American Strategic Leadership (ASL): Case of Public Moroccan Universities

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ABSTRACT

It would seem that in the majority of non-Anglo-Saxon countries, including Morocco, most public administrations/organizations are not yet familiar with the Strategic Leadership (SL) culture initiated and largely dominated by the Americans. In this context, the state of the art relating to SL in the United States has empirically demonstrated the cause-and-effect relationship between the implementation of SL within large organizations and the improvement of their performance, especially through the development of a clear and dynamic vision centered on the development of competencies not only at the individual level, but also and above all, those specific to leading large organizations, particularly within the Volatile Uncertain Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment. From a closer qualitative analysis of the Moroccan public universities president's feedback, as leaders at strategic level, through a post-positivist epistemological approach *via* a hypothetico-deductive reasoning, we find many gaps comparing to the foundational ASL framework. Then, we discuss how these findings can help facilitate a smooth and progressive American Strategic Leadership implementation within national public universities community through a smart and adapted induction. Therefore, the adoption of SL, as a mode of governance, would be a critical and important contribution to improving the overall performance of national public universities and their sustainability which would very likely play its fundamental key role in the development and upgrading of national human capital and ipso-facto launch them to a better repositioning on the regional and international arena.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, Volatile Uncertain Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA), Moroccan universities, Vision, Alignment, change, Personal Leadership Development Plan (PLDP)

Abbreviations: VUCA: Volatile Uncertain Complex and Ambiguous; CSEFRS: Conseil Superieur de l' Enseignement de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique; UC: University Center; LMD: License Master and Doctorate

INTRODUCTION

As the environment has changed, while becoming more Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA), especially in the 21st century, the skills needed for Strategic Leaders (SLs) have also changed and require more specific leadership competencies in order to succeed in the long run, with more complex and adaptive strategic critical and creative thinking abilities as a key factor in maintaining competitive advantages. Because the economy has become more globalized, the new environment is characterized by an increased level of complexity and interconnectedness and where there are no boundaries anymore between countries along with several criteria that are more challenging for future SLs worldwide such as the melting of traditional organizational boundaries due to new technologies that disrupt old work practices while different values and expectations of new generations entering the workplace requiring the need to lead across cultures [1].

These facts are more challenging in developing countries where Strategic Leadership (SL) concepts are not adopted yet within public organizations, including in Morocco. In public universities, higher education performance, which has constantly been struggling with many problems, despite a series of reforms, is actually very poor [2]. Furthermore, several types of research have established that most big American companies and industries have developed their performance by multiplying their Gross Domestic Product thanks to SL implementation processes at all the levels. Amazon, Apple, Google, Boeing, and Procter & Gamble for instance have succeeded to improve their productivity, quality, and organizational performance at international level recognitions to creativity brought by SL concepts applied by their SLs who out-innovated all competitors [3-5]. On the other hand, other large

American organizations had gone bankrupt because their leaders could not integrate SL concepts: Kodak in 2012 due to SL problems and increasing competition from digital photography and where doubts surrounded the competence who failed to adapt to market changes and not investing enough in digital technology; Lehman Brothers in 2008 due to the global financial crisis where the executives were accused of taking excessive risks and mismanaging the company's finances; Enron in 2001 and WorldCom in 2002 due to fraud and mismanagement scandals where their leaders challenged contentions of providing fabricated information to investors and regulators and manipulating and falsifying financial results to hide losses. Hence, through the success, influence, and the international recognition of American universities which 10 of them are continuously among the 20 top international prestigious universities complying with most reliable university rankings indicators, we have got the idea to incense this research to try providing some key answers to the following main question: How can we take advantage of the American experience and expertise in SL way of managing to enable Moroccan public universities to implement this governing mode that brings added value in terms of academic excellence and performance at all levels (Table 1).

Table 1: Main international ranking indicators.

International ranking indicators	Shanghai	Times Higher Education (THE)	Center for World University Ranking (CWUR)	QS World University
Education quality		X	X	
Research quality		X	X	
Research articles' citations		X	X	
Incomes from industry		X		
Nomber of Nobel awards	X	X		
Nomber of field medals	X			
Articles published in high standard scientific magazines	X			
Employers' reputation				X
Academic reputation				X
Academic performance	X			
International outlook		X		
Size of the university			X	
International students ratio			X	X
International professors ratio			X	X

Source: Author.

At first glance, this issue appears very simple; however, it is quite complex insofar as the American concepts of SL are not widely adopted within Moroccan large organizations, including public high education sector, its implementation would very likely face cultural and traditions challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical foundations of leadership

Leadership definitions and its interactions with the concept of management: In our previous research, we have dedicated a complete and consistent article to the evolution of leadership definitions since the beginning of the 20th century and another one to characterize the interactions between leadership and management [6,7]. In the first one, we suggested not a new definition of this concept, but our personal approach of leadership which will enable leaders of the 21st century to better cope with VUCA environment to enhance their organizations' competitive advantages. The second one highlighted that the use and the perception of these two concepts have evolved according to the geo-economics and technological contexts that have marked the history of commercial and industrial relations, particularly within developed countries such as United States.

Levels of leadership: Many leadership researchers have explicitly recognized that leadership needs depend on the level of the leader within the organization [1]. Within this framework, Jacobs and McGee distinguish three general levels of leadership that correspond to the organizational design of firms: At the low end, leadership consists of overseeing hiring, firing, and assigning tasks, which the authors consider situational leadership. At a middle level, leaders set operational goals and coordinate the efforts required to achieve organizational objectives. Commonly considered transactional leadership. Finally, at a high level, the strategic top of the organization establishes a vision and sets overall goals for the entire organization and is referred to as transformational leadership [8].

In fact, one of the challenges that many managers and leaders face is the distinction they must make between these different levels of leadership. Although they share a common theoretical and practical basis, tactical and SL have quite different requirements. In addition, there is an aspect of leadership-the operational level-that many do not even know exists [9].

Theoretical foundations of strategic environment

Understanding the strategic level in VUCA environment: In VUCA environment, which is full of huge and evolving challenges, SLs need to better understand the strategic level environment, both internal and external, to be able to develop appropriate strategies in order to efficiently respond in such environment (VUCA) especially when the problems being faced are "wicked or super wicked" [10,11].

SLs' competencies required to better lead large organizations: Along with individual competencies (technical, interpersonal, and conceptual), SLs have to develop several specific ones to better lead large organizations and which we have detailed in our previous research [12]. In this regard, it's worth to note that the concept of SL in Morocco in general and in public university system in

particular had not been addressed yet in the literature.

Conceptual model

In order to deal objectively with interviewees' answers to the questionnaires at different levels, particularly at strategic level, we opted for an analysis concept that enabled us to compare the perceptions and practices of SL at national public universities on the basis of SL concepts, theories, styles, and practices implemented within large American organizations (Figure 1).

