# Vision effects: a critical gap in educational leadership research

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Although leaders are widely believed to employ visions, little is known about what constitutes an "effective" vision, particularly in the higher education sector. This paper seeks to proposes a research model for examining relationships between vision components and performance of higher education institutions, as measured by financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement, and learning and faculty satisfaction. The model proposes that vision attributes of brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability, and vision content relating to financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement, and learning and faculty satisfaction can affect performance through four vision realisation variables.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based on a critical review of existing theoretical concepts and empirical evidence, a new research model, as well as research hypotheses, are developed for future research.

**Findings** – With future empirical support, the model will help university and college administrators to effectively improve their institutional performance.

**Originality/value** – While vision is core to the prevailing vision-based leadership theories, little is theoretically and empirically known about attributes for effective visions, particularly in the education sector. The paper proposes a model for future research to fill this gap.

**Keywords** Educational planning and administration, Leadership, Higher education, Performance management

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

The higher education sector is characterised by immense change (Apps, 1988; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993; Greene, 1988; Leslie and Fretwell, 1996; Lucas, 1994; Millard, 1991; Munitz, 1995; Tierney, 1993.), influenced by external pressures (e.g. demand for improved business practices, distance learning and virtual universities, competition for students). Moreover, nature of the student body is changing in many ways. Among others, university students are generally older and students demand creative use of technology in instruction. In such a fast-changing context, the question is what kind of leadership strategy is needed for universities and colleges to survive and remain competitive. To many leadership scholars, leadership with vision as a core component is the answer (Bass, 1990; Conger, 1991; Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Tichy and Devanna, 1986). Educational leaders can no longer be passive, but will need to look ahead to the future and scan the environment for change forces coming from the outside, a CEO-like function called "visioning" (Bolman and Deal, 1992; Deal and Peterson, 1990; Leithwood, 1994).

Empirically, vision has been studied as part of a blend of vision-based leadership in a wide variety of samples and industries, predominantly at the individual level rather than at the business-unit and organisational levels. Overall, positive findings between visionary leadership and individual follower performance, attitudes, and perceptions

have been found. However, examining what constitutes an effective vision, particularly in the education sector, has not been sufficiently studied, yet this is critical to researchers and practitioners who wish to understand the relationship between visionary leadership and organisational performance. Since Senge (1990) argues that two types of vision exist: positive and negative visions, and only a few exceptional studies (Baum *et al.*, 1998; Kantabutra, 2003; Kantabutra, 2008a) have investigated various vision characteristics and their impact on organisational performance, a need to develop a conceptual model to identify what characterise "positive" or "negative" visions is identified.

Empirically, no published studies have linked vision components specifically to educational institution performance, which is critical since vision has been emphasized as key to performance throughout the educational leadership literature (see Hallinger and Heck, 2002). This paper addresses some key issues in developing a vision, and proposes a research model for examining "effective" vision components and performance of higher education institutions. Sixteen hypotheses, future research directions and possible managerial implications are also discussed.

## Vision concepts

In this section, the literature relating to vision definitions, attributes, content and realisation factors is summarised.

### Defining vision

Despite its apparent importance, vision definition is still not generally agreed on, which is an important issue because empirical research on vision may be affected by the various ways in which vision has been defined. At present, vision definitions range from a goal-oriented mental construct (Seeley, 1992), a force field whose formative influence leaders can use to create a power, not a place (Wheatley, 1999), and a mental model each leader defines (Kantabutra, 2008b)**.** Accordingly, existing studies into vision are complicated by the fact that vision is frequently confused with, or even deliberately combined with, mission, goals, strategy, values, and organisational philosophy (Kantabutra, 2008b).

Avoiding the definitional confusion, Baum *et al.* (1998) opted to define the term vision as each leader defines it, reasoning that it is the leader's actual vision that guides his/her choices and actions. Later on, Mumford and Strange (2005) suggest that vision is ultimately a cognitive construction or specifically a mental model, a conceptual representation used to both understand system operations and guide actions within the system. Taking these two definitions into consideration, a vision is defined in the higher education context as a mental model each faculty leader defines, used to both understand system operations and guide actions within the system. This pragmatic definitional approach is adopted in this paper for two main reasons. First, each leader arrives at a vision in his/her own way, sometimes rationally and objectively, often intuitively and subjectively (Nanus, 1992). Second, visionary leadership can vary significantly from leader to leader in both the leader's style, the content of the leader's vision, and the context in which it takes root (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989). Given these two reasons, it is essential to consider the visionary tools that the leader

practically employs, rather than a possibly unrelated theoretical definition, in investigating any relationships between leader vision and organisational performance.

