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# STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION: EVALUATING THE AGILITY OF SAUDI ARABIA UNIVERSITIES IN A CHANGING EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

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## ABSTRACT

*In the context of rapid technological disruption and the global shift toward digital higher education, strategic leadership has emerged as a pivotal factor in driving institutional agility and resilience. This study explores the role of strategic leadership in enhancing organisational adaptability within Saudi Arabia universities, particularly in alignment with the goals of Vision 2030. Drawing on strategic leadership theory and concepts of institutional agility, the research adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with senior academic leaders from four Saudi universities. Thematic analysis uncovered key leadership practices, enablers, and barriers to fostering institutional responsiveness and innovation. Findings reveal that while Saudi HEIs demonstrate increasing strategic vision and alignment with national digital agendas, significant challenges persist in areas of distributed decision-making, leadership capacity building, and change management processes. The study concludes with a proposed framework for strategic leadership that supports institutional agility in similar socio-cultural and policy-driven contexts. This research contributes to the global discourse on leadership in higher education by presenting insights from a rapidly evolving non-Western educational context.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Strategic Leadership, Institutional Agility, Higher Education, Digital Transformation, Organisational Resilience, Saudi Arabia, Academic Leadership, Change Management, Non-Western Contexts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of unprecedented digital disruption and evolving socio-economic demands, higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide are under increasing pressure to become more agile, resilient, and responsive to change. Strategic leadership has emerged as a vital enabler of institutional transformation, guiding universities through complexity, fostering innovation and aligning internal capabilities with external demands (Davis, 2024; Rowley & Sherman, 2003). The ability of university leaders to navigate uncertainties while promoting a clear strategic vision is now more critical than ever.

In Saudi Arabia's higher education context, education is undergoing a profound transformation driven by Vision 2030, a national framework that seeks to diversify the economy and foster a knowledge-based society. This agenda has significantly emphasised digital transformation, institutional excellence, and global competitiveness in universities (Aljendan, 2024b; Ministry of Education, 2021). As a result, university leadership in Saudi Arabia faces the challenge of modernising infrastructure and cultivating strategic foresight, agility, and change readiness at all organisational levels.

Despite the growing scholarly interest in leadership and digital transformation in higher education, there remains a notable gap in empirical research examining how strategic leadership contributes to institutional agility, particularly in non-Western contexts such as Saudi Arabia. Much of the existing literature is Western-centric and does not adequately address the cultural, organisational, and policy dimensions unique to Gulf region universities (Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabia, 2021; Bush & Glover, 2014).

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the role of strategic leadership in enhancing institutional agility within Saudi higher education. By investigating leadership practices in selected universities, the research aims to generate insights that contribute to academic discourse and inform policy and practice in similar socio-political contexts.

**The importance of the study lies in its potential to:**

- Offer a contextualised understanding of strategic leadership in an under-represented region.
- Contribute to theoretical discourse by examining how strategic leadership practices foster institutional agility in the face of ongoing reform and digital transformation in

higher education.

- Provide practical recommendations to university leaders navigating complex reforms.

Ultimately, this research aspires to position the Saudi higher education experience as a valuable reference point for global discussions on agile and strategic governance in universities.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Strategic Leadership in Higher Education

Strategic leadership has become a defining element in the governance and success of HEIs amid increasing globalisation, marketisation, and technological advancement (Popkova & Sergi, 2023). It focuses on vision-setting, strategic alignment, and building long-term institutional capacity to respond to emerging challenges (Davies & Davies, 2004; Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). Previous studies often describe leaders who adopt a strategic approach as transformational, forward-thinking, and capable of steering institutions through uncertainty and complexity.

Unlike transactional leadership, which emphasises short-term goals and maintenance, strategic leadership emphasises long-term innovation and sustainability. It also fosters shared governance, promotes collaboration, and enhances institutional effectiveness (Rowley & Sherman, 2003). Recent studies underscore the importance of strategic thinking among university leaders to successfully manage digital disruption, declining funding, and increasing accountability (Singun & Amando, 2025).

