


## Fostering student academic integration through institutional leadership in Saudi higher education



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### ABSTRACT

#### Article History

Received: 19 May 2025

Revised: 21 July 2025

Accepted: 7 August 2025

Published: 4 September 2025

#### Keywords

Academic integration  
Higher education leadership  
Leadership practices  
Saudi Arabia  
Situational leadership  
Student engagement  
Student integration  
University deans.

This study investigates the leadership styles that promote student involvement in Saudi Arabia's higher education institutions, with a particular focus on the role of university leaders. The research explores how institutional leaders facilitate student integration into academic and extracurricular activities. The study employed qualitative interviews with deans and faculty members, providing insights into how cultural factors and leadership practices influence student learning processes. Two theoretical frameworks guide this research: Situational Leadership Theory and Kahu's Conceptual Framework of Student Engagement. These models collectively explain how academic leaders motivate students through personalized communication and comprehensive institutional support systems. Results indicate that successful deans adapt their strategies according to circumstances, employing approaches that involve telling, selling, participating, and delegating to meet diverse student needs. Key practices for enhancing student success include open communication, encouragement of faculty autonomy, and the establishment of inclusive educational environments. The study enhances leadership understanding by further integrating students into the cultural context of Saudi Arabian universities, providing viable means of promoting student interaction and academic integration.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study uniquely combines Situational Leadership Theory with Kahu's Student Engagement Framework to examine dean leadership practices in Saudi higher education. It fills a research gap in Gulf literature by highlighting the role of leadership in shaping institutional culture, communication, and student-centered practices.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has dedicated more resources than ever before to investing in higher education to achieve Vision 2030 by building a diversified and knowledge-intensive economy. Public universities have doubled their enrollment, introduced performance-based funding, and aligned with international accreditation standards through the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA), which specifies definitive measures of teaching quality and graduate employability. Student integration, defined as a combination of behavioral participation, emotional attachment, and cognitive investment in studies, has become a central indicator of institutional success amid ongoing reforms. Domestic tracking data show that higher integration scores correlate with lower first-year dropout rates and improved grade point averages [1], a trend that is also observed internationally, as indicated by Trowler [2].

Integration is not created in a vacuum; it is significantly influenced by leadership practices that shape learning environments. Classic contingency theories, such as Situational Leadership Theory by Hersey and Blanchard, emphasize the importance of adapting leadership styles to specific situations to enhance organizational effectiveness.

Hersey and Blanchard [3] argue that effective leaders consciously adjust directive, coaching, supportive, or delegative behaviors to match student readiness. Complementing this, Kahu's multidimensional model positions integration at the nexus of student motivation, institutional culture, and teaching practices, all nested within socio-cultural currents. Combining these two perspectives provides a comprehensive analytical framework, particularly relevant in Saudi Arabia's collectivist, high-power-distance context, where hierarchical norms coexist with demands for participative governance [4].

Despite the centrality of leadership to reform agendas, Gulf scholarship has emphasized technology adoption, individual learning styles, and curriculum design while marginalizing leadership research Al Haj Sleiman, et al. [5]. While some studies have explored context-specific leadership initiatives for integration in Saudi universities [6], a notable gap in the existing literature persists. This study aims to address this research gap by examining the impact of university leadership, particularly that of deans, on student integration within Saudi Arabian universities.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores adaptive leadership practices across three geographically diverse public universities in Saudi Arabia. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, it examines how deans conceptualize integration with national reform targets and cultural values, how they recalibrate their leadership styles as students evolve from passive recipients to autonomous learners, and the role played by transparent communication and faculty empowerment in translating leadership intent into engaged learning. By weaving these focal inquiries into a qualitative narrative that privileges participants' voices, the study aims to illuminate context-sensitive pathways for elevating integration within and beyond the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The goal is to equip academic leaders with practical strategies to enhance student involvement.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership practices comprise a collection of strategic options, social behaviors, and organizational actions that academic leaders draw upon to steer, motivate, and govern their institutions. In the context of higher education, these practices influence the university's responses to policy imperatives, resource allocation, and the ability to motivate individuals engaged in learning and teaching activities. Relevant literature frames effective educational leadership as primarily purposeful yet flexible: leaders should be able to communicate an inspiring, purposeful vision that identifies priorities within the national context and addresses the evolving needs of students. They must make evidence-based decisions regarding curricula, schedules, and budgets, ensuring transparent and two-way communication that makes lecturers and learners feel heard. Creating a culture of recognition and psychological safety is essential to promote intrinsic motivation among staff and students. Additionally, exhibiting situational agility by adjusting leadership styles according to specific circumstances is vital. Engaging stakeholders effectively completes the leadership approach. When these overlapping behaviors are implemented as a cohesive system, they form organizational ecosystems that reward excellent teaching, foster continuous improvement, and ultimately lead to student success.

