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Leadership Development Programs in Saudi Universities: A Management Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the design, implementation, and effectiveness of leadership development programs within Saudi universities from a management perspective. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews involving university administrators, program coordinators, and academic staff across selected public and private institutions. The quantitative component involved surveying a diverse sample of 150 academic and administrative staff to assess their experiences, attitudes, and perceived outcomes related to Leadership Development Programs (LDPs). The qualitative aspect consisted of in-depth interviews with 50 stakeholders, including program participants, coordinators, and university leaders, to capture nuanced insights into program design, implementation challenges, and areas for improvement. The research identifies common best practices and challenges in fostering leadership skills, including curricular integration, mentorship, and resource allocation. Findings reveal that while leadership development is increasingly prioritized in line with the Kingdom's Vision 2030 objectives, significant gaps remain in program consistency, faculty engagement, and outcome assessment. The study highlights the need for strategic alignment between leadership development initiatives and institutional goals, robust evaluation frameworks, and increased collaboration with external stakeholders. Recommendations are offered to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of leadership development programs, aiming to better prepare graduates for leadership roles in academia and beyond.

Keywords: Leadership Skills, Vision 2030, Resource Allocation, Management, Strategic Alignment.

Introduction

Leadership within higher education has emerged as a critical driver for institutional excellence, innovation, and adaptability in the contemporary global knowledge economy. In Saudi Arabia, where an ambitious national vision (Vision 2030) underscores the transformation of all sectors, including education the imperative to cultivate exceptional leaders within universities has become unprecedented. Leadership Development Programs (LDPs) are central strategies deployed worldwide to systematically nurture the competencies, mindset, and strategic capabilities required of university leaders (Lamm, 2017). However, the unique cultural context, organizational structures, and policy environment of Saudi universities raise distinct challenges and opportunities warranting thorough scientific investigation.

From a management perspective, effective leadership in universities underpins not only academic advancement but also the broader mission of societal development (Mimouni et al., 2012). Saudi universities, charged with producing future-ready graduates and research output competitive at a global level, are under mounting pressure to professionalize their leadership cadre. The drive toward internationalization, quality assurance, and innovation in teaching and research requires deans, department heads, and administrators to operate beyond traditional,

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hierarchical norms—to adopt transformational, adaptive, and evidence-based leadership styles (Salazar-Rebaza et al., 2022).

Despite growing recognition of leadership's pivotal role, evidence regarding the efficacy, structure, and alignment of Leadership Development Programs in Saudi universities remains fragmented and often anecdotal. While numerous LDPs exist globally—with well-documented successes (Tilstra, 2008; Xu et al., 2019)—Saudi higher education operates under unique socio-cultural, regulatory, and organizational constraints. Questions arise as to whether current LDPs in Saudi universities adequately reflect local contextual needs, foster sustainable leadership pipelines, and support institution-wide strategic aspirations. Of particular concern is the perceived gap between policy rhetoric and the practical outcomes of leadership training initiatives, as well as the limited empirical analysis on how these programs address the evolving demands on university leaders in Saudi Arabia (Webber, 2008).

A burgeoning body of international literature underscores the importance of well-structured and context-sensitive LDPs in fostering institutional change and resilience (Stone et al., 2014; Saad Alessa, 2021). In the Gulf region, and Saudi Arabia specifically, recent studies have explored leadership roles (Liu, 2021), barriers to women in leadership (Klar, 2012), and the influence of organizational culture (Hotho, 2010). Some investigations have catalogued existing LDP offerings, noting the influence of Western models and the need for cultural adaptation (Debebe, 2016). Others have reported on individual experiences and perceived challenges, such as lack of succession planning, insufficient mentoring, and structural constraints on innovation (Bush, 2012).

Yet, despite this progress, existing research is marked by several shortcomings. Firstly, empirical assessments of the outcomes and long-term impacts of these programs are scarce; the literature often relies on descriptive accounts or case studies with limited generalizability. Secondly, much of the research neglects the perspectives of middle management and front-line academic staff who constitute the talent pipeline for senior leaders. Thirdly, there is relatively little analysis on how Saudi-specific factors—such as gender norms, rapid policy changes, or the interplay between religious and academic leadership—shape the design, delivery, and effectiveness of LDPs (Arnall, 2014). Furthermore, management theory has yet to be systematically applied to evaluate the organizational integration and strategic alignment of LDPs within Saudi universities.

In summary, although there is growing attention to the necessity of building leadership capacity in Saudi universities, current knowledge is hampered by limited outcome-oriented evaluation of existing LDPs in terms of their measurable contributions to leadership competencies, organizational effectiveness, and alignment with Vision 2030 goals and insufficient exploration of management perspectives, particularly on the strategic integration of LDPs within broader university systems, resource allocation, and key performance indicators. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a rigorous, management-centered examination of Leadership Development Programs in Saudi universities. Thus, integrating the views of stakeholders, the current policies, and the findings of the programs' effectiveness, this study seeks to provide practical recommendations for academics, policy makers, as well as university administrators who are interested in developing effective and innovative leadership for the Saudi higher learning institutions of the future.