Although strategic leadership offers the basic model that enlightens us on the effectiveness of leadership within the higher educational sector, the evolving nature of the education sector demands institutions to build certain adaptive aspects that are not covered by the conventional strategic planning. Such demand on organisational responsiveness has led to the emergence of the concept of institutional agility that completes the triangle of strategic leadership to pay attention to the health of an organisation in terms of operation and culture of agility (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; García-Morales et al., 2012). The joining of those ideas gets especially pertinent when it comes to situations where universities are tasked with managing long-term strategic planning with the need of quick responses to external forces.

### 2.2 Institutional Agility in the Context of Organisational Change

Institutional agility refers to an organisation's ability to adapt rapidly and effectively to external and internal changes (Kwasek et al. 2024). In HEIs, this means revising policies, restructuring governance, and reconfiguring academic delivery systems to maintain relevance and sustainability (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Agility is not only about technology or process change but also about fostering a mindset of innovation, resilience, and continuous improvement (García-Morales et al., 2012).

In the extension of this knowledge, Shaban (2024) establish that strategic agility acts as a very important intermediary between leadership practices and excellence in HEIs. Their study also offers empirical evidence that entities that are highly strategic and agile in their operation have a strong influence on attaining the institution's objectives and with a high measure of flexibility amidst environmental dynamics (Menon & Suresh, 2020).

Universities with high agility are likelier to thrive in volatile contexts such as post-pandemic recovery or digital transformation. Leaders must facilitate adaptive capacity by fostering cultures of trust, decentralised decision-making, and stakeholder engagement (Deem et al., 2007). Moreover, existing research shows that agility is often enabled through leadership behaviours that balance autonomy with strategic coherence (Samodien et al. 2024).

It is only in the case of digital transformation when the combination of strategic leadership and institutional agility is highly important, as the former needs not only to be able to conceive of the technological change but also to allow the organisation to rapidly adapt to digital disruption (Mpuangnan & Roboji, 2024). Such a dynamic of leadership vision and adaptive capacity is peculiarly high in educational institutions that try to operate through overall digital reforms.

### ***2.3. Leadership in the Digital Transformation Of Heis***

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the urgency of digital transformation in higher education. Strategic leadership was pivotal in enabling institutions to respond to crises, shift to online learning, and embed digital capabilities across the academic and administrative domains (Zawacki-Richter, 2020).

Studies such as those by Alotaibi (2020) and Tsekouropoulos et al. (2025) highlight that leadership and digital contexts require technological understanding, emotional intelligence, strategic foresight, and inclusive governance. Digital

leadership also involves reimagining academic work, bridging data for decision-making, and building partnerships to support innovation.

Such universal tendencies of digital transformation and strategic leadership acquire distinct features when analysed in specific cultural and policy contexts. The Saudi Arabia system of higher education offers an interesting example of how the idea of strategic leadership and institutional agility can be implemented in a fast-changing context of the non-Western environment, especially when it is subjected to the impact of a development program aimed at comprehensive national changes, like Vision 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Edu (2024) demonstrate that transformational leadership remains highly relevant in contemporary higher education, particularly in fostering innovation and managing complex organisational changes required by digital transformation initiatives.

### ***2.4. The Intersection of Strategic Leadership and Institutional Agility***

The mutual relationship between strategic leadership and institutional agility is a complementary and synergistic one, a very critical nexus of organisational performance in competitive situations.

Strategic leadership would give the vision, direction, and resource distribution that gives long-term success, whereas institutional agility would enable organisations to be ready to adjust their structures, processes, and abilities to address strategic purposes in swiftly transforming situations (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Davies & Davies, 2004). This intersection has been specifically applied in the higher education context, where the institution has a set tradition that must be balanced with innovative ways of reacting to external forces, such as the disruptive effect of technology, changing student populations, and the changing demands of society (García-Morales et al., 2012; Bolden et al., 2009).

