

EXAMINING LEADERSHIP DEPARTURES (TURNOVER) IN THE ACADEMIC SETTING: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

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Abstract: This qualitative analysis addresses the complex and multifarious forces behind leadership departure (turnover) in Saudi Arabian higher education, a dynamic and rapidly morphing landscape subject to context-specific socio-cultural factors. Individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels of analysis and established leadership theories and constructs are examined, including transformational leadership and leader–member exchange (LMX) theory. This study involved the collection of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 21 academic leaders (Deans, Vice Deans, and department heads) from seven geographically diverse public universities in Saudi Arabia. The interview data were analysed to inform a thematic analysis of leadership departure data. These insights can inform targeted interventions and policies aimed at reducing leadership turnover, improving retention, and fostering well-being among academic leaders in Saudi higher education.

Keywords: Leadership Departure; Turnover; Academia; Qualitative Investigation; Saudi Arabia

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education leadership is key to institutional success and continued innovation in a positive learning environment. However, leadership turnover is a serious problem faced by universities around the world as it can disrupt strategic initiatives, affect faculty morale, and hinder long-term growth (Rahman et al., 2014; Saad Alessa, 2021). This is especially relevant in rapidly expanding higher education systems such as that in Saudi Arabia (Rahman et al., 2014), where universities are breaking through historical barriers and undergoing unprecedented expansion and intensive internationalisation within unique socio-cultural contexts. The numbers of universities and students enrolled in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions have increased considerably (Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabia, 2023). For these institutions to be well positioned, a strong cadre of leaders is required to shepherd them through this transformation. Moreover, demands for internationalisation remain high, including appeals to attract international faculty members and students, the development of joint research programmes, and benchmarking against global best practices—all of which significantly change the context of leadership (De Wit, 2019). Although leadership turnover is an acknowledged issue globally (e.g., Hinkin & Tracey, 2000), there are few studies directly examining this issue in the Saudi Arabian context. Previous studies typically addressed overall leadership challenges (e.g., Rahman et al., 2014) or investigated leadership styles but omitted the precise causes of voluntary departures. This gap in the research highlights the importance of investigating the specific nature of leadership turnover in Saudi higher education. Furthermore, understanding the underlying causes of leadership turnover is essential for the development of targeted interventions and policy measures that promote leadership retention, leadership effectiveness, and, therefore, the sustainable development of Saudi universities.

1.1. Research Problem

Leadership turnover in Saudi Arabian higher education is increasing, reflecting the current situation in higher education in general. The high turnover rate disrupts strategic initiatives, undermines faculty morale, and negatively affects overall institutional effectiveness (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000). This profound expansion and the globalisation of Saudi higher education necessitates dependable and productive leadership to address the challenges caused by these changes (De Wit, 2019). Nevertheless, there is little empirical knowledge specifically related to

the factors associated with the turnover of educational leaders in Saudi Arabia, thus impeding the implementation of strategic retention strategies and interventions (Rahman et al., 2014). This issue must be addressed to increase understanding of the causes of high leadership turnover in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia.

1.2. Significance of This Study

By addressing an urgent gap in the prevailing literature regarding the drivers of leadership turnover in Saudi Arabian higher education, this study contributes to the understanding of leadership turnover within a specific socio-cultural context (Rahman et al., 2014; Saad Alessa, 2021). These findings will inform policymakers, university administrators, and future leaders to create targeted interventions and policies to reduce leadership turnover and increase retention (Saad Alessa, 2021). By voicing the experiences of academic leaders, this study highlights this dynamic, developing a more nuanced understanding of leadership within Saudi higher education and promoting a context-sensitive approach and a more sustainable leadership climate. This study also investigates established leadership theories (such as transformational leadership and LMX) and how they are evidenced in Saudi higher education.

It expands theoretical discussions about leadership and provides empirical data to support best practices in leadership development and succession planning in Saudi universities (Allen et al., 2010; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This research also emphasises the interplay of individual, interpersonal, and institutional processes shaping the exit of leaders and outlines the need for a comprehensive approach to understanding this phenomenon. Importantly, the analysis highlights the need for differentiated interventions and policies based on the unique factors influencing leadership exit by gender, discipline, and experience (Kallio et al., 2024; Muthuswamy, 2022).

1.3. Purpose of This Study

This research aims to investigate the complex motivations behind the resignation of leaders within Saudi Arabia's higher education institutions. It explores the intricate dynamics of individual, relational, and institutional factors that cause leaders to withdraw from their roles. By analysing these drivers, this study seeks to offer crucial perspectives for university administrators, policymakers, and prospective leaders to cultivate a more conducive and holistic leadership environment, thereby assisting the expansion and sustainability of universities in Saudi Arabia. To accomplish this, the following research questions are addressed: "What are the key factors contributing to the leadership departure in Saudi Arabian higher education?" and "How do these factors interact at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels?"

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, existing research that considers leadership turnover in academia is considered, and various factors influencing departures from leadership roles are identified, drawing from leadership research and research on higher education. This section also outlines gaps in the current literature and the theoretical framework supporting this study.

2.1. Leadership in Academia

Academic leadership comprises an array of roles, including department chairs, deans, provosts, and presidents. These positions demand a special combination of scholarly respectability, administrative ability, and interactive skill (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Effective academic leaders are vital to nurturing a strong institutional climate, providing faculty development, driving strategic initiatives, and leading to greater student success (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). They traverse multi-layered governance structures and juggle competing stakeholder priorities, frequently doing so in a resource-limited context (Birnbaum, 1988). Academic leadership positions have become increasingly complex over the last few decades as external pressures and accountability demands have ramped up (Tight, 2020). Bolman and Deal (2017) advocate for transparent and fluid academic leadership, proposing that effective leaders should apply multiple lenses and approaches to tackling the diverse challenges. They assert that leaders must be proficient in structural, human resource, political, and symbolic framing to address organisational complexities and pursue institutional objectives. Characterising practices and outcomes in leadership, Kezar and Eckel (2002) found that culture is an important determinant in leadership within an institution. This means that leaders must understand the cultural context at hand and tailor their approaches to drive successful transformation and innovation.

