



Learning-oriented governance for transforming GCC higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

This review aims to examine how governance arrangements shape institutional transformation, faculty agency, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) higher education. Using a critical narrative review methodology, the study synthesizes scholarly literature on university governance, academic freedom, institutional theory, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, academic identity, and comparative higher education to develop an integrated conceptual understanding of these relationships. The findings reveal persistent tensions between centralized administrative control and meaningful academic participation, indicating that constrained faculty agency can limit knowledge exchange, leadership development, innovation, and organizational learning, whereas participatory governance can strengthen institutional adaptability when supported by trust, accountability, and clearly defined responsibilities. The review's originality lies in developing an integrated five-dimension framework connecting governance structures, academic freedom and faculty agency, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity as analytically distinct but institutionally interconnected dimensions operating through reciprocal relationships rather than sequential stages. The framework demonstrates how governance conditions can enable faculty participation and cross-generational knowledge exchange, while organizational learning can feed back into leadership practices and governance adaptation. The findings imply that policymakers and university leaders should balance national strategic coordination with meaningful faculty participation and accountability. Accordingly, the review recommends inclusive leadership pathways, reciprocal mentoring, knowledge-retention mechanisms, and reflective learning processes. The review is limited by its reliance on secondary literature and limited GCC-specific empirical evidence. Future research should empirically examine these relationships across GCC countries, institutional types, and academic career stages. Overall, the framework provides a conceptual foundation for learning-oriented governance and sustainable institutional transformation in GCC higher education.

Original Article

PII: S232247702600007-16

Received: 14 August, 2026

Revised: 20 Sept, 2026

Accepted: 21 Sept, 2026

Keywords

Higher education;
University governance;
Academic freedom;
Earning-oriented
Governance;
Academic freedom;
Intergenerational
leadership;
Organizational learning.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education systems across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have undergone profound transformation over the past two decades, driven by national development visions, economic diversification strategies, and the transition toward knowledge-based economies. Governments have invested heavily in expanding universities, strengthening research capacity, enhancing international competitiveness, and aligning higher education with innovation agendas (Han & Zhang, 2024). Consequently, universities have evolved from teaching institutions into strategic organizations

expected to contribute to economic development, human capital formation, technological advancement, and societal transformation (Waterbury, 2019). Within this evolving policy landscape, governance has become a central issue because universities must balance national priorities with institutional autonomy, academic excellence, and global competitiveness (Capano, 2020).

Despite these modernization efforts, governance reform across GCC higher education has been uneven. Institutional expansion has been accompanied by quality assurance systems, strategic planning, and managerial reforms, while decision-making in many universities remains highly centralized and

administratively driven (Alsaadi & Awashreh, 2025). These arrangements have strengthened policy coordination and organizational stability but have also generated persistent concerns regarding academic freedom, faculty participation, institutional autonomy, and organizational adaptability (Awashreh, 2025). This tension suggests that modernization has frequently strengthened administrative capacity and performance management without fundamentally transforming relationships between university leadership and academic communities. Consequently, an important question remains insufficiently addressed: how are governance structures, faculty agency, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity interconnected in shaping institutional transformation?

Addressing this question requires moving beyond governance as an administrative process toward governance as an institutional mechanism that shapes participation, leadership development, knowledge exchange, learning, and professional engagement. Contemporary universities must respond to technological change, international competition, and evolving societal expectations. Their capacity to do so depends not only on formal governance arrangements but also on whether academics have meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making, exchange knowledge, develop leadership capabilities, and contribute to institutional adaptation. Leadership therefore extends beyond formal administrative authority to encompass collaborative learning, innovation, resilience, and academic development. Yet leadership opportunities within many GCC universities continue to be influenced by governance structures that shape participation, authority, and leadership succession (Awashreh, 2025).

Intergenerational leadership represents an important dimension of this transformation. Academic career stages may involve different professional experiences, technological competencies, leadership expectations, and approaches to institutional engagement (Oliveira et al., 2024). Senior academics may contribute institutional memory, disciplinary expertise, and organizational continuity, whereas early-career academics may introduce international perspectives, digital competencies, and emerging approaches to participation. Mid-career academics may connect established practices with emerging priorities. Rather than treating these differences as fixed generational characteristics or sources of conflict, they can be understood as complementary sources of institutional knowledge that influence leadership development, knowledge

exchange, and organizational adaptation (Awashreh et al., 2024).

This intergenerational perspective is particularly important because universities function as learning organizations in which knowledge is continuously created, exchanged, interpreted, retained, and applied. Organizational learning can occur through mentoring, research partnerships, curriculum development, professional collaboration, and shared governance. Governance systems that encourage dialogue and faculty participation can strengthen knowledge exchange, institutional adaptability, and innovation, whereas highly centralized arrangements may restrict participation and weaken institutional learning capacity (Bogacz-Wojtanowska et al., 2022). Governance also shapes academic identity by influencing how faculty members understand their professional roles, responsibilities, autonomy, and opportunities for institutional contribution. Although academic identity develops through teaching, research, governance participation, mentorship, and scholarly communities (Oliveira et al., 2024), managerial governance emphasizing compliance and performance accountability may influence how academics understand their professional roles and leadership aspirations (Alibašić et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship has documented persistent challenges associated with centralized governance and constrained academic agency in GCC higher education. Leadership appointments and institutional decision-making often remain closely aligned with hierarchical administrative structures and national priorities, limiting broader faculty participation (El Amine, 2019). Similarly, university councils and governance committees may remain administratively dominated, while performance systems can prioritize measurable outputs over mentoring, leadership development, and other qualitative academic contributions (Pezzullo, 2022; Bantilan et al., 2023). Although these studies provide valuable insights, governance, academic freedom, leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity are often examined as separate phenomena.

