CRISIS MANAGEMENT COMPETENCY GAPS: ADDRESSING EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP FAILURES

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Abstract - This study examines the crisis management competencies perceived as absent during the #FeesMustFall (FMF) student protests in South Africa, focusing on the role of university leadership during the crisis. While the #FMF protests highlighted long-standing issues in South African higher education, such as financial accessibility, decolonization, and the treatment of staff, the response from university management exacerbated the crisis. The study aims to identify the specific crisis management competencies that were perceived as missing, such as decision-making, communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, and resource management. Through a mixed-methods approach, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from staff members of a university in the Western Cape, who were directly involved in or impacted by the crisis. The results indicate a significant gap in the competencies needed to effectively navigate the crisis, leading to reactive responses, reliance on security forces, and a failure to engage in meaningful dialogue with students. The study contributes to the development of a more robust crisis management framework, providing valuable insights for improving crisis preparedness and fostering organizational resilience in higher education institutions. It underscores the importance of leadership development, strategic communication, and a proactive approach to crisis management to mitigate future risks and ensure institutional stability.

Keywords - Crisis Management Competencies, Executive Management, #FeesMustFall, Stakeholder Perception.

I. INTRODUCTION

Crisis management competencies are essential for organizations to navigate unexpected disruptions that threaten stability, reputation, and operational continuity. These competencies encompass strategic decision-making, effective communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, resource management, and adaptability. In times of crisis, institutions must act swiftly and strategically to mitigate risks and minimize adverse impacts. Without these competencies, response efforts may become fragmented, resulting in confusion, inefficiency, and severe long-term consequences that jeopardize institutional sustainability.

The #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement, which emerged in 2015, represents a significant crisis in South Africa's higher education sector. Rooted in a history of student activism, FMF sought to address financial barriers, demands for free education, curriculum decolonization, and improved staff conditions. Unlike earlier anti-apartheid protests, FMF centered on specific systemic issues within education, leading to campus occupations, academic disruptions, and property damage. This crisis aligns with established definitions of crises. Van Wart and Kapucu (2011) describe crises as events that threaten institutional objectives, surprise leadership, and require rapid response under heightened stress (Dubrovski, 2023).. FMF disrupted university operations, created uncertainty among students and staff, and exposed systemic inequalities within South African higher education, necessitating effective crisis management.

University leadership was largely unprepared for the scale and intensity of FMF, exposing critical gaps in crisis management competencies. Institutions primarily relied on reactive measures, such as deploying private security and law enforcement, which escalated tensions and weakened communication between students and management. Studies by Jaques (2007) and Anand et al., (2022) highlights that effective crisis management requires a structured approach encompassing prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. However, the failure to engage in meaningful dialogue and address student concerns eroded trust and prolonged disruptions. Infrastructure damage and continued unrest symbolized broader governance and inequality issues, reinforcing the need for comprehensive crisis management strategies prioritizing stakeholder engagement and transparent communication.

This study aims to identify the specific crisis management competencies perceived as absent during FMF by analyzing the perspectives of employees who lived through the crisis. Evaluating these perceptions provides critical insights into the strengths and weaknesses of institutional crisis response mechanisms. Addressing competency gaps is essential for strengthening training, policy development, and organizational culture to ensure an effective response to future crises.
Beyond immediate crisis response, this research contributes to the development of a robust crisis

management framework aligned with stakeholder needs and institutional priorities. By identifying and addressing deficiencies in crisis management competencies, organizations can refine training programs, enhance leadership development initiatives, and create proactive crisis response strategies. The broader impact of this research lies in its potential to cultivate a culture of preparedness and resilience, ensuring that institutions not only react to crises but also anticipate and manage them effectively. Helsloot and Groenendaal (2017) emphasize that investment in crisis management training and leadership development is crucial for handling future crises. As FMF demonstrated, institutions must adopt strategic crisis management approaches that extend beyond reactive measures. Lessons from the movement should inform future strategies in higher education, focusing on proactive engagement, transparent communication, and addressing systemic inequalities. Strengthening crisis management competencies will enhance institutional resilience and ensure a more effective and sustainable response to future challenges, including those exacerbated by socio-economic disparities, political unrest, and evolving educational demands..