In order to answer the research questions prepared in this study, the researcher has gone through American SL and tries to come up with a set of questions through four kinds of questionnaires (tactical, operational, strategic, and politico-strategic) related to examination of individual competencies related to Moroccan public universities' presidents (left-hand side of Figure 1) as well as those specific to leading large organizations (The middle of Figure 1). In other way around, the questionnaire method is used to extract out the SL competencies formulated from various leadership's

point of views at all these four levels while ensuring the coherence between the political/strategic level and other levels–operational and tactical. This strategic approach would allow our empirical research to run through a systematic iteration between the quality of the final outcome, and the systematic feedback process while emphasizing the need for any involved leader to get a Personal Leadership Development Plan (PLDP) to further enhance their strengths and refine the skills that require improvement through 05 main Key Performance Indicators (KPI) which allowed us to discuss our findings.

Epistemological positioning and methodological choice

Epistemological framework: As our research is mainly conducted through the US SL framework of reference, we have adopted the post-positivism epistemological approach through a hypothetical-deductive reasoning process and have specifically chosen to proceed with a qualitative type of research in order to enrich our work as shown in the Table 2 below.
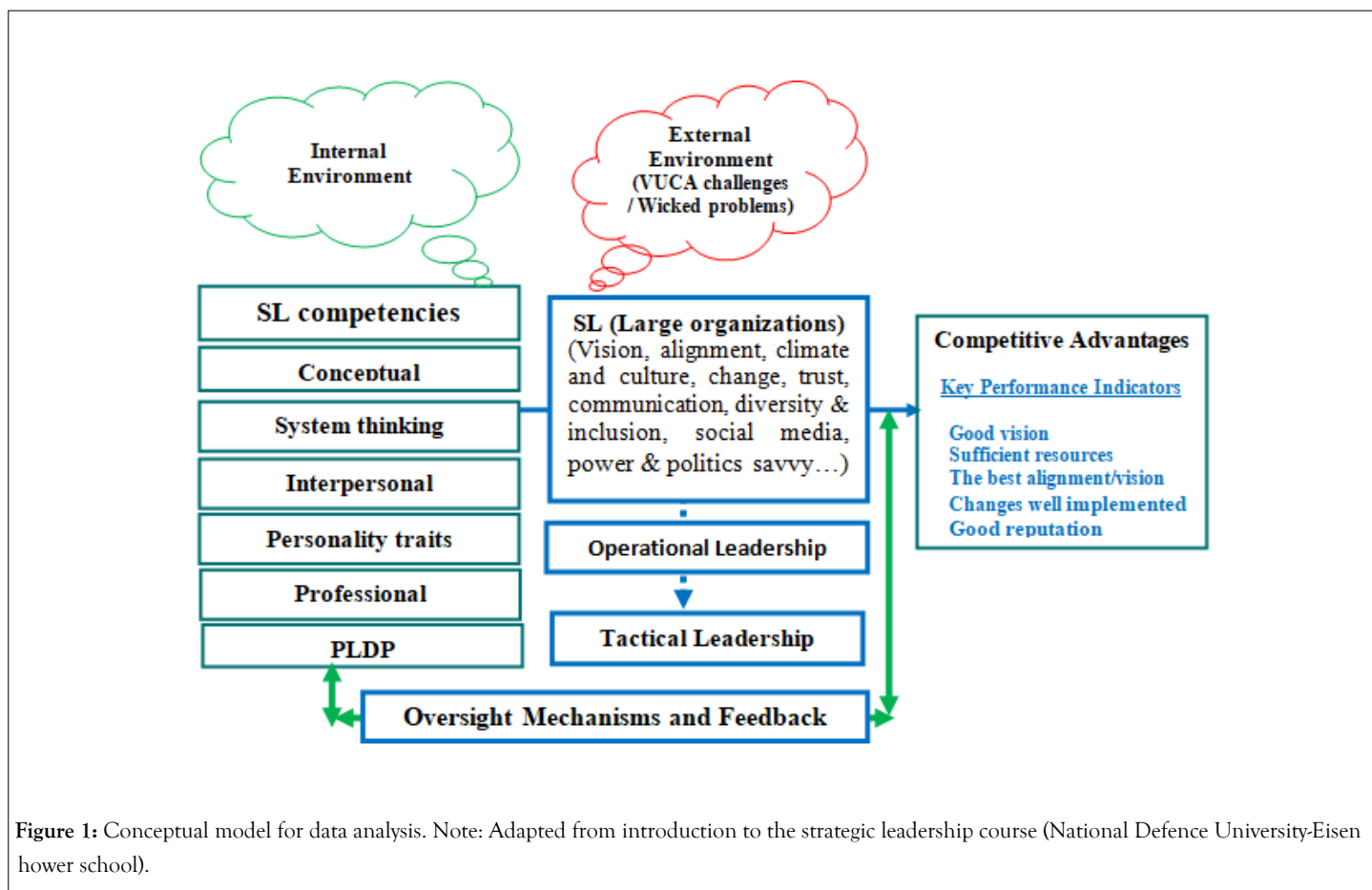
Figure 1: Conceptual model for data analysis. Note: Adapted from introduction to the strategic leadership course (National Defence University-Eisen hower school).

Table 2: Epistemological framework adopted for the research.

Methodological axis	Our choices	Reference
The epistemological paradigm	The post-positivism	Nawrin, R., and Mongkolsirikiet, K. (2012).
The reasoning process	Hypothetical-deductive approach	Pratama, W. P. (2021).
Source: Self-conceived.		

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer our research problematic, we went through a qualitative working method, as an empirical approach study, which aims to analyze a phenomenon, a situation, or individuals to come out with potential findings to be able to suggest relevant recommendations which are not included in this article. We relied on our case study insofar as it not only meets the criteria of large organizations; but also, and above all because of the strategic importance and the recognized sensitivity of the field of education in general and higher education in particular in the socio-economic development of any country (Table 3).

In this regard, within the qualitative methodology, we adopted a hypothetical-deductive approach, conducted through semi-directed interviews and surveys carried out with Moroccan public universities staff at all the concerned levels. This type of questionnaires has several advantages, particularly because it will allow us to analyze the perceptions and practices of the leaders interviewed and the degree of their implementation within Moroccan public universities. By choosing a qualitative study, we were interested in the perceptions of the staff interviewed in order to get the big picture of how far SL concepts are understood, applied and/or implemented in this large administration (Ministry).

Research process and hypothesis

Research process: Moroccan public higher education (universities) is one of the most important components of National Higher Education System, among Partnership based Higher Education and Private Higher Education which all fall under the authority of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation (MHESRI). The Public Higher Education consists of universities and non-university Higher Education Establishments (Specialized establishments under the administrative and financial authority of technical ministries and under the pedagogical authority of the MHESRI). The scope of our research is only limited to public universities because of its importance role in human capital development especially for the youth employability, and therefore for socioeconomic development of our country. Our choice is also motivated by the systemic and structural crisis which undermines the role, mission, and place of public universities in the context of globalization as evidenced by its non-ranking among the top 1000 international universities before 2022/2023. In fact, all the successive reforms carried out have been all so far, an unfinished project, despite the resources allocated to them. Several reports issued by the Moroccan Higher Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research point to governance as the weak link in our university system [13-16].

