

Strategic Leadership–HRM Integration in Education

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Abstract

Accelerating digital transformation is reshaping the strategic priorities of higher education institutions, intensifying the need for coherent leadership and people-management systems. However, educational leadership and human resource management (HRM) are often treated as parallel rather than integrated drivers of institutional performance. This paper develops a conceptual “dual-engine” model that explains how the strategic alignment of educational leadership and HRM can jointly optimize institutional effectiveness in the digital era. Drawing on strategic alignment theory, resource-based perspectives, and digital transformation literature, the model identifies key alignment mechanisms across vision setting, talent architecture, capability development, and performance governance. The paper proposes that synergistic interaction between leadership direction and HRM systems enhances organizational agility, digital readiness, and sustained performance in higher education contexts. The study contributes to the literature by offering an integrative framework that bridges leadership and HRM silos and by outlining propositions for future empirical testing. Practical implications highlight how university leaders and HR executives can co-design policies and structures to support digitally enabled institutional transformation.

Keywords

Digital transformation, Educational leadership, Higher education, Institutional performance, Strategic alignment, Strategic Human resource management

1. Introduction

Universities worldwide are confronting a convergence of digital disruption, shifting workforce expectations, and intensified accountability pressures that are redefining the strategic landscape of higher education (Gurr et al., 2025; Holcombe et al., 2025). As institutions expand hybrid learning ecosystems, invest in data-driven governance, and respond to growing demands for organizational

agility, the capacity to coordinate leadership direction with human capital capability has become increasingly salient (Aube et al., 2021; Fullan, 2020). Contemporary scholarship indicates that digital transformation in higher education extends beyond technological upgrading but a systemic organizational reconfiguration requiring coherent leadership vision supported by strategically aligned people-management systems (Bond et al., 2018; Crawford et al., 2020; Bates, 2019). In this evolving environment, institutional performance depends less on isolated functional excellence and more on the integration of leadership and workforce architectures capable of sustaining adaptive capacity.

Parallel developments in the strategic human resource management (HRM) literature reinforce this imperative. A substantial body of research demonstrates that HR systems generate their strongest performance effects when tightly aligned with organizational strategy and leadership processes (Collings et al., 2021; Yihong et al., 2024; Bannya et al., 2022; Christensen et al., 2022). Within higher education, leadership effectiveness is increasingly understood as contingent upon the institution's ability to mobilize human capital through integrated talent management, capability development, and performance governance mechanisms (Yada, 2025; Leithwood et al., 2020; Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Yet universities often retain loosely coupled administrative structures in which leadership initiatives and HR architectures evolve in parallel rather than in concert. This structural fragmentation raises a critical question regarding how higher education institutions can achieve the level of strategic coherence required to perform effectively in digitally transforming environments (Bondarouk et al., 2017).

Recent debates in higher education administration further underscore the complexity of leading digitally transforming institutions. Universities are now expected to balance academic collegiality with managerial accountability, financial sustainability, and technological innovation, thereby creating hybrid governance environments that intensify leadership demands (Hallinger, 2018). Under such conditions, leadership effectiveness extends beyond visionary direction to encompass the orchestration of institutional capabilities embedded within human capital systems (Leithwood et al., 2020). Concurrently, advances in strategic HRM highlight the growing relevance of talent analytics, digital competency frameworks, and performance alignment mechanisms in sustaining institutional competitiveness (Collings et al., 2021; Cascio & Boudreau, 2016). However, many higher education institutions continue to exhibit loosely coupled administrative structures, which may inhibit the coordinated implementation of leadership and HR strategies. Consequently, achieving meaningful strategic alignment between educational leadership and HRM constitutes a central governance challenge for universities navigating digital-era transformation (Veletić & Olsen, 2024).

Despite growing scholarly attention to digital transformation and strategic HRM in higher education, important theoretical and integrative gaps persist. Existing research has largely examined educational leadership, talent management, digital readiness, and institutional performance as parallel streams, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how universities develop coherent organizational capability (Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020). While the broader strategic alignment literature emphasizes the performance benefits of integrating organizational subsystems, explicit conceptualization of the interactive relationship between educational leadership and strategic HRM in higher education remains limited (Gunnulfsen et al., 2022). This fragmentation is becoming increasingly problematic in digitally

transforming environments, where universities must simultaneously manage technological change, workforce capability renewal, and governance complexity (Bond et al., 2018; West, 2018). Consequently, the field lacks a theoretically grounded framework that explains how leadership and HRM function as a coordinated strategic system to enhance institutional performance.