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. #FMF Student Protest Movement. From student movement to Crisis?

The #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement emerged as a direct response to persistent socio-economic inequalities in South Africa's higher education system. Its roots can be traced to the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement, launched on 9 March 2015 at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where students demanded the removal of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes—a symbol of colonial oppression—and called for broader institutional transformation, including curriculum reform and improved labor rights for outsourced workers (Cornell et al., 2016; Kamazi, 2015). The dramatic act of protest by Chumani Maxwele, who threw faeces on the statue, underscored students' frustrations with the enduring legacies of colonialism and exclusion at UCT (Fairbanks, 2015). While initially peaceful, some protests escalated into violence, reflecting deep-rooted tensions between students and university management (Singh, 2016). Although RMF catalyzed #FMF, earlier protests at institutions such as the Durban University of Technology in 2008 (MacGregor, 2008), the University of Limpopo in 2009 (SA History, 2017), and the University of Johannesburg in 2010 (Newman & Gifford, 2010) had already highlighted student concerns regarding rising tuition costs, limited financial aid, and academic exclusion. These events laid the groundwork for what would become a national movement. The immediate trigger for #FMF was the University of the Witwatersrand's (Wits) announcement of a tuition fee increase for 2016, which sparked widespread student mobilization (Pillay, 2016). However, the movement's demands extended beyond financial accessibility to include the decolonization of higher education, linguistic inclusivity—particularly at Stellenbosch and Pretoria—and the resolution of housing shortages, notably at UCT (Hodes, 2016). As Zwane (2015) noted, protests rapidly spread across South African campuses in October 2015, paralyzing the higher education sector.

Unlike previous labor-led protests, #FMF represented a shift to a coordinated, student-led demand for a just and inclusive education system (Msweli & Hutton, 2016). The bureaucratic and security-driven responses by university administrations, such as court interdicts and the deployment of police, further aggravated tensions, drawing criticism for escalating rather than diffusing the crisis (Naidoo, 2016). International solidarity also bolstered the movement's visibility, with South African students abroad and global supporters echoing the call for free, decolonized education (EWN, 2015).

In sum, the #FMF movement arose from a complex interplay of historical injustices, rising costs, and institutional resistance to transformation, culminating in a nationwide demand for equitable access to higher education.

The #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement constituted a crisis due to its profound disruption of university operations, governance, and the broader socio-political landscape in South Africa. It emerged in response to rising tuition fees, funding inequities, and demands for decolonized education, escalating into a national challenge that threatened institutional stability.

According to Van Wart and Kapucu (2011), a crisis jeopardizes core organizational objectives, surprises leadership, and shortens response time, inducing high stress (Dubrovski, 2023). FMF fit this definition, undermining universities' financial sustainability, governance structures, and academic schedules. Buhagiar and Anand (2021) state that the growing occurrence and intensity of crises—such as natural disasters and pandemics—pose significant challenges for organizations in maintaining continuity. Such disruptions can threaten essential operational and strategic goals, revealing organizational weaknesses and causing a disconnect between intended objectives and actual performance. FMF exposed systemic inequities in higher education, drawing national and international attention and complicating institutional

responses.

Jaques (2007) emphasizes that crisis management involves prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. FMF necessitated coordinated action from universities, government, and stakeholders, yet inadequate management led to prolonged disruptions, financial losses, and reputational damage (Pharaoh & Visser, 2024).
Ultimately, FMF aligns with established crisis definitions, underscoring the necessity of effective crisis management in higher education. Lessons from this movement can inform future strategies for handling large-scale institutional challenges.

B. Crisis Management: An Overview
Crisis management is a multifaceted discipline that integrates diverse theoretical frameworks to enhance organizational responses to crises. A synthesized conceptual crisis management theory must incorporate crisis classification, strategic communication, corporate social responsibility (CSR), stakeholder engagement, leadership competencies, and empathetic communication. By integrating these components, organizations can create a holistic framework that not only addresses immediate crises but also fosters long-term resilience and reputation management (Liu-Lastres, 2022; Wooten & James, 2008).