*Vision attributes*

Opinions vary on what characterise an effective vision, from the notion that an effective vision is inspiring, abstract, brief, stable and motivating (Locke *et al.*, 1991), strategic and well-communicated (Conger, 1989), to ideas that long-term and focus should be included (Jacobs and Jaques, 1990; Kouzes and Posner, 1987). Among others, Sashkin (1988) and Sims and Lorenzi (1992) propose that effective visions are inspirational, widely accepted, and integrated with visions of others. Despite many opinions, there is no existing theory to explain how each vision attribute creates an impact on organisational performance. This is indeed a serious missing area of the prevailing vision-based leadership theories (Bass, 1990; Conger, 1989; Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Tichy and Devanna, 1986; Westley and Mintzberg, 1989).

In his effort to develop a vision theory to fill in the gap, Kantabutra (2003) asserted that the seven vision attributes of brevity, clarity, challenge, abstractness, stability, future orientation, desirability or ability to inspire interact to create a positive impact on overall organisational performance initially through follower satisfaction. A vision that is too brief will not positively impact overall organisational performance unless it is clear to followers what needs to be done, or it may not appear to challenge followers to do their best. A clear vision will not positively influence follower satisfaction because it may be too lengthy, preventing a leader to communicate it massively and frequently. It also may not be abstract, therefore possibly creating conflicts among groups with different specific purposes and not allowing for individual creative interpretation among followers. A too specific vision makes it difficult to form an effective group to carry out the vision. Moreover, abstractness reflects stability in the vision because it implies no radical change over time. An unstable vision suggests to followers a serious lack of managerial integrity and commitment to the vision, negatively affecting follower morale. A vision that is brief, clear, abstract, challenging and stable will not draw follower commitment in working toward the vision unless the vision is also inspiring or desirable. In addition, when a vision is not inspiring or desirable, it is unlikely to develop and nurture a shared vision, which is critical to organisational performance (e.g. Kantabutra and Avery, 2005). An inspiring vision that is clear, brief, abstract, challenging, and stable will not be able to attract affective commitment from followers unless it offers a compelling view of a better future. Without a desirable future picture, a leader is unlikely to be able to draw followers from where they presently are to work toward the vision. Therefore, visions characterised by the seven vision attributes are expected to improve the vision's effectiveness.

Empirically, research into vision attributes is scanty. The first exception is by Baum *et al.* (1998) who investigated relationships between vision content and attributes, and organisational performance in American new ventures. They found that vision attributes of brevity, clarity, future orientation, stability, challenge, abstractness, desirability or ability to inspire; and content of venture growth imagery impacted venture growth positively, both directly and indirectly, via vision communication. However, while the literature reveals other possible influential variables in the process

in which a leader realises his/her vision, Baum *et al.* (1998)'s study included only one categorical intervening variable of vision communication. This is rather a serious overlook.

The second exception is by Kantabutra (2003) who addressed Baum *et al.* (1998)'s limitation by investigating relationships between vision components, a set of vision realisation factors, and customer and staff satisfaction in Australian retail stores. Findings on the positive effects of the seven vision attributes on customer and staff satisfaction support the Baum *et al.*'s study. However, this prior study is limited by the unreliable vision content scale, and validity of two vision attributes of challenge and desirability is also questionable.

The most recent report about the relationship between vision components and organisational performance is in Thai retail stores by Kantabutra (2008a), addressing Baum *et al.*'s and Kantabutra's studies' limitations. The study reports that the seven vision attributes is an indirect predictor of improved staff and customer satisfaction. Motivation of staff is the only direct predictor of enhanced staff satisfaction, while vision, empowerment of staff, organisational alignment, and vision communication are four indirect predictors of improved staff satisfaction. On the other hand, vision, vision communication, empowerment and motivation of staff, and staff satisfaction are five indirect predictors of enhanced customer satisfaction.

