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Leadership Practices for Student Engagement in Saudi Arabia Universities

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Abstract

This research studies the leadership styles that lead to student involvement in Saudi Arabia higher education institutions. The purpose of this study is to explore the way university leaders, particularly the deans, support the integration of students into academic as well as extracurricular life. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews conducted with the deans and faculty of the universities to learn how cultural factors and practices of leadership affect the learning process of students. Two theoretical frameworks guide this study and its approach: The Situational Leadership Theory and Kahu's Conceptual Framework of Student Engagement form the major theoretical pillars of this research. When put together, these frameworks explain how academic leaders can encourage student engagement by using individualised leadership styles, as well as an all-encompassing institutional system to provide support. Based on the findings, ideal academic leaders should therefore adapt their leadership styles to the situation; they should employ a combination of telling, selling, participating and delegating approaches to address individual students' needs. Transparent communication, faculty autonomy promotion, and inclusive educational setting are practices towards increasing student success.

Keywords: Student Engagement, Higher Education, Leadership Practices, Saudi Arabia, University Deans.

Introduction

It has been clear that creating student engagement is crucial for academic success, institutional effectiveness and student satisfaction (Kuh, 2009; Trowler, 2010; Kahu, 2013; Senior & Howard, 2015). The research findings show that the more deeply engaged students are more motivated and tend to complete academic courses (Henning, 2012; Alrashidi et al., 2016; Zafar & Nausheen, 2022).

Student engagement brings better performance at the institutional level and higher rates of retention (Nauffal, 2012). Although student engagement is of utmost importance, it requires strategic leadership and engagement of various stakeholders in its management because of its complexity (Alrashidi et al., 2016).

Higher education has recently undergone reforms in Saudi Arabia; the emphasis on the educational quality and the student experience in the country is growing (Kutbi & Hashim, 2017; Allam, 2020; Alshayea, 2012). Although few studies have been found about context-specific leadership initiatives for engagement in Saudi universities (Drew, 2010), a gap in the literature exists.

This research gap is attempted to be addressed by this study, which examined the effects of

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university leadership, particularly the deans, on students' engagement in Saudi Arabian universities. The study investigates the relationships between cultural influences, leadership actions and student engagement status to equip the academic leaders with the practical strategies to enhance student involvement. The research questions to be answered in the study include:

- Which cultural elements are of great importance in influencing student engagement in the Saudi Arabian universities?
- What specific leadership behaviour and approach do university deans employ to promote student engagement?
- What techniques can academic leaders in Saudi Arabia have to enhance active involvement and participation in students?

Leadership Practices

Leadership practices refer to the strategies, behaviours and action tactics, and behaviours that leaders use to guide, motivate and manage organisations or groups. Even though in educational settings, leadership practices are defined by various approaches, such as:

Vision Setting: Setting out the exact expectations that the institution should have that are aligned with broader educational requirements and needs of individual students.

Decision Making: The deployment of thoughtful decisions that determine curricular content, school parameters, and how resources are controlled.

Communication: Making all of the staff and students feel informed and respected through good and open communication within the school (Leithwood, K., & Riehl, C., 2005).

Motivation: Maintaining a culture of recognition for achievement and growth, a positive atmosphere and personal career development for teachers and students (Bass, B. M., 1985).

Adaptability: Adapting leadership approaches and strategies to facilitate new educational challenges and new educational environments (Hersey, Blanchard, 1988).

Stakeholder Engagement: Involvement of participating stakeholders (students, parents, teachers and representatives of the community) in the decision-making to promote better education and students' achievements (Epstein, J. L., 2018).

The embrace of these strategies is fundamental in developing a school climate that champions excellent teaching, student learning, and the persistent progression of the school.

Student Engagement

Student engagement refers to the degree to which students show attention, curiosity, interest, optimism and enthusiasm when learning or receiving instruction. This also includes how motivated students are in participating in their educational growth and development.

