

A Framework of Key Competencies for Academic Department Heads in the Current Dynamic University Environment

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Abstract

This study, conducted as part of an unfunded research project, presents the findings of an empirical investigation aimed at developing a comprehensive framework of key competencies for heads of academic departments. The framework is designed to support both the preparation of academics for leadership roles and the ongoing development and evaluation of current academic leaders. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected from 22 academic experts across 10 Saudi universities during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year, using two instruments: a semi-structured interview guide and a structured questionnaire. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis and descriptive statistics. The resulting framework comprises four competency domains: professional competencies (8), leadership competencies (13), managerial competencies (9), and competencies related to aligning academic programs with employability (5). These findings contribute to the development of evidence-based criteria for the selection and assessment of academic leaders and offer higher education institutions practical guidance for designing targeted training programs to enhance the leadership capacity of department heads.

Keywords: *Academic leadership, leadership, effective leadership, higher education, mid-level leadership.*

Introduction

The effectiveness of universities largely depends on investment in academic staff, particularly department heads who oversee academic programs and guide faculty and students toward achieving institutional goals. Given the profound transformations in higher education over the past two decades—including economic pressures, strategic realignments, and increasing organizational complexity—it is essential to redefine the qualifications and competencies required for effective academic leadership (Ruben et al., 2023, pp. 18–31). Calls for reform similarly emphasize leadership capacity building, life and work skills, and the integration of competency-based learning (UNESCO, 2016). Leadership roles have expanded considerably (Alrayes et al., 2022),

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making leadership development essential for institutional resilience amid global shifts (Whorton et al., 2017, p. 51), despite its current underemphasis (Abdulla et al., 2022). Although widely recognized as critical, leadership development remains under-theorized and inconsistently implemented (Floyd et al., 2023; Dopson et al., 2019), particularly in response to rising external pressures (Alrayes & Omar, 2022; Kok & McDonald, 2015; Lynn & Kalay, 2015). In this context, a competency-based approach offers practical tools for self-assessment and adaptable development across leadership tiers (Ruben et al., 2023, p. 152), with competencies understood as both observable behaviors and underlying traits (Sanghi, 2016; Daru & Ali, 2020; Skorková, 2016). Academic leadership competencies not only shape student development (Radwan et al., 2021) but also enhance role clarity and autonomy (Maddock, 2023). However, early-career academics often face challenges in navigating complex institutional settings (Dore & Richards, 2022), and department heads frequently experience role overload and limited support (Davis-Salazar, 2023; Machovcova et al., 2023), with their effectiveness closely tied to institutional alignment, trust, and support from senior leadership (Chaaban et al., 2023). As such, a structured competency-based leadership development framework is essential (Floyd et al., 2023; Lawrence et al., 2023). Higher education leaders must integrate broad leadership competencies with specialized academic expertise (Ruben et al., 2023, p. 24), supported by reflective and developmental tools (Ruben, 2019, p. 26). In Arab contexts, leadership selection further highlights the importance of ethical integrity and communication (Alholiby, 2024), along with key competencies such as strategic vision, coaching, and crisis leadership (Ruben, 2019, p. 22; Lestari et al., 2021; Piip, 2015). In response to these needs, this study proposes a comprehensive framework to guide the preparation, evaluation, and development of academic department heads in Saudi higher education, grounded in empirical findings drawn from semi-structured interviews and structured questionnaires with academic experts across Saudi universities.

Study Background

The functional competencies required of academic department heads can be conceptualized across four core dimensions: administrative, leadership, technological, and personal, and developing these competencies demands not only the foresight to anticipate future trends but also the analytical ability to assess complex situations, the creativity to generate innovative solutions, and the strategic intelligence necessary for effective decision-making (Abdullah & Aziz, 2023).

Effective academic leadership in higher education particularly requires mastery of essential competencies such as self-awareness (understanding one's identity and contributions), learning agility (the capacity to absorb and apply new information to address challenges swiftly and effectively), communication (building mutual understanding and articulating a compelling vision), and influence (motivating others to act in accordance with that vision). Each of these key competencies consists of a set of interrelated skills (Center for Creative Leadership, 2022). Establishing a tailored competency framework specifically designed for academic department heads is therefore critical, as it provides a structured approach for their selection, evaluation, and ongoing professional development.

Problem Statement

This study aims to develop a framework that identifies the key competencies required of academic department heads, with the goal of supporting universities in the processes of selection, development, and evaluation. The central research question guiding this investigation is: What constitutes a framework for the key competencies of academic department heads in today's dynamic and evolving university environment?

Study Objectives

- To develop a key competency framework designed to meet the specific needs of academic department heads.
- To provide actionable recommendations for universities to enhance leadership development programs for current and prospective academic department heads.
- To contribute to the existing body of knowledge on academic leadership by offering insights into the competencies required for effective departmental management.

