

Research Article

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A Competency-Based Framework for Departmental Leadership: Insights from College Deans in Higher Education

Nasser Saud Alrayes 

Abstract

Background/purpose. College deans' responsibilities include monitoring and evaluating the performance of academic department heads to ensure that they lead academic programs, faculty members, and students efficiently, thereby contributing to the achievement of both college-level and institutional objectives. This study is the second phase of a project identifying the key competencies required by academic department heads in Saudi Arabia; it explored the perspectives of college deans on the significance of the key competency framework developed during the project's first phase.

Materials/methods. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, utilizing questionnaire results and semi-structured interview responses from 17 deans at a Saudi Arabian university.

Results. The results showed statistically significant differences due to gender and leadership experience in favor of women. The deans provided insights on the implementation of key competencies.

Conclusion. These findings will help higher education institutions design and implement targeted training programs to enhance the leadership capabilities of current and future department heads.

1. Introduction

The academic department is the fundamental administrative unit of the university system, and it is expected to contribute to achieving the goals of universities and colleges by offering high-quality academic programs aligned with labor market demands, conducting rigorous scientific research, and providing effective community services. In Saudi Arabia, the increasing demand for globally competitive graduates has intensified the expectations placed on department heads, who must lead in dynamic and complex environments (Ruben et al., 2023). These shifts, driven by strategic and institutional pressures, necessitate governance reforms that prioritize leadership capacity and competency-based frameworks (Abdullah & Abdel Aziz, 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016).

Despite their pivotal roles, academic middle leaders often operate with unclear responsibilities, limited institutional support, and insufficient professional development (Floyd et al., 2023; Maddock, 2023). While competency-based leadership development provides actionable strategies that promote self-assessment, adaptability, and alignment with institutional goals (Ruben et al., 2023), ambiguity remains regarding the definition and operationalization of competencies in academic leadership (Daru & Ali, 2020). Skills such as decision making, strategic planning, and communication have been shown to impact student and institutional success (Davis-Salazar, 2023; Radwan et al., 2021).

Saudi Arabia's education sector has undergone a significant transformation aligned with Vision 2030, which emphasizes "learning to work" as a core strategic focus (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). This shift has elevated expectations of the outcomes of universities. One of the flagship initiatives of Vision 2030 is the Human Capability Development Program, which aims to equip Saudi citizens with the skills necessary to thrive in a globally competitive environment and align educational outputs with labor market needs (Human Capability Development Program, 2022). These national priorities place increased responsibility on academic department heads; against this backdrop, their role is manifested as transformational leaders with competencies they must possess to effect the desired qualitative shift in the dynamic university environments shaped by Saudi Vision 2030.

Recent years have witnessed significant changes in leadership and management within higher education institutions (Alrayes et al., 2022). Given the complexity of the academic environment, recent studies have focused on the existing gap in academic leadership development (Abdulla et al., 2023). However, the field still lacks a deep empirical and theoretical understanding (Floyd et al., 2023). Given the diversity of tasks and the often limited preparation of department heads (Lumpkin & Jones, 2023), Saudi universities must establish a structured system to provide support, training, and continuous professional development for all faculty members and department heads (Bataineh et al., 2025; Hundessa, 2021). In this context, college deans play a key role in selecting and developing academic leaders (Harvey, 2023).

Accordingly, this study represents the second phase of a research project and aims to explore college deans' perspectives on the importance of a framework of key competencies for academic department heads. The first phase involved constructing an initial framework through an integrative literature review and conceptual validation via consultations with academic experts from Saudi universities. Data were collected from 22 experts across ten institutions through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using content analysis and descriptive statistics. The resulting framework comprised four competency domains—professional (8 competencies), leadership (13), managerial (9), and program-alignment with employability (5)—and is currently under review (Alrayes, 2025).

Building on that foundation, the significance of this study lies in providing evidence-based insight that addresses a clear gap in the literature on leadership competencies for academic department heads, particularly within the Saudi higher education context.