Student integration reflects the quality and depth of learners' engagement in their academic life. It goes beyond mere attendance or compliance, encompassing students' contributions to both the curriculum and co-curricular activities through their attention, curiosity, enthusiasm, and optimism. Substantial evidence indicates that higher levels of integration are associated with increased learning outcomes, greater persistence, and improved graduation performance [7]. At Saudi Arabian universities, newly published empirical evidence supports the findings of previous studies indicating that students who establish connections with their programs tend to attend classes more regularly, participate more actively in discussions, and demonstrate increased loyalty to their institutions [8-10].

Integration is widely conceptualized as multidimensional. Behavioral integration refers to observable participation in classroom tasks, adherence to institutional norms, and involvement in campus life [11]. Emotional integration encompasses positive feelings, such as interest, enjoyment, belonging, and pride, which foster a strong connection between students and their university. This connection helps sustain motivation over time, contributing to students' academic success and overall well-being [12]. The cognitive integration is described as the strategic and

self-controlled effort applied by students in their attempt to grasp intricate concepts: goal setting, methodology selection, and comprehensive processing surveys and oversight [13, 14]. These dimensions complement each other: students are motivated and more active when they feel valued and are intellectually challenged. Additionally, active engagement enhances affective connections and cognitive integration.

Extensive research demonstrates that leadership serves as a crucial antecedent of integration across all three dimensions. Visionary leadership clarifies expectations and directs collective action, providing behavioral engagement with clear direction. Open communication and reward strategies foster positive feelings, which support the affective attachment between students and the institution. Competent, student-centered decision-making promotes deep learning rather than superficial knowledge acquisition and rewards intellectual risk-taking, thereby fostering cognitive engagement. Research conducted across various education systems reveals that as leaders exemplify inclusive decision-making, offer feedback when it is urgent, and make investments in evidence that enable faculty to apply active learning design and techniques, the scores of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive integration among students improve significantly [15].

In culturally conservative yet rapidly modernizing contexts such as Saudi Arabia, the nexus between leadership and integration is complicated by hierarchical norms and collectivist values. High power distance can constrain open dialogue; however, today's digitally connected students increasingly expect participatory learning environments. Leaders, therefore, face the dual challenge of respecting cultural protocols while introducing inclusive practices that empower students as partners in their learning journey. Evidence from comparable Asian settings suggests that leaders who employ what Hallinger and Walker [16] term "contextually responsive pedagogy" successfully mediate these tensions, cultivating climates in which integration flourishes without eroding cultural coherence.

Despite the global consensus on the importance of leadership, investigations in the Gulf region remain fragmented. Many studies focus on technological drivers or treat engagement as an individual trait, divorced from institutional structures. When leadership is examined, the focus often gravitates toward department chairs, leaving deans—whose decisions on policy, pedagogy, and resources have system-wide implications largely unexplored. This gap is significant because deans in Saudi universities must balance directive authority with participatory practices to motivate an increasingly diverse and autonomous student body [4].

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how deans in Saudi public universities deploy adaptive leadership practices to cultivate holistic student engagement. By emphasizing behaviors such as vision setting, data-informed decision-making, open communication, motivational support, flexibility, and stakeholder partnership, the inquiry seeks to illuminate culturally sensitive pathways through which engagement can be strengthened in a rapidly reforming higher education landscape.

### *2.1. Institutional Leadership and Academic Integration in Saudi Higher Education*

Whereas integration captures the quality of students' effort, academic integration concerns the fit between students and the intellectual life of their university, a central construct in Tinto [17] model of persistence. Integrated students perceive alignment between their goals, the curriculum, and the broader academic culture; they understand expectations, access support when needed, and internalize disciplinary norms. Academic integration is consistently associated with increased persistence and graduation rates [18]. However, research on integration in the Saudi context is limited, particularly regarding the role of institutional leaders in creating an environment conducive to student integration.