It has been argued that higher education leaders who are able to exercise strategic coherence and nurture organisational responsiveness and organisational flexibility at the same time are the most effective (Middlehurst, 2008). Moreover, strategic leadership and institutional agility also prove to be vital in the reform environment characterised by policymaking, as in such situations external directives demand visionary leadership and the ability of the organisation to adapt quickly (Deem et al., 2007).

These processes are especially noticeable in emerging markets and systems that are not

specifically focused on the Western world, in which the institutions of higher education have been confronted with the two-fold task of modernising and preserving their traditions.

### **2.5. Strategic Leadership In Saudi Higher Education**

The most significant feature that has taken place in the last 20 years in Saudi Arabia in the higher education field is a drastic reconfiguration, as the centralised model of higher education has shifted to one that emphasises innovation, global improvement in competitiveness, and institutional independence. Such transformation has mainly gained momentum in the wake of the launch of Vision 2030, an all-encompassing national strategy that considers education as one of the fundamental pillars of economic diversification and social growth (Ministry of Education, 2021; Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

As a result, the strategic leadership issues which face Saudi universities are, in a way, a part of this greater national setting, whereby the leaders must negotiate the cultural, economic, and technological change caused by the larger transformation.

In previous years, there was a high degree of centralisation in the regulation systems of higher education in Saudi Arabia, whereby management was largely restricted with low autonomy of institutions, and decisions were made at the ministerial level. The implementation of the Vision 2030 has, however, changed this situation in its very core as university leaders need to acquire new skills when it comes to strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and change management (Al Shamlan, 2023).

The Vision 2030 has developed certain targets in higher education which have direct influences on the practice of strategic leadership, such as the number of Saudi universities listed in the top 200 all over the world, enhanced research and innovation, development of graduate employability and partnerships among the international institutions (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

Strategic leadership in Saudi higher education should be put into the context of the peculiar cultural environment, an environment that strongly affects the practices of leadership and its performance. The interaction of the Islamic customs, the tribal culture and modernisation dynamic brings a complicated platform upon which the strategic leaders would have to deal with cultural encroachment to drive institutional change. This cultural aspect comes out particularly in gender integration, international co-operations and even in the curricular developments

where the leadership role in such domains is to mediate between the firm expectations and forward-looking innovations (Alghofaily, 2019). Therefore, the ability to understand and capitalise on such cultural structures increases the chances of the leaders to effect positive change programs.

### **2.6. Vision 2030 As A Catalyst For Strategic Leadership Excellence**

Within the framework of Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia, a package of governance reforms was implemented, which requires a shift in strategic leadership: the creation of university boards of trustees, financial autonomy, a performance-based funding system, which redistributes the focus on the managerial work as oriented to compliance practice to strategic work that aims at achieving the given outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2021).

In this regard, it is believed that university leaders should address, and maintain a balance between, a set of priorities that are said to sometimes conflict with each other, particularly the requirement of ensuring cultural authenticity, the need to pursue internationalisation, the need to protect established academic traditions and, at the same time, fostering innovation, the need to remain relevant to locals and, at the same time, achieving international standards (Al-Shamlan, 2023).

The dynamic of gender and the immense growth of the number of women taking part in leadership roles is also very influential in the process of strategic leadership transformation. The introduction of co-ed programs, extension of the driving rights of women, and diversification of professional opportunities within the framework of Vision 2030 have created not only new challenges but also new opportunities for leadership development. Because of that, women in leadership roles in academia are holding more roles that were inaccessible to them in the past, bringing unique views and methods to strategic decisions (Dahlan, 2023).

Empirical studies indicate that leaders exhibiting inclusive leadership styles marked by collaborative decision-making, active stakeholder interaction, and inclusive planning achieve better contextual performance, particularly when institutional support systems are in place. Simultaneously, these leaders confront and must overcome cultural expectations and societal norms that may otherwise hinder participatory practices (Ahmed & Sadiq, 2025; Smith, 2025).

Al Shamlan (2023) provided well-timed research that addresses one of the efforts to analyse the nature of the leadership challenges pertaining to Saudi

higher education transformation under Vision 2030, thereby shedding light on cultural and institutional trends that shape the strategic leadership effectiveness within the setting environment.

