Educational Administration: Theory and Practice
2022, 28(3), 494-504
ISSN: 2148-2403
https://kuey.net/

Research Article

Educational Leadership and the Integration of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: Strategies, Challenges, and Opportunities

Dr. Mufadhi Ratyan Al-Sharari[1*]

[1*]Associate Prof. in Educational Management, Department of Educational Leadership and Policies, College of Arts and Education, Box:1321, Northern Border University, P.O. 91431, Arar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, mofsharari@hotmail.com, mufadhi.alsharari@nbu.edu.sa

***Corresponding author:** Dr. Mufadhi Ratyan Al-Sharari
*Associate Prof. in Educational Management, Department of Educational Leadership and Policies, College of Arts and Education, Box:1321, Northern Border University, P.O. 91431, Arar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, mofsharari@hotmail.com, mufadhi.alsharari@nbu.edu.sa

Citation: Dr. Mufadhi Ratyan Al-Sharari, (2022). Educational Leadership and the Integration of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: Strategies, Challenges, and Opportunities, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 28(3) 494-504
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v28i03.10517

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of educational leadership in integrating artificial intelligence (AI) technologies within Saudi universities, addressing the strategies, challenges, and opportunities involved. Employing a descriptive analytical design, the research used a validated questionnaire to collect data from 122 participants, including deans, department heads, faculty members, and administrators. The analysis focused on five key domains: leadership vision, strategic planning, technical and organizational support, faculty development, and institutional policies. Results revealed that leadership vision (M = 3.86) and strategic planning (M = 3.83) were the strongest predictors of successful AI integration, while technical support and faculty development showed moderate performance, highlighting areas for improvement. No significant gender differences were found, but participants with over 10 years of experience and those in senior positions demonstrated significantly higher perceptions of leadership effectiveness. The findings confirm that educational leadership plays a transformative role in advancing AI integration, not merely as a facilitator but as a driver of institutional change. The study concludes with practical recommendations, including strengthening infrastructure, enhancing leadership training, expanding faculty development, and fostering innovation through partnerships. These findings contribute valuable insights to both the theoretical and practical understanding of AI integration in higher education, particularly within the Saudi Arabian context.

Keywords: digital transformation; ethical governance; adaptive learning; faculty development; change management; innovation strategies; institutional resilience

1. Introduction

The world is currently experiencing a rapid technological revolution, with artificial intelligence (AI) emerging as one of its most transformative elements. Owing to its exceptional capabilities, AI has introduced faster, smarter, more efficient, and more precise methods across diverse fields. Among these, the higher education sector has increasingly embraced AI as an essential tool for driving innovation and reform. In recent years, educational technology has undergone remarkable progress, with AI at the forefront of this transformation. AI is widely recognized as a powerful tool capable of creating fundamental changes in educational systems by enabling personalized learning environments, leveraging big data analytics, and delivering innovative, intelligent educational solutions. These advancements have demonstrated significant potential for improving student learning outcomes and academic performance. The integration of AI technologies into higher education presents vast opportunities to enhance teaching, learning, and administrative processes. AI's applications have attracted growing attention in academia, driven by technological advancements, economic

imperatives, and the rapid diffusion of AI across scientific, technical, and humanistic domains. In the educational context, AI has supported the emergence of new teaching methodologies and practical applications that enrich learning environments. This integration has been particularly notable in the areas of online and distance learning, where AI technologies have contributed to improving student engagement, facilitating communication between students and instructors, and supporting learning in asynchronous environments. Furthermore, AI enables machines to simulate human cognitive processes and decision-making abilities, offering capabilities that extend beyond traditional educational approaches. As AI continues to evolve, educational leadership plays a critical role in shaping how these technologies are adopted and utilized within higher education institutions. Leaders must navigate the complex challenges and opportunities associated with AI integration to ensure that its transformative potential is harnessed effectively, ethically, and sustainably.