2.2. The Landscape of Academic Leadership Departure (Turnover)

The widespread issue of leadership turnover, which affects many sectors, including higher education, is a significant challenge to organisations. Many individual and institutional factors that can be categorised as "push" and "pull" factors (Allen et al., 2010) shape this turnover. Push factors (e.g., poor work-life balance, lack of organisational support, limited career development opportunity, and conflict with organisational culture) cause some professionals to leave their jobs (Allen et al., 2010). So-called "push" factors push people out of their current roles, while "pull" factors draw them to new opportunities.

Too many transitions in leadership positions can disrupt strategic planning, affect morale and productivity, and result in a loss of institutional knowledge (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000). The effectiveness of these transitions has raised alarms in many organisations as the recruitment, training, and onboarding of new executives can be costly (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000) and, coupled with the potential for erratic organisational behaviour during these transitions, organisations experience the dilemma of determining what they are looking for. In fact, if organisations can understand why people are leaving, they can implement measures to reduce turnover. This involves creating a positive workplace culture, encouraging healthy work–life balance, offering career advancement opportunities, and ensuring employees' values match the organisation mission. This will help retain talented leaders, ensure stability, and reach goals.

In the domain of higher education, academic leadership turnover refers to departures from executive positions in higher education (De Vries et al., 2010; Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996) and/or mid-level positions. This turnover must be understood through the lens of the specific push and pull factors that impact academic leaders, as well as the role of communication in sustaining strong relationships, sharing information, and meeting shared goals (De Vries et al., 2010; Kallio et al., 2024).

2.3. The Complexity of Retaining Academic Leadership

Leadership turnover in higher education is an example of a complex phenomenon driven by the interaction of personal, interpersonal, and institutional forces. Three domains—the personal (spirit), the relational (between people), and the institutional—are interlinked and play a distinct role in a leader's commitment to remain at or depart from an organisation. Researchers theorise that a successful retention programme must address all three spheres and that one without the others is not sufficient to keep academic leaders to their current institutions.

2.4. Individual Factors: The Burden of Expectations

Although the reasons for leaving their position vary among academic leaders, a common theme is the overwhelming burden of work. A problem that occurs at all levels of leadership (Kallio et al., 2024) is the phenomenon of burnout, which is often defined by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and diminished personal accomplishment. This is indicative of the enormous pressure and workload that such roles often entail, and it does not last forever. Moreover, poor work–life balance, which is especially problematic for women and caregivers (Muthuswamy, 2022), introduces another dimension of complexity.

It is also important to acknowledge that for many women, this level of workload is a product of systemic issues such as gender bias and inadequate institutional support for work–life integration. Women's and caregivers' ambitions can be thwarted by their limited opportunity to advance or dissatisfaction with promotional processes (Avolio & Benzaquen, 2024).

2.5. Interpersonal Dynamic: The Power of Relationships

The quality of relationships in the academic environment is also important to leadership retention, extending beyond individual struggles to stay afloat. New leaders may feel particularly isolated from their more senior colleagues, who provide them with insufficient mentorship and guidance (Kallio et al., 2024). This lack of support can create an environment in which professional growth is stunted and team members feel undervalued, ultimately leading leaders to search for more supportive opportunities elsewhere.

Differences within the team with respect to direction or goals, leadership style, or personality can lead to conflict with colleagues, creating a toxic and hostile work environment (Kezar & Eckel, 2002) and undermining a leader's feeling of belonging and commitment. Further, a lack of cooperation and ineffective communication may become a source of friction and impede institutional progress, causing its leaders to feel isolated and unsupported and potentially resulting in poor interpersonal relations among them (Saad Alessa, 2021).

2.6. Institutional Factors: The Context of Leadership

The organisational context within which academic leaders operate impacts their decision to remain or leave. Institutional support deficits (under-resourcing, staff shortages, and unwieldy bureaucratic processes) can lead to frustration and feelings of being de-valued, particularly among mid-level leaders who have limited freedom to remedy the situation (Kebede, 2024). The institutional culture and climate—the interpersonal environment surrounding faculty, staff, and students—influence leader satisfaction and retention.

Ensuring a healthy and inclusive culture that fosters collaboration and open dialogue and appreciates leadership endeavours is crucial to not only attracting effective leaders but also retaining them (Rahman et al., 2014; Saad Alessa, 2021). In addition, governance structures that emphasise transparency and inclusivity in decision-making can support leaders in their commitment and job satisfaction. Engaging faculty in decision-making through shared governance models can increase leader satisfaction and retention. Lastly, external environments may introduce pressures such as funding constraints, growing accountability demands, and political interference, leading to increased stress and disengagement that can be particularly pronounced for executive leaders and contribute to high turnover (Tight, 2020).