The pandemic in the field of COVID-19 proved to stimulate digital transformation speeds in Saudi higher education, establishing new priorities in the strategic technology application and governance in a digital environment. Officials running educational institutions in Saudi Arabia were forced to quickly switch to online learning systems, use digital infrastructures to maintain administrative processes, and avoid creating efficient methods of engaging students in an online environment and assist faculty members (Aljendan, 2024a).

The experience indicated that the leaders should acquire digital literacy, learn about new technologies, and establish institutional cultures of embracing innovation and lifelong learning, such as the skills to oversee the process of digital change, cybersecurity issues, and equitable access to digital resources (Tomste et al., 2019).

The importance of international partnership in the context of strategic leadership in Saudi universities has been brought about by Vision 2030's devotion to international competitiveness. Nowadays, leaders must advance the necessary skills related to cross-cultural communication, international communication, and global academic cooperation without any loss of institutional identity and cultural authenticity (Ministry of Education, 2021).

The process of setting international branch campuses, joint degree programs and research links has brought about new issues of leadership in terms of quality assurance, cultural integration and matching-up of academic standards. Despite such opportunities, Saudi higher education is portrayed as a major challenge when it comes to leadership development and capacity building. Leadership selection in higher education sometimes prioritises scholarly output over leadership skills, potentially limiting effectiveness in areas such as change management and institutional planning (Al-Harthy & Showail, 2021).

The modern strategic leadership is permanently challenged with such phenomena as bureaucratic inertia, the reluctance to change, the lack of global exposure among a certain part of leaders, and the difficulty of taking into consideration the expectations of numerous parties (Tipurić, 2022). Nevertheless, the dedication of government to reforms in the field of education, huge financial investments, and increased international awareness of Saudi universities promote good climate of

conditions in which strategic leadership can be effective, however increasing the number of a new generation of Saudi leaders with international experience offers the chance to be innovative in approaches toward the institution governance and strategic planning.

This study contributes to this body of work by examining the lived experiences of academic leaders, including Deans, Vice Deans, and department heads from four Saudi universities. The inclusion of both male and female leaders offers insights into gendered perspectives on institutional reform and strategic capacity, while addressing the limited empirical research on specific leadership practices that contribute to institutional agility in the Saudi context.

## 2.7. Summary And Research Gap

The literature review reveals a robust theoretical foundation linking strategic leadership to organisational effectiveness and institutional agility to adaptive capacity in higher education contexts. The reviewed studies demonstrate that strategic leadership theory provides essential insights into vision-setting, resource allocation, and long-term institutional direction (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001; Davies & Davies, 2004), while institutional agility theory offers frameworks for understanding organisational responsiveness and adaptability (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; García-Morales et al., 2012).

However, three critical gaps emerge from this comprehensive analysis. First, while strategic leadership theory has been extensively studied in Western higher education contexts, limited empirical research examines its application in non-Western higher education systems undergoing rapid transformation (Carvalho et al., 2021).

Second, although institutional agility has gained attention as a crucial organisational capability, few studies have empirically investigated how strategic leadership practices specifically contribute to building agility in universities (Zainal et al. 2024).

Third, the intersection of these concepts within policy-driven reform contexts, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, remains underexplored, despite the potential for such contexts to provide unique insights into leadership-agility relationships in culturally distinct environments.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a theoretically informed and contextually grounded analysis of strategic leadership practices in the Saudi higher education sector, specifically focusing on how strategic leadership contributes to building institutional agility in alignment with national reform agendas.

### 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study frames the investigation using two interrelated theoretical perspectives: strategic leadership theory and Institutional agility theory. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens to explore how leadership practices shape the adaptive capacities of HEIs within complex and dynamic environments.

#### 3.1. Strategic Leadership Theory

Strategic leadership theory emphasises the role of senior leaders in setting organisational direction, allocating resources, and creating conditions for long-term success (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001).

