

Performance Leadership in the Digital Era: Transforming Strategies for Sustainable Organization Excellence in Higher Education Institutions

Teti Rohayati

Universitas Bina Nusantara, Bekasi, Indonesia; teti.rohayati@binus.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies are reshaping how higher education institutions (HEIs) deliver learning, manage research, and run core services, yet many digital initiatives fail to translate into sustained organizational excellence. Leadership is a critical determinant of whether digital transformation becomes a strategic, mission-aligned change rather than fragmented technology adoption. This study develops an integrative conceptual account of performance leadership as a core enabling mechanism for HEI digital transformation. Using an integrative review guided by PRISMA-oriented selection and thematic synthesis, the study examines recent scholarship (2014–2024) on leadership, digital transformation, governance, and performance management in HEIs. The synthesis identifies four recurring dimensions of effective performance leadership: (1) digital literacy and technological competence, (2) agile and adaptive management, (3) stakeholder-centric governance, and (4) performance analytics and data-driven accountability. Building on these themes, the study proposes a conceptual model in which performance leadership strengthens digital transformation outcomes through mediating mechanisms such as strategic execution quality, performance-driven culture, and data governance maturity, while recognizing contextual moderators (e.g., institutional digital maturity, governance structures, and regulatory pressures). The article contributes a higher-education-specific framework and a set of testable propositions to guide future empirical research. Practically, it offers actionable implications for HEIs on leadership development, participatory governance, and responsible analytics use to support sustainable outcomes in teaching quality, innovation, and operational efficiency.

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Corresponding Author:

Teti Rohayati

Universitas Bina Nusantara, Bekasi, Indonesia; teti.rohayati@binus.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

The accelerating diffusion of artificial intelligence, learning analytics, cloud infrastructures, and platform-based services is reshaping how higher education institutions (HEIs) design learning, conduct research, and operate core administrative functions. In this context, “digital transformation” in HEIs

extends beyond the adoption of new tools; it entails coordinated changes in strategy, governance, culture, and processes that redefine institutional value creation and delivery (Ng, 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021). While digital technologies can expand flexibility, enable real-time monitoring, and streamline workflows, their benefits are neither automatic nor evenly distributed. Critically, digital transformation is a sociotechnical project that must be guided by human-centered values—particularly in education, where issues of equity, professional autonomy, and educational quality are foundational (Selwyn, 2020). Accordingly, HEIs increasingly require leadership approaches capable of aligning digital initiatives with mission-driven priorities and long-term organizational sustainability (Enders & de Boer, 2021).

Leadership scholarship in higher education has long emphasized that universities are distinctive organizations: they are professionalized, multi-stakeholder, and governance-intensive, with decision authority distributed across academic and administrative domains (Jongbloed et al., 2008). Contemporary pressures intensify this complexity, as HEIs face heightened accountability demands for quality assurance, student success, research productivity, and efficient resource utilization. Strategic management traditions suggest that institutions need clear goals, coherent execution mechanisms, and feedback loops that connect strategy to operations (Kaplan & Norton, 2008). Yet leadership for digital transformation additionally demands digital fluency and the capability to lead through virtual, data-mediated, and rapidly changing environments. The e-leadership perspective highlights that digital contexts alter communication patterns, coordination, and performance expectations, requiring leaders to be proficient in technology-enabled interaction and sensemaking (Avolio et al., 2014). In HEIs, these pressures are amplified by collegial governance norms and the need to engage academic staff as co-creators of pedagogical and organizational innovation (Bolden et al., 2018).

Against this backdrop, performance leadership offers a promising lens for understanding how HEIs can translate digital possibilities into sustainable organizational excellence. Performance leadership emphasizes strategic alignment, accountability, continuous improvement, and evidence-informed decision-making that connects institutional goals to measurable outcomes and learning cycles (De Waal, 2020). Unlike leadership approaches that focus primarily on vision or inspiration, a performance leadership orientation foregrounds disciplined execution, transparent evaluation, and governance practices that enable coordinated change across units. This is particularly relevant in digitally transforming HEIs, where leaders must balance innovation with reliability, experimentation with compliance, and data-driven governance with the qualitative dimensions of educational value (Bryson et al., 2021; Selwyn, 2020). Empirical work in higher education further indicates that leadership that supports innovation and motivates teams can enhance organizational outcomes, suggesting that performance-oriented practices may complement transformational and distributed leadership mechanisms in university settings (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2018; Bolden et al., 2018).