2.7. Leadership “Turnover”: A Crisis for Higher Education

The loss of academic leaders triggers a cascading cycle of negative outcomes that reverberate through higher education institutions and distort their functioning, effectiveness, and success. Leadership turnover interrupts strategizing, as new leaders often discard the basic initiatives of their predecessors. Such a disruption can stifle innovation, deter the movement toward institutional goals, or reduce performance metrics (student retention, fund-raising success, research output) (Rahman et al., 2010). Further, the loss of leadership breeds uncertainty and anxiety among faculty and staff, which undermines morale, diminishes job satisfaction, and is a primary driver of additional turnover. This kind of instability is more likely to be experienced by junior faculty, people of colour, and staff who are precariously employed, preventing their career advancement and professional development.

Students are similarly affected. When a school loses its leader, much of the learning environment is disrupted in a way that often results in new curricula, interruptions in access to support services, and inconsistent academic advising. This can have a detrimental effect on students' morale, engagement, and academic success, with measurable declines in retention and graduation rates (Saad Alessa, 2021). Moreover, leadership transitions and the associated uncertainty can deepen existing fears among vulnerable student groups, including first-generation students, students of colour, and students with disabilities, who fear failing to thrive.

Adequately addressing these complex consequences demands a kebab approach that embeds an interlinking chain of causation—individual, interpersonal, and organisational. At the same time, institutions need to take ownership of the solution by prioritising leadership development and supportive programmes, addressing burnout, encouraging work–life balance, investing in coordination and collaboration among departments, and building a culture of mentorship. By establishing transparent governance structures, equitable resource allocation, and a commitment to shared decision-making, the negative impact of leadership transitions can be lessened, and a more stable and supportive environment can be maintained for the entire academic community.

2.8. Towards Sustainable Academic Leadership: A Multi-Dimensional Model

Attracting and retaining effective academic leaders is a pressing topic for higher education institutions worldwide. Meeting this challenge requires a multilayered approach that recognises the tangled interactions between personal, social, and organisational dimensions. Sustainable academic leadership is built on nurturing conditions in which leaders are sustained and empowered to flourish. Focusing solely on individuals or isolated initiatives will not be enough; a systemic change is needed.

Academic institutions must ensure that they consistently provide an ecosystem that strengthens belongingness and community. This shift requires progress from simply tolerating the existence of others to actively embracing them, making room for many voices (Rahman et al., 2014; Saad Alessa, 2021). The feeling of belonging is connected to psychological safety, encouraging leaders to produce and share their best work (Kebede, 2024) and supporting a collaborative, rather than competitive, culture. If departments work in silos and each leader thinks as an individual and tries to outsmart the others, progress is marred by burnout. Interdisciplinary collaboration, mentorship programmes, and shared governance models that enable leaders to work together to achieve common goals should be encouraged by institutions (Kezar & Eckel, 2002).

Effective leaders stay longer when given opportunities for professional growth and development. This means that institutions must cultivate leadership development programmes that are broader than those found in management training. More specifically, these programmes should be focused on skills involving strategic thinking, change management, conflict resolution, and inclusive leadership (Northouse, 2018). Importantly, they should enable leaders to reflect on their own leadership styles, values, and biases. In addition, institutions should help leaders achieve a healthy work–life balance. Academic leaders today are subjected to increasing demands, and the digital age has removed the separation of work and personal time, leading to burnout and attrition (Acker, 2016). Institutions should adopt policies and practices that foster work–life integration, including flexible work arrangements, generous leave policies, and access to wellness resources.

Decision-making processes that are open and inclusive can help build trust and ensure buy-in from academic leaders. When leaders believe their voices are heard and their contributions are valued, they are more likely to remain at their institution. Institutions will benefit from participative forms of governance that include leaders in important decisions, particularly ones governing their departments or units (Birnbaum, 1988). This encompasses transparent communication channels, access to pertinent information, and mechanisms for feedback.

Lastly, it is crucial to eliminate systemic challenges such as working mother bias and inequities. Academic women and underrepresented minorities encounter significant obstacles to advancement, and even when they achieve leadership, they may be subjected to more insidious forms of discrimination and marginalisation (Rahman et al., 2014). We must be proactive about breaking down the barriers erected by these systemic problems with implicit bias training, equitable hiring practices, and targeted mentorship programmes for women and underrepresented minorities seeking leadership positions.

Hope springs eternal, and academic leaders are human beings. If given the chance, human beings will put heart and soul into their work and try to improve their workplace. This necessitates a data-informed strategy that balances individual, relational, and institutional levers for leadership retention. Investing in leadership

development, cultivating collaboration, creating inclusive decision making, and dismantling systemic inequities are not gestures of good will; they are strategic investments in the future of higher education.

2.9. Theoretical Framework

The present study examines the theoretical underpinnings of academic leadership departures in Saudi Arabian universities by investigating two significant leadership perspectives (namely, transformational leadership and leader–member exchange (LMX)). Transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006) provides a framework through which we can understand how leaders inspire and motivate followers via idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. The existence or nonexistence of these transformational leadership behaviours within Saudi universities yields a positive or negative work environment which, in turn, affects leaders' decisions to remain or leave, a gap addressed by this study. Specifically, this study examines whether a lack of inspirational motivation leads to burnout among leaders and, if so, whether a lack of individualised consideration negatively affects faculty morale, leading to a retention issue when it comes to leadership.

LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) is concerned with the quality of leader–follower dyadic relationships. This study investigates the extent to which the quality of these relationships, perceived as high (e.g., trust, respect, mutual influence) to low (which is limited to formal roles), affects the retention of leaders in Saudi universities. It looks at whether poor LMX relations with superiors create feelings of isolation and a lack of support that pushes leaders to seek alternatives. In addition, it explores how strained LMX bonds with coworkers can breed conflict, discontent, and turnover.