It distinguishes itself from other leadership paradigms by focusing on the interplay between leadership vision, environmental scanning, and strategic alliance. In higher education, strategic leadership involves guiding universities through external pressures such as globalisation, technological change and shifting policy landscapes (Davies & Davies, 2004). It also entails balancing competing interests while sustaining academic values and institutional identity (Middlehurst, 2008).

Strategic leadership is critical in navigating the Vision 2030 reforms within the Saudi context, particularly those requiring significant cultural and structural shifts. The theory helps explain how leaders influence organisational readiness for change and innovation.

Building on the existing literature, Marshall (2024) focuses on the dynamic nature of strategic leadership in the current environment of higher education that emphasises the existence of stability and innovation in the fast-changing environments.

#### 3.2. Institutional Agility Theory

Institutional agility refers to an organisation's ability to anticipate, respond, and recover from change promptly and efficiently. Agility encompasses technological flexibility, strategic foresight, and an adaptive governance culture that supports innovation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). In higher education, agility involves curriculum innovation, digital transformation, flexible governance, and stakeholder responsiveness (García-Morales et al., 2012). Drawing on the findings of Castillo and Detoya (2024), strategic leadership particularly in its adaptive and innovative forms plays a central role in enabling higher education institutions to build organisational agility. This agility allows universities to navigate post-pandemic challenges, align with strategic reforms, and maintain institutional relevance in dynamic environments. Kwasek et al. (2024) shows empirical evidence that leadership practices are a definite determinant of organisational agility in institutions of higher learning, and strategic leaders are key facilitators of agility in terms of responsiveness and adaptability of an institution.

#### 3.3. Integrative Framework

Building on these theoretical foundations, the study proposes an integrative framework linking strategic leadership to institutional agility. This framework conceptualises the relationship as a causal and dynamic process influenced by mediating and contextual factors.

Table 1 presents the Conceptual Model Linking Strategic Leadership to Institutional Agility.

**Table 1: Core Components of the Integrative Framework.**

Component	Definition	Role in Framework
Strategic Leadership	The ability to formulate and execute long-term institutional strategies.	Independent Variable / Driver
Institutional Agility	The institution's capacity to adapt to change and remain operationally effective.	Dependent Variable / Outcome
Organisational Culture	Shared values and norms within the institution influencing receptivity to change.	Mediator
Leadership Capacity	The skills, experience, and readiness of leadership teams.	Mediator
Decision-Making	The degree of decentralisation, responsiveness, and inclusivity.	Mediator
Vision 2030 Reforms	National policy agenda driving transformation.	Contextual Moderator

<b>Cultural Context</b>	Socio-cultural norms shaping leadership behaviours.	Contextual Moderator
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This integrative framework aims to provide a nuanced understanding of leadership as a dynamic process that shapes institutional responsiveness, particularly within Saudi Arabia's unique socio-political and cultural context

### 3.4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the strategic leadership practices that contribute to institutional agility in Saudi HEIs. The research seeks to understand academic leaders' lived experiences, perceptions, and strategic behaviours within their organisational contexts. The research is grounded in an interpretive paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the perspectives of individuals. This paradigm is suitable for capturing the complexity of leadership in truly unique environments such as Saudi universities undergoing rapid transformation.

The primary data collection method employed in this study is semi-structured interviews. This technique allows consistency in guiding questions and flexibility in probing emerging themes. An interview protocol was developed based on the study's conceptual framework, covering leadership vision, strategic planning, responsiveness to change and organisational challenges.

Interviews were conducted using the semi-structured protocol. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and subsequently translated into English. All transcripts were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality.

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants in formal academic leadership positions, including Deans, vice Deans and department heads across 4 Saudi universities. Four Saudi universities were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) geographic representation across different regions of Saudi Arabia, (2) institutional diversity, including both established and newer universities, (3) active participation in Vision 2030 reform initiatives, and (4) accessibility for data collection. The selected universities represent different stages of transformation implementation, providing varied perspectives on strategic leadership practices. A total of 24 participants were interviewed, with six leaders selected from each university. The sample included

both male and female leaders to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. Participants were selected based on their involvement in institutional decision-making, strategic planning, and reform implementation. The study presents the distribution of participants in the selected universities and leadership roles presented in the table below.