Student engagement is a multidimensional framework bringing together how students think, act, and feel during learning. Based on the literature that was scrutinised for the present investigation, it is noted that student engagement can be defined as an optimistic, rewarding and energising attitude characterised by enthusiasm, commitment and sustained involvement in both academic and extracurricular activities. Active participation among students is characterized by interest in their courses; allegiance to the university and participation in activities and discussion (Wang & Degol, 2014; Zafar & Nausheen, 2022; Ghasemi et al., 2018; Kassab et al., 2022;

Several primary dimensions of student engagement are emphasised in academic literature, including:

Behavioural Engagement: involves participation in university activities, educational and communal. Behavioural engagement is reflected in students' daily participation in classroom activities and adherence to university rules and norms (Finn, J. D., & Zimmer, K. S., 2012). This engagement type is centred on students taking an active role in their learning and engaging in classroom activities, but also learn outside the traditional classroom environment.

Emotional Engagement: A positivity in attitude to learning, identification with the university, and a sincere desire to enjoy the academic experience. It means both the intense attachment to the institution and its educational offers, and satisfaction gained from involvement therein. Students' emotional engagement with studies and the university society can trigger higher degrees of motivation and engagement in learning. These emotions (interest, happiness, or a feeling of belonging) create conditions for motivating students for their involvement in the learning process (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

Cognitive Engagement: Relates to the work and methods of use of the students on application in the study of complex ideas and skills acquired in a demanding approach to learning. It includes self-regulation, determination, and concentration on deep learning techniques, not surface ones (Zimmerman, B. J., 1990). This aspect describes the level of engagement of students' intellect and efforts to master difficult concepts and their critical thinking abilities (Alrashidi et al., 2016).

Effective leadership is essential in creating an environment of engagement throughout all student realms. Educational leaders who understand and use these ideas can then better support and advance student learning and development.

The Role of University Leadership in Promoting Student Engagement

The involvement of students in a learning process is essential for students' experience stimulated by comprehensive evidence revealing its beneficial impact on academic and personal accomplishments (Kuh, 2009; Trowler, 2010). Scholarly work by Kuh and Trowler has shown that engaged students are more motivated and persistent in their studies, which encourages better academic outcomes, greater graduation rates and favours the institutions. Active students often participate in classroom discussions, regularly submit assignments within set deadlines, use extra learning materials, and develop a stronger attachment to the institution. In return, the levels of student retention, academic performance, and overall vibrant life in the campus experience increased. As a result of this, encouraging the engagement of students is of paramount concern to the university leadership as the implications for both individual student outcomes and overall effectiveness of the institution are large.

The extant literature on student engagement in higher education gives attention to several dimensions of student engagement, such as cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kuh, 2009; Trowler, 2010). Several variables characterise these dimensions, namely, how courses are taught, the support from the institution, and the environment that accommodates learning (Carini et al., 2006; Kahu, 2013). There are many barriers to student engagement in Saudi Arabian institutions, including poor student-faculty links, financial limitations, and a societal corrosion the Elyas & Picard, 2013).

The role played by university leadership, including deans, regarding stimulating student engagement has become visible in recent scholarship (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bryman, 2007; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Deans are responsible for developing the big picture/long-term vision for their academic units, controlling resources at their disposal, and initiating the roll-out of academic programs and student support services. As a result, the leadership approach and deeds of such leading executives may substantially influence the student engagement that students will experience at their institutions (Kezar, 2006; Ramsden, 1998).

Recent studies (Smith et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2021) review some leadership strategies which can enhance student engagement in universities. Prominent among the leadership strategies identified include clear communication in terms of goals and priorities of the institution, as well as frequent interaction with students, faculty and those outside.

The other important point is empowerment of faculty because deans who provide instructors with resources, training, and incentives to employ student-centred teaching strategies tend to have increased student engagement. In addition, the creation of a learning friendly environment, which enables the creation of a cooperative and mutually supportive climate within the school environment, has been discovered to increase student involvement.

It has been found consistently that the effectiveness of these leadership behaviours is contingent upon the organisational culture and institutional policies in place (Kuh & Trowler, 2005; Tinto, 2012).

In the past few decades, however, Saudi Arabia has witnessed an expansion of its higher education landscape, with both public and private universities working to flood the country with institutions of higher learning (Aljendan, 2024). In a general attempt to achieve high standards and competitiveness, the Saudi government has adopted various measures, such as establishing the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) in 2004 (Allam, 2020). One of the core focuses of the reform is on students

Thus, the discussion of leadership approaches that would contribute to higher students' engagement in Saudi Arabia appears particularly timely and relevant with consideration for ongoing reforms and growth of higher education in the country. This is a call for insight into the best ways of engaging and involving their students in the process of institutional development as Saudi Arabian universities strive to enhance academic standards and thrive in a dynamic education setting.