This study examines these theories in the context of the distinctive Saudi Arabian culture to understand how they may manifest and affect withdrawals from leadership positions. It recognises that cultural factors can shape leadership expectations and relationships, e.g., through hierarchical structures and collectivist versus individualist values. Institutional structures formed around a centralised decision-making process and resource allocation have similar effects on leadership effectiveness and satisfaction. Personal factors such as personality traits, career goals, and values are also considered in conjunction with leadership behaviours. This research adopts a qualitative approach that allows for a deep exploration of these multilayered processes, leading to a more nuanced comprehension of the reasons behind the turnover of academic leaders in Saudi Arabia.

3. METHODOLOGY

Methods used in this study, including researcher positionality, sampling strategy, data collection, and data analysis procedures, are outlined in this section.

3.1. Reflexivity and Positionality of the Enquirer

The researcher, who has a long history of working in Saudi Arabian higher education, has an insider status that carried several advantages. It enabled access to the participants and facilitated building trust and a rapport, which are crucial for qualitative research (Mercer, 2007). Having this cultural knowledge enabled the researcher to understand the participants' experiences in a contextualised way (Miles & Huberman, 2014) and to appreciate the complexities and challenges faced by academic leadership in this context.

However, this same positionality necessitates an awareness of and reflection upon the potential bias and power dynamics involved. In response to some of these issues, the researcher was transparent about their positionality and potential biases to participants as a strategy to manage the above concerns (Mercer, 2007). The theme of reflexivity was central; half of the research process included continuous reflexivity, as the researcher's perspective and interpretation were critically debated and applied to the emerging data (Miles & Huberman, 2014). This process included record-keeping, peer debriefing, and periodic reviews of the data analysis steps.

3.2 Ethics and Integrity in Research

This study was carried out in accordance with the principles and guidance for ethical research detailed by the Economic and Social Research Council (Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 2022). Ethical approval was obtained from the King Saud University Research Ethics Committee before data collection started, and all procedures were followed in accordance with institutional and national provisions.

The principle of informed consent was the cornerstone upon which all ethical considerations in this study were built. All subjects were informed about the study objectives, methods, risks, and benefits and their right to refuse or terminate participation at any time without penalty. Questions and explanations were provided as needed after informed written consent was obtained, ensuring that participation was voluntary and informed.

In order to protect the participants' confidentiality and privacy, a number of protective measures were implemented. All research reports and publications used pseudonyms. Participants were also given the chance to read and approve transcripts of the interviews, giving them a chance to validate that the data reflected their lived experiences. Additionally, all data analysis was carried out done anonymously, and any identifying data were scrubbed from the database before analysis.

These methodological decisions reflect current ethical guidelines and recommendations for research involving human participants, particularly qualitative research studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative inquiry frequently calls for intensive engagement with respondents around sensitive subjects that underscore the need to prioritize trust and participant welfare (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2020). All aspects of the research process were designed and implemented to support participant rights and wellbeing, as demonstrated through the robust systems in place for informed consent, confidentiality, and data security.

This study followed the ethical principles and guidelines established by organizations such as the American Speech–Language–Hearing Association (ASHA, 2023), as well as Creswell and Poth (2018), regarding the authenticity and quality of research and institutional review board approval for participant rights and welfare. This is an example of the integrity with which this study was conducted and emphasizes the importance of this information.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The main form of data collection employed in this study was semi-structured interviews, as they are a powerful means of capturing the contextualised complexities of lived experiences relevant to this research (Miles & Huberman, 2014; Roulston, 2010). This practice balances the framework of the inquiry and the space for personal perspective. A semi-structured interview guide allowed us to address some key themes related to leadership departure and turnover, the manifestations and consequences of these departures, their impact on functions at the individual, social, and institutional levels, and coping mechanisms. Moreover, our semi-structured design allowed for themes and insights to surface that were not originally included in our guide, enriching the data collected and facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed iteratively, drawing on previous studies, and tailored to the requirements of this study. An overview of the literature on leadership departures in academia (transformational leadership theory and LMX theory) provided a sound theoretical premise. Participants felt less restrained when describing their experiences by answering open-ended questions. After the initial testing with academic leaders, the guide was revised and clarified. To focus on data collection, the research questions and theoretical framework were used to derive questions. The questions were written in clear, accessible language, avoiding jargon. Subsequently, translation and back-translation were used to validate and cross-culturally adapt the guide.

The researcher aimed to maintain participant comfort and data quality throughout the interview. To ensure maximal convenience, interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone, according to participant preference. Extended interviews (1:30) allowed for the detailed sharing of experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcription service, with written informed consent. To facilitate recruitment, scheduling, interviews, and transcription, data were collected over 2 months (January–February 2025).

3.3.2. Sampling Strategy

A purposive snowball sampling technique was used to recruit 21 academic leaders from seven state universities in Saudi Arabia. This approach was particularly fitting for accessing participants who were experienced and knowledgeable in the area of interest, as the context for establishing rapport and gaining access was normalised (Wellington, 2015). Purposive sampling allows scholars to choose elements that yield rich data relevant to the topic of study. Purposive sampling enabled the inclusion of academic leaders with different experience levels and backgrounds as well as leadership departure perspectives, enhancing the breadth of the study.

To achieve sample diversity, the researcher approached potential participants at different levels of seniority in each university. Individuals who registered their interest early were encouraged to refer other colleagues who might be open to sharing their experience. This study used a snowballing recruitment method and thus considered a wider range of perspectives.