**Table 2: Sample Distribution by University and Position.**

University (Region)	Leadership Positions	Number of Participants
University A (Central Region)	Deans, Vice-Deans, Department Heads	6
University B (Western Region)	Deans, Vice-Deans, Department Heads	6
University C (Eastern Region)	Deans, Vice-Deans, Department Heads	6
University D (Northern Region)	Deans, Vice-Deans, Department Heads	6
<b>Total</b>		<b>24</b>

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Interview transcripts were coded and organised into key themes aligned with the conceptual framework: strategic foresight, agility-building practices, leadership enablers and constraints. This study used NVivo software to support data management and coding consistency. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adhered to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing and thick description were employed. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process. This research complies with ethical standards for social science research. Participants were informed of their rights, and confidentiality was assured. University names were anonymised to preserve institutional privacy.

This study recognises there is a list of methodological shortcomings. The first one is that the language might have influenced the responses of the participants because interviews were mainly done in Arabic and then translated to English, hence distorting intricate meanings. Second, the researcher was an academic engaged in the Saudi higher education system, which caused a risk of interviewer bias, but the problem was solved with the use of the reflexive practices and member checking. Third, the purposive sampling method works for the research purposes, but the findings are limited to translating the results to any other university in Saudi Arabia or

to any other country. Fourth, the emphasis on principal leadership roles might not have brought on board the views of mid-level administrators or faculty members who also play a role in promoting the institutional agility. Lastly, the cross-sectional design produces the information of how things are being practised and does not provide a relationship between the two factors of strategic leadership and institutional agility over time as a causal factor.

#### 4. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study based on the thematic analysis of 24 semi-structured interviews with academic leaders from four Saudi universities. The analysis generated four main themes reflecting how strategic leadership is perceived and enacted to support institutional agility in higher education transformation. Each theme is discussed in the study's conceptual framework, highlighting how strategic leadership functions as a key enabler of agility through specific behaviours, organisational mechanisms, and contacts to adaptations.

##### 4.1. Theme 1: Vision-Driven Leadership and Strategic Alignment

This theme aligns with the concept of strategic foresight within strategic leadership theory. Participants consistently emphasise the necessity of a well-articulated institutional vision closely aligned with national development plans, most notably Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. Strategic leaders are crucial in operationalising this vision by translating high-level goals into actionable plans and cascading them throughout the university's administrative and academic structures. The findings suggest that strategic alignment enhances institutional clarity, which contributes to agility by reducing ambiguity in times of change.

Several leaders noted that without a shared sense of purpose and direction, responsiveness would be fragmented and reactionary rather than planned. Aligning institutions with Vision 2030 also enables access to national funding, policy support, and public legitimacy.

"Our role is to respond to change and anticipate it. Vision 2030 gave us a framework, and we align all initiatives accordingly," Vice Dean, University A.

##### 4.2. Theme 2: Leadership Responsiveness And Adaptability

This theme is based on the institutional agility framework, especially regarding adaptive capacity and strategic responsiveness. They explained how

their work requires them to constantly monitor changes in policy, technology, and societal demand and react promptly when necessary. Such flexibility is commonly enabled through agile resource allocation mechanisms, decentralised decision-making, and fast decision-action timelines. Agility in this context was considered not just changeability but also speed and intentionality.

Those in leadership positions also spotlighted cases in which institutional agility had allowed them to change the delivery of courses, redesign curricula or carry out organisational restructuring with relatively little disruption. It was also discussed as a cultural characteristic, something to be developed in the long term through the example of leadership and supported institutionally.

"There are times when policies change overnight. We could not amend our academic offerings or structures in time without flexible leadership." Dean, Female University B.

