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Operationalizing Leadership as a Governance Mechanism in Higher Education: A Conceptual and Methodological Framework for Empirical Inquiry

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Abstract
Higher education scholarship widely recognizes the interdependence of leadership and governance, yet this relationship is rarely operationalized for systematic empirical examination. Building on scholarship that conceptualizes leadership as a governance mechanism, this article develops a conceptual and methodological framework that renders leadership as governance empirically examinable within higher education institutions. The framework identifies three governance functions enacted through leadership, namely coordination, accountability translation, and trust building, and translates each function into measurable constructs. These constructs are illustrated through dimensions, indicators, and potential data sources organized in a construct indicator matrix. To support empirical inquiry across institutional contexts, the article outlines mixed methods pathways combining survey-based measurement and structural modeling with qualitative case-based inquiry. This approach enables analysis of both patterned relationships and governance processes in practice. Four propositions are advanced to guide future research, positioning trust building as a mediating pathway, accountability translation as a moderating condition, coordination as a driver of institutional alignment and performance, and the joint enactment of all three functions as a synergistic configuration. While informed by governance challenges observed in Pakistan and comparable Global South systems, the framework is articulated in transferable terms to support comparative research across diverse contexts.

Keywords: Higher Education, Educational Leadership, Governance, Accountability, Coordination, Trust, Mixed Methods, Operationalization

1. Introduction

Higher education research increasingly recognizes that leadership and governance are conceptually interdependent, yet this relationship remains insufficiently operationalized in empirical inquiry (Croucher et al., 2020; Macfarlane et al., 2024; Öberg and Boberg, 2023). Governance is commonly understood as the structures, rules, and processes

through which higher education institutions are directed and held accountable, while leadership provides the agency through which these arrangements are enacted, interpreted, and mobilized in practice (Croucher et al., 2020; Ruan et al., 2023). Although this conceptual linkage is well established in the literature, empirical research has struggled to specify how leadership and governance interact in ways that can be systematically observed and measured (Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, 2021; Schophuizen et al., 2022).

Recent integrative scholarship has sought to address this gap by reconceptualising leadership not merely as one variable influencing organisational outcomes, but as a governance mechanism through which institutional direction, accountability, and collective action are realized (Croucher et al., 2020; Macfarlane et al., 2024). Drawing on studies of distributed and enabling leadership in educational settings, leadership challenges in Pakistan's higher education system, and leadership roles in quality assurance and policy implementation processes, this work has argued that leadership performs core governance functions by coordinating organisational activity, translating accountability demands into practice, and fostering trust among institutional actors (Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, 2021; Schophuizen et al., 2022; Novitasari et al., 2025). Through this lens, leadership connects people, structures, and processes in ways that shape institutional performance and legitimacy (Öberg and Boberg, 2023). However, this framework has thus far remained primarily conceptual in nature and has not been subjected to systematic empirical validation.

A central limitation of existing research lies in the absence of clearly defined constructs and indicators capable of capturing leadership as a governance mechanism in empirical studies. While the leadership–governance nexus is widely acknowledged at a theoretical level, it has rarely been translated into measurable components that allow comparative analysis across institutional contexts (Karimi and Khawaja, 2023; Schophuizen et al., 2022). As a result, empirical investigations often treat leadership and governance as parallel or loosely related phenomena rather than as interconnected processes operating through identifiable mechanisms (Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, 2021; Ruan et al., 2023). This conceptual and methodological gap constrains the ability of researchers to examine how governance is enacted through leadership practices and to assess its implications for institutional outcomes.

The present article addresses this limitation by advancing a conceptual and methodological framework that operationalizes leadership as a governance mechanism in higher education. Building on prior integrative work, the study specifies measurable constructs associated with three core governance functions enacted through leadership, namely coordination, accountability translation, and trust building (Croucher et al., 2020; Schophuizen et al., 2022). For each construct, observable indicators are proposed and organized within a construct–indicator matrix, which provides a foundation for systematic empirical investigation. In addition, the article outlines complementary quantitative and qualitative research designs through which the framework may be examined, including survey-based measurement, structural equation modelling, interviews, and case-based analysis (Stentz et al., 2012; Karimi and Khawaja, 2023).