3.3.3. Addressing Potential Biases

Purposive sampling is never unbiased; therefore, this sampling required careful consideration. Inherent bias was implicit in participant selection and data interpretation in this study owing to the researcher's insider status in Saudi Arabian higher education. To address this, the researcher utilised reflexivity at each stage of the process, constantly questioning their own assumptions and interpretations. Snowball sampling is used for gaining access to hidden populations, but it may introduce bias as it is likely to attract respondents with similar interests or perspectives. The researcher was mindful of this potential bias and, in response, made a concerted effort to solicit referrals from an array of subjects and recruit participants with a diversity of experiences and perspectives.

3.3.4. Sample Size and Saturation

The sample size ($n = 21$) was considered adequate for this qualitative study. Saturation occurs in qualitative studies when there are no additional data that reveal any new themes (Guest et al., 2020). Saturation was reached after interviewing 21 participants, when no additional information about the experience and implications of burnout was obtained.

3.3.5. Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic data of the participants in terms of gender, age, academic rank, years of experience, and university affiliation. The interviewees were male and female academic leaders from Saudi Arabia with varying specialisations and degrees of seniority, providing potentially valuable insight into the aims of this study.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Number of Designations	University Name	Designation	Gender	Age Range	Academic Rank	Years of Experience	Department/Field
1	A University	Dean	M	41–50	Professor	20+	Medicine
2	A University	Vice Dean	M	41–50	Professor	10+	Education
3	A University	Head of Department	F	30–40	Associate Professor	10+	Mathematics
4	B University	Dean	M	41–50	Professor	20+	Computer science
5	B University	Vice dean	F	41–50	Professor	20+	Business
6	B University	Head of Department	F	30–40	Associate Professor	10+	Education
7	C University	Dean	M	41–50	Associate Professor	20+	Social Sciences
8	C University	Vice Dean	F	30–40	Associate Professor	10+	Law
9	C University	Head of Department	M	41–50	Assistant Professor	20+	Engineering
10	D University	Dean	M	51–60	Professor	20+	Business
11	D University	Vice Dean	F	30–40	Assistant Professor	10+	Science
12	D University	Head of Department	M	51–60	Professor	20+	Computer science
13	E University	Dean	M	51–60	Professor	20+	Medicine
14	E University	Vice Dean	M	41–50	Assistant Professor	20+	Education
15	E University	Head of Department	M	30–40	Associate Professor	10+	Computer science
16	F University	Dean	M	30–40	Assistant Professor	10+	Engineering
17	F University	Vice Dean	M	41–50	Professor	20+	Business
18	F University	Head of Department	M	51–60	Professor	20+	Law
19	G University	Dean	M	30–40	Associate Professor	10+	Humanities
20	G University	Vice Dean	F	41–50	Professor	15+	Science
21	G University	Head of Department	M	30–40	Assistant Professor	10+	Engineering

3.4. The Pseudonym Structure

This study examines the linkage between reasons for leadership departure (turnover) among academic leaders in the higher education sector of Saudi Arabia based on the responses of 21 research participants. Pseudonyms are indicated as follows: “University (U) + letter for the specific university (A/B/C/D/E/F/G)”, “participant number

(1/2/3),” and “interview date.” Hence, the subjects are referred to as “UALD3, 05/2023,” “UCLVD3, 06/2023,” “UBLHOD1, 07/2023”, and so on, for the first type of the case study site. The position titles and data used for the analysis are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Pseudonym structure.

Element	Code	Example	Explanation
University	U	UA	7 university letters (A, B, C, D, E, F, or G) “U” indicates University, followed by the letter assigned to each university (A, B, C, D, E, F, or G)
Posts	D, V.D HOD	D	The abbreviation of the leader’s position title
Participant number	1, 2, 3...	1	Participant university role sequence number
Date of interview		20 February 2025	Date of interview

Example: UBD1, pers. comm., FEBRUARY 20, 2025. U indicates University; BD indicates University Name/Position (D: Dean); 1 indicates Participant Number 1; and Pers. Comm. indicates a Personal Communication (indicates an interview), with an interview date of 20 February 2025.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents and discusses the key findings of this qualitative study, which explored the factors contributing to leadership departures in Saudi Arabian higher education. The findings are based on a thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data gathered from 21 academic leaders (Deans, Vice Deans, and department heads) across seven geographically diverse public universities in Saudi Arabia.

The research sought to answer the following overarching question:

What are the key factors contributing to leadership departures in Saudi Arabian higher education, and how do these factors interact at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels?

To address this question, the analysis focused on identifying recurring themes and patterns related to individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors influencing leadership departures. The findings are presented below, organised by key themes and subthemes and illustrated with representative quotes from the participants.

4.1. Individual-Level Factors

The analysis was conceptualised and organised into themes, and the individual-level results revealed several key themes and subthemes that explored the personal motivations, aspirations, and experiences of academic leaders who had left or were considering leaving their position. The results are arranged by factor category, theme, sub-theme, illustrative quotes, analysis/context, and connections to existing research and theoretical frameworks (Table 3).

Table 3. Individual-level factors.