Sample studies: Through this sample, we also sought to enrich our knowledge in order to better understand what the necessary competencies are required to better lead national public universities taking as reference those implemented in the US. Our research mainly focuses on the strategic level (Universities presidents) while including other levels (Ministry/State), as the vision and policies makers, and (faculties and schools) as the implementation components of the higher education ministry/state vision as outlined in Table 4 below.

Furthermore, the twelve Moroccan public universities are distributed as follows (Table 5):

Table 3: Empirical research process adopted.

Methodological axis	Our choices	Reference
The working method	Qualitative	Dana, L. P., and Dumez, H. (2015).
The empirical method of work	Semi-directive interview	George, T. (2022).
Data collection tool	Questionnaires	Kohn, L., & Christiaens, W. ; 2014

Source: Self-conceived.

Table 4: Positions of Moroccan public universities leaders interviewed.

Leadership Levels	Number of interviewees	Ministry	University	Faculties	Establishments
			Presidents	Deans	Professors
Political-Strategic	3	3	-	-	-
Strategic level	9	-	9	-	-
Operational level	12	-	-	12/83	-
Tactical level	24	-	-	-	24/62

Source: Self-conceived

Table 5: Distribution of public national universities by administrative regions.

N°	Administrative regions	Universities	Faculties	Schools	Institutes
1	Tangier/ Tetouan/ El Hoceima	Abdelmalek Essaadi Tetouan	Tetouan (04)	2	-
			Tanger (03)	3	
			Larache (01)	-	
			El Hoceima (01)	1	
			Ksar-Lekbir (01)	-	

2	Eastern region	Mohammed Premier Oujda	Oujda (04)	3	-
			Nador (01)	-	-
3	Fes/ Meknes	Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah Fes	Fes (07)	4	-
			Taza (01)	-	-
		Moulay Ismail Meknes	Meknes (03)	4	-
			Errachidia (02)	-	-
4	Rabat/Salé/Kenitra	Mohammed V Rabat	Rabat (06)	4	5
			Salé (01)	1	-
		Ibn Tofaïl Kenitra	Kénitra (03)	5	-
5	Beni-Mellal/ Khenifra	Sultan Moulay Slimane Beni-Mellal	Beni-Mellal (04)	4	-
			Khouribga (01)	1	
			Khenifra	1	
			Fkih Ben Saleh	1	
6	Casablanca / Settat	Hassan II Casablanca	Casa (08)	6	-
		Mohammedia	Mohammedia (03)	1	-
		Hassan 1er	Settat (03)	2	2
		Settat	Berrechid	1	-
		Chouaïb Doukkali El Jadida	El Jadida (03)	3	
			Sidi Bennour (01)	1	
7	Marrakech/ Safi	Cadi Ayyad Marrakech	Marrakech (06)	3	-
			Safi (01)	2	
			Essaouira	1	
			Kelaa Sraghna (01 UC[3])	-	
8	Draa/Tafilalet	Ibn Zohr Agadir	Ouarzazate (01)	-	-
9	Souss Massa		Agadir (05)	4	-
			Taroudant (01)	-	
			Ait Melloul (03)	-	
10	Guelmim / Od Noun		Guelmim (01 UC)	-	
11	Laayoune / Sakia El Hamra		Laayoune	1	
12	Dakhla/Oued Eddahab		Dakhla	1	
			Smara (01)	-	
	Total	12	81	60	7

Source: Self-conceived Note; 3UC: University Center: smaller than a university.

Questionnaires: At the very beginning of the empirical research, we conducted exploratory interviews with a few deans of faculties and professors in higher education, using an interview guide that was adapted from the one used in auditing large American universities. Furthermore, and in order to ensure the content validity of our questionnaires, we followed the steps below: First, we conducted extensive research on the topic and then specified the structure of leadership at all the four levels, especially at the strategic one under study. Then we consulted some expert practitioners and academics in the field of SL, primarily university presidents and faculties' deans which helped us to finally make the necessary corrections, by gathering relevant information about the contextualization of the concept of SL within the Moroccan university system. In fact, these initial interviews and surveys were very important for us as they allowed us to develop, adapt and refine the questionnaires for each category of our interviewees. Then, our approach has been conducted through an iterative work between theory and fieldwork surveys, until we have finalized our four questionnaires after having eliminated almost 25 questions and reworded a number of other questions to finally get a questionnaire that was valid in terms of content to university context.

The aim is to check the degree of understanding, coherence, and implementation of the strategic vision within the Ministry at all levels. It is useful to underline in this context that the elaboration of the questionnaires, dedicated to all the leaders involved in the present empirical research, was inspired by those developed for the conduct of the audits carried out with the large American civil and military organizations, in which we participated in 2016 and which allowed us to reach the main objective of this research through the similar process and analysis. Alongside some leaders who were available to arrange face to face interview, the questionnaires were sent by email to the remain staff since November 2022, and the last answers were received in late April 2023.

Data collection: In accordance with our qualitative methodological approach adopted for our research subject, the interview technique was the best way to access the information insofar as interviews are considered to be the most correct method for the collection of

information serving the proper scientific approach. However, and for practical reasons, we have mainly collected our data through the analysis of all the answers to the questionnaires received by email or during our face-to-face meetings. Then, and within this framework and based on the research questions, some specific themes were carefully prepared and developed for each category of leaders while leaving them the latitude to suggest and develop any particular aspect not provided by the questionnaire, which would certainly enrich the horizons of SL integration in Moroccan universities.

Hypothesis

Given this current alarming higher education setback in our country, we do wish and have the ambition that the concepts of SL be integrated, as a mode of governance within national public universities, to repositioning itself minimum among the top thousand prestigious international universities. We are certainly very aware of the difficulties of a possible and imminent enthronement of this concept within this system, but we believe that its implementation remains one of the key solutions for improving the performance of Moroccan public universities.

Therefore, and based on literature review and the central question of this research, we have opted for the following hypothesis:

H1: Moroccan public universities may benefit from ASL through a partial implementation to enhance its overall performance;

H2: Moroccan public universities may fully take advantage from ASL implementation through smart adjustments taking in account its sociocultural backgrounds.

RESULTS

The analysis of the answers of the various levels has enabled us to highlight some recurring preliminary aspects related to the perceptions and practices related to basic notions of the theoretical concepts of leadership in general and SL environments' characteristics and challenges in particular.