A foundational aspect of crisis management theory is the classification of crises based on their attribution levels, which influences the selection of appropriate response strategies. Liu-Lastres (2022) emphasizes that understanding the type of crisis allows organizations to tailor their communication and reputational management strategies effectively. This aligns with Zhong and Low's (2012) complexity theory framework, which underscores the necessity of contextualizing crisis communication within the complexity of the crisis scenario. Furthermore, the integration of CSR into crisis management has gained traction, particularly in societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Ahmed et al. (2021) argue that proactive CSR initiatives foster trust and goodwill among stakeholders, positioning firms to navigate crises more effectively. Rolf (2023) further highlights that increased CSR engagement during crises can enhance corporate reputation and provide a competitive advantage. These perspectives align with stakeholder theory, which emphasizes the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders for a comprehensive crisis response (Alpaslan et al., 2009; Grunwald, et al.,2021).

Effective leadership is another critical component in crisis management. Wooten and James (2008) identify key leadership competencies necessary for navigating crises, including signal detection, damage control, and recovery. Their findings are supported by Zacher and Rudolph (2021), who explore the role of leadership in fostering team dynamics and effective communication during crises. Additionally, Pharaoh and Visser (2024) note that crises can escalate into catastrophes if not managed properly, reinforcing the necessity of strong leadership to mitigate risks and drive resilience.

Historical crises, such as the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear accident and the 2011 Fukushima disaster, illustrate the severe consequences of inadequate crisis management. The Three Mile Island incident led to major U.S. nuclear industry changes, costing $4 billion (Martens et al., 2016), while the Fukushima disaster, triggered by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake, resulted in over 20,000 deaths and a nuclear crisis (). These events emphasize the need for organizations to adopt proactive and structured crisis management strategies.

Jääski et al. (2024) define crisis management as strategic planning to respond to threats that disrupt business activities, while Pearson and Clair (1998) argue that it involves systematic attempts to prevent or manage crises (Babenko et al., 2021). Jaques (2007) stresses that crisis management should cover prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery phases to minimize impacts (Stenhammer et al., 2023). Social movements, such as the #FeesMustFall (FMF) protests in South Africa, demonstrate how social and economic issues can escalate into crises requiring robust management strategies. Empathetic communication is emerging as a pivotal factor in effective crisis management. Dolamore et al. (2020) argue that empathetic engagement with stakeholders enhances relationships and improves crisis management performance. This perspective is reinforced by Williams and Liou (2023), who highlight the role of transparency and credibility in crisis messaging.

Crisis management is an essential organizational competency that demands a proactive, multifaceted approach. By synthesizing crisis classification, strategic communication, CSR, stakeholder engagement, leadership competencies, and empathetic communication, organizations can develop a resilient crisis management framework. This comprehensive strategy not only mitigates immediate risks but also strengthens long-term organizational stability, reputation, and stakeholder trust in the face of adversity.

C. Crisis Management Competencies
Crisis management competencies are crucial for navigating the complexities and uncertainties of

crises. Unlike general managerial skills, these competencies require adaptability and quick decision-making under pressure (Mikusiva & Copikova, 2016; Ruggiero, 2016). Studiesby Herbane (2010), Williams and Lou (2023) and Jaaski, et al., (2024) highlight the reliance on intuition and context-dependent competencies during urgent situations that demand swift action.

Identifying specific crisis management competencies is essential, particularly in sectors like higher education. These competencies include decision-making, communication, leadership, and resource management, all vital for effective crisis management. Ruggiero (2016) stresses the importance of communication strategies in crisis situations, emphasizing the need for clear communication under stress.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of agility and adaptability. Adikaram et al. (2021) note that attributes such as redundancy and elasticity are key to resilience in crises, particularly in higher education, where institutions face rapidly changing circumstances. Johansen (2017) and Schoofs et al. (2019) emphasize the need for emotional intelligence in crisis communication, as empathy influences both stakeholder perceptions and organizational reputation.

