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Leadership as a Governance Mechanism in Higher Education: An Integrative Analysis of Distributed Leadership, Quality Assurance, and Institutional Performance

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Abstract

Higher education systems worldwide face intensifying pressures for accountability, quality, and effective governance amid continual reform. This article presents a comprehensive integrative analysis framing leadership as a governance mechanism in higher education, synthesizing insights from three prior studies on distributed leadership, contextual leadership challenges, and quality assurance. Drawing on findings that distributed leadership fosters trust and collective efficacy, that higher education leaders navigate complex challenges (e.g. bureaucratic constraints, political interference, resource limitations) especially in developing contexts, and that leadership is pivotal in implementing quality assurance for improved institutional performance, this article proposes a unifying conceptual framework. In this framework, leadership fulfills key governance functions – coordinating institutional efforts, translating accountability demands into improvement-oriented practices, and building trust – which collectively enhance institutional outcomes. The analysis is grounded in contemporary higher education governance debates and offers a model whereby leadership (encompassing both formal and distributed forms) links governance processes to educational quality and performance. By reframing leadership through a governance lens, this article contributes a novel theoretical integration and practical insights for higher education leaders and policymakers striving to improve institutional governance and outcomes.

Keywords: Distributed Leadership, Higher Education Governance, Quality Assurance, Institutional Performance, Accountability, Trust

1. Introduction

In an era of rapid change and scrutiny in higher education, leadership has emerged as a critical factor in institutional success and governance effectiveness (Latha et al., 2025; Abdeldayem & Aldulaimi, 2022; Macfarlane et al., 2024; Riza et al., 2025). Universities and colleges are under mounting pressure to demonstrate educational quality, accountability to stakeholders, and agile governance amid reforms and global competition (Latha et al., 2025; Anggraheni & Maspiyoh, 2025; Ruan et al., 2023; Nabaho et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2016). Within this context, leadership is not only about personal influence or administrative efficiency; it increasingly serves as a *governance*

mechanism – a means through which institutions coordinate action, ensure accountability for performance, and build trust among stakeholders (Elo & Uljens, 2022; Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2021). This integrative article examines how leadership in higher education can be conceptually framed as a governance mechanism that links leadership processes with institutional governance functions and outcomes (Macfarlane et al., 2024; Anggraheni & Maspiyoh, 2025). It does so by synthesizing three prior peer-reviewed studies by the author, which separately investigated: (a) distributed leadership in educational contexts (emphasizing shared leadership and collaboration) (Carbone et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Kayode & Naicker, 2021), (b) leadership challenges and contextual factors in a developing higher education system (Pakistan) (Jamshaid et al., 2025; Ruan et al., 2023), and (c) leadership's role in implementing quality assurance mechanisms to drive institutional performance (Nadeem, 2023b; Holt et al., 2014).

Contemporary discourse in higher education governance highlights the need for effective leadership to meet the demands of accountability and quality improvement (Nadeem, 2023b; Ahmad & Ahmed, 2022; Nabaho et al., 2020; Stensaker, 2015). Yet, leadership studies and governance studies often remain siloed (Stensaker, 2015). The novelty of this article lies in integrating insights across these domains to propose a unified perspective. Individually, the prior studies offered important findings – for instance, that distributed leadership practices can foster inclusive decision-making and collective responsibility, enhancing trust and school improvement (Bolden, 2011; Spillane et al., 2001; Nadeem, 2024; Tschannen-Moran, 2014) that higher education leaders in contexts like Pakistan face multifaceted challenges (from bureaucratic hurdles to political interference) requiring strategic and context-responsive leadership (Nadeem, 2023a); and that strong leadership in quality assurance (QA) implementation is essential for achieving and sustaining institutional performance gains (Nadeem, 2023b; Ahmad & Ahmed, 2022; Holt et al., 2014). However, none of these studies alone framed leadership explicitly as a governance mechanism. By bridging them, this article develops a conceptual model in which leadership is the linchpin connecting distributed leadership practices, quality assurance processes, and institutional performance through core governance functions (Latha et al., 2025; Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2021; Macfarlane et al., 2024).

The structure of the article is as follows. The Theoretical Background section reviews relevant literature on distributed leadership, higher education governance, and quality assurance, establishing a foundation for integration. Next, Conceptual Integration of Prior Studies summarizes key findings of the three studies (on distributed leadership, contextual leadership challenges, and leadership in QA) and analyzes their interconnections. The Emergent Framework/Model section presents the integrated conceptual model, detailing how leadership performs governance functions – coordinating organizational activity, translating external accountability into internal improvement, and cultivating trust – that impact institutional outcomes. The Contribution to Knowledge section discusses how this integrative framing advances theoretical understanding of leadership and governance in higher education. The Implications for Higher Education Governance section addresses practical implications, offering insights for leaders and policymakers on strengthening governance through leadership approaches. Finally, the Conclusion reflects on the significance of viewing leadership as a governance mechanism and suggests avenues for future research. Throughout, the tone remains formal and analytical, aiming to engage an international scholarly readership interested in higher education leadership and governance.

By examining leadership through an integrative governance lens, this article responds to calls for more cohesive frameworks in higher education research that mirror the complexity of contemporary institutional challenges. Ultimately, it argues that effective leadership – distributed across stakeholders yet coordinated, accountability-oriented yet trust-building – can serve as a powerful governance mechanism to steer higher education institutions toward improved quality and performance.

2. Theoretical Background

Leadership and Governance in Higher Education: Leadership and governance are deeply intertwined in the context of higher education. Governance refers to the structures and processes through which institutions are directed, controlled, and held accountable, often involving boards, executive leaders, and participatory bodies (e.g. academic senates). Traditionally, the notion of *shared governance* has been prominent in academia, denoting a balance of authority among trustees, administrators, and faculty in decision-making. Shared governance is

fundamentally about collaboration and mutual oversight in university operations (Nabaho et al., 2020). Effective governance thus relies on leadership not as a solitary authority, but as a facilitative force that brings together diverse actors (faculty, staff, students, external stakeholders) toward common goals. In modern higher education, leadership is increasingly expected to bridge the gap between academic values and managerial imperatives – aligning institutional missions with external accountability demands such as accreditation standards, performance-based funding, and public expectations (Nabaho et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2016). Leaders (from presidents and vice-chancellors to deans and quality managers) play a key role in translating these governance requirements into institutional strategies and practices.

