

Aldighrir, W. (2024). An Analysis of Leadership Strategies in Higher Education to Close the Gap between Education and the Labor Market Requirements in Saudi Arabia Kingdom, *Journal of Educational Science*, 11 (2), 375 - 403. 10.54643/1951-011-002-012

An Analysis of Leadership Strategies in Higher Education to Close the Gap between Education and the Labor Market Requirements in Saudi Arabia Kingdom

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the leadership strategies in higher education institutions in bridging the gap between education and labor market requirements, focusing on the potential of strategic decision-making, institutional policy-making, and curriculum design in aligning academic programs with market needs. This paper adapts a descriptive-analytical approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue and suggest practical solutions that ensure the relevance of education to the future workforce. The research question guiding this study is: What are the leadership strategies in higher education that can bridge the gap between the outputs of education and the labor market requirements in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia? The study's results indicate that while there is a significant gap between higher education outputs and labor market requirements, efforts are being made to bridge this gap, such as improving communication and collaboration between higher education institutions and labor market institutions, making curriculum changes, providing better student guidance, establishing robust alum associations, and implementing continuous self-evaluation could substantially mitigate this gap. Future research should focus on evaluating the impact of these strategies.

Keywords: leadership, strategies, labor markets, higher education.

الدغير، وفاء. (2024). تحليل استراتيجيات القيادة في التعليم العالي لسد الفجوة بين التعليم ومتطلبات سوق العمل في المملكة العربية السعودية. *مجلة العلوم التربوية*، 11 (2)، 375 - 403.

10.54643/1951-011-002-012

تحليل استراتيجيات القيادة في التعليم العالي لسد الفجوة بين التعليم ومتطلبات سوق العمل في المملكة العربية السعودية

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المستخلص:

تحل هذه الورقة استراتيجيات القيادة في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في سد الفجوة بين التعليم ومتطلبات سوق العمل ، مع التركيز على إمكانات اتخاذ القرارات الاستراتيجية ، وصنع السياسات المؤسسية ، وتصميم المناهج الدراسية في مواءمة البرامج الأكاديمية مع احتياجات السوق. تتبنى هذه الورقة منهجاً وصفيًا تحليليًا لتوفير فهم شامل للقضية واقتراح حلول عملية تضمن أهمية التعليم للقوى العاملة المستقبلية. والسؤال البحثي الذي توجه هذه الدراسة هو: ما هي الاستراتيجيات القيادية في التعليم العالي التي يمكنها سد الفجوة بين مخرجات التعليم ومتطلبات سوق العمل في المملكة العربية السعودية؟ تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أنه على الرغم من وجود فجوة كبيرة بين مخرجات التعليم العالي ومتطلبات سوق العمل ، إلا أنه يتم بذل الجهود لسد هذه الفجوة ، مثل تحسين التواصل والتعاون بين مؤسسات التعليم العالي ومؤسسات سوق العمل ، وإجراء تغييرات في المناهج الدراسية ، وتوفير خدمات أفضل. إن توجيه الطلاب ، وإنشاء جمعيات قوية للخريجين ، وتنفيذ التقييم الذاتي المستمر يمكن أن يخفف من هذه الفجوة بشكل كبير. يجب أن تركز الأبحاث المستقبلية على تقييم تأثير هذه الاستراتيجيات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القيادة ، الإستراتيجيات ، أسواق العمل ، التعليم العالي.

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Introduction

The landscape of the modern labor market is experiencing rapid shifts in knowledge and technology, necessitating continuous adaptation and evolution in higher education to meet the changing demands of employers. One of the most pressing issues facing higher education today is the noticeable gap between what universities offer and the real-world requirements of the labor markets. In Saudi Arabia, this discrepancy has left some graduates ill-prepared for the tasks and roles they encounter professionally, subsequently impacting their job performance and overall satisfaction (Al-Otaibi, 2010). Additionally, specific academic majors may appear misaligned or irrelevant to the current labor market, resulting in an oversupply of talent in some areas and a shortage in others (Lebeau & Alruwaili, 2022). Thus, strategic intervention from leaders in higher education institutions is required to align academic programs with market needs.