However, the current literature remains fragmented in ways that limit theoretical and practical guidance for HEIs. First, digital transformation research often focuses on technology adoption, strategic roadmaps, or organizational redesign without sufficiently specifying the leadership behaviors and governance mechanisms that enable sustained performance improvements in academic contexts (Ng, 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021). Second, higher education leadership research frequently examines transformational, distributed, or e-leadership constructs in isolation, offering partial explanations that do not fully integrate performance governance, analytics capability, and stakeholder alignment as interdependent drivers of transformation (Avolio et al., 2014; Bolden et al., 2018). Third, despite growing interest in data-informed decision-making, there is limited conceptual integration that explains how performance measurement and analytics become effective (or counterproductive) in HEIs given issues of data governance, professional autonomy, and the risk of metric fixation (Bryson et al., 2021; Selwyn, 2020). As a result, HEI leaders and policy actors often receive generic prescriptions (e.g., “be agile,” “use data,” “engage stakeholders”) without an integrative model that clarifies mechanisms, outcomes, and boundary conditions specific to higher education governance and culture.

To address these gaps, this article develops an integrative conceptual account of performance leadership for digital transformation in HEIs through an integrative review and thematic synthesis of

recent scholarship (Snyder, 2019). The study contributes in three ways. First, it clarifies the conceptual boundaries of performance leadership in HEIs by positioning it as an integrative leadership orientation that links digital literacy, agile management, stakeholder-centric governance, and performance analytics to coherent strategy execution (De Waal, 2020; Kaplan & Norton, 2008). Second, it proposes a higher-education-specific conceptual model in which performance leadership functions as a core integrating mechanism that shapes digital transformation outcomes through mediating processes such as performance-driven culture, strategic execution quality, and data governance maturity—while recognizing moderating conditions such as institutional digital maturity, governance structures, and regulatory pressures (Enders & de Boer, 2021; Jongbloed et al., 2008). Third, the article advances a set of testable propositions that translate the model into a research agenda and provide actionable implications for leadership development, governance design, and analytics-enabled accountability in HEIs (Latif et al., 2023).

Guided by these aims, the study addresses four research questions: RQ1 asks how the literature defines and operationalizes performance leadership in HEIs and how it differs from e-leadership/digital leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership (Avolio et al., 2014; Bolden et al., 2018; De Waal, 2020). RQ2 examines which leadership capabilities and practices are most consistently associated with successful digital transformation in HEIs, including digital literacy, agile governance, stakeholder engagement, and analytics-enabled accountability (Graham, 2018; Latif et al., 2023; Verhoef et al., 2021). RQ3 explores the conceptual mechanisms that explain the relationship between performance leadership and sustainable organizational excellence, including cultural and governance processes that convert digital initiatives into durable improvements in quality, innovation, and efficiency (Bryson et al., 2021; Kaplan & Norton, 2008). RQ4 investigates the contextual conditions that moderate the effectiveness of performance leadership in digitally transforming HEIs, such as institutional culture, governance arrangements, policy constraints, and stakeholder expectations (Enders & de Boer, 2021; Jongbloed et al., 2008; Selwyn, 2020). By answering these questions, the article aims to strengthen theory-building at the intersection of leadership, digital transformation, and organizational excellence in higher education, while providing a pragmatic roadmap for institutions seeking to align digital capabilities with mission-driven, sustainable performance outcomes.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual research design informed by a systematic literature review and interpretive thematic analysis. The objective of this method is to explore and synthesize existing scholarship on performance leadership and digital transformation in higher education institutions (HEIs), and to develop an integrative conceptual framework that explains how performance leadership can support sustainable organizational excellence in the digital era.

