

A Conceptual Framework on the Relationship between Strategic Leadership and Human Resource Management Practices in Public Universities in the United Arab Emirates: A Narrative Review

AbdulAziz Al-Kaabi*, Ali Nasser Al-Tahitah

Faculty of Leadership and Management Universiti Sains Islam, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes that three key dimensions of strategic leadership—strategic vision, communication skills, and change leadership—may influence HRM practices in public universities in the UAE. This paper utilizes a narrative literature review method to integrate and critically evaluate existing work on strategic leadership and HRM. Using Strategic Leadership Theory, Human Capital Theory, and resource-based view (RBV), the study finds that three critical dimensions of strategic leadership - strategic vision, communication skills, and change leadership - have a significant impact on HRM practices. This study differs from purely descriptive studies, as it synthesizes existing literature and offers a critique of theoretical inconsistencies and limited empirical evidence in the UAE higher education context. First, earlier studies tend to treat strategic leadership as a broad construct and focus mainly on non-educational sectors, thereby limiting their applicability in the university context. Based on this analysis, a multidimensional conceptual model is proposed, including testable hypotheses. This study adopts a conceptual approach based on a narrative literature review and does not involve empirical testing. However, it proposes directions for future research using quantitative methods such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The implications for theory and practice are twofold by proposing a systematic framework that suggests how leadership capabilities can bolster the effectiveness of HRM and contribute to the sustainable performance of institutions.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, human resource management practices, public universities.

INTRODUCTION

There is growing pressure for models of sustainable development in a rapidly changing economic, environmental, social, and technological landscape that meet the needs of today without destroying the future (Hariram et al. 2023). This has highlighted the shortcomings of traditional management strategies, leading to an increased focus on effective leadership as a key influence on organizational efficacy and sustainable success (Kasarapu and Lakkakula 2025). In this respect, strategic leadership is crucial to lead institutions through these uncertainties (Ferede et al. 2024). Shaping vision and mobilizing resources to coordinate organizational efforts toward common goals.

At the same time, organizations are beginning to understand that human resources are not only a commodity but also strategic assets that can lead to competitive advantage and organizational excellence (Kareska 2023). Human resource management (HRM) in contemporary times is not limited to administrative duties alone but also extends to strategic responsibilities such as talent management, performance appraisal, and organizational learning (Schuler and E. Jackson 2014). Moreover, advancements in technology underscore the significance of HRM by increasing efficiency, reducing costs, and enabling data-driven decision-making (Tuli et al. 2018).

In response to increasing environmental complexity and competitive pressures, organizations, particularly in the higher education sector, are required to continuously innovate their strategic frameworks and operational practices (Hart and Rodgers 2024). Following the transition to a knowledge economy in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and amid an ever-changing environment, public universities are increasingly being called

upon to enhance performance, foster innovation, and work more closely with national initiatives on strategic priorities (Ahmed and Abdalla Alfaki 2013). The need for strategic leadership and HRM practices in this respect is imperative to improve working effectiveness and lead towards sustainable institutions.

Although both constructions have been recognized as important, current literature lacks in several aspects. Although strong archival and causal evidence from other fields support the relationship between strategic leadership and HRM practices, most studies treat them independently or take a sector-specific perspective outside higher education (Ellafi, A., et al. 2025). Stated another way, it is even second nature to treat strategic leadership as a one-dimensional topic by never appropriately separating the specific responsibilities of its principal dimensions-strategic vision, communication skills, and change leadership. Such limitations necessitate the development of a new, more integrated and context-specific conceptual framework, particularly within a UAE public university.

In this regard, the goal of this research is to propose a conceptual model that builds on and demonstrates the theoretical foundations that define how core values of strategic leadership impact HRM best practices. Using narrative literature review methodology, this study seeks to bridge existing gaps and serve as a reference point for future empirical research by offering critical evaluations of prior work.

LITERATURE REVIEW APPROACH

A narrative literature review is employed in this study to provide a basis for developing a conceptual framework. In contrast to a systematic review, the narrative approach facilitates the synthesis, interpretation, and assessment of existing knowledge, which is particularly valuable for theory-building.

The literature review included a few peer-reviewed articles published between (year–year), retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The selection focused on studies examining the relationship between strategic leadership and HRM practices, particularly in higher education contexts.

To identify available literature, the classic databases Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were used. For the search, keywords such as "strategic leadership", "human resource management practices", "higher education", and "organizational performance" were used.

The selection criteria focused on:

- Academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles
- International peer-reviewed studies

We have included research that directly addresses the association between strategic leadership and HRM practices.

- Recent publications, for timeliness

The included studies were critically appraised rather than described, with attention to commonalities, inconsistencies in the theoretical basis of the work, and particular limitations of context. The focus was specifically on gaps in this literature base regarding higher education institutions and the UAE context, as well as on the underexplored multidimensional leadership constructs. This method provides a reliable basis for developing a developmental framework that blends concepts with sound theory and context. Despite the growing interest in strategic leadership, limited research has examined its multidimensional influence on HRM practices within public universities in the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, the underlying mechanisms through which leadership dimensions shape HRM practices remain underexplored.

Problem Statement and Objectives

Some challenges hinder public universities in the UAE from adopting human resource management practices tailored to the academic environment. By promoting a creative work environment, these are meant to enhance

performance and reach strategic goals. Yet, Al-Wahshi (2020) has identified some shortcomings in their application, suggesting that human resource departments be reinforced through sound policies that develop human capital and improve performance efficiency, in line with the UAE vision of creating an ideal work environment.