The responsibility of top-level leadership to bridge the gap between the education system and the labor market is very significant in mitigating the unemployment rate. The gap between education and the labor market impacts young graduates' participation (Rashed et al., 2020 & Muammar, 2022). Based on estimates from the Labor Force Survey of the General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT), the total unemployment rate in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (for Saudis and non-Saudis) reached 5.1% in the third quarter of 2023, a decrease of 0.7 percentage points from the third quarter of 2022. While the unemployment rate for Saudis reached 8.6% in the third quarter of 2023, an increase of 0.3 percentage points compared to the second quarter of the same year, and a decrease of 1.3 percentage points compared to the third quarter of 2022. The Saudi labor force participation rate decreased by 1.6, a decrease of 0.9 percentage points from the third quarter of 2022. The ratio of Saudi workers to the population also decreased by 0.2 percentage points, reaching 47.2% compared to the second quarter of the same year and a decrease of 0.1 percentage points compared to the third quarter of 2022. As of 2022, the unemployment rate among individuals with

a bachelors degree or equivalent was notably high , at approximately 9.9%. In comparison, those possessing only a diploma had an unemployment rate of 8.1%, and the rate for high school graduates stood at 7.4%. Further examination of the data reveals variations in unemployment rates across different academic fields. Notably, science-related disciplines, including physics, chemistry, geology, mathematics, and statistics, experienced some of the highest unemployment rates (15.2%). Similarly, graduates from arts, humanities, and information technology were among those with elevated unemployment rates in Saudi Arabia by the end of 2022. These statistics highlight a significant misalignment between the skills imparted by higher education institutions and the needs of the labor market , underlining the urgent need for strategic interventions in curriculum and educational policy development in Saudi Arabia (GASTAT , 2023).

The above data raises the question of why the Saudi education system alters labor market productivity. To what extent do quality and performance excellence affect labor market competence? Despite the huge budget allocated to education, the quality of education remains low and not at par with European education standards (Altbach , 2019 & Abdurizaizah , 2022). Ensure the quality of the education system in Saudi Arabia meets the competitiveness of the growing market. Today's artificial intelligence era requires understanding leadership strategies to close the gap between education and labor market requirements in the competitive workplace (Gonaim , 2019; Malik & Ahmed , 2020).

This outlines the problems associated with the misalignment between education and the needs of the labor market. This paper examines the causes and consequences of this disconnect , focusing on its leadership strategies that help to overcome this gap. First , the study tends to examine the misalignment between academic curricula and the needs of the labor market. Next , we will delve into the situation's specifics in Saudi Arabia. This will include a thorough analysis of the current higher education system , the structure of the labor market , and the nature of the gap between them.

In the subsequent section, we will explore the potential leadership strategies in higher education as a catalyst for change. We will discuss how leaders can employ strategic decision-making, institutional policymaking, and curriculum design to reduce the gap above.

Finally, we will propose potential solutions, including curriculum reform, enhanced career guidance services, more vital industry-academia collaboration, and vocational and technical education promotion. These strategies aim to ensure that the higher education system in Saudi Arabia effectively prepares students for the labor market, thereby reducing unemployment, underemployment, and job dissatisfaction among graduates.

Problem Statement.

Rapid developments and challenges worldwide have affected all forms of education in Saudi society and have caused them to change and evolve continuously due to the need to adapt to economic changes to meet the needs of the Saudi local market. The challenges included the exacerbation of these changes, the rise in Saudi graduate unemployment and the absence of university majors that are compatible with the demands of the modern labor market, the educational challenge facing education in the face of globalization, the difficulties associated with scientific research and the information revolution, and more (Al-Omari, 2021; Lardhi, 2021).

Many Saudi universities have responded to these challenges by implementing ongoing training strategies to increase their graduates' employability and competence. This is an effective way to achieve their policy of raising the standard of their outputs, satisfying labor market demands, and keeping up with the growing global trend of long-term investment in human resources. Weber (2018) highlighted the shift towards digital literacy programs in universities like King Saud University, aligning education with evolving market demands. Similarly, King Abdulaziz University integrates practical training and internships into curricula, as seen

in collaboration with industry partners to offer practical training and internships in society (AlGhamdi, 2019).