The current study assesses the significance and applicability of the framework from the viewpoints of college deans. It is intended to support both the preparation of future academic leaders and the development and evaluation of current department heads. The findings will contribute evidence-based criteria for selecting and assessing academic leaders, and offer guidance for higher education institutions in designing targeted leadership development programs. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) assess deans' perceptions of the proposed framework and rank its four domains and 35 competencies; (2) examine statistically significant differences in evaluations based on gender, leadership experience, and academic rank; and (3) provide practical insights for the selection, evaluation, and development of academic leaders.

1.1. Study background

Overall, academic qualifications alone are no longer sufficient for effective leadership, and department heads require a broad set of competencies to navigate evolving institutional expectations (Ruben et al., 2023). Core competencies—including self-awareness, learning agility, communication, and influence—span across managerial, leadership, technological, and personal domains and must incorporate future-oriented thinking and strategic intelligence (Abdullah & Abdel Aziz, 2023; Center for Creative Leadership, 2022). Therefore, a structured competency framework is essential for the selection, evaluation, and development of department heads.

1.2. Theoretical perspective

This study is grounded on the premise that the key competencies of academic department heads can be conceptually understood through Transformational Leadership Theory, one of the most widely studied models in educational leadership (Gumus et al., 2018). Although alternative models (e.g., authentic, ethical, servant leadership) have emerged, empirical studies show significant conceptual overlaps, with transformational leadership remaining a strong foundation for leadership development (Alessa, 2021; Deng et al., 2023).

Building on these theoretical foundations, a competency-based approach offers a practical mechanism for academic leaders to acquire and strategically apply necessary skills (Macfarlane et al., 2024; Ruben et al., 2023). Accordingly, Transformational Leadership theories inform the conceptual model guiding this study and frame the identification of key competencies required of academic department heads in dynamic university settings shaped by Saudi Vision 2030. As summarized in Figure 1, the model illustrates how transformational leadership practices align with core competency domains, offering a structured framework for leading academic programs, faculty members, and students effectively and strategically. This conceptualization is further illustrated in the following model.

