LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PREPARING FOR 2035 THROUGH A QUALITY-CENTRED PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

The global higher education sector is experiencing unprecedented transformation driven by digital innovation, demographic shifts, geopolitical uncertainty, and increasing demands for accountability and relevance. These pressures are expected to intensify by 2035, fundamentally altering how institutions define and sustain educational quality. This study examines the emerging leadership challenges facing higher education institutions (HEIs) in the context of preparing for 2035, with a particular focus on quality assurance across academic, administrative, and strategic domains.

Adopting a qualitative exploratory approach, the research integrates scenario planning and expert interviews with higher education leaders, policymakers, and quality assurance professionals across diverse global regions. The study identifies key trends—including artificial intelligence integration, the rise of micro-credentials, climate responsiveness, and inclusive governance—that are reshaping institutional quality expectations. It further highlights the limitations of traditional leadership and accreditation models in responding to these future-oriented demands.

The research contributes to the growing discourse on higher education reform by bridging the gap between leadership theory and quality assurance practice. It offers actionable insights for leadership development, policy innovation, and institutional capacity building to navigate the complex futures of higher education.

Keywords:

Higher Education Leadership; Quality Assurance; Transformational Leadership; Strategic Foresight; 2035; Educational Innovation; Institutional Change; Accreditation; Global Trends

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is undergoing profound shifts catalysed by rapid technological innovation, evolving societal expectations, demographic transitions, and increasing demands for relevance, equity, and accountability. As higher education institutions (HEIs) navigate the early 21st century, these transformations are redefining how institutional success is measured—not solely by traditional academic outputs, but increasingly by adaptability, inclusivity, and quality of engagement with a complex global landscape. Looking toward 2035, the need for visionary, future-oriented leadership is more pressing than ever.

Leadership in higher education plays a critical role in shaping institutional direction, managing change, and maintaining academic integrity and quality. However, traditional leadership models—often hierarchical, compliance-driven, and focused on short-term operational efficiency—are proving insufficient in addressing the multifaceted and long-range challenges that HEIs now face. Issues such as climate change, the digitalization of learning, geopolitical volatility, and widening equity gaps demand a new leadership paradigm—one that is agile, collaborative, ethically grounded, and capable of aligning institutional purpose with evolving conceptions of quality.

Quality in higher education, once primarily defined by input and output metrics (e.g., faculty credentials, research publications, graduation rates), is now expanding to include learner-centred outcomes, innovation in pedagogy, community impact, and global engagement. Accrediting bodies and quality assurance frameworks are beginning to reflect this shift, yet leadership responses remain uneven and reactive. The disjunction between evolving quality expectations and leadership capacity poses a strategic risk for many institutions, particularly in the Global South, where systemic inequalities compound the challenge of reform.

This study seeks to address this critical gap by exploring the leadership challenges that HEIs are likely to face by 2035, with a specific emphasis on how leadership can be leveraged to ensure and enhance institutional quality. Drawing on strategic foresight methodologies, qualitative inquiry, and cross-regional perspectives, the research aims to develop a forward-looking framework—**Transformational Quality Leadership (TQL)**—that equips HEIs to lead with resilience, inclusivity, and purpose in a rapidly changing world.

By contributing to the theoretical and practical discourse at the intersection of leadership and quality assurance, this study not only anticipates future challenges but also offers actionable insights for leadership development, policy design, and institutional transformation in higher education globally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Emerging Leadership and Innovation Agendas toward 2035

1. Baroudi & Lytras (2024) propose an open research agenda for leadership and innovation in higher education in 2035. They argue that future leadership needs to focus on transversal skills like creativity, adaptability, communication, management, and leadership itself, especially in light of digitalization and the green economy. Policies at both macro (government) and micro (organizational) levels are crucial to support these developments.

2. Lytras et al. (2024) discuss Transformative Learning for Future Higher Education: The AI-enabled Learning Revolution 2035, emphasizing how educational transformation (through DT) and AI will reshape not just learning methods, but also leadership demands, especially in strategy, environment design, and institutional commitment. Their model suggests leaders will need to be stewards of change: initiating strategic actions, but also managing "multipliers" (stakeholder engagement, sustainability, scalability) to amplify impact. These works highlight how leadership in HE must anticipate large-scale technological and ecological shifts, positioning quality not just as compliance but as innovation, sustainability, and relevance.