However, many graduates have stated that their lack of technical skills (Alrewas, 2019), poor English proficiency (Albiladi, 2022), and a lack of leadership abilities—such as planning, communication, decision-making, teamwork, and problem-solving—have made it difficult for them to enter the workforce (Aldighrir, 2021; Lardi, 2021). While these talents may be present in some graduates, they may not have been developed or applied throughout their education or after graduation to make them desirable workers in the job market because most colleges prioritize their academic responsibilities over the skills that graduates need to acquire. (Al-Omari, 2021; Al-Harbi 2021)

The main problem is that the curricula of Saudi Arabia's universities must correspond with the job markets shifting needs not only focus on emphasis theory but also to offer enough hands-on training in digital literacy, advanced technology applications, and soft skills like teamwork and communication, which are becoming increasingly critical in today's workforce (Alrewas, 2019; Qahl, 2022). As a result, there is a scarcity in these expanding sectors and an excess of graduates in conventional subjects.

Thus, the researcher claims that the labor market demands, the challenges and variables these institutions face, and the nature of the job markets rapid evolution still need to impact university educational institutions' outputs. It is essential to comprehend the recent strategies that senior leadership has used. To close this disparity and guarantee that higher education programs sufficiently equip students for the needs of the labor market, bold policies and effective leadership are required (Albiladi, 2022; Ryan, 2023). This study's central question is: What leadership strategies in higher education are used to close the gap between educational outcomes and labor market demands in Saudi Arabia Kingdom?

The Objective of the Study:

The aim of this study is to:

1. Evaluate the alignment of the higher education system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with current workplace requirements. This analysis will specifically concentrate on the extent to which curricula, content, and teaching methods within Saudi universities meet the practical and skill-based demands of the contemporary job market.
2. Explore this gaps potential causes and impacts, analyze the contemporary situation in Saudi Arabian higher education, and suggest practical solutions.
3. Understand how effective leadership strategies in universities and colleges can drive curriculum reform to ensure the relevance of education to the future workforce.
4. Provide valuable insights for future academicians and practitioners in Saudi Arabia to formulate policies that upgrade educational programs, particularly at the university level, to improve employment opportunities and foster overall economic growth.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to review previous research data and gather new information about the leadership strategies in education that contribute to a nuanced understanding of the problem at hand, provide a comprehensive roadmap addressing and bridging this gap, and propose proactive measures to this problem in the future. The lessons learned can also offer valuable insights for other nations grappling with similar challenges.

Literature Review

A brief overview of the countrys higher education system and labor market landscape to Understand the particular context of Saudi Arabia. As of 2018, Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in higher education, establishing

numerous universities and colleges. The number of public universities in Saudi Arabia rose from 8 to 28 (Abdul Qadir, 2021). The higher education system in the country encompasses both public and private institutions, offering various academic programs across numerous disciplines. In 2021, Saudi Arabia had 15 public universities and 11 private universities offering undergraduate computing programs (Alkhatani, 2023). There has been a substantial surge in enrollment rates in higher education institutions, indicating the escalating significance of tertiary education in the country. The higher education system in the country encompasses both public and private institutions, offering various academic programs across multiple disciplines (Alkhatani, 2023). There has been a substantial surge in enrollment rates in higher education institutions, indicating the escalating significance of tertiary education in the country (Altbach, 2019; Alsultan, 2020).

The characteristics of the labor market in Saudi Arabia are crucial for comprehending the demands and prerequisites that graduates are expected to meet. The country's labor market is diverse, covering sectors like oil and gas, healthcare, finance, and construction. The Saudi Vision 2030 initiative has identified key sectors for economic diversification, underscoring the need for a skilled workforce in technology, entrepreneurship, and innovation (Kitan et al., 2019; Amirat & Zaidi, 2020). In this context, understanding the needs and requirements of the labor market is imperative for educational leaders to provide students with the necessary skills and knowledge needed to thrive in their future chosen careers.

By examining the literature on this subject, insights can be gained into the strategies and methods leaders employ to align academic programs with labor market needs. Leaders within higher education institutions are instrumental in driving change and promoting innovation (Al- Kaled & Chung, 2020; Alshahrani, 2022). They are responsible for making strategic decisions, formulating policies, and designing curricula that reduce the gap between higher education and the labor market (Alamri et al., 2019; Marginson, 2020).