Moreover, existing higher education management frameworks often under-specify the mechanisms through which leadership–HRM alignment is operationalized, particularly under conditions of rapid digitalization and post-pandemic restructuring (Chadwick et al., 2016). Recent strategic management research calls for more integrative, capability-based models that explain how organizations build agility and sustained performance through coordinated leadership and human capital systems (Collings et al., 2021; Teece, 2018). Responding to these calls, there remains a clear need for theoretically grounded frameworks that bridge educational leadership and strategic HRM within the higher education context and that explicitly account for the amplifying effects of digital transformation (Wamba et al., 2017).

Accordingly, this paper develops a Dual-Engine Alignment Model that conceptualizes educational leadership and strategic human resource management (HRM) as mutually reinforcing drivers of institutional performance in higher education. The study makes three primary contributions. First, it advances educational administration scholarship by integrating previously fragmented literatures on educational leadership and strategic HRM into a unified, higher education–specific conceptual framework. Second, it introduces a multidimensional view of alignment—strategic, structural, cultural, and data-driven—thereby specifying the mechanisms through which leadership intent is translated into workforce capability in digitally transforming universities (Niguse et al., 2025). Third, the study extends emerging work on organizational agility and digital readiness by theorizing their roles as capability pathways linking leadership–HRM coherence to sustainable institutional performance (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). Collectively, the proposed framework offers a theoretically grounded platform for future empirical research and provides higher education leaders with a systems-level perspective for navigating digital-era complexity.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on educational leadership, strategic HRM, strategic alignment, and digital transformation in higher education, establishing the theoretical foundations for the study. This is followed by the development of the Dual-Engine Alignment Model, where the core constructs, alignment mechanisms, and digitally contextualized relationships are elaborated. Subsequently, the paper advances a set of research propositions linking leadership–HRM alignment to organizational agility, digital readiness, and institutional performance outcomes. The final section discusses theoretical and practical implications for higher education institutions, acknowledges limitations, and outlines directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Educational Leadership in Higher Education

Educational leadership has long been recognized as a critical determinant of institutional effectiveness in higher education (Fullan, 2020). Contemporary perspectives increasingly conceptualize leadership as a distributed and context-sensitive process that extends beyond

individual authority to encompass system-wide capability building (Hallinger, 2018). In universities facing rapid digital transformation, leadership responsibilities have expanded to include fostering innovation cultures, enabling technology integration, and guiding organizational change under conditions of uncertainty (Northouse, 2021).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that effective educational leadership in higher education must balance traditional collegial governance with emerging managerial and performance-oriented expectations (Yada, 2025). This balancing act has become more complex in the post-pandemic environment, where leaders must simultaneously manage digital learning ecosystems, workforce flexibility, and stakeholder accountability (Crawford et al., 2020; Bates, 2019). Leithwood et al. (2020) further argue that leadership impact is largely indirect, operating through organizational conditions that support teaching quality, staff engagement, and institutional adaptability.

Despite these advances, much of the educational leadership literature continues to focus on leadership behaviors, styles, and governance structures, with comparatively limited attention to how leadership effectiveness is enabled—or constrained—by human resource architectures within universities (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). This suggests the need for more integrative perspectives that connect leadership processes with strategic people-management systems. The lack of a unified framework that connects educational leadership with strategic HRM continues to hinder both theoretical development and practical progress in universities' digital transformation (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016).

2.2 Strategic Human Resource Management in Higher Education

Strategic human resource management (HRM) research consistently demonstrates that well-designed HR systems contribute to organizational performance by enhancing employee skills, motivation, and opportunities to contribute (Yihong et al., 2024). The resource-based view further positions human capital as a strategic asset capable of generating sustained competitive advantage when effectively developed and deployed (Bannya et al., 2022; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009).