2.1 Research Design

Given the exploratory nature of the topic and the focus on theoretical development, a qualitative conceptual approach is used. Conceptual research enables the integration of insights from multiple theoretical and empirical sources to construct new explanatory perspectives and propositions (Snyder, 2019). This design is well-suited for emerging research areas where practical implementation is evolving and interdisciplinary synthesis is required.

2.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Data were selected from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, institutional reports, and relevant case studies published primarily between 2014 and 2024 to ensure currency with contemporary digital leadership practices. Sources were obtained through targeted searches in academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar using the following key terms:

- a. “performance leadership”

- b. "digital transformation in higher education"
- c. "organizational excellence"
- d. "academic leadership and innovation"
- e. "digital strategy in HEIs"

Inclusion criteria comprised scholarly works that:

- a. Directly address leadership models in higher education,
- b. Discuss digital transformation processes or digital capability frameworks,
- c. Provide empirical evidence, thematic observations, or theoretical models relevant to institutional performance,
- d. Are published by credible academic publishers or indexation sources.

Grey literature (such as blog posts, non-peer-reviewed commentaries, and media articles) was excluded to maintain scholarly rigor.

2.3 Analytical Procedure

The selected literature was subjected to thematic content analysis. Initially, a preliminary reading phase allowed familiarization with the content and identification of recurrent conceptual patterns. The extracted data were then organized through open coding, enabling categorization into conceptual themes relating to digital competencies, strategic alignment, leadership behaviors, performance evaluation, and organizational culture.

Subsequently, axial coding was used to identify interrelationships between themes, enabling synthesis of broader conceptual clusters. This analytical process facilitated the construction of a conceptual map illustrating how performance leadership functions within digitally transforming HEIs.

To ensure analytical rigor and reliability, the themes were cross-checked through repeated iterative examination and comparison of interpretations to avoid subjectivity bias. The analytical procedure emphasized transparency, replicability, and consistency in the extraction of insights.

2.4 Case Illustrations

While primarily conceptual, the study incorporates illustrative examples from digitally progressive HEIs identified in the literature, such as institutions that implemented data-driven learning management systems, agile governance models, or strategic digital roadmaps. These cases were not treated as empirical data for comparative analysis but served to contextualize theoretical insights and demonstrate real-world applicability.

2.5 Conceptual Framework Development

Based on the analytic synthesis of leadership theories, digital transformation models, and institutional performance literature, a conceptual model was developed. This model positions performance leadership as a central enabling mechanism that integrates:

- a. digital literacy and competencies,
- b. adaptive and agile management,
- c. stakeholder-centric governance,
- d. performance measurement and analytics,
- e. innovation-driven institutional culture.

The resulting framework is intended to provide theoretical guidance and strategic insight for HEIs seeking to embed performance leadership practices into digital transformation processes.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the collected literature and case illustrations revealed four dominant and interrelated themes that characterize effective performance leadership in the digital transformation of higher education institutions: (1) digital literacy and technological competence, (2) agile and adaptive

management, (3) stakeholder-centric governance, and (4) performance measurement and data-driven accountability. Together, these themes illuminate the conceptual dynamics through which leadership practices enable sustainable institutional excellence in the digital era.

To clarify the theoretical structure of this study, a conceptual framework was developed to visually illustrate how performance leadership functions as a central integrating mechanism within the digital transformation of higher education institutions. The framework positions performance leadership at the core and demonstrates its relationship with four key strategic dimensions—digital literacy, agile management, stakeholder-centric governance, and data-driven accountability—each of which contributes distinctively to institutional transformation. These components interact synergistically, forming a holistic leadership ecosystem that enables HEIs to translate digital potential into sustainable organizational excellence. The visual model below (Figure 1) summarizes these relationships and provides a structural representation of the conceptual logic underlying this research.