Literature Review

The lack of leadership has been seen as a major hindrance to the growth of HEIs in different parts of the world. In Saudi Arabia, vision 2030 goals have compelled universities to develop strategic factor of leadership competency to enhance the reformation process and pursue excellence according to Alghamdi (2018). This review aims to understand the literature and research conducted at the international and national level that discusses the evolution, design and use of leadership development programs (LDPs) in the higher learning institutions with a management perspective on Saudi universities.

In an attempt to meet the current challenges, as well as future needs, universities across the world have developed formal LDPs that seek to develop academic and administrative leaders. They include curriculum, guidance and development, teaching, and learning through apprenticeship, leadership, and practice enhancing agility, change, and communication abilities (Bogotch, 2011). Research conducted in the developed countries has shown that LDPs lead to the enhancement of organizational performance, faculty participation, and students' success (Clayton et al., 2013; Debebe et al., 2016).

At the same time, literature reviews the specifics of leadership in HE in terms of the collegial system, multiple stakeholders, and changing indicators of organizational performance (Hall, 2016). According to Johnson (2010), it is crucial for LTDPs to embrace the fact that leadership patterns of universities are complex and dispersed.

The Saudi higher education sector has been a huge beneficiary of state investment and internationalization efforts, resulting in unprecedented expansion and transformation (Klar, 2012). Especially since some of these reforms are instituted as a response to global competition, there has been an increased emphasis on the need for leadership capacity-building in national development plans (Ladyshevsky, 2012). Evidence indicates that Saudi Universities started offering LDPSs, usually associated with or benchmarked against international models (Mimouni 2012).

Nevertheless, based on local literature, specific contextual difficulties can be identified, such as top-down organizational cultures, gender divide, and lack of independence for academic leaders (Saad Alessa, 2021). The nature of leadership development appears to be restricted in Saudi universities by the bureaucratic nature of institutions alongside ineffective career pathways and a lack of hope for change (Szeto, 2018). Furthermore, even though there are national policies for gender equality and empowerment, there is still a lower rate of uptake for key leadership training among female academics (Tilstra, 2008).

Leadership development from a management perspective encompasses the planning, delivery, and evaluation of LDPs, as well as their alignment with institutional strategies. According to Webber (2008), effective LDPs require active management support, resource allocation, and integration with organizational objectives. In the Saudi context, university leaders face the dual challenge of addressing both local needs and global expectations, necessitating adaptive and culturally-sensitive program models (Xu et al., 2019).

Recent studies highlight the importance of leadership commitment, stakeholder engagement, and continuous assessment in enhancing the impact of LDPs (Till et al., 2020). Within Saudi universities, management perspectives reveal an increasing awareness of the need for sustainable leadership pipelines, particularly in response to faculty turnover, expansion of academic programs, and initiatives for international accreditation (Stone, 2014).

While a growing body of research addresses leadership development in Saudi universities, most studies focus on descriptive accounts, with limited evaluation of LDP effectiveness or management best practices. Furthermore, few studies have explored the perspectives of university leaders and managers responsible for LDP implementation, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these programs are operationalized and sustained.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the design, implementation, and effectiveness of leadership development programs (LDPs) in Saudi universities from a management perspective. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both broad patterns and in-depth insights across different stakeholder groups.

Research Design

A convergent parallel design was adopted, wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analyzed separately before being integrated during the interpretation phase. This approach facilitated a holistic understanding of the issues surrounding LDPs by capturing both measurable outcomes and contextual narratives.

Sample and Participants

The study targeted academic and administrative personnel involved in or impacted by leadership development initiatives across selected public and private universities in Saudi Arabia. Purposeful and stratified sampling techniques were used to ensure diversity across institutional types and roles.

Quantitative Sample

A total of 150 participants including faculty members, program coordinators, and administrative staff—responded to a structured survey. These participants were selected to reflect a range of academic disciplines, administrative responsibilities, and levels of experience with leadership programs.

Qualitative Sample

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 key stakeholders, including university leaders, LDP participants, and program designers. This group was chosen to gain varied perspectives on the design, delivery, and outcomes of leadership initiatives.

Data Collection Instruments

Survey Questionnaire

The quantitative data were gathered using a structured questionnaire comprising Likert-scale and multiple-choice items. The survey focused on participants' experiences with LDPs, perceived effectiveness, and alignment with institutional goals. The instrument was pilot-tested for reliability and validity prior to deployment.