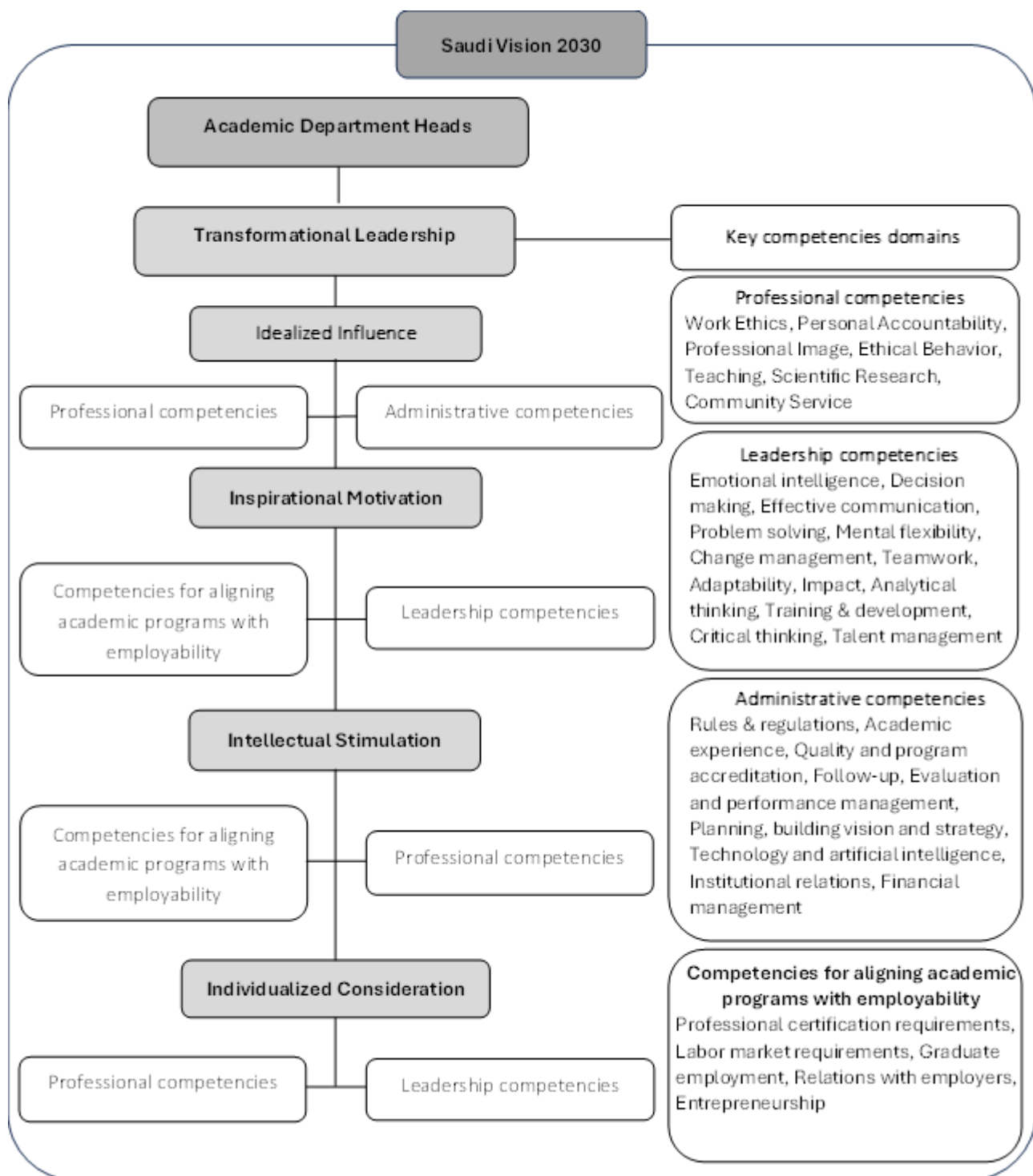


Figure 1. Conceptual model linking the components of transformational leadership and key competency domains

This conceptual model illustrates the relationship between the key competency domains required of academic department heads and the components of transformational leadership aligned with Saudi Vision 2030 and enables department heads to fulfill their expected roles as transformational leaders. It maps onto the four dimensions of transformational leadership: Idealized Influence (the leader's admirable behavior and charisma), Inspirational Motivation (the articulation of an attractive and inspiring vision), Intellectual Stimulation (challenging followers' assumptions and listening to their ideas), and Individualized Consideration (mentoring and coaching according to each follower's unique needs) (Alessa, 2021). Idealized Influence is underpinned by leadership and managerial competencies; Inspirational Motivation is underpinned by leadership competencies and

competencies for aligning academic programs with employability; Intellectual Stimulation is underpinned by professional competencies and competencies for aligning academic programs with employability; and Individualized Consideration is underpinned by both leadership and professional competencies.

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship emphasizes that leadership competencies in higher education are multidimensional. Tyminski and Owens (2024) categorized them into knowledge, skills, and attitudes, while Mobley (2022) highlighted personal, interpersonal, and strategic capacities. In Saudi Arabia, Radwan et al. (2020, 2021) examined academic leadership competencies and their impact on student outcomes, while Gonaim (2019) revealed both the benefits and challenges of adopting leadership models. More recently, Alqarni (2024) has linked leadership competencies to the national priorities outlined in Vision 2030. Despite these contributions, empirical validation of competency frameworks from the perspectives of academic leaders remains limited. Based on existing literature, the key competencies of academic department heads can be categorized into the following domains.

2.1. Professional competencies

College deans play a crucial role in developing the professional capacities of department heads (Dean et al., 2021; Dogbatse, 2024). Despite their central roles in teaching, research, and service, department heads often lack formal leadership preparation (Stawnychko, 2021). Development areas include communication, negotiation, delegation, financial management, and institutional leadership, which are reinforced by formal training and administrative infrastructure (Lumpkin & Jones, 2023). The main positive antecedents of professional competencies were having personality traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and open-mindedness; having intrinsic and altruistic motivation; and having developed executive function plans and effective time management skills, while the main negative antecedent of professional competencies was the personality trait of negative emotionality (Ballová Mikušková et al., 2023). Lee and Ragupathi (2024) emphasized that trust and ethos are central to establishing credibility and academic identity.