Theoretical Perspective

This study represents the second phase of a broader research project grounded in literature that addresses the ongoing debate surrounding effective leadership practices in higher education and their successful implementation (Dopson et al., 2019). The study is based on the hypothesis that a Key Competencies Framework for academic department heads can be developed through a conceptual foundation rooted in Distributed Leadership Theory and Transformational Leadership

Theory, two of the most extensively studied leadership models in educational research (Gumus et al., 2018).

Distributed Leadership Theory is one of the most widely recognized concepts in the field of educational leadership (Harris et al., 2022). It suggests that leadership emerges through the dynamic interactions among leaders, followers, and contextual factors (Spillane et al., 2004), emphasizing the importance of broader contextual, temporal, and social dimensions (Bolden et al., 2009). Despite its theoretical appeal, the implementation of distributed leadership in universities presents notable challenges due to its complexity across multiple organizational levels and the diverse responsibilities inherent in higher education institutions operating within an increasingly dynamic global environment (Floyd & Fung, 2015). In response to these challenges, Jones and Harvey (2017) proposed a practical model aimed at facilitating the shift from a leader-centered approach to a distributed leadership model within higher education settings.

Transformational leadership consists of four core components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. It embodies a strong commitment to driving change and fostering continuous improvement within academic environments, encouraging a culture of innovation, engagement, and reflective practice in higher education settings (Bass et al., 2003). Moreover, the better the transformational leadership, the more effective the institution will be (Komariyah, 2022). While newer leadership models—such as authentic, ethical, and servant leadership—offer theoretical distinctions, empirical studies have revealed considerable overlap with transformational leadership and limited added value. As a result, transformational leadership emerges as a highly effective model for leadership development initiatives, as it promotes the adoption of positive and effective behaviors and offers opportunities for leaders to practice and refine these behaviors (Deng et al., 2022). Given its learnable nature, transformational leadership is particularly well-suited to supporting the development of academic department heads, with the potential to enhance their leadership performance, organizational effectiveness, and capacity to address emerging challenges (Alessa, 2021).

From the perspective of best practices in managing and driving positive change—through the identification of the abilities, skills, and competencies essential for effective university leadership (Macfarlane et al., 2024)—a competency-based approach equips leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the evolving higher education landscape strategically (Ruben et al., 2023). In this context, Distributed Leadership Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory

together provide the foundational conceptual framework for identifying the key competencies required of academic department heads amid the profound transformations reshaping higher education.

We claim that the academic challenges department heads frequently encounter when making critical decisions shape the specific competencies required for effective distributed and transformational leadership practices, thereby enhancing institutional effectiveness. Identifying and systematically categorizing these competencies—through a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative analyses with input from academic experts and decision-makers—confirms their relevance within dynamic university environments seeking global competitiveness under Saudi Vision 2030 and in response to broader international pressures on higher education. The conceptual model in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between transformational and distributed leadership practices and the key competency domains essential for academic department heads to lead programs, faculty, and students effectively in alignment with the strategic goals of Saudi Vision 2030.

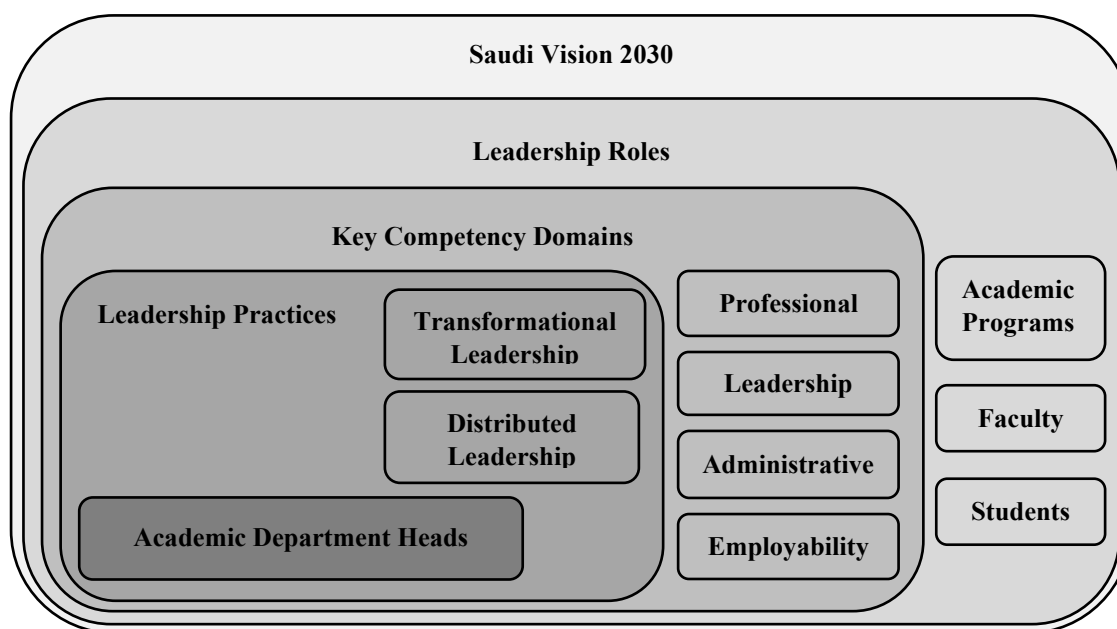


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Leadership Roles, Key Competency Dimensions, and Leadership Practices for Academic Department Heads under Saudi Vision 2030