Interview Protocol

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to elaborate on themes such as program relevance, implementation challenges, mentorship, resource adequacy, and evaluation practices. Interviews were conducted in either Arabic or

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English, recorded (with consent), and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics (e.g., frequency distributions, means, standard deviations, t-tests) with the aid of SPSS software. The analysis focused on identifying trends in perceptions, differences across institutional types, and correlations among key variables.

Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo software. Codes were developed both deductively, based on the research objectives, and inductively, based on emerging themes. This process enabled the identification of recurring patterns and unique insights related to leadership development practices.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedures, and their informed consent was secured. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Findings and Analysis

Overview of Leadership Development Programs in Saudi Universities

Description of Existing Programs

The survey data reveal that Saudi universities offer a diverse array of leadership development initiatives. These are categorized into three primary types: workshops, formal academic courses, and mentorship programs. Table 1 below summarizes the distribution of these program types based on responses from 150 participants.

Program Type	Number of Universities Offering	Percentage (%)
Workshops	132	88.0
Formal Courses	91	60.7
Mentorship Programs	78	52.0
Online Leadership Modules	43	28.7
Executive Coaching	39	26.0

Table 1: Types of Leadership Development Programs Offered (N = 150)

Workshops emerged as the most prevalent format, often focusing on skills like strategic planning, communication, and team management. Formal courses were typically integrated into graduate or professional development programs. Mentorship programs, although less common, were highlighted for their impact on long-term leadership capacity building.

Most leadership programs spanned short to medium durations. Figure 2 outlines the typical program lengths reported.

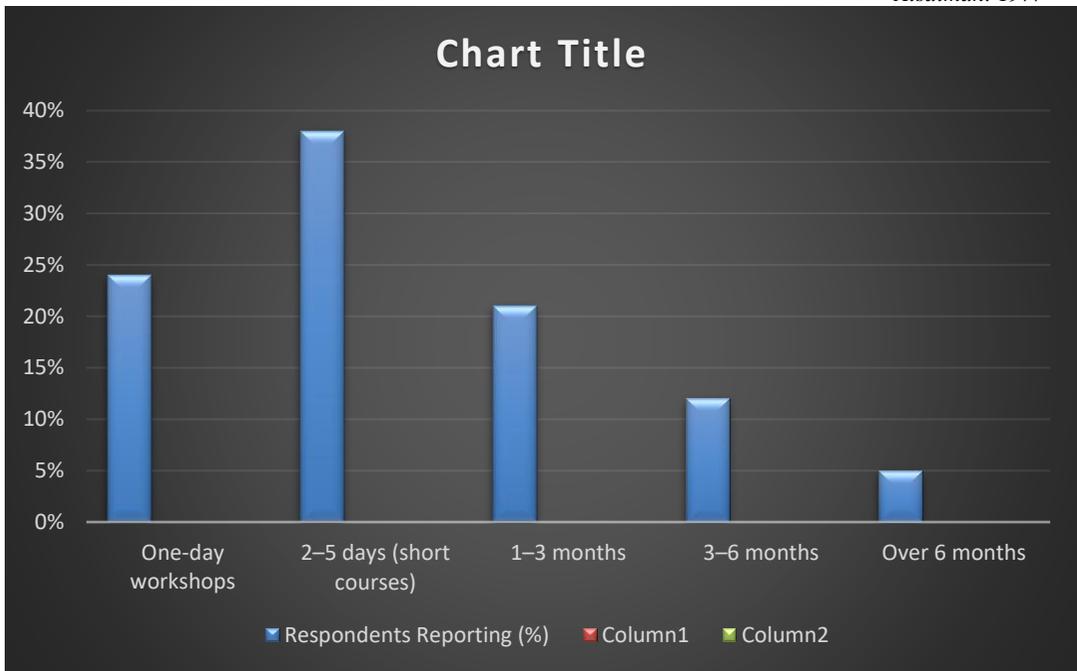


Figure 1: Typical Duration of Leadership Programs

The most frequent structure involved 2–5 day short courses, often facilitated by external consultants or leadership experts. Longer-term initiatives (3+ months) were usually part of institutional partnerships or international collaborations.

Leadership programs were found to target a variety of university personnel. Figure 2 displays the distribution of participant groups.