This fragmentation represents an important conceptual gap. Existing studies provide limited explanation of how governance structures, academic freedom and faculty agency, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity interact and collectively shape institutional transformation within GCC universities (Craciun, 2025). Consequently, scholarship offers only a partial understanding of why governance reforms may strengthen administrative capacity while producing more limited changes in academic participation,

knowledge exchange, leadership development, and institutional learning.

This review addresses this gap by developing an integrated conceptual framework for Learning-Oriented Governance (LOG) that connects five dimensions: governance structures; academic freedom and faculty agency; intergenerational leadership; organizational learning; and academic identity. These dimensions are analytically distinct but institutionally interconnected rather than sequential. The review argues that governance structures shape the conditions for substantive faculty agency; faculty agency enables participation and knowledge exchange; intergenerational leadership connects knowledge across career stages; organizational learning converts knowledge and experience into institutional capacity; and academic identity influences, and is influenced by, participation and learning. These relationships operate through reciprocal feedback, allowing learning and changing professional practices to reshape governance and leadership over time.

Accordingly, the review pursues four objectives: (1) to examine how governance structures, academic freedom, and faculty agency interact with intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity in GCC higher education; (2) to synthesize how these interconnected dimensions shape institutional adaptation and leadership development; (3) to identify governance mechanisms that can strengthen faculty participation, cross-generational knowledge exchange, and organizational learning; and (4) to develop an integrated five-dimension conceptual framework for learning-oriented governance. Guided by these objectives, the review addresses two research questions: (1) How are governance structures, faculty agency, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity interconnected in shaping institutional transformation within GCC higher education? and (2) What governance mechanisms can strengthen these interconnections to support academic participation, leadership development, organizational learning, institutional resilience, and sustainable transformation? By integrating governance theory with perspectives on academic freedom, institutional theory, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity, this review provides a conceptual foundation for understanding learning-oriented governance as an interconnected and adaptive institutional configuration.

■ METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a critical narrative review methodology to synthesize and interpret scholarship on university governance, academic freedom, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) higher education as recommended by [Ahmad \(2025\)](#) and [Ahsan \(2025\)](#). A critical narrative review is appropriate because the literature spans multiple disciplinary traditions—including higher education studies, educational leadership, organizational studies, public administration, sociology, and policy analysis—and addresses complex institutional processes that cannot be adequately examined through statistical synthesis alone. Unlike systematic reviews focused primarily on intervention effectiveness, critical narrative reviews examine conceptual development, theoretical relationships, competing perspectives, and integrative frameworks. This approach is particularly appropriate for GCC higher education, where governance transformation is shaped by political, cultural, organizational, and historical contexts. Accordingly, the review seeks to develop a conceptual understanding of how governance structures influence leadership development, organizational learning, faculty agency, and academic identity, rather than evaluate a single governance model.

Literature search strategy

The review is based on a structured search of peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, book chapters, and reports published primarily between 2000 and 2025, while incorporating seminal earlier works where theoretically necessary. The search process comprised literature identification, relevance screening, and conceptual synthesis. Searches were conducted using Scopus and Google Scholar, supplemented by backward citation tracking. Search terms were organized into four overlapping clusters: governance and institutional structure; academic freedom, autonomy, and faculty participation; leadership and organizational learning; and GCC/Arab higher education. Boolean operators (AND/OR) combined terms including university governance, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, participatory governance, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, academic identity, faculty engagement, GCC universities, and higher education reform.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were selected according to their conceptual relevance rather than methodological design alone. Included publications addressed university governance, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, leadership, organizational learning, faculty agency, or academic identity in higher education. Preference was given to GCC universities, while comparative evidence was included when it offered relevant theoretical or practical insights. Sources included peer-reviewed articles, academic books, edited volumes, and reports from organizations such as UNESCO, the World Bank, and the OECD. Sources were retained when they provided substantive theoretical, empirical, or contextual evidence concerning relationships among governance, participation, leadership, learning, and academic identity.

Studies were excluded when they focused on non-higher education sectors, examined university management without addressing governance processes, lacked sufficient scholarly analysis, or duplicated evidence available in more comprehensive publications. Both foundational and contemporary studies were retained to capture theoretical development and recent governance transformations. During screening, sources were assessed for relevance and contribution to the conceptual synthesis. GCC evidence was prioritized, while comparative studies were retained when providing transferable insights. Where evidence permitted, the analysis differentiated Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, as well as public, private, and internationally oriented institutions.

Analytical framework

The literature was analyzed using thematic synthesis informed by interpretive social science, institutional sociology, and critical organizational analysis. Rather than summarizing studies sequentially, the analysis identified recurring concepts, theoretical relationships, convergence, disagreement, and unresolved debates. The analytical process involved iterative identification of recurring concepts; comparison of how studies conceptualized governance, participation, leadership, learning, and identity; examination of convergence, divergence, and contextual variation; and integration of related concepts into higher-order themes.

Particular attention was given to the distinction between formal governance arrangements and substantive institutional practices, examining their practical operation and implications for faculty

agency and organizational learning. This distinction helped identify differences between structural modernization and deeper institutional transformation.

Five interconnected themes emerged: (1) governance transformation and institutional restructuring; (2) academic freedom and faculty agency; (3) intergenerational leadership and succession; (4) organizational learning and institutional adaptation; and (5) academic identity formation. These themes were treated as interconnected dimensions shaping and reinforcing one another rather than as sequential stages.

Comparative perspective

Although the review focuses primarily on GCC universities, comparative international literature was incorporated to examine alternative governance arrangements and transferable principles. Studies from Tunisia and Lebanon provide regional comparisons, while evidence from Germany, Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, South Korea, Japan, and South Africa illustrates different approaches to autonomy, participation, leadership, and organizational learning. These cases serve as analytical reference points rather than universal models or direct policy prescriptions, highlighting how governance mechanisms operate across political, institutional, and cultural contexts. The analysis therefore emphasized mechanisms rather than institutional transplantation, while recognizing the influence of national regulations, institutional histories, ownership structures, and sociocultural conditions. Figure 1 illustrates the critical narrative review methodology, detailing search strategies, selection, and analysis steps.