Finally, accurate information management is critical in crisis decision-making. Simeunovićet al. (2019) highlight that timely, accurate information is essential to avoid exacerbating crises and to guide public response. Crisis management competencies—decision-making, communication, leadership, and resource management—are essential for effective crisis response. Insights from numerous studies emphasize their importance in ensuring organizational resilience and effective crisis navigation.

III. METHODOLOGY

Bryman and Bell (2016) define research design as a framework guiding data collection and analysis, providing a structure for applying research methods. This study employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies within an exploratory research design. Exploratory research, as described by Saka, et al., (2023), addresses a problem that has not been thoroughly studied, while Burns and Bush (2010) argue that this design is suitable when the topic is not well understood, allowing for flexible use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach is ideal for this study, which integrates both data types to examine management competencies during the #FMF crisis. The quantitative aspect of the study aims to quantify trends, attitudes, or opinions from a sample of the population. Studies by Hanson (2016) Charlesworth (2019) and Cascini (2021) support this statement.. Research questions focused on understanding aspects of the crisis phenomenon, with results presented numerically to determine the perceived importance of management and crisis management competencies. In contrast, qualitative methods, according to Ryan et al. (2007), explore participants' experiences, emotions, and attitudes. The studies by Morgan (2023); Gupta et al., (2023) and Dembeleet al., (2024) collectively indicate that qualitative research methods are uniquely suited for capturing the intricacies of lived experiences and thus making qualitative research ideal for the study on crisis management.

Bryman and Bell (2016) define population as the broader group from which a research sample is drawn. For this study, the population includes academic, administrative, and support staff employed at the university during the #FMF crisis. Notably, artisan, security, and traffic staff fall under the support category. Executive members, Deans, and Directors are excluded from the study. The total population, as obtained from the Human Resource Department, consists of 2,149 eligible staff members.

Bhardwaj (2019) indicate that sampling refers to the process of selecting a subset of individuals from a larger population to serve a specific research purpose.). This study employed a probability sampling method, allowing generalization of findings to the population, with each staff member having an equal chance of selection (Bryman & Bell, 2016). The population was divided into strata—academic staff (40.7%, or 876 individuals) and administrative/support staff (59.3%, or 1,249 individuals). A stratified random sampling approach ensured proportional representation from both groups.

The research was conducted at a university in the Western Cape affected by the #FMF crisis. Due to financial and time constraints, the study focused on this single institution to explore management competencies as perceived by stakeholders.

The sample frame consisted of academic, support, and administrative staff with over one year of employment at the university. Staff members with less than one year of experience and top-tier management were excluded. The total population meeting the criteria was 2,149. The sample size, calculated using Krejci and Morgan’s (1970) table, was 326, reflecting a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. However, only ninety-seven valid responses were received, representing approximately 30% of the sample size.

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained approval from the Higher Degrees Committee, ethical clearance from the University of the Western Cape, and permission from the Registrar to conduct research on campus. A staff list was requested from the Human Resource Department, ensuring the confidentiality and security of the participants' information.

A self-administered questionnaire, consisting of both closed and open-ended questions, was distributed via online and paper formats. The online questionnaire was accessible to staff with email access, while paper copies were distributed to support staff. The data collection process began after piloting the questionnaire with twelve randomly selected staff members to ensure clarity and improve the instrument.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections: consent confirmation, biographical information, and research questions on management competencies during the #FMF crisis. The research questions addressed perceptions of the management competencies exhibited, the competencies deemed necessary, and the competencies absent during the crisis. The use of open-ended questions allowed for the collection of rich qualitative data.

Following the pilot study, the researcher distributed the revised questionnaire to the staff via email and in-person, ensuring all participants were aware of the study's goals and gave informed consent. Despite repeated attempts to increase response rates, only ninety-seven valid responses were received, representing 30% of the target sample. While the response rate was low, the qualitative nature of the data provided valuable insights into the management competencies perceived by stakeholders during the crisis.