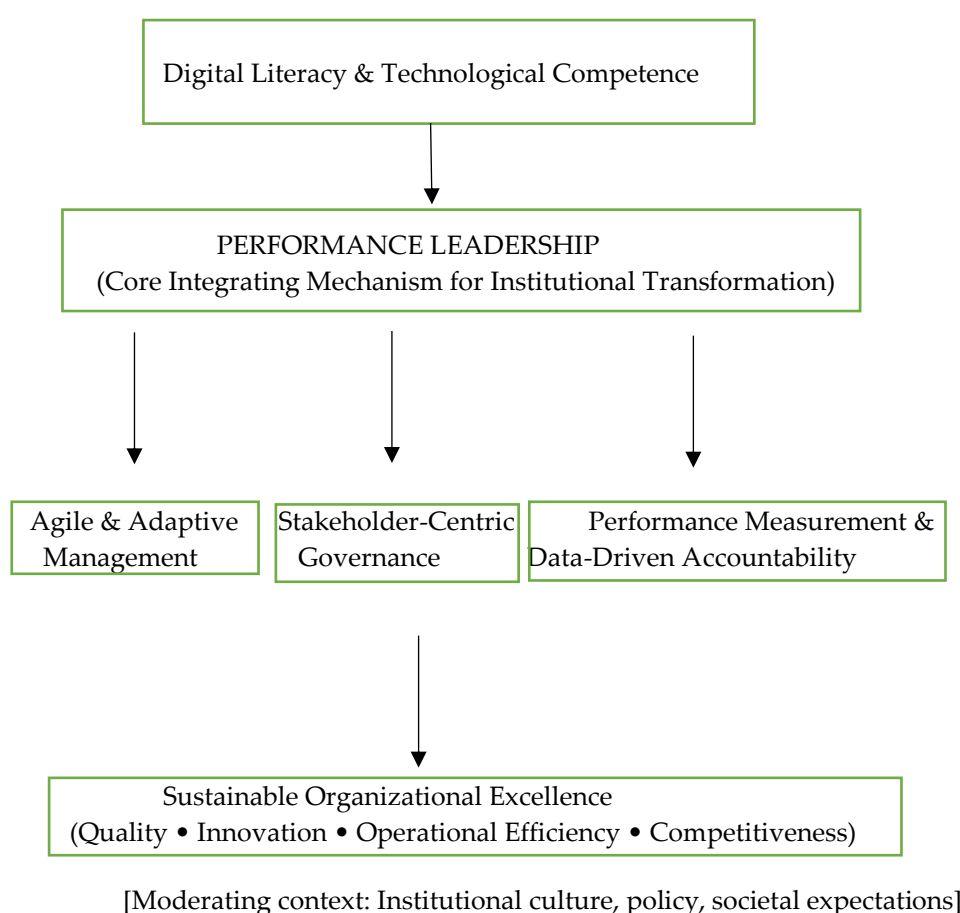


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Digital Literacy and Technological Competence

A prominent theme across the literature is the centrality of digital literacy among institutional leaders. Effective performance leadership requires leaders to not only understand technological trends but to actively integrate digital capabilities into academic and operational strategies. Leaders who exhibit digital fluency serve as catalysts for organizational learning, encouraging faculty and staff to adopt emerging technologies in both teaching and administrative functions. This competence fosters a culture of innovation and legitimizes technological transitions within the institution. Digital confidence

among leaders also correlates with improved organizational readiness for technological integration, reducing resistance to change and accelerating transformation processes.

3.2 Agile and Adaptive Management

The second key theme is the emergence of agile management as a requisite leadership approach in digitally shifting enterprises. Performance leaders in HEIs demonstrate adaptability, rapid decision-making, and iterative strategic adjustment. Rather than adhering to rigid bureaucratic structures, they promote flexible governance, enabling swift responses to evolving technological conditions and educational demands. This agility manifests in the adoption of short-cycle planning, experimentation with pilot initiatives, and responsiveness to user feedback. Institutions with adaptive leadership structures exhibit higher operational efficiency and are better equipped to implement digital reforms sustainably. Such agility enables institutions to maintain competitiveness amid shifting global expectations and uncertain external environments.