Overall, the previous findings endorse Kantabutra (2003)'s vision theory, particularly when Kantabutra and Avery (2007) found in their study of Australian retail stores that vision attributes that were not characterised by some of the seven attributes rendered no significant effect on either staff or customer satisfaction. Therefore, the seven vision attributes are adopted in this paper to examine their predictive validity in a higher-education setting.

*Vision content*
Literature on vision content is sparse. Andrews *et al.* (2006) draw from their study of 119 English local authorities to suggest that measures of strategy content must be included in valid theoretical and empirical models of organisational performance in the public sector because strategy content impacts organisational performance. Baum *et al.* (1998) argued that the content or core of a vision needs to be addressed because it is important to organisational growth. In a healthcare context, Williams-Brinkley (1999) argued that the focus of a healthcare vision should always be on patients, their families, and staff. In a public school setting, Kantabutra (2005a) argued that vision content should contain reference to teacher and student satisfaction, student achievement, and efficiency. Kantabutra (2005b) also argues that a vision should contain reference to corporate sustainability for a corporation to succeed in the long run. In Senge (1991)'s view, a positive vision emphasizes change and aspirations for growth, while a negative vision emphasizes continuing the status quo, even under changing environments.

The literature appears to indicate the existence of many proposals for vision content. A possible reason is that what should be included in vision content depends on the types of business and competitive environments in which they operate. If there is indeed common vision content across organisations, whether and how organisations can be developed, compete and sustain their strategic advantage are in a serious doubt.

Scholars appear to agree with this conclusion. For example, Westley and Mintzberg (1989) suggest that the strategic content of a vision may focus on products, services, markets, organisations, or even ideals, with this strategic component being the central image that drives the vision. Supporting this view, Collins and Porras (1994) suggest that vision content need not be common across different visionary organisations. This is consistent with Pearson's (1989) view that a successful vision takes into account industry, customers, and the specific competitive environment in identifying an innovative competitive position in the industry.

Similarly, little research has been conducted into vision content. Given a wide range of what to be included in a vision in the theoretical literature, it is interesting to find that some of the best visions were not indeed brilliantly innovative and all too often had an almost mundane quality, usually consisting of ideas that are already well-known (Kotter, 1999). This finding suggests that there may be a limitation to effective vision content. In addition, Larwood *et al.* (1995) published the first large sample empirical study of vision content. In this study, chief executives in one national and three regional samples participated in a study of content and structure of their business visions. They were asked to describe their visions in one sentence and to evaluate their visions along 26 content dimensions. Vision content ratings appeared in clusters found to relate to rapidity of firm change, amount of control the executives exercised over firms, and type of industry. The study did not, however, associate vision content with performance, a critical missing piece. Later on, Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) found that vision statements that emphasized product quality were related to increased trust, leader-follower goal congruence, and inspiration. In a more recent study by Dvir *et al.* (2004), vision formulation, content of social-oriented values, and assimilation were positively related to affective commitment to the organisation, and unrelated to continuance commitment among 183 high-tech employees. This finding indicates the positive relationships of a balanced transcendental and realistic content of the vision and a high level of "sharedness" in vision assimilation processes to affective organisational commitment. This finding makes much sense because people need to know where they need to head from the vision content before they agree with the direction and commit to it.

In Australia, Kantabutra (2003) found that store manager visions containing reference to customer and staff satisfaction were significantly correlated to customer and staff satisfaction in Australian apparel stores. Sales, customer, employee and leadership were four frequently mentioned vision content elements in this study, which is not surprising because all are strategically important to acquire or maintain a leadership position in the market. Moreover, Rafferty and Griffin (2004), drawing on their study of a large Australian public sector organisation, suggest that visions do not always create a positive impact on follower attitudes, and that one should distinguish between "strong" and "weak" visions as well as vision content to see their effectiveness. This suggestion gains support from Senge's (1990, 1991) view of negative and positive visions discussed earlier. More recently, Kantabutra (2008a) found in Thai retail stores that visions containing images about leadership were positively correlated with customer satisfaction.

As evident in the previous findings, vision content is related in some complex ways to organisational performance. In the context of higher education institutions, I propose

that the focus of a vision is on financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement, and learning and faculty member satisfaction because they are key broad performance measures for higher education institutes (Cullen *et al.*, 2003). It can be hypothesised that the more a faculty leader imagines about enhancing these performance measures, the better the overall performance of the faculty. Therefore, vision content in this paper is defined as vision imageries about financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement, and learning and faculty member satisfaction.