Factor Category	Theme	Sub-theme (n)	Illustrative Quote	Analysis/Context	Connection to Existing Research and Theoretical Framework
Personal Motivations and Aspirations	Desire for Personal Growth	Seeking New Challenges (8)	“I felt I had plateaued in my existing role...”—UFD1, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	Opportunities for challenge and personal growth encourage leaders to leave.	This is consistent with research findings on career motivation and leadership development, which show that individuals are driven, to a large extent, by the need to grow and seek new challenges (Avolio et al., 2009). According to transformational leadership theory, leaders are also encouraged to nurture intellectual stimulation and developmental

					opportunities for their followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006).
	Desire for Work–Life Balance	Family Responsibilities (12)	“I could not balance what my job needed from me with my family, and I had to make a choice more than once...” UBVD2, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	Work–life balance challenges, especially among women with children, can help explain some departures.	This finding resonates with studies demonstrating the challenges women encounter in leadership positions, especially concerning work–family balance (Malik & Allam, 2021).
	Career Advancement	Seeking Higher Positions (5)	“I received an offer for a more senior role at another institution...”—UCHOD3, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	Those in leadership may depart for more prestigious and powerful roles.	This is consistent with the literature on career ambition and leader succession, which notes that individuals may seek upward mobility and new opportunities to advance (Rahman et al., 2014)
Job Satisfaction and Well-being	Burnout	Emotional Exhaustion (15)	“I was constantly fatigued and overwhelmed...”—UED2, pers. comm., 20 February 202	Burnout—a syndrome marked by emotional exhaustion, cynicism and diminished personal accomplishment—plays a major role in leadership turnover.	This aligns with research highlighting the high rate of burnout among academic leaders (Northouse, 2018).
	Stress and Pressure	High Workload (18)	“The work was constant and unending, with no time to breathe...”—UFD3, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	Oversight and management of leaders, especially in academic departments, leads to stress and attrition.	This supports findings from research on occupational stress and leadership that stressful tasks and environments can harm leader well-being and increase turnover (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000).
	Lack of Recognition	Feeling Undervalued (9)	“I felt underappreciated and ignored in my contributions...”—UGV. D2, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	Insufficient recognition and appreciation can lead to discontent and turnover.	This finding aligns with the literature on employee motivation and recognition, indicating that feeling valued and appreciated is vital to job satisfaction and retention (Allen et al., 2010).

4.2. Interpersonal Factors

While individual motivations and experiences may differ greatly between individuals, the qualitative nature of interpersonal relationships and interactions in the academic environment was found to be a major factor behind departures at the leadership level. Table 4 describes the main themes and subthemes regarding interpersonal dynamics, with corresponding quotes from the participants. Encouraging supportive and collegial relationships can be an effective means of fostering leadership retention and well-being.

Table 4. Interpersonal influences.

Factor Category	Theme	Sub-theme (n)	Illustrative Quote	Analysis/Context	Connection to Existing Research and Theoretical Framework
Relationships and Support	Lack of support from promoters	Limited Mentorship (10)	“I didn’t feel like I had a guide, I didn’t feel like I was supported...”—UAHOD3, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	A lack of support and mentorship from superiors can also leave employees feeling isolated and frustrated.	This builds upon research on mentoring and leadership development, which encourages support and guidance for successful leader pipeline

					development and retention (Kallio et al., 2024; Tight, 2020).
	Conflicts with colleagues	Personal-ity Clashes (7)	“It was nonstop arguing and fighting for power...”—UCV. D2, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	Strained relationships with colleagues lead to a bad organisational culture.	This conclusion correlates with studies that note workplace discord and its detrimental effects on employee morale and turnover (Kezar & Eckel, 2002).
	Lack of collaboration	Siloed Departments (5)	“There was no inter-department collaboration or communication...”—UBHOD1, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	Institutions and leaders will struggle with growth when collaboration and teamwork are absent.	For example, the role of collaboration and teamwork toward institutional goals is a well-established area of organisational culture and leadership research (Rahman et al., 2014).
Communication and Feedback	Lack of effective communication	Limited Feedback (12)	“I had been getting very little constructive feedback in terms of my performance...”—UDHOD2, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	Wishy-washy feedback in a timely manner can dampen leader growth, making them miserable on all fronts.	This is in line with the literature on performance management and leadership development that emphasises the significance of feedback for learning and improvement (De Vries et al., 2010).
	Poor communication channels	Inefficient Processes (8)	“Communication was complex and ineffective...”—UEHOD3, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	One common workplace challenge is inefficient communication processes, leading to frustration and misunderstandings.	This is consistent with research into organisational communication and the relationship between communication styles and employee satisfaction and productivity (Tight, 2020).

4.3. Institutional Factors

In addition to individual and interpersonal factors, the institutional context clearly emerged as having a strong influence on leadership departures. These three subthemes are described in greater detail in Table 5; these findings refer to the institutional factors impacting academic leaders, such as a hierarchical organisational culture, institutional resource distribution, and institutional support systems. These findings highlight the need for interventions on institutional levels to cultivate a more supportive and sustainable environment for leadership.

Table 5. Institutional factors.

Factor Category	Theme	Sub-theme (n)	Illustrative Quote	Analysis/Context	Connection to Existing Research and Theoretical Framework
Organisational Culture and Climate	Bureaucratic culture	Excessive Paperwork (14)	“I was drowning in paperwork...”—UFD1, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	A culture of bureaucracy can kill creativity and create unnecessary burdens.	This is consistent with research on organisational culture and leadership indicating that bureaucracy cultures can stifle innovation and frustrate the leaders (Bolman & Deal, 2017).
	Low transparency causes distrust and	Decision-Making Processes (9)	“Sometimes decisions were made in private...”—UAHOD3, pers.	Low transparency causes distrust and dissatisfaction	In alignment with research on organisational trust and leadership, transparency and communicative

	dissatisfaction		comm., 20 February 2025		openness are considered essential elements for professional trust-building and enhancing workplace atmosphere (Kezar & Eckel, 2002).
	Resistance to change	Traditional Mindset (6)	“The new ideas were met with a healthy resistance...”—UED2, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	A reluctance to change will hold you back and breed resentment.	This finding aligns with the literature on organisational change and leadership, indicating that a common challenge faced by leaders, especially in traditional or hierarchical organisations, depends on overcoming resistance from others to change (Tight, 2020).
Resources and Support These initiatives can become impossible and frustrating with budget constraints.	Limited resources	Budget Constraints (11)	“We were all the time fighting limited resources...”—UBV. D2, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	These initiatives can become impossible and frustrating with budget constraints.	This is consistent with research on resource distribution and leadership, which emphasises the salience of appropriate resources for leader effectiveness and satisfaction (Kallio et al., 2024).
	Inadequate support systems	Lack of professional Development (8)	“Professional development opportunities were few and far between...”—UED2, pers. comm., 20 February 2025	Failure to invest in leader development can lead to stagnation and turnover.	This result corroborates research concerning leadership development and retention revealing the significance of continual learning or developmental opportunities for leader growth and satisfaction (Allen et al., 2010).