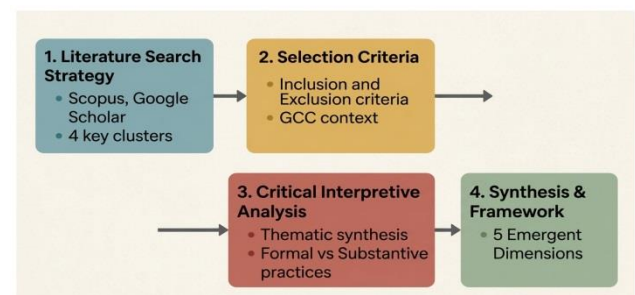


Figure 1. Critical Narrative Review Methodology Flowchart. Source: Author's own work

Critical interpretive approach

The review adopts a critical interpretive perspective that conceptualizes governance as a socially constructed and politically embedded process rather than a purely administrative mechanism. It

examines how governance structures shape authority relations, institutional cultures, leadership opportunities, faculty participation, organizational learning, and academic identity. Rather than applying formal critical discourse analysis, the review critically interprets recurring governance narratives concerning efficiency, accountability, quality assurance, excellence, modernization, participation, and autonomy, examining their relationship with authority and academic participation. Although these principles may support institutional improvement, they may also reinforce centralized authority and managerial control without meaningful academic participation (Riaz, 2019). Institutional sociology further explains how governance arrangements become embedded through routines, regulations, and cultures. Accordingly, governance transformation is understood as interconnected changes in institutional values, leadership practices, professional identities, participation, and organizational learning, informing the five-dimension framework.

■ DISCUSSION

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Understanding governance transformation in GCC higher education requires a theoretical architecture that explains how authority, academic participation, leadership, knowledge, and professional identity interact within institutional contexts. Universities are complex organizations in which governance arrangements influence decision-making, participation, leadership development, knowledge exchange, and institutional adaptation. Governance is therefore not only an administrative structure but also an institutional process through which organizational priorities and professional roles are negotiated.

This review integrates six theoretical perspectives: (1) university governance theory; (2) academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and capabilities; (3) institutional theory; (4) intergenerational leadership; (5) organizational learning; and (6) academic identity. These perspectives inform five analytical dimensions: (1) governance structures; (2) academic freedom and faculty agency; (3) intergenerational leadership; (4) organizational learning; and (5) academic identity. This distinction is intentional: Perspective 2 combines related concepts that explain substantive faculty agency, while Perspective 3 provides a cross-cutting institutional lens rather than a separate dimension.

The perspectives provide the theoretical foundations, whereas the dimensions organize the empirical and conceptual synthesis.

Perspective 1: university governance theory — governance structures

University governance theory provides the foundation for the first dimension, governance structures, focusing on authority, decision-making, responsibility, and accountability. Governance extends beyond administrative management because it determines whose expertise informs institutional priorities and how universities reconcile accountability with academic autonomy (Atanaw, Estifanos & Negash, 2024).

Three governance logics are particularly relevant. The collegial model emphasizes professional expertise, shared responsibility, and collective deliberation and can support academic autonomy, trust, and organizational learning. The bureaucratic model emphasizes hierarchy, formal procedures, and centralized authority and can strengthen coordination, consistency, and accountability. However, excessive bureaucratization may constrain participation and concentrate leadership opportunities within administrative structures (Emmett, 2025). The managerial model, associated with New Public Management, emphasizes strategic planning, performance measurement, efficiency, and accountability but may privilege measurable outcomes over collegial participation and academic deliberation (Sütőová, Teplická & Straka, 2022).

These models are understood as overlapping institutional logics rather than mutually exclusive categories. GCC universities may combine modernization through strategic planning, accreditation, and performance management with continuing forms of centralized authority and administrative control (Awashreh & Al Ghunaimi, 2025A; Awashreh & Mohamed, 2024). The resulting governance configuration establishes the conditions within which participation and faculty agency can develop.

Perspective 2: academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and capabilities — academic freedom and faculty agency

The second theoretical perspective combines academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the capabilities approach to explain the second dimension, academic freedom and faculty agency. Academic freedom protects teaching, research, inquiry, and scholarly expression, while institutional autonomy concerns universities' capacity for self-governance. The capabilities approach complements

these concepts by focusing on the practical opportunities academics have to exercise their rights and professional judgment.

Participatory governance can enable academics to influence curricula, research priorities, institutional strategies, and leadership processes, whereas centralized structures may narrow these opportunities (Kabasakal Badamchi, 2022). The UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel identifies institutional autonomy, academic participation, and self-governance as important foundations of academic quality and integrity (UNESCO, 1997; Hussen, 2023).

The central distinction is between formal participation and substantive agency. Academic capabilities may depend on mentoring, professional development, transparent promotion systems, research support, leadership opportunities, and meaningful access to decision-making (Schweiger, 2025). Academics at different career stages may therefore possess formal governance rights while experiencing unequal opportunities to exercise them (Schweiger, 2025). Academic freedom and autonomy establish the institutional space for participation, while capabilities determine whether academics can effectively use that space.

Perspective 3: institutional theory — cross-cutting institutional context

Institutional theory explains how governance arrangements and associated practices become embedded within particular organizational and national contexts. Organizations are shaped by formal regulations as well as norms, routines, cultural expectations, historical practices, and established authority relationships (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). Consequently, formal reform does not necessarily produce equivalent changes in institutional practice.

This is particularly relevant to GCC higher education, where universities have adopted strategic planning, quality assurance, accreditation, and performance-based management while established forms of centralized authority may continue to influence decision-making (Al-Haddad & Yasin, 2018). Institutional theory is therefore applied across the five dimensions to explain persistence, variation, and the institutional conditions under which governance reforms are interpreted and enacted. It is not treated as a separate framework dimension.