2.2. Leadership competencies

Given that most department heads ascend from faculty positions, leadership skills are critical to success (Ruben et al., 2018). Effective communication grounded in empathy and clarity underpins leadership impact (Angelakis et al., 2024). Essential leadership competencies encompass vision, collaboration, coaching, crisis management, and self-leadership, as well as emotional and adaptive intelligence (Abdullah & Abdel Aziz, 2023; Ruben, 2019). Recent research has emphasized inclusive and compassionate leadership as a cornerstone of effective higher education governance, highlighting the importance of building trust and fostering collaboration (Angelakis et al., 2024).

2.3. Administrative competencies

Managerial skills are vital for academic leaders in managing increasingly complex institutional systems (Ruben, 2019). Effective administration facilitates program coordination, quality assurance, accreditation, and resource management —critical areas for institutional improvement (Bougherira et al., 2024). These competencies include budget planning, performance evaluation, and cross-unit coordination (Escobar et al., 2022). AI and interpersonal skills are vital for current leadership (Tasnim, 2024). Therefore, a deeper understanding of AI developments is necessary for the future of higher education (Jafari & Keykha, 2024).

2.4. Competencies for aligning academic programs with employability

One persistent challenge facing higher education is aligning academic programs with labor market needs, which requires reforms in life skills and competency-based education (United Nations

Educational, Scientific, And Cultural Organization, 2016). Department heads play a key role in adapting programs to reflect market realities and employer expectations (Lehman et al., 2024). In resource-constrained and competitive environments, entrepreneurial skills are essential for supporting income-generating initiatives and sustainability strategies (Cleverley-Thompson, 2016). Overall, department chairs must recognize and harness the complex and interconnected external forces that influence their work to actualize their role as transformative leaders fully (Lehman et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed in this study, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Dawadi et al., 2021). In this design, qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously, allowing for the integration of these datasets to provide comprehensive and in-depth insights into the college deans' views on the key competency framework for academic department heads.

3.1. Participants

A purposeful sampling approach, a strategy in which people are deliberately selected to provide important information that cannot be obtained from other sources, was used (Taherdoost, 2016). Given the limited and clearly defined nature of this population, a targeted sampling method was employed—namely, a total population sample. All college deans at a Saudi university were invited to participate, totaling 19. Of these, 17 responded to the questionnaire and participated in the semi-organized interview, whereas two were unable to join during the one-week data collection period. The participants represented a broad spectrum of academic fields, including seven Health Colleges (e.g., Medicine, Pharmacy, Nursing), two Engineering Colleges (Architecture and Engineering), four Arts and Education Colleges, and four Science and Business Colleges (e.g., Science, Business Administration, IT). Participant information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant information

Variable	Category			
Gender	10 Men	7 Women		
Academic rank	3 Professors	6 Associate Professors	8 Assistant Professors	
Leadership experience	0 <5 years	8 from 5 to <10 years	9 ≥10 years	
College Type	7 Health (41.2%)	2 Engineering (11.8%)	4 Sciences and Management (23.5%)	4 Arts & Education (23.5%)

3.2. Data collection and analysis

After obtaining ethical approval, the researcher designed a questionnaire to quantify participants' perceptions regarding the proposed key competencies framework. Following a review by two academic colleagues, the questionnaire was administered to all 17 participants, who were asked to evaluate the framework and rank the four domains and 35 competencies in terms of importance. A 6-point Likert scale was used for each item; for interpretation purposes, mean scores were categorized as follows: 1.00–1.82 = Very low, 1.83–2.65 = Low, 2.66–3.48 = Somewhat low, 3.49–4.31 = Somewhat high, 4.32–5.14 = High, and 5.15–6.00 = Very high.

