



## Original Article (Qualitative)

# Providing a smart leadership model based on digital transformation in higher education

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study was to provide a smart leadership model based on digital transformation in higher education centers in Kerman province. This research was applicable-developmental in terms of purpose, and qualitative in terms of research method, and was conducted using the content analysis method. The data collection tool consisted of two parts: a review and exploration of research literature in the library section, and semi-structured interviews in the field section. The participants of this study in the field section were the managers of higher education centers in Kerman province. Individuals were selected using a purposive sampling method based on at least 10 years of experience in higher education management and complete familiarity with this field. Semi-structured interviews with participants continued until the theoretical saturation stage. The method of analyzing the interviews was carried out using the content analysis method (basic, organizing, and comprehensive themes). The coding and text analysis process of the interviews was carried out in the MAXQDA 2018 qualitative data analysis software. The research findings showed that the intelligent leadership model based on digital transformation in higher education includes the following dimensions: digital insight (awareness of digital trends and technologies, development and explanation of digital strategy, foresight and digital innovation), digital competencies (digital literacy, analytical and data-driven thinking, risk management and digital security), transformational leadership (creating a shared vision, empowerment and participation, support and coaching), agility and adaptability (flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity, agile approach, continuous learning and adaptation), and digital culture (promoting a culture of innovation and experimentation, digital collaboration and communication, digital customer orientation).

**Keywords:**

Smart leadership,  
digital  
Transformation,  
Digital insight,  
Digital  
competencies,  
Digital culture.

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## Extended abstract

### Introduction

Globalization and rapid growth of information and communication technology have brought a fundamental change to the human resource management process, and the role and function of human resources have been marginalized by the strong presence of information and communication technology, and it is even feared that one day human resource management will be realized without the role of humans in all organizational areas and dimensions. Planning, organizing, directing, and controlling human capital have become intelligent and digital, and cyberspace accelerates and facilitates its processes. The digital transformation process is one of the new tricks in the field of human resource management that has recently gained double importance among some government organizations and businesses in the digital and technological fields (Orhan & Kurnaz, 2025).

In the current era, organizations are facing a wave of digital transformations that require a review of traditional leadership models. Leaders play an important role in shaping organizational culture, structure, strategy, and policy development, and human resources also play a key role in achieving sustainable development (Alirezaei et al., 2022). Today's leaders must not only have a deep understanding of digital technologies, but also have the ability to create an innovative and agile organizational culture. This requires the ability to adapt quickly to change, encourage continuous learning, and create an environment where employees can come up with new ideas and take risks. Therefore, the main issue is the lack of a comprehensive and effective leadership model that can guide organizations on the path of digital transformation. Traditional leadership models often lack the agility, technology knowledge, and data-driven perspective needed to face the complex challenges of this era. As a result, organizations are in dire need of a smart leadership model that can help them achieve their strategic goals by leveraging digital technologies, the right organizational culture, and empowering employees. In the era of digital transformation, leadership in higher education faces complex challenges, including rapid technological changes, dynamic stakeholder expectations, and globalization demands in the education system (Rahimi and Oh, 2024; Syahrudin et al., 2023).

There are always fundamental problems in implementing smart leadership, including gaps in the use of digital systems to support administrative management, learning, and data-based decision-making. In addition, adapting to changes in educational policies and global demands has not been entirely optimal, causing institutions to face difficulties in improving academic competitiveness and the professionalism of educators. Therefore, it is expected that this research, by providing a model, can pave a smooth path for the successful entry and movement of higher education and other organizations towards digital transformation. For this purpose, this research tries to provide a model of smart leadership based on digital transformation in higher education in line with this necessity, and specify what features this model should have and how it should be designed and implemented. To achieve this purpose, first the theoretical foundations related to the field of smart leadership and digital transformation were reviewed to determine the shortcomings and deficiencies in it. Then, considering these shortcomings and in accordance with higher education, using a qualitative method and also having the views of experts, an attempt is made in the research process to answer the question: What is the smart leadership model based on digital transformation like?