Within higher education, HRM has gained increasing prominence as universities confront talent shortages, digital skills gaps, and growing performance pressures (Collings et al., 2021; Cascio & Boudreau, 2016). Contemporary HRM practices in universities extend beyond administrative personnel functions to include strategic talent management, leadership development, performance analytics, and workforce agility initiatives (Bondarouk et al., 2017; Wamba et al., 2017). These developments reflect a broader shift toward viewing HRM as a strategic partner in institutional transformation (Boxall & Purcell, 2016).

However, higher education institutions often retain legacy HR structures characterized by bureaucratic processes and limited strategic integration. Such fragmentation may reduce the effectiveness of HR initiatives and weaken their contribution to institutional goals (Chan et al., 2006). Moreover, HRM research in higher education has tended to examine discrete practices rather than their alignment with leadership strategy, leaving an important conceptual gap.

2.3 Strategic Alignment and Organizational Agility

The concept of strategic alignment provides a useful lens for understanding how organizational subsystems jointly contribute to performance (Veletić & Olsen, 2024). Alignment theory posits that organizational effectiveness depends not only on the quality of individual functions but also on the coherence among strategy, structure, leadership, and human capital systems. When alignment is achieved, organizations are better positioned to develop dynamic capabilities and respond to environmental turbulence (Teece, 2018).

In parallel, the organizational agility literature highlights the importance of coordinated leadership and workforce capabilities in enabling rapid adaptation (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). In higher education contexts, agility is increasingly associated with the ability to pivot instructional delivery, redesign academic programs, and reconfigure workforce capabilities in response to digital disruption.

Despite the conceptual relevance of alignment and agility, empirical and theoretical work rarely integrates these perspectives with the specific institutional dynamics of higher education (Holcombe et al., 2025). In particular, the joint role of educational leadership and HRM in enabling institutional agility remains underdeveloped.

2.4 Digital Transformation in Higher Education

Digital transformation has emerged as a defining force reshaping higher education globally (Bond et al., 2018; Bates, 2019). Universities are investing heavily in digital infrastructure, online and hybrid learning models, data analytics, and platform-based service delivery (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020). However, scholars increasingly caution that technological investments alone are insufficient to generate meaningful institutional transformation (West, 2018).

Instead, digital transformation in universities requires complementary changes in leadership mindset, organizational culture, workforce capabilities, and governance systems (Crawford et al., 2020; Gurr et al., 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift by exposing structural weaknesses in institutional readiness and human capital adaptability (Al-Emran et al., 2018). These developments underscore the need for integrated leadership–HRM approaches that support digital-era institutional resilience (Wamba et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, much of the existing literature treats digital transformation as either a technological or pedagogical issue, with limited attention to the cross-functional alignment required to sustain performance improvements. This reinforces the need for frameworks that explicitly connect digital pressures with leadership and HR system integration (Niguse et al., 2025).

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, these lines of research highlight the need for a systems-level perspective. The literature reviewed points to four notable patterns. First, educational leadership research highlights the growing complexity of governing digitally transforming universities but pays limited attention to the enabling role of HR systems (Hallinger, 2018). Second, strategic HRM scholarship demonstrates strong performance effects of human capital systems but rarely situates these within higher education leadership contexts (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Third, alignment and agility

theories emphasize systemic coherence yet remain underapplied in university settings. Fourth, digital transformation research underscores the urgency of organizational adaptation but often under-specifies the cross-functional mechanisms that make such adaptation possible (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020; West, 2018).

Consequently, a significant gap persists at the intersection of educational leadership, strategic HRM, and digital transformation in higher education. Addressing this gap requires an integrative conceptual framework that explains how leadership and HRM function as mutually reinforcing drivers of institutional performance (Teece, 2018). The Dual-Engine Alignment Model proposed in this study responds to this need by articulating the mechanisms through which leadership–HRM alignment enhances organizational agility, digital readiness, and sustainable performance in higher education institutions.

3. Conceptual Model Development

3.1 The Dual-Engine Alignment Perspective

Building on the preceding literature, this study conceptualizes institutional performance in higher education as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between educational leadership and strategic human resource management (HRM). While prior research has established the independent importance of leadership and human capital systems, universities operating in digitally turbulent environments increasingly require coordinated capability architectures that enable rapid adaptation and sustained effectiveness. Accordingly, this paper advances the Dual-Engine Alignment Model, which positions educational leadership and HRM as mutually reinforcing strategic engines whose alignment enhances organizational agility, digital readiness, and institutional performance (Teece, 2018).