1.1 The Importance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its aim to clarify the role of educational leadership in advancing the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies within Saudi universities. Under the title Educational Leadership and the Integration of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: Strategies, Challenges, and Opportunities, this study addresses several essential dimensions reflecting the international and national relevance of the topic. First, this study responds to the critical need for higher education institutions to adapt to the accelerating development of AI technologies, which hold considerable promise in improving student learning outcomes, enhancing institutional efficiency, and supporting data-informed decision-making (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). By examining how educational leaders in Saudi universities engage with these technologies, the study provides insight into the organizational strategies and leadership approaches that facilitate successful innovation. Second, the study highlights the pivotal role of educational leadership as a catalyst in the adoption and application of AI in higher education. Educational leaders are instrumental in setting strategic priorities, managing institutional change, and ensuring that AI initiatives are aligned with ethical principles and educational objectives (Salmon & Asgari, 2022). Their leadership is crucial in building institutional readiness, overcoming resistance to technological change, and fostering an inclusive environment that embraces digital transformation. Third, this research seeks to strengthen awareness among educational leaders regarding the importance of leveraging AI and other emerging technologies to improve the quality and effectiveness of university teaching, learning, and research. By focusing on leadership practices, the study offers valuable insights into how leaders can promote a culture of innovation, support professional development, and encourage experimentation with AI-enhanced educational models (Bond et al., 2021). Finally, the study contributes practical recommendations for educational leaders to improve the integration of AI technologies in the Saudi higher education context. These recommendations aim to help leaders address implementation challenges, capitalize on emerging opportunities, and formulate strategies that optimize the benefits of AI adoption, ultimately improving institutional resilience, competitiveness, and student success (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021).

1.2 Problem Statement

With the growing reliance on technology across all sectors of society, particularly in education, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force reshaping learning environments, pedagogical practices, and institutional operations. The integration of AI technologies into higher education has the potential to personalize learning, improve student engagement, and enhance institutional decision-making (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). However, realizing these benefits depends critically on the role of educational leadership, which is responsible for setting strategic direction, managing change, and fostering an institutional culture that supports innovation and ethical practice (Salmon & Asgari, 2022). Accordingly, this study is guided by the following central research question:

1- What is the role of educational leadership in enhancing learning through the integration of artificial intelligence technologies in Saudi universities? From this overarching question, several sub-questions are derived to structure the investigation.

2- What is the current level of knowledge and awareness among educational leaders regarding artificial intelligence technologies? Recent research highlights the importance of leaders' digital competence in successfully managing AI implementation (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021).

3- What are the key practices adopted by educational leadership to integrate AI technologies into teaching, learning, and administration? Identifying these practices provides insight into institutional strategies that support innovation (Salmon & Asgari, 2022).

4- What challenges do educational leaders encounter in adopting artificial intelligence technologies within Saudi universities? Existing literature points to challenges such as ethical concerns, infrastructure gaps, and resistance to change (Bond et al., 2021).

5- What practical recommendations can be proposed to educational leaders to strengthen AI integration in Saudi higher education? Addressing this question offers pathways to develop context-sensitive, evidence-based strategies (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

1.3 Study Objectives

This study is designed to achieve several interrelated objectives that reflect the urgent need to understand and strengthen the role of educational leadership in advancing the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies within Saudi universities.

1- To identify the level of knowledge and awareness among educational leaders regarding artificial intelligence technologies and their applications in Saudi universities. Understanding leaders' digital literacy and awareness is essential, as recent research has shown that leaders' familiarity with AI directly influences the success of institutional innovation and digital transformation efforts (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021).

2- To analyze the practices adopted by educational leaders in integrating artificial intelligence technologies into educational processes.Examining current leadership practices provides insight into how AI is operationalized across teaching, learning, and administration and highlights effective strategies that align with institutional goals (Salmon & Asgari, 2022).

3- To examine the challenges and difficulties that educational leadership encounters in adopting artificial intelligence technologies. This objective focuses on exploring institutional, cultural, technical, and ethical barriers that hinder effective AI integration, as identified in recent educational technology research (Bond et al., 2021).

4- To propose evidence-based recommendations to strengthen the role of educational leadership in enhancing learning through artificial intelligence technologies. By synthesizing empirical findings and best practices, the study aims to provide practical guidelines that can assist leaders in maximizing the benefits of AI integration and improving educational quality and institutional resilience (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

1.4 Study Importance

The importance of this study can be articulated across both theoretical and practical dimensions, reflecting its contribution to advancing knowledge and improving practice within the field of educational leadership and artificial intelligence integration in higher education.