### Theoretical foundations

Technology-based leadership and data-driven decision-making can improve the efficiency of educational institutions' management and accelerate the process of adapting to global changes (Nicola-Gavrila, 2023). Smart leadership is a new approach to leadership that focuses on



developing self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and systems thinking in leaders. This type of leadership promotes the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, make effective decisions in complex situations, and build positive and constructive relationships with others. Smart leaders, with a deep understanding of themselves and their surroundings, can guide organizations towards strategic goals while also paying special attention to the growth and development of employees. In other words, smart leadership is a combination of cognitive, emotional, and social skills that enable leaders to deal more effectively with the complex challenges of today's world (Kabuum & Nathan, 2024).

Abdulkazem Helu Al Rakabi et al., (2025) made a research aimed at presenting a model for improving human resource management with an emphasis on technology-based training in the era of digital transformation. The results of the research showed that there is a 17-factor model with 88 indicators for improving human resource management in the era of digital transformation. This model includes seven causal factors, six enabling factors, two intervening factors, and two strategies. The findings showed that there are meaningful relationships between all the factors of the model and its two strategies. Also, the presented model has a strong overall fit. This research can be useful for managers and policymakers to use technology-based training to improve human resource management in their organizations in the era of digital transformation.

Kabuum & Nathan (2024) conducted a research entitled Smart Leadership: Organizational Adaptation to the Environment and Organizational Collaboration. Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, this study explores the perspectives of institutional leaders, lecturers, teaching staff and students through in-depth interviews, participatory observation and document analysis. The results of this study show that awareness of the importance of digitalization currently exists, but its implementation remains limited due to inadequate infrastructure and low digital literacy. Leadership still relies on individual initiatives and is not yet based on a sustainable system. Internal collaboration is underway, but the participation of external parties still needs to be strengthened. To overcome this challenge, a strategy is needed to increase leadership capacity, strengthen digital infrastructure, and develop a more innovative organizational culture. This study helps to enrich the understanding of smart leadership in higher education in remote areas and provides strategic recommendations for improving leadership effectiveness in the digital age.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study is classified as applicable-developmental in terms of purpose, and qualitative in terms of research method, and of content analysis type. A total of 12 interviewees in this study were interviewed in a tailored manner. An attempt was also made to include those individuals in the study who, in addition to being willing to participate in the interview, also had sufficient information on the topic of smart leadership and digital transformation, and had a background and practical experience in this issue. A snowball technique was also used to select individuals, and each interviewee was asked to provide the researcher with a list of individuals who were willing and had expertise in participating in a study.

### **Research findings**

The coding process and text analysis of the interviews were carried out in the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2018. The research findings showed that the intelligent leadership model based on digital transformation includes the dimensions of: digital insight (awareness of digital trends and technologies, formulation and explanation of digital strategy, foresight and digital innovation), digital competencies (digital literacy, analytical and data-

driven thinking, risk management and digital security), transformational leadership (creating a shared vision, empowerment and participation, support and coaching), agility and adaptability (flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity, agile approach, continuous learning and adaptation), and digital culture (promoting a culture of innovation and experimentation, digital collaboration and communication, digital customer orientation).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The aim of the present study was to identify the dimensions and components of smart leadership based on digital transformation in Kerman higher education centers. The research findings showed that the smart leadership model based on digital transformation includes the dimensions of: digital insight (awareness of digital trends and technologies, formulation and explanation of digital strategy, foresight and digital innovation), digital competencies (digital literacy, analytical and data-based thinking, risk management and digital security), transformational leadership (creating a shared vision, empowerment and participation, support and coaching), agility and adaptability (flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity, agile approach, continuous learning and adaptation), and digital culture (promoting a culture of innovation and experimentation, digital collaboration and communication, digital customer orientation). The results of this study are somewhat consistent with the findings of Kabuam & Nathan (2024) and confirm the results of this study.

Smart leaders with digital insight have the ability to deeply understand digital technologies, emerging trends, and potential opportunities that arise in the digital context. They are good at anticipating the future and understanding the impact of digital on business and society, and seek to create a digital vision for their organization that is aligned with the needs of the market and competitors. Digital competencies refer to the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively use digital tools and technologies in the organization.