Distributed Leadership: One important theoretical strand is *distributed leadership*, which challenges heroic or individual-centric views of leadership. Distributed leadership (DL) posits that leadership is spread across multiple people and levels in an organization, rather than vested in a single leader at the top. In educational settings, Spillane et al. (2001) famously argued for studying leadership practice as a distributed phenomenon, focusing on interactions among leaders, followers, and their situation rather than individual traits (Spillane et al., 2001; Nadeem, 2024). Gronn (2002) likewise conceptualized leadership as a *conjoint agency*, emphasizing that multiple actors engage in leadership tasks in a coordinated way toward organizational objectives. Essentially, DL fosters an inclusive environment where various members (e.g. teachers or faculty, middle managers, staff) are empowered to participate in decision-making and share responsibility for outcomes (Spillane et al., 2001; Nadeem, 2024). This approach aligns with contemporary needs for innovation and adaptability: by tapping the expertise and initiative of many, distributed leadership can enhance problem-solving capacity and organizational learning. A fundamental element enabling effective distributed leadership is trust. Researchers have noted that trust acts as both a prerequisite for and an outcome of distributed leadership practice (Spillane et al., 2001; Nadeem, 2024). When leadership is shared, individuals need to trust one another's competence and intentions, and over time successful collaboration further builds trust in the leadership system (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Nadeem, 2024). Trust, in turn, contributes to a positive organizational climate and collective efficacy, which are linked to improved institutional performance and change readiness. While much distributed leadership literature originates from school contexts, the concept increasingly resonates in higher education, where traditional collegial models and contemporary networked structures both imply leadership dispersion. By viewing leadership as distributed, this article sees governance not just as top-down control but as a *collective process* of steering the institution, with formal leaders orchestrating and supporting leadership contributions across the organization.

Leadership Styles and Organizational Performance: Beyond distribution of leadership, classical leadership theories provide insight into how leaders influence organizational outcomes. Transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985; 1990) argues that leaders who inspire a shared vision, stimulate innovation, and attend to individual development can elevate followers' commitment and performance. Such leaders transform institutional culture and expectations, often yielding improved organizational outcomes. In higher education, transformational leadership has been associated with fostering innovation and responsiveness to change – qualities needed in governance amid shifting external demands. Other styles like transactional leadership (focusing on clear structures, rewards, and penalties) and servant leadership (emphasizing serving others and empowering followers) also inform how leadership is practiced. The prior study on quality assurance (Paper C) explicitly considered transformational, transactional, and distributed leadership styles in relation to quality enhancement (Bass, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bush, 2003; Nadeem, 2023b). While transformational leadership may align closely with inspiring a quality culture, and transactional leadership may ensure compliance with standards, distributed leadership complements these by engaging widespread participation in quality improvement efforts. An integrative governance perspective does not prescribe a single "best" style; rather, it suggests effective leadership in governance may require a *blend* or alignment of styles with context – for instance, being transformational to set vision and culture, transactional to meet formal requirements, and distributed to empower stakeholders.

Quality Assurance and Institutional Performance: Quality assurance (QA) in higher education encompasses the policies, procedures, and practices through which institutions maintain and improve academic standards and demonstrate accountability for educational outcomes. QA has become a central concern in higher education governance globally. Governments, accreditation bodies, and the public increasingly demand evidence of quality and continuous improvement. Key governance questions revolve around how institutions implement internal

quality assurance (e.g. program reviews, teaching evaluations, outcome assessments) and respond to external quality evaluations (accreditation, audits, rankings). Leadership is deeply implicated in QA processes: institutional leaders need to foster a culture that values quality, allocate resources for improvement, and ensure compliance with external standards. The literature distinguishes between accountability-driven QA (focused on compliance, meeting benchmarks, and reporting to authorities) and improvement-driven QA (focused on internal development, learning enhancement, and innovation). Effective governance often requires balancing these two aspects. Harvey and Newton (2007) note that quality assessment serves multiple purposes – accountability, control, and improvement – and warn that an overemphasis on compliance can create an "illusory tension" that undermines genuine enhancement of quality. This is where leadership comes in: leaders navigate external accountability pressures while cultivating an internal commitment to quality improvement. *Trust* is again a crucial factor – both internal trust (faculty trusting that QA is not merely punitive or bureaucratic) and external trust (public confidence in the institution's quality). Studies have found that overly compliance-oriented quality assurance systems can erode trust, particularly in emerging higher education contexts, whereas approaches that balance accountability with support and development tend to build credibility and engagement (Harvey & Newton, 2007; Ryan, 2015; Stensaker, 2008; Stensaker, 2019). Thus, leadership has the task of translating accountability requirements into practices that faculty and staff buy into, thereby maintaining trust and engagement.

Leadership as a Governance Mechanism: Bringing together these strands, this article approaches the concept of leadership-as-governance. In governance theory, mechanisms are the means or processes through which objectives (like coordination, control, and accountability) are achieved. Traditionally, governance mechanisms in higher education include formal regulations, committees, reporting systems, and incentive structures. This article posits that leadership itself functions as a mechanism to achieve governance aims. Specifically, leadership practices (whether by individuals or collectively distributed) can enact: (1) Coordination – aligning the myriad activities and decisions within the institution toward strategic goals; (2) Accountability translation – interpreting and implementing external accountability mandates in ways that also drive internal improvement; and (3) Trust-building – fostering a culture of integrity, openness, and mutual respect that underpins effective governance relationships (between administration and faculty, institution and stakeholders, etc.). This view is supported by organizational scholarship suggesting that leadership is the "glue" or sense-making force in organizations, especially in times of complexity (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In higher education, where formal authority is often diffuse and expertise decentralized, leadership's role in coordination and sense-making is even more vital. By conceptualizing leadership in terms of these governance functions, this article integrates the micro-level behaviors of leaders with the macro-level outcomes of governance. The theoretical background thus sets the stage for analyzing how empirical insights from the three prior studies can be woven together under this unifying lens.

3. Conceptual Integration of Prior Studies

This section reviews and integrates the key insights from the three foundational studies (referred to as Paper A, Paper B, and Paper C for ease of reference) on which this article builds (Paper A refers to Nadeem, 2024; Paper B refers to Nadeem, 2023a; Paper C refers to Nadeem, 2023b). Each study examined leadership from a different angle within higher education, and together their findings illuminate how leadership serves governance functions. This article summarizes each study's focus, context, and findings, and then analyzes how their insights collectively inform the emergent concept of leadership as a governance mechanism.