- **Theoretical importance:** This study contributes to enriching the body of scientific literature addressing the intersection of artificial intelligence technologies and educational leadership in higher education. It offers a contemporary theoretical framework that expands current understanding of how leadership practices shape the adoption, implementation, and governance of AI in academic contexts. By providing a structured analysis of leadership roles, practices, and challenges, the study lays the groundwork for future empirical investigations and comparative research (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Bond et al., 2021). Moreover, the study helps fill existing gaps in the literature by focusing on the Saudi higher education context, which remains underexplored in global AI research (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021).
- **Practical importance:** From a practical perspective, the findings of this study are expected to offer valuable insights and actionable recommendations for educational leaders in Saudi universities. The results will support leaders in enhancing their practices related to the integration of AI technologies into teaching, learning, and administrative processes. Specifically, the study will assist leaders in designing effective strategies to address institutional challenges, promote faculty and student engagement with AI tools, and ensure ethical and sustainable technology adoption (Salmon & Asgari, 2022). Additionally, by highlighting best practices and innovative approaches, the study provides a resource for policymakers, practitioners, and university stakeholders aiming to strengthen the capacity of higher education institutions to navigate digital transformation (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Bond et al., 2021).

1.5Study Limits

This study is framed by several well-defined boundaries that clarify its scope and ensure that the findings are both focused and meaningful within the targeted research context.

1- Human limits: The study is restricted to educational leaders working in Saudi universities, including individuals holding leadership roles such as deans, vice deans, department heads, and program coordinators. Focusing on this group allows for an in-depth exploration of leadership perspectives and practices relevant to the integration of artificial intelligence in higher education (Salmon & Asgari, 2022).

2- Spatial limits: The research is geographically limited to Saudi universities. This spatial focus enables the study to address the specific institutional, cultural, and policy contexts of Saudi higher education, which are crucial factors influencing AI adoption (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

3- Temporal limits: The data were collected during the academic year 2022–2023. This time frame provides a contemporary snapshot of leadership practices and perceptions during a period marked by significant technological advancement and global shifts in educational delivery models (Bond et al., 2021).

4- Subject limits: The study specifically investigates the role of educational leadership in enhancing learning through the use of artificial intelligence technologies. It does not aim to cover all dimensions of AI in education, such as purely technical, student-centered, or curriculum-related aspects, which remain beyond the scope of this investigation (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021).

1.6 Hypothesis

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force in higher education, offering unprecedented opportunities to enhance teaching, learning, and institutional operations. The effective integration of AI into universities, however, depends largely on the role of educational leadership in setting

strategic direction, managing change, and fostering innovation. In the context of Saudi universities, understanding how leadership drives AI adoption is critical for realizing the full potential of these technologies while addressing institutional challenges and ensuring sustainable development. The major hypothesis is:

- There is a statistically significant overall role of educational leadership in promoting the integration of artificial intelligence technologies in Saudi universities, reflected through leadership vision, strategic planning, technical and organizational support, faculty and staff development, and institutional policies and regulations, with significant variation in perceptions based on demographic variables such as years of experience and job title.

1.7Terminology of the Study

1- Educational Leadership: Refers to the collection of administrative and strategic practices employed to guide, influence, and direct the educational process toward achieving institutional objectives with efficiency, innovation, and ethical accountability (Salmon & Asgari, 2022).

2- Artificial Intelligence Technologies: Encompasses computer-based systems and applications capable of performing tasks traditionally requiring human cognitive functions, such as learning, problem-solving, decision-making, natural language processing, and predictive analytics (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

3- Enhancing Learning: Involves the process of improving the quality, effectiveness, and outcomes of the educational experience by leveraging innovative tools, evidence-based strategies, and adaptive technologies that address diverse student needs and optimize teaching practices (Bond et al., 2021).