Key Competency Domains

Professional Competencies:

The assumption that academically qualified and experienced staff are inherently equipped for leadership roles is increasingly insufficient, given the current challenges and evolving expectations in higher education. As a result, there is growing recognition of the need for department heads to acquire a broad range of competencies that enhance their leadership effectiveness (Ruben et al., 2023, p. 29). In addition, the implementation of ethical leadership can lead to improved job satisfaction (Berges Puyo, 2022). University leaders can facilitate this development by clearly defining professional competencies aligned with leadership responsibilities, identifying individual developmental needs, offering targeted training opportunities, and implementing effective mentoring systems (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Additionally, preparatory workshops and training programs should be offered to prospective department heads to strengthen their managerial and administrative competencies (Dean et al., 2021; Dogbatse, 2024). Given their responsibility for managing teaching, research, and service functions, department heads serve as essential intermediaries between institutional strategies and their practical execution. Despite the critical nature of this role, many assume leadership positions with minimal professional preparation, making department heads one of the most underprepared leadership groups within the university structure (Stawnychko, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to cultivate skills in communication, mentorship, negotiation, delegation, financial management, and leadership. Moreover, there is a pressing need for enhanced administrative training and institutional support (Lumpkin & Jones, 2023), alongside broader efforts to foster holistic academic development (van et al., 2024). Because many individuals enter leadership roles with limited exposure to their demands, building interpersonal and strategic planning skills is imperative. Informal, face-to-face support mechanisms remain crucial for effective development (Brinkley-Etz Korn & Lane, 2019). Ultimately, multiple factors contribute to departmental excellence, including effective change management, academic quality, strategic communication, shared values, organizational culture, reward systems, and recruitment practices (Kok & McDonald, 2015).

Leadership Competencies:

Identifying the leadership competencies required of academic department heads is essential to addressing the evolving demands of higher education, particularly as formal leadership roles are frequently assumed by current academic staff (Ruben et al., 2018). Communication plays a central role in educational leadership, with communicative competence recognized as a fundamental component of professional performance and a key factor in achieving positive institutional outcomes (Qobilovna, 2023). Effective leaders demonstrate empathy and maintain a positive communicative tone, fostering stronger engagement among diverse stakeholders (Angelakis et al., 2023). Research also suggests that gender may influence leadership communication styles, especially during times of crisis; female leaders are more likely to adopt transformational and inclusive communication approaches, whereas male leaders often exhibit more transactional styles (Angelakis et al., 2023). High-performing leadership teams typically demonstrate four core behaviors—problem-solving, goal orientation, openness to diverse perspectives, and support for others—which collectively account for 89 percent of the variance in organizational leadership effectiveness (Feser et al., 2015). These competencies can be further developed through structured leadership programs, peer collaboration, and active participation in professional learning communities, all of which promote emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and the capacity to build and lead effective teams (Abdulla et al., 2022).

Administration Competencies:

Administrative capabilities are fundamental to effective leadership across various organizational contexts (Ruben, 2019). While there is no universal consensus on how to classify administrative competencies (Vaishya et al., 2016), key attributes for selecting academic leaders typically include specialized qualifications, strategic planning, time management, scientific expertise, and practical experience (Alholiby, 2024). These competencies enable academic leaders to effectively organize and coordinate tasks in alignment with institutional objectives. Their responsibilities often encompass managing quality assurance processes, overseeing academic and program accreditation procedures, and conducting performance evaluations—all of which are critical for maintaining educational excellence and ensuring compliance with academic standards (Bougherira et al., 2024).

Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability:

Higher education governance processes and institutions face structural challenges, particularly due to an emphasis on qualitative rather than quantitative education. This is evident in the varying levels of graduate readiness for the rapidly evolving and competitive labor market. Such readiness is best achieved through the development of student capabilities via innovative, competency-based education strategies (UNESCO, 2016, 2018). In this context, the qualitative role of academic department heads becomes critical, as they lead academic programs to ensure alignment with current and future labor market needs. This leadership is demonstrated through active engagement with industry stakeholders, effective management of curriculum development, and supervision of graduate training, all while responding to external pressures to maintain high educational standards (Al-Rais, 2021). The ability of department heads to meet these expectations relies on a deep understanding of external influences and the strategic use of these insights to fulfill their transformative leadership roles (Lehman et al., 2022).