Strategic decision-making is essential for leaders in higher education institutions aiming to bridge the gap. They must proactively analyze labor market demands, anticipate future needs, and adjust academic programs accordingly. This involves identifying emerging industries and professions, understanding the evolving skill sets required, and tailoring programs to meet those demands (Allmnarkrah & Evers, 2020). Policy formulation is another critical aspect of leadership in higher education institutions. Leaders must develop policies supporting academic programs' alignment with labor market needs. This might involve revising accreditation standards, fostering interdisciplinary collaborations, and incentivizing faculty members to engage in industry-relevant research and teaching (Lebeau & Alruwaili, 2022).

For instance, some studies have indicated that integrating practical training and real-world experiences into the curriculum can foster a better understanding of the subject matter and prepare students for the job market more effectively. A study by Durand-Lasserve (2022) mentioned that the German dual education system, characterized by robust cooperation between educational institutions and businesses, has demonstrated its efficacy in providing students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Such collaboration ensures that educational programs are tuned to the requirements of industries, facilitating seamless transitions from education to employment and allowing leaders to stay abreast of current and emerging trends, enabling them to update curricula and incorporate practical experiences such as internships, cooperative education, or apprenticeships (Mishrif & Alabduljabbar, 2018; Bin Othayman et al., 2022).

Alrewas (2019) identified factors contributing to the gap encompassing rapid technological progress, shifts in market dynamics, and a need for more substantial cooperation between higher education institutions and employers. In the context of the higher education landscape, one key issue that has been extensively debated is the alignment, or lack thereof, between higher education outputs and labor market needs. The literature suggests that

disconnect damages the economy and disheartens graduates who cannot find suitable employment after investing significant time and resources into their education (Al-Dogheim et al., 2021; Al-Harbi, 2021). Moreover, traditional teaching methods emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical skills (Al-Awda; Al-Otaibi, 2020), further widening this gap.

Thus, establishing strong connections between educational and labor market institutions is essential. Developing these links and fostering a symbiotic relationship between these entities can be crucial for achieving better alignment. Leadership in higher education plays a significant role in these efforts, with responsibility for developing strategies for knowledge exchange and even resource sharing (Birks & Sinclair, 2020). Partnerships with industries could be facilitated, allowing students to gain real-world experience through internships and cooperative education programs (Bunaiyan, 2019; Ryan, 2023). Additionally, the overproduction of graduates in specific disciplines and the disparity between the graduate majors and labor market demands exacerbate this problem (Alrehaili, 2022).

Regular curriculum reviews and updates are critical to ensure the knowledge imparted remains relevant in the fast-paced and ever-changing labor market (Alsultan, 2020). In this regard, leadership must invest in regular professional development for educators, keeping them up-to-date with the latest advancements in their respective fields and active in research and development. Moreover, experiential learning should be incorporated into curricula to equip students with hands-on experience and a better understanding of their field in a practical context. Leadership in higher education should facilitate more informed decision-making among students when it comes to choosing specializations. They should also provide resources such as career counseling to assist students in making these decisions. This can be done by ensuring that students are exposed to a broad spectrum of fields before choosing a specialization, offering a more holistic understanding of the various opportunities available (Aburizaizah, 2022).

The gap between higher education and the labor market is a critical factor affecting graduates' employability, underemployment, and job satisfaction. This relationship has been extensively explored in various studies, including those by Kitan et al. (2019), Alrewas (2019), and Al-Omari (2021). Employability, defined as an individual's ability to obtain and maintain employment that matches their skills and qualifications, is directly impacted by the education they receive. Kitan et al. (2019) observed that their employability is adversely affected when higher education fails to equip graduates with the skills demanded. This mismatch often leads to difficulties in securing suitable job opportunities. The study conducted by Alrewas (2019) supports this view, highlighting that many graduates face extended periods of unemployment or accept positions that only partially utilize their qualifications, leading to underemployment. Moreover, Al-Awda and Al-Otaibi (2020) shed light on this aspect by documenting instances where graduates in roles that do not align with their education and skills experience considerable dissatisfaction and frustration. This misalignment diminishes job satisfaction and adversely influences their motivation, engagement, and career progression. Collectively, these studies emphasize the critical nature of the gap between higher education outputs and labor market demands. They illustrate how this gap can lead to a cycle of reduced employability, underemployment, and lower job satisfaction among graduates. This evidence underscores the urgent need for effective educational leadership and strategic reforms in higher education to bridge this gap, enhancing graduates' employability and job satisfaction and aligning their skills more closely with market needs.