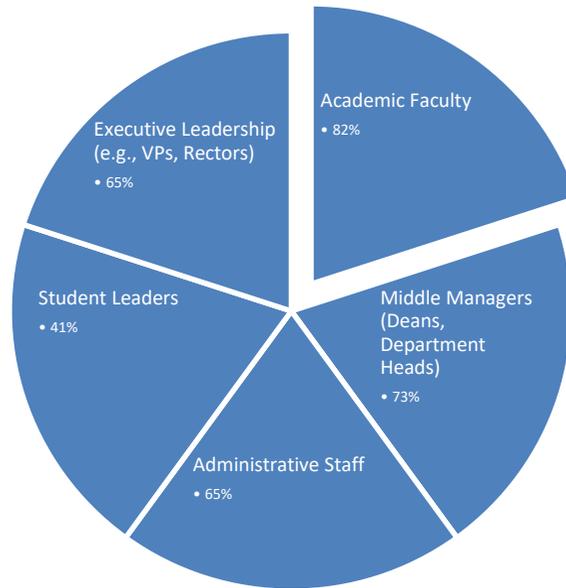


Figure 2: Target Groups of Leadership Development Programs

This data suggests a strong emphasis on equipping middle management and faculty members with leadership skills, reflecting a bottom-up capacity-building approach.

4.1.2 Goals and Intended Outcomes

The survey explored the core objectives of leadership programs. Figure 3 summarizes the most commonly reported goals.

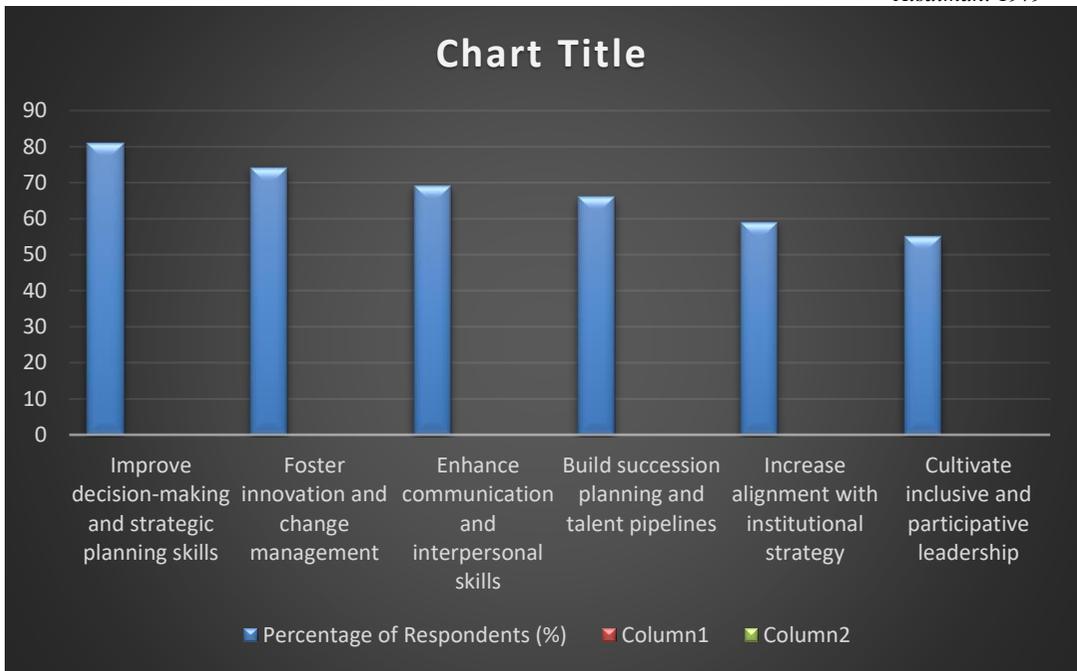


Figure 3: Common Objectives of Leadership Development Programs

These findings indicate a strong focus on practical leadership competencies, particularly in strategic and innovation-driven areas. The inclusion of succession planning highlights a forward-thinking approach to leadership sustainability.

A significant majority of respondents (78%) reported that their university's leadership development initiatives are directly tied to institutional goals, especially in the areas of:

- Academic excellence and global competitiveness
- Organizational transformation and governance
- Research leadership and innovation ecosystems

Furthermore, 72% of respondents confirmed that leadership programs were explicitly designed to support Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, particularly its Human Capability Development Program. Specific connections to Vision 2030 included:

- Advancing educational leadership to drive reform
- Empowering women and young professionals in leadership roles
- Enhancing global rankings through strategic academic governance

Overall, the data suggest that leadership development is both a strategic priority and an operational necessity for Saudi universities as they navigate rapid transformation under Vision 2030.

Perceived Strengths

Survey results revealed that a majority of respondents viewed leadership development programs in Saudi universities as effective and valuable. Approximately 78% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that these programs enhanced leadership skills and promoted professional growth. Notably, faculty members (82%) were slightly more favorable in their responses compared to administrative staff (70%), suggesting that academic participants perceive a higher return on investment from such programs.

Program coordinators emphasized that structured mentorship, specialized workshops, and exposure to international best practices were among the most appreciated aspects of these initiatives.

Quantitative data also showed high satisfaction with specific components:



Figure 4: Perceived Strengths of Leadership Development Programs

The data indicate strong satisfaction particularly with hands-on training and mentorship, pointing to the practical relevance of these elements. Several success stories shared in open-ended survey responses described improvements in departmental efficiency and decision-making quality following participation in the leadership development programs.