This article makes three interrelated contributions. First, it translates theory into measurement by delineating constructs and indicators that enable leadership as governance to be empirically observed and analysed (Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, 2021). Second, it proposes mixed-methods research pathways that support both the examination of patterned relationships and the exploration of governance processes as they unfold within institutional settings (Stentz et al., 2012; Kovačević et al., 2020). Third, it advances a set of research propositions, rather than formal hypotheses, to guide future empirical testing of the framework's core relationships, including the mediating role of trust, the moderating influence of accountability translation, and the coordinating function of leadership in shaping institutional alignment and performance (Schophuizen et al., 2022).

While the framework is informed by governance challenges observed in Pakistan and comparable Global South higher education systems, where leadership responses to accountability pressures and institutional constraints are particularly salient (Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej, 2021; Ruan et al., 2023), it is articulated in transferable terms to support comparative inquiry across diverse national and institutional contexts (Latha et al., 2025). By grounding the framework in a developing world setting while maintaining analytical generality, the article seeks to contribute both context-sensitive insight and broader theoretical relevance. In doing so, it provides a methodological blueprint for empirically investigating how leadership operationalizes governance within higher education institutions.

2. Conceptual Foundations

2.1. Leadership and Governance in Higher Education

Governance in higher education refers to the formal structures, rules, and processes through which universities are directed, controlled, and held accountable (Machado-Taylor and Matias, 2022). These arrangements typically involve governing boards, executive leadership, and participatory bodies such as academic senates (Hussein and Zadeh, 2024; Rowlands, 2013). While governance frameworks establish the formal parameters of institutional authority and accountability, their effectiveness depends on leadership as the agent through which governance is enacted in practice (Machado-Taylor and Matias, 2022). Leadership provides direction, mobilizes organisational actors, and interprets governance arrangements in ways that shape institutional behaviour and outcomes (Jones, 2014).

In contemporary higher education systems, leaders operate at the intersection of academic values and external accountability demands (Anggraheni and Maspiyoh, 2025). They are required to align institutional missions with expectations arising from accreditation regimes, government performance frameworks, and public scrutiny (Machado-Taylor and Matias, 2022; Novitasari et al., 2025). This mediating role reflects principles commonly associated with shared governance, in which authority and responsibility are distributed among trustees, administrators, and academic staff (LaForge, 2020; Mcnaughtan et al., 2025). Within such arrangements, leadership is not exercized solely through hierarchical command, but through facilitative processes that encourage collaboration, deliberation, and collective decision making (Pearce et al., 2018; Youngs, 2017). Research that treats leadership and governance as analytically separate domains risks overlooking these interactive dynamics (Elken, 2023). An integrated perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how universities are steered and how strategic and operational change is accomplished (Hussein and Zadeh, 2024).

A substantial body of literature suggests that leadership in educational organisations is frequently distributed across multiple actors and levels rather than concentrated in a single individual (Harris et al., 2022; Mifsud, 2023; Hickey et al., 2022). Distributed leadership theory emphasizes the shared enactment of leadership tasks by formal and informal leaders who collaborate in guiding organisational activity (Jones et al., 2012; Jones, 2014). Empirical studies in schools and universities indicate that such arrangements can promote inclusive decision making, collective responsibility, and organisational learning (Printy and Liu, 2020).

Trust occupies a central position within distributed leadership processes. It functions both as a condition that enables shared leadership and as an outcome of successful collaboration (Harris et al., 2022; De Jong et al., 2023). When academic and professional staff are empowered to exercise leadership, they rely on mutual confidence in one another's competence, integrity, and intentions (Lizier et al., 2022; Lichao et al., 2024). Over time, effective collaboration can strengthen both interpersonal trust and institutional trust (Madan et al., 2024). Elevated levels of trust have been associated with positive organisational climates, increased openness to change, and improved institutional performance (Mifsud, 2023; Okiri and Hercz, 2024).

These findings suggest that trust is not merely a relational attribute but a foundational governance resource that supports coordination, accountability, and collective action (Rance et al., 2025). Governance systems that lack trust, regardless of their formal design, are likely to encounter resistance and implementation failure (Lizier et al., 2022; Hickey et al., 2022).

2.2. Quality Assurance, Accountability, and Context

Higher education institutions operate within increasingly demanding accountability environments shaped by quality assurance policies, regulatory oversight, and performance-based funding mechanisms (Penda and Mathilda, 2025; Krooi et al., 2024). Quality assurance encompasses the formal procedures through which institutions demonstrate compliance with external standards while seeking to improve teaching, research, and service provision (Amtu et al., 2021; Ahmad and Ahmed, 2022). As such, it has become a core element of contemporary governance arrangements across national systems (Parvin, 2018; Chikazinga, 2024).

