-stage resilient capabilities of anticipation, coping, and

adaptation at the individual and organisational levels as the basis for enhancing the proactive academic resilience of a business school in future crises.

One key finding revealed by this study was that the strategic leaders of the selected business school quickly identified academic continuity as a strategic and desirable outcome of the COVID-19 crisis. Samimi et al. (2020) explicitly stated that the right vision establishes a standard for excellence and prepares the present for the organisation's future. In the current study, strategic thinking by strategic leaders involved identifying and evaluating online teaching and learning as a strategic option to react to COVID-19. In their study, Samimi et al. (2020) asserted that successful strategic leaders can think strategically continuously and make correct strategic choices. A study of strategic leaders in Malawi by Kanyangale (2017) revealed that strategic leaders employ strategic thinking to ensure an organization remains competitive and achieves its objectives. Strategic thinking involves integrating perspectives and creative, futuristic and holistic thinking to provide innovative solutions to the organization in a changing environment (Kabetu et al. (2018). The findings of the current study on the influence of strategic thinking on organisational activities and resilience-related outcomes resonate with the study by AlThani and Obeidat (2020), who concluded that strategic leadership plays a crucial role in guiding the organization through strategic assessment and planning process, aligning resources, fostering a culture of innovation, and making crucial decisions to achieve both the immediate and the long-term objectives

Second, the current study also found that strategic leaders of the selected business school exercised strategic flexibility through holistic re-designing of teaching and learning as key aspects of the organisational architecture of the business school. Marquis and Huston (2009), recommended that strategic flexibility enables strategic leaders to handle complex situations swiftly and proactively to attain current performance and acquire future opportunities. As strategic leaders lead and manage organisational change, they must demonstrate adaptability.

It is also prudent that re-alignment and re-designing of teaching and learning are holistic to reinforce synergy for resilience, mindful that different components of the business school organisational architecture (e.g. skill, staff, systems, teaching and assessment strategy) are interdependent. In the current study, contingency plans were responsive to the needs of various stakeholders to get stakeholder buy-in to meet immediate goals without compromising strategic direction. In a comparative study of online learning transition conducted by Fernández-Batanero et al. (2022), it was found that universities that implemented a phased approach towards redesigning teaching and learning online provided faculty training and prioritized

student engagement so that they were introduced to the new teaching and learning method in a phased approach. The study reported a smoother transition to online learning during the pandemic when a phased approach was used in the university (e.g., first-trained students to use laptops, software and virtual learning). Third, this study has found that speed, focus on resource mobilization and utilization, and dynamic re-prioritization are key aspects of agility to ensure academic continuity and resilience in the business school. Strategic leaders at the selected business school were agile in focusing on critical tasks (e.g. agile procurement of laptops for staff, allocating data, and building new digital and social competencies of leading in remote work). A report by Deloitte (2020) is explicit that organizations that adapt their agile practices during crises are more likely to maintain productivity and morale, as they can quickly realign their efforts with the changing environment. In the current study, agile practices in identifying, evaluating and choosing technologies as enablers were salient in influencing academic continuity and resilience. Technology can further enhance a team's ability to adapt agile practices during crises. Tools like ZOOM can facilitate task management and collaboration, while communication platforms like Microsoft Teams keep team members connected and informed. A study on leadership agility by Elali (2021) concurs that strategic leaders who demonstrated agility in decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic were more effective in navigating uncertainties and fostering organizational resilience. Flexibility and innovation are adaptive strategies adopted by strategic leaders in university crises that contribute significantly to successful crisis response. García and Weiss (2020) found that utilising different thinking capabilities of internal and external human resources and using collective resources are pivotal to pulling together in thinking and finding solutions during a crisis. The study by García and Weiss (2020) agrees with the current study's findings that strategic thinking should involve finding adaptive, agile and flexible strategies to drive resilient and inclusive solutions.

Fourth, the current study has illuminated the significance of transparent strategic communication, which not only considers the needs of various key stakeholders but also permeates the multiple levels of the organisation in times of crisis. Strategic leaders of the selected business school believed quick, transparent and aligned communication with key stakeholders such as students, staff, and academics was important during the crisis. During the COVID-19 crisis, strategic leaders prioritized communication with students and ensured their buy-in while developing and implementing the emergent crisis response plan. Strategic leaders developed communication strategies which were proactive, inclusive, transparent and across all levels of the university. In this study, strategic communication was proactive as it required understanding risks that

could occur during a crisis and had short- and long-term implications for employees, the university, staff and students. Providing transparent, timely information helps organisations establish trust with interested parties to make decisions in their best interests (Althani and Obeidat, 2020). To build trust, sharing up-to-the-minute information is important in times of uncertainty and volatility. However, it is unclear how the strategic leaders of the selected business school minimized the spread of misinformation in the digital environment. In the study by Demiroz and Kapucu (2012), leadership communication in crisis mitigation is highlighted as crucial in mitigating uncertainties and key as a trust-building mechanism. The current study has shown how strategic leaders of the selected business school boosted the confidence of staff and students, generated team spirit, organizational citizenship behaviour and employee readiness to respond to the disruption caused by COVID-19.