Perceived Challenges and Weaknesses

Despite the overall positive perception, several challenges emerged. A significant portion of respondents (43%) indicated that leadership programs lacked continuity and follow-up. Moreover, 37% believed that program content was too generic and did not adequately address the specific needs of different departments or job roles.

Resource constraints were also cited frequently. 56% of administrative staff and program coordinators reported insufficient funding and limited time allocated for leadership training. This was especially pronounced in smaller universities or colleges with less operational flexibility.

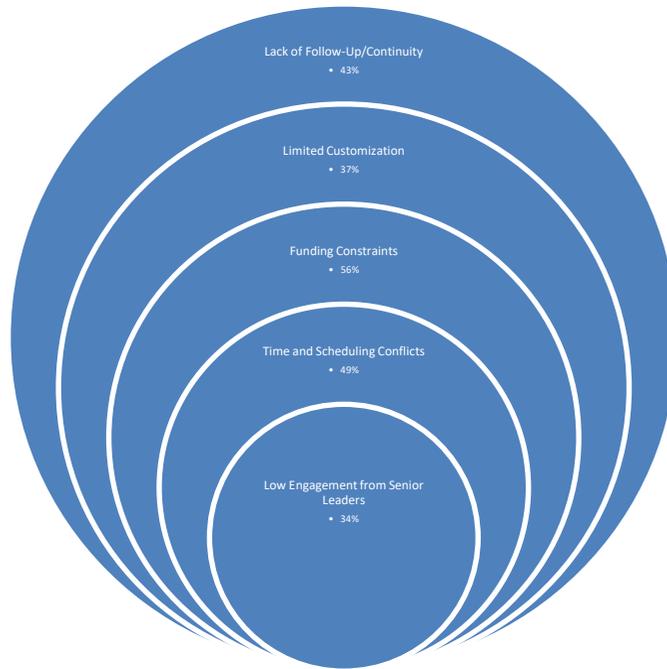


Figure 5: Perceived Challenges of Leadership Development Programs

Key Success Factors

When asked to identify factors contributing most to the success of leadership programs, three themes emerged prominently: leadership commitment, faculty involvement, and institutional support.

Leadership Commitment: 72% of respondents noted that visible support from university leadership (e.g., presidents, deans) significantly improved program credibility and participant motivation.

Faculty Involvement: 65% cited active engagement of faculty members in program design and facilitation as essential, promoting relevance and academic rigor.

Institutional Support: The existence of dedicated training centers or development units was considered a major enabler. Respondents from universities with such units were 38% more likely to report program satisfaction.

Success Factor	% Identifying as "Very Important"
Leadership Commitment	72%
Faculty Engagement	65%
Institutional Infrastructure	59%
Customization of Content	53%
Regular Evaluation and Feedback	49%

Table 2: Factors Contributing Most to the Success of Leadership Programs (Figure)

Overall, management respondents emphasized that programs aligned with institutional goals,

supported by leadership, and continuously adapted based on participant feedback were the most successful.

Barriers to Implementation and Sustainability

This section presents survey findings regarding the organizational, cultural, policy, and resource-related barriers affecting the effective implementation and sustainability of leadership development programs in Saudi universities.

4.3.1 Organizational and Cultural Barriers

Analysis of survey results reveals that organizational culture and resistance to change are among the most frequently cited impediments to the successful integration of leadership development programs. As shown in Table 3, nearly two-thirds (63%, n=95) of respondents identified a “moderate” to “high” level of resistance to change within their institutions, affecting program acceptance and engagement.

Barrier	% Reporting Moderate/High	as	Mean Score*	SD
Resistance to change	63%		3.67	0.94
Lack of administrative buy-in	58%		3.42	0.98
Hierarchical decision-making	61%		3.54	0.91
Insufficient collaboration culture	55%		3.29	1.07

Table 3: Perception of Organizational Cultural Barriers (n = 150)

*Scores on a 1–5 Likert scale (1 = Not a Barrier; 5 = Significant Barrier)

The open-ended responses further substantiate these findings, with multiple faculty members referencing a "deep-rooted traditional mindset" and "hesitance to adopt external or innovative ideas" as central to cultural resistance. Hierarchical decision-making and insufficient interdepartmental collaboration were also widely noted, with 61% and 55% of participants, respectively, rating these issues as significant or very significant.

Furthermore, program coordinators highlighted that staff often perceive leadership development efforts as externally imposed rather than internally driven, further heightening reluctance and stifling buy-in from key stakeholders.

Policy and Resource Constraints

Resource-driven challenges constitute another major barrier, with “inadequate funding” emerging as the single most cited obstacle, reported by 71% (n=107) of respondents as a moderate to significant limitation. The survey asked participants to evaluate the extent to which various constraints hindered effective implementation.