Concepts of leadership foundations in general

- **Incomplete definition of the leadership concept:** Many respondents have been able to explain this concept from only the influence perspective between the leader and the followers as defined by several authors while it depends actually on other factors such as time and space framework and also the context where these interactions occur [17];

- **Leadership as a crosscutting concept:** Some interviewees who received the questionnaires by email, especially at the tactical and operational levels, did not respond to the said questionnaires. They argue that their faculties and/or schools are not dedicated to leadership, and therefore only those institutions that are specialized in management sciences are able to deal with this kind of questions;

- **Lack of understanding of the different levels of leadership, particularly the strategic one:** This research revealed that the majority know the tactical level very well; however, there is little confusion between tactical and operational level in some respondents' opinion, while others are unaware of the existence of the intermediate level "Operational" which is an essential coordination and sustainment stage between tactical and strategic ones;

- **Confusion between leadership and management concepts:**

almost 50% of the interviewed consider them to be similar when in fact they are not. For presidents, a third only got a real perception of management and leadership and their interactions.

Strategic leadership framework

- **Strategic leadership:** The majority of respondents are not familiar with it and its challenges;

- **Strategic environment:** It has been noticed a partial knowledge of this environment in general and a certain lack of awareness of its characteristics and challenges. In fact, the majority of interviewees do not have sufficient knowledge about the variety of factors that characterize the strategic environment, particularly at the operational and strategic levels;

- **VUCA environment and its challenges:** 10% of the interviewees are not familiar at all with this environment while 50% have already heard this acronym but without understanding its deep meaning; 40% understand it partially and finally only 10% seize the real meaning of it.

Individual competencies required of SLs

In general, almost all the interviewees are aware of the most important competencies that are necessary for any leader to better manage the challenges faced at all levels, including in crisis time such as the conceptual, interpersonal, and professional ones. However, the creative and critical system thinking usually required from SLs in VUCA environment are not enough apprehended especially in the decision-making process. For the majority, to be able to get and achieve all stakeholders' consensus, for a certain decision, requires not only a good enough experience but also charisma and credibility.

Specific competencies required from SL to better lead large organizations

Regarding the vision, which is developed at political level, the findings related to all the other levels are synthetized in the Table 6 below.

The exploration of table 6 below, which summarizes the responses to the questions relating exclusively to the vision, recorded in the left-hand column, has led to the following fact findings:

- While the spirit and letter of the vision concept are fairly well understood at the political-strategic and strategic levels, they remain incomplete or even unknown at lower levels. Only the third of the universities' presidents, at strategic level, understand the real process and the outcomes of the vision process and its right level of development, communication, and implementation at all the levels;

- The same applies to the concepts of vision and strategic objectives where their confusion is even more pronounced at the operational and tactical levels (more than 50%). Indeed, it was noted that the concept of vision, which remains exclusively at the political-strategic level (Ministry/State), is sometimes used at either university or deanery/school level. In addition, there is a tendency to confuse the Ministry's vision with the university's objectives, particularly at the tactical level where the majority of professors interviewed are not familiar with all vision process.

- For the vision development, the results showed that only

10% of presidents contribute to it, while other collaborators, including deans and directors, are not generally involved in this process;

• When it comes to communicating the department's vision, the table shows that efforts in this area are generally more consistent at presidency's level, particularly in terms of internal institutional communication;

• For the effective implementation of the vision at all levels, whose main mission is obviously the responsibility of the Ministry, it has been noted that efforts in this area at this level need to be further strengthened on one hand; and that those made to support the Ministry in the successful implementation of this vision are decreasing as they move towards lower levels, and even disappearing at the tactical level. We have also noted that the effective implementation of the Ministry's vision varies from one university to another, and depends on several factors, such as available resources, the quality of teaching and administrative staff, and the capacity of each institution to adapt to the proposed changes;

• With regard to the process of monitoring alignment with the Ministry's vision, we found that there are not enough mechanisms for systematic assessment of the process alignment to the vision within almost all the entities and establishments across the country

The alignment processes

Almost all the interviewees at all the levels (90%) respond that the objectives of the universities, faculties, schools, and laboratories are aligned with the vision of the Ministry in charge, but without any relevant justification. However, 10% dared and confirmed that the development projects of the universities remain aligned with the general orientations of the Ministry but are not necessarily synchronized with the general strategy of the Minister in office. Finally, no one at any level has put forward an approach or methodology established for alignment process implementation with the said vision, such as that advocated by Bradach in the USA, known as the 7S model.

The change's process

SL can be defined as "the leader's ability to predict and maintain flexibility and to empower others to create strategic change as necessary" (Table 7) [18].

Table 6: Results on the VISION questioning.

Findings/Levels	Strategic level	Operational level	Tactical level
	Presidents	Deans/Directors	Professors
Incorrect definition	50%	75%	90%
Incomplete definition	75%	80%	90%
A confusion between the vision and the Ministry objectives	10%	30%	90%
A confusion between the vision and the university objectives	10%	10%	80%
Who developed the vision?	10%	0%	0%
How is the vision communicated?	50%	10%	0%
How do you ensure that your Minister's vision is effectively implemented at all levels?	10%	5%	0%
Aspects nonaligned to the Ministry vision?	10%	0%	0%
Methodology to align?	~	~	~

Source: Self-conceived

Table 7: Results on the CHANGE process.

Niveau	Political-Strategic	Strategic level
Challenges and constraints awareness.	90%	80%
Opportunity to reform the national university system, which aspects would you attacks in priority?	60%	80%
Methodology for any change process?	~	-

Source: Self-conceived.

Almost all the interviewees at strategic level (presidents) (90%) are aware of the importance of the concept of resistance to change in general, which is even more apparent and widened within Moroccan society especially the university community that is traditionally conservative and often reluctant to change due to its cultural background. For those who experimented changes, especially at the level of universities presidency, they especially pointed out the following internal and external challenges:

Internal environment:

- Staff training and management of governance structures such as the University Council;

- The obsolescence of the management style and the governance of the University;

- The inappropriate overall organizational structures;

- The non-generalization of the digital working tools;

- The desuetude of current legal norm.

External environment: The lack of support of the local and regional actors; the difficult exchanges with professional unions, including those representing professors-researchers (National Union of Higher Education). In another register, the university presidents were asked if they had the opportunity to make any changes, what would be, and which specific intellectual approach or methodology should be applied to efficiently conduct and implement these changes. To the first part of the question, all the presidents interviewed agreed on the fact that there are a lot of domains which requires change in order to be in tune with the rapid evolution of technology, society, and organizations, and their priorities are synthetized as follows:

- The revision of Law 01.00 on the organization of Higher Education;

- Reduce the number of Institutional and University Councils and establish a dedicated financial department for each university;

- Ensure that clear and precise objectives are communicated and set for all stakeholders;

- Set up and implement a Digital University;

- Fight against the massification of students;

- Set up research Centers of excellence;

- Review the functioning and the way of the University's governance bodies;

- Adopt a comprehensive reform approach taking in account all stakeholders including education reform from the early years of schooling to be in line with the high education scope;

- Strengthen the financial autonomy of the University;

- Generalize the implementation of the Quality Management System to all components of the university, while combining it with the development of the information and management system that provides effective tools for decision making;

- Encourage more involvement of national, regional, and local partners; and

- Share experiences and expertise with famous international universities.