The dual-engine perspective draws theoretically from strategic alignment theory, the resource-based view, and dynamic capabilities thinking. Alignment theory suggests that organizational subsystems generate superior outcomes when internally coherent and externally responsive. The resource-based view highlights the strategic value of human capital and leadership capabilities as sources of sustained advantage (Boxall & Purcell, 2016), while dynamic capabilities scholarship emphasizes the importance of orchestrating leadership and workforce resources to respond to environmental change (Teece, 2018). Integrating these perspectives provides a useful theoretical foundation for conceptualizing how leadership–HRM alignment operates within higher education institutions.

3.2 Educational Leadership as a Strategic Engine

Within the proposed model, educational leadership functions as the primary direction-setting engine (Hallinger, 2018; Fullan, 2020). Leadership in higher education shapes institutional vision, strategic priorities, governance arrangements, and innovation orientation. In digitally transforming universities, leaders play a pivotal role in articulating digital strategy, fostering change readiness, and mobilizing organizational commitment.

However, leadership influence is largely indirect. Its performance effects materialize through the creation of enabling organizational conditions, including supportive cultures, coherent structures, and aligned human capital systems (Leithwood et al., 2020). Without complementary HR architectures, leadership initiatives may remain aspirational rather than operational (Bondarouk et al., 2017). Therefore, the effectiveness of educational leadership is contingent upon its alignment with strategic HRM processes that translate vision into workforce capability (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016).

A clearer boundary around the leadership engine helps prevent conceptual overlap with HRM. Educational leadership in this model is concerned with direction-setting functions: articulating institutional purpose, defining strategic priorities, shaping governance arrangements, and cultivating the cultural conditions that enable change. Leadership does not directly manage talent systems or operationalize workforce practices; instead, it establishes the strategic intent and institutional climate within which HRM designs and implements capability-building processes. This distinction positions leadership as the source of vision and strategic coherence rather than the executor of human capital routines.

3.3 Strategic Human Resource Management as a Capability Engine

Strategic HRM represents the model's capability-building engine, responsible for developing, deploying, and sustaining the human capital required for institutional strategy execution. In higher education, this includes talent acquisition, digital skills development, performance management, leadership pipelines, and workforce agility practices (Collings et al., 2021; Boxall & Purcell, 2016).

Strategic HRM research demonstrates that well-designed HR systems enhance employee ability, motivation, and opportunity to contribute, thereby improving organizational outcomes (Yihong et al., 2024). Yet their strategic impact depends heavily on coherence with leadership direction. When HR practices operate in isolation or remain administratively oriented, their contribution to institutional transformation may be limited (Chadwick et al., 2016). Conversely, when HR architectures are strategically synchronized with leadership priorities, universities are better positioned to build adaptive capacity and sustain performance in digitally disrupted environments (Wamba et al., 2017).

Defining the HRM engine with equal clarity reinforces its distinct contribution. Strategic HRM is responsible for translating leadership intent into workforce capabilities through structured systems such as recruitment, development, performance management, and talent deployment. Unlike leadership, HRM does not determine institutional direction or strategic priorities; its role is to operationalize those priorities by shaping the skills, motivation, and opportunities of staff. This boundary positions HRM as the mechanism through which strategic direction becomes actionable human capital capacity, complementing but not duplicating leadership functions.

Together, these distinctions highlight that neither engine can generate institutional capability on its own, making the alignment mechanisms introduced in the next section essential for linking leadership direction with the workforce systems that bring that direction to life.