Paper A – Distributed Leadership in Educational Contexts: The first study focused on *distributed leadership* (DL) and its impact in educational settings. Conducted as a scholarly analysis in the context of schools (with implications for higher education), this article highlighted distributed leadership as a catalyst for organizational improvement and positive culture (Bolden, 2011; Spillane et al., 2001; Nadeem, 2024). Key findings from Paper A indicated that when leadership responsibilities are broadly shared – for example, when teachers or faculty members are empowered to take initiative in decision-making and innovation – institutions benefit from greater collective ownership of goals and enhanced capacity for change. The study emphasized that distributed leadership leads to an inclusive decision-making climate where members at various levels collaborate in shaping the institution's direction (Bolden, 2011; Spillane et al., 2001; Nadeem, 2024). Crucially, Paper A found that trust is both a condition and a consequence of effective distributed leadership (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Nadeem, 2024). Trust

among staff and leaders fosters open communication and willingness to share leadership roles, and as people experience successful collaboration, their trust in the leadership process deepens (Spillane et al., 2001; Nadeem, 2024). This reinforces a virtuous cycle: trust enables distribution of leadership, and distributed leadership, in turn, builds further trust and collective efficacy. The implications for governance are notable – rather than relying solely on hierarchical controls, an institution can use distributed leadership to coordinate and govern through professional goodwill and shared commitment. In effect, Paper A illuminated how leadership practice, when distributed, can function as a governance mechanism by promoting alignment and engagement without heavy-handed authority. Although this article was set largely in school contexts, it drew on higher education literature as well, suggesting that universities, with their diverse expert workforce, can similarly harness distributed leadership for improvement. For instance, faculty senates, departmental leadership teams, and cross-functional committees in universities reflect distributed leadership in action, relying on collegial trust and shared goals as governance foundations. Paper A thus contributes the insight that a governance system rooted in trust and shared responsibility can be highly effective, and leadership is the facilitator of that system.

Paper B – Leadership Challenges and Contextual Factors (Pakistan's Higher Education): The second study took a different lens, examining the challenges faced by higher education leaders in Pakistan, and the contextual factors that shape leadership effectiveness in a developing country setting (Nadeem, 2023a). Pakistan's higher education system, like many in the Global South, has expanded rapidly in recent decades, resulting in numerous new institutions and increased enrollment (Hoodbhoy, 2021). However, this expansion has come with significant governance and leadership challenges. Paper B was a comprehensive literature-based analysis identifying a *multifaceted array of challenges* that university leaders in Pakistan are required to navigate (Nadeem, 2023a). Among the challenges highlighted were: bureaucratic constraints, where rigid administrative procedures and centralized control can stifle initiative; financial limitations due to underfunding; governance issues including unclear roles and politicization; lack of faculty empowerment in decision-making; pressures of maintaining quality assurance with limited capacity; political interference in leadership appointments and university affairs; rapid technology integration needs; brain drain of talented academics; gender inequality affecting leadership diversity; and insufficient research funding (Nadeem, 2023a). This exhaustive list underscores that leadership in such contexts is profoundly shaped by external and internal governance environments. Paper B argued that addressing these challenges requires strategic and transformative leadership approaches, rather than status quo management. It advocated for "transformative approaches that foster innovation, excellence, and progress" in Pakistan's HE landscape (Nadeem, 2023a), effectively calling for leaders who can drive structural and cultural changes. The study's relevance to governance lies in its attention to how *contextual governance structures* (political systems, resource distributions, policy frameworks) either enable or constrain leadership actions. For example, *political interference* in university governance – such as external authorities influencing vice-chancellor appointments – can undermine meritocratic leadership and erode trust in governance (a scenario not uncommon in many countries' public universities). Similarly, *bureaucratic constraints* reflect governance arrangements that may prioritize control and compliance over flexibility, requiring leaders to find creative ways to motivate and coordinate their institutions within tight rules. Paper B's findings suggest that effective leadership as a governance mechanism is context-responsive. In other words, leaders need to adapt their governance strategies to the local context: building coalitions to reduce political pressures, streamlining bureaucratic processes to empower faculty, securing resources through advocacy or partnerships, and instilling a quality culture even when external QA demands feel burdensome. The Pakistan case amplifies a general point: higher education leaders operate within specific governance regimes, and their success in fulfilling governance functions (coordination, accountability, trust-building) depends on how well they manage and reform those contextual factors. Thus, Paper B contributes the insight that leadership-as-governance is best understood in context – especially in environments of constrained resources and politicized governance, leadership plays a reformist and buffering role, aligning institutional goals with external expectations while protecting academic values.

Paper C – Leadership's Role in Implementing Quality Assurance for Institutional Performance: The third study zeroed in on the nexus between leadership and quality assurance (QA) in higher education, investigating how leadership influences the implementation of QA mechanisms and, by extension, institutional performance outcomes. Paper C, published in *Education Quarterly Reviews*, provided a conceptual analysis and framework demonstrating that leadership is central to successful quality assurance initiatives (Nadeem, 2023b; Ahmad &