Context

Saudi Arabia's education sector has undergone substantial transformation in alignment with Vision 2030, which identifies "learning to work" as a core strategic priority (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). This shift has elevated expectations for the outcomes of higher education institutions, particularly universities, which are viewed as essential drivers of national development. A central initiative within Vision 2030 is the Human Capability Development Program, designed to equip Saudi citizens with the skills needed to succeed in a globally competitive landscape while aligning educational outcomes with labor market demands (Human Capability Development Program, 2022). These national objectives place heightened responsibility on academic department heads, who are expected to lead faculty, students, and academic programs in ways that enhance institutional performance, support national development goals, and contribute to the pursuit of global common goods in higher education (Tian et al., 2025).

Method**Study Design**

As part of an unfunded research project aimed at developing a framework for the Key Competencies of Academic Department Heads, the researcher collaborated with four graduate

students and two academic colleagues, all of whom voluntarily contributed to the review and application of the research tools. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to enable a comprehensive and cohesive analysis of the data (Dawadi et al., 2021). This approach involved the simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data to ensure an in-depth and well-rounded identification of the key competencies framework. The first phase of the project, which this article presents, involved data collection through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews conducted with 22 academic experts during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. The data were then analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative analytical techniques.

Participants

A purposive sampling approach was employed, deliberately selecting individuals capable of providing critical insights not readily available from other sources (Taherdoost, 2016). The sample comprised 22 academic experts from ten Saudi universities, each possessing over ten years of experience in educational leadership, along with specialized knowledge in educational administration and extensive practical experience. Additional demographic details, including participants' gender and academic rank, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of Study Experts by Gender and Academic Experience Variables

Variable	Category		
Gender	15 males	7 females	
Academic rank	13 professors	7 Associate professor	2 Assistant professor

Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative Data:

Following ethical approval and a comprehensive literature review, a questionnaire was developed to collect expert opinions on a proposed framework of key competencies for academic department heads. The framework consisted of six domains encompassing 33 competencies: professional (4), academic (3), leadership (9), soft skills (5), managerial (7), and competencies related to aligning academic programs with job market requirements (5). The instrument was first validated by two academic experts, then reviewed and rated by 22 expert participants using a five-point Likert scale,

deemed appropriate for the study's objectives (Taherdoost, 2019). For interpretative clarity, mean scores were categorized as follows: 1.00–1.80 = Strongly Disagree; 1.81–2.60 = Disagree; 2.61–3.40 = Neutral; 3.41–4.20 = Agree; and 4.21–5.00 = Strongly Agree. The complete questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

Psychometric Properties of the Questionnaire

The researcher validated the questionnaire using a standardization sample of 48 academic experts. The results of the instrument validation are outlined below:

- Validity Assessment:

Content Validity (Expert Judgment):

The questionnaire was reviewed by four academic experts who confirmed the appropriateness of the items and their direct alignment with the study's objectives.

Internal Consistency Validity:

To evaluate the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between each item and the total score using SPSS software. The results are presented in the following table.

Table 2

Correlation Coefficients Between Questionnaire Items and the Total Score

r	Competency Domains
**0.657	Professional competencies.
*0.541	Second: Academic competencies.
**0.798	Leadership competencies.
**0.646	Fourth: soft competencies.
**0.773	Administration competencies.
**0.693	Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

As presented in Table 4, the correlation coefficients between the questionnaire items and the total score are statistically significant, confirming the internal consistency of the instrument. This strong internal correlation among the items indicates that the questionnaire demonstrates a high level of reliability and is valid for measuring the constructs it was intended to assess.

- *Reliability:*

The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.748. This result shows an acceptable level of internal consistency, confirming that the questionnaire is a reliable tool for measuring the intended constructs.

Quantitative Data Analysis:

Following data collection during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to assess the perceived importance and adequacy of each competency domain in relation to current academic demands. The assumption of normal distribution was assessed to ensure the appropriateness of subsequent parametric analyses. Two independent-samples Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to examine differences based on gender, and means and standard deviations were calculated for all items. Additionally, a Kruskal-Wallis test was employed to explore differences based on academic rank.

Qualitative Data:

The researcher developed an initial semi-structured interview guide following the recommendations of Moser and Korstjens (2017). To ensure content relevance, clarity, and completeness, the guide was reviewed by two academic consultants with expertise in qualitative research tools. Their feedback informed revisions to improve question phrasing and coverage. The finalized version of the guide consisted of open-ended, preliminary questions, which were presented to all study participants in a consistent and systematic order. A total of 22 academic experts participated in the interviews, where they were asked to share their views on the importance of establishing a competency framework for academic department heads. Specifically, they provided feedback on the relevance of each of the seven proposed domains, suggestions for merging domains, and the suitability of the competencies listed within each domain, including recommendations for additions, removals, or modifications. Participants were encouraged to express their perspectives openly. The interview guide was shared with all experts and discussed with them via text or phone communication. Interview data were coded and managed using NVivo software (Kraiwanit et al., 2023). Thematic categories were generated through this process to inform the development of a comprehensive key competencies framework, ensuring alignment with expert perspectives and grounding in the existing literature.