##### 4.3. Theme 3: Distributed Leadership and Decision-Making Culture

This theme integrates the theory of strategic leadership and the enabling conditions for agility. Leadership empowerment, which means authority is pushed to the lower levels, was cited as paramount to creating an agile firm. Participants stated that empowering department heads and involving faculty members in strategic planning led to faster responses and more locally relevant decisions. This shift also improved accountability and morale within academic units.

However, not all institutions have embraced this model similarly. Some participants noted persistent hierarchical cultures where centralised authority impeded rapid action. The findings emphasise that distributed leadership should be supported through structural changes while simultaneously developing a culture of trust and cooperation.

"We are structuring a culture where leadership is shared. When department heads feel empowered, they act faster and more confidently." Head of Department, University C.

##### 4.4. Theme 4: Leadership Capacity And Professional Development

The final theme relates to leadership capacity mediating between strategic leadership and institutional agility. Participants emphasised that effective strategic leadership depends heavily on leaders' skills, experience, and preparedness to handle uncertainty. Several institutions have launched internal development programmes to

improve leadership capabilities in digital transformation, crisis response, and strategic governance.

Nonetheless, many respondents expressed concern that leadership roles are often assigned based on academic seniority rather than demonstrated capacity. This mismatch can weaken agility by placing ill-prepared individuals in key roles. The findings indicate a strong desire for more structured leadership training, mentorship, and succession planning.

"Strategic leadership is not about titles; it is about capacity. We need structured training to deal with future uncertainty." Female Dean, University A.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This section provides a critical discussion of the study's findings in relation to the conceptual framework and existing literature. The findings confirm and extend the theoretical understanding of how strategic leadership enables institutional agility, particularly in non-Western contexts such as Saudi Arabia. Drawing from strategic leadership theory and institutional agility frameworks, this discussion integrates empirical evidence with theoretical insights and highlights areas of agreement and divergence with prior studies.

### 5.1. Strategic Vision And Institutional Alignment

The study's findings strongly support the proposition that strategic vision is a cornerstone of effective leadership in higher education. Participants frequently emphasised aligning institutional goals with national policy frameworks, especially Vision 2030. This aligns with Boal and Hooijberg (2001), who argue that strategic leaders provide direction by establishing long-term goals that guide organisational action. Similarly, Davies and Davies (2004) highlighted the role of vision setting in ensuring institutional coherence. This study's emphasis on strategic alignment is consistent with recent research by Alyami and Floyd (2019), who found that Saudi university leaders increasingly seek to embed national goals into local strategies. However, the current study goes further by revealing how this alignment enhances organisational agility, not only through policy compliance but also by fostering institutional legitimacy, streamlining resources, and improving stakeholder coordination.

### 5.2. Adaptive Capacity And Strategic Responsiveness

Institutional agility is widely associated with the

ability to adapt swiftly to change (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). In this study, participants reported that leadership responsiveness was critical in managing policy shifts, technical demands, and internal challenges. This finding echoes García-Morales et al. (2012), who observed that agile organisations thrive on leader-driven responsiveness and flexibility. Respondents in this study described real-life scenarios in which academic leaders adjust rapidly to reforms, a process facilitated by decentralised decision-making and communication channels.

Nevertheless, the study highlights challenges to sustaining agility, such as structural rigidities and cultural inertia. While this aligns with Dahlan (2023), who noted that bureaucratic norms in Saudi universities often hinder innovation, the current research adds nuance by showing how certain institutions have begun to overcome these limitations through strategic empowerment at departmental levels.

### 5.3. Distributed Leadership As A Catalyst For Agility

The findings reinforce the growing body of literature advocating for distributed leadership to increase institutional agility. Bolden et al. (2009) argue that shared leadership enables organisations to respond more flexibly by decentralising authority and involving a wider range of actions and decision-making. In this study, participants described how empowering department heads and faculty contributed to faster and more effective responses.

However, this finding also diverges from studies that caution against over-reliance on distributed models in hierarchical cultures. For instance, Bush and Glover (2014) argued that shared leadership may be difficult to sustain when leadership traditions remain top-down. This tension was observed in the current study when some leaders reported a lack of institutional readiness or support to implement distributed models fully, indicating the need for a more profound cultural transformation.