Ahmed, 2022). It examined how various leadership styles – notably transformational, transactional, and distributed – intersect with QA processes to impact educational quality (Bass, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Nadeem, 2023b). The study found that *transformational leadership* can inspire a quality-oriented vision and motivate stakeholders to embrace quality enhancement efforts, *transactional leadership* can establish clear expectations and accountability for meeting quality standards, and *distributed leadership* can engage multiple actors (faculty committees, department heads, etc.) in carrying out quality improvement activities. One of the key messages of Paper C was that without strong and supportive leadership, QA mechanisms risk becoming mere bureaucratic exercises. For instance, the establishment of internal QA units or committees (such as Quality Enhancement Cells in Pakistan's universities) is not sufficient by itself – leaders need to actively champion the importance of quality, allocate necessary resources, and use QA findings to inform strategic decisions. Participants in related case studies observed that the absence of a *"common culture of quality assurance"* was detrimental, and that the institutional leader plays a critical role in creating and sustaining a culture of quality assurance practices (Nadeem, 2023b). This involves consistent communication about quality goals, modeling the use of data for improvement, and recognizing and rewarding good practice. Paper C also underscored the idea that leadership balances external and internal facets of QA. External quality assurance (e.g. accreditation, audits) brings accountability; leaders need to ensure compliance with these requirements to maintain credibility and legitimacy. At the same time, internal quality assurance (academic program reviews, teaching evaluations, etc.) should be leveraged as tools for continuous improvement rather than seen as checkbox exercises. The study referenced international evidence that QA systems are most credible and effective when accountability is coupled with developmental support for units and staff. Leaders can provide that support – for example, by offering faculty development for teaching improvement in response to evaluation results, rather than using evaluations punitively. Another important insight from Paper C relates to trust: in environments where QA has been imposed in a top-down compliance-oriented manner, faculty often distrust the process, which can undermine genuine improvement. Leaders who engage faculty in dialogue about quality, allow transparency in QA processes, and demonstrate that QA is aimed at enhancement (not just surveillance) can build trust, thereby making QA implementation more successful. Ultimately, Paper C concluded that leadership significantly influences institutional performance via quality assurance: institutions with committed, strategic leaders tend to integrate QA into their governance and decision-making, leading to improvements in teaching, learning, and administrative services (reflected in outcomes like student success, stakeholder satisfaction, accreditation results, etc.). Thus, this article contributes the understanding that leadership operationalizes governance in the domain of quality – acting as the bridge between accountability mandates and the on-the-ground academic practices that produce educational quality.

Integrative Analysis: When viewed together, the findings of Papers A, B, and C provide a multi-dimensional picture of leadership in higher education. Paper A contributes a micro-organizational perspective: how leadership distribution and trust at the grassroots level can improve internal governance and outcomes. Paper B provides a macro-contextual perspective: how external governance conditions and systemic challenges demand certain leadership responses. Paper C adds a process perspective: illustrating leadership's role in a critical governance process (quality assurance) that connects external accountability and internal improvement. The integrative insight that emerges is that leadership functions as a connecting fiber between the various elements of governance – people, structures, and processes – to produce effective institutional performance. In essence:

- From *Paper A*, this article takes the idea that leadership, when shared and trust-infused, can serve as an *internal governance mechanism* to coordinate action and innovation beyond formal hierarchies. This highlights the coordination and trust-building functions of leadership.
- From *Paper B*, this article recognizes that leadership does not operate in a vacuum; it contends with and shapes the *governance environment*. Effective leadership can mitigate the negative effects of poor governance (e.g. by pushing for structural reforms, advocating for resources, or creating workarounds to bureaucratic red tape) and harness positive elements (e.g. leveraging policy support or cultural values). This emphasizes the adaptive and buffering role of leadership in governance – essentially translating external constraints into feasible internal strategies.
- From *Paper C*, this article sees a concrete instantiation of leadership as governance mechanism: leaders drive accountability and improvement through QA. Leadership sets the tone for whether governance processes like QA are merely for compliance or are tools for progress. This accentuates the

accountability-translating function of leadership – connecting stakeholder demands for quality with the institution's internal practices and culture.

Notably, a few unifying themes cut across all three studies. One is accountability vs. improvement – the dual pressures on institutions. In each study, leadership is depicted as crucial to turning accountability (external or internal) into real improvements. Distributed leadership (Paper A) turns individual accountability into collaborative improvement; contextual leadership (Paper B) aims to transform compliance-driven systems into innovative ones; leadership in QA (Paper C) uses external standards as a springboard for internal enhancement. Another theme is trust and legitimacy. Paper A shows trust emerging from inclusive leadership; Paper B implicitly touches on trust in institutions (which is undermined by politicization or poor governance, requiring leaders to restore it); Paper C highlights trust in QA processes and outcomes. Trust is the currency of governance – stakeholders will follow governance decisions if they trust the leaders and processes. Therefore, building trust is a critical leadership task that underpins successful coordination and accountability in all contexts.

In summary, the integration of these studies suggests a holistic proposition: leadership in higher education can be conceptually understood as a governance mechanism that aligns distributed efforts, contextual realities, and quality assurance imperatives toward the goal of improved institutional performance. This proposition is more than the sum of the parts of each study. It reframes leadership not just as a variable influencing outcomes, but as the *mechanism of governance itself* – the active agent that carries out governance through coordinating people, complying with and modulating accountability demands, and nurturing the trust and engagement needed for an institution to function effectively. The next section articulates the emergent framework/model derived from this integration, making explicit the components and relationships in this conceptualization.

4. Emergent Framework / Model

Building on the integrated insights from the previous section, this article proposes an emergent conceptual framework that portrays leadership as a governance mechanism in higher education. The framework can be summarized as follows: Leadership (in various forms and styles) → Core Governance Functions (Coordination, Accountability Translation, Trust-Building) → Institutional Outcomes (Quality Improvement, Effective Performance, Stakeholder Confidence). In this model, leadership is the driving force that executes governance functions, which in turn lead to desired outcomes for the institution. This framework (conceptually described here) illustrates these relationships, showing leadership at the input side, the governance functions as intermediate processes, and outcomes on the output side, all embedded in the context of a higher education institution.

Leadership Inputs – Styles and Distribution: On the left side of the framework, this article recognizes that *leadership in higher education is multi-faceted*. It includes formal leadership (e.g. senior administrators such as presidents, rectors, deans) and informal or distributed leadership (e.g. faculty leading initiatives, student leaders, committees). It also spans different leadership styles – for instance, transformational leadership (which inspires and drives change), transactional leadership (which sets clear expectations and maintains standards), and distributed/shared leadership (which mobilizes collective involvement) (Bass, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Nadeem, 2023b). The framework does not privilege one style as universally superior; rather, it suggests effective governance may require a *context-appropriate mix*. For example, a vice-chancellor might use transformational tactics to set a compelling vision for academic excellence, employ transactional methods to hold units accountable to accreditation standards, and foster distributed leadership by empowering faculty committees to design curricula or improvement plans. The key is that leadership – however it is configured – provides the initiating impetus and continuous guidance for governance processes. Without leadership engagement, formal governance structures (like committees or policies) may exist on paper but lack vitality. With active leadership, those structures become arenas of productive coordination and decision-making.