### *2.2. Leadership as an Architect of Integration*

Institutional leaders utilize three interconnected design levers: structure, culture, and support. Structurally, deans influence program coherence, credit transfer pathways, and assessment policies elements that communicate clear academic expectations. Culturally, they promote scholarly values, model intellectual curiosity, and legitimize

student voices in academic affairs. Supportively, they allocate resources for tutoring, advising, and bridge programs that help bridge the gap between students' prior preparation and university demands [19]. When these levers are aligned, students perceive their university as a welcoming and supportive system that equips them for success, thereby reinforcing their sense of integration into the academic community.

Saudi universities offer a unique research environment. Rapid expansion has diversified the student body, bringing first-generation learners from peripheral regions into research-intensive campuses [20]. Leaders must balance national aspirations for world-class standards with equitable access. Evidence from comparable systems shows that mission clarity, transparent communication, and proactive advising are particularly important for first-generation and underprepared students [21].

### *2.3. Key Leadership Practices*

#### *2.3.1. Vision Framing for Integration*

Deans who embed academic integration into college vision statements send a powerful symbolic message: success is collective, not solely individual. Such framing guides policy choices, from curriculum mapping to faculty workload, ensuring initiatives converge on the integration goal.

#### *2.3.2. Curricular Coherence and Pathway Design*

International studies demonstrate that sequenced curricula and aligned assessments enhance students' sense of progress [22]. In Saudi environments where program revisions are frequent, leadership vigilance is required to prevent curricular drift that confuses students and dilutes integration.

#### *2.3.3. Data-Informed Early Alert Systems*

Leveraging analytics to identify disengagement, missed classes, and low LMS activity enables advisors to intervene proactively before fragmentation worsens. Successful pilot programs at King Saud University demonstrate that retention improves when deans combine data analysis with culturally sensitive outreach, respecting privacy norms while providing support.

#### *2.3.4. Faculty Development for Inclusive Pedagogy*

Saudi faculty often hail from diverse national backgrounds; shared professional learning communities around active learning and formative feedback cultivate a common teaching vocabulary that students can navigate confidently.

#### *2.3.5. Bridging the High-Power Distance Gap*

Hierarchical norms sometimes deter students from seeking help. Leaders mitigate this by institutionalizing mentorship programs where senior students or alumni serve as "near peers," normalizing help-seeking and strengthening belonging.

The leadership practices described above are promising in terms of potential; however, their impact is neither automatic nor constant, as it is continuously influenced by structural and cultural limitations. The availability of government-linked funding often restricts the range of student support services, and the highly centralized governance of Saudi higher education can hinder individual deans' ability to innovate locally. An already bureaucratic environment in certain faculties can further diminish inclusive approaches. Conversely, collegial departments that share a common vision tend to adopt inclusive methods with great enthusiasm (see [23]).

Thus, the literature review reveals a significant gap, as the role of leadership in establishing academic integration has been recognized in the international literature but remains poorly researched in Saudi studies. These studies tend to analyze the phenomenon predominantly as an isolated system of structures, cultures, and support mechanisms.

Most domestic inquiries isolate educational technologies or student attributes, overlooking how senior leaders integrate these elements into a coherent whole. This omission is particularly pressing considering Vision 2030. Accordingly, the present study investigates how Saudi deans mobilize structural, cultural, and support strategies to foster students' academic integration, providing context-specific insights to inform policy and practice during this period of rapid transformation.

#### 2.4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks:

- Situational Leadership Theory [3].
- Kahu's Conceptual Framework of Student Engagement [24].

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for a detailed analysis of the impact that academic leaders, specifically deans, have on student engagement within the distinct cultural and institutional context of Saudi Arabia.

The Situational Leadership Theory, developed by Hersey and Blanchard [3], suggests that there is no single best way to be an effective leader. Instead, it emphasizes that a leader's performance is influenced by the style they adopt, which can be either directive or delegative. This choice depends primarily on two key factors: the preparedness of followers, such as students, and the complexity of the academic tasks they are assigned. In the context of this study, deans in Saudi Arabian universities must communicate with students from diverse academic backgrounds, varying levels of motivation, and different cultural expectations. The situational leadership model provides deans with the flexibility to adapt their leadership skills to effectively interact with students [3, 25]. For example, students who are less independent in their studies may require a more directive (telling) style. Conversely, adopting a more engaging and empowering approach, such as participative or delegative leadership, can foster a greater sense of responsibility and ownership over the learning process.