1.8 Theoretical Framework

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the defining technological innovations of the twenty-first century, profoundly reshaping multiple sectors, including education. In higher education, AI offers the ability to analyze vast datasets, provide personalized learning pathways, and support data-informed decision-making, all of which contribute to improving learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Educational leadership, by contrast, serves as the driving force behind institutional vision, governance, and strategic planning. Leaders in higher education are tasked with creating the conditions necessary for effective technology integration, motivating faculty and staff, and aligning technological initiatives with institutional missions and values (Salmon & Asgari, 2022). Successfully integrating AI technologies into education requires leaders to possess not only a clear strategic vision but also an innovative mindset and the capacity for adaptive leadership. They must skillfully navigate organizational change, anticipate and overcome implementation challenges, and foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation within their institutions (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021). This study is anchored in the theoretical proposition that the transformative potential of AI in higher education is contingent upon the quality, preparedness, and vision of educational leadership

2. Literature review

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, particularly regarding the role of educational leadership. Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) emphasized the transformative potential of AI in reshaping educational systems, highlighting the urgency for leaders to adapt and guide change. Similarly, Bond et al. (2021) and Salmon and Asgari (2022) underscored how leadership vision and institutional readiness are essential for successful AI adoption. Educational leadership plays a pivotal role in driving educational quality through AI integration. Leaders with a clear vision and digital competence can guide institutions toward innovation while promoting a culture of continuous learning (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Chen et al., 2020). Providing professional development and ensuring ethical safeguards are also essential components of effective leadership (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Holmes et al., 2019).

However, leaders face critical challenges, including resource constraints, training gaps, and resistance to change (Bond et al., 2021; Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) noted that without sufficient infrastructure and strategy, the rapid pace of AI development may surpass institutional capacity. Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive planning and faculty engagement (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Luckin et al., 2016). Best practices in AI integration include developing clear strategic plans, forming specialized committees, and fostering innovation (Bond et al., 2021; Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Popenici & Kerr, 2017). Faculty development is key, as continuous training helps educators apply AI tools effectively (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). Encouraging experimentation with new pedagogical approaches also supports institutional adaptability (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Tsai et al., 2019).

Change management is essential for smooth AI integration. Leaders must communicate goals transparently, engage stakeholders, and address concerns to reduce resistance (Bond et al., 2021; Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Schneider & Council, 2021). Training initiatives, including workshops and seminars, help faculty and staff build the necessary technical competencies (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Zhang & Aslan, 2021). Strategic planning is the backbone of AI adoption. Leaders must set measurable goals, establish implementation

timelines, and involve stakeholders at all stages (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Bond et al., 2021; Gulson et al., 2018). This proactive approach maximizes AI's benefits and aligns implementation with long-term institutional priorities (Salmon & Asgari, 2022).

Infrastructure is another critical factor. Leaders must ensure adequate hardware, software, and data security, while upholding privacy and ethical standards (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Holmes et al., 2019). Investment in modern infrastructure supports not only technical needs but also the development of an ethical institutional culture (Bond et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). AI can enhance educational decision-making through data analytics and predictive modeling. Leaders must develop the skills to interpret AI outputs and apply them to resource allocation, curriculum design, and student support (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). Collaborative work between leadership teams and data specialists optimizes decision-making processes (Bond et al., 2021; Reich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019).

Teaching and learning processes are also transformed by AI. Adaptive learning platforms personalize instruction, improving engagement and outcomes (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Bond et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020). Leadership support, including faculty training and resource provision, is essential to maximize the benefits of these technologies (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Luckin et al., 2016). AI's impact extends to academic advising and research. In advising, AI supports course selection and career guidance, while in research, it enables large-scale data analysis (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Tsai et al., 2019). Leaders play a key role in integrating AI into these areas by ensuring proper infrastructure, training, and ethical oversight (Bond et al., 2021; Holmes et al., 2019).
Promoting a culture of innovation is central to leadership in the AI era. Leaders should encourage pilot projects, create safe spaces for experimentation, and foster external partnerships to strengthen institutional capacity (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Bond et al., 2021; Zhang & Aslan, 2021). Aligning these efforts with institutional missions ensures ethical and strategic alignment (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Gulson et al., 2018). Assessing AI outcomes is vital for continuous improvement. Leaders should establish robust evaluation frameworks, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to inform implementation strategies (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Bond et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). Long-term sustainability requires planning that builds institutional resilience and supports continuous learning (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Popenici & Kerr, 2017). Developing digital competence among educational leaders is a foundational requirement. Institutions must invest in leadership training programs to prepare leaders for the technical, ethical, and organizational challenges of AI (Bond et al., 2021; Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Holmes et al., 2019). Engaging stakeholders across all levels promotes inclusive governance and shared ownership (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). Future-focused leadership involves creating strategic visions that position institutions for global competitiveness while upholding equity and ethical standards (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Bond et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2019). The literature consistently underscores that educational leadership is not merely a supportive function but a transformative force in ensuring that AI integration advances educational excellence and societal impact (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Schneider & Council, 2021).