3.3. Psychometric efficiency of the tool

The researcher validated the questionnaire using a standardization sample of 56 faculty members. The validation results are presented as follows:

1. Validity assessment

a. Content validity (expert judgment):

The questionnaire was reviewed by four academic colleagues, who confirmed the validity of the statements and their direct relevance to the study's topic.

b. Internal consistency validity:

To assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between each statement and the total score using the SPSS software. The results are shown in the following tables:

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between questionnaire items and the total score

R	Competency Domains
**0.404	Professional competencies.
*0.602	Leadership competencies.
**0.583	Administration competencies.
**0.839	Competencies for aligning academic programs with employability

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

Table 3. Detailed correlation coefficients by competency dimensions

Professional Competencies		Leadership Competencies		Administrative Competencies		Competencies for Aligning Academic Programs with Employability	
Competency	t	Competency	t	Competency	t	Competency	t
Teaching and learning	0.348**	Impact	0.688**	Rules & regulations	0.758**	Graduate employment	0.666**
Developing academic programs and courses	0.492**	Decision Making	0.530**	Planning, building vision, and strategy	0.824**	Relations with employers	0.862**
Research	0.269*	Change management	0.577**	Financial management	0.665**	Labor market requirements	0.517**
Community service	0.410**	Talent management	0.521**	Evaluation and performance management	0.611**	Professional certification requirements	0.798**
Business ethics	0.434**	Training & development	0.528**	Follow-up	0.439**	Entrepreneurship	0.862**
Personal accountability	0.427**	Analytical thinking	0.487**	Institutional relations	0.768**		

Professional image	0.555**	Critical thinking	0.626**	Quality and program accreditation	0.518**
Ethical behavior	0.277*	Effective communication	0.555**	Academic experience	0.502**
				Technology and artificial intelligence	0.826**
		Teamwork	0.667**		
		Emotional intelligence	0.689**		
		Problem solving	0.643**		
		Adaptability	0.633**		
		Mental flexibility	0.587**		

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

2. Reliability assessment

Cronbach's Alpha Method: The internal consistency reliability of the instrument was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.905. This indicates a high level of reliability, confirming that the questionnaire is a stable and consistent tool for measuring the target constructs.

Two independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences based on gender and leadership experience, and means and standard deviations were calculated for all items. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was used to explore differences based on academic rank.

For qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Two academic colleagues first reviewed the interview questions and content to verify their accuracy and ensure that they provided the correct coverage and relevance. Once the open-ended questions were finalized, the interview was conducted. The deans were asked to share their views on the significance of the key competency framework in preparing faculty members to assume the role of department head as well as in evaluating and developing the skills of the current department heads.

The interview data were organized using NVivo and analyzed using coding techniques. After assigning the data into codes and categories, thematic analysis was used to reveal the shared insights into the significance of the framework, its domains, and associated competencies.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative results

Table 4 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the deans' perceptions of the key competencies framework. The deans regard the framework with high importance, with an overall average score of 5.4. All four domains achieved a very high level of importance, with leadership competencies ranking the highest, followed by professional competencies, administration competencies, and competencies for aligning academic programs with employability.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of competencies by domain category

Professional competencies				
C	Competency	Average	Standard deviation	Domain level
1	Ethical behavior	6.00	0.00	Very high
2	Business ethics	5.82	0.39	Very high
3	Teaching and learning	5.76	0.44	Very high
4	Personal accountability	5.71	0.47	Very high
5	Professional image	5.53	0.51	Very high
6	Developing academic programs and courses	5.47	0.51	Very high
7	Research	5.35	1.00	Very high
8	Community Service	4.94	0.90	High
General average of professional competencies		5.57	0.29	Very high
Leadership competencies				
C	Competency	Average	Standard deviation	Domain level
1	Emotional intelligence	6.00	0.00	Very high
2	Decision making	5.76	0.44	Very high
3	Effective communication	5.76	0.44	Very high
4	Problem solving	5.59	0.62	Very high
5	Mental flexibility	5.59	0.62	Very high
6	Change management	5.53	0.62	Very high
7	Teamwork	5.53	0.72	Very high
8	Adaptability	5.53	0.62	Very high
9	Impact	5.47	0.62	Very high
10	Analytical thinking	5.41	0.62	Very high
11	Training & development	5.29	0.69	Very high
12	Critical thinking	5.18	0.73	Very high
13	Talent management	4.88	1.05	High
General average of leadership competencies		5.46	0.39	Very high
Administration competencies				
C	Competency	Average	Standard deviation	Domain level
1	Rules & regulations	5.59	0.62	Very high
2	Academic experience	5.59	0.51	Very high