3.4 Alignment Mechanisms as the Integrative Core

At the center of the Dual-Engine Model are alignment mechanisms that operationalize the interaction between educational leadership and HRM (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). This study conceptualizes alignment as a multidimensional construct comprising four reinforcing mechanisms:

- **Strategic alignment** – coherence between leadership vision and HR priorities
- **Structural alignment** – integration of governance, reporting, and decision systems
- **Cultural alignment** – shared values supporting innovation and digital adaptation
- **Data-driven alignment** – use of analytics to coordinate leadership and HR decisions (Wamba et al., 2017)

Middle managers play a pivotal role in activating the alignment mechanisms by serving as the primary translators of institutional strategy into day-to-day academic and administrative practice. Positioned between senior leadership and frontline staff, they interpret strategic priorities, communicate expectations, and coordinate the local implementation of HRM systems such as workload allocation, performance feedback, and capability development. Their proximity to academic units enables them to identify emerging capability gaps, mediate cultural tensions, and adjust practices in ways that preserve coherence with institutional direction. By linking leadership intent with the operational routines shaped by HRM, middle managers function as the connective tissue that allows alignment mechanisms to take effect across the organization.

These mechanisms translate high-level strategic intent into coordinated organizational action. When alignment is strong, leadership initiatives are effectively embedded in workforce systems, thereby enhancing institutional responsiveness. When alignment is weak, universities may experience strategic drift, implementation gaps, and reduced agility (Teece, 2018).

Causal Pathways Linking Alignment Mechanisms to Agility and Digital Readiness

A clearer understanding of how alignment produces institutional outcomes requires attention to the micro-processes that connect leadership intent with workforce behavior. Cultural alignment supports agility by embedding shared norms that encourage experimentation, collaborative problem-solving, and openness to change, allowing staff to respond quickly when digital or environmental demands shift. Strategic and structural alignment translate leadership priorities into HRM routines such as competency-based recruitment, targeted capability development, and performance systems that reinforce desired behaviors. Through these mechanisms, HRM becomes the operational channel through which leadership direction is enacted in everyday practice. Data-driven alignment further accelerates this process by creating a shared analytical foundation that enables leaders and HR professionals to identify capability gaps, monitor progress, and adjust decisions in real time. Together, these pathways explain how alignment mechanisms convert strategic vision into coordinated action, ultimately strengthening agility, digital readiness, and institutional performance.

3.5 Digital Era Context as an Amplifying Condition

The model further posits that the digital era context acts as an environmental amplifier that heightens the importance of leadership–HRM alignment (West, 2018). Digital disruption increases environmental uncertainty, compresses decision cycles, and raises capability requirements across universities (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020). Under such conditions, loosely coupled administrative systems become increasingly dysfunctional. Consequently, the performance returns of alignment are expected to be stronger in digitally intensive environments. Universities pursuing online expansion, data-driven governance, and digitally enabled service delivery face particularly strong incentives to integrate leadership and HRM architectures (Wamba et al., 2017).

Digital intensity in higher education is shaped by several interrelated factors that heighten the need for coordinated leadership and HRM systems. Institutions with mature data governance, expanding AI adoption, or large-scale online learning operations face more complex capability requirements and faster decision cycles, making alignment essential for sustaining performance. Advanced digital infrastructures demand integrated approaches to workforce planning, reskilling, and performance oversight, while high levels of digital service integration and cybersecurity exposure require shared governance and consistent capability development across units. These dimensions clarify why the digital context amplifies the effects of alignment: the more digitally dependent an institution becomes, the greater the strategic premium on synchronizing leadership direction with HRM systems.

3.6 Institutional Performance Outcomes

The ultimate outcome of the Dual-Engine Alignment Model is enhanced institutional performance, conceptualized in multidimensional terms. Consistent with higher education management literature, this study emphasizes three intermediate capability outcomes—organizational agility, digital readiness, and operational effectiveness—which collectively support sustainable institutional performance.

Organizational agility reflects the university’s capacity to respond rapidly to environmental change. Digital readiness captures preparedness to implement and scale digital initiatives (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020; Bates, 2019). Operational effectiveness refers to improvements in academic and administrative performance. The model proposes that these outcomes emerge most strongly when educational leadership and HRM operate as an aligned strategic system (Tece, 2018).

3.7 Transition to Propositions

Based on the foregoing conceptual development, the following section advances a set of research propositions specifying the expected relationships among leadership–HRM alignment, digital context, and institutional performance outcomes in higher education (Boyce & Bowers, 2018).