### Realizing visions

Developing a vision is the first step, but the literature review reveals that leaders need to realise their visions through the following four common themes: vision communication, organisational alignment, empowerment and motivation. Since these themes have been extensively scrutinized and discussed elsewhere, I do not discuss them in great length here. Visionary leaders:

(1) Communicate their visions to promote changes (e.g. Bass, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Conger and Kanungo, 1987, 1988; Cowley and Domb, 1997; House, 1977; Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Larwood *et al.*, 1995; Levin, 2000; Locke *et al.*, 1991; Nanus, 1992; Tichy and Devanna, 1986; Williams-Brinkley, 1999). Visionary leaders communicate their visions to promote changes and seek support for the visions, since follower involvement through a vision communication process is core to many charismatic leadership theories (e.g. Bass and Avolio, 1993; House and Shamir, 1993). Leaders communicate their visions in various ways including written statements and personal communication (Kouzes and Posner, 1987). Kantabutra (2003) proposes that the seven vision attributes facilitate the vision communication process between leader and followers. Obviously, a brief, clear and inspiring vision aids in getting members to act consistently with the vision. Accordingly, vision communication is operationally defined as the extent to which a faculty leader is perceived to communicate his/her vision by his/her faculty members through any or all of (a) spoken, (b) written and (c) technology-mediated channels.

(2) Align people and supporting systems, including the recruiting system, reporting lines, incentives, teamwork versus individual focus, and job design, to support their visions (e.g. Priem and Rosenstein, 2000), to suit their visions (Kotter, 1990; Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Locke *et al.*, 1991; Nanus, 1992). Not only do visionary leaders align people and supporting systems to suit their visions (Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Locke *et al.*, 1991; Nanus, 1992), but good visions also align people in organisations (Parikh and Neubauer, 1993), emphasizing the importance of vision quality. Such an alignment frees energies that up to then may have been consumed by internal friction and political infighting. The process of developing vision and strategies, aligning relevant people behind those strategies, and empowering individuals to turn the vision into reality, despite obstacles, is seen as leadership (Kotter, 1999). Clearly, a clear and future oriented vision that points directly at a prime goal and a future environment in which the vision functions assists in rallying people and organisational systems behind the unified vision (Kantabutra, 2003).

Organisational alignment is operationally defined as the extent to which a faculty leader reassigns his/her faculty members as needed to support his/her new vision, and sets up new faculty evaluation criteria according to the new vision.

(3) Empower their people to act consistently with the new vision and to help sustain their commitment to it (e.g. Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Cowley and Domb, 1997; Nanus, 1992; Robbins and Duncan, 1988; Sashkin, 1988; Srivastva, Suresh and Associates, 1983). While an alignment of organisational systems concerns structural changes, empowerment is regarded as the genuine downward distribution/relinquishment of power and control over circumstances. To empower employees, visionary leaders shape social contexts in their organisations in many ways, to suit their visions (Nanus, 1992). They do so largely through their decisions about and commitments to the following:

- whom they choose to assign to groups and tasks;
- the amount and types of resources and support services they make available to work groups;
- the design of incentive systems;
- the way jobs are structured and allocated among workgroups;
- their choice of people to head the teams; and
- the goals and expectations they associate with each organisational unit.

Together, the vision and the redesigned social contexts help to direct the energies of the people toward a common, audacious goal. In relation to vision quality, an abstract vision allows people throughout the entire organisation to creatively interpret the vision as to what is needed to be done within their roles and responsibilities to turn the desirable vision into reality (Kantabutra, 2003). Accordingly, empowerment is operationally defined as the extent to which a faculty leader is perceived by his/her faculty members to:

- delegate work to his/her faculty members;
- provide resources and support services to his/her faculty members; and
- encourage his/her faculty members to make more decisions regarding daily operations.