Core Governance Functions Executed by Leadership: At the heart of the framework are three core functions that leadership performs as a governance mechanism:

1. Coordination and Alignment: Leadership coordinates by setting direction and aligning the actions of various parts of the institution. This involves strategic planning, priority-setting, and ensuring different departments and stakeholders work synergistically rather than at cross purposes. Coordination has a

horizontal aspect (aligning activities across faculties or units) and a vertical aspect (aligning institutional strategy with departmental implementation and individual efforts). Effective coordination addresses the classic challenge in higher education governance: the "silo" effect, where faculties or administrative units operate in isolation. A leader acting as a coordinator uses tools like inclusive planning processes, cross-campus task forces, and clear communication of goals to break down silos. For instance, a university president might coordinate a campus-wide initiative to improve undergraduate learning outcomes by convening working groups of faculty, student services, and institutional research staff, thereby integrating academic and administrative perspectives. This coordination function resonates with distributed leadership principles – it requires engaging many people and orchestrating their contributions toward a coherent whole. It also reflects what in corporate governance might be called the *integrator role* of leadership. By coordinating, leadership helps govern the institution in a way that maximizes use of talents and resources across the board.

2. Accountability Translation: Modern higher education institutions face numerous accountability demands – from government mandates, accreditation requirements, performance metrics, to student and employer expectations. One critical function of leadership is to *translate* these external (and internal) accountability pressures into policies and practices that make sense within the institution and lead to improvement rather than mere compliance. This translation involves interpretation, prioritization, and implementation. For example, consider a new national policy requiring universities to adopt outcome-based education and assess student learning outcomes regularly. A leader's role is to interpret what this means for their institution's context (e.g. which outcomes matter for which programs), to prioritize resources and attention (e.g. choosing to invest in an assessment office or faculty training), and to implement processes (e.g. instituting annual learning outcome reports) that both satisfy the external requirement and genuinely benefit the institution's educational quality. Leadership bridges the external and internal – ensuring that the institution can answer to external stakeholders (showing compliance and performance) while also fostering internal buy-in by linking those requirements to the institution's mission and values. This can be seen in the way effective leaders handle accreditation: rather than treating it as a one-time hurdle, they embed accreditation standards into ongoing quality enhancement activities, thereby turning an external check into an internal developmental tool. Research supports the need for such balance; overly compliance-centric approaches can breed faculty cynicism, whereas approaches that emphasize improvement can fulfill accountability in a more meaningful way. Thus, through accountability translation, leadership performs a governance function of control with purpose – not control in an authoritarian sense, but in ensuring that standards are met in a way congruent with institutional goals.

3. Trust-Building and Legitimation: Governance in higher education ultimately depends on legitimacy and trust. Faculty and staff need to trust institutional leaders and governance processes to follow them in challenging times; students and external stakeholders (e.g. parents, employers, regulators) need to trust that the institution is delivering value and quality. Leadership plays a pivotal role in building and maintaining this trust. Internally, trust is built through fairness, transparency, inclusivity, and competence. For example, leaders who engage faculty in important decisions, communicate rationale for changes clearly, and follow through on commitments tend to earn greater trust. This internal trust underlies effective shared governance, as shared governance fundamentally depends on trust-building among faculty, students, and governing bodies to enable institutional progress (Nabaho et al., 2020). Externally, leaders build trust by *symbolizing integrity* and responsiveness – for instance, publicly sharing institutional performance data, welcoming external reviews, and demonstrating improvement on issues of public concern (like graduate employability or research impact). Leadership also manages the narrative of the institution, thereby influencing stakeholder confidence (e.g. through annual reports, community engagement, and media communication). In the framework, trust-building is not a vague ideal but a functional mechanism: high trust levels facilitate smoother implementation of policies (people cooperate rather than resist), increase tolerance for short-term failures during innovation (stakeholders give benefit of the doubt), and enhance the institution's reputation (stakeholders advocate for and support the university). Trust is especially crucial in contexts of change or crisis – if a governance change is introduced (say a new QA system or a major curriculum reform), whether it succeeds may hinge on the trust leaders have cultivated. Paper A highlighted trust as intertwined with leadership distribution (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Nadeem, 2024), and Paper C implied trust as a condition for QA acceptance;

the framework elevates trust-building as a core function that leadership continually perform to sustain effective governance.

These three functions – coordination, accountability translation, and trust-building – are mutually reinforcing. Coordination done transparently can build trust. Translating accountability in a fair, improvement-driven way also builds trust (as opposed to imposing mandates without consultation). Trust, in turn, makes coordination easier (people align willingly) and makes accepting accountability measures more palatable. Together, they represent the operationalization of leadership-as-governance.

Institutional Outcomes: On the right side of the framework are the outcomes that effective leadership-as-governance seeks to achieve. While specific outcomes can vary, the broad categories include: Educational Quality Improvement, Institutional Performance, and Stakeholder Satisfaction/Confidence. Educational quality improvement refers to tangible enhancements in teaching, learning, and research – for example, higher student engagement, better learning outcomes, improved program review results, innovations in curriculum, or increased research productivity. Institutional performance often encompasses not just academic quality but also efficiency and strategic goal attainment – metrics like graduation rates, accreditation status, world rankings, financial health, etc. Stakeholder confidence (or trust, legitimacy) is more intangible but evident in things like student enrollment demand, alumni support, employer feedback, and government or community relations. The framework posits that when leadership effectively carries out the governance functions above, it creates conditions for positive results in these areas. For instance, by coordinating efforts towards a student success agenda (leadership function) and building trust with faculty in the process, a university might see improved retention and graduation rates (outcome). Or, by translating accountability requirements from an accreditation body into meaningful internal improvements and communicating them openly, an institution might both satisfy the accreditors (performance outcome) and gain stronger reputation among prospective students (stakeholder confidence outcome).

It is important to note that this framework is dynamic and context-sensitive. Feedback loops exist: outcomes can in turn affect leadership and governance (e.g. a boost in performance can reinforce trust in leadership, whereas a crisis can erode it, necessitating even stronger leadership action). Additionally, the external context (as highlighted by Paper B) surrounds this model – governmental policies, cultural factors, economic conditions, and institutional history will moderate how leadership can perform these functions. For example, in a highly centralized higher education system, the scope for distributed leadership might be narrower, placing more weight on top leaders to coordinate and build trust in creative ways. In a resource-poor environment, demonstrating performance gains may require prioritizing where improvements can be made with limited means, again testing leadership ingenuity.