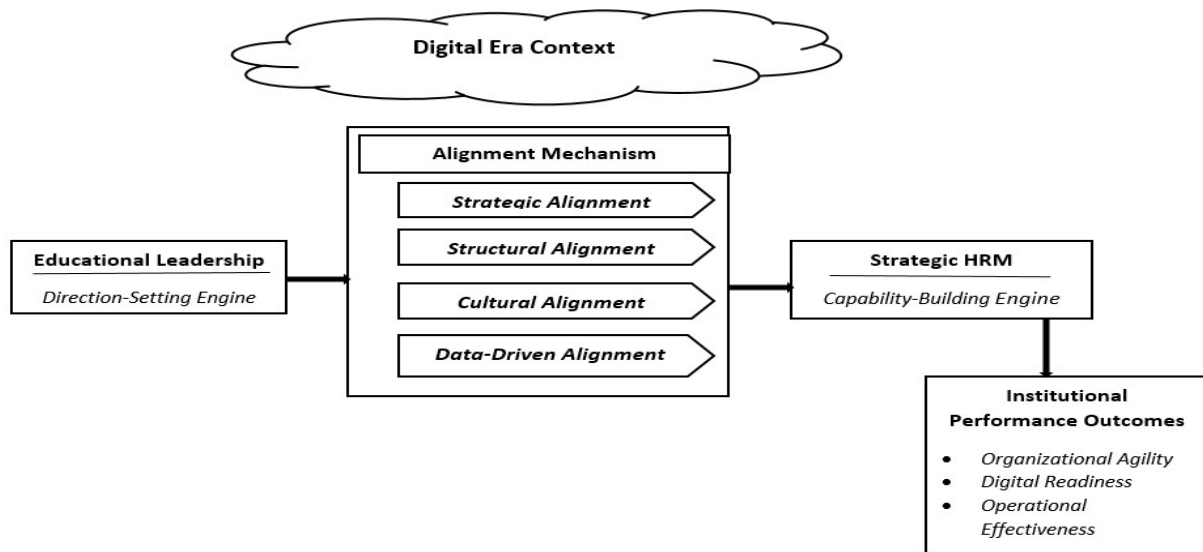


Figure 1. Dual-Engine Alignment Model for Higher Education Institutional Performance

Figure 1 illustrates the Dual-Engine Alignment Model, showing how educational leadership and strategic HRM interact through alignment mechanisms to drive institutional performance in the digital era.

Legend

The Dual-Engine Alignment Model conceptualizes Educational Leadership and Strategic Human Resource Management (HRM) as two interdependent strategic engines that jointly influence institutional performance. Their interaction is operationalized through four Alignment Mechanisms:

- **Strategic Alignment:** Coherence between leadership vision and HR priorities
- **Structural Alignment:** Integration of governance, reporting, and decision systems
- **Cultural Alignment:** Shared values and norms supporting innovation and digital adaptation
- **Data-Driven Alignment:** Use of analytics to coordinate leadership and HR decisions

Digital Context serves as a moderating factor, amplifying the influence of alignment on institutional outcomes. The model identifies three primary Institutional Performance Outcomes:

1. **Organizational Agility** – the ability to respond rapidly to environmental changes
2. **Digital Readiness** – preparedness for digital initiatives and transformation
3. **Operational Effectiveness** – improvement in academic and administrative performance

Arrows indicate the direction of influence, highlighting the dynamic interaction between leadership, HRM, alignment mechanisms, and institutional performance within digitally transforming universities.

4. Research Propositions

Building on the Dual-Engine Alignment Model, this section advances a set of propositions specifying the expected relationships among educational leadership, strategic human resource management (HRM), alignment mechanisms, and institutional performance in higher education operating in the digital era (Teece, 2018).

4.1 Leadership–HRM Alignment and Organizational Agility

Educational leadership provides strategic direction and change impetus, while strategic HRM builds the workforce capabilities required to enact institutional priorities. When these two engines operate in a coordinated manner, universities are better positioned to respond rapidly to environmental shifts, including technological disruption and evolving stakeholder expectations. In contrast, misalignment may produce implementation gaps and reduced responsiveness. The proposed model leads to the following propositions:

P1: Strategic alignment between educational leadership and HRM is positively associated with organizational agility in higher education institutions.

4.2 Leadership–HRM Alignment and Digital Readiness

Digital readiness depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on leadership commitment and workforce digital capability (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020; Bates, 2019). Alignment ensures that leadership digital vision is translated into targeted talent development, reskilling initiatives, and performance incentives that support digital transformation (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016; Wamba et al., 2017). Universities with tightly coupled leadership and HR systems are therefore expected to demonstrate higher levels of digital preparedness.