To demonstrate the multidimensional nature of student integration, Kahu [24] offers a representation of a socio-ecological model that helps explore the interaction between structural forces (e.g., institutional guidelines, leadership, teaching approaches), psychosocial factors (e.g., motivation, identity, emotions), integration indicators (e.g., behavioral, emotional, cognitive), and potential long-term outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, personal development, retention). This structure is also relevant to the given research since it provides a framework in which leadership is recognized as a significant structural determinant of student integration. Besides its direct influence, leadership affects integration by:

- Building an institutional culture.
- Promoting student-centered teaching practices.
- Creating inclusive learning environments.
- Improving relations between students and faculty [26].

Within the hierarchical structure of Saudi Arabia's higher education system, characterized by evolving academic demands and the influence of Vision 2030 policies, Kahu's framework enables this study to explore how leadership behaviors interact with these broader contextual factors [4]. The combination of Situational Leadership Theory and Kahu [24] Engagement Framework provides a dual perspective for examining leadership practices, encompassing both individual behaviors (leadership actions) and systemic aspects (institutional and cultural impacts). From a pragmatic standpoint, Situational Leadership assists deans in adjusting their behaviors to align with varying student needs. Kahu's model further elucidates why these behaviors are crucial for achieving cognitive and emotional integration outcomes. As a result, the theoretical underpinning of this study offers a solid analytical framework to understand how deans of Saudi universities can develop and enhance their leadership capacities through contextualization to local cultural idioms and fostering integration.

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework utilized in this study.

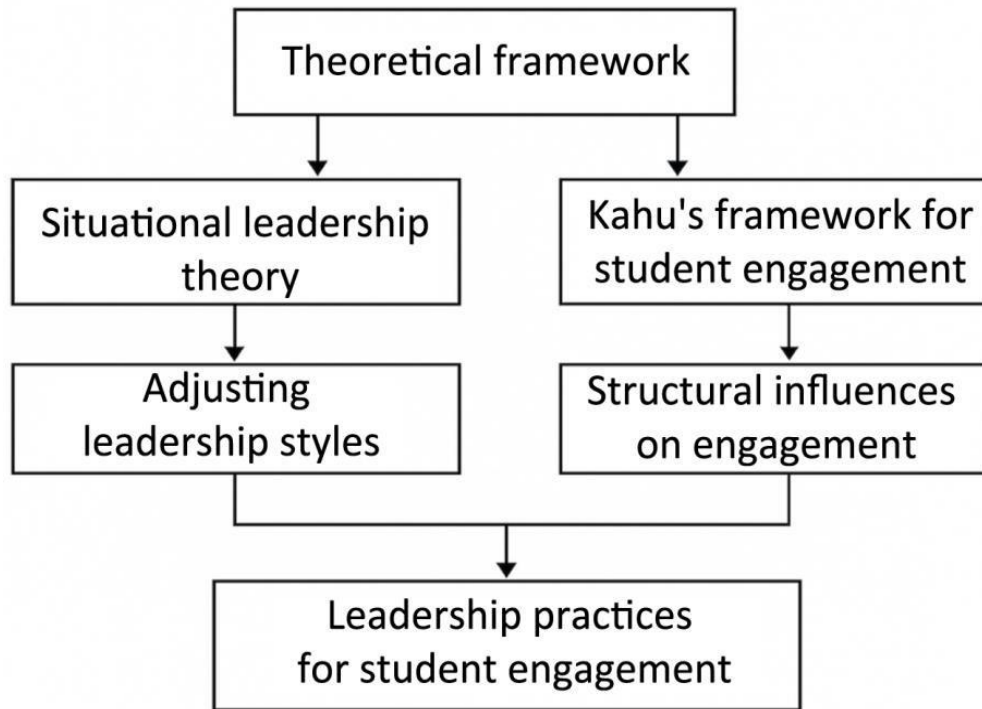


Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework of student integration.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, multiple-case design to illuminate the leadership practices that foster student academic integration in Saudi public higher education. Thirty-five participants, including 15 university deans and 20 faculty members, participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Researchers employed purposive sampling, selecting three public universities located in the eastern, central, and western regions of the Kingdom, thus encompassing geographical and cultural variation. In each of the institutions, five deans and six to seven academics were invited to participate, with the distribution based on discipline diversity and administrative experience (see Table 1 showing the complete distribution).

Table 1. Participant distribution by university.