The work of university leaders directly impacts the level of students' engagement. The role of deans is to cast the mission of the institution, disburse resources and prioritise teaching initiatives. A better engagement is created by deans with transformational and situational leadership styles (Lee & Kim, 2021; Bolden et al., 2008). There needs to be open and regular communication between the top and the student level at the university. Facilitating faculty to integrate student-focused teaching and collaboration throughout the university increases student engagement (Soria & Roberts, 2020).

As higher education in Saudi Arabia continues to grow, the styles of leadership will have to consider the peculiarities of the region. The cultural expectations of hierarchical structure and respect for authority influence how both the understanding of leadership and leadership practice are carried out (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2021). Consequently, there must be a harmonisation of conventional cultural norms and contemporary instructional procedures in effective leadership.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks:

Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988)

Kahu's Conceptual Framework of Student Engagement (Kahu, 2013)

Together, these theories present a framework for a detailed analysis of the impact that academic leaders, and specifically, deans have on students' engagement in the specific cultural and institutional context of Saudi Arabia.

In the Situational Leadership Theory, Hersey and Blanchard (1988) suggest that there is no well-established way of being an effective leader. Rather, it is based on the leader's ability to make changes to his/her style, from directive to delegative, with reference to two main criteria: readiness of the followers, more specifically, the students in this study, and the sheer difficulty, or timing, of the assigned academic tasks.

In the framework of the study, Saudi Arabia universities' deans deal with students who have different academic backgrounds, levels of motivation, and cultural expectations. According to the situational leadership model, the deans become empowered to change their approach to engage with students (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Lee & Kim, 2021). For example, those students who do not have independence in their studies might need a more directive (telling) approach. Taking participative or delegative leadership styles, for students with greater engagement and autonomy, can encourage stronger feelings of responsibility for learning.

Kahu (2013) proposes a multi-dimensional, socio-ecological model of student engagement that demonstrates the interconnection of structural forces (institutional guidelines, leadership, teaching approaches), psychosocial elements (motivation, identity, emotions), indicators of involvement (behavioral, emotional, cognitive), and long-term outcomes (academic achievement, personal development, retention).

This framework is particularly useful for this study because it places leadership at the front line of the structural factor influencing student engagement. Engagement is not only influenced by leadership but also influenced through: Building institutional culture, promoting student-centred teaching practices, creating inclusive learning environments, and improving relations between students and faculty (Soria & Roberts, 2020).

Within the structural hierarchy of the Saudi Arabian higher education characterised by changing academic demands and Vision 2030 policy influences, Kahu's framework allows the study to explore how leadership behaviours interact with these broader contextual factors (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2021).

The combination of Situational Leadership Theory and Kahu's Engagement Framework allows a double look at the way the practices of leadership work from the point of individual behaviours (leadership actions) and systemic aspects (institutional and cultural impact) perspectives.

The integration of Situational Leadership Theory and Kahu's Engagement Framework enables this research to examine leadership practices from both behavioural (leadership actions) and systemic (institutional and cultural impact) perspectives. From a pragmatic perspective, situational Leadership helps the deans adjust their behaviours according to the different student needs. The model presented by Kahu explains why the discussed behaviours are essential to achieve engagement outcomes cognitively and emotionally.

Therefore, the theoretical grounds of this research provide a strong analytical platform for understanding how deans of Saudi universities can improve leadership skills through the contextualization with a local set of cultural values and the promotion of engagement.

Figure 1 includes a summary of the theoretical framework used in this study.