In sum, the emergent framework/model provides a structured way to understand the role of leadership in higher education governance. It moves beyond saying "leadership matters" to articulating *how* leadership matters in governance terms – by coordinating complex organizations, mediating between accountability and improvement, and cultivating the trust that holds the academic community together. This model is the core contribution of the integration, offering both a conceptual lens for researchers and a practical guide for academic leaders. Next, this article discusses this contribution to knowledge in more depth, and then explores implications for real-world governance practice.

5. Contribution to Knowledge

This integrative analysis contributes to the scholarly understanding of higher education leadership and governance in several significant ways:

1. A Unified Theoretical Lens: The primary contribution is the development of a unified lens that links leadership and governance concepts, which are often treated separately. By framing leadership as a governance mechanism, the article bridges micro-level leadership dynamics (e.g. trust, empowerment, leadership styles) with macro-level governance outcomes (e.g. quality assurance, institutional performance, stakeholder accountability). This responds to a gap in literature where calls have been made to better connect leadership theory with governance theory in education. Existing research has richly documented leadership styles and their effects, as well as governance structures and reforms, but seldom are leadership behaviors explicitly conceptualized in governance terms. The integrative framework posits that certain core functions (coordination, accountability translation, trust-building)

are the missing conceptual link – they translate what leaders *do* into what governance *achieves*. This offers a more process-oriented view of governance, positioning leadership actions as the engine driving governance success. The framework aligns with and extends prior notions such as *shared governance* by detailing how leadership (both shared and hierarchical) can enact shared governance principles in practice. It also dovetails with organizational theories that view leadership as central to organizational sense-making and alignment. However, by explicitly couching it in governance language, the framework encourages researchers to analyze leadership impacts not just on proximate outcomes (like follower satisfaction or unit performance) but on institution-wide governance outcomes like policy implementation effectiveness, cultural cohesion, and long-term sustainability.

2. Synthesis of Empirical Insights Across Contexts: Another contribution lies in synthesizing empirical insights from different contexts and levels of analysis (school-level distributed leadership, country-level challenges in Pakistan, institutional QA processes) and demonstrating their interoperability. This cross-context integration suggests the framework's broader applicability. For instance, trust emerged as a theme in both distributed leadership in schools and QA in universities; by bringing them together, the analysis underscores the universality of trust as a leadership-governance linchpin across educational contexts (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Nadeem, 2024). Similarly, the notion of leadership navigating external demands appears in both the developing country governance challenges and QA implementation; integrating them highlights that whether the external demand is government policy or accreditation criteria, the leadership task of translation is fundamentally similar. The contribution here is in revealing underlying commonalities: it shows that a principal trying to improve a school through teacher empowerment and a university vice-chancellor trying to meet accreditation standards through faculty engagement are in fact addressing the same governance challenge – aligning people with requirements through leadership. By doing so, the article encourages a more coherent approach to studying educational leadership across K-12 and higher education, and across different national contexts, focusing on functional roles of leadership rather than siloed settings.

3. Conceptual Innovation – Governance Functions of Leadership: The identification and articulation of the three governance functions (coordination, accountability translation, trust-building) can be seen as a conceptual innovation in the context of higher education studies. While each of these concepts is known in isolation (coordination is a classic organizational function, accountability is a hot topic in governance, trust has been studied in academic contexts), framing them as integrated functions executed by leadership offers a novel way to categorize and evaluate leadership activities. Future research can build on this by operationalizing these functions – for example, developing instruments or qualitative indicators to assess how well a given institution's leadership is performing each function. This could be valuable for research and practice. For researchers, it opens new questions: Is one function more critical than others in certain contexts (e.g. trust-building might be paramount in a low-trust environment, whereas coordination might be key in highly complex, decentralized systems)? Do certain leadership styles inherently favor certain functions (e.g. is transformational leadership especially suited to trust-building, whereas transactional aids accountability translation)? For practitioners and organizations, this conceptualization provides a diagnostic tool. Governing boards or policy-makers could evaluate institutional leadership not just by typical KPIs (like financial metrics or enrollment numbers) but by asking: Are our leaders effectively coordinating across silos? How well are they translating new policies into practice? What is the level of trust within the institution? These questions, derived from the framework, are directly tied to governance health and can inform professional development and evaluation.

4. Integrating Quality Assurance into Leadership Narrative: The article also contributes by more deeply integrating *quality assurance* into the leadership and governance narrative. Quality assurance has often been discussed in higher education literature somewhat apart from leadership theory – usually in terms of systems, policies, and impacts on faculty work. By bringing QA into the fold of leadership-as-governance (especially via Paper C's insights), the article highlights that QA is not just a technical or bureaucratic process but fundamentally a *leadership-driven process*. This enriches leadership studies by adding the dimension of how leaders influence organizational learning and quality culture. It also enriches governance studies by emphasizing human agency (leadership) in processes that are sometimes analyzed as structural or compliance-based. The concept of *quality culture*, for instance, is frequently mentioned in QA literature; this article essentially argues that leadership is the mechanism by which a quality culture is established or weakened. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary

debates on how to achieve meaningful quality enhancement in higher education. It supports the argument that investing in leadership development (particularly in change leadership and communication skills) is key to making QA reforms work – an argument that might influence policy recommendations or institutional improvement initiatives.

5. Relevance to Contemporary Reform Discourses: Finally, this integrative perspective contributes a timely viewpoint to contemporary higher education reform discourses. Across the world, higher education is experiencing calls for greater accountability, for adoption of new pedagogies and technologies, for inclusion and equity, and for demonstrating value to society. Often these reforms come as top-down mandates or broad trends (e.g. outcomes-based funding, international ranking races, online education expansion). The concept of leadership as governance mechanism provides a way to think about *how* these reforms can be effectively implemented or moderated at the institutional level. It suggests that successful reform is less about the specific content of policies and more about the presence of effective leadership that can coordinate, translate, and build trust around the change. Thus, it contributes a perspective that places leadership capacity at the center of higher education innovation and resilience. By formalizing this idea, the article adds weight to arguments for leadership capacity-building as part of governance reform (e.g. leadership training for department chairs on governance, or creation of roles like chief quality officers who blend leadership and QA expertise). Moreover, for scholars and theorists, it invites more integrative research designs – for example, studying a higher education reform by examining simultaneously the policy environment, the institutional leader's actions, and the trust/cohesion among faculty, rather than limiting the focus to one aspect.