5. DISCUSSION OF THE KEY FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LEADERSHIP DEPARTURE (TURNOVER) IN SAUDI ARABIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

This study examined the mechanisms behind leadership turnover in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions, with a focus on the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. The results illustrate the intricacy of the motivations underpinning academic leaders' decision to walk away from their position, highlighting the multi-faceted characteristics of turnover, as described in the literature (Allen et al., 2010; Kallio et al., 2024).

5.1. Individual Factors

At the individual level, factors such as the need for personal development, work–life balance difficulties, and opportunities for career progression are significant in leader departures (Kallio et al., 2024). Self-determination theory (SDT), which is a macro theory of human motivation and personality, addresses the importance of intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being as factors driving human behaviour, and it posits that individuals are more likely to engage in behaviour when they can shape their environment or act according to their own volition. SDT proposes that people have basic psychological needs, specifically the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and if these needs are not met, people may feel unsatisfied and desire a change. Higher education leaders in Saudi Arabia who desire personal growth and new challenges may perceive limited opportunity for such development given the existing cultural or policy environment. This agrees with past research on why people pursue careers and develop their leadership capabilities, which suggests that the need to learn and develop is a strong motivator. Avolio et al. (2009) advocate for providing professional opportunities and growth potential to retain talented leaders.

This study also found that challenges to the work–life balance, particularly among women with children, can lead to resignation from leadership roles. This insight is consistent with studies indicating that women are pulled between work and family when they have an executive rank. In Saudi Arabia, with its more traditional culture of gender roles and family, women leaders may face even greater struggles in balancing work and family life.

5.2. *Interpersonal Factors*

This study identified interpersonal factors, such as lack of support from superiors, conflicts with colleagues, and poor communication channels, as contributing to leadership departures. This suggests the relevance of social exchange theory and LMX theory, which highlights the significance of relationship and reciprocity in individual behaviours and organisational outcomes.

Social exchange theory states that people create relationships based on the cost and reward of each relationship. For a leader, this translates into the simple fact that if people feel supported, they are much more likely to remain in their role. On the other hand, if they feel unsupported or face conflict, they may be more likely to leave.

LMX theory looks at the quality of leader–follower dyadic relationships. Bond 1: LMX: High-quality LMX relationships are defined by trust, respect, and influence (Northouse, 2018). The positive outcomes of LMX relationships include job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and turnover intention reduction (a meta-analysis found consistent positive results of LMX with job satisfaction and organisational commitment, as well as the negative correlation with turnover intentions (3)). In contrast, low-quality LMX relationships, characterised by agreement with the law of supply and demand, involve formal exchanges that can cause dissatisfaction and attrition.

Given the high importance of interpersonal relationships and social links in Saudi culture, the impact of LMX relationships on leadership retention may be stronger than in other cultures. Well-connected managers appear to be a sign of success in an organisation in which subordinates follow their leaders out of fear.

5.3. *Institutional Factors*

At the institutional level, this study revealed that leadership departures resulted from issues such as bureaucratic culture, lack of transparency, and resistance to change. This is consistent with the principles of institutional theory, which highlights how organisational structures and norms shape individual behaviour.

Institutional theory posits that organisations function in an institutional environment that impacts their practices and norms. In higher education, this implies that universities are affected by stakes such as government policies, accreditation standards, and social expectations.

What are academic leaders saying about this? This study found that a bureaucratic culture characterised by excessive paperwork and rigid procedures can stifle innovation and create unnecessary burdens for academic leaders. This is in line with the research on organisational culture and leadership suggesting that bureaucratic cultures can disrupt the effectiveness of organisations and frustrate leaders.

The lack of transparent decision-making processes can also spur departures along the chain of command. Many academic leaders feel that decisions are taken without consulting or informing them, leading to distrust and dissatisfaction with the process (Northouse, 2018). This conclusion underlines the importance of transparency and open communication—factors known to build trust and create a healthy work environment—which was highlighted in organisational trust and leadership studies.

Leadership effectiveness and growth can also break down if there is resistance to change (particularly from those with a traditional mindset). The study results indicate that some academic leaders meet resistance when attempting to introduce new ideas or initiatives, and this leads to frustration and a feeling of futility. This finding agrees with the literature on organisational change and leadership, suggesting that resistance to change is a common obstacle facing leaders, particularly in conventional or hierarchical organisations.

5.4. *Interaction of Factors*

There seems to be a complex mix of individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors influencing departures by leaders. Personal development can be impeded by a bureaucratic company culture lacking promotion opportunities that allow employees to grow. Similarly, a lack of support from superiors or clashes with colleagues can compound work–life balance challenges.

These results suggest that researchers addressing leadership turnover must think much more systemically about the various reasons for turnover and how they interact with each other. They must provide more tailored solutions in 2023 and beyond. This demands adopting a more holistic view that considers the personal, relational, and institution-wide factors behind leadership departures.