The relationship between accountability and improvement is often characterized by tension. Institutions are expected to meet externally defined benchmarks while also fostering internally driven enhancement processes (Penda and Mathilda, 2025; Krooi et al., 2024). Leadership plays a critical role in navigating this tension by interpreting and translating accountability requirements into institutional practices that support meaningful improvement (Ahmad and Ahmed, 2022; Vu, 2025). Empirical research indicates that leadership engagement in quality assurance processes is essential for ensuring that accreditation and evaluation exercises contribute to organisational learning rather than symbolic compliance (Chikazinga, 2024; Mgaiwa, 2020).

This translational role is particularly pronounced in developing country contexts, where higher education institutions frequently face political interference, regulatory rigidity, and resource limitations (Parvin, 2018; Mgaiwa, 2020; Obadahun, 2025). In such settings, leaders must adapt externally imposed mandates to local conditions and capacities, balancing compliance with institutional autonomy and developmental priorities (Amtu et al., 2021; Rohman et al., 2023). Effective leadership can buffer the negative effects of external constraints while leveraging available policy support and resources (Vu, 2025; Yasuttamathada and Worapongpat, 2025). Through this intermediary function, accountability mechanisms are more likely to be integrated into institutional strategies for quality enhancement and performance improvement (Krooi et al., 2024; Masci et al., 2024).

2.3. Core Governance Functions of Leadership

Synthesising insights from the preceding strands of literature, an integrative framework identifies three core governance functions performed through leadership in higher education. These functions are coordination, accountability translation, and trust building. Together, they capture how leadership operationalizes governance beyond formal structures and policies.

Coordination refers to the alignment of institutional actors, activities, and resources around shared goals. Through coordination, leadership provides strategic direction, communicates priorities, and facilitates collaboration across organisational units. This function seeks to reduce fragmentation and ensure that individual and departmental initiatives contribute to collective objectives.

Accountability translation denotes the process through which leaders interpret external accountability requirements and embed them within institutional practices. Rather than treating accountability as a compliance obligation, leadership translates external demands into internal goals, policies, and improvement initiatives. This process converts external pressure into internal motivation for enhancement and learning.

Trust building involves the cultivation of confidence in leadership and governance processes among institutional stakeholders. Leaders foster trust by demonstrating consistency, transparency, inclusiveness, and fairness in decision making. Trust enhances the legitimacy of governance arrangements and supports participation in coordination and accountability processes. These functions are analytically distinct but empirically interrelated. Coordination is facilitated in environments characterized by trust, while effective accountability translation can further strengthen trust when conducted in credible and participatory ways.

The following section builds on these conceptual foundations by translating the identified governance functions into operational constructs and indicators. This step provides the basis for empirical examination of leadership as a governance mechanism in higher education.

3. From Theory to Measurement: Conceptual to Operational Translation

Translating theoretical constructs into measurable form is a necessary step for systematic empirical inquiry. Conceptual frameworks that remain at an abstract level offer limited guidance for empirical research unless their core elements are specified in ways that permit observation and measurement. This section therefore translates the three governance functions of leadership identified earlier, namely coordination, accountability translation, and trust building, into empirically examinable constructs. For each function, definitions are provided along with

illustrative dimensions and indicators that bridge the gap between theory and data. Together, these elements form the basis for a structured approach to empirical investigation.

3.1. Coordination as Alignment and Steering

3.1.1. Definition

Coordination as a leadership function refers to the deliberate alignment of actions, decisions, and resources across organisational units and actors in pursuit of shared institutional objectives. It involves providing strategic direction and ensuring that faculties, departments, and administrative units act in a coherent and mutually reinforcing manner rather than in isolation.

Key dimensions of coordination include strategic alignment and cross unit collaboration. Strategic alignment concerns the degree to which unit level plans, priorities, and activities are consistent with the institution's mission and strategic objectives. Cross unit collaboration refers to the extent of communication, joint initiatives, and cooperative practices across organisational boundaries.