3	Quality and program accreditation	5.53	0.62	Very high
4	Follow-up	5.41	0.62	Very high
5	Evaluation and performance management	5.35	0.86	Very high
6	Planning, building vision, and strategy	5.24	0.66	Very high
7	Technology and artificial intelligence	5.24	0.66	Very high
8	Institutional relations	5.24	0.66	Very high
9	Financial management	4.47	0.80	High
General average of administration competencies		5.30	0.44	Very high

Competencies of aligning academic programs with employability

C	Competency	Average	Standard deviation	Domain level
1	Professional certification requirements	5.65	0.49	Very high
2	Labor market requirements	5.59	0.51	Very high
3	Graduate employment	5.29	0.59	Very high
4	Relations with employers	5.24	0.66	Very high
5	Entrepreneurship	4.59	1.00	High
Overall average of competencies of aligning academic programs with employability		5.27	0.47	Very high
Overall average of the key competency framework for heads of academic departments		5.4		Very high

C = Competency

As seen in Table 5, 31 among the 35 competencies were ranked very highly (mean > 5.00), while four were ranked highly (mean > 4.00). Among the items, ethical behavior and emotional intelligence were ranked as the most important (mean = 6.00), while financial management had the lowest average (mean = 4.47).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of competencies by ranking

C	Ranking of competencies	Mean	Standard deviation	Domain-level ranking	Level
1	Ethical behavior	6.00	0.00	1	Very high
2	Emotional intelligence	6.00	0.00	1	Very high
3	Business ethics	5.82	0.39	2	Very high
4	Teaching and learning	5.76	0.44	3	Very high
5	Decision making	5.76	0.44	2	Very high
6	Effective communication	5.76	0.44	2	Very high
7	Personal accountability	5.71	0.47	4	Very high

8	Professional certification requirements	5.65	0.49	1	Very high
9	Problem solving	5.59	0.62	3	Very high
10	Mental flexibility	5.59	0.62	3	Very high
11	Rules & regulations	5.59	0.62	1	Very high
12	Academic experience	5.59	0.51	1	Very high
13	Labor market requirements	5.59	0.51	2	Very high
14	Professional image	5.53	0.51	5	Very high
15	Change management	5.53	0.62	4	Very high
16	Teamwork	5.53	0.72	4	Very high
17	Adaptability	5.53	0.62	4	Very high
18	Quality and program accreditation	5.53	0.62	2	Very high
19	Developing academic programs and courses	5.47	0.51	6	Very high
20	Impact	5.47	0.62	5	Very high
21	Analytical thinking	5.41	0.62	6	Very high
22	Follow-up	5.41	0.62	3	Very high
23	Research	5.35	1.00	7	Very high
24	Evaluation and performance management	5.35	0.86	4	Very high
25	Training & development	5.29	0.69	7	Very high
26	Graduate employment	5.29	0.59	3	Very high
27	Planning, building vision, and strategy	5.24	0.66	5	Very high
28	Artificial intelligence technology	5.24	0.66	5	Very high
29	Institutional relations	5.24	0.66	5	Very high
30	Relations with employers	5.24	0.66	4	Very high
31	Critical thinking	5.18	0.73	8	Very high
32	Community service	4.94	0.90	8	High
33	Talent management	4.88	1.05	9	High
34	Entrepreneurship	4.59	1.00	5	High
35	Financial management	4.47	0.80	6	High

C = Competency

Regarding gender, the t-test results in Table 6 show that there were no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) in perceptions regarding leadership competencies, administration competencies, and competencies for aligning academic programs with employability that could be attributed to gender. However, perceptions on professional competencies according to gender were found to have significant differences among the deans.

Table 6. T-test results for differences attributed to gender

Competency Domains	Male		Female		Value (v)	p value	Statistical significance
	n = (10)		n = (7)				
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation			
Professional competencies	5.60	0.52	5.86	0.38	6.401	0.02	Statistically significant
Leadership competencies	5.80	0.42	5.71	0.76	0.766	0.40	Not statistically significant
Administration competencies	5.50	0.53	5.57	0.53	0.184	0.67	Not statistically significant
Competencies of aligning academic programs with employability	4.90	0.88	5.57	0.53	0.08	0.78	Not statistically significant

The one-way ANOVA test in Table 7 revealed no statistically significant differences in competencies attributable to academic rank ($p > 0.05$).