Perspective 4: intergenerational leadership — intergenerational leadership

The fourth theoretical perspective, intergenerational leadership, informs the third

dimension, intergenerational leadership. It focuses on how leadership knowledge, experience, responsibilities, and opportunities are exchanged across academic career stages.

Senior academics may contribute institutional memory, disciplinary expertise, and knowledge of organizational traditions; mid-career academics can connect established practices with emerging priorities; and early-career academics can contribute new knowledge, digital competencies, international perspectives, and innovative approaches. Such interaction can support leadership development and institutional continuity (Cloete et al., 2023).

Intergenerational leadership is therefore understood as a mechanism through which faculty participation becomes knowledge exchange across academic generations. Concentrated authority and restricted participation may instead fragment such exchange and limit opportunities for leadership development (Cloete et al., 2023).

Perspective 5: organizational learning — organizational learning

The fifth theoretical perspective, organizational learning, informs the fourth dimension, organizational learning. It concerns how institutions create, exchange, retain, interpret, and apply knowledge. Learning can occur through collaboration, mentoring, research partnerships, curriculum development, quality processes, and participation in shared governance (Bogacz-Wojtanowska et al., 2022).

Its relevance to learning-oriented governance lies in converting individual and intergenerational experience into institutional knowledge and capacity. When knowledge is shared, interpreted, retained, and applied, experience can contribute to institutional adaptation. Conversely, restricted participation and fragmented knowledge exchange can weaken organizational learning.

Intergenerational leadership and organizational learning are therefore connected but analytically distinct: the former concerns the people and relationships through which knowledge is exchanged, whereas the latter concerns the institutional processes through which that knowledge is retained and applied. Organizational learning can subsequently reshape leadership practices and governance priorities, creating an important feedback relationship (Cloete et al., 2023).

Perspective 6: academic identity — academic identity

The sixth theoretical perspective, academic identity, provides the foundation for the fifth

dimension, academic identity. It concerns how academics understand their professional roles, responsibilities, values, autonomy, and relationships with their institutions. Academic identity develops through interactions among individual aspirations, disciplinary communities, institutional cultures, governance arrangements, and professional experiences (Cloete et al., 2023).

Governance transformation can alter professional meaning and engagement. Participatory governance may reinforce professional autonomy, intellectual contribution, and collective responsibility, whereas managerial and bureaucratic environments may emphasize compliance, measurable performance, and administrative expectations, potentially creating tensions with established academic values (Alibašić et al., 2024).

Generational differences may also influence academic identity. Senior academics may draw on institutional memory and disciplinary authority, mid-career academics may bridge established and emerging expectations, and early-career academics may bring international, digital, and innovative orientations. These differences are treated as complementary sources of professional knowledge rather than inherently competing identities. Academic identity can consequently influence how academics respond to participation, leadership opportunities, and institutional learning.

Cross-cutting tension: bureaucratization and participation

Bureaucratization is treated as a cross-cutting governance tension rather than an additional theoretical perspective or framework dimension. Bureaucratic systems can provide coordination, consistency, accountability, and stability, but excessive procedural control may constrain professional autonomy and creativity (Monteiro & Adler, 2021).

In higher education, centralized approval procedures, reporting requirements, performance monitoring, and administrative regulation can strengthen accountability while potentially reducing faculty influence over institutional priorities. Informal practices and unequal access to networks may further shape participation and leadership opportunities (Hassan & Larreguy, 2023). Participatory mechanisms such as faculty senates, representative committees, and academic councils can provide opportunities for academics across generations to contribute to governance and organizational learning (Rask & Shin, 2024). Their effectiveness depends on institutional culture, trust, openness, mentorship, and recognition of academic expertise (Al-Haddad & Yasin, 2018).

The issue is therefore not bureaucracy versus participation, but the balance between coordination and control and between accountability and professional judgment. Excessive control can weaken the conditions required for faculty agency and knowledge exchange.

Integrative theoretical architecture

The six perspectives have distinct but complementary explanatory roles. University governance theory explains how authority is organized; academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and capabilities explain whether academics can exercise meaningful agency; institutional theory explains how these arrangements become embedded; intergenerational leadership explains cross-generational knowledge and leadership exchange; organizational learning explains how knowledge becomes institutional capacity; and academic identity explains how academics interpret and engage with institutional change.

These perspectives map onto five dimensions as follows: Perspective 1 → governance structures; Perspective 2 → academic freedom and faculty agency; Perspective 3 → cross-cutting institutional context; Perspective 4 → intergenerational leadership; Perspective 5 → organizational learning; and Perspective 6 → academic identity. This mapping avoids artificially creating a sixth dimension while preserving the distinct contribution of each theoretical perspective.

The core conceptual mechanism is that governance structures create enabling or constraining conditions for substantive faculty agency; faculty agency creates opportunities for participation and intergenerational leadership; intergenerational leadership facilitates knowledge exchange; organizational learning converts that knowledge into institutional capacity and adaptation; and academic identity influences, and is influenced by, participation and learning. Institutional theory explains how these relationships are shaped by established institutional conditions.

This mechanism is directional but not linear. Faculty participation can reshape governance arrangements, organizational learning can modify leadership practices and institutional priorities, and changing academic identities can strengthen or constrain subsequent participation. The five dimensions therefore operate through connectivity and reciprocal feedback rather than sequential stages. The framework also recognizes contextual variation across Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman and across institutional types. National regulation, institutional history,

ownership, organizational culture, and sociocultural conditions can influence how the dimensions interact. Accordingly, learning-oriented governance is conceptualized as an interconnected institutional configuration in which governance structures shape the conditions for faculty agency, faculty agency enables intergenerational leadership and knowledge exchange, organizational learning converts knowledge into institutional capacity, and academic identity shapes engagement with these processes. Institutional theory provides the contextual lens

through which these relationships are embedded and transformed. Figure 2 presents the integrative theoretical architecture of Learning-Oriented Governance (LOG) in GCC higher education, illustrating the interconnections among governance arrangements, faculty agency, intergenerational leadership, and organizational learning.