Lastly, the current study is explicit that strategic leaders pursue multi-level strategic commitment, which invokes organizational citizenship at different levels (e.g. head of school, head of programme, lecturers, support staff) to help realize the business school's academic continuity and resilience in times of crisis. It is critical to underscore that leaders create strategic commitment only when employees vigorously and voluntarily support the initiatives and passionately share ownership and accountability for achieving new levels and standards (Caviglia-Harris et al. 2021). In the current study, strategic commitment started with the leaders who worked long hours, were highly accessible to give support and made personal sacrifices just to see the selected business school continue with its academic activities. Notably, transparent strategic communication is vital to trigger and nurture personal accountability and organisational citizenship as elements of strategic commitment that business school strategic leaders ignited during COVID-19.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has found that strategic thinking, holistic redesigning of teaching and learning from face-to-face to online, agile resource mobilization and utilization, transparent strategic communication, and pursuit of multi-level strategic commitment are pivotal for the strategic leadership of the business school to influence academic continuity and reactive resilience in a crisis. This study has explored the influence of strategic leadership of the selected business school on activities and strategic direction during COVID-19, which ultimately shaped academic resilience typified as reactive as it did not engage much of the crisis anticipation competencies of individuals and the school. As the results predominantly reflect reactive resilience, there is a strong need for strategic leaders to proactively build the anticipatory capabilities useful before the crisis to complement coping and adaptation when

adversity has occurred already. Emergent resilience is important as it includes coping and adaptation but is weak and unsustainable without anticipation capabilities.

The reactive academic resilience identified in this study occurred in the digital era. However, it is unclear what strategies were adopted by strategic leaders to avoid misinformation, which can erode trust and organisational citizenship behaviours and exacerbate uncertainty during a VUCA situation. This study recommends that the business school investigate and review the pattern and nature of the emergent crisis response to COVID-19 and ensure a proactive resilience plan exists to guide future crisis response.

7. Limitations and Further Study

This study is qualitative and exploratory research that employed purposive sampling to determine the perspective of a sample of strategic leaders at GSB on how they practised leadership, which influenced the activities and direction to lead self and others, thereby ensuring academic continuity and resilience during COVID-19. Therefore, future studies should employ quantitative tools to compare the outcomes of both studies

The study did not focus on the views of employees who were not in the upper echelon, although they may have views on how strategic leaders influenced the activities of the Graduate School of Business and Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, future research should accommodate the opinions of employees who were not in the upper echelon.

8. Implications of this Research

This study has two key implications for strategic leaders of business schools and leadership development practitioners.

First, the study is useful for current and future strategic leaders of business schools in South Africa as it has provided insights into the variety of key activities by strategic leadership to influence strategic direction in a crisis and resilience capabilities, which are pivotal to enhancing a business school's academic continuity and resilience. This study contributes to the literature on understanding strategic leaders' influence during COVID-19 and organisational resilience in the academic context. Second, there is a compelling need for leadership development practitioners to design programmes aimed at developing strategic thinking, holistic and strategic alignment of teaching, learning and research to create synergy, leadership agility competencies, strategic communication, and strategic commitment as well as the three-stage resilient capabilities which constitute the foundation for proactive resilience of a business school.

As the small sample size is a key limitation, it is suggested that future research includes followers or participants from other business schools in South Africa

to understand better business school strategic leadership in crisis times and academic proactive resilience. Additionally, future research needs to embrace the views of lower-level employees to get diverse views on strategic leadership in crisis and the nature of academic resilience in a business school.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Nonhlanhla Lucia Sindane and Macdonald Kanyangale; methodology, software, validation, Macdonald Kanyangale and Cosmas Anayochukwu Nwankwo.; formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation were done by Nonhlanhla Lucia Sindane; writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, visualization, supervision, Professor Macdonald Kanyangale and Cosmas Anayochukwu Nwankwo. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.”

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Dataset available on request from the authors: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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