Besides these proposals, there were others that we have not considered because they fall under the operational and tactical levels such as the pedagogical architecture (LMD system), curricula and training programs and others, as it is explicit in the Figure 2, below. For the second part of the question, no one has suggested a working methodology as a tool to analyze and implement change within an organization as performed by American SLs [19]. Finally, the remain 10% of the presidents interviewed confirm that they have never experimented any change event or such process in this field.
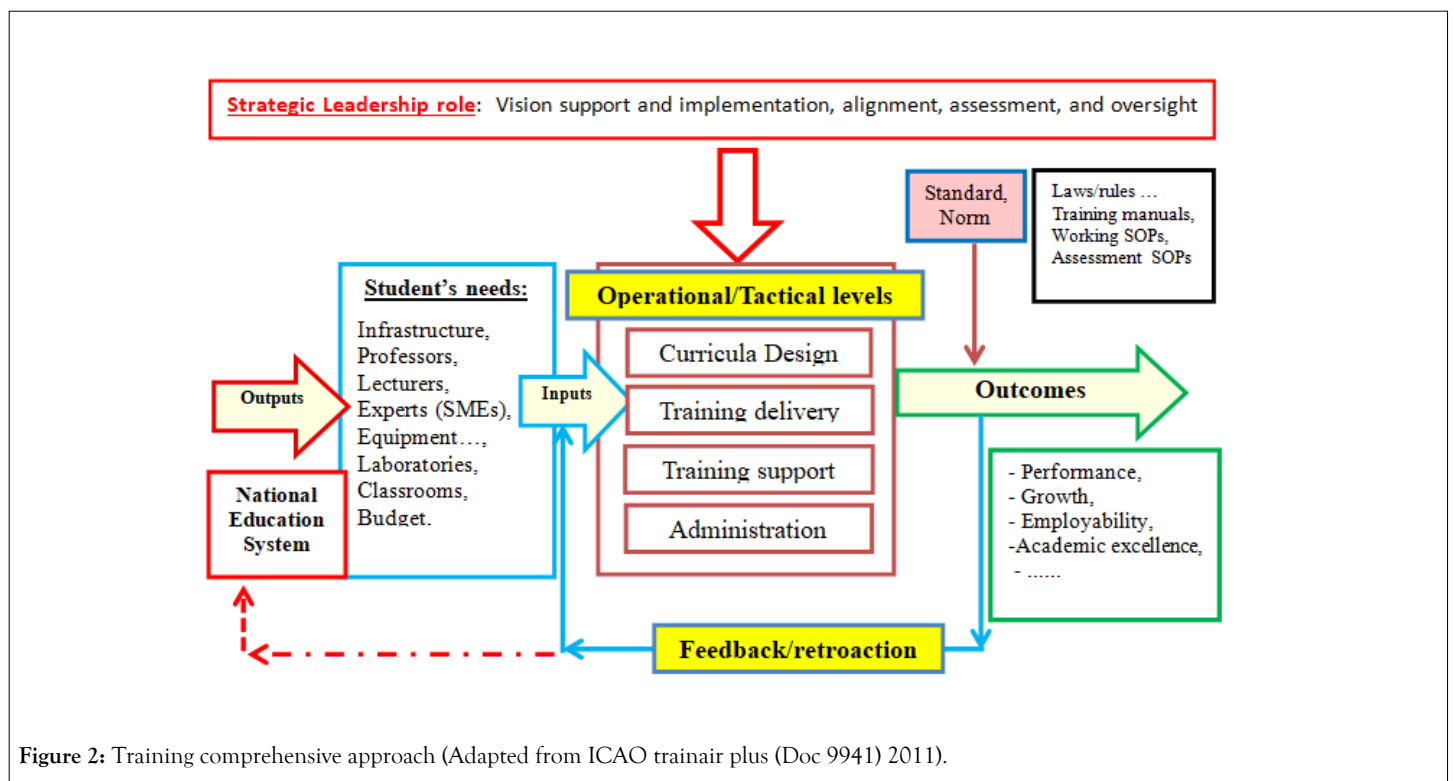

Figure 2: Training comprehensive approach (Adapted from ICAO trainair plus (Doc 9941) 2011).

Organization culture

In all national universities, as for all other organizations, success depends greatly on the cultural background. This research revealed that it's possible to apply American leadership concepts within national public universities through a smart adaptation of these concepts while maintaining and respecting the national cultural values, norms, and practices. In fact, even the most talented of leaders will achieve little if the culture doesn't allow them to influence people to work toward a common goal. In this regard, it should be noted that from our experience in the United States, which also is characterized by a melt pot cultural background, American SL easily apply these concepts because of the establishment of a strong procedural framework which doesn't allow to anybody to improvise any initiatives or decision-making process based on a cultural or personal background or personal interests.

Financing issues

Apart from the 30% of the interviewees who did not express any opinion on this subject, the following findings were highlighted to better enhance the financial aspects through sufficient allocation of resources to support the implementation of the Ministry vision at all levels:

• Law and regulations outdated and not appropriate;

• Slowness, complexity of procedures and nonstop change of laws and regulations;

• State subsidy not sufficient;

• The operating budget allocated to the university by the ministry, does not take into account the new project creations;

• Construction and equipment projects, co-financed by the region or by other organizations or stakeholders, are generally delayed in terms of execution, mainly due to delays in payment;

• Methods of control linked to the execution of the university budget, are too complex to implement, particularly for scientific research aspects;

• Complexity of the procedures applied which causes delays in transfer deadlines;

• Legal arsenal non-adapted to the specificities of each university.

In this regard, one of the interviewees has highlighted that the implementation of the vision requires the mobilization of substantial and sustainable financial resources to support the projected ambition and ensure the feasibility of the transformative choices advocated by the vision implementation action plan. He added that a mixed financing policy is therefore necessary. This policy must be based on optimized budgetary and innovative financing mechanisms capable of continuously generating new financial resources for the development of the high education ecosystem (administrative regions, private sectors, international donors, etc.). In this regard, the State must provide universities with sufficient financial resources to implement any strategic vision. It is not enough to have the vision, but also to have the means to implement it. Besides this, he added that SL within the national university system must ensure that the university demonstrates its social and economic legitimacy much more than in the past. In addition to its traditional missions, it must also transfer and valorize scientific research, to become more entrepreneurial, especially in regional, national, and international innovation.

PLDP and its importance

Most important in this matter is that national universities SLs develop their own PLDP that will enable them to improve specific competencies required for continuous improvement of their personal career path and their organization's performance. For this question, almost 50% of the answers show that the PLDP culture is not established yet in national universities' governance culture. In fact, a personal leadership development plan is important for any strategic leader, especially in large organizations because it allows them to take a proactive approach to foster their own development by identifying and leveraging their strengths while improving their weaknesses and develop their self-awareness, strategic planning, skill development (communication, strategic thinking, creative and critical thinking), adaptability and agility especially through periods of uncertainty.