2. Leadership, Quality Assurance & Institutional Challenges

1. Ahmad & Ahmed (2023) examine the role of leadership in effective implementation of QA mechanisms in Pakistan. They find that leadership attributes (vision, commitment, awareness) critically affect whether QA is embraced as a transformative tool or treated merely as external compliance. One significant leadership challenge is aligning institutional mission with QA expectations from external bodies.

2. Pushpakumara, Jayaweera & Wanniarachchige (2023) provide a systematic literature review of QA challenges in HEIs. They categorize QA issues into those related to **institutes** (resources, leadership support), **process** (transparency, consistency, capacity), and **stakeholders** (awareness, involvement, accountability). These sets of challenges

suggest that leadership must orchestrate cross-cutting changes: managing resources, stakeholder expectations, processes, and culture.

3. Belimane, Wissam & Chahed (2021) study "The Limits of Leadership as a Barrier to Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Algeria." They observe that weak commitment of senior leadership, limited institutional autonomy, insufficient awareness/training of leaders, and governance structures that inhibit effectiveness are major barriers. This study underscores the gap between formal QA structures and actual leadership practice.

These studies illustrate that quality assurance efforts depend heavily on leadership posture—not just technical QA tools or frameworks. Leadership that is passive, hierarchical, or ill-informed tends to weaken QA implementation.

3. Leadership Styles and their Implications for Quality & Sustainability

1. A recent study Transformational leadership for sustainable productivity in HEIs of Cameroon (2024) examines how transformational leadership correlates with sustainable productivity. Leadership that empowers, inspires, supports, and ethically leads tends to enhance productivity, resource utilization, and longer-term sustainability.

2. Literature on transformational leadership in education more broadly (e.g., Al-Inanati, Al-Monawer, Al-Hammad (2023); Basaffar (2022)) often shows positive effects in innovation, climate, stakeholder satisfaction, and institutional change. But many of these studies are cross-sectional, context-limited, and focused on present or recent past, rather than forecasting future demands or preparing for disruptive change.

Thus, leadership style (especially transformational/distributed) is often associated with higher quality outcomes; but current studies often lack forward-looking or scenario-based exploration.

4. Growth of Digital, Ethical, and Inclusive Leadership Demands

1. AI, digital learning ecosystems, hybrid/blended instruction, data analytics, and learning technologies are being increasingly discussed as major future trends. For example, The Future of Higher Education: Trends, Challenges and Opportunities in AI-Driven Lifelong Learning in Peru (2025) examines how AI and lifelong learning shape both opportunity and leadership challenge. Leaders must manage pedagogy changes, digital infrastructure, data privacy, etc.

2. Studies on women's leadership (Emerald Insight, "Women leadership in higher education: past, present and future trends") indicate that gender equity, stereotypes, institutional culture, and systemic biases continue to affect who leads and how leadership is exercised. Transforming these norms is part of the leadership challenge for sustainability and quality in HE.

3. Also, educating future leaders to engage the challenges of a changing world (University of Hong Kong, 2024) talks about blended learning approaches for leadership education – how HEIs are preparing students/leaders in-training to engage with societal, ethical, global challenges. These are signaling that quality in leadership is increasingly tied to values: ethics, global awareness, sustainability, inclusion.

EMERGING GLOBAL TRENDS

The future of HEIs is being shaped by:

1. AI and digital learning ecosystems

2. Micro-credentials and modular learning

3. Global mobility and cultural pluralism

4. Climate adaptation and ethical leadership

5. Increased demand for lifelong learning

These trends require leadership that is anticipatory and strategic, not just operational.

5. Theoretical Framework

The research is underpinned by three interlinked theoretical foundations:

1. **Transformational Leadership Theory** (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985): Emphasizes vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—critical for navigating disruptive change.

2. **Total Quality Management (TQM)** and **European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM)** models: Emphasize continuous improvement, stakeholder focus, and strategic alignment.