University	Number of deans	Number of faculty members	Total of participant
University A (Western Region)	5	7	12
University B (Central Region)	5	6	11
University C (Eastern Region)	5	7	12
Total of participants	15	20	35

Four broad areas identified in the interview schedule included participants' knowledge of student integration and integration processes; the perceived impact of institutional leadership; facilitators or obstacles, including contextual and cultural factors; and specific actions, policies, or programs considered useful. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim; they were conducted in either English or Arabic, depending on the participants' preferences.

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted on the data. To import the transcripts, we utilized NVivo (v.12) and coded them iteratively. Codes were grouped into higher-order themes through continuous comparison, which resulted in themes that described common patterns as well as contrasts between cases. Credibility was reinforced through member checking with five participants and by maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions.

Ethical clearance was obtained from King Faisal University. The Research Ethics Committee approved the study (Ref. No. KFU2025-ETHICS3492), and all participants provided informed consent.

Figure 2 offers a schematic overview of the research process, from sampling through analysis.

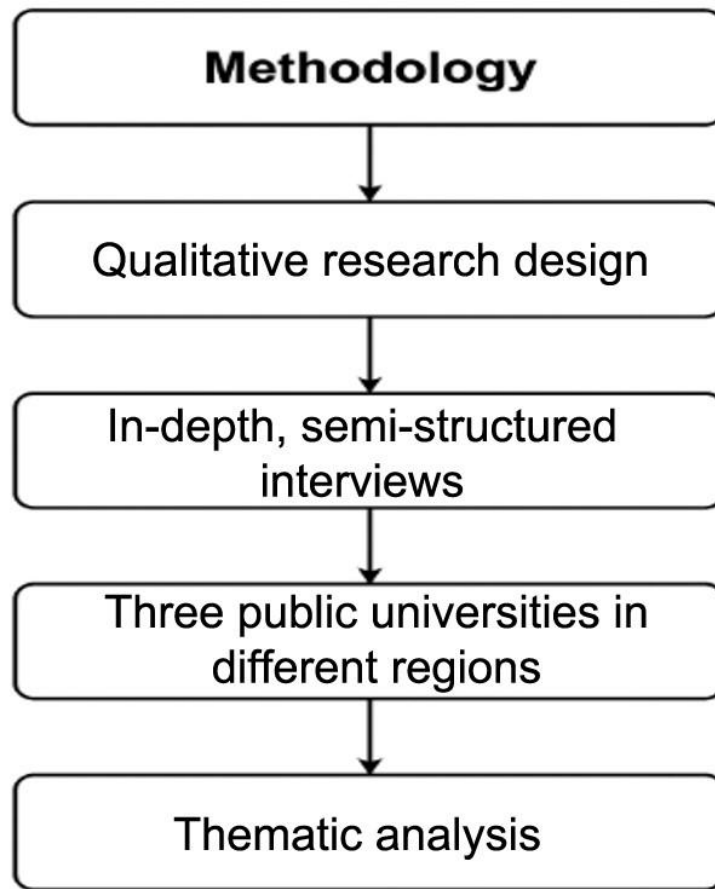


Figure 2. Research process.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interview data present a coherent narrative indicating that intentional, flexible, and collaborative leadership plays a crucial role in maintaining relevant academic integration within public universities in Saudi Arabia. Deans are identified as the primary architects of this environment, where the definitions of integration are established, how integration is implemented, and how it is experienced within their institutions. Three interconnected themes emerged from participants' accounts: adaptive leadership, communication as the infrastructure for integration, and faculty empowerment. Collectively, these themes illuminate the dynamic relationship between leadership behavior, institutional culture, and student motivation.

##### 4.1. Adaptive Leadership Through Situational Styles

Effective deans are consistently portrayed by respondents as diagnosticians who align their leadership approach with the developmental readiness of both students and staff members. When working with cohorts perceived as inexperienced, such as first-year undergraduates or novice lecturers, deans tend to adopt a more directive style. This approach is characterized by providing clear structures, explicit expectations, and close supervision to ensure effective guidance. Conversely, when confidence and competence are established, deans shift towards a more participative or delegative manner. They involve students in advisory boards and encourage academics to trial new assessment practices, fostering autonomy and innovation. An example of this fluidity was observed in a dean from the Eastern Region, who demonstrated adaptability in leadership style based on the developmental stage of their cohorts and staff, ensuring appropriate support and empowerment at each phase.