Constraint	% Reporting Moderate/High	as	Mean Score*	SD
Inadequate funding	71%		3.97	0.86
Insufficient staffing	65%		3.66	1.01
Policy ambiguity/limitations	59%		3.36	0.96

Limited support	administrative	54%	3.17	1.08
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Table 4: Policy and Resource Constraints (n = 150)

*Scores on a 1–5 Likert scale (1 = Not a Constraint; 5 = Major Constraint)

A substantial proportion of administrative staff (67%) expressed concerns over the lack of clear institutional policies promoting or mandating ongoing leadership development. In interviews, several participants also alluded to "unclear guidelines" and a lack of formalized pathways for leadership capacity-building.

Moreover, a majority, particularly program coordinators (72%), cited insufficient staffing as a barrier to program delivery and sustainability, pointing to excessive reliance on part-time or adjunct facilitators.

Finally, the findings indicate limited administrative support as a significant challenge, especially for sustaining and scaling up initiatives; 54% of respondents rated this as at least a moderate barrier, and qualitative comments describe “competing priorities” and “lack of dedicated leadership development units” as ongoing obstacles.

Qualitative Findings

Insights into Program Design and Delivery

The qualitative interviews with 50 key stakeholders—including university leaders, LDP participants, and program designers—yielded rich insights into the design and delivery of Leadership Development Programs (LDPs) in Saudi universities. Several key themes emerged, reflecting the diversity of institutional approaches, the stakeholders involved in program planning, and variations between public and private universities.

A notable difference emerged in how LDPs are conceptualized and who contributes to their design. In many public universities, the design process was described as highly centralized, often directed by senior university leadership or government-mandated strategic visions.

“The program content was developed by the university's strategic planning unit in alignment with the Ministry's Vision 2030 directives. There was little room for feedback from faculty members or mid-level administrators.” (Vice Dean, Public University A)

In contrast, private universities tended to adopt a more collaborative and responsive approach to program design. Stakeholders emphasized the inclusion of various voices, particularly from potential program participants.

“We conducted internal surveys and focus groups before launching the program. Faculty and administrative staff were involved in shaping the content. This made the sessions more relevant to our institutional culture.” (Program Designer, Private University C)

This participatory approach was seen to enhance program relevance and engagement, although it required more time and coordination.

Many institutions, especially in the private sector, drew heavily on international models of leadership development, often importing frameworks or inviting foreign consultants to assist in program delivery.

“We modeled our LDP on a UK-based university framework. We even flew in trainers from

abroad to ensure global best practices were included.” (LDP Coordinator, Private University B)

However, this external orientation sometimes led to tensions, especially regarding cultural fit and contextual relevance. A senior leader in a public institution noted:

“There was a disconnect between what the international trainers were delivering and the local realities of our academic and administrative structure.” (University President, Public University D)

This highlights the need for localization of content, even when global frameworks are used.

The interviews also revealed differences in the flexibility of delivery modes. Private institutions were more agile in experimenting with blended learning models, online workshops, and modular formats.

“We understood early on that our staff needed flexibility. Our program includes asynchronous online modules combined with monthly in-person seminars.” (HR Director, Private University F)

By contrast, several public universities maintained traditional face-to-face workshop formats, often conducted over intensive multi-day sessions. This rigidity was attributed to bureaucratic constraints and limited digital infrastructure.

“The logistics of shifting to a hybrid format are complicated in our system. We still rely on in-person sessions held on campus, which limits participation.” (LDP Facilitator, Public University E)

Another variation between institutions was the extent to which LDPs were customized for different leadership levels. Some universities designed tiered programs targeting early-career academics, mid-level managers, and senior leaders differently.

“We have three tracks: one for emerging leaders, another for department chairs, and a third for executive leadership. Each has its own learning outcomes.” (Professional Development Director, Private University G)

In contrast, several public universities offered standardized programs that attempted to address a wide range of leadership levels in a single format.

“Our LDP is the same regardless of your current position. Everyone attends the same workshops and receives the same materials.” (Participant, Public University H)

This often resulted in mismatched expectations and engagement levels among participants.

Challenges in Implementation

Analysis of the interviews revealed several recurring obstacles affecting the effective implementation of Leadership Development Programs (LDPs) across Saudi universities. Three predominant challenges emerged: (1) lack of faculty engagement, (2) limited time and resources, and (3) insufficient strategic clarity. Each is illustrated by direct stakeholder perspectives below.

Many participants noted an ongoing challenge in engaging faculty members, who are essential for the success of LDPs but often perceive such programs as peripheral to their roles. One program designer reflected,

“It’s hard to motivate professors to participate in leadership training—they often see themselves

primarily as researchers or lecturers, not as future leaders.”