P2: Strategic alignment between educational leadership and HRM is positively associated with digital readiness in higher education institutions.

4.3 Leadership–HRM Alignment and Operational Effectiveness

Operational effectiveness in universities—encompassing both academic and administrative performance—requires coordinated governance and human capital deployment (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). When leadership priorities are embedded within HR architectures such as performance management, rewards, and workforce planning, institutional execution is likely to improve (Chadwick et al., 2016; Wamba et al., 2017).

P3: Strategic alignment between educational leadership and HRM is positively associated with operational effectiveness in higher education institutions.

4.4 Mediating Role of Organizational Agility

The Dual-Engine Model posits that alignment enhances performance partly by strengthening the institution's adaptive capacity. Organizational agility enables universities to reconfigure programs,

processes, and workforce deployment in response to environmental change, thereby translating alignment into tangible performance gains (Deci, 2017).

P4: Organizational agility mediates the relationship between leadership–HRM alignment and institutional performance.

4.5 Moderating Role of the Digital Era Context

Environmental conditions characterized by high digital intensity increase the need for coordinated leadership and workforce capabilities (West, 2018; Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020). Under such conditions, the benefits of alignment are expected to be amplified because fragmented systems become more costly and ineffective.

P5: The digital era context positively moderates the relationship between leadership–HRM alignment and institutional performance, such that the relationship is stronger in highly digitalized environments.

4.6 Direct Effect on Institutional Performance

Beyond indirect pathways, tightly aligned leadership and HRM systems may directly enhance institutional performance by improving strategic coherence, reducing implementation gaps, and strengthening workforce engagement (Budhwar et al., 2019).

P6: Strategic alignment between educational leadership and HRM is positively associated with institutional performance in higher education institutions.

5. Implications

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the educational administration and strategic human resource management (HRM) literature in several important ways. First, it advances theory by conceptualizing educational leadership and HRM as interdependent strategic engines rather than parallel administrative functions. Prior research has largely examined these domains in isolation, which has limited understanding of how universities build systemic capability in digitally turbulent environments. By introducing the Dual-Engine Alignment Model, the study offers a more integrated theoretical lens for explaining institutional performance in higher education. Second, the framework extends strategic alignment and resource-based perspectives into the digital transformation context of universities. While alignment theory has been widely applied in corporate settings, its application to higher education governance and human capital systems has remained underdeveloped. The proposed model addresses this gap by specifying multi-level alignment mechanisms—strategic, structural, cultural, and data-driven—that translate leadership intent into workforce capability. This contributes greater construct clarity and offers a platform for cumulative theory building. Third, the study enriches the emerging literature on organizational agility in higher education by positioning agility as a key mediating capability through which leadership–HRM alignment influences institutional outcomes. This shifts the conversation from

static performance models toward more dynamic, capability-oriented explanations of university effectiveness in the digital era. Finally, by incorporating the digital era context as a moderating condition, the model responds to recent calls for more context-sensitive educational administration frameworks, thereby enhancing the external relevance and timeliness of leadership and HRM research in higher education.

Institutional diversity shapes how leadership–HRM alignment unfolds, and recognizing this variation is important for interpreting the model’s applicability. Highly centralized universities may achieve alignment through unified governance structures and standardized HR systems, enabling tighter coupling between leadership priorities and workforce practices. Decentralized institutions, particularly those with strong faculty autonomy, often rely on negotiation and unit-level adaptation, making alignment a more distributed and iterative process. Public universities may face regulatory constraints, civil-service employment structures, and political oversight that limit HRM flexibility, whereas private institutions typically have greater discretion to redesign roles, incentives, and capability-building initiatives. These structural differences suggest that the Dual-Engine Model provides a general framework whose specific dynamics may vary across institutional types.

5.2 Practical Implications

The proposed Dual-Engine Alignment Model also offers important implications for university leaders, HR executives, and higher education policymakers. First, the findings suggest that institutional performance in the digital era depends less on isolated excellence in leadership or HR practices and more on the strategic coherence between the two domains. University governing bodies should therefore move beyond siloed reforms and instead prioritize cross-functional integration between academic leadership and HR units.