Results

Quantitative results:

Table 3

Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations for the Key Competencies of Academic Department Heads Framework and Its Domains According to the Experts

M	Competency Domains	Mean	Standard deviation	Ranking	Adequacy Level
1	Professional competencies: which lead the behavior of the head of the department, by adhering to work ethics - personal accountability - professional image - ethical behavior.	4.71	0.72	2	Very high
2	Academic competencies: They can be determined by being able to: teaching - scientific research - community service.	4.76	0.70	1	Very high
3	Leadership competencies: They can be determined by being able to: influence - planning and building vision and strategy - decision-making - problem solving - change management - training and development - analytical thinking - critical thinking - academic experience.	4.76	0.44	1	Very high
4	Soft competencies: They can be determined by being able to: Effective communication - teamwork - problem solving - adaptability - mental flexibility.	4.67	0.58	3	Very high
5	Administration competencies: It can be determined by the ability to manage the application of rules and regulations - financial management - performance management - evaluation - follow-up - institutional relations - quality and program accreditation.	4.71	0.46	2	Very high
6	Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability: It can be determined by commitment to employment of graduates - relations with employers - labor market requirements - professional certificates - development of academic programs and courses.	4.38	0.74	4	Very high
	Overall average	4.665			Very high

As presented in Table 3, the overall average of the framework across all six domains was rated as very high by the experts within the current dynamic university environment.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Competency Domains Based on Gender

Competency Domains	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Professional competencies	21	4.7143	.71714	2.00	5.00
Academic competencies.	21	4.7619	.70034	2.00	5.00
Leadership competencies.	21	4.7619	.43644	4.00	5.00

Soft competencies.	21	4.6667	.57735	3.00	5.00
Administration competencies.	21	4.7143	.46291	4.00	5.00
Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability	21	4.3810	.74001	3.00	5.00
Gender	21	1.2857	.46291	1.00	2.00

Table 5

Mann-Whitney U Ranks for Gender-Based Differences in Competency Domains

Competency Domains	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Professional competencies	1.00	15	10.87	163.00
	2.00	6	11.33	68.00
	Total	21		
Academic competencies.	1.00	15	11.07	166.00
	2.00	6	10.83	65.00
	Total	21		
Leadership competencies.	1.00	15	10.70	160.50
	2.00	6	11.75	70.50
	Total	21		
Soft competencies.	1.00	15	10.47	157.00
	2.00	6	12.33	74.00
	Total	21		
Administration competencies.	1.00	15	10.50	157.50
	2.00	6	12.25	73.50
	Total	21		
Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability	1.00	15	11.47	172.00
	2.00	6	9.83	59.00
	Total	21		

Table 6

Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Gender Differences in Competency Domains

Competency Domains	Professional competencies	Academic competencies.	Leadership competencies.	Soft competencies.	Administration competencies.	Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability
Mann-Whitney U	43.000	44.000	40.500	37.000	37.500	38.000
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.820	.898	.635	.430	.456	.547

As presented in Table 6, there are no statistically significant differences in competencies attributable to the gender variable.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics for Competency Domains Based on Academic Rank

Competency Domains	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Professional competencies	21	4.7143	.71714	2.00	5.00
Academic competencies.	21	4.7619	.70034	2.00	5.00

Leadership competencies.	21	4.7619	.43644	4.00	5.00
Soft competencies.	21	4.6667	.57735	3.00	5.00
Administration competencies.	21	4.7143	.46291	4.00	5.00
Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability	21	4.3810	.74001	3.00	5.00
Rank	21	1.4762	.67964	1.00	3.00

Table 8*Kruskal-Wallis Mean Ranks for Competency Domains by Academic Rank*

Competency Domains	Rank	N	Mean Rank
Professional competencies	1.00	13	12.23
	2.00	6	7.67
	3.00	2	13.00
	Total	21	
Academic competencies.	1.00	13	11.73
	2.00	6	8.92
	3.00	2	12.50
	Total	21	
Leadership competencies.	1.00	13	11.08
	2.00	6	10.00
	3.00	2	13.50
	Total	21	
Soft competencies.	1.00	13	12.46
	2.00	6	9.00
	3.00	2	7.50
	Total	21	
Administration competencies.	1.00	13	11.58
	2.00	6	8.75
	3.00	2	14.00
	Total	21	
Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability	1.00	13	10.69
	2.00	6	11.50
	3.00	2	11.50
	Total	21	

Table 9*Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for Academic Rank Differences in Competency Domains*

Competency Domains	Professional competencies	Academic competencies.	Leadership competencies.	Soft competencies.	Administration competencies.	Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability
Kruskal-Wallis H	5.242	2.630	.885	3.178	2.231	.103
df	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.073	.268	.643	.204	.328	.950

It is clear from the previous table that there are no statistically significant differences in competencies attributable to the academic rank variable.

Qualitative results:

The analysis confirms that experts strongly endorsed the importance of establishing a Key Competencies Framework for Academic Department Heads in today's dynamic university environment, highlighting its strategic role in the selection, evaluation, and professional development of department heads who lead academic programs, faculty, and students in alignment with institutional objectives.