In summary, the contributions of this work are both conceptual and practical. Conceptually, it unites disparate threads into a cohesive model of leadership in governance. Practically, it yields insights that can inform how institutions approach leadership development, governance restructuring, and change management. It advances the field's knowledge by highlighting the often underappreciated *mechanistic* role of leadership in making governance systems function effectively. This integrated understanding is especially pertinent to higher education, where traditional collegial governance and modern executive leadership coexist and complement each other – a balance that this article's perspective helps to explain and guide.

6. Implications for Higher Education Governance

Viewing leadership as a governance mechanism carries several important implications for higher education institutions, policy-makers, and stakeholders. These implications span practical governance arrangements, leadership development, policy formulation, and further scholarly inquiry. Below, this article outlines key implications and recommendations derived from the analysis:

1. Strengthening Shared Governance through Leadership Practices: One implication is that institutions should intentionally strengthen their shared governance by cultivating distributed leadership and trust at all levels. Governing boards and senior leaders should recognize that effective governance is not achieved solely by formal statutes or committees, but by how people in those structures interact and lead. Thus, universities might invest in programs that train and support department chairs, faculty committee heads, and other mid-level leaders in collaborative leadership skills. By doing so, these institutions ensure that coordination is happening horizontally, not just top-down. For example, workshops on team leadership, conflict resolution, and cross-department collaboration for academic leaders can enhance coordination across silos. Additionally, institutions should embed trust-building measures in governance routines: this could include transparent communication strategies (regular town halls, open budget forums), inclusive decision-making processes (joint committees with faculty and administrators for major initiatives), and consistent follow-through on decisions (to show reliability). These practices, championed by top leadership, reinforce a culture of trust and shared responsibility. In essence, an implication is that good governance requires distributed leadership capacity, so attention should be paid to developing leadership skills broadly in the academic community, not only focusing on those at the top.

2. Leadership Selection and Evaluation Criteria: For those responsible for hiring or evaluating institutional leaders (such as boards selecting a president, or presidents hiring deans), the framework suggests specific criteria to prioritize. Beyond academic credentials or managerial experience, selection committees should consider a candidate's proven ability or philosophy in coordinating diverse teams, translating external demands into internal

action, and building trust. Interview questions or reference checks could probe examples of how the candidate has built consensus around a strategic plan (coordination), how they responded to an external mandate in their previous role (accountability translation), or how they handled a crisis of trust or morale. Performance evaluations of leaders in post can similarly incorporate these dimensions: for instance, a dean's success might be measured not just by faculty research outputs in their college but also by evidence of improved internal collaboration and a healthy climate of trust (perhaps measured by faculty surveys). This marks a shift from seeing leadership performance in purely outcome terms to also assessing *process*, which is vital to long-term governance health.

3. Policy and System-Level Support: At the system or government policy level, the analysis implies that policy-makers should design higher education reforms in ways that enable and leverage effective institutional leadership, rather than bypass or stifle it. For example, if a government is rolling out a new quality assurance framework or performance-based funding scheme, it should provide institutions with flexibility and support so that leaders can adapt the implementation to their context. Rigid, one-size-fits-all mandates might backfire if they don't allow institutional leaders to perform the necessary translation function. Moreover, policy-makers could invest in leadership development initiatives at the national/regional level – such as leadership academies for university administrators, mentoring programs, or communities of practice for sharing governance best practices. These initiatives acknowledge that improving governance across a higher education system partly hinges on enhancing the skills and networks of leaders who operate that governance. In contexts like Pakistan (from Paper B) and other developing systems, donors and governments might fund capacity-building projects that address identified gaps: for instance, training in financial management for academic leaders to better handle resource constraints (linking to accountability), or forums for university leaders to dialogue with government officials to mitigate political interference through mutual understanding and trust-building.

4. Balancing Accountability and Improvement in Quality Assurance: For quality assurance specifically, the implication is that institutions (and accrediting bodies) should strive for approaches that balance accountability with improvement – and that to do so, they need to rely on skilled leadership within institutions. Accrediting agencies or quality auditors might include, as part of their review criteria, an examination of how the institution's leadership engages faculty and staff in QA processes. If an accreditor observes that QA is handled by a small office in isolation, with little leadership involvement or campus-wide engagement, it could signal a risk to sustainability of quality improvements. Therefore, accreditors might recommend greater leadership-driven integration of QA into governance (for instance, requiring that institutional strategic plans include quality enhancement goals championed by leadership, or checking that leadership communicates accreditation results and follow-up actions transparently to stakeholders). From the institutional side, leaders should approach QA not as a compliance checklist but as an opportunity to galvanize organizational learning. This could involve reframing required reports as tools for reflection, celebrating improvements publicly to reinforce a quality culture, and personally modeling an evidence-based mindset (e.g. a president who openly discusses institutional data trends and how they plan to address weaknesses). The analysis underscores that such an approach can improve both actual performance and the perceived legitimacy of the QA process among faculty (since it is seen as internally beneficial, not just externally imposed).

5. Addressing Contextual Challenges Proactively: The challenges outlined in Paper B for Pakistan's system carry broader lessons: many higher education institutions worldwide face some mix of bureaucratic inertia, resource scarcity, and political pressures. The implication is that leaders and governing bodies should proactively identify and tackle these governance hurdles as part of their strategic planning. For instance, if bureaucracy is slowing innovation, an implication might be for leaders to streamline decision-making processes – perhaps by delegating more authority to academic units, reducing unnecessary committees, or employing technology for quicker administrative workflows. If political interference is an issue, leaders might work on strengthening institutional autonomy through formal charters or by building coalitions of support that make undue interference harder. They should also double down on meritocratic and transparent processes for hiring and promotions to bolster internal trust and external credibility (countering any narratives of politicization). Essentially, leaders should not just react to contextual constraints but see influencing the context as part of their job. Governing boards and government officials, on their part, should empower such proactive leadership – for example, by granting reasonable autonomy to institutions and protecting leaders who take decisions in the long-term interest of academic quality even if those

are politically unpalatable (like shutting down low-performing programs or disciplining misconduct). The analysis suggests that insulating academic decision-making from capricious political or external pressures helps leaders focus on governance core functions and build internal trust.