3.3 Stakeholder-Centric Governance

A third theme highlights the importance of stakeholder-centric leadership in fostering institutional alignment and shared responsibility. Performance leaders engage actively with students, faculty, administrative staff, industry partners, and governing bodies to co-create strategic priorities. Stakeholder involvement enhances trust, transparency, and organizational cohesion, thereby facilitating acceptance of digital transformation initiatives. The analysis also indicates that collaborative leadership models—such as distributed or shared governance—strengthen institutional legitimacy and foster a collective sense of direction. By incorporating diverse perspectives into planning and evaluation processes, performance leaders ensure that digital strategies reflect institutional values and community needs.

3.4 Performance Measurement and Data-Driven Accountability

The fourth theme centers on the use of performance analytics and measurable indicators to guide decision-making. Studies consistently show that performance leadership promotes the systematic use of data to evaluate outcomes, assess risks, and track progress toward strategic goals. The adoption of digital dashboards, learning analytics, and institutional metrics enables leaders to monitor quality, productivity, and resource utilization. Data-informed leadership reinforces accountability, ensuring that initiatives are aligned with mission-driven objectives and that strategic adjustments are made based on empirical evidence. Institutions that implement robust performance measurement systems exhibit improved decision accuracy, transparency, and organizational learning capacity.

3.5 Integrative Dynamics of Themes

While each theme offers distinct insights, the results indicate that performance leadership is most effective when these dimensions function synergistically. Digital literacy equips leaders with strategic insight into technological opportunities; agile management allows responsive adaptation; stakeholder-centric governance secures institutional buy-in and collaborative action; and performance measurement ensures accountability and disciplined execution. The interplay of these elements enables HEIs to balance innovation with strategic stability, fostering environments conducive to sustainable excellence.

In sum, the results demonstrate that performance leadership provides a robust conceptual foundation for guiding digital transformation in higher education. Institutions led by performance-oriented leaders show greater capacity to integrate technological innovation with organizational goals, maintain operational resilience, and cultivate cultures of continuous improvement. These findings

reinforce the conclusion that leadership, rather than technology alone, is the decisive factor in translating digital potential into enduring institutional performance.

Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm that performance leadership is a central enabler of successful digital transformation and sustainable organizational excellence in higher education institutions (HEIs). Rather than positioning technology as the primary driver of change, the synthesis demonstrates that leadership capabilities, governance arrangements, and performance-oriented cultures ultimately determine whether digital initiatives translate into durable institutional outcomes (De Waal, 2020; Ng, 2021).

Digital literacy as a foundational leadership capability

The prominence of digital literacy and technological competence highlights a fundamental shift in leadership requirements within HEIs. Traditional academic leadership models—often grounded in disciplinary reputation or administrative seniority—are increasingly insufficient in digitally mediated environments. Leaders must now understand digital infrastructures, data ecosystems, and platform logics to make informed strategic decisions (Porter & Heppelmann, 2015; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017). This aligns with OECD (2020), which emphasizes that institutional leaders play a decisive role in shaping how digital technologies support educational quality and equity.

From an e-leadership perspective, digital competence reshapes communication patterns, authority relations, and performance expectations, requiring leaders to operate effectively in virtual and data-rich contexts (Avolio et al., 2014). Empirical evidence further suggests that digitally supported leadership positively influences organizational performance and innovation capacity in HEIs (Teo & Huang, 2019). Thus, digital literacy functions not merely as a technical skill but as a strategic and symbolic resource that legitimizes transformation efforts and reduces resistance among academic staff (Selwyn, 2020).

Agile and adaptive management in complex academic systems

The second theme—agile and adaptive management—underscores the growing misalignment between rigid bureaucratic structures and the dynamic nature of digital transformation. Classical management perspectives emphasize planning, coordination, and control (Mintzberg, 2009), yet digital contexts demand iterative learning, rapid decision-making, and responsiveness to uncertainty. Performance leaders reconcile this tension by combining disciplined execution with adaptive governance mechanisms (Kaplan & Norton, 2008; De Waal, 2020).

In higher education, agility is closely linked to distributed and shared leadership arrangements that enable faster experimentation and localized innovation (Bolden et al., 2018; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Dexter et al. (2016) further argue that leadership for technology integration must be context-sensitive, acknowledging institutional culture and professional norms. Institutions that adopt agile management approaches are therefore better positioned to pilot digital initiatives, scale successful practices, and discontinue ineffective solutions without excessive organizational inertia (Graham, 2018).