DISCUSSION

We used three types of data: data from the theoretical framework mobilized from literature review mainly the American one, data from our non-participant observation revealed during the interviews, and finally documents that were delivered to us by some participants at the end of the face-to-face interview or those we have got from the Ministry website and international research articles and reports. Indeed, thanks to this triangulation, we were able to respond to our hypotheses. We elaborated a synthesis of the interviews which helped us to see what the limits of the effectiveness of a SL shortfalls are observed at the level of the universities in Moroccan context, before discussing some main aspects to consider in implementing and adapting the ASL to national universities' historical and cultural backgrounds. Indeed, the discussion of these outcomes has been conducted while keeping in mind our research hypothesis. In this context, we will take up the main concepts of the SL, as the central subject of this study, and submit them not only to a descriptive interpretation resulting from our observations, but also and above all to an explanatory theoretical interpretation resulting from our theoretical frame of reference (United States Strategic Leadership approach).

Through our interpretations, we will try to highlight the results that converge or diverge with the theoretical foundations of ASL. We will also check the degree of consistency between the strategic level and the other levels as well as the convergence of operational and tactical strategies with respect to the strategic objectives established by the Ministry in charge. As such, it is useful to remember that when analyzing the data, we tried to maintain as effectively as possible our objectivity; however, it remains very likely that a degree of subjectivity defects somehow our interpretation, particularly at the level of our observations made during the interviews. Finally, the data collected from the various questionnaires addressed to the four levels categories, including the political and strategic levels (Ministry HQ and university presidents), enabled us to proceed to the analysis and the synthesis of the national public university's outcomes through the lens of the five main KPI as determined in our conceptual framework and highlighted in Figure 3. In fact, the following five KPI will allow us to discuss and determine, throughout the data collection results, whether the ASL concepts would benefit for Moroccan universities or not. The main outcomes are as follows:

Figure 3: SL main decisive indicators success (KPI).

Vision

According to our analysis, all levels combined, the vision is not an important concept for several interviewees insofar as, from their views, the universities' objectives are achieved. Other interviewees think that the vision is at the level of university or/and of the faculty while it is actually at the level of Ministry and even at the State level. This is a serious concern for us because, at least for the ASLs, the vision remains the foundation and the guiding thread for any transaction carried out within large organizations, and this, in several aspects including in particular the coherence between the levels, the internal alignment, and consideration of the external environment including the strategic interests of all stakeholders.... Therefore, it should be noted that the fact that national public universities are not ranked among the best international universities all over the world reveals that the outcome is not actually realized and recall consequently for an actual implementation of the vision in line with a general sensitization about this concept at all levels.

In this regard, the political level, at the headquarters of the Ministry, should guarantee consistency of the action plans established at all levels (Strategic level (Universities presidents), operational level (Deans of faculties and Directors of Schools and Institutes) and tactical one (Professors and Directors of research laboratories)) to the strategic orientation arising from of the Ministry vision. This degree of consistency and convergence to the political-strategic objectives should be assessed and monitored through adequate incremental oversight mechanisms starting with universities, regions and at national level. In fact, the lack of consistency and coordination between all the levels are likely the most important arguments that require the implementation of the US SL concepts in our national public universities to better deal with all the challenges highlighted in this study.

Efficient resource strategic planning (Funding, powers, and politics)

From the questionnaires results, we noticed that national public universities are bounded to the limited budget and resources allocated by the political level (State) whereas it is difficult at regional and local levels to collect necessary funds from the partners in order to realize their own projects developments and therefore achieve universities' strategic goals. In this regard, some interviewees have suggested that it necessary that the State increases the subvention and the budget allocated to universities to take in account the new projects development (New constructions, equipment). They added that the government should allocate sufficient financial resources to the universities to be able to implement the vision. Furthermore, they added that the distribution of resources, funding and regulation of universities might be influenced by political considerations, which may lead to a situation where some universities are underfunded and unable to provide the necessary resources to their students and faculties. Meanwhile, universities that have strong political connections or can effectively navigate the political landscape may receive more resources and funding, even if they do not necessarily have the best performance or outcomes. Additionally, power, and political interference may also lead to the appointment of faculty members and/or administrators who may not have the necessary requirements such as qualifications or/and experience or/and competencies, which negatively affect the quality of education and research.

Alignment process through a comprehensive approach to the vision

Comparing to American alignment process within large organizations, which is based on a comprehensive approach relying on scientific tools such as the "7S model" our research revealed that national public universities' community system does not apply any methodology to detect in time any deficiencies or discrepancies to realize the alignment process when necessary [20]. Indeed, when dysfunctions are identified, SLs must immediately proceed with the necessary alignment at all levels, paying particular attention to synchronization, convergence, and coherence with the vision. In short, SL focuses on strategic decisions that bind the future of the organization over a long period of time in terms of alignment, vision, and change processes [21]. The fundamental objective is to understand the components, dynamics, and interdependencies of their internal/external environments in general and especially the

endogenous reasons that led to the emergence of challenges, such as any kind of resistance within their organizations, including a possible inappropriate structure and/or policies or procedures in force.

For instance, in the United States, American large organizations SLs resort to the use of the "7-S" model to proceed to the organization's different components alignment to support the vision, mission statement, and the defined strategic goals and objectives [19]. Indeed, these leaders use this framework which involves a proactive and continuous alignment of organizational components, to diagnose the following 07 different aspects (Strategy, Structure, Systems, Skills, Staff, Style, and shared values). In this register, we picked-up some examples of the 7S model within national public universities system to better demonstrate the importance of a comprehensive approach within an organization.

Strategy: From the main results outcomes, and as we went deeply in the analysis, we found out that the alignment process is very difficult to achieve in the Ministry in charge because there is an almost systematic break with the achievements of the outgoing Minister general strategy, or even a complete reject to what have been realized so far. The reasons given by some interviewee's lies on the quasi-automatic breakup between political tendencies and ideological objectives of the new elected political parties. In fact, in the United States as our framework of reference, the education system policy is strictly independent from either politics or ideology and therefore all the parties involved capitalize upon the realized former achievements [22].

Public high education structures: First of all, we have noted that higher education structures in Morocco are too numerous and diluted in too diverse fields (public, private and partnership; universities under the Ministry's supervision, those outside universities, establishments under the Ministry's pedagogical authority, engineering schools; the National Commission for High Education Coordination, High education national evaluation and quality assurance Agency, the Scientific National Center for Technical Researches and the National Office for cultural and social activities, university halls of residence and boarding schools) to such an extent that at the outset, we were personally lost. In fact, it's very difficult to grasp the overall architecture and by extension its complexity which makes us think about coherence issues and big concerns at all these levels.

In this context, and by way of sampling, we have analyzed only the structures linked to quality management systems in the Ministry of Higher Education, through the responses received, following which we found that these structures are not established as they should be in the universities or faculties/schools. While it's true that one university has been able to establish and maintain its ISO 9001 certification in terms of quality management, and others are striving to introduce this culture, it's worth pointing out that other ad hoc structures are not yet widespread within all universities [23].