Several factors contribute to respondent fatigue, including the length and topic of the survey, as well as the complexity and format of the questions and over surveying of respondents. According to Kim, et al., (2024), over surveying can lead to a decrease in willingness to participate, thus compromising the quality and representativeness of the data collected (Kim et al., 2024). This could lead to non-response bias.

According to Postema et al. (2022), the effects of non-response bias can differ significantly depending on the research context, indicating that response rates alone are not sufficient to assess the extent of bias. Therefore, it is essential to thoroughly document and compare the attributes of both respondents and non-respondents. Similarly, Zini and Banfi (2021) highlight that the absence of information from those who do not respond presents a major challenge in evaluating non-response bias, thereby limiting the reliability of conclusions drawn from survey data. To ensure the credibility and broader applicability of survey findings, it is imperative to identify and openly address any potential non-response bias.

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The quantitative analysis centered on descriptive statistics, including rankings, frequencies, and percentages, to provide a concise overview of the data collected from the sample population. Specifically, the perceived importance of management and crisis management competencies, as viewed by various stakeholders, was examined. A detailed account of competency rankings was generated by analyzing the frequency of responses for each ranking within the top ten competencies. To ensure a clear hierarchy, if a competency had already been assigned a higher rank, the next highest available rank was considered. This methodology provided a thorough understanding of the relative importance stakeholders placed on these competencies. The application of frequencies and ranks facilitated a more nuanced interpretation of the data, ensuring the results were both methodical and reflective of the broader trends observed within the sample. Although the study used a mixed-methods approach, the qualitative data obtained provided a more in-depth perspective, which provides direction for this article. The qualitative data, as stated above, provided the importance the respondents placed on the various competencies, but the qualitative data also provided the reasons why. The study used Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to systematically analyses open-ended responses, which is instrumental in providing depth to the analysis of emotional and psychological responses (IM, et al., (2023),. All data were analyzed inductively due to limited prior knowledge. Following Elo and Kyngäs's (2007) three-stage framework—preparation, organization, and abstraction—the researcher selected a unit of analysis, immersed in the data, and conducted open coding by noting similarities and grouping them into categories using coding sheets. In the abstraction phase, categories and subcategories were named and organized into broader themes. Young et al. (2022) highlighted that this approach enables the discovery and adjustment of themes as additional data is reviewed, ensuring that the coding frameworks stay applicable and flexible in relation to the data being analyzed.

This study, while using both qualitative and quantitative methods, focused primarily on qualitative data. As Bryman and Bell (2016) argue—drawing on Lincoln and Guba (1985)—qualitative research should

be assessed through trustworthiness, not traditional validity, or reliability. Trustworthiness includes four criteria: credibility, ensured through triangulation and consistent pilot results; transferability, demonstrated by the study's relevance to other universities facing crises like #FeesMustFall; dependability, achieved through thorough documentation of each research step and confirmability, supported by independent data analysis to ensure findings were based on participant responses, not researcher bias.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of responses regarding the absence of crisis management competencies revealed key gaps in organizational crisis preparedness. Table 1 summarizes the top ten competencies perceived as missing, based on the frequency of responses. Competencies were ranked hierarchically, with the most frequently mentioned receiving higher ranks, reflecting the perceived severity and importance of their absence.

This approach highlighted critical areas where stakeholders felt leadership was lacking in crisis response, offering a nuanced understanding of essential competencies for improving crisis management. The findings provide valuable insights that can inform future training, policy development, and crisis preparedness strategies.

Table 1: Top 10 Absent Crisis Management Competencies

Rank	Absent Crisis Management Competency
1	Problem-Solving
2	Safety Consciousness
3	Good Communication
4	Leadership Skills
5	Flexibility/Adaptability
6	Teamwork/Collaboration
7	Customer Focus
8	Innovation/Creativity
9	Trustworthiness/Integrity
10	Risk-taking/Decision-making
Own processing	

The analysis of respondent feedback revealed four distinct competency clusters, each of which is outlined and examined in detail below.