Table 7. One-way ANOVA test results for differences attributed to academic rank

Competency domains	Contrast source	Total squares	Degrees of freedom	Average squares	p	Level of statistical significance	Statistical significance
Professional competencies	Between groups	0.154	2	0.077	0.32	0.731	Not statistically significant
	Inside groups	3.375	14	0.241			
	Total	3.529	16				
Leadership competencies	Between groups	0.517	2	0.259	0.797	0.47	Not statistically significant
	Inside groups	4.542	14	0.324			
	Total	5.059	16				
Administration competencies	Between groups	0.235	2	0.118	0.412	0.67	Not statistically significant

Competencies of aligning academic programs with employability	Inside groups	4	14	0.286	0.3 29	0.725	Not statistically significant
	Total	4.235	16				
	Between groups	0.471	2	0.235			
	Inside groups	10	14	0.714			
	Total	10.471	16				

Regarding leadership experience, there were no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) in perceptions of professional and administrative competencies (Table 8). However, the p-values for leadership competencies ($p = 0.05$) and competencies of academic program alignment with employability ($p < 0.05$) indicate that there are statistically significant differences for these items, attributable to differences in leadership experience in favor of women.

Table 8. T-test results for differences attributed to leadership experience

Competency domains	Male n = (10)		Female n = (7)		Value (v)	p	Statistical significance
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation			
Professional competencies	5.63	0.52	5.78	0.44	1.61	0.22	Not statistically significant
Leadership competencies	5.63	0.74	5.89	0.33	4.50	0.05	Statistically significant
Administration competencies	5.38	0.52	5.67	0.50	0.11	0.74	Not statistically significant
Competencies of aligning academic programs with employability	5.00	1.07	5.33	0.50	1.59	0.23	Not statistically significant

4.2. Qualitative results

The analysis confirmed that college deans strongly endorse the importance of defining a key competency framework for academic department heads in today's dynamic university environment. This framework is seen as essential for evaluating, developing, and selecting department heads, given their central role in leading programs, staff, and students and meeting rising institutional expectations, as shown by the following quotes: "The position of the department head is highly important and sensitive, highlighting the need for thorough preparation prior to the appointment," and "Due to the importance of the head of the department, what has been mentioned in the framework is considered very important and must be available to those who assume or are likely to assume this role."

The participants also discussed the importance of professional competencies, as shown in the following quotes: "Professional competencies are important for determining a leader's ability to take

responsibility for and adhere to the goals of educational institutions,” and “It represents a subconscious mindset of leadership.”

The participants mentioned the importance of leadership competencies, as shown in the following quotes: “Leadership competencies help the head of a department assess matters holistically,” and “Leadership competencies are reflected in the ability of the department head to make rational decisions and face contemporary challenges, which helps enhance the position of the college and university at the local and international levels.”

The participants viewed administrative competencies as crucial, as shown in the following examples: “Here, experience and knowledge are manifested, as some legislation is restricted by regulations and some is still vague,” and “Administration competencies are important in many respects, as they improve the management of resources, enhance operational efficiency, and develop policies and procedures.”

Regarding competencies in aligning academic programs with employability, the participants stressed its importance with the following quotes: “These competencies must be in front of our eyes! Is our main goal in universities to graduate students from highly qualified national cadres in line with the aspirations of the Kingdom's Vision 2030?” and “Building bridges of permanent cooperation with the labor market and understanding its nature and variables helps department heads qualify the program product (graduate) as suitable for a competitive and changing labor market.”

5. Discussion

The findings revealed a strong agreement between college deans and the research team regarding the importance of the proposed key competency framework for academic department heads in today's dynamic university environment. Deans ranked the four domains as leadership, professional, administrative, and employability-related competencies, which is consistent with previous research (Radwan et al., 2020).