High education system: The analysis of the most important results reveals that other potential and relevant vocational stakeholders inherent in the education system as a whole, are not fully integrated in the comprehensive approach. In fact, the high education system should fully consider national education (Secondary and high school), as inputs to the university system, as well as parents' and students' associations, unions, Vocational Training and Labor Promotion Office as stakeholders likely to impact the education system as a whole, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Skills: The analysis of interviewee's answers showed that the universities' presidents appointed to these positions are highly skilled in managing national universities thanks to their professional backgrounds and expertise in the education field. However, from the SL perspective, these SLs should get more involved in applying the SL approach and concepts to better enhance their universities' performance and regional and international outlook. Indeed, they have very good individual competencies required of SLs, but they need to develop or/and improve those specific competencies required from SLs to better lead large organizations such as national universities.

In this regard, and from the answers of the interviewees, we have taken a look, for instance, at how these SLs deal with their PLDP. Focusing on universities presidents, as Strategic Leaders within national universities, only 50% have answered to this question which leads us to think that some of them are not aware yet of the necessity and the importance to have a PLDP, especially at strategic level [24].

Staff: The comprehensive analysis of the interviewee's answers shows that almost all the staff of national universities is aware of the importance of acquiring the concepts of SL, and the necessity to try to implement this approach through an appropriate adaptation to national culture and context.

Style: From the answers of the four levels of questionnaires, we got the picture that all the presidents interviewed understand very well the variety of leadership styles.

Shared values (Culture): The analysis of the answers of some Ministry's staff, universities presidents, deans, and professors has revealed that adapting ASL approach to Moroccan universities requires careful consideration of both the historical and cultural backgrounds of Moroccan society. While there may be some universal principles of leadership that are applicable across cultures, it is important to understand the unique characteristics of Moroccan society in order to effectively implement this leadership approach that meets the needs of national universities. First, our traditional values and cultural norms have been shaped by several historical factors, and any leadership approach must take these into account these influences. Second, Moroccan society is characterized by a strong sense of community, with a focus on family and social connections, which requires from any leadership approaches to prioritize group cohesion over individual success to be more effective in this context. Therefore, the implementation of ASL within the national public universities would likely be influenced by the country's cultural values and norms. Moroccan culture is characterized by strong traditions, hierarchical structures, and a collectivist mindset, which might impact the implementation process in several ways.

Firstly, Moroccan culture tends to emphasize the importance of respect for authority figures, which may affect how the American leadership style is perceived and received by Moroccan SLs. Furthermore, American leadership approaches that prioritize individualism and participatory decision-making may be viewed as less effective or appropriate in the Moroccan context. Secondly, Moroccan culture values collaboration and teamwork, may be at odds with some American leadership practices that prioritize individual achievement and competition. Therefore, implementing these leadership strategies in national universities may need to adjust their approaches to align with national and even local cultural norms and expectations. Finally, our culture also places a strong emphasis on relationships and personal connections, which may play a significant

role in the implementation process. Building trust and establishing strong relationships with Moroccan leaders, stakeholders, and staff may be critical to the success of any American leadership initiatives within the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation. In fact, the implementation of these concepts needs to be sensitive to the local cultural context and norms to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability; however, this concept affords SLs a chance to expand on the embedding mechanisms they should use to shape these values over time. Overall, et from the Figure 4 below, we notice that all the seven alignment pillars are well-adjusted within, American SL alignment process while they are not within public national universities. In fact, strategy, structures, and systems are the most three components that are basically neglected in the alignment process which appeals for further actions to better improve these 03 components. In the figure above, and in accordance with the Bradach "7S" Model, all elements must be dealt with in a balanced way in order to achieve near-perfect alignment of the system that is the object of the alignment process. To this end, we have assigned the same percentage for the 7 theoretical pillars of the 7S Model (named in the figure as the optimal theoretical alignment to be achieved by Strategic Leaders, i.e., an optimal percentage of around 15% or 16% considered as the best score for each aspect, which makes a total percentage of 100%). Next, the alignment of American universities comes very close to the objectives sought for each pillar, given that ASLs are continually seeking to develop the tools and methodologies capable of perfecting these results. Finally, a summary of the pillars relating to national public universities has been accurately depicted in this figure, in line with the analysis of results presented previously. Briefly, it appears that Skills, Styles and Shared values are well developed within our national universities; however, strategies, structures and systems need to be further developed to ensure the success of any structural alignment process within the Moroccan public university system.

Change leading strategy

If there were three consistent themes that emerged from interviewees as the greatest challenges for current and future SLs, it was the pace of change, its level initiation, and the way it is conducted. First, it has been obvious to notice that the change in public universities occurs generally when a new Minister take over the former one, at the national election process frequency (5 years). This five-year frequency change is too long to detect any discrepancies and/or deficiencies in the system because we are all living in VUCA environment where changes may occur or be triggered by any event at any time. Therefore, there should be regular assessment for a minimum of one academic cycle (One year) and through a comprehensive approach considering all the stakeholders involved directly and indirectly in the education system. In the Figure 5 below, the 8 steps should be assessed in a chronological way depending on the effort done by SLs for each stage comparing to another within the same change process event. With a starting point at 20 (maximum point in the figure) for the first step for instance (Increasing urgency), means that the best effort has been done at the beginning of the process change, while the upcoming steps would be generally decreasing in numbers affected to the following steps. Indeed, and through the analysis of the Figure 5 below, we may state that all the change processes eight steps within national universities are poorly dealt with, starting from the triggering point which shows that the sense of urgency is not taken seriously as it should be for any expected change. The same reasoning applies to all other following steps which really require strong commitment from universities' SLs to adopt this methodology in dealing with changes within large organizations (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Comparison between processes alignment to the Vision. **Note:** (██): Optimal alignment; (██) : US Universities alignment; (██) : Moroccan universities alignment.

Figure 5: Change processes comparison. Note: (▬): Optimal change process; (▬) : US Universities; (▬): National public universities.

In fact, we did not notice, through all the answers, any change initiative at the levels of universities presidency or at faculties' deanery. Everybody is actually dealing with routine administration and management tasks. Second, at political-strategic level, almost all the change processes have been conducted without any consistent studies or research. Some interviewees stated that the changes have been sometimes decided in an improvised manner to only discard former decisions or orientations. Even more, there were not an efficient strategy nor did a scientific methodology to implement the changes decided at all the levels while ensuring the convergence to the vision and the consistency with the strategic objectives of the Ministry in charge. Finally, and based on our study framework, the adoption of American SL can help national universities to anticipate future changes by integrating all the stakeholders, through a scientific methodology based on relevant data and statistics where the patterns of change in universities are assessed, and the nature, degree, and root causes of the misalignment are factually analyzed considering new economic, social, and technological conditions within universities environments [25].