This theoretical architecture provides the foundation for the subsequent synthesis of the reviewed literature and development of the integrated five-dimension framework.

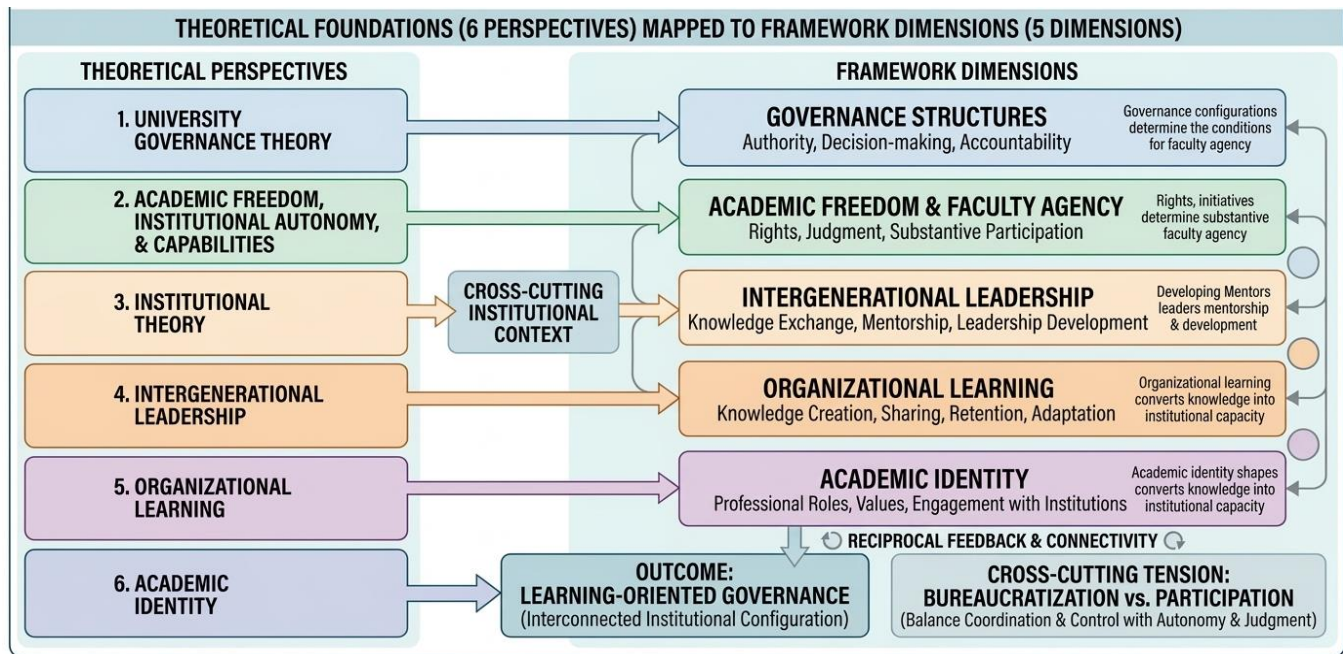


Figure 2. Integrative Theoretical Architecture for Learning-Oriented Governance in GCC Higher Education. Source: Author's own work

GOVERNANCE TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Governance transformation in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) higher education has developed within national agendas emphasizing economic diversification, knowledge production, innovation, and global competitiveness. Initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Vision, and Qatar National Vision 2030 have repositioned universities as strategic institutions for research development, workforce preparation, and societal advancement (Azzi, 2018; Ridge, 2014). These reforms have expanded institutional capacity through international partnerships, quality assurance, research investment, and organizational modernization. However, institutional modernization has not necessarily been accompanied by equivalent redistribution of decision-making authority. Universities have become more

strategically oriented and internationally connected, while significant authority remains concentrated within administrative and governmental structures (Alibašić et al., 2024; Cloete et al., 2023).

GCC universities have increasingly adopted managerial governance practices involving strategic planning, performance indicators, accreditation, and accountability systems. These mechanisms can strengthen coordination, transparency, and external accountability, but may also increase bureaucratization and reduce opportunities for meaningful faculty participation (Riaz, 2019). Quality assurance illustrates this dual effect: although it can strengthen academic standards and organizational transparency, it may simultaneously expand administrative responsibilities and procedural control (Riaz, 2019). From an institutional perspective, governance transformation therefore involves the

coexistence of new managerial practices with established authority arrangements, producing variation in how reforms affect academic participation and institutional autonomy (Cloete et al., 2023).

Administrative centralization remains an important feature of GCC higher education governance. Leadership appointments, regulatory oversight, resource allocation, and accountability processes frequently involve senior administrative and state-linked bodies (Al-Haddad & Yasin, 2018). Such arrangements can facilitate strategic alignment and policy implementation, but may limit collegial participation and opportunities for academics at different career stages to develop leadership capabilities (Ingber, 2018). Similarly, the expansion of quality assurance units, planning offices, and institutional effectiveness divisions has strengthened organizational capacity while potentially increasing the distance between administrative decision-making and academic communities (Riaz, 2019).

Government regulation further shapes university operations through programme approval, funding, institutional monitoring, and strategic planning requirements (Awashreh, 2024). The central governance issue is therefore not regulation itself, but the balance between coordination and institutional flexibility. Comparative higher education research indicates that sustainable governance requires public accountability to coexist with sufficient institutional autonomy to respond to emerging academic and societal needs (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Managerial systems emphasizing compliance, financial efficiency, and measurable outcomes may strengthen organizational monitoring but can also reduce faculty influence over curriculum development, research priorities, and institutional strategy (Banker & Bhal, 2019; Cloete et al., 2023). Governance should consequently be considered in relation to the extent to which academic expertise can inform institutional decisions.