The literature also underlines the importance of a strong alum network to track alums. At the same time, institutions also can gain insights into employment trends, the effectiveness of their programs, and areas requiring improvement. Moreover, such a database can help build strong relationships between the institution and its alumni, providing opportunities for networking, mentorship, and even job placements for recent graduates.

Continuous self-evaluation and improvement are crucial for higher education institutions to adapt to the rapidly changing world. Thus, leadership is vital in creating a culture that encourages feedback, learning, and growth through being open to criticism, actively seeking feedback, and using this feedback to improve institutional policies and practices (Alkhatani, 2023). Alums can also guide current students, providing insights about industry requirements and expectations and bridging higher education and labor market institutions (Bunaiyan, 2019). Therefore, academic leaders must ensure that students can access comprehensive guidance and counseling services to help them make informed choices based on labor market trends and personal interests.

The context of the constant evolution of the labor market necessitates periodic curriculum revisions. Leaders should ensure that the curriculum is relevant, up-to-date, adaptable, and flexible enough to incorporate changes necessitated by advancements in industry and technology and reflective of the skills and knowledge demanded by employers (Altbach et al., 2019 & Alsultan, 2020). This is crucial for ensuring graduates remain competitive in the ever-evolving job market. This could involve incorporating experiential learning opportunities, integrating industry-specific projects, and using technology to enhance teaching and learning.

Another critical leadership strategy in higher education highlighted in the literature is the importance of continuous self-evaluation and improvement. Through this self-evaluation process, higher education institutions can maintain their relevance and continue providing high-quality education that meets the needs of the labor market (Alsultan, 2020). Long-term strategic planning also features prominently in the literature as a crucial leadership strategy in higher education. Given the dynamic nature of the labor market, higher education leaders must be forward-thinking and proactive in their planning. This could involve predicting changes in the industry, societal needs, and demographic shifts and preparing their institutions and students to adapt to these changes effectively (Alkhatnai, 2023).

Research also suggests that enhancing Legal and legislative backing is vital for advancing higher education. A synergy between higher education leaders and policymakers is necessary to establish supportive regulations, laws, and legislation that will enhance the quality of education and its alignment with labor market needs. In response to shifting labor market needs, restructuring colleges, programs, and majors is a strategy gaining traction. Higher education leaders should keenly know labor market trends and demonstrate agility in initiating necessary institutional changes (Alsayyari et al. , 2019; Al-Youbi et al. , 2020).

By closely examining the higher education system, labor market characteristics, and existing research pertinent to Saudi Arabia, the literature provides various strategies that higher education leaders can leverage to bridge the gap between education and labor market requirements. These strategies underscore the importance of collaboration, strategic planning, continuous self-evaluation, and flexibility in adapting to changing labor market trends (Ahmed, 2019). When effectively implemented, these can steer higher education institutions towards producing graduates who are not only academically proficient but also equipped with the skills and knowledge to excel in their chosen fields. By establishing partnerships with industry, engaging in strategic decision-making, formulating effective policies, and designing relevant curricula, leaders can enhance graduates' employability and readiness for the labor market (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2018; Domingo et al. , 2023).

However, there are certain limitations and gaps in the existing literature. A notable limitation is the need for more research specifically focused on the context of Saudi Arabia. Most of the available studies draw predominantly on experiences from Western countries, suggesting a need for research that considers the unique cultural, social, and economic factors influencing the relationship between higher education and the labor market in Saudi Arabia (Ab-Alsuoood & Andrew, 2018). Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations and gaps in the existing literature. By addressing these gaps, higher education leaders in Saudi Arabia can play a pivotal role in narrowing the gap

between education and the labor market , ensuring that graduates are equipped with the skills and competencies necessary for success in their professional lives. Thus , leaders in higher education should work towards enhancing collaborations with labor market institutions to fully communicate the value and relevance of the education they provide. The labor market needs to evolve , and so should the focus of higher education institutions (Radwan et al. , 2020). The literature indicates a need for increased investment in developing study areas that align with current and prospective labor market requirements.