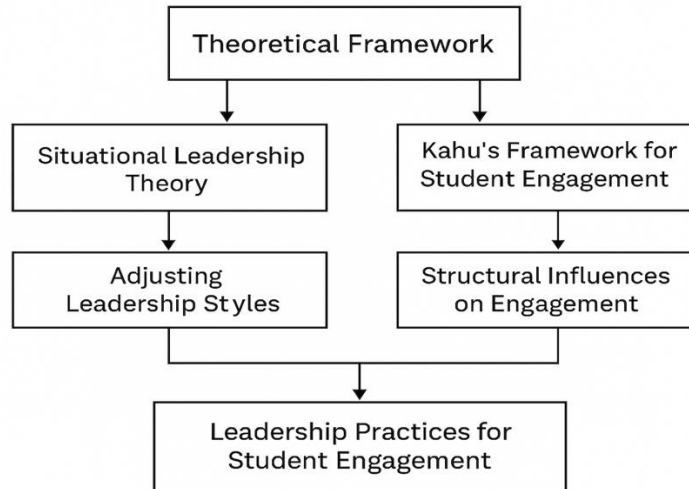


Fig.1 Theoretical Framework

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the leadership practices that enhance student engagement in Saudi Arabian universities. The researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a total of 35 participants: 15 university deans and 20 faculty members. The sample was drawn from three public universities located in three different regions of Saudi Arabia—the eastern, central, and western regions, ensuring geographic diversity and contextual variety.

Each university contributed 5 deans and approximately 6–7 faculty members, selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure variation in academic discipline and administrative experience within the public higher education context. Table I presents the distribution of participants across the universities.

The interview questions focused on the participants' perceptions of student engagement, the role of university leadership in promoting it, the cultural factors that shape engagement, and the specific leadership behaviours and strategies that have been effective in their respective institutions.

The interview data were transcribed and analysed using a thematic analysis approach, through which the researchers identified and coded key themes and recurring patterns in the response.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the methodological approach used in this study.

University	Number of Deans	Number of Faculty Members	Total Participant of
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

Table 1: Participant Distribution by University

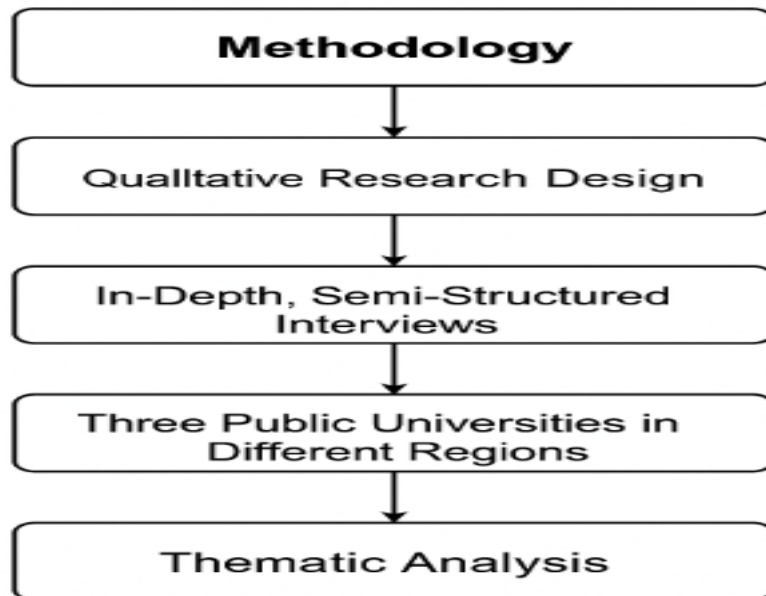


Fig.2 Methodology

Findings and Discussion

The study findings suggest that effective academic leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing student engagement in Saudi Arabian universities. University deans, in particular, were discovered to be effective in addressing student engagement and facilitating positive growth.

Three key themes emerged, all supported by participants' statements and grounded in the study's theoretical framework.

Adaptive Leadership through Situational Styles

One key theme that emerged from the data was the need for deans to adopt a situational leadership approach, where deans are able to adjust their leadership style based on the particular needs and preferences of the student population. According to Deans, they modified their leadership techniques, either taking a directive or participative type to suit the readiness profiles

of the students:

"We must be flexible and change our approach when required to meet student engagement"

University Dean.

This is strongly seen in alignment with Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory, which shows the need to be flexible and adjust to the readiness levels of the followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988). Deans who manoeuvred on giving instructions, building a consensus, inclusion of students, and granting autonomy recorded better results when keeping students engaged at differentiated readiness levels (Lee & Kim, 2021).

Communication as a Vehicle for Engagement

Data showed how proactive and continuous communication from deans facilitated increased student engagement at emotional and cognitive levels. This finding is consistent with the insights of Kahu (2013), who highlights leadership transparency as a structural factor that influences the ongoing experiences of students.

"Deans who communicate the university's goals clearly and have regular interaction with faculty and students help increase commitment and support level", Faculty Member. Another dean stated that: "Those deans who communicate the university's mission and who regularly interface with the faculty and student body tend to increase the level of agreement and dedication to the cause".