One of the most important and challenging leadership roles in higher education is that of the academic department head, as this position holds important decision-making authority and requires a high level of leadership awareness and competence. Finding individuals who possess the necessary competencies can be difficult, highlighting the critical importance of thorough preparation before appointment. Despite the role's high importance and sensitivity, it often lacks appeal among faculty members, many of whom prefer positions with less responsibility and influence—making it essential to consider motivational incentives. Ultimately, without falling into idealism or excessive theorizing, it is the responsibility of the department head to adopt and apply these key competencies and to encourage faculty members to recognize and value their relevance.

The study experts also emphasized the overlap between soft skills and leadership competencies, recommending their integration within the framework. They suggested that elements of leadership be embedded within the soft competencies domain to better reflect the interconnected nature of these skill sets and to enhance the practical relevance of the framework.

Experts noted that it is appropriate to merge soft competencies with leadership competencies under a single category, as soft competencies are viewed as an integral part of leadership rather than a separate domain. From their perspective, leadership competencies represent the core of a department head's role, and incorporating soft skills within this category reflects their interdependence. They also emphasized that leadership competencies embody the spirit of departmental leadership and can naturally encompass soft competencies. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of explicitly including emotional intelligence as a key competency within the framework.

The study experts also emphasized the integration of academic and professional competencies, noting that professional competencies inherently include academic competencies. Perhaps it is appropriate to combine academic competencies with professional competencies, as they complement each other. I suggest that professional competencies reflect what is related to the performance of the job and the profession itself, that is, it is required in all fields, so I suggest merging academic competencies with it.

Regarding administrative competencies, the study experts emphasized their significance, as demonstrated by the following examples:

The role of academic experience becomes clear in enhancing Administration competencies, and some Administration competencies are enhanced through practice. Administration competencies enhance the quality of the work of the head of the department and thus reflect positively in improving the work of Academic staff. Administration competencies are reflected in enhancing the operational efficiency of academic programs. There is an importance to adding technology and artificial intelligence competencies at the present time.

As for competencies for aligning academic programs with employability, the study experts discussed their importance: There is no doubt that the ability of the head of the department to these competencies has a great and influential role in improving the image of the department and thus the program as well as opening new horizons for the department and its graduates. It has a clear role in achieving the objectives of the Kingdom's Vision 2030, regarding directing education to prepare for the job. It will be reflected in providing job opportunities for university graduates and enhancing their competitiveness in the current labor market.

Discussion

The study's experts agreed on the scope of professional competencies, which include work ethics, personal responsibility, professional demeanor, ethical conduct, teaching proficiency, research engagement, and contributions to community service—findings that align with previous research

(Hakim, 2015; Skorková, 2016; Sanghi, 2016; Daru & Ali, 2020; Qobilovna, 2023; George & Rose, 2023). They also reached consensus on leadership competencies, identifying key elements such as influence, planning, vision and strategy, decision-making, problem-solving, change management, training, analytical and critical thinking, and academic experience, in agreement with findings reported by Hakim (2015), Skorková (2016), Sanghi (2016), Ruben (2023), Daru and Ali (2020), Radwan et al. (2021), Qobilovna (2023), Alghowinem et al. (2024), and Tasnim (2024). In contrast, experts emphasized the need to add emotional intelligence to the leadership domain, highlighting its critical role in enhancing decision-making (Baba et al., 2021). Core traits such as empathy, self-management, and the ability to guide others are fundamental to effective academic leadership (Parrish, 2015), and emotional intelligence is a developable competency that significantly improves leadership outcomes (Saha et al., 2023). Its application has been shown to support student success (Halimi et al., 2021; Khassawneh et al., 2022) and strengthen organizational commitment among academic staff, underscoring the importance of training programs aimed at improving leadership behaviors and attitudes (Tegegne & Wondimu, 2024). Integrating emotional intelligence into leadership development fosters emotional well-being and academic achievement (Pattiasina et al., 2024), while also contributing to better workplace outcomes and team performance (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023). As a key determinant of performance and motivation, emotional intelligence enhances job commitment, adaptability, and effort (Matta & Alam, 2023). Therefore, higher education institutions should prioritize building capacity in emotional intelligence (Coleman & Ali, 2022) to ensure instructional quality and improve institutional performance (Khassawneh et al., 2022). Regarding managerial competencies—which include systems and regulations, financial and performance management, evaluation, monitoring, institutional relationships, and program quality and accreditation—the study experts affirmed alignment with prior findings (Hakim, 2015; Feser et al., 2015; Skorková, 2016; Sanghi, 2016; Daru & Ali, 2020; Radwan et al., 2021; Escobar et al., 2022; Qobilovna, 2023; Alghowinem et al., 2024; Tasnim, 2024). However, they emphasized the importance of incorporating technology and artificial intelligence (AI) as essential managerial competencies, reflecting the increasing integration of AI into education and academic leadership (Alghowinem et al., 2024; Tasnim, 2024). AI now plays a strategic role in shaping educational practices, creating opportunities across teaching, learning, assessment, institutional structures, and academic culture (Ouyang & Jiao, 2021; Jafari & Keykha, 2024; Alshammari & Al-Enezi, 2024). It also enhances