Methodology:

The study relied on the descriptive analytical documentary approach through data and information collected from office studies , previous field studies , and statistics published online through platforms such as Google Scholar , JSTOR , and the Saudi digital library. The overall goal is to examine previous literature related to the leadership strategies that leaders in higher education have used to bridge the gap between education and labor market requirements. This will provide an in-depth understanding of leadership strategies in higher education. This approach will create a coherent picture of the issue and suggest feasible solutions to the current gap through adaptive leadership strategies that help students gain the skills needed by labor markets.

Inclusion criteria for sources:

- Published within the last five years to ensure currency of data.
- Peer-reviewed sources for credibility.
- Sources focusing primarily on Saudi Arabia or applicable to the Saudi Arabian context.
- Written in English or Arabic (translated to English).

Exclusion criteria for sources:

- Non-academic sources.
- Sources that do not provide substantial information related to the study.

The collected data underwent rigorous analysis involving reading, extracting relevant information, and categorizing it into themes such as leadership strategies, educational trends, and labor market needs. A total of 87 researchers were found in the database according to the theme selected; after reading the abstracts and applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 47 were selected from the database, which was read in full for annotation and extraction of topics of interest. A thematic analysis was conducted, where codes were created and iteratively refined. This qualitative data analysis helped manage and analyze the data effectively. See the table below:

Table(1)
A thematic analysis code for the research study.

Code	Description
Educational Program Alignment	Examines how higher education curricula align with market needs
Leadership Strategies	Focuses on the role of leadership in higher education institutions
Market-Driven Curriculum	Curriculum development driven by labor market needs and trends.
Labor Market Requirements	Analyze the current and future needs of the Saudi labor market.
Stakeholder Engagement	Involvement of various stakeholders (e.g., industry partners, government) in decision-making.
Leadership Effectiveness	Assessment of the effectiveness of leadership styles and practices in universities.
Government Support	The role of government support in enhancing leadership effectiveness, especially for women.

Results

The results section of this research synthesizes the significant findings derived from the content analysis, mainly focusing on leadership strategies in bridging the gap between higher education and the labor market in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Tables and Statistics: Tables were used to organize and present the data systematically. See table1.

Table(1)

Illustrates the distribution of themes across the analyzed literature.

Theme	Description	Source	Key Findings
Quality Teaching and Staff Development	Focus on enhancing teaching quality and developing staff competencies.	Bunaiyan, 2019; Radwan & Razak, 2020	Emphasized the need for continuous professional development and training for educators to meet international standards.
Labor Market Needs	Understanding Future Vision 2030 of Saudi Higher Education Patterns	Al-Otaibi, 2021; Alrehaili, 2021; & Abdul Qadir, 2021.	Preparing future students according to the labor market needs in a new era.
Knowledge-Based Innovation	Emphasis on innovation in educational practices based on current knowledge trends.	Qahl et al., 2019 & Rashed et al., 2020	Highlighted integrating innovative teaching methods and research to keep pace with global educational trends.
Curriculum Challenges	Efforts to meet international accreditation standards and quality assurance in higher education.	Alrewas, 2019 & Albikadi, 2022	Discussed the challenges and strategies in curriculum achieving and maintaining international accreditation standards.
Strategic Organizational Change	The role of leadership, culture, and learning in implementing university strategic changes.	Al-Khaled, 2020 & Ryan, 2023.	Identified the crucial role of leadership in guiding strategic change and adapting organizational performance.
Total Quality Management (TQM)	Leadership commitment to TQM and staff involvement in TQM training.	Abdurizaizah, 2022.	Explored the impact of TQM practices on improving the quality of education and administrative processes.

Theme	Description	Source	Key Findings
Building Institutional Leadership	The role of the Academic Leadership Centre in enhancing leadership capabilities.	Alsultan, 2020 & Muammar, 2022.	Focused on the development of leadership skills through specialized programs and initiatives.
Culturally Responsive Strategies	Importance of culturally responsive strategies for advancing organizational performance in leadership roles.	Alkhatnai, 2023	Addressed the need for culturally sensitive approaches to support leadership in higher education.
Societal and Organizational Cultural Influences	Influence of societal and organizational culture on leadership practices in universities.	Abu Alsuoood & Andrew, 2018	Analyzed how societal norms and organizational culture shape leadership styles and practices in Saudi universities