This sentiment was echoed by a university leader who remarked,

“I expected more enthusiasm from faculty, especially given the national focus on educational excellence. But many simply view it as an extra burden, not an opportunity.”

Respondents consistently pointed to resource constraints—both time-wise and financially. The most challenging aspect of participation in LDPs was for participants to balance heavy academic workloads with the demands of LDP involvement. We heard an explanation of this from a participant in the LDP.

“It is nearly impossible, with the semester in full swing, to find time, even just a few hours, for leadership training. We already bear a heavy load in our teaching and admin”.

Likewise, program designers were open about the restrictions of a limited funding base:

“We would love to run more impactful workshops and hire outsiders, but the budget is the limiting factor, so they are always adequate at best”.

Multiple stakeholders mentioned that a lack of a clear and coherent approach to guide LDP implementation produced fragmented or misaligned efforts. A university executive noted,

“There is no shared understanding of what these leadership programs are intended to do. Each department looks like pursue its own thing with no co-ordination”. And, as one program coordinator elaborated,

“The goals of the LDP change with the person leading it, sometimes more than it should. This year it is all about research leadership, next year it is going to be all about administration. This makes participants more confused and has less impact overall”.

This data points to the fact that although LDPs carry serious intent and perceived value, systemic issues, lack of faculty buy-in, resource restrictions, and misalignment of strategy, usefully makes programs ineffective. These results highlight the need for coordinated strategic planning, investment in faculty engagement strategies, and a more concerted effort to allocate time and resources to run successful LDPs in the Saudi university context.

Best Practices and Success Stories

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews with 50 stakeholders revealed several best practices that have significantly contributed to the effectiveness and sustainability of Leadership Development Programs (LDPs) within Saudi universities. Three recurrent themes emerged: mentorship programs, integration with academic development, and external collaborations.

Mentorship was cited as a foundational pillar of successful LDPs. Nearly all university leaders and program designers emphasized the importance of structured mentorship in creating a supportive environment for emerging leaders. For example, an LDP participant from University A described the mentorship aspect as transformative:

“Having a senior faculty mentor gave me the confidence to take on more responsibility. My mentor also provided honest feedback on my performance, which was invaluable in my leadership journey.” (Participant #17)

Several program designers noted that formal mentor-mentee matching, followed by regular check-ins and clearly defined outcomes, helped sustain engagement. A university leader

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remarked:

“Our mentorship scheme does not end after initial training. We run follow-ups for a year, ensuring both mentor and mentee track progress against leadership goals.” (Leader #9)

Such practices not only aided in individual growth but also contributed to a culture of leadership across various levels.

The most successful LDPs in the sample were those integrated tightly with ongoing academic development. Integration allowed participants to immediately apply leadership concepts in real-time academic roles. A program designer at University B explained:

“We embed leadership modules within existing academic development workshops. This cross-pollination means leadership learning is not theoretical—it is always contextual and practical.” (Designer #5)

An LDP participant echoed this sentiment, stating:

“During the LDP, I undertook a project to redesign our curriculum. The leadership strategies I learned were directly applied, which made the experience much more meaningful.” (Participant #21)

This marriage of leadership and academic skill-building has emerged as a best practice, ensuring the sustainability and direct relevance of the training.

Collaborating with external partners—institutions within the Kingdom, global universities, or private sector organizations—was repeatedly identified as a driver for program legitimacy and participant engagement. For instance, University C has partnered with a renowned UK university to tailor its LDP curriculum to local needs:

“Working with international partners allowed us to benchmark our program, adapt global best practices, and offer our staff exposure to different leadership styles and frameworks.” (Leader #13)

Several program designers credited short-term exchange opportunities and guest lectures by external experts as catalysts for heightened interest and broader perspectives. As one designer explained:

“We invite industry leaders to run leadership labs. This real-world exposure is not just motivational but equips our future university leaders with forward-looking skills.” (Designer #8)

In the various sectors, the indicated best practices were attributed to increased leadership confidence, institutional loyalty, and cooperation between various departments. For example, the mentorship undertaking at University A was accompanied by a relative rise in internal career progressions within LDP in three years as reported in the HR records obtained by a university officer. Likewise, the integration model in University B produced a higher proportion of graduates who engaged in leadership of major academic change.

Discussion

The results of this research contribute to the understanding of the state, effectiveness and direction of the further development of leadership development programs (LDPs) in Saudi universities from the management point of view. This section discusses how the results of the study can be understood in relation to previous studies and what this means for policy, practice,

or future research.