"You have to sense the temperature of the room; sometimes they need firm guidance, and other times you simply step back and let them lead."

This line of argument appeals to the Situational Leadership Theory advanced by Hersey and Blanchard, which assesses the readiness of followers to inform the leadership style [3]. They also approve the more recent evidence from the Gulf that associates greater student satisfaction with situational virtuosity [25]. Most importantly, learners did not conceptualize adaptation as arbitrariness but as a culturally informed practice: deans demonstrated a level of authority that considered hierarchical prerequisites yet allowed significant spaces for integration over time. This detail underscores the importance of demonstrating responsiveness to the context in leadership within Saudi higher education, where even the very idea of reform must reject the historical patterns established by previous generations [4].

Two specific practices illustrate this adaptive logic. First, several deans described staged delegation: they began major curriculum revisions with tight steering committees, then progressively handed responsibility to departmental teams once initial templates had been agreed upon. Students consequently encountered a stable framework early on, yet saw lecturers exercising increasing autonomy as modules matured. Second, deans embedded flexible feedback loops, weekly pulse surveys, and informal lunchtime meetings, enabling rapid adjustments when groups struggled with new pedagogical approaches. These mechanisms embody the "diagnose-act-review" cycle central to situational leadership and demonstrate its practical viability in large, multi-campus universities.

#### 4.2. Communication as a Vehicle for Integration

Where adaptive leadership sets the tone, communication provides the connective tissue that sustains integration at emotional and cognitive levels. Both student and academic reports discussed the inspirational impact of listening to aims, justifications, and progress directly from senior leaders. Open communication regarding programme updates, accreditation benchmarks, or the Vision 2030 initiatives can instill confidence and foster a sense of shared purpose. One faculty member succinctly expressed this sentiment:

When the dean explains why a change is happening, we feel part of something bigger; that enthusiasm rubs off on our students.

This finding echoes Kahu's [24] engagement ecology, which positions leadership communication as a structural antecedent of student experience and aligns with Soria and Roberts' [26] observation that clarity and visibility from senior figures enhance learners' sense of belonging. Closer analysis revealed three communicative practices that appeared particularly potent.

- Multimodal outreach. Deans blended formal addresses, corridor conversations, email newsletters, Telegram groups, and Twitter Spaces, thereby reaching commuter students and female cohorts who might hesitate to attend mixed gatherings. The result was a "constant hum of information," reducing rumors and reinforcing a culture of openness.
- Narrative framing. Technical changes, such as the use of outcome-based assessment, were often linked by leaders to larger narratives concerning national progress and professional ethics. This story framing helped students relate their daily work to long-term goals, fostering cognitive engagement by emphasizing relevance.
- Reciprocal dialogue. Several deans instituted question-time sessions where students submitted queries anonymously in advance. By answering live, leaders signaled respect for student voices and modeled accountability, further lowering psychological distance.

These practices, in general, transform communication from a one-way broadcast into a two-way infrastructure that underpins academic integration. Notably, the respondents emphasized that it was not only about the frequency but also about the tone of the communication: simple and non-exclusive language was considered more credible than a formal memo filled with bureaucratic jargon.



#### 4.3. Faculty Empowerment for Learner-Centered Practice

The third theme emphasizes the mediating role of academics: deans who invest in staff development create multiplier effects that ripple through classrooms. Participants cited funded workshops on problem-based learning, mini grants to trial flipped lectures, and award schemes recognizing exceptional supervision. These initiatives, they argued, generate a “virtuous circle” in which motivated lecturers model active learning, and students respond with greater cognitive effort and deeper disciplinary attachment. A senior lecturer from the Western Region noted:

When the college supports our ideas by providing time and training, you can almost see students leaning forward in their seats.

Kahu’s notion of structural support is present, as is Bolden, et al. [27], emphasizing relational leadership. Empowered staff also reported higher job satisfaction, echoing international findings that collegial climates foster both employee commitment and student engagement [23]. Yet empowerment was not merely about resources; it was framed as trust. Deans who delegated curriculum committees or invited lecturers to co-design strategic plans signaled confidence in academic judgment, reinforcing the participatory ethos initiated through adaptive leadership and transparent communication.

Two mechanisms were especially influential. First, peer-led professional learning communities allowed academics to exchange classroom evidence and collectively refine their practices, creating what one dean termed “a living laboratory of pedagogy.” Second, recognition rituals, annual teaching fellowships, and spotlight articles on institutional websites amplified the visibility of learner-centred innovations, encouraging their diffusion across departments.