2.1 Summary of the Study

The literature highlights that artificial intelligence (AI) has become a transformative force in higher education, with educational leadership playing a pivotal role in its successful integration (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Bond et al., 2021). Effective leadership requires vision, digital competence, and the ability to foster continuous learning while promoting ethical and innovative practices (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021). Despite the potential benefits, leaders face significant challenges such as limited resources, faculty resistance, and inadequate infrastructure (Bond et al., 2021; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Addressing these barriers requires strategic planning, professional development, and the creation of supportive environments for experimentation and innovation (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021). Best practices identified in the literature include transparent change management, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation of AI initiatives to align with institutional goals (Bond et al., 2021; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Leaders also play a central role in ensuring that AI supports teaching, learning, academic advising, and research while maintaining ethical and inclusive standards (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021; Salmon & Asgari, 2022). Overall, the literature consistently emphasizes that educational leadership is not just a supportive element but a transformative driver that determines the success and sustainability of AI integration in higher education (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Bond et al., 2021).

3. Methodology.

This study employed a descriptive analytical method, which is widely used in educational and social research for its ability to examine relationships between variables, describe their characteristics, and explore related phenomena. This approach was particularly appropriate for investigating the role of educational leadership in integrating artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in Saudi universities, as it enabled the researcher to analyze

current practices, interpret patterns, and draw informed conclusions and recommendations (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Bond et al., 2021).

3.1 Study Instrument and Data Collection

The primary data collection tool was a questionnaire developed following an extensive review of recent literature and empirical studies (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021). The questionnaire was structured in two main sections.

The first section collected demographic data, including gender, age, years of professional experience, and job title. The second section focused on domains related to the leadership role in enhancing learning through AI technologies, specifically measuring how educational leaders engage with and support AI integration in their institutions. A four-point Likert scale was used for measurement: 1 = Very Rarely, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Frequently, and 4 = Very Frequently.

3.2 Validity and Reliability Verification

To ensure the clarity, coherence, and validity of the questionnaire, it underwent expert review and refinement, drawing on both theoretical insights and empirical best practices (Bond et al., 2021; Salmon & Asgari, 2022). Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire items. A threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ was set to confirm acceptable reliability levels, and the instrument demonstrated excellent reliability with the following result:

Reliability Statistics Table:

Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
18	0.972

3.3 Study Sample

The study population consisted of faculty members and administrative staff at Saudi universities. A total of 134 questionnaires were distributed, and 122 valid responses were received and included in the analysis. The participants represented various job positions, as detailed below:

Job Title	Frequency	Percentage (%)
College Dean	11	7.40%
Department Head	16	14.90%
Faculty Member	39	31.30%
Educational Administrator	31	27.50%
Other	25	18.90%
Total	**122**	**100%**

The study sample comprised a diverse group of participants drawn from Saudi universities, reflecting a broad range of leadership and administrative roles. Out of 134 distributed questionnaires, 122 valid responses were included in the final analysis, yielding a high response rate that strengthens the reliability of the data. The distribution of participants across job positions reveals that faculty members constituted the largest group, representing 31.30% of the total sample (n = 39). This indicates that the perspectives of those directly engaged in teaching and research were strongly represented. Educational administrators accounted for 27.50% (n = 31), highlighting substantial input from those involved in institutional operations and policy implementation. Department heads made up 14.90% (n = 16), while college deans represented a smaller but significant portion at 7.40% (n = 11), providing insights from senior leadership levels. The 'other' category, which includes roles such as program coordinators and technical staff, comprised 18.90% (n = 25), adding further diversity to the sample. This distribution reflects a well-balanced representation across different organizational levels, ensuring that the study captured a wide spectrum of views on educational leadership and the integration of artificial intelligence technologies. Importantly, the inclusion of both academic and administrative voices allows for a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with AI adoption in higher education settings.