Second, senior leaders should ensure that digital strategy initiatives are systematically embedded within HR architectures. This includes aligning recruitment profiles, digital competency frameworks, leadership development programs, and performance management systems with institutional digital priorities. Such integration can accelerate workforce readiness and reduce implementation gaps that often undermine transformation efforts.

Third, HR leaders in higher education should reposition their function from an administrative support role toward a strategic capability partner. Investments in talent analytics, workforce planning, and continuous reskilling are particularly critical in digitally intensive environments. Establishing joint leadership–HR governance forums may further strengthen alignment and improve strategic execution.

Finally, policymakers and system-level regulators should recognize that digital transformation in higher education is fundamentally an organizational capability challenge rather than purely a technological one. Policies that encourage leadership development, workforce agility, and integrated governance structures may yield more sustainable institutional performance improvements than technology investments alone.

Taken together, these implications highlight the importance of treating educational leadership and strategic HRM as a coordinated capability system. By advancing an integrative and digitally contextualized framework, this study offers both scholars and practitioners with a more coherent roadmap for enhancing higher education institutional performance in an era of accelerating change.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Because it offers a conceptual synthesis, the model carries interpretive limitations that stem from integrating multiple theories. Despite its theoretical contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the paper adopts a conceptual design and does not provide empirical validation of the proposed Dual-Engine Alignment Model. While the framework is grounded in established leadership, strategic HRM, and alignment theories, its propositions remain to be empirically tested across diverse higher education contexts. Second, the model is developed primarily within the institutional logic of universities and may not fully capture governance dynamics in alternative higher education structures, such as private, transnational, or highly centralized systems.

Third, although the digital era context is incorporated as a moderating condition, the model does not differentiate between varying levels of digital maturity across institutions. Universities differ significantly in technological infrastructure, regulatory environments, and cultural readiness, which may influence the strength and direction of the proposed relationships. Fourth, the framework assumes a degree of structural coordination between leadership and HRM functions that may not exist in loosely coupled or highly bureaucratic institutions, potentially limiting generalizability.

Future research should empirically examine the proposed propositions using quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches. Large-scale survey studies could test the mediating role of organizational agility and the moderating influence of digital context. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable for capturing alignment dynamics over time, especially during digital transformation initiatives. Comparative cross-national studies may further illuminate how governance regimes and policy environments shape leadership–HRM alignment.

In addition, future scholarship should refine measurement instruments for strategic alignment in higher education, an area that remains underdeveloped relative to corporate settings. Micro-level investigations exploring faculty perceptions, middle-management roles, and HR analytics capabilities would deepen understanding of how alignment mechanisms operate in practice. Finally, integrating emerging themes such as artificial intelligence in HR systems, distributed leadership, and hybrid academic-administrative roles could extend the model's relevance in increasingly complex institutional environments.

7. Conclusion

This study addressed a persistent fragmentation in higher education research by integrating educational leadership and strategic human resource management (HRM) within a unified conceptual framework. In the context of accelerating digital transformation and rising institutional

complexity, the paper advanced the Dual-Engine Alignment Model, which conceptualizes leadership and HRM as mutually reinforcing strategic engines shaping institutional performance.

The central argument of the study is that university effectiveness in digitally transforming environments depends not merely on strong leadership or sophisticated HR systems in isolation, but on the degree of strategic coherence between them. By articulating four core alignment mechanisms—strategic, structural, cultural, and data-driven—the model explains how leadership intent is translated into workforce capability and enhanced organizational responsiveness. Positioning digital context as an amplifying condition further highlights that alignment becomes increasingly consequential under conditions of technological intensity and environmental uncertainty.

The proposed propositions provide a foundation for future empirical inquiry and offer a structured pathway for testing the performance implications of leadership–HRM alignment in higher education. By bridging educational leadership, strategic HRM, and digital transformation scholarship, this study contributes a systems-level perspective that advances theory development in educational administration.

Ultimately, universities seeking sustainable performance should move beyond siloed reforms and cultivate integrated leadership–HRM architectures capable of fostering agility, digital readiness, and long-term institutional resilience in digitally transforming higher education systems.

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