6. Leadership Development and Succession Planning: The perspective that leadership is central to governance success implies that institutions need robust leadership development and succession planning. Universities should cultivate a pipeline of future leaders who understand governance functions. This might involve rotating faculty through administrative internships or leadership fellowships, mentoring promising individuals, and providing cross-functional experiences (so a future dean, for instance, has served on important committees like budget and quality councils to understand coordination and accountability issues firsthand). Succession planning ensures continuity in governance approaches; if a trusted leader departs, having others who are versed in the same values and processes can maintain stability. This is particularly critical for trust – trust in an institution can be severely tested during leadership transitions. A smooth handover where the new leader already has relationships and credibility can preserve the trust capital built up, whereas a sudden change with no prepared successor could set back governance cohesion significantly.

7. Engaging Stakeholders in Governance Discourse: A further implication is the importance of engaging external stakeholders (students, parents, industry, community) in the governance discourse through leadership outreach. Since leadership as governance mechanism includes building external trust and legitimacy, leaders should not confine themselves to internal matters. They should form advisory boards, community forums, or student councils that allow stakeholder voices in governance. For example, involving student representatives in quality assurance reviews or consulting employers when updating curricula can be led by academic managers and signals an inclusive governance ethos. This not only improves decisions by incorporating diverse perspectives but also strengthens stakeholder confidence that the institution is responsive and well-governed. In an era where public skepticism about higher education's value runs high in some regions, outward-engaging leadership can help rebuild public trust by emphasizing accountability and public value to external stakeholders (Nabaho et al., 2020). Therefore, an implication is that leaders need to act as diplomats and communicators beyond campus, which is a governance function of representation and legitimacy.

8. Research and Monitoring: Finally, for scholars and institutional research units, the framework implies new angles for monitoring and research. Institutions might monitor indicators related to the governance functions: for coordination, one could track cross-department collaboration frequency or alignment in strategic goal achievement across units; for accountability translation, one could assess the extent to which external requirements lead to internal policy updates or improvements; for trust, one can use climate surveys or 360-degree feedback on leadership. By including these in institutional self-assessments or dashboards, governing bodies can gain a more nuanced picture of governance effectiveness. Moreover, further research could test and refine the proposed model in different settings – an implication for academia is to encourage studies that, for example, examine case studies of successful governance reforms through the lens of leadership actions, or compare institutions that thrived versus struggled under similar external pressures, to see if leadership function execution differed. This kind of research will feed back into practice, continually improving the understanding of how to govern universities in challenging times.

In conclusion, the implications of adopting a leadership-as-governance perspective are broad and actionable. They essentially call for a re-centering of human agency and relational processes in the practice of higher education governance. Institutions that heed these implications are likely to be more agile, cohesive, and trusted – characteristics that are invaluable in navigating the uncertain future of higher education.

7. Conclusion

Higher education institutions today operate in an environment of complexity, scrutiny, and change. This article has argued that meeting the challenges of this environment requires viewing and harnessing leadership as a governance mechanism. By integrating insights from three distinct studies, this article presented a conceptual model in which leadership – encompassing both influential individuals and distributed networks of actors – performs the crucial governance functions of coordinating action, translating accountability into improvement, and building trust,

thereby driving positive institutional outcomes in quality and performance. This integrative lens is a departure from approaches that treat leadership and governance separately; instead, it underscores their synergy and interdependence.

In concluding, several key takeaways emerge. First, leadership in higher education is not merely about administrative efficiency or personal charisma; it is fundamentally about enabling the institution to navigate between its academic mission and the demands of its stakeholders. Effective leaders act as intermediaries between the internal academic community and the external accountability environment, ensuring coherence and purpose in how institutions respond to pressures. Second, trust stands out as the bedrock of sustainable governance. Trust facilitates open communication, eases the acceptance of necessary changes, and is both a product of and prerequisite for successful distributed leadership (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Nadeem, 2024). Without trust, even well-designed governance structures falter; with trust, even informal arrangements can yield cooperation and progress. Third, context matters – leadership as governance is exercised in specific cultural, political, and economic contexts, which means strategies are tailored. The lessons drawn from Pakistan's higher education scenario, for example, may differ in particulars from those in other countries, but they universally highlight the need for leaders to be contextually astute, reform-oriented, and resilient in the face of systemic constraints (Nadeem, 2023a).

This article's proposed framework offers both a diagnostic and an aspirational tool. Diagnostically, stakeholders can examine their institutions through this lens to identify gaps – perhaps coordination is weak, or accountability processes are alienating rather than engaging, or trust levels are low – and pinpoint where leadership efforts should concentrate. Aspirationally, the framework provides a vision of a well-governed institution: one where leadership is not concentrated at the top alone, but infused throughout the organization; where everyone understands how external requirements connect to internal values and goals; and where a culture of trust and continuous improvement pervades daily operations. Achieving this may be challenging, but it aligns with the highest ideals of higher education as collegial, evidence-driven, and socially responsive institutions.

It is important to note that this integration did not introduce new empirical data; rather, it rearranged existing pieces into a new conceptual whole. As such, one limitation is that the framework remains to be empirically validated in future research. Do institutions that exemplify these leadership governance functions indeed perform better or handle crises more effectively? Future studies could take up this question, employing case studies, surveys, or longitudinal designs to test the relationships posited here. Additionally, while this article avoided the first-person perspective, it is implicit that the synthesis was informed by the author's prior work; other scholars might bring in additional literature to expand or critique the model – for example, incorporating perspectives on academic power dynamics or the role of digital technologies in leadership and governance (an area for further exploration given the rise of data-driven decision-making).

In closing, as higher education worldwide faces calls for transformation – whether through embracing equity, technology, interdisciplinary knowledge, or societal engagement – the success of these endeavors will depend less on *what* changes are proposed and more on *how* they are implemented and led. Governing boards, policy-makers, and academic communities should pay as much attention to fostering effective leadership processes as they do to drafting strategic plans and policies. The integrative analysis presented here reinforces that leadership is the conduit through which the abstract ideals of governance become lived realities. When leadership is exercised as a thoughtful, inclusive, and accountable governance mechanism, higher education institutions are not only better governed – they are also better poised to fulfill their varied missions in service of students and society.

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