Discussion

The derived outcomes highlight the pivotal leadership strategies in effectively addressing the A standout for adopting dynamic strategies and fostering synergistic collaborations and communications. Successful leaders comprehensively analyze labor market trends, industry demands, and emerging skills requirements. They actively seek input from stakeholders, such as employers, alums, industry experts, and academic staff, which informs their decision-making processes and guides their strategic directions (Al-Dogheim et al. , 2021; Al-Harbi, 2021; Lebeau & Alruwaili, 2022; Ryan, 2023). By actively engaging with these external partners, leaders can gain valuable insights into the evolving needs and trends of the labor market.

Given the findings, the study found that a substantial gap exists between the outputs of higher education institutions and labor market requirements, mainly due to a need for more effective communication and collaboration mechanisms between the two entities. However, efforts are being made to

support these institutions through appropriate regulations, laws, and legislation. The necessity for higher education leaders in the Saudi Arabian context to demonstrate foresight, receptivity to industrial transformations, and an unwavering commitment to perpetual enhancement is underscored by these findings.

Moreover, several pragmatic recommendations emerge for higher education leaders within Saudi Arabia. Initially, leaders should champion forging robust relationships with industry partners to ensure academic curricula stay abreast of contemporary and forecasted labor market demands (Alrewas, 2019; Lardi, 2021). This can be accomplished by forming advisory boards, initiating regular industry consultations, and actively partaking in cooperative projects. Subsequently, higher education leaders must prioritize investment in professional development opportunities for faculty (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2018; Radwan et al., 2020). This enables educators to keep pace with industry trends and evolving skills requisites, and they can then devise and deliver curricula that equip graduates with market-relevant skills.

Therefore, leaders must foster an institutional culture that champions innovation and entrepreneurship (Ab-Alsuoood & Andrew, 2018). This can be realized by endorsing interdisciplinary paradigms, backing research and development initiatives, and providing resources to encourage students and faculty to embark on entrepreneurial pursuits. Furthermore, leaders should actively engage students in curriculum design and decision-making, creating a sense of ownership and relevance. This involvement ensures that academic programs remain attuned to students' needs and career aspirations, boosting their motivation and employment readiness.

The research findings also highlight leadership strategies, especially in curriculum design. Influential leaders collaborate with faculty to ensure that curricula are up-to-date, relevant, and aligned with industry-emerging skills requirements. They prioritize integrating practical skills development

and experiential learning opportunities within the curriculum, enhancing graduates' employability and readiness for the labor market (Alsultan, 2020; Aburizaizah, 2022).

In the context of curriculum and teaching methods, this study showed an active restructuring of higher education institutions' programs and majors to align better with labor market needs. Measures are being taken to increase the number of faculties of structural engineering and science, reflecting the needs of society. Simultaneously, some sections are being reduced, merged, or separated, while others are being halted completely to match labor market needs better (Alsayyari et al., 2019; Al-Youbi et al., 2020).

Strategic decision-making is another crucial strategy, a recurring theme emphasized in the research findings. Successful leaders demonstrate a proactive approach to decision-making, leveraging their understanding of labor market demands and industry requirements, promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, and creating opportunities for work-integrated learning. They make informed choices regarding program development, resource allocation, and investment in infrastructure and facilities. Such strategic decision-making ensures that higher education institutions are agile and responsive to the changing needs of the labor market.

Furthermore, influential leaders are instrumental in formulating and implementing policies that foster alignment between higher education and the labor market. These policies encourage academic-industry collaboration, promote innovation and entrepreneurship, and facilitate work-integrated learning opportunities (Alrewas, 2019; Alsultan, 2020; Alkhatnai, 2023). By creating a supportive policy environment, leaders enable the development of skills and competencies that employers highly value.

Regarding student decision-making on the strategy concerning alum associations, the results indicated the potential benefits of such associations in creating robust communication channels with graduates, leading to

discussions about their experiences in the labor market (Bunaiyan, 2019). Assessing the success of their educational institutions in preparing them for these challenges could be more efficient. However, the study has yet to find a precise mechanism to guide students toward appropriate courses for specialization. The research suggested that better guidance could improve student skill sets and readiness for the labor market.