3.1.2. Illustrative Indicators

Coordination may be operationalized through indicators that capture both structural arrangements and perceived alignment. Structural indicators include the presence and functioning of committees, working groups, or task oriented forums that bring together representatives from multiple organisational units. Additional indicators include the frequency of inter unit meetings, the existence of joint academic or administrative initiatives, and the degree of consistency between institutional strategic plans and faculty or departmental plans.

Document analysis may be used to assess strategic alignment by examining the extent to which unit level documents reflect institutional priorities. Administrative records may provide counts of collaborative teaching programmes, research initiatives, or shared governance activities. Survey based measures may capture staff perceptions of coordination, such as the extent to which a shared sense of institutional direction is experienced across the organisation. High levels of coordination would be indicated by clearly articulated goals, consistent action across organisational levels, and limited duplication or conflict between units.

3.2. Accountability Translation as an External Internal Bridge

3.2.1. Definition

Accountability translation refers to the leadership driven process through which external accountability requirements are interpreted, internalized, and embedded within institutional policies and practices. This function involves transforming mandates originating from governments, regulatory bodies, or accreditation agencies into forms that are meaningful and actionable for institutional members. Through this process, compliance with external expectations is linked to internal learning and improvement.

Two key dimensions characterize accountability translation. Policy internalisation refers to the extent to which external rules and standards are incorporated into internal policies, procedures, and routines. Improvement orientation concerns the degree to which external accountability is used as a catalyst for substantive enhancement rather than symbolic compliance.

3.2.2. Illustrative Indicators

Accountability translation may be measured through indicators that capture how external requirements are reflected in internal decision making and practice. One indicator is the degree of alignment between internal policies and external standards, such as the explicit incorporation of accreditation criteria into internal quality

assurance guidelines. Another indicator concerns leadership responsiveness, for example evidence that resources are allocated or programmes are adjusted in response to external review feedback.

Additional indicators include the initiation of improvement activities that go beyond minimal compliance. For instance, when external evaluations identify weaknesses, effective accountability translation would be reflected in leadership led initiatives that address these issues in practice rather than solely in documentation. Relevant data sources include document analysis of strategic plans, internal reports, and governance records, interviews with senior leaders and administrators, and surveys of academic staff perceptions regarding how external requirements are communicated and enacted. Effective accountability translation would be evident where external expectations are widely understood, embedded in daily practice, and associated with sustained efforts to improve institutional performance.

3.3. Trust Building as Cultural and Relational Capital

3.3.1. Definition

Trust building refers to the leadership function of cultivating confidence in governance processes and institutional decision making among internal and external stakeholders. It reflects leaders' capacity to foster environments characterized by integrity, transparency, inclusiveness, and fairness. Through trust building, leadership generates relational capital that supports cooperation, participation, and acceptance of governance arrangements.

This function encompasses two interrelated dimensions. Internal trust refers to the level of confidence that faculty, staff, and internal leaders place in institutional leadership and governance processes. External stakeholder trust refers to the confidence that external actors, such as regulatory agencies, partners, and the wider public, place in the institution's leadership and governance.

3.3.2. Illustrative Indicators

Trust is primarily a perceptual construct, but it can be measured through carefully designed quantitative and qualitative approaches. Internal trust may be assessed through survey items capturing confidence in leadership decision making, perceptions of fairness, and openness of communication. Additional indicators include the presence of participatory governance forums, transparency in decision making processes, and levels of engagement in institutional governance activities.

Qualitative data from interviews or focus groups may provide deeper insight into the sources and dynamics of trust or distrust. Proxy indicators may include staff retention, willingness to participate in governance processes, and the frequency of unresolved disputes or grievances. External trust may be reflected in stakeholder surveys, the stability of partnerships, continued support from funding bodies, or the nature of interactions with regulatory agencies.

A high trust institutional environment would be characterized by confidence in leadership competence and integrity, open communication, and a willingness among stakeholders to engage constructively in governance processes without fear of reprisal.

To translate the three governance functions into empirically examinable form, Table 1 presents a construct–indicator matrix outlining illustrative dimensions, indicators, and potential data sources for each leadership governance function.