3. **Strategic Foresight**: A planning-oriented framework used to anticipate multiple futures, identify uncertainties, and build resilient strategies (Slaughter, 2004).

6. Research Gaps and Challenges Looking Forward to 2035

Based on the literature summarized, several gaps emerge that are especially relevant to your research topic. These suggest where your work can contribute.

Gap	Evidence / Explanation
Futures/Scenario Planning in Leadership & QA	Few studies explicitly project to 2030+, or engage scenario planning to understand leadership's trajectory under disruptive change. Works like Baroudi & Lytras open the agenda, but empirical studies are scarce.
Longitudinal or Predictive Research	Most studies are cross-sectional. For preparing for 2035, we will need longitudinal data, trend analysis, or foresight methods to identify future leadership competencies and institutional readiness.
Contextual Diversity (Global South, Institutional Types)	Many QA and leadership studies focus on specific countries or types of institutions. There's less comparative work across regions with different resources, governance (e.g. public vs private), degrees of autonomy, etc.
Alignment of Leadership, Quality Assurance, and Institutional Strategy	Though many papers note leadership attributes and QA challenges, fewer examine deeply how leadership strategy, governance structures, and QA frameworks interplay over time to sustain quality under future pressures.
Inclusive, Ethical, & Sustainability-oriented Quality Metrics	The redefinition of "quality" is frequent in policy discussions. However, integrating ethical/social/sustainability metrics (beyond "outputs" like publications, graduate employment) into mainstream QA and leadership performance is under-researched.

Objectives

1. **To assess current leadership competencies and frameworks** in higher education and evaluate their adequacy in responding to future quality demands.

2. **To develop a forward-looking leadership model**, tentatively titled Transformational Quality Leadership (TQL), that integrates strategic foresight, ethical governance, stakeholder collaboration, and quality assurance principles.

3. **To provide actionable insights and policy recommendations** for leadership development, institutional planning, and quality assurance reform in preparation for 2035 and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative exploratory research design** to investigate the anticipated leadership challenges in higher education by the year 2035, with a specific emphasis on sustaining and redefining institutional quality. Given the complex, dynamic, and context-dependent nature of higher education leadership, a qualitative approach is best suited to elicit rich, nuanced insights from experienced professionals in the field.

To enhance the study's future-oriented perspective, **scenario planning** and **strategic foresight methods** are integrated into the research design. These tools allow for the systematic exploration of plausible futures and leadership responses, moving beyond presentist assumptions.

2. Research Questions

The methodology is guided by the following central questions:

1. What leadership challenges are higher education institutions likely to face by 2035?

2. How are emerging global trends (e.g., digital transformation, inclusion, sustainability) expected to reshape quality expectations in higher education?

3. What leadership competencies and frameworks are needed to uphold and enhance institutional quality in this evolving context?

4. How can quality assurance processes be aligned with anticipatory and transformative leadership practices?

Significance of the Study

This study addresses a critical and underexplored nexus in higher education research—the intersection of future leadership challenges and the evolving conceptualization of quality within institutions preparing for the transformative demands of 2035. As the global higher education landscape becomes increasingly complex, leaders must not only manage operational pressures but also proactively shape institutional resilience, innovation, and social relevance.

Theoretical Contributions

By integrating **transformational leadership theory**, **quality assurance frameworks**, and **strategic foresight**, this research advances the academic discourse on leadership in higher education. It extends existing leadership models by emphasizing the necessity of **future-focused, adaptive, and ethically grounded leadership** that aligns with dynamic quality expectations. The proposed **Transformational Quality Leadership (TQL)** framework

contributes a novel conceptual tool for scholars seeking to understand how leadership can be systematically linked with quality outcomes in uncertain futures.

Practical Implications

The findings provide actionable insights for higher education leaders and administrators globally, equipping them with a deeper understanding of emerging challenges such as technological disruption, demographic shifts, sustainability demands, and geopolitical uncertainties. This research underscores the importance of cultivating **agile leadership competencies** that foster institutional adaptability and stakeholder engagement while preserving academic integrity and excellence.

Policy and Quality Assurance Relevance

The study also holds significant implications for policymakers and quality assurance agencies. It highlights the urgent need to **reframe accreditation and quality frameworks** to support innovative leadership approaches and flexible institutional responses. By aligning leadership development initiatives with forward-looking quality criteria, this research supports the design of more resilient and inclusive higher education systems capable of thriving in complex futures.

Global and Equity Perspectives

By incorporating diverse voices from multiple regions, including underrepresented Global South perspectives, the study enriches the global dialogue on higher education leadership. It advances equity by recognizing context-specific challenges and opportunities, promoting leadership paradigms that are culturally responsive and socially just.

Long-term Impact

Ultimately, this research contributes to shaping higher education institutions that are not only efficient and competitive but also ethically responsible and socially impactful by 2035. It offers a foundational knowledge base for future studies and interventions aiming to prepare HEIs for a rapidly changing world, ensuring that quality remains central to their mission and vision.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the multifaceted leadership challenges confronting higher education institutions (HEIs) as they prepare for the transformative horizon of 2035. The findings underscore that future leadership in HEIs must navigate an increasingly complex environment shaped by rapid technological advancements, shifting societal expectations, climate change, and evolving notions of educational quality.

Complexity and Uncertainty as Leadership Imperatives

Consistent with contemporary leadership theories (Bass & Riggio, 2006), the study confirms that transformational leadership qualities—such as vision-setting, innovation, and ethical stewardship—are essential but insufficient in isolation. Leaders must also develop **strategic foresight** and **adaptive capacities** to anticipate and respond to disruptive forces. The integration of scenario planning and quality assurance frameworks emerges as a critical innovation for future-focused governance.

Reconceptualizing Quality in Higher Education

The research reveals an expanding conception of quality, moving beyond traditional metrics such as research output and teaching evaluations, toward a more holistic framework

incorporating **equity, sustainability, and social impact**. This aligns with global policy shifts emphasizing inclusive and socially responsible education (UNESCO, 2021). Leaders must therefore champion quality not only as compliance but as continuous innovation that addresses complex global challenges.

Leadership Competencies for the Future

A key contribution is the identification of a set of core competencies necessary for 2035 leadership: digital literacy and ethical AI governance, intercultural competence, resilience in crisis management, and collaborative stakeholder engagement. These competencies demand a shift in leadership development programs and organizational cultures that traditionally privilege hierarchical and disciplinary silos.

Global and Contextual Diversity

The study's inclusion of diverse geographic perspectives reveals varied leadership challenges and resource constraints, especially in the Global South. This emphasizes the need for contextually sensitive leadership models that can flexibly adapt quality assurance and governance practices to local realities while engaging global standards.

Policy and Institutional Implications

From a policy perspective, the findings call for a recalibration of accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms to enable innovation and agility without compromising standards. Institutional strategies must integrate foresight-driven leadership development, invest in digital infrastructure, and cultivate inclusive governance models to remain relevant and competitive in the evolving higher education landscape.

CONCLUSION

This research contributes a timely and critical understanding of the evolving leadership landscape in higher education as institutions prepare for 2035. It articulates the need for a **Transformational Quality Leadership (TQL)** framework that merges strategic foresight, ethical governance, and quality assurance into a coherent approach for future-ready HEIs.

Effective leadership will be pivotal in navigating the uncertainties ahead, ensuring that HEIs remain agile, equitable, and impactful. By redefining quality to encompass societal relevance and sustainability, higher education leaders can foster institutions that contribute meaningfully to global challenges.

The study also underscores the importance of developing leadership competencies that transcend traditional managerial skills, advocating for programs that emphasize adaptability, digital fluency, and inclusivity. Policymakers and quality assurance bodies must play an active role in creating enabling environments that support such leadership transformation.

Future research should continue to explore region-specific leadership dynamics and extend empirical validation of the TQL framework across varied institutional contexts. As the 2035 horizon approaches, the insights from this study provide a foundational guide for leaders, policymakers, and scholars committed to sustaining and enhancing the quality of higher education worldwide.

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