Strengthening the reputation of the university

During our empirical survey, we observed much dissatisfaction either at the levels of universities and faculties, which do not help to gain actually any reputation for national public universities [26]. First, Moroccan universities ranking performance is not satisfactory at all for any stakeholder or shareholder (Professors, deans, presidents, politicians, unions, parents, students). Second, the following performance indicators are not enough integrated within national public universities strategic objectives:

- Academic performance regarding the size of the university (Quality of education, teaching, and research, research articles citation numbers);

- Innovation research;

- Knowledge transfer and the size of research network;

- International Students and professor's ratio comparing to university's size;

- Revenue incomes from industries;

- Employers' reputation (Firms, organizations, enterprises which

highly value practical skills and competencies);

- International outlook.

To sum up, an effective adoption of ASL concepts would help strengthen the reputation of national universities by fostering a culture of academic and research excellence, and therefore attract talented students and prominent professors, who will contribute to the success of national universities reputation and outlook all over the world. Hence, the various theoretical arguments, analysis and empirical studies presented previously allow us to deduce the upcoming final outcomes:

- "There would be a positive impact of the ASL concepts through the understanding and the smart implementation of the VISION concept at all levels (universities and faculties)";

- "There would be an efficient resource strategic planning, especially on financial shortfalls aspects, which would benefit to national public universities strategic leaders to manage and overcome the limited resources to be able to innovate";

- "National public universities leaders would very likely benefit from American comprehensive approach in aligning all the components involved in the Ministry vision roll-out";

- "ASL implementation would be essential and beneficial to national universities leaders insomuch they will adapt easily to national culture to face any expected change while acquiring the specific competencies to quickly adapt to new economic, social, and technological trends";

- "Moroccan public universities would benefit from the implementation of ASL concepts by fostering a culture of academic and research excellence as a necessary requirement to strengthening their regional and international reputation and academic ranking";

Thus, among our two hypotheses, the second one "H2: Moroccan public universities may fully take advantage from ASL implementation through smart adjustments taking in account its sociocultural backgrounds" remains the most likely answer to this research central problematic, because the most of answers of all the targeted leaders, especially at the strategic level, shows that the American SL concepts are essential to Moroccan public

universities and would benefit to likely become more competitive among international universities as already proven by the American universities all over the world [27].

Limitations

As per any research approach, ours has certain limitations that need to be clarified. First of all, the choice of questions is of course subjective, and may therefore be elaborated differently depending not only on the researcher's background, but also and above all on his or her experience and expertise in the field of leadership in general and SL in particular, as well as on the context of the study, in this case the public university system. The same applies to the analysis of results due to any author subjectivity, which also depends on the above-mentioned parameters. In the same vein, it should also be recognized that the data collected (answers to questionnaires) during the empirical part of our work were not treated with the same rigor by the various interviewees, insofar as certain answers were sometimes too generic, and therefore did not allow us to carry out an in-depth analysis of the matter, as they did not include all the relevant information for a better outcome.

Similarly, the results obtained might have been relatively different if the research had been carried out on a larger sample or selected according to very precise criteria, which was not the case in this study insofar as university presidents, who participated in this research, are officially nominated to these functions. Moreover, the notion of leadership induces in its definition parameters of influence inherent to the space-time framework and context in which it occurs. On one hand, it's worth pointing out the limitations relating to the results related to the current timeframe of our research (2019-2023), would most likely be different in the next 5 years or 10 years. On the other hand, a change of context, which depends on socio-economic and cultural developments and technological paradigms, would undoubtedly lead to other results as conclusive as these. Examples are numerous in this respect, and we may cite different contexts such as private higher education (instead of public); other vital strategic sectors of the country such as aeronautics or automotive industry; banking sector; or even within defense or security institutions.

Recommendations for future research

At the end of this research, it should be noted that the results of this work could obviously be improved insofar as they can be completed by studies likely to assess the real impacts of a possible implementation of ASL within national public universities, among other things, such as their international ranking, and its influence at regional and international level.

In addition, other new avenues of research in the future could further contribute to the promotion of SL concepts, as follows:

- Adopting a more global approach by broadening the sample to other stakeholders would make a significant contribution to the academic community. In fact, the empirical phase should include the various stakeholders in the national education system, i.e., the Ministry of National Education (High, Middle, and Elementary schools), the vocational training and work integration offices, the universities' main economic partners, sponsors, trade unions, parents' associations, students, etc.

- Extending the scope of SL to small and medium-sized organizations and firms instead of large organizations;

- A consistent consideration and analysis of other parameters impacting the determinants of SL within large organizations

and hence their performance, such as culture, traditions, and religion, particularly in terms of decision-making processes;

- The extension of this research to other vital strategic sectors of the country, whatever the nature of their activities, insofar as leadership is a cross-disciplinary concept, in an attempt to generalize the SL culture within large national organizations;

- With the exception of the Anglo-Saxon countries that are pioneers and leaders in the field of SL (USA and Great Britain in particular), this study could benefit to other countries, including those in Africa, by conducting specific research in the future;

- At the same time, similar research could be carried out on the other levels, i.e., tactical, and operational leadership, in order to take a closer look at the impacts of day-to-day practices on the organization's operational and tactical performance;

- This study could be refined in the future by researchers choosing for hybrid quantitative and qualitative approaches of which we believe the results would bring further insights to this discipline...

Finally, these expectation results of this work will be widely disseminated, not only within Moroccan public universities community, but also to the entire academic and business community, both nationally and internationally.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between SL and the performance of large organizations needs no longer to be established, insofar as research shows a positive correlation between the application of SL concepts, as a way of governing American universities, and what has enabled them to be the best ranked in the world. Therefore, and based on American literature review related to leadership in general and SL concepts and foundations in particular on one hand; and on the perceptions and practice analysis of these concepts within Moroccan public universities on the other hand, we went through a post-positivist epistemology approach using hypothetical-deductive reasoning process to detect gaps and discrepancies to better enhance both personal skills and specific competencies required to better lead large organizations. In this regard, we adopted qualitative methodology conducted through semi-directed interviews and questionnaires with the staff involved in national public universities governance and management, at the four levels, to identify the needs of individual skills (technical, interpersonal, and conceptual) and specific competencies required for national SLs (Universities presidents in our case study) to better lead public universities. The analysis and discussion of the main results and findings, and based on our study framework, this research has shown that national universities would gain several competitive advantages by integrating the American SL concepts. However, we clearly admitted that the implementation of ASL concepts would be relatively difficult at the outset due to some resistance to change. Therefore, with a political and strategic will of the ministry in charge, national public universities' presidents could easily proceed through a gradual implementation with adjustments and adaptations specific to Moroccan culture and traditions. This will certainly enable national SLs to take up future challenges inherent to the advent of a ruthless competitiveness within an environment that is becoming more and more VUCA. In this respect, by adopting these concepts, national universities SLs would align their structures to the vision of the Ministry in charge and anticipate future changes by involving all

stakeholders, through a scientific methodology based on relevant data and statistics while taking into account their financial capacities and new economic changes, social and technological paradigms.

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