These arrangements have direct implications for academic freedom and faculty agency. Academic freedom encompasses not only independence in teaching and research but also the practical capacity to participate in decisions affecting academic work. Limited faculty influence can constrain the ability of academics to shape priorities and contribute to institutional innovation (Hussen, 2023). Reduced participation may also weaken curriculum innovation, research creativity, and organizational learning when scholarly expertise is insufficiently connected to strategic decision-making (Cho et al., 2021; Keith et al., 2024). Similarly, aligning research agendas with national priorities can provide resources and strategic

direction, while excessive institutional control may constrain intellectual diversity and independent inquiry (Awashreh, 2025). Bureaucratic environments may additionally increase administrative demands and reduce professional autonomy and engagement (Matriano & Bueno, 2024; Ray, 2021).

The governance implications extend to intergenerational leadership and organizational learning. Early-career academics may seek greater transparency, collaboration, and participation, while mid-career academics may possess substantial expertise without equivalent opportunities to exercise leadership. Without mentoring, shared governance, and knowledge-transfer mechanisms, universities may underutilize the complementary knowledge of different career generations and weaken leadership succession and organizational learning (Awashreh et al., 2024). Governance structures therefore influence not only who participates in decisions, but also how knowledge moves across generations and becomes institutional capacity.

Overall, GCC governance transformation reflects connectivity rather than a simple transition from traditional to managerial governance. Strategic modernization, accountability, and administrative capacity can coexist with centralized authority and constrained faculty participation (Alibašić et al., 2024; Cloete et al., 2023). Future development therefore involves strengthening transparent leadership processes, empowered academic councils, inclusive decision-making, and faculty representation within accountable institutional structures. Participatory governance is not merely a formal arrangement but an institutional culture grounded in trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility (Al-Haddad & Yasin, 2018). Strengthening academic participation can support institutional learning, innovation, and resilience while maintaining alignment with national development objectives (Hussen, 2023; Sharma, 2025). The resulting governance model is consequently better understood as an adaptive institutional system in which accountability, autonomy, participation, intergenerational exchange, and learning remain mutually connected.

INTERGENERATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The transformation of GCC higher education depends not only on governance reform but also on universities' capacity to develop, exchange, and renew leadership knowledge across academic generations. Intergenerational leadership refers to collaboration among senior, mid-career, and early-career academics

through which diverse experiences, expertise, and perspectives contribute to institutional development (Cloete et al., 2023). Senior academics may contribute institutional memory and disciplinary expertise, mid-career academics may connect established practices with emerging reforms, and early-career academics may contribute digital competencies, international perspectives, and innovative approaches (Cloete et al., 2023). The significance of this diversity lies not in fixed generational characteristics but in the complementary knowledge and experience available across career stages. Intergenerational leadership is therefore both a leadership-development process and a mechanism through which universities convert dispersed knowledge into institutional learning.

Intergenerational interaction is particularly important in knowledge-intensive organizations because universities depend on continuous knowledge creation, exchange, interpretation, and application. Governance arrangements that facilitate collaboration, mentoring, and shared decision-making can enable career-stage diversity to contribute to institutional development. Conversely, hierarchical arrangements that restrict participation may constrain knowledge exchange, leadership development, and institutional adaptability (Bogacz-Wojtanowska et al., 2022). Thus, governance structures influence whether intergenerational diversity becomes an institutional resource or remains fragmented within academic communities.

Intergenerational leadership and institutional adaptation

Contemporary higher education requires leadership processes that extend beyond formal administrative positions toward distributed and collaborative forms of leadership. In GCC universities, the expansion of academic programmes, research activities, and international partnerships increases the need for broader leadership pipelines. However, centralized leadership appointments may limit opportunities for emerging academics to gain governance experience and develop leadership capacity (Awashreh et al., 2024). Creating opportunities for participation across career stages can consequently strengthen both leadership succession and institutional responsiveness.

Effective intergenerational leadership involves balancing continuity with innovation. Senior academics can contribute historical knowledge, professional experience, and disciplinary expertise, while younger academics can introduce new technologies, international networks, and alternative approaches to academic work. Mid-career academics

can contribute by connecting established institutional practices with emerging priorities. Such exchange can help universities preserve institutional knowledge while adapting to changing academic environments (Arnaud et al., 2024). Leadership development should therefore be understood as a collective institutional capability rather than solely as individual career progression.

Generational differences, academic identity, and knowledge exchange

Academic generations may differ in professional experiences, expectations, and relationships with institutions. Senior academics may have developed identities shaped by collegial traditions, disciplinary autonomy, and institutional loyalty, whereas younger academics may have greater exposure to internationalization, digital transformation, global competition, and changing expectations regarding transparency and participation. Mid-career academics may occupy a bridging position between established practices and emerging expectations (Hunter et al., 2023). These tendencies should not be treated as universal characteristics of age groups; rather, they identify potential differences in career-stage experiences that can shape knowledge exchange and participation. Such differences need not produce conflict. Universities that create opportunities for dialogue, shared governance, and collaborative problem-solving can transform career-stage diversity into a resource for organizational renewal (Laforge, 2020). Reciprocal interaction can also reinforce academic identity by enabling faculty members to connect their professional expertise with collective institutional purposes. In this sense, academic identity and intergenerational exchange are mutually connected rather than independent processes.

Organizational learning and barriers to leadership development

Organizational learning explains how universities acquire, share, interpret, retain, and apply knowledge to improve institutional capacity. In higher education, learning occurs through research collaboration, mentoring, professional development, and participation in governance processes. Intergenerational knowledge exchange is particularly valuable because experiential and institutional knowledge can interact with emerging knowledge and practices (Hunter et al., 2023). Sustainable learning consequently depends on reciprocal exchange, institutional retention of lessons, and opportunities to apply knowledge rather than one-directional knowledge transmission.