personalized learning, boosts administrative efficiency, and supports equity through data-driven decision-making (Eden et al., 2024; Pedro et al., 2019). Nevertheless, experts cautioned that challenges related to accessibility, privacy, and the digital divide must be addressed with ethical foresight to fully harness AI's transformative impact on higher education (Eden et al., 2024). In contrast, for the domain of competencies related to aligning academic programs with employability—covering graduate employment, employer relations, labor market alignment, professional certifications, and academic program development—the experts confirmed consistency with prior research (George Washington University Center for Career Services, 2025; Lehman et al., 2022; Olo et al., 2021; Sanghi, 2016; UNESCO, 2016).

A review of the literature revealed a wide range of scholarly studies addressing the concept of competencies, core competencies, and competency-based approaches, including proposed applied frameworks used for the selection, development, and evaluation of academic department heads, middle leaders in higher education, and leaders across various sectors. However, there is noticeable variation in how competencies are defined and categorized, reflecting inconsistencies in their scope and presentation. Given this discrepancy, it is necessary to develop a core competency framework specifically tailored to the roles and responsibilities of academic department heads within today's dynamic university environment. The study experts agreed that the framework should be:

Academic Head of Department Competency Framework:

1. Professional Competencies:

Work Ethics - Personal Accountability - Professional Image - Ethical Behavior – Teaching
- Scientific Research - Community Service

2. Leadership Competencies:

Influence - Planning, Vision Building, and Strategy Development - Decision-Making -
Change Management - Talent Management - Training and Development - Analytical
Thinking - Critical Thinking - Academic experience - Effective Communication –
Teamwork - Problem-Solving – Adaptability - Mental Flexibility - Emotional Intelligence.

3. Administration Competencies:

Policies and Regulations - Financial Management - Performance Management – Evaluation - Follow-up - Institutional Relations - Quality and Program Accreditation - Technology and Artificial Intelligence.

4. Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability:

Graduate Employment - Employer Relations - Labor Market Requirements - Professional Certification Requirements - Academic Program and Curriculum Development.

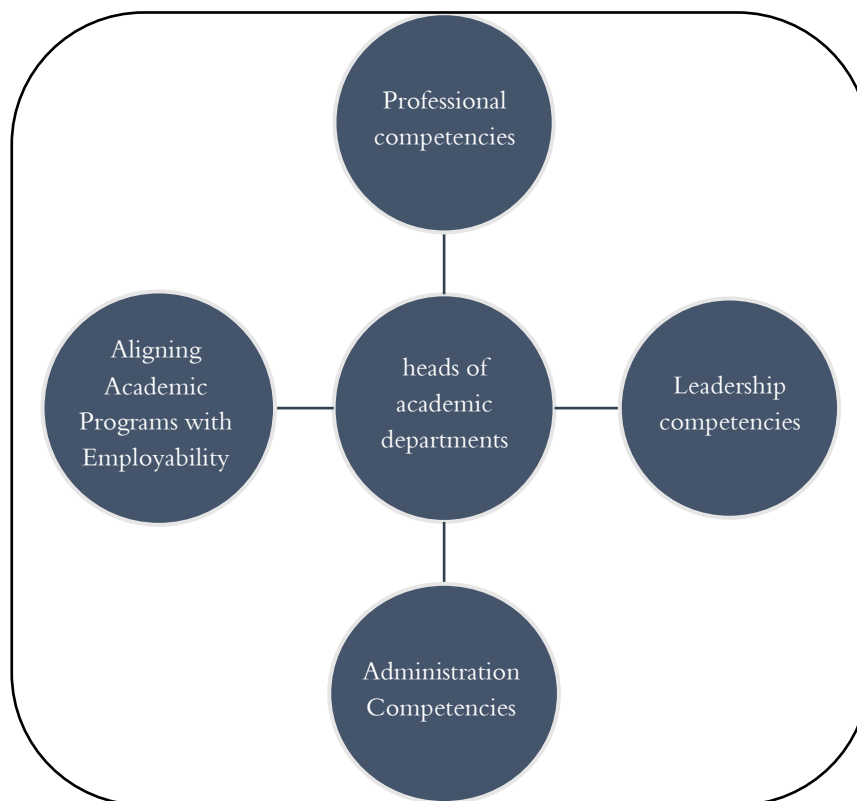


Figure 2. Framework of Key Competencies of Academic Department Heads

Conclusions

This article aims to establish a framework for the Key Competencies of Academic Department Heads within the current dynamic university environment in Saudi Arabia, intended to support their selection, evaluation, and professional development. While acknowledging the cultural context in which the study was conducted, the article also recognizes a global imperative for universities to address such critical leadership issues, especially in response to the growing influence of globalization, the internationalization of higher education, and the common challenges faced by institutions worldwide. The development of this framework does not overlook the local