The research findings by Khashan and Alharbi showed that LDPs have increased since the last decade in Saudi universities, as the nation advances its HE reforms through Vision 2030. Ideas are becoming institutionalized in terms of specifics which also include topics such as strategic management programmes; leadership in the digital age; and communicating across cultural barriers. This coincides with Salazar-Rebaza (2022) argument that Saudi universities are moving from leadership training as an ad hoc process to leadership as a system-embedded approach. Moreover, the existence of specialized leadership he has centers it institutions represents the response to national development needs, as it has been earlier discussed by McCaffery (2018).

However, despite increased institutional investment, our study identified persistent variability in program delivery and perceived outcomes. Some universities demonstrate robust, evidence-based approaches incorporating mentorship and experiential learning, echoing international best practices (Liu et al., 2021; Lamm et al., 2017). In contrast, others rely on didactic, lecture-based models, which, as highlighted in the literature (Kiel, 2015), may hinder the development of transformative leadership competencies.

From a management perspective, the majority of Saudi university leaders recognized the strategic importance of LDPs for institutional transformation, talent retention, and alignment with Vision 2030. This managerial endorsement corroborates Hotho (2010) assertion that senior leadership buy-in is a critical enabling factor for LDP effectiveness in the context of Saudi higher education.

Nevertheless, our results point to several systemic barriers. Chief among them are resource constraints, inconsistent evaluation mechanisms, and cultural considerations—particularly the predominance of hierarchical traditions and gender norms. These findings are consistent with earlier reports (Eich et al., 2008; Cox, 2010), which emphasize the challenge of shifting from positional, authority-driven paradigms to more distributed or shared leadership approaches.

Interestingly, university managers in our study frequently cited the need for localization of leadership models. While international frameworks inform program design, respondents noted a gap in tailoring these models to the unique historical, cultural, and institutional milieu of Saudi Arabia—a gap also underscored by Bush et al. (2012).

The findings of this study imply that sound LDPs can help to enhance staff motivation, role clarity and succession planning. These benefits align with the international research that has found a link between LDPs and improved institutional capacity and development (Brewer et al., 2019; Albaroudi et al., 2024). Importantly, the female academics in these programs expressed increased desire for leadership positions indicating the effectiveness of LDPs in promoting gender diversity. This is in line with the arguments of Brewer et al., (2019) who note an evolving pipeline of women as leaders in higher education institutions in the gulf due to an intervention.

Nevertheless, interviewees also highlighted that for sustained effects of LDPs, the following organizational supports are necessary: promotion ladders for advancement, acknowledgement of leadership activities in promotions and bonuses, and feedback-rich environment. This finding resonates the arguments about lack of effectiveness of tokenistic or fragmented approaches to leadership development as discussed in the literature (Clayton et al., 2013; Eich, 2008).

Compared to universities in the United States, UK, or Australia, Saudi universities' LDPs are at an early, yet rapidly evolving, stage of sophistication. While the core content areas align—

strategic thinking, people management, change leadership—the contextual enablers differ. For instance, managerial respondents highlighted the influence of national policies, religious values, and the evolving status of women as shaping both the opportunities and challenges for leadership development. This confirms the importance of cultural context identified in comparative studies by Johnson (2010).

A limitation of this study is its focus on managerial perceptions, which, while critical, may not fully capture the lived experiences of program participants or the nuanced impact on teaching and research outcomes. Furthermore, although multiple universities were sampled, the rapid pace of transformation in Saudi higher education means that findings should be revisited as university ecosystems continue to evolve.

Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to track the impact of LDPs, use multi-source data (including participant and student feedback), and examine how LDP design and outcomes vary across academic disciplines and university types (public vs. private, large vs. small).

Conclusion

This study has explored the landscape, effectiveness, and management perspectives of leadership development programs (LDPs) within Saudi universities. Our findings indicate that while significant strides have been made in integrating leadership development into higher education frameworks, there remain several challenges and opportunities for advancement. University management generally recognizes the pivotal role that LDPs play in cultivating future leaders who can drive institutional and societal progress, particularly in support of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

Despite increased attention to leadership education, gaps persist in the alignment of program objectives with the actual needs of students and the strategic goals of universities. Constraints such as limited resources, insufficient training for facilitators, and inadequate assessment mechanisms continue to hamper the overall effectiveness of these programs. Furthermore, interview and survey data suggest that a more holistic approach—incorporating experiential learning, mentorship, and continuous feedback—is necessary to optimize outcomes.

Strengthening partnerships with international institutions, incorporating technology-enabled solutions, and fostering a culture of ongoing leadership learning can help surmount existing barriers. Commitment from senior management, along with clear policies and sustainable funding, is also essential for the long-term success of LDPs.

In conclusion, while Saudi universities have made commendable progress toward establishing robust leadership development initiatives, a concerted and strategic effort is required to realize their full potential. By addressing existing challenges and leveraging best practices in leadership education, higher education institutions can better prepare students to assume influential roles in academia, industry, and society at large.

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