(4) Motivate their followers (e.g. Awamleh and Gardner, 1999; Bass, 1985; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Cowley and Domb, 1997; Kotter, 1990; Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Locke *et al.*, 1991; Nanus, 1992; Tichy and Devanna, 1986; Tvorik and McGivern, 1997). Many scholars (e.g. Chia, 1998; Goleman, 1998) have even associated motivation with performance outcomes. Highly motivated followers help to work toward a desirable or inspiring vision. Effective leaders motivate their followers through devices such as the use of formal authority, role modeling, building self-confidence, creating challenge through goal-setting, delegating, and rewarding and punishing (Locke *et al.*, 1991). Certainly, motivation of followers is related in some sophisticated ways to performance

outcomes. Since vision represents a perspective from the leader, it tends to be within the latitude of acceptance, notwithstanding the extreme discrepancy. By having a challenging vision, employees will also be able to raise their self-esteem in their attempts to achieve the vision (Gecas and Seff, 1990), which in turn motivates and satisfies the employees (i.e. Maslow, 1943). Effective visions also motivate employees by inspiring them with a better future and creating a spark of excitement that lifts the organisation out of the mundane (Parikh and Neubauer, 1993), nurturing a more pleasant workplace for employees. Motivation is operationally defined as the extent to which a faculty leader is perceived by his/her faculty members to:

- act as a role model for his/her faculty members;
- build his/her faculty members' self confidence;
- create challenges for his/her faculty members; and
- reward his/her faculty members who act consistently with the vision.

## Measuring performance in higher education

Higher education institutions have been working towards establishing performance indicators to measure progress towards their goals and objectives. A plethora of measures and other efforts has flooded the literature of higher education. However, Kaplan and Norton (1992) developed the balanced scorecard as a model which was aimed at translating vision and strategy of an organisation into objectives, measures and targets in four different areas: the financial perspective, the customer perspective, the internal process perspective, and the innovation and learning perspective. They argue that the financial measures show the results of actions already taken, and suggested that these financial measures need to be complemented by operational measures on customer satisfaction, internal processes, and the organisation's innovation and improvement activities; these operational measures being the drivers of future financial performance.

Although there is little empirical evidence available concerning the use of balanced scorecard approaches in an academic environment, Kaplan and Norton (2001) refer to its use in the administrative service units of the University of California. The balanced scorecard concept was also strongly supported by academic participants in the cases of Bailey *et al.* (1999), and O'Neil *et al.* (1999). Both studies comment that the approach satisfied the need for a simple and multi-dimensional measure that could guide and focus efforts to improve performance (Cullen *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, the balanced scorecard concept is adopted in this paper for measuring the performance of higher education institutions.

According to Cullen *et al.* (2003), the following measures are suggested for the four balanced scorecard perspectives. The financial perspective covers the main area of financial stability. Suggested measures for this area are income and remaining budget at year end. The customer perspective covers the main area of student satisfaction and growth, suggested measures of which are enrolment targets, new partners, student registrations, and number and quality of business/commercial contracts. The internal process perspective covers the area of process improvement, suggested measures of which are elimination of non-core courses, simpler reporting mechanisms, successful

review of academic programmes, and student recruitment figures. The learning and growth perspective covers the area of learning and faculty member satisfaction. Suggested measures are publications, registered PhD students, awarded bursaries, seminars and conferences, international journal articles, and peer review of teaching.

## Research model

Since higher education institutions are frequently structured around faculties, a model is proposed for the relationships between vision components and faculty performance. Although relationships among the various characteristics of visions and higher education institution performance are not yet well understood, Figure 1 depicts a model proposing a link between vision – faculty performance, derived from the vision, business strategy, leadership, and higher education institution performance literature.

Relationships among vision attributes, vision content, vision communication, organisational alignment, motivation and empowerment, and the four outcomes of learning and faculty satisfaction, process improvement, student satisfaction and growth, and financial stability are not yet well understood. Based on the literature review, Figure 1 depicts a structural model showing hypothesised relationships among vision attributes, vision content, vision communication, organisational alignment, motivation and empowerment, and the faculty outcomes of learning and faculty satisfaction, process improvement, student satisfaction and growth, and financial stability.

Initially, vision attributes can be postulated to have direct positive effects on vision communication, which in turn creates direct positive effects on motivation. Motivation then can be postulated to have direct positive effects on learning and faculty satisfaction, which in turn creates direct positive effects on process improvement. Process improvement then can be postulated to create direct positive effects on student satisfaction and growth, which eventually creates direct positive direct effects on financial stability.