cultural specificities; however, its generalizability requires further validation across different academic contexts. It may be more appropriate to create context-sensitive frameworks that reflect how academic leadership can be effective based on the unique challenges and expectations faced by department heads. This study presents a comprehensive and integrated set of key competencies, including work ethics, accountability, teaching, research, and community service, aligning with findings from existing literature. It further highlights essential leadership competencies such as decision-making, problem-solving, change management, and emotional intelligence, underscoring their role in fostering faculty engagement, student achievement, and overall institutional performance. Additionally, the study emphasizes the significance of financial management, performance evaluation, and academic program accreditation. The integration of artificial intelligence is also addressed, positioned as a transformative tool for enhancing administrative efficiency, supporting personalized learning, and driving research innovation. Nonetheless, ethical concerns—particularly regarding data privacy and equitable access—must be carefully considered to ensure the responsible implementation of AI in higher education. Moreover, by focusing on graduate employability, the study underscores the importance of aligning academic programs with labor market needs and incorporating professional certification requirements. It highlights the necessity for universities to integrate both emotional intelligence and artificial intelligence into their leadership and administrative practices to foster adaptability, drive innovation, and improve outcomes for both academic staff and students. The findings affirm that realizing this vision requires the adoption of the proposed competency framework in the design of targeted training programs to prepare academic staff for leadership roles, as well as in the development and evaluation of current academic department heads. Finally, the study calls for future research to investigate effective strategies for implementing these competencies across diverse institutional contexts and to examine their long-term impact on academic leadership effectiveness.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

A Framework of Key Competencies for Academic Department Heads in the Current Dynamic University Environment

Dear Esteemed Academic Expert,

As part of an unfunded research project, the first phase of this study aims to develop a framework that identifies the key competencies required of academic department heads. This framework is intended to support universities in their selection, development, and evaluation processes. The central research question guiding this study is: *What is the framework of key competencies for academic department heads in the current dynamic university environment?*

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design has been employed, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data collection has involved two instruments: a semi-structured interview guide and a structured questionnaire. The current phase focuses on the questionnaire, which is designed to quantitatively assess expert perspectives on the proposed competency framework. Your valued input as an educational expert is greatly appreciated. The literature suggests that the framework consists of several domains, each comprising a set of key competencies that enable department heads to effectively fulfill their responsibilities and meet the high expectations of universities. These competencies play a critical role in advancing institutional goals—particularly in response to recent transformations in the higher education sector. This aligns with the Human Capacity Development Project, which emphasizes the need for graduates to possess globally competitive capabilities. In this rapidly evolving context, competencies are essential for both preparing faculty members for leadership roles and supporting the ongoing professional development of current academic department heads.

These competencies can be classified as follows:

1. **Professional Competencies:** work ethics, personal accountability, professional image, and ethical behavior.
2. **Academic Competencies:** teaching, scientific research, and community service.

- I kindly invite you to participate in this questionnaire, which utilizes a five-point Likert scale. Your responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and used exclusively for academic research purposes. Your thoughtful input is sincerely appreciated and will make a valuable contribution to the success of this study.

Part I. Demographic Information: Kindly place a (✓) in the appropriate box:

Academic Rank: ☐ Professor. ☐ Associate Professor. ☐ Assistant Professor. ☐ Lecture

M	Competency Domains	Degree of approval				
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
First: Professional Competencies: These competencies guide the behavior of the department head and are identified as follows:						
1	Business Ethics					
2	Personal accountability					
3	Professional image					
4	Ethical behavior					
Comments on the above (if any):						
Second: Academic Competencies, which can be identified as follows:						

M	Competency Domains	Degree of approval				
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	Teaching					
6	Research					
7	Community Service					
Comments on the above (if any):						
Third: Leadership competencies, which can be identified as follows:						
8	Impact					
9	Planning, building vision, and strategy					
10	Decision Making					
11	Change Management					
12	Talent Management					
13	Training & Development					
14	Analytical thinking					
15	Critical thinking					
16	Academic Experience					
Comments on the above (if any):						
Fourth: Soft competencies, which can be identified as follows:						
17	Effective Communication					
18	Teamwork					
19	Problem solving					
20	Adaptability					
21	Mental flexibility					
Comments on the above (if any):						
Fifth: Administrative competencies, which can be identified as follows:						
24	Rules & Regulations					
25	Financial Management					
26	Performance Management					

M	Competency Domains	Degree of approval				
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
27	Evaluation					
28	Follow-up					
29	Institutional Relations					
30	Quality and Program Accreditation					
Comments on the above (if any):						
Sixth: Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability, which can be identified as follows:						
31	Graduate Employment					
32	Employer Relations					
33	Labor Market Requirements					
34	Professional Certification Requirements					
35	Developing academic programs and courses					
Comments on the above (if any):						

The data collected through this questionnaire will be used exclusively for academic research purposes and will remain strictly confidential.

I sincerely appreciate your valuable cooperation and engagement in support of scientific research.

May Allah reward you abundantly and bless your efforts.