The normal and transparent communication contributes to building trust and supports the university's mission. These actions are reflective of Soria and Roberts (2020), who found that students' engagement and motivation were due to strong leadership communication.

Faculty empowerment for teaching learner-centred instruction.

The final theme dwelt upon the approaches deans use to support faculty in incorporating engagement-oriented instruction. These initiatives include training, provision of resources, and incentive programs, together contributing to a collaborative and continuously transforming academic environment.

"When deans create an atmosphere of cooperation and backing between employees, the student interaction situation fares the best". Faculty Member

This is in line with Kahu's pattern of structural support, where proactive leadership affects students' achievements with support from faculty. This is congruent with the relational leadership frameworks as defined by Bolden et al. (2008).

The discussion of the findings highlights the need for adaptive and culturally responsive leadership techniques. The major issues of situational leadership, effective communication, and faculty empowerment convey the notions enunciated by Hersey and Blanchard (1988); Kahu (2013). This agreement implies that for leadership to be meaningful in the Saudi higher education sector, individual needs and the broader institutional landscape need to be fully considered.

Interviews articulate the way deans who engage in situational leadership, who assess the level of readiness of the students and faculty to implement a particular leadership strategy, record better engagement results. This evidence reinforces the continued relevance of flexible leadership, first presented by Hersey and Blanchard (1988), in systems undergoing rapid

At the same time, Kahu's theoretical framework demonstrates the ways leadership actions affect the institutional structures and the student experience. Deans employ structural support, communication, and empowerment in assuming the role of the cultural architects and constructing the students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagement (Kahu, 2013; Soria & Roberts, 2020).

In addition, the current study relates to previous literature (e.g., Bolden et al. 2008; Alhazmi & Nyland, 2021) argue that leadership in Saudi Arabia requires moving away from pure administration-oriented efficiency towards implementation of relational and participatory practices. Such strategies increase faculty motivation and reveal engagement behaviours that students usually follow.

Thus, the findings confirm that student engagement is not only the result of student characteristics but is considerably formed by intentional and context-sensitive leadership. These findings support earlier research by Senior and Howard (2015), who highlighted the developing role of institutional culture in shaping student involvement, and by Alsuood and Youde (2018), who discovered the effect of cultural factors on leadership behaviour in the Saudi context.

The link between leadership communication and student motivation aligns with AbdulCader and Anthony (2014), while the emphasis on academic quality improvement reinforces insights by Allam (2020) and Alshayea (2012). Nauffal (2012) also emphasises that increased engagement provides learning outcomes and institutional retention, supporting the strategic significance of the leadership practices discussed in this study.

These study findings support with global literature highlighting the role of flexible, communicative, and empowering leadership in fostering engagement (Kezar, 2006; Soria & Roberts, 2020). In the Saudi context, where reform and tradition coexist, leaders must navigate institutional transformation while respecting cultural beliefs. The application of situational leadership allows flexibility and responsiveness, making it an effective model in this setting.

The study explains the best practices promoted by Saudi Arabian university deans for student engagement, along with the pertinent factors influencing the effectiveness of the initiatives. The results of the study only add to the ongoing literature on leadership practices in the academic world within the Middle Eastern region, and this is at the brink of a time of great transition in the higher education world. An analysis of the leadership practices for promoting student engagement in Saudi Arabian universities provides important information to policymakers, administrators, and academic leaders who are responsible for increasing the level of quality of education and student life.

The combination of the theoretical frameworks into practical strategies offers a roadmap for university leaders looking to enhance learning outcomes in alignment with Vision 2030 goals. The dual influence of adaptive leadership (from Situational Leadership Theory) and institutional culture (from Kahu's framework) serves as a foundation for strategic, context-sensitive engagement practices in Saudi universities. This dynamic interplay demonstrates that effective leadership for engagement is not just about direction, but about responsive, inclusive, and relational leadership embedded in cultural awareness.

Figure 3 illustrates the study's findings through the theoretical lens adopted in this research.