The professional competencies emphasized included work ethics, accountability, professional identity, ethical behavior, teaching, research, and community services, reflecting previous findings (Daru & Ali, 2020; Lee & Ragupathi, 2024).

Ethical behavior received a unanimous consensus, aligning with Ghasemy (2024), who found that it significantly influenced job satisfaction and motivation. Responsible leaders who interact with faculty members in an ethical and responsive manner reduce academic job insecurity (Islam et al., 2024).

Leadership competencies such as influence, vision, decision-making, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence were found to be considered essential. This supports studies highlighting emotional intelligence as a vital trait linked to decision-making, student achievement, and institutional success (Davis-Salazar, 2023; Saha et al., 2023). It also contributes to faculty commitment and organizational performance (Coleman & Ali, 2025; Tegegne & Wondimu, 2024).

The identified administrative competencies included familiarity with policies, financial and performance management, and accreditation. Deans have also emphasized the role of AI in improving administrative efficiency, while calling for ethical safeguards in its application (Eden et al., 2024; Jafari & Keykha, 2024; Tasnim, 2024).

Employability-related competencies focus on industry engagement, curricular alignment, and graduate readiness, consistent with labor market demands and consideration of labor market conditions, which often dictate realistic prospects of employment (George Washington University Center for Career Services, 2025; Lehman et al., 2024; Ma & Bennett, 2024; United Nations Educational, Scientific And Cultural Organization, 2016).

The results revealed statistically significant differences due to gender and leadership experience in favor of women. This partly corroborates the findings of Angelakis et al. (2024), who found that women's professional competencies outperform those of men. In contrast, Radwan et al. (2020) found that male academic leaders have a higher level of leadership competencies than female academic leaders, but that academic experience influences their professional behavior.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to determine the perspectives of college deans regarding the importance of the key competencies framework for academic department heads. Consistent with previous studies, the findings confirmed that the deans consider the framework and its four domains to be of high importance in supporting academic department heads in fulfilling their expected leadership roles as transformational leaders within the current dynamic university environment. It also highlights leadership competencies such as decision-making, problem-solving, and change management and emphasizes the essential role of emotional intelligence in enhancing faculty commitment, raising student success, and improving organizational performance. Administration competencies encompass financial resource management, performance evaluation, and programmatic accreditation, underscoring AI as a transformative tool that enhances administrative performance efficiency. However, the participants emphasized the need to address the ethical challenges associated with the use of AI, particularly regarding data privacy and accessibility, to ensure its responsible and effective integration into academic processes.

Additionally, this study underscores the importance of aligning academic programs with labor market needs by fostering employability skills, developing relevant curricula, and promoting professional certification. Emotional intelligence and ethical behavior emerged as cross-cutting competencies that enhance leadership effectiveness and institutional adaptability. In light of these findings, this study recommends designing targeted training programs that integrate both technical and emotional competencies and promote ethical practices in AI deployment. Beyond these practical implications, this study provides a unique contribution by presenting one of the first empirically validated frameworks of academic leadership competencies from the perspective of Saudi college deans, thereby addressing a critical gap in both local and international literature.

This study acknowledges the contextual limitations of the proposed framework, as it was developed and tested within a specific cultural and institutional environment, linking the key competency domains required of academic department heads to the components of transformational leadership. While the framework provides a solid foundation, it requires adaptation and validation across diverse university contexts to ensure broader applicability.

7. Suggestion

Future research should investigate mechanisms for implementing the key competency domains and evaluate their long-term impacts on transformational leadership practices in higher education and institutional outcomes. Furthermore, actively involving both current and prospective department heads and incorporating their input on the proposed key competency domains is crucial for the framework's successful adoption and sustained impact on institutional effectiveness, as it informs their selection, evaluation, and development processes.

Declarations

Author Contributions. N.S.A. was responsible for all work involved in this study, including literature review, conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, review-editing and writing, and original manuscript preparation. The author has read and approved the published and final version of the article.

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Generative AI. During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT for assistance with translation and linguistic proofreading. The author declares that they reviewed and edited the final output as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Ethical Approval. This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University with NCB E Registration No. (HAP-05-D-003) under approval number IRB-2025-19-0137. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

Data Availability Statement. The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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