Table 1: Construct Indicator Matrix for Leadership Governance Functions

Construct (Governance Function)	Example Indicators (with Data Sources)
Coordination *Alignment and Steering*	Strategic alignment index assessing the degree of congruence between institutional strategic plans and departmental objectives, based on content analysis of planning documents and leadership self assessment reports. Cross unit collaboration frequency measured by the number of inter departmental initiatives, joint committees, or cross functional projects undertaken within a defined period, drawing on institutional records and administrative reports. Perceived coordination effectiveness measured by the proportion of academic and professional staff who agree that leadership promotes alignment toward shared institutional goals, based on annual faculty or staff survey data.
Accountability Translation *External–Internal Bridge*	Policy internalisation score reflecting the extent to which external accreditation requirements or policy recommendations are incorporated into internal governance documents, based on document review of quality assurance manuals and compliance reports. Improvement actions following audits measured by the number and scope of internal enhancement projects initiated in response to external quality assurance reviews, drawing on quality office records and leadership interviews. Stakeholder alignment perception assessed through faculty and staff agreement that external requirements are communicated clearly and used constructively to support improvement, based on survey responses and focus group data.
Trust-Building *Cultural/Relational Capital*	Leadership trust index capturing levels of faculty and staff confidence in leadership integrity, openness, and fairness, measured through multi item climate surveys. Governance participation rate indicating the proportion of faculty and staff engaging in formal governance processes such as elections, committees, or consultative forums, based on governance records and attendance data. External confidence indicators reflecting stakeholder perceptions of institutional transparency and responsiveness, derived from stakeholder surveys, partnership evaluations, or systematic media analysis.

Note. The indicators presented in this matrix are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Empirical application of the framework would require refinement of measures, assessment of reliability and validity, and adaptation of data sources to the institutional and national context under investigation. While specific indicators may vary across contexts, the underlying constructs are designed to remain analytically comparable, thereby supporting cross-national and cross-institutional research.

4. Methodological Pathways for Empirical Validation

To empirically examine the proposed operational framework, this article advances a mixed methods research design as the most appropriate methodological approach. Leadership conceptualized as a governance mechanism constitutes a complex and multi layered phenomenon that encompasses both measurable attributes and context dependent processes. Quantitative indicators, such as reported levels of coordination or trust, coexist with qualitative dimensions, including how leaders interpret accountability demands and how trust is cultivated through everyday practices. A mixed methods design enables the systematic integration of these complementary forms of evidence and provides a comprehensive basis for empirical validation. As a conceptual and methodological study, this article did not involve human participants, human data, or human material and therefore did not require ethics approval.

4.1. Quantitative Component

The quantitative phase provides an initial point of entry for empirical testing. A survey based design may be implemented across one or more higher education institutions to measure the constructs of coordination, accountability translation, and trust building, alongside selected outcome variables such as perceived institutional performance or quality improvement. Drawing on the indicators outlined in the construct indicator matrix, survey

instruments may be developed for academic staff, administrators, and where appropriate other institutional stakeholders.

Survey items would be organized into multi item scales aligned with each construct. Examples include perceptions of alignment across organisational units, leadership support in interpreting external accountability requirements, and confidence in senior leadership decision making. Where possible, established measures from the literature may be incorporated or adapted to enhance construct validity, particularly in the measurement of trust and organisational alignment. In addition to perceptual data, objective indicators drawn from institutional records, such as the number of cross unit initiatives or documented policy adaptations, may be included to support triangulation. Quantitative analysis enables the examination of the structural relationships posited by the framework. For example, it allows assessment of whether higher levels of coordination are associated with stronger performance outcomes, whether trust is related to both leadership practices and outcomes, and whether accountability translation shapes these relationships. Structural equation modelling provides a suitable analytical technique for this purpose, as it permits simultaneous evaluation of measurement models and structural relationships among constructs. With an adequate sample size, the model may be tested across multiple institutions or units. Where data permit, comparative analysis may also be conducted to examine whether the relationships hold across different national or institutional contexts. Longitudinal designs, such as repeated surveys over time, may further strengthen inferences regarding the relationship between leadership practices and institutional outcomes.

4.2. Qualitative Component

While quantitative analysis identifies patterns and associations, qualitative inquiry is essential for understanding how leadership enacts governance functions and why particular relationships emerge. The qualitative component therefore complements the survey phase by examining processes, meanings, and contextual influences that cannot be captured through numerical indicators alone.

One appropriate strategy is an explanatory sequential design in which qualitative case studies are conducted following analysis of survey results. Institutions or organisational units may be purposefully selected to represent contrasting patterns, such as high and low levels of coordination or trust. Data collection may include semi structured interviews with institutional leaders, academic staff, and administrative personnel, as well as with external stakeholders where relevant. Interview questions would focus on concrete examples of coordination practices, leadership responses to accountability demands, and experiences of trust or mistrust within governance processes.