This study finds that the interacting factors align with existing research on turnover in leadership. For example, Allen et al. (2010) believe that individual, interpersonal, and organisational factors combined lead to employee turnover intention. In a complementary manner, Kallio et al. (2024) investigated the exit decisions of middle managers and concluded that multiple and combined push and pull factors, including individual factors (career ambitions and work–life balance challenges) and organisational factors (lack of support and opportunity scarcity), influence the exit decisions of middle managers.

We contribute to existing research by demonstrating that considering different levels of analysis—such as individual and organisational levels—can be fruitful for understanding dynamic processes in the black box of the organisation. For example, social–ecological theory not only maintains that behaviour is affected by various levels but has also shown empirically that factors at each level influence the development of this behaviour. Likewise, the theory of institutions points out the organisational influences on individual behaviour.

We hope to consolidate the results of this study with the literature and theory to create a better understanding of leadership departures in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions. Such knowledge will enable the creation of scalable interventions and policies to strengthen leadership retention and foster a more supportive and sustainable leadership ecosystem.

The analysis uncovered multiple examples of the interplay between factors at different levels that shape executive exits. For example, one participant, UED2 (Dean, pers. Comm., 20 February 2025) explained, “With the high workloads and the relentless pressure to produce results, added to the absence of support from administration, I burned out and chose to resign.” Leaders are exposed to individual factors (burnout) that are worsened by institutional factors (lack of support).

Another participant, UBV. D2 (Vice Dean, pers. comm., 20 February 2025), said: “The extreme demands of the work culture, the endless hours and the lack of flexibility, made it impossible for me to balance my work and family life, particularly after having kids. I wanted something more permanent, and with no chances at the university for career advancement.” This quotation reflects the fact that personal factors (work–life balance) can be exacerbated by institutional factors (a demanding culture, limited promotion opportunities).

The first step is realising that these stories are much more than surface-level narratives. They highlight the need to assess the individual, interpersonal, and institutional contexts when developing interventions and policies to address leadership turnover.

5.5. Theoretical Implications

By incorporating transformational leadership, LMX theory, and institutional theory, this study makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on leadership departure in higher education. It is a multi-level phenomenon that is shaped by personal, interpersonal, and institutional influences. This study underscores the necessity of incorporating different levels of analysis to investigate leadership turnover and offers a more complex understanding of the contributors that impact academic leaders’ decisions to depart from their roles.

5.6. Practical Implications

The results of this research have practical implications for Saudi universities and policymakers. Studying the themes that explain leadership departures will help institutions create specific solutions and systems for retaining leaders within a healthier and more sustainable leadership environment. In such cases, this will consist of efforts to design and apply strategies and initiatives to prevent and mitigate toxicity by promoting leadership training, counselling, mediation, flexible work arrangements, and culture change initiatives.

5.7. Limitations

Some limitations in this study should be considered in interpreting the results. This research was conducted within a particular context, namely, Saudi Arabian higher education, and the results may not apply to other contexts. The reliance on self-reported data from a limited sample of academic leaders may create bias and reduce generalizability; considering a much larger and more representative sample and testing more contextual factors will address these limitations.

Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to understanding the factors associated with leadership turnover in Saudi Arabian higher education. By analysing these findings, new targeted intervention efforts can be developed to present policies that support leadership retention and help promote a better leadership atmosphere.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study identifies the multifaceted individual, interpersonal, and institutional drivers underpinning leadership departures, offering insight into the complexities of leadership turnover in the context of Saudi Arabian higher education. The core finding is that leadership turnover can be described as a systemic denominator connecting personal motivations, relational dynamics, and institutional contexts. This realisation facilitates a more integrated perspective on the departure of leadership in organisations and indicates why operating in silos can only prolong the transformation of the workforce experience.

The contribution of this current research is its systematic exploration of leadership turnover in the unique socio-cultural context of Saudi Arabia. Using established leadership theories and a qualitative approach, this study offers rich insights into the lived experiences of academic administrators and their reasons for leaving their roles. The identified factors can provide useful insights for policymakers and university officials with regard to developing targeted programmes and policies aimed at reducing the turnover in leadership whilst creating a more sustainable leadership climate in Saudi universities.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

LMX	leader–member exchange
ASHA	American Speech–Language–Hearing Association

Appendix A

Interview Guide Questions

Interview Guide Questions:

Main Research Question	Prompts	(Theme)
What were the major factors that made you start thinking about stepping down from your leadership role?	(Personal Motivations)	(Individual Level)
How satisfied are you with your existing leadership role?	(Job Satisfaction)	
How do you manage work–life balance?	(Work–Life Balance)	
How well do you get along with your colleagues at your work?	(Relationships with Colleagues)	(Personal Level)
What do you sense is your relationship with senior management at the university?	(Interaction and Communication with Senior Management)	
Which leadership style do you follow?	(Leadership and Mentorship)	
How might you characterize the work culture at your university?	(Organizational Culture)	(Institutional level)
How do you feel about the policies and procedures in place at your university?	(Policies and Procedures)	
What is the biggest opportunity and what is the biggest challenge you have in your leadership role?	(Opportunities and Challenges)	
Are you rewarded and recognized for your work?	(Recognition and Rewards)	
What individual, personal, and institutional constructs and habits combine to impact your decision to leave your leadership role?	(Interaction between Levels)	
Is there anything else you would like to add around leadership turn-over around Saudi higher education?		(Conclusion)
What advice do you have for academic leaders who are thinking of stepping down from their post?		
What strategies would you suggest that academic institutions employ to keep their best leaders?		

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