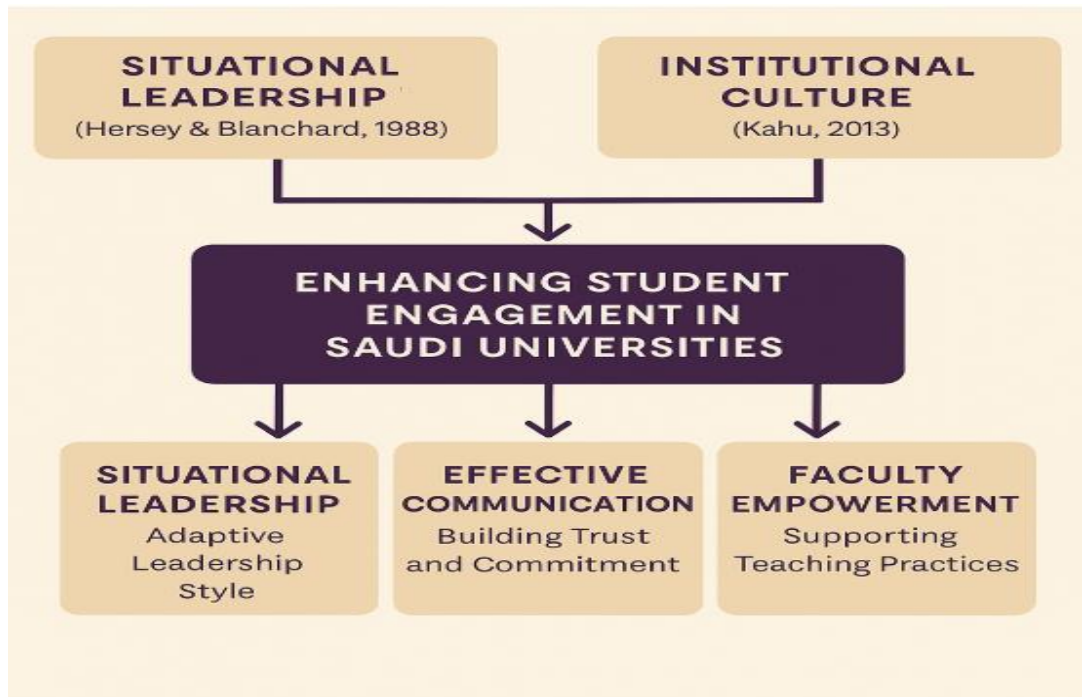


Fig.3 Findings

Contributions

This research improves our knowledge of student engagement in the higher education environment, specifically in the Saudi Arabian environment. This research gives emphasis to how the leadership styles of the university deans affect student engagement positively.

The findings that emerge from this study add value to both academic theory and practice. This research, therefore, adds to theoretical debates by calling for a contextual approach to the examination of the relationship between leadership and the students' engagement.

From an applied point of view, the research offers valuable suggestions based on evidence to university administrators, such as deans, to increase student engagement in their universities. This includes forming leadership practices that accommodate the situation, improving stakeholder communication, and facilitating student-centric ways of teaching for the faculty.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the key limitations of this study is that this research is qualitative and has a modest sample of participants. The use of a small sample size may influence the generalizability of these results. Subsequent research may enhance the scope of the study by applying a larger pool of universities and subjects and a larger variety of universities and participants, and thus, using the quantification method in determining how specific leadership behaviours can affect student engagement. Comparison with private and public institutions, or looking at Gulf universities like Saudi Arabia and others, may illuminate many things.

Moreover, this study was based primarily on the views of university deans and faculty members, but not the students. Direct student feedback in future studies could increase our understanding

of what motivates students to engage and of how academic leadership contributes to such engagement.

Conclusion

This study concludes that developing student engagement in Saudi Arabian universities needs academic leadership that is both culturally and adaptable informed. Using Situational Leadership Theory allows deans to modify their leading approaches about various stages of preparedness among students and faculty members, while Kahu's Framework emphasises the contribution of institutional dynamics and psychosocial factors to engagement outcomes. This dynamic interplay demonstrates that effective leadership for engagement is not simply about direction, but about responsive, inclusive, and relational leadership embedded in cultural awareness. Together, these frameworks provide a robust lens for understanding and improving leadership effectiveness.

By aligning leadership strategies with the cultural and systemic realities of Saudi higher education, universities can develop more inclusive, participatory, and responsive environments that encourage cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement. These findings not only contribute to the scholarly literature on academic leadership and engagement but also offer practical implications for policymakers, institutional leaders, and faculty members striving to meet the educational goals outlined in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

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