Document analysis may further support qualitative inquiry through examination of strategic plans, governance records, accreditation reports, and policy documents. Such analysis can provide insight into how external requirements are interpreted and embedded within institutional practices. Observation of governance meetings or leadership forums may also be employed to capture leadership interactions and decision making processes in situ. Together, these qualitative approaches enable close examination of how governance functions are enacted and how institutional actors respond to leadership practices.

4.3. Research Propositions

Rather than advancing formal hypotheses, this study proposes a set of research propositions to guide empirical investigation using the methodological pathways outlined above. The propositions are derived from the conceptual framework and associated literature and are formulated to be analytically testable while remaining sufficiently general to support inquiry across institutional and national contexts. Together, they articulate the expected relationships through which leadership operates as a governance mechanism in higher education.

4.3.1. Proposition 1. Trust as a Mediating Pathway

Leadership trust building mediates the relationship between leadership practices and institutional outcomes. Specifically, the positive influence of leadership on institutional performance and improvement is expected to

occur primarily through the cultivation of trust among internal stakeholders. Leadership practices that foster confidence, credibility, and mutual respect are therefore anticipated to strengthen collaboration and collective commitment, which in turn support improved institutional outcomes.

4.3.2. Proposition 2. Accountability Translation as a Moderating Condition

The accountability translation function of leadership moderates the relationship between coordination and institutional improvement. When leaders effectively interpret and internalize external accountability requirements, coordination efforts are expected to have a stronger association with positive outcomes. In contrast, weak accountability translation is likely to constrain the effectiveness of coordination, particularly where external demands are poorly communicated or implemented without organisational sense making. Under conditions of strong accountability translation, coordination is therefore expected to contribute more substantially to institutional improvement.

4.3.3. Proposition 3. Coordination and Institutional Alignment

Leadership coordination is positively associated with institutional alignment and performance. Leaders who succeed in aligning plans, decisions, and activities across organisational levels are expected to enhance coherence within the institution. This organisational alignment is anticipated to support improved performance outcomes, including indicators related to educational quality, research activity, and institutional effectiveness. Accordingly, higher levels of coordination are expected to correspond with higher levels of institutional performance.

4.3.4. Proposition 4. Synergistic Effects of Governance Functions

The combined enactment of coordination, accountability translation, and trust building produces a synergistic effect on institutional performance that exceeds the influence of any single governance function considered in isolation. Leadership that demonstrates strength across all three functions is expected to achieve more sustained and comprehensive improvement than leadership that emphasizes one function while neglecting others. This proposition may be examined through interaction effects or composite measures that capture the joint contribution of the governance functions to institutional outcomes.

These propositions are analytically interrelated. Proposition 1 identifies trust as a central mediating mechanism through which leadership influences outcomes. Proposition 2 introduces accountability translation as a contextual condition shaping the effectiveness of coordination. Proposition 3 establishes coordination as a direct driver of institutional alignment and performance. Proposition 4 integrates these relationships by positing a cumulative and interdependent configuration of governance functions. Empirical examination of these propositions through mixed methods research will clarify the relative salience of each pathway and the extent to which their interaction varies across institutional environments.

5. Implications

5.1. Implications for Research

The framework and methodological approach advanced in this article open several avenues for future research on higher education leadership and governance. By specifying clearly defined constructs and research propositions, the study provides a foundation for cumulative empirical inquiry. Researchers may apply the framework across diverse institutional settings, including different national systems, public and private institutions, and multiple organisational levels ranging from central governance to departmental leadership. Because the constructs are articulated in consistent and operational terms, findings from such studies can be compared and synthesized over time. This cumulative process supports theory development by moving the field beyond isolated case studies or fragmented survey research toward a more coherent body of evidence.

The use of operationalized constructs also enables researchers to identify which aspects of leadership as governance are robust across contexts and which are contingent on institutional or regulatory conditions. For example, empirical testing may reveal that trust building consistently mediates the relationship between leadership and outcomes, whereas the salience of accountability translation varies according to the intensity of external regulation. Such findings would allow refinement of the theoretical framework by distinguishing core mechanisms from context dependent dynamics. In this way, the propositions offered in this study encourage research that focuses on explanatory pathways and boundary conditions rather than on simple associations between leadership and performance.