#### 4.4. Synthesizing the Themes

Conclusively, the results imply that involvement is successful when structure, culture, and relationship leadership behaviors are congruent. Situational agility makes policies sensitive to changing preparedness; communication explains shared intentions and reduces psychological distance; empowerment engages faculty as active contributors to creating an integrative learning environment. This triadic model mirrors Kahu [24], who contends that engagement is shaped by the entire ecology of interactions, while extending it by emphasizing the distinctive influence of deans in Saudi universities.

Additionally, the evidence complicates the allegations of inescapable non-participation in hierarchical cultures. Intelligent deans do not dismiss hierarchy; instead, they utilize the power of their position to facilitate rather than obstruct lines of communication. While authority recognizes the legitimacy of student voices in areas such as advisory councils, curriculum consultations, or research showcases, this respect for leadership can become an advantage rather than an obstacle. This approach aligns with what AbdulCader and Anthony [28] have described as an argument that hierarchies, embedded within cultures, can be employed to support rather than hinder emancipatory practices.

Lastly, synergistic interactions among the three themes highlight that student participation is not merely the addition of features of individual students. Its social construction occurs through deliberate acts of leadership, which are coordinated with institutional history and national aspirations. In the Saudi environment, characterized by rapid growth in higher education, accreditation requirements, and the human-capital agenda of Vision 2030, the ability to calibrate, communicate, and collaborate is essential for embracing comprehensive integration within academia.

#### 4.5. Contributions

This inquiry enriches the still-nascent corpus on student academic integration within Gulf higher education by emphasizing the pivotal, context-specific influence of deans. Theoretically, it supplements the Situational Leadership Theory and Kahu's engagement ecology within a Middle Eastern context, demonstrating that leadership style, communication architecture, and faculty empowerment do not operate independently but instead collaborate to foster integration. Viewing these practices as a configuration that is continually adjusted to align with cultural standards

and the institution's history, the study advocates for a more context-sensitive interpretation of the relationship between leadership and integration.

In practice, the results provide evidence-based advice to top managers. Deans who can assess the preparedness of their staff and students, engage in purposeful communication through various means, and invest in patient-centered pedagogy create conditions where cognitive, emotional, and behavioral integration can thrive. These lessons offer a clear action plan that universities can use to realize the human capital goals of Vision 2030: nurturing adaptive leaders, instilling transparency in decision-making, and professionalizing the development of skills within institutions.

#### 4.6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The limitation to statistical generalizability arises because the study was qualitative, and the sample was purposively selected, comprising three public universities with thirty-five research participants. Future research should consider employing mixed-method or longitudinal approaches, which could include a broader range of institutions beyond public organizations. This expansion might encompass private universities and newer campuses to assess the applicability of the triadic leadership model across diverse educational settings. Incorporating the student voice through focus groups, surveys, or learning analytics traces would also enhance the study by providing triangulation of staff-centered perspectives. This approach would clarify not only staff perceptions of leadership signals but also how students interpret these messages. Additionally, conducting comparative studies across Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries could shed light on how different regulatory frameworks and cultural expectations influence the relationship between leadership and integration within higher education institutions.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The evidence indicates that fostering academic integration in Saudi universities hinges on leadership that possesses adaptive, communicative, and empowering qualities, aligning with both Situational Leadership Theory and Kahu's institutional framework. High-performance deans troubleshoot preparedness, police jurisdiction, publicize missions, and arm academics to implement learner-centered instructions. Through these efforts, they transform hierarchical norms to invite rather than confine dialogue, thereby promoting an intellectually and emotionally compelling, behaviorally durable integration.

Institutions can transition from transactional administration to responsive, inclusive governance by adapting leadership strategies to the cultural and systemic realities of Saudi higher education. This approach would not only facilitate the further development of scholarly knowledge regarding leadership in non-Western cultures but also provide practical insights to policymakers and practitioners responsible for implementing the educational objectives of Vision 2030.

**Funding:** This research was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research at King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia (Grant number: KFU252416).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The Ethical Committee of the king Faisal University, Saudi Arabia has granted approval for this study on 1 January 2025 (Ref. No. KFU-2025-ETHICS3492).

**Transparency:** The author states that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

**Competing Interests:** The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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