Strategic Responsiveness

Effective crisis management in higher education requires more than isolated competencies; it demands a unified, strategic approach. The first thematic cluster, Strategic Responsiveness, comprises the competencies of problem-solving, risk-taking, and decision-making, innovation/creativity, and flexibility/adaptability. This cluster reflects an institution's ability to evaluate evolving situations, generate timely solutions, and take informed risks in a rapidly changing environment. Respondents highlighted management's failure to act decisively, stating, "There was no clear strategy; decisions were reactive rather than proactive," and "They stuck to outdated protocols that didn't fit the crisis." These deficiencies underscore the need for leaders who can analyze complex problems, adapt swiftly, and think creatively under pressure. Tutar et al. (2022) emphasize that organizations which adopted adaptable cultural frameworks during the pandemic were more capable of addressing job dissatisfaction and sustaining employee motivation. Metag (2016) stresses the crucial importance of clear and effective communication in managing complex issues, including debates related to climate change. Strategic responsiveness, therefore, forms the intellectual and tactical engine of effective crisis leadership.

Relational Engagement

The second cluster, Relational Engagement, includes communication, trustworthiness/integrity, and customer focus. This grouping centers on the organization's relational intelligence—its capacity to build trust, communicate transparently, and address stakeholder needs with empathy and accountability. Respondents lamented the lack of clear messaging and attention to staff and student concerns: "We were left in the dark," and "Student concerns were dismissed rather than addressed." These reflections illustrate a breakdown in the emotional contract between the institution and its stakeholders. Research by Zoonen and Meer (2015) and Dominic et al. (2023) supports the assertion that transparent, empathetic communication reinforces public trust and stakeholder compliance in times of crisis. When relational engagement is prioritized, it not only enhances crisis responses but also strengthens institutional credibility and stakeholder loyalty over the long term.

Operational readiness

The third cluster, Operational Readiness, brings together teamwork/collaboration and safety consciousness. These competencies ensure that the institution can function cohesively and securely during disruptions. Feedback from respondents revealed a fragmented internal environment: "Departments operated in silos, making collaboration impossible," and "Safety of staff and students was an afterthought." This underscores the need for structured collaboration and proactive safety planning. According to Badia et al. (2020), a strong safety culture, built on common values and strict safety procedures, can greatly enhance an organization's capacity to oversee complex operational difficulties. Operational readiness is not

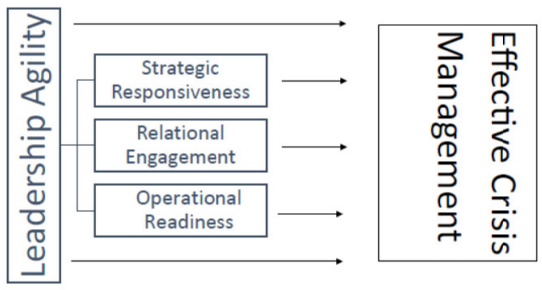
simply about protocols—it is about enabling frontline teams to act effectively, safely, and in concert when a crisis hits. Without it, even the best strategies can fail in execution.

Leadership Agility

Finally, Leadership Agility serves as the overarching competency that binds and enables the other three clusters. Leadership in crises must be adaptive, accountable, inclusive, and emotionally intelligent. Respondents frequently cited a leadership vacuum, noting, "Leaders were absent when we needed them most," and "Instead of taking responsibility, management shifted blame." These statements reflect a lack of visible and responsible leadership, which further destabilized already uncertain conditions. Research by Williams and Liou (2023) and Purnomo et al. (2023) demonstrates that agile and transformational leadership is essential for guiding institutions through complexity. Leaders must be able to shift between strategic roles—decision-maker, communicator, coordinator—while maintaining trust and clarity. Leadership agility is thus both a standalone necessity and a critical enabler of strategic, relational, and operational effectiveness.