Stakeholder-centric governance and institutional legitimacy

The findings also highlight stakeholder-centric governance as a critical mechanism through which performance leadership secures alignment and legitimacy. HEIs operate as networked organizations embedded in complex stakeholder ecosystems, including students, faculty, regulators, industry partners, and society at large (Jongbloed et al., 2008). Digital transformation initiatives that neglect these interdependencies risk resistance, fragmentation, or symbolic compliance.

Shared governance traditions remain a defining feature of higher education, even as they are increasingly challenged by managerial and accountability pressures (Birnbaum, 2004; Enders & de

Boer, 2021). Performance leaders navigate this tension by fostering participatory planning, transparent communication, and collaborative decision-making processes that engage stakeholders as co-creators of digital strategy (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Such engagement enhances trust, reinforces institutional values, and improves the execution quality of digital initiatives (Kaplan & Norton, 2008).

Performance measurement, analytics, and responsible accountability

The fourth theme emphasizes the role of performance measurement and data-driven accountability in translating digital transformation into measurable outcomes. Digital technologies generate unprecedented volumes of institutional data, enabling real-time monitoring of teaching quality, student engagement, research productivity, and operational efficiency (Verhoef et al., 2021). Performance leaders leverage these data to support evidence-informed decision-making and continuous improvement (Latif et al., 2023).

However, the literature cautions against technocratic or reductionist uses of metrics. Davenport and Harris (2017) note that analytics create value only when embedded within strategic and cultural contexts. In HEIs, performance measurement must respect professional autonomy and the qualitative dimensions of educational value to avoid metric fixation or gaming behaviors (Bryson et al., 2021; Selwyn, 2020). Responsible analytics governance—supported by leadership judgment and ethical awareness—is therefore essential for sustaining trust and institutional learning.

Integrative dynamics and leadership implications

Taken together, the findings suggest that performance leadership operates as an integrative system rather than a discrete set of competencies. Digital literacy enables strategic sensemaking; agile management supports adaptation; stakeholder-centric governance secures alignment; and performance analytics provide feedback and accountability. This integrative logic resonates with broader leadership theories emphasizing vision, execution, and values-based influence (Bennis & Nanus, 2007; Elkington et al., 2017).

Importantly, the effectiveness of performance leadership is contingent on contextual moderators such as institutional culture, governance arrangements, and regulatory environments (Enders & Boer, 2021). As Selwyn (2020) argues, digital transformation is inherently sociotechnical; its outcomes depend on how technologies are interpreted, enacted, and governed within institutional settings. Performance leaders therefore play a crucial role as cultural architects who shape norms of innovation, collaboration, and accountability.

Research and practice implications

From a research perspective, this integrative framework provides a foundation for future empirical studies examining the mechanisms through which performance leadership influences digital transformation outcomes in HEIs. Longitudinal and mixed-method designs could explore how leadership practices evolve alongside institutional digital maturity and how stakeholder engagement mediates performance effects (Snyder, 2019).

Practically, the findings underscore the need for leadership development programs that integrate digital competencies, analytics literacy, collaborative governance, and performance management skills. As HEIs confront intensifying competition and societal expectations, performance leadership offers a coherent pathway for aligning digital transformation with mission-driven, sustainable organizational excellence (Ng, 2021; De Waal, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights that performance leadership—characterized by digital literacy, agile management, stakeholder-centric governance, and data-driven accountability—is essential for guiding HEIs through digital transformation and achieving sustainable organizational excellence;

however, the conceptual nature of this research and reliance on secondary literature impose limitations, as it lacks empirical measurement and institutional field validation, suggesting that future research should employ quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches—including surveys, longitudinal institutional case studies, and comparative analyses across different regional or cultural contexts—to empirically examine how performance leadership practices translate into measurable outcomes in teaching quality, institutional innovation, administrative efficiency, and academic performance across diverse higher education environments.

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