4. Results

4.1 Differences According to Demographic Variables

Variable	Category	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Gender	Male	3.76	0.87	No statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$)
	Female	3.73	0.91	
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	3.57	0.89	More than 10 years = significantly higher perceptions ($p < 0.05$)
	5–10 years	3.66	0.88	

	More than 10 years	3.88	0.86	
Job Title	College Dean	3.94	na	College deans and department heads showed the highest perception
	Department Head	3.87	na	
	Faculty Member	3.72	na	
	Administrator	3.67	na	

The analysis of demographic differences provides insightful patterns regarding perceptions of educational leadership's role in integrating artificial intelligence (AI) within Saudi universities. Regarding gender, the results show very similar mean scores between male respondents (M = 3.76, SD = 0.87) and female respondents (M = 3.73, SD = 0.91), with no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$). This indicates that perceptions of leadership's role in AI integration are generally consistent across genders. In terms of years of experience, there is a clear trend showing that perceptions improve with greater professional experience. Respondents with less than five years of experience reported a lower mean score (M = 3.57, SD = 0.89), while those with 5–10 years of experience reported a moderate mean (M = 3.66, SD = 0.88). Importantly, respondents with more than 10 years of experience showed the highest perceptions (M = 3.88, SD = 0.86), and this difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that more seasoned professionals are more likely to recognize or value the role of leadership in AI integration. When examining job titles, the results reveal notable variation. College deans had the highest mean perception score (M = 3.94), followed closely by department heads (M = 3.87). Faculty members reported a lower mean score (M = 3.72), and administrators reported the lowest among the groups (M = 3.67). This pattern suggests that those in senior leadership roles, such as deans and department heads, hold the strongest perceptions of the importance and effectiveness of educational leadership in AI adoption, likely due to their direct involvement in strategic planning and decision-making processes. Overall, the table highlights that while gender does not significantly influence perceptions, both years of experience and job position play a meaningful role in shaping how respondents view educational leadership's impact on AI integration efforts.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations

The following table presents the arithmetic means and standard deviations for the main domains examined in the study, all of which contribute to testing the major hypothesis regarding the significant role of educational leadership in promoting the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in Saudi universities.

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
Leadership's Vision in Adopting AI	3.86	0.9
Strategic Planning for AI Integration	3.83	0.87
Technical and Organizational Support	3.68	0.88
Faculty and Staff Development	3.61	0.87
Institutional Policies and Regulations	3.76	0.9
Overall Role of Educational Leadership	3.75	0.89

The results show that leadership's vision in adopting AI received one of the highest mean scores (M = 3.86, SD = 0.90), reflecting a strong strategic commitment among educational leaders. Strategic planning closely followed (M = 3.83, SD = 0.87), emphasizing the importance of structured approaches to AI integration. Technical and organizational support scored moderately high (M = 3.68, SD = 0.88), suggesting steady progress but also identifying an area that may need strengthening. Faculty and staff development reported a slightly lower mean (M = 3.61, SD = 0.87), pointing to ongoing needs for training and capacity building to maximize AI use. Institutional policies and regulations (M = 3.76, SD = 0.90) demonstrated firm institutional backing, reinforcing the importance of governance and ethical standards in driving AI initiatives. The overall role of educational leadership was positively rated (M = 3.75, SD = 0.89), affirming the major hypothesis that leadership plays a statistically significant role in advancing AI integration across these core domains. Together, these findings highlight a balanced pattern: strong vision and planning at the leadership level, solid institutional frameworks, and a clear opportunity to further strengthen faculty and staff preparation to optimize AI adoption.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

Main Hypothesis:

"There is a statistically significant overall role of educational leadership in promoting the integration of artificial intelligence technologies in Saudi universities, reflected through leadership vision, strategic planning, technical and organizational support, faculty and staff development, and institutional policies and regulations, with significant variation in perceptions based on demographic variables such as years of experience and job title"**.**

Dimension	T-value	P-value (Sig)
Leadership's Vision in Adopting AI	3.86	0
Strategic Planning for AI Integration	3.83	0
Technical and Organizational Support	3.68	0
Faculty and Staff Development	3.61	0
Institutional Policies and Regulations	3.76	0
Overall Role of Educational Leadership	3.75	