A further implication concerns research design. The study demonstrates how mixed methods approaches can be employed to investigate complex governance phenomena in higher education. Future research may adopt similar designs by combining large scale surveys with in depth qualitative inquiry, including interviews, document analysis, and observational methods. The framework is sufficiently flexible to accommodate additional techniques, such as social network analysis to capture coordination patterns or longitudinal designs to examine change over time. By integrating perceptual measures of leadership and trust with institutional indicators of governance and performance, future studies can better capture the interaction between relational and structural dimensions of governance.

5.2. Implications for Policy and Practice

Operationalising leadership as a governance mechanism carries several implications for higher education policy and institutional practice. From a policy perspective, the framework offers a means of strengthening how governance quality is assessed and supported in universities. Policy instruments and external quality assurance processes have traditionally emphasized formal governance structures and measurable outcomes, such as compliance arrangements, graduation rates, or research productivity. In contrast, the leadership processes through which governance structures are enacted have received comparatively limited attention. The framework advanced in this study suggests that policy evaluations of institutional governance would benefit from greater consideration of leadership functions that connect formal arrangements to practical outcomes.

For policymakers and quality assurance agencies, this implies the inclusion of criteria that examine how leadership enables coordination, interprets accountability requirements, and cultivates trust within institutions. Governance reviews may, for example, consider how institutional leaders align unit level objectives with strategic priorities or how external policy requirements are communicated and embedded in internal practices. Such an approach shifts the focus of governance assessment beyond the presence of formal mechanisms toward the capabilities through which institutions enact governance in practice. Policies that support leadership development programmes focused on coordination, sense making of accountability, and trust building can therefore be understood as investments in governance effectiveness rather than as supplementary initiatives.

At the level of institutional practice, the framework provides a basis for reflection, assessment, and leadership development. Senior leaders, including vice chancellors, rectors, deans, and department heads, may use the three governance functions to examine how their activities contribute to institutional direction and performance. Consideration of coordination practices, approaches to translating external requirements, and efforts to build trust can assist leaders in identifying areas of strength and areas requiring development. By framing leadership work in terms of governance functions, the framework encourages a more deliberate and balanced approach to leadership practice.

The framework further has implications for institutional change and reform processes. Universities frequently undertake initiatives related to curriculum reform, organisational restructuring, or regulatory compliance, many of which encounter resistance or limited uptake. The framework underscores that the success of such initiatives depends on leadership capacity to coordinate action, translate external rationales into meaningful internal objectives, and build trust among affected stakeholders. Change initiatives that explicitly address these functions are more likely to achieve sustained implementation. In settings characterized by heightened external scrutiny or

institutional stress, attention to trust building may be particularly important in creating the conditions necessary for subsequent coordination and improvement.

Overall, the implications for policy and practice emphasize that effective governance in higher education extends beyond formal structures and regulatory compliance. It depends critically on how leadership functions are enacted within institutions. By strengthening coordination, accountability translation, and trust building, policymakers and practitioners can enhance governance capacity in ways that support institutional performance, legitimacy, and long term sustainability.

6. Conclusion

This article has advanced a conceptual and methodological framework that operationalizes leadership as a governance mechanism in higher education. Building on earlier conceptual contributions, the study has identified three core governance functions enacted through leadership, namely coordination, accountability translation, and trust building, and has outlined systematic approaches through which each function may be empirically examined. By translating integrative theory into measurable constructs and methodological pathways, the article completes a cumulative programme of scholarship that moves from conceptual articulation toward empirical readiness.

The article further underscores that operationalising leadership as a governance mechanism has relevance beyond theory development. For researchers, it offers a coherent analytical lens through which leadership may be examined in functional rather than stylistic or personality based terms. For policymakers and practitioners, it provides a shared language for understanding how leadership practices shape governance capacity and institutional performance. As higher education institutions across diverse systems face sustained pressures related to accountability, legitimacy, and performance, understanding the mechanisms through which leadership influences governance becomes increasingly important.

With conceptual foundations established and methodological tools specified, the framework invites empirical exploration across national and institutional contexts. Such research has the potential to generate evidence that informs both scholarly debate and governance practice. In this sense, the article positions leadership as a measurable and consequential mechanism through which governance is enacted, thereby contributing to a more rigorous and policy relevant understanding of leadership in higher education.

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