Similarly, vision content can be postulated to create direct positive effects on organisational alignment, vision communication and empowerment. Vision communication, organisational alignment and empowerment then can be postulated to each create direct positive effects on motivation. Empowerment and motivation can then be postulated to each create direct positive effects on learning and faculty
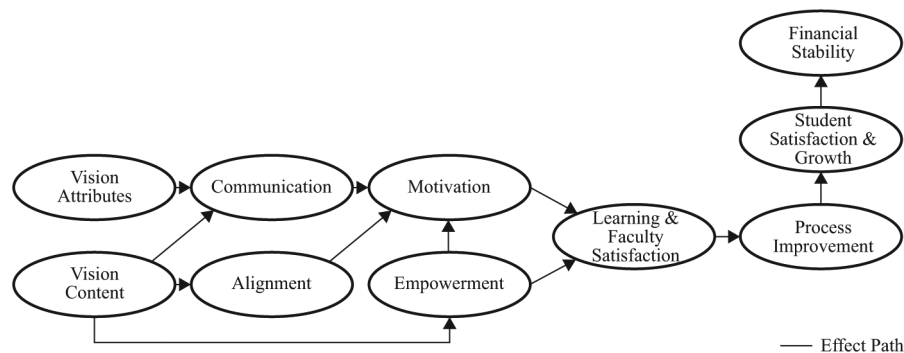


**Figure 1.**
Proposed model linking vision and faculty performance

satisfaction, which in turn creates direct positive effects on process improvement. Process improvement then can be postulated to create direct positive effects on student satisfaction and growth, which finally creates direct positive direct effects on financial stability.

While vision communication is probably the most widely recognized vision realisation factor, by including other three additional realisation factors of organisational alignment, motivation and empowerment, the proposed model is comprehensive.

Based on the model, the following directional hypotheses can be developed.

*H1.* Vision attributes is indirectly predictive of enhanced learning and faculty satisfaction.

*H2.* Vision content is indirectly predictive of enhanced learning and faculty satisfaction.

*H3.* Vision communication is indirectly predictive of enhanced learning and faculty satisfaction.

*H4.* Organisational alignment is indirectly predictive of enhanced learning and faculty satisfaction.

*H5.* Motivation of faculty members is directly predictive of enhanced learning and faculty satisfaction.

*H6.* Empowerment of faculty members is directly predictive of enhanced learning and faculty satisfaction.

*H7.* Vision attributes is directly predictive of enhanced vision communication.

*H8.* Vision content is directly predictive of enhanced organisational alignment.

*H9.* Vision content is directly predictive of enhanced vision communication.

*H10.* Vision content is directly predictive of enhanced empowerment of faculty.

*H11.* Vision communication is directly predictive of enhanced motivation of faculty members.

*H12.* Organisational alignment is directly predictive of enhanced motivation of faculty members.

*H13.* Empowerment of faculty members is directly predictive of enhanced motivation of faculty members.

*H14.* Learning and faculty satisfaction is directly predictive of enhanced process improvement.

*H15.* Process improvement is directly predictive of enhanced student satisfaction and growth.

*H16.* Student satisfaction and growth is directly predictive of enhanced financial stability.

## Future research directions

Clearly, research is needed to test the 16 hypotheses. One critical area is to test whether visions characterised by brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability are associated with improvements in financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement and learning and faculty member satisfaction than visions without these attributes. Similarly, one can also test whether visions containing images about financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement and learning and faculty member satisfaction are associated with improvements in financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement and learning and faculty member satisfaction than ones without. It would also be interesting to examine the extent to which vision creates such effects on higher education institutions' financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement, and learning and faculty member satisfaction through any or all of the proposed vision realisation variables, namely vision communication, organisational alignment, empowerment and motivation. One could also test the relationships among these vision realisation variables, and identify their relative importance.

If supported by future research, the proposed model will have important managerial implications, in particular for institutions of higher education. Once effective vision components are known, higher education institution administrators can apply them to develop their visions to maximize their overall faculty performance via financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement, and learning and faculty member satisfaction. Higher education institution administrators can also apply the four realisation factors of vision communication, organisational alignment, empowerment, and motivation in maximizing their overall faculty performance via financial stability, student satisfaction and growth, process improvement, and learning and faculty member satisfaction. The uncovered relationships among the vision realisation variables and their relative importance will also help to set priority in terms of budget allocation.

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