Several barriers can constrain this process in GCC universities. Centralized governance may limit junior and mid-career participation in strategic decision-making, while bureaucratic cultures may prioritize compliance over creativity and collaboration (Monteiro & Adler, 2021). Promotion and evaluation systems may also emphasize measurable outputs while giving limited recognition to mentoring, institutional service, and leadership development. Unequal access to professional networks and leadership opportunities can further affect trust and perceptions of fairness within academic communities (Hassan & Larreguy, 2023). These conditions can weaken the feedback through which individual experience becomes shared institutional knowledge.

Toward intergenerationally inclusive universities

Developing intergenerational leadership requires governance systems that institutionalize mentoring, shared decision-making, and inclusive leadership pathways. Effective mentoring should be reciprocal, with experienced academics contributing institutional and disciplinary knowledge while newer scholars contribute emerging perspectives and practices. Leadership development can also be embedded through committee participation, collaborative research, and meaningful governance responsibilities (Cho et al., 2021). Participatory governance provides an important foundation by enabling academics across career stages to contribute to institutional decisions. Through sustained collaboration and shared responsibility, universities can strengthen organizational learning, academic identity, and institutional resilience (Gustafson & Hertting, 2016). Intergenerational leadership therefore functions as a connecting mechanism within learning-oriented governance: governance creates opportunities for participation, participation enables cross-generational knowledge exchange, and organizational learning converts that exchange into institutional capacity and adaptation.

ACADEMIC IDENTITY AND FACULTY AGENCY

Academic Academic identity is a central dimension of university transformation because it shapes how faculty members understand their professional responsibilities, contribute to knowledge production, and engage with institutional development (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). In GCC higher education, academic identity is being reshaped by rapid expansion,

modernization, managerial reforms, and increasing accountability. These developments create a tension between established academic values—autonomy, collegiality, disciplinary expertise, and intellectual contribution—and emerging expectations emphasizing efficiency, productivity, and measurable performance (Alibašić et al., 2024). Governance transformation has consequently influenced the meaning of academic professionalism. Academic identity has traditionally been associated with intellectual autonomy, disciplinary expertise, collegial participation, and commitment to knowledge creation (Alsaadi & Awashreh, 2025). However, managerial governance has increased emphasis on rankings, performance indicators, accreditation, and administrative compliance. Faculty roles may consequently become more closely aligned with institutional priorities, potentially altering perceptions of professional autonomy and academic purpose (Awashreh & Al Ghunaimi, 2025B).

Faculty agency refers to academics' capacity to exercise professional judgment, influence institutional decisions, and contribute to university development. Where governance provides meaningful opportunities for participation, agency can connect academic expertise with institutional decision-making and support trust, collaboration, and innovation. Conversely, centralized arrangements may restrict faculty influence over curriculum development, research priorities, and strategic planning, creating a gap between academic responsibility and decision-making authority (Qorraj et al., 2022).

Academic identity and agency are also connected to intergenerational exchange. Senior academics may emphasize institutional continuity, disciplinary traditions, and accumulated experience, while early-career academics may contribute perspectives shaped by internationalization, digital transformation, and global academic networks. Mid-career academics can connect established practices with emerging expectations for reform. When governance creates opportunities for dialogue and collaboration, career-stage differences can strengthen rather than fragment institutional knowledge (Cloete et al., 2023). Academic freedom provides an essential foundation for both identity and agency. Beyond autonomy in teaching and research, academics require opportunities to participate in institutional governance and influence university development. The capabilities approach emphasizes that academic freedom depends not only on formal rights but also on the substantive opportunities and resources required to exercise autonomy and participate in collective decisions (El Amine, 2019; Schweiger, 2025). Thus,

formal participation does not necessarily constitute substantive agency; agency depends on whether faculty possess meaningful opportunities to influence decisions.

Weak faculty agency may constrain innovation, collaboration, and institutional engagement. Compliance-oriented environments can encourage academics to prioritize administrative requirements over creative and transformative activities, with implications for research capacity, talent retention, and institutional reputation (Prisacariu & Shah, 2016; Ray, 2021; Suleiman, 2023). Strengthening academic identity therefore requires governance arrangements that recognize faculty as institutional contributors rather than only policy implementers. Participatory decision-making, inclusive leadership pathways, and evaluation systems that recognize teaching, mentoring, collaboration, and service alongside conventional performance indicators can strengthen this role (Sharma, 2025). Academic identity and faculty agency consequently function as mutually reinforcing dimensions: identity shapes how academics engage with institutional change, while meaningful agency enables them to translate professional values and expertise into institutional development (Alibašić et al., 2024).

INTERGENERATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

Comparative higher education experiences indicate that effective governance depends on balancing institutional autonomy, public accountability, academic freedom, and stakeholder participation. The relevance of these experiences for GCC universities lies not in replicating external models, but in identifying institutional conditions that enable participation, knowledge exchange, and learning. Governance systems can retain state involvement while establishing productive relationships among governments, university leaders, and academic communities (Capano, 2020). Regional cases demonstrate that structural reform alone does not ensure meaningful participation. Tunisia's post-2011 reforms sought greater university autonomy and faculty involvement, but implementation was constrained by political instability and enduring administrative traditions (Natter, 2021; Dienes, 2023). Similarly, private universities in Lebanon illustrate how representative structures, including senates and committees, can support academic quality and institutional resilience, although external pressures and resource constraints remain important (AUB, 2019). These experiences suggest that formal

participation becomes consequential when supported by institutional trust, organizational capacity, and opportunities for sustained collaboration.

European systems provide further evidence of this relationship. Germany's tradition of academic self-administration incorporates faculty involvement in appointments, academic programmes, and research priorities while maintaining public accountability (Stipkovits, 2024). Nordic systems, particularly Finland and Sweden, emphasize trust, collaboration, and stakeholder inclusion, illustrating how organizational culture can shape the effectiveness of participatory structures (Al-Thani, 2024). Anglo-American systems demonstrate continuing tensions between managerial accountability and academic autonomy. In the United Kingdom, quality assurance and performance systems coexist with academic representation mechanisms, although excessive managerialism may weaken professional autonomy (Torrance, 2019).