The study's findings provided strong empirical support for the main hypothesis, which posited that educational leadership plays a statistically significant role in promoting the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in Saudi universities. The results revealed that leadership's influence extends across several key domains, each contributing meaningfully to the institution's ability to adopt and implement AI effectively. The analysis showed that the domain of leadership's vision in adopting AI was highly significant, underscoring the importance of clear and strategic leadership in setting the institutional direction. When leaders articulate a forward-looking vision, they not only set priorities but also inspire confidence among faculty, staff, and students. Similarly, strategic planning for AI integration emerged as a critical factor, indicating that well-structured plans, timelines, and performance indicators are fundamental to successful implementation. In addition, the role of technical and organizational support was found to be statistically significant, reflecting the need for robust infrastructure, IT resources, and administrative systems to sustain AI initiatives. The domain of faculty and staff development also demonstrated strong significance, emphasizing that investments in professional development are essential for equipping personnel with the necessary skills and competencies to engage with AI tools effectively. Lastly, institutional policies and regulations played an important role in ensuring that AI integration is carried out ethically and responsibly, with clear guidelines that protect privacy, promote accountability, and maintain public trust. Taken together, the t-test results confirmed that educational leadership significantly shapes all these dimensions, highlighting its transformative role in driving innovation and institutional change. The findings also point to important differences in perceptions based on demographic factors, such as years of professional experience and job title, suggesting that leadership strategies must be tailored to accommodate the diverse needs and perspectives of the university community. Overall, the study positions educational leaders not merely as managers of operations, but as visionary change agents who are central to realizing the full potential of artificial intelligence in higher education.

5. Discussion

The present study offers robust evidence that educational leadership plays a pivotal role in advancing the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in Saudi universities. Anchored in the hypothesis that leadership significantly influences AI adoption across multiple domains—vision, strategic planning, technical support, faculty development, and institutional policy—the findings align closely with both international literature and local institutional realities. The analysis revealed that leadership vision in adopting AI achieved the highest mean score, underscoring the importance of clear, future-oriented leadership in setting the tone for institutional innovation. As Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) and Salmon and Asgari (2022) emphasize, leaders' ability to articulate a compelling vision is foundational to cultivating institutional readiness and inspiring faculty, staff, and students to embrace change. This suggests that Saudi educational leaders are aware of the potential of AI but may still need to translate this awareness into concrete strategies for implementation. Strategic planning for AI integration emerged as another highly significant domain, reinforcing the argument by Bond et al. (2021) that structured, goal-oriented planning is essential for aligning AI initiatives with educational goals. This finding is particularly relevant in the Saudi context, where Vision 2030 prioritizes digital transformation in the education sector. However, despite the positive results, the moderate scores in technical and organizational support and faculty and staff development suggest that implementation gaps remain.

As Ifenthaler and Schumacher (2021) point out, even the most well-intentioned plans will falter without sufficient infrastructure, training, and ongoing capacity building. The results highlight an urgent need for Saudi universities to strengthen their investment in technical resources and professional development programs that equip educators with the necessary competencies to integrate AI tools effectively. The domain of institutional policies and regulations also received favorable ratings, indicating that governance frameworks are in place to guide ethical and responsible AI integration. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of ethical safeguards, privacy protection, and accountability mechanisms in technology governance (Bond et al., 2021; Salmon & Asgari, 2022). Yet, the study also points to the need for continuous updates of these policies to keep pace with the evolving technological landscape and emerging ethical challenges. Importantly, the findings showed that perceptions of leadership's role varied significantly across years of experience and job titles, with senior leaders and those with longer professional experience reporting higher levels of engagement and awareness. This variation suggests that leadership strategies should be differentiated and context-sensitive, recognizing the diverse needs, expectations, and capacities of various stakeholder

groups across the university hierarchy. As Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) emphasize, inclusive leadership practices and broad stakeholder engagement are critical for overcoming resistance to change and ensuring the sustainability of innovation efforts. Addressing the study's research questions, the results confirm that educational leaders in Saudi universities possess a moderate-to-high level of knowledge and awareness of AI technologies, but they face challenges in translating this awareness into effective practice. Key leadership practices identified include the establishment of clear institutional goals, the development of faculty training initiatives, and the creation of supportive governance structures. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited technical resources, resistance to change, and insufficient faculty preparedness continue to hinder full-scale AI integration. To overcome these challenges, the study recommends several practical proposals, including increasing investment in technical infrastructure, expanding leadership training programs, and fostering partnerships with technology firms to enhance institutional innovation capacity. Overall, the study extends previous research by demonstrating that educational leadership in Saudi universities is not merely a managerial function but a transformative force that shapes the trajectory of digital transformation in higher education (Salmon & Asgari, 2022; Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2021). The findings affirm that the success of AI integration depends not only on technological readiness but also, critically, on the quality of leadership that guides institutional change. This research contributes to the international literature by offering context-specific insights into the Saudi higher education sector, highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement.

6. Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that educational leadership plays a decisive and multifaceted role in advancing the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies within Saudi universities. Through a descriptive analytical approach, the research confirmed that leadership's influence extends across critical domains, including strategic vision, planning, technical and organizational support, faculty and staff development, and the establishment of institutional policies and regulations. The findings support the central hypothesis, demonstrating that educational leaders are not merely facilitators but transformative agents driving institutional change and digital innovation. The study reveals that while educational leaders in Saudi universities display considerable awareness and commitment toward AI adoption, challenges persist—particularly in technical infrastructure, faculty readiness, and continuous capacity building. Leadership vision and strategic planning emerged as the strongest predictors of successful AI integration, echoing the conclusions of Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019), Salmon and Asgari (2022), and Bond et al. (2021), who underscore the necessity of forward-thinking leadership and clear implementation frameworks. However, moderate performance in areas such as technical and organizational support and professional development signals a need for targeted interventions, including investments in infrastructure and leadership training initiatives, as highlighted by Ifenthaler and Schumacher (2021).

Importantly, the study underscores that leadership effectiveness is not uniform across institutional levels; variations were observed based on years of experience and job titles. This finding suggests that leadership strategies must be context-sensitive and adaptive to address the diverse needs of senior administrators, department heads, faculty, and administrative staff. Moreover, the research reinforces the importance of ethical governance, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation, aligning with best practices identified in the international literature. In practical terms, the study offers several recommendations: (1) increase investments in AI-related infrastructure; (2) expand leadership and faculty development programs focused on digital competencies; (3) foster innovation through pilot projects and partnerships; and (4) establish robust, adaptive institutional policies to ensure the ethical, equitable, and sustainable deployment of AI technologies. By addressing these priorities, Saudi universities can accelerate their digital transformation agendas and strengthen their global competitiveness. Overall, this study contributes valuable empirical insights to the field of educational leadership and technology integration, particularly within the context of Saudi higher education. It affirms that the successful integration of AI in universities is contingent not only on technological capabilities but also, critically, on the vision, preparedness, and adaptability of institutional leaders. Future research should build on these findings by exploring longitudinal impacts, cross-institutional comparisons, and the evolving ethical implications of AI in educational settings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several important recommendations are proposed to strengthen the role of educational leadership in integrating artificial intelligence (AI) technologies within Saudi universities. First, it is essential to invest in comprehensive training programs for educational leaders, aiming to enhance their digital competencies and equip them with the skills necessary to navigate the complexities of AI integration. Such programs should focus on both technical knowledge and the ethical implications of AI use in education. Second, universities should develop clear strategic plans for AI adoption, with well-defined objectives, timelines, and performance indicators. This will ensure that AI initiatives are aligned with institutional goals and that progress can be systematically monitored. Third, there is a need to strengthen technological

infrastructure, including the provision of adequate hardware, software, and data management systems, to support the effective use of AI tools across academic and administrative functions. Fourth, faculty and staff development programs should be expanded, focusing on continuous professional development to ensure educators can effectively integrate AI into teaching and learning. Finally, institutions are encouraged to foster a culture of innovation, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration, pilot projects, and partnerships with technology firms to enhance institutional capacity and adaptability in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

Study Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, the human scope of the study was restricted to educational leaders and administrative staff within Saudi universities, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts or regions. Second, the geographic limitation to Saudi universities means that cultural, policy, and institutional factors specific to Saudi Arabia may have influenced the results, and caution should be exercised when applying the findings to international settings. Third, the data collection was cross-sectional, capturing a snapshot of perceptions and practices during the academic year 2022–2023. As such, the study does not account for longitudinal changes or the evolving nature of AI integration over time. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported data collected through questionnaires, which may introduce response bias, as participants' answers may have been influenced by social desirability or their perceptions rather than actual practices. Lastly, while the study focused on the role of educational leadership, it did not explore student perspectives or technical dimensions of AI implementation, leaving room for future research to adopt a more holistic, multi-stakeholder approach.

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