Lastly, continuous self-evaluation and improvement found a need for consistent performance evaluation of higher education institutions to keep pace with developmental requirements on time (Al-Awda & Al-Otaibi, 2020). Currently, there needs to be more systematic mechanisms for such specific assessments.

A wealth of literature examined leadership strategies for aligning higher education with labor market needs. As the Saudi Arabian labor market undergoes significant changes precipitated by initiatives like Vision 2030, the study focused on the need for more context-specific studies focusing on Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, we must recognize that implementing these strategies and initiatives may pose substantial challenges. Constraints on resources, resistance to change, and institutional inertia are all factors that can hamper the effective execution of interventions designed to narrow the education-labor market gap. Future research should delve into these nuances to comprehensively understand the alignment between higher education and labor market needs in Saudi Arabia. Hence, higher education leaders must be equipped to navigate these obstacles, employing innovative solutions to conquer these potential roadblocks.

The research has fulfilled its intended purpose by casting light on the significant role of leadership in connecting the domains of higher education and the labor market within Saudi Arabia. In conclusion, the study's results indicate that while there is a significant gap between higher education outputs and labor market requirements, through comprehensive market analyses,

stakeholder collaboration, policy formulation, and relevant curriculum design providing better student guidance, establishing robust alum associations, and implementing continuous self-evaluation could substantially mitigate this gap. Consequently, the research offers critical insights into the necessary measures for tackling the gap. At the same time, general trends emerge from the literature, and specific research focusing on Saudi Arabia's unique context must provide comprehensive solutions tailored to its labor market and higher education landscape. Future research should focus on evaluating the impact of these strategies.

Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders:

Based on the findings of the research, several recommendations can be made to Saudi Arabian higher education leaders to enhance the alignment of academic programs with labor market needs and bridge the gap between higher education and the labor market:

1. Foster Strong industry-academic collaboration and communication

Leaders in higher education should actively engage and sustain robust communication channels with industry partners to understand their evolving needs and ensure that academic programs are aligned with the demands of the labor market. This can be achieved by establishing advisory boards, industry consultations, and collaborative projects involving industry professionals in curriculum design and development. This would ensure a better understanding of labor market trends and expectations, enabling institutions to align their curriculums, training methods, and graduate outputs to better diverse skills that meet the multidisciplinary needs of the labor market.

2. Enhancing Curriculum Revision and Adaptation

Higher education leaders should regularly review and update curricula to incorporate industry-relevant knowledge and skills, keeping labor

market needs in view. This can be achieved by collaborating with industry experts, conducting regular needs assessments, and integrating practical, vocational, and experiential learning, industry-focused projects, and soft skills training. The goal should be to equip students with soft and technical skills directly applicable through their academic journey, enhancing their employability.

Moreover, higher education institutions should foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship among students and faculty. This can be done by supporting entrepreneurship programs, establishing incubators and innovation centers, and offering resources and mentorship for students interested in starting their ventures.

3. Establish career Guidance and Counseling Services.

Higher education institutions should invest in comprehensive career guidance and counseling services to assist students in making informed decisions about their academic and career paths. More robust systems should be in place to guide students in selecting their specializations based on labor market trends, personal aptitude, and interests, helping them align their educational choices with future employment prospects. This could be achieved through career counseling sessions, career fairs, or mentorship programs. Alums also can provide valuable insights into the labor market, offer mentoring opportunities, and contribute to the continuous improvement of academic offerings.

Emphasis on Continuous Self-Evaluation and Improvement

Higher education institutions must foster a culture of continuous self-evaluation and improvement. Regular reviews and feedback mechanisms should be in place to assess the effectiveness of teaching methods, curriculum relevance, and student outcomes. This should be done with internal and external stakeholders, including faculty, students, alumni, employers, and industry experts.

Long-term Strategic Planning

leaders in higher education should undertake long-term strategic planning with an eye toward future labor market trends. This includes anticipating industry, technology, societal needs, and demographic changes. Planning for these changes can help ensure their institutions and students are prepared for the evolving labor market landscape.

Implementing these recommendations will require strong leadership, collaboration, and a commitment to continuous improvement. By embracing these strategies, Saudi Arabian higher education leaders can bridge the gap between higher education and the labor market, ultimately enhancing graduates' employability and contributing to developing a skilled and competitive workforce.

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