The four integrated clusters—Strategic Responsiveness, Relational Engagement, Operational Readiness, and Leadership Agility—offer a comprehensive framework for understanding and strengthening crisis management competencies in higher education. Rather than viewing these skills in isolation, this model reveals their interdependence and collective power to build organizational resilience. Institutions that invest in developing these clusters holistically will be better prepared not only to survive crises but to lead effectively through them and emerge stronger on the other side.

Conceptual Figure: Integrated Crisis Management Competency Framework



Own processing

The Integrated Crisis Management Competency Framework is a conceptual visualization that outlines the critical elements needed for effective crisis management, emphasizing the interconnectedness of leadership, strategy, relationships, and operational readiness. At the top of the framework is Leadership Agility, which serves as the cornerstone for all other components. This agility allows leaders to drive decision-making processes, foster trust, and ensure the execution of plans during crises. Below Leadership Agility are three foundational clusters that support crisis management efforts: Strategic Responsiveness, Relational Engagement, and Operational Readiness. These clusters represent distinct but interdependent areas of focus, where Strategic Responsiveness involves planning and adaptability, Relational Engagement emphasizes collaboration and communication, and Operational Readiness ensures that the necessary systems and resources are in place to act quickly. The arrows between these clusters highlight the reciprocal relationships that allow for effective collaboration and influence across all elements. Ultimately, the framework shows how these interconnected competencies contribute to the core goal of Effective Crisis Management, which is essential for achieving organizational resilience during times of crisis.

To strengthen crisis management capacity in higher education, institutions should adopt a holistic approach grounded in the four identified competency clusters. First, leadership development must be prioritized through targeted training that fosters agility, emotional intelligence, and strategic decision-making, enabling leaders to adapt swiftly and guide teams effectively under pressure. Equally important is cultivating a culture of innovation and flexibility, where staff are encouraged to think creatively and respond proactively to emerging challenges. Institutions should also reinforce internal communication structures by establishing transparent, empathetic messaging protocols that ensure timely and consistent updates to all stakeholders, thereby fostering trust and psychological safety. Additionally, interdepartmental collaboration and safety preparedness must be institutionalized through cross-functional crisis response teams, regular training exercises, and the promotion of a strong safety culture. Finally, the competency framework itself should be embedded into organizational policy, human resource development, and performance management systems, ensuring that crisis readiness becomes an integral and sustained part of institutional operations.

The synthesis of respondent feedback revealed four interdependent clusters—Strategic Responsiveness, Relational Engagement, Operational Readiness, and Leadership Agility—as essential competencies for effective crisis management in higher education. Each cluster plays a critical role in how institutions anticipate, respond to, and recover from crises.

Crucially, these competencies are not isolated; rather, they are dynamically linked and mutually reinforcing. A failure in one area, such as poor communication or leadership absence, can undermine the entire crisis response effort. Conversely, when these competencies are developed and aligned holistically, they serve as a solid foundation for institutional resilience. By adopting this integrated competency model, higher education institutions will be better positioned to navigate complexity, protect stakeholders, and lead proactively in times of disruption.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into the crisis management competencies during the #FeesMustFall protests, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the research focuses on a single university in the Western Cape, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutions in South Africa or beyond. The perspectives gathered are also limited to university staff members, excluding students, which may have provided a more holistic view of the crisis and the leadership response. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data from participants, which may be subject to biases such as recall bias or social desirability bias. Furthermore, the mixed-methods approach, while comprehensive, may not fully capture the complexity of the crisis or the nuanced perceptions of leadership effectiveness during such a multifaceted event.

Future Research

Future research could expand on this study by exploring the crisis management competencies from a broader range of stakeholders, including students, faculty, and external partners, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the crisis response. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to assess how universities have adapted and developed their crisis management frameworks since the #FMF protests, evaluating whether the identified gaps in competencies have been addressed. Additionally, comparative studies across multiple universities, particularly those in different regions or with different institutional profiles, would help identify familiar challenges and best practices in crisis management. Investigating the role of digital communication tools and social media in crisis management could also provide valuable insights, especially in the context of increasing digital engagement in protests and institutional responses.

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