Moreover, varied reports from universities, such as the one conducted by Emirates University, reveal that some consider human resource management practices a fundamental organizational asset, imperative for increasing institutional effectiveness. This highlights the need for these institutions to modernize and keep abreast with technological and environmental transformation (Al-Qahtani, 2022). Despite their importance, implementation gaps persist; Al-Wahshi (2020) urges that human resource policies be updated to align with the goals of institutional development. Thus, this study highlights the need to understand strategic leadership and HRM practices to alleviate these gaps and achieve effective human resource management in UAE government universities.

Significance of the Study

Given the growing relevance of this subject in the profoundly impacted higher education environment, this study contributes significantly to our understanding of how strategic leadership aligns human resource management practices in UAE public universities. Specifically, the theoretical study not only fills a gap in the literature on how strategic leadership could help guide prized human resources to achieve institutional ends by integrating two previously under-examined variables at universities, but also provides an academic foundation on which further studies may be built.

In terms of implementation, the results are intended to guide universities' decisions on human resource policies and strategies, aligned with national purposes that enhance higher education quality and increase human capital efficiency. It also aligns with the UAE's vision of a knowledge economy and institutional innovation by identifying competencies that promote a culture of creativity and excellence, making it an appropriate sociodemographic tool for developing instruments that foster human capital development. It also points to future research opportunities on potential mediating variables, such as digital transformation, organizational culture, and strategic readiness, that could further facilitate institutional sustainability and global competitiveness.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Foundation and Justification

This study is based on three main theories of Strategic Leadership Theory, Human Capital Theory, and the Resource-Based View (RBV). Strategic Leadership Theory describes how leaders shape organizational vision, decision-making, and performance. In this sense, strategic vision can help clarify and coordinate HR policies, while communication skills are vital for maintaining employee engagement. Transformative approaches in leadership for HR practices: Adaptation during environmental challenges

Human Capital Theory focuses on the importance of employees as strategic resources for organizations. Strong leadership bolsters HRM activities, such as training and development, and performance management systems, thereby positively affecting staff capabilities and institutional outcomes. Moreover, the Resource-Based view (RBV) assumes that human resources can be a sustainable competitive advantage if managed properly, creating a strong foundation for this relationship. In the second target area are strategic leaders, who use HRM practices to enhance these resources in harmony with long-term organizational goals.

As such, drawing from these theoretical underpinnings, we propose that each dimension of strategic leadership directly and positively influences HRM practices.

Human Resource Management Practices

Employing an evolutionary perspective, this paper explores the emergence of human resource management from a traditional focus on administrative and operational roles in agricultural and craft societies to today's

strategic management function vital for institutional success. This shift involves economic, social, and organizational development, which have enabled human resource management to become a pivotal instrument for improved institutional performance and comparative advantage (Dessler 2011).

Scholars define it as a strategic concern in the management of human capital. (Ulrich and Dulebohn 2015) View the role of HR in creating high-performing organizations. (Nicolaescu et al. 2020). Highlight talent by meticulous examination. According to Schmidt and Lee (2024), purpose plays a key role in enhancing employee experience and aligning organizational targets with long-term strategy), fairness, i.e., in the context of law (Kaufman 2004), and the labor market is emphasized. It includes recruitment, training, evaluation, and development (Dessler 2011).

(Armstrong and Taylor 2023; Mathis and Jackson 2010) Describe its strategic fit with organizational goals and talent management. Human resource management (HRM) must support ongoing organizational performance by leveraging talent attraction strategies (Armstrong and Taylor 2023). This aligns employee skills to organizational strategies (Ulrich and Dulebohn 2015), boosting engagement and motivation. So into diversity and equity (Pougajendy et al. 2024), equal work environments (Schein 2010). It allows organizations to ensure legal and ethical compliance (Gunawan and Mikhail 2025) and promote innovation and increase competitiveness by using a diverse workforce (Abdulah et al. 2021). The 5 main objectives are attracting and recruiting talent, developing employee capabilities, achieving satisfaction, aligning human resources with organizational goals, and maintaining a fair & stable work environment.

Human resource management practices have expanded to include functions that directly influence organizational performance, such as recruitment, training, and performance appraisal. Recruitment is the process of attracting appropriate talent, internally or externally, to ensure a proper balance between renewal and retention of expertise (Dessler 2011). Training is a strategic investment to ensure that personnel have the skills and knowledge needed to adapt to technological and professional changes (Yertas 2024). Performance appraisal determines how well objectives have been accomplished, supports promotion decisions, and motivates organizational growth by recognizing performance weaknesses (Dessler 2011). From the above overview, we can conclude that human resource management has evolved from a traditional role to become an important strategic factor in achieving organizational goals. Contemporary HR systems are based on modern recruitment, training, and appraisal practices that enable them to adapt and compete in complex contemporary environments.

Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership is an important concept in modern management, serving as a fundamental pillar for determining organizational strategy and aligning efforts toward long-term objectives in complex, dynamic environments. In this study, strategic leadership is conceptualized through three core dimensions: strategic vision, communication skills, and change leadership. These dimensions are consistently used throughout the analysis and model development.

In this regard, it has been defined as a channel through which effective individual leadership is integrated with future generations of planning and positioning to increase service life and growth (Omondi et al. 2022, Al-Tahitah, A., et al, 2021). Although it began as a concept limited strictly to military contexts, the idