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The Role of University Leadership in Managing Strategic Quality Development in Higher Education

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Abstract---This paper investigates the role of university leadership in managing strategic quality development in Vietnamese higher education institutions. Drawing on a mixed-method design, the study combines survey data from 287 university leaders and faculty members with 24 semi-structured interviews and document analysis from eight institutions. Quantitative results reveal that leadership effectiveness significantly predicts strategic quality development, which in turn influences institutional performance. Qualitative findings highlight the importance of participatory planning, digital transformation, and internal feedback mechanisms. The study aligns with global literature on leadership and quality, while offering localized insights from the Vietnamese context. It concludes that effective leadership is essential for integrating innovation, accountability, and sustainability into institutional strategies and for achieving long-term quality goals.

Keywords---digital transformation, higher education management, strategic quality development, university leadership, Vietnam.

Introduction

In the context of global competition and the knowledge-based economy, higher education institutions (HEIs) are under increasing pressure to enhance their quality, relevance, and sustainability. University leadership plays a pivotal role in steering strategic quality development, ensuring that academic institutions not only meet internal and external standards but also adapt to the rapidly changing environment of higher education (McCaffery, 2018; Marshall, 2019). Effective leadership is considered a critical determinant of an institution's ability to align its vision, mission, and strategic goals with evolving societal and market needs. According to Taylor et al. (2008), strategic leadership and management serve as key mechanisms for translating institutional priorities into actionable plans that drive long-term quality improvements.

Leadership in higher education goes beyond administrative oversight; it encompasses the creation of a shared vision, the management of organizational change, and the fostering of an academic culture that prioritizes continuous quality enhancement (Dopson et al., 2019; Ruben et al., 2023). Strategic leadership is particularly crucial in promoting innovation, stakeholder engagement, and the implementation of quality management systems. Studies in diverse contexts, such as Palestine and Egypt, demonstrate that effective strategic leadership practices are strongly correlated with improved quality of educational services and enhanced organizational climate (Alayoubi et al., 2020; Aboudahr, 2022). In this regard, leaders must not only possess managerial competencies but also the capacity to inspire faculty and staff toward the collective achievement of quality objectives.

The strategic development of higher education is increasingly intertwined with global agendas and sustainable development goals (SDGs). HEIs are expected to contribute to SDG 4.7 on quality education by integrating knowledge management initiatives and sustainability practices into their core activities (Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023; Fia et al., 2022). Performance management tools, such as the balanced scorecard, are being adopted to monitor institutional progress, enhance transparency, and align strategic quality objectives with measurable outcomes (Camilleri, 2021). Moreover, internationalization has emerged as a key strategic approach to improving quality, as

universities seek global collaboration, benchmarking, and cross-border knowledge exchange (Hoai et al., 2023; Bui et al., 2024).

In the era of digital transformation, university leadership faces both unprecedented opportunities and challenges in managing strategic quality development. The integration of digital tools and open knowledge management systems enhances teaching, learning, and administrative efficiency while simultaneously requiring strong leadership to overcome technological, cultural, and structural barriers (Tinh et al., 2022; Singun, 2025). In Vietnam, where higher education is undergoing reforms to improve competitiveness and align with international standards, digital transformation and sustainable development are central to institutional strategies (Nhung et al., 2025; Linh et al., 2022; Tien et al., 2021). University leaders are thus required to balance traditional governance responsibilities with the demands of innovation, autonomy, and accountability in a rapidly evolving educational landscape (Tinh, 2021; Dumulescu & Muşiu, 2021).

Overall, the role of university leadership in managing strategic quality development is both multidimensional and context-dependent. Leaders must integrate strategic planning, digital transformation, internationalization, and sustainability into a coherent framework that drives institutional excellence. Building on prior research, this study explores how university leadership can effectively manage strategic quality development in higher education, offering insights for both local and global contexts (Verhoef et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Conceptualizing University Leadership in Higher Education

University leadership is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the processes, behaviors, and competencies required to guide higher education institutions toward achieving their mission and responding to societal demands. Leadership in universities is not limited to administrative management. It involves articulating a shared vision, fostering academic excellence, and facilitating organizational change (McCaffery, 2018; Marshall, 2019). In this context, effective leaders are expected to engage multiple stakeholders, including faculty, students, and external partners, and align their efforts toward institutional development.

Scholars emphasize that academic leadership is complex because universities serve both as knowledge-producing organizations and as public service institutions (Taylor et al., 2008; Dopson et al., 2019). Decision making often requires consensus building and collegiality while balancing academic autonomy with accountability. Modern leadership approaches in higher education highlight the importance of strategic thinking, innovation orientation, and the ability to respond to dynamic changes in technology and policy. In Vietnam, university leaders are increasingly required to combine traditional governance skills with digital competencies to adapt to national reforms and internationalization pressures (Tinh, 2021; Hoai et al., 2023).

Strategic Quality Development in Higher Education

Strategic quality development in higher education refers to the systematic and long-term efforts undertaken by institutions to enhance their academic standards, administrative efficiency, and societal impact. Quality development is no longer confined to accreditation or compliance. It includes continuous improvement, the integration of sustainability, and the enhancement of stakeholder satisfaction (Camilleri, 2021; Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023). Higher education institutions increasingly adopt strategic management tools such as the balanced scorecard and performance dashboards to align quality objectives with measurable outcomes.

Recent studies show that quality development is closely linked to global agendas, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals, which encourage universities to integrate social responsibility, environmental sustainability, and digital innovation into their operations (Fia et al., 2022; Bui et al., 2024). In Vietnam, public universities have begun to implement reforms such as salary system restructuring and open knowledge management to improve competitiveness and support sustainable development (Linh et al., 2022; Tien et al., 2021; Tinh et al., 2022). Moreover, digital transformation initiatives, including e learning, online governance, and data-driven decision making, are becoming central to quality strategies, although many institutions still face challenges such as limited infrastructure and resistance to change (Nhung et al., 2025; Singun, 2025).

Relationship between Leadership and Quality Development

The relationship between university leadership and strategic quality development has been widely recognized in higher education research. Effective leadership is a critical driver of quality enhancement because leaders shape institutional vision, allocate resources, and facilitate the adoption of innovative practices (Alayoubi et al., 2020;

Aboudahr, 2022). Leaders who demonstrate strong strategic capabilities can mobilize academic and administrative units toward collective goals, ensuring that quality initiatives are embedded in the institutional culture rather than implemented as temporary projects.

Empirical studies indicate that strategic leadership is positively associated with improved quality outcomes, including student satisfaction, academic performance, and international accreditation (Dopson et al., 2019; Ruben et al., 2023). Leadership also plays a mediating role in integrating digital transformation and sustainability into quality frameworks, which is particularly important for institutions in emerging economies (Dumulescu & Muțiu, 2021; Hoai et al., 2023). In Vietnam, leadership commitment to autonomy, accountability, and innovation is essential for transforming universities into competitive and globally relevant institutions (Tinh, 2021; Nhung et al., 2025).

The literature shows that leadership and quality development are interdependent. Without visionary and strategic leadership, quality initiatives are likely to remain fragmented and unsustainable. Conversely, a robust quality management framework provides the foundation for leaders to implement long-term strategies that strengthen governance, improve academic outcomes, and increase societal impact (Martins et al., 2019).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method research design to explore both the breadth and depth of the role of university leadership in managing strategic quality development. The quantitative component involved a structured survey to collect data on leadership practices, quality management activities, and institutional performance. The qualitative component included semi-structured interviews and document analysis, which provided rich contextual insights into strategic approaches and operational mechanisms at the institutional level. This methodological integration ensured a comprehensive and triangulated understanding of the research problem.

Population and Sample

The research targeted key stakeholders involved in university governance and quality assurance, including principals, vice principals, heads of training and quality assurance departments, and core faculty members. The sample was drawn from eight higher education institutions in Vietnam: the Institute of Training and Advanced Studies in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam National University Hanoi, Thai Nguyen University, Military University of Culture and Arts, National Academy of Educational Management, Hanoi Metropolitan University, and Hong Duc University.

A total of 320 questionnaires were distributed, with 287 valid responses received, resulting in a response rate of 89.69%. Among the respondents, 58.2% were male and 41.8% were female. In terms of professional roles, 27.5% were principals or vice principals, 21.6% were heads of training and quality assurance departments, and 50.9% were core faculty members. For the qualitative phase, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted, three participants from each institution, ensuring a balanced representation across different organizational contexts and leadership levels.

Data Collection Methods

Three complementary data collection methods were employed:

Survey: A structured questionnaire comprising 25 items measured on a five-point Likert scale was administered to assess perceptions of leadership effectiveness, strategic quality development practices, and institutional outcomes.

Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with 24 senior leaders, each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews explored leadership strategies, quality management challenges, and approaches to digital transformation.

Document analysis: Institutional documents were reviewed, including strategic plans (2018–2025), annual reports (2020–2024), and accreditation evaluations, to support data triangulation and provide additional evidence of institutional practices.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26 for descriptive statistics and reliability testing, and AMOS 24 for structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine relationships among variables. The leadership practice scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Qualitative data from interviews and document analysis were subjected to thematic analysis. Key themes emerged around strategic planning processes, staff participation in quality initiatives, and the integration of digital tools into institutional quality systems.

Findings

Quantitative Results from the Survey

The results from the structured questionnaire administered to 287 participants across eight universities show strong agreement on the effectiveness of university leadership and its role in strategic quality development. Participants rated their perceptions on a five-point Likert scale across three dimensions: leadership effectiveness, strategic quality development, and institutional performance. The mean score for leadership effectiveness was 4.09, indicating generally positive perceptions of leadership practices. Strategic quality development had a mean score of 3.99, and institutional performance was rated at 3.92.

These values suggest that while leadership is perceived as effective overall, there remains room for improvement in the consistency of quality development practices and their translation into tangible institutional outcomes. Standard deviations ranged from 0.50 to 0.59, showing relatively moderate variability in perceptions among participants.

Table 1
Overall Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Constructs

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Cronbach's Alpha
Leadership Effectiveness	4.09	0.50	2.48	6.03	0.91
Strategic Quality Development	3.99	0.57	2.52	5.85	0.88
Institutional Performance	3.92	0.59	2.28	5.48	0.85

The high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.85 for all constructs) confirms the reliability of the measurement scales. To further understand differences in perceptions among different leadership roles, the responses were categorized into three groups: principals or vice principals, heads of quality and training departments, and core faculty members. Principals and vice principals reported slightly higher perceptions of leadership effectiveness (mean = 4.23), while heads of departments and core faculty members rated this construct slightly lower, at 4.10 and 4.01, respectively. Similar patterns were observed for the other two constructs.

Table 2
Mean Scores by Professional Role

Role	Leadership Effectiveness	Strategic Quality Development	Institutional Performance
Principal/Vice Principal	4.23	4.15	4.12
Head of Training/Quality	4.10	3.98	3.89
Core Faculty Member	4.01	3.91	3.81

These results reflect the leadership hierarchy's proximity to strategic planning processes and performance monitoring, which may explain the differences in perspective.

A structural equation model was constructed using AMOS to examine the causal relationships between the variables. The model showed a good fit, with a chi-square/df ratio of 2.41, comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.94, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) of 0.92, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.067. Leadership effectiveness significantly predicted strategic quality development (standardized coefficient $\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn significantly predicted institutional performance ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). These results confirm that leadership plays both a direct and indirect role in improving institutional outcomes.

Qualitative Results from Semi-Structured Interviews

The qualitative phase of the study included 24 interviews with senior leaders from the eight participating universities. These interviews yielded three major themes that complement the quantitative results and provide deeper insight into leadership strategies.

The first theme was strategic vision and participation. Most leaders emphasized that strategic planning in their institutions was shifting from a top-down approach to a participatory model that engages faculty and departments. This approach was said to improve ownership and alignment with institutional goals. One vice rector shared:

“Our strategic plan was developed through multiple consultation sessions with departments to ensure that everyone understands and owns the direction we are moving toward.”

The second theme was digital transformation and capacity building. Leaders noted progress in implementing technology for teaching, administration, and quality monitoring. However, several challenges were also reported, especially related to staff digital literacy and the integration of data into decision-making. A head of quality assurance stated:

“We have implemented a new quality dashboard, but many staff still need training to interpret and apply the data effectively.”

The third theme was feedback culture and continuous improvement. Several universities reported using regular feedback mechanisms, especially student evaluations, to improve academic and administrative processes. A faculty dean explained:

“We collect student feedback at the end of each semester, and the data are used to revise the curriculum and teaching methods.”

These interview findings reinforce the survey results, particularly regarding the influence of leadership on quality systems and staff engagement.

Results from Document Analysis

The analysis of institutional documents—including strategic plans (2018–2025), annual reports (2020–2024), and internal quality assurance guidelines—confirmed that most universities have formally integrated strategic quality development into their core operations.

All eight institutions had strategic documents that outlined goals related to innovation, internationalization, sustainability, and digitalization. Many institutions had adopted performance indicators and internal evaluation mechanisms. The annual reports included evidence of goal tracking, stakeholder feedback collection, and the use of data to inform decision making.

For example, Hanoi Metropolitan University’s strategic plan explicitly stated:

“The institution commits to using data-driven dashboards and annual feedback cycles to inform academic program improvements and align with national higher education reforms.”

The document review also revealed that while some institutions had advanced systems in place, others were still in the early stages of implementing structured monitoring processes. This variation supports the findings from both the survey and interviews, indicating that leadership effectiveness is a critical driver of how well these systems are established and maintained.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the central role of university leadership in managing and advancing strategic quality development, particularly in the context of Vietnamese higher education reforms. The positive and statistically significant relationship between leadership effectiveness and both quality development and institutional performance is consistent with the conclusions of [McCaffery \(2018\)](#) and [Marshall \(2019\)](#), who emphasized that leadership in higher education involves vision setting, change management, and long-term planning.

The structural model revealed that leadership effectiveness directly influences strategic quality development, which in turn affects institutional outcomes. This result aligns with the model proposed by Taylor and colleagues (2008), who argued that leadership and strategic management are critical tools for aligning institutional priorities with implementation. The current study validates this perspective in an emerging system such as Vietnam.

Qualitative data from interviews highlight the growing shift toward participatory planning, internal feedback systems, and a culture of continuous improvement. However, challenges remain in the digital transformation process, particularly related to limited staff capacity and insufficient technological integration. These issues support the findings of [Singun \(2025\)](#), who identified digital competence, infrastructure, and organizational culture as key barriers in higher education institutions.

The study also reinforces international findings regarding the link between strategic leadership and service quality. Similar to research in Palestinian and Egyptian universities by Alayoubi et al. (2020), and Aboudahr (2022), this study shows that effective leadership is closely associated with a positive institutional climate and stronger engagement in quality assurance activities.

Document analysis further indicates that many Vietnamese universities have adopted performance indicators and reporting mechanisms to support transparency and alignment with national reforms and global education goals. This reflects similar trends found in the work of Camilleri (2021) and Adhikari & Shrestha (2023), although the degree of implementation varies across institutions and depends heavily on leadership capacity.

Additionally, internationalization remains a strategic priority, consistent with the findings of Hoai et al. (2023), as universities aim to strengthen academic quality through global partnerships and benchmarking. At the same time, institutional leaders are responding to structural reforms related to autonomy and financial incentives, including salary system changes discussed by Linh et al. (2022) and governance reforms addressed by Tinh (2021).

Conclusion

This study confirms that university leadership plays a fundamental role in shaping the strategic direction and quality development of higher education institutions. By integrating survey results, interview data, and institutional document analysis, the research demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is closely linked to the advancement of quality assurance practices and overall institutional performance.

Vietnamese universities are increasingly adopting participatory and data-informed approaches to strategic planning and evaluation. Nevertheless, several challenges remain, particularly in digital infrastructure, staff readiness, and the inconsistent implementation of quality frameworks across institutions. These findings suggest that leadership must go beyond traditional administrative functions to actively promote a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

The study also supports global research that connects strategic leadership with a positive organizational climate, successful digital transformation, and progress toward sustainable development goals. In the Vietnamese context, ongoing reforms related to institutional autonomy, governance, and performance-based accountability are placing new demands on university leaders to become more adaptive, inclusive, and forward-thinking.

To effectively navigate complexity and global change, higher education leadership must evolve from a management-oriented approach to a strategic and transformative role. Strengthening leadership capacity at all institutional levels is essential for enhancing academic quality, achieving long-term excellence, and aligning with both national priorities and international expectations in higher education.

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