The United States shared-governance model similarly emphasizes defined responsibilities between administrators and faculty, supporting the integration of administrative coordination with academic expertise (Laforge, 2020). Experiences from Asia and the Global South further demonstrate that governance transformation is context-dependent. Japan and South Korea show how universities can respond to international competition while retaining elements of academic participation (Chan, 2013), while South Africa highlights the contribution of inclusive governance to institutional legitimacy and transformation (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). Across these contexts, participation creates potential channels through which experience and expertise can be exchanged, retained, and incorporated into institutional practice.

For GCC universities, these comparative experiences therefore suggest transferable principles rather than universal governance templates. Empowered representative structures, trust-based cultures, distributed leadership, and mechanisms for collaboration across academic generations can create conditions for participation and organizational learning (Al-Haddad & Yasin, 2018; Richardson et al., 2019). Autonomy and accountability can coexist when responsibilities and decision-making authority are clearly defined (Burns, Köster & Fuster, 2016). The implication is that GCC universities can preserve national coordination while expanding faculty participation and intergenerational knowledge exchange, thereby strengthening the institutional capacity to learn and adapt.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK

The reviewed literature demonstrates that governance transformation in GCC higher education requires more than administrative restructuring. Although universities have expanded, internationalized, and aligned with national development priorities, persistent challenges concern academic autonomy, faculty participation, leadership development, and institutional learning. The evidence therefore supports an integrated perspective in which governance structures, faculty agency, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity are treated as analytically distinct but institutionally interconnected dimensions.

A central implication is the need to move beyond control-oriented governance toward learning-oriented governance that combines accountability with participation and institutional adaptation. GCC universities have strengthened administrative systems, quality assurance mechanisms, and performance frameworks, but these reforms have not necessarily produced greater academic participation. Administrative coordination can improve efficiency, while excessive managerial dominance may constrain innovation, knowledge creation, and faculty engagement (Alibašić et al., 2024; Cloete et al., 2023). Learning-oriented governance instead incorporates academic expertise into institutional decision-making and supports collective problem-solving and adaptation (Rask & Shin, 2024).

Academic freedom and faculty agency provide a critical enabling condition within this framework. Academic freedom extends beyond teaching and research independence to meaningful involvement in institutional governance. When academics carry responsibility without corresponding influence over decisions, professional commitment and institutional engagement may decline (Hussen, 2023). The capabilities approach further emphasizes that autonomy depends on actual opportunities, resources, and institutional conditions enabling academics to participate and contribute (Schweiger, 2025). Strengthening faculty councils, participatory planning, and representative governance can therefore support institutional effectiveness and academic legitimacy (Qorraj et al., 2022).

Intergenerational leadership provides a connecting mechanism through which participation can generate knowledge exchange and leadership renewal. Senior scholars may contribute institutional memory, mid-career academics may connect experience with reform, and early-career academics

may introduce emerging perspectives and practices. Centralized leadership arrangements can restrict these exchanges and limit future leadership capacity. Mentoring, collaborative research, leadership development, and inclusive governance can instead convert career-stage diversity into an institutional resource (Awashreh et al., 2024; Craciun, 2025).

Organizational learning provides the institutional process through which exchanged knowledge is interpreted, retained, and translated into adaptation. Mentoring, professional development, research collaboration, and academic communities can facilitate this process, whereas excessive bureaucracy may prioritize compliance over creativity and innovation (Monteiro & Adler, 2021). Learning is therefore not an endpoint but a feedback mechanism through which experience can inform subsequent governance, participation, and leadership practices.

Accordingly, this review proposes five interconnected dimensions: (1) governance structures, (2) academic freedom and faculty agency, (3) intergenerational leadership, (4) organizational learning, and (5) academic identity. Their relationship should be understood through connectivity rather than a fixed sequence: governance shapes opportunities for agency; agency enables participation and intergenerational exchange; learning converts knowledge into institutional capacity; and academic identity shapes how faculty interpret and engage with these processes. Feedback can subsequently reshape governance and professional practice. Sustainable transformation therefore depends on institutional structures and cultures that enable participation, knowledge exchange, reflection, and adaptation while maintaining appropriate accountability.

■ CONCLUSION

The transformation of GCC higher education requires more than modernization initiatives, international rankings, or administrative efficiency. Sustainable development depends on shifting from centralized control-oriented governance toward participatory and learning-oriented systems that strengthen academic freedom, faculty agency, organizational learning, and institutional resilience. This review contributes to higher education scholarship by integrating university governance, academic freedom, intergenerational leadership, organizational learning, and academic identity into a unified framework for understanding institutional transformation. It demonstrates that governance reform is not only a structural process but also a cultural and relational

process involving participation, knowledge exchange, and professional identity development. Sustainable reform requires stronger faculty involvement, inclusive leadership pathways across academic generations, broader recognition of academic contributions, and institutional environments that support collaboration and innovation.

The review is limited by its reliance on secondary literature, the limited availability of GCC-specific empirical studies, and variations among national higher education systems. Future research should investigate how governance reforms are experienced and implemented by academic communities across different career stages and GCC contexts. Further empirical studies should examine intergenerational leadership practices, knowledge transfer mechanisms, organizational learning processes, and the impact of modernization reforms on academic identity and engagement. Ultimately, GCC universities can develop governance models that balance national development priorities with academic autonomy, innovation, and institutional resilience by recognizing universities as dynamic knowledge communities rather than solely administrative organizations.

■ DECLARATIONS

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges the use of ChatGPT (free version) as an AI-assisted tool for language editing, refinement, and translation support to improve the clarity and quality of English expression in this manuscript. This article is written by a single author (Raed Atef) from A to Z.

Availability of data and materials

No primary data were collected or generated in this study; therefore, data availability is not applicable.

Funding support

The author declares that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation or publication of this manuscript.

Competing interest

The author declares that they have no competing interests

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