### 5.4. Leadership Capacity And Organisational Readiness

Leadership capacity emerged as a key mediator between strategic intent and institutional agility. Respondents consistently called for formal leadership development initiatives focused on strategic foresight, digital governance, and crisis leadership. This aligns with Al-Shamlan's (2023) identification of leadership competence as a determinant of institutional adaptability in complex environments. The findings expand upon this by

illustrating the gap between role and readiness, where leadership roles are assigned based on academic credentials rather than leadership ability. (Al-Shamlan, 2023) Similarly, it is noted that leadership appointments in Saudi universities often lack structured evaluation, which can hinder reform efforts. This study contributes to this discourse by offering concrete examples of how inadequate leadership preparation impacts agility.

### 5.5. Theoretical Synthesis And Contributions

Overall, the study validates the integrated conceptual framework, demonstrating that strategic leadership significantly influences institutional agility through mediating factors such as leadership capacity, decision-making, culture, and strategic alignment. While most findings affirm existing theories, they also reveal the influence of unique cultural and policy contexts in shaping leadership practices in Saudi Arabia universities. This synthesis contributes to theoretical development by highlighting how strategic leadership can operate effectively in hierarchical, policy-driven environments, providing a model for similar contexts globally. Future research may further test these findings through comparative or longitudinal studies. Table 3 below summarises the integration of findings with the theoretical framework. This table highlights the connection between the study's empirical insights and the underpinning theoretical concepts, demonstrating how strategic leadership mechanisms contribute to institutional agility in the Saudi higher education context.

**Table 3: Linking Findings To Theoretical Framework.**

Theme	Linked Theoretical Concept	Empirical Evidence
<b>Strategic Vision and Alignment</b>	Strategic Foresight (Strategic Leadership Theory)	Alignment with Vision 2030 enhances direction and coherence.
<b>Leadership Responsiveness and Adaptability</b>	Adaptive Capacity (Institutional Agility Theory)	Flexible governance supports rapid adaptation to reform and tech changes.
<b>Distributed Leadership and Decision-Making</b>	Enabling Conditions for Agility (Strategic + Distributed Leadership)	Empowering faculty increases agility and innovation at departmental level.
<b>Leadership Capacity and Development</b>	Mediating Variable (Leadership Capacity in Strategic Leadership)	Gaps in leadership training affect ability to lead agile transformation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of strategic leadership in enhancing institutional agility in Saudi higher education. Drawing on a qualitative design grounded in strategic leadership and institutional agility theory, the research provides empirical insights into how academic leaders navigate change, align vision with national reforms, and build the organisational capacity required for agile responses.

The findings revealed that strategic vision, leadership responsiveness, distributed decision-making, and leadership capacity are pivotal in fostering institutional agility. These components reflect core constructs of the conceptual framework and demonstrate how they are operationalised within the culturally specific and policy-driven context of Saudi universities. Notably, the alignment with Vision 2030 emerged as a strategic anchor that enhances coherence and drives long-term transformation agendas. The study contributes to the literature by validating and refining an integrated theoretical model that links leadership practices with agility outcomes. It offers a contextualised understanding of leadership in non-Western higher education environments, which have been underrepresented in mainstream leadership research. Furthermore, the study highlights areas requiring further development, such as structured leadership training, decentralised governance, and cultural shifts toward collaborative leadership models.

From a practical perspective, the study provides actionable insights for policymakers, university administrators and leadership development practitioners. It underscores the need for intentional leadership capacity building, cultivating adaptive governance structures and reinforcing strategic alignment mechanisms to foster agility in disruption and reform.

Future research could expand on this study by employing longitudinal or comparative designs, including diverse institutional types and regions, or by integrating quantitative measures to assess the strength of leadership agility relationships. Such work would further enrich our understanding of how strategic leadership could drive institutional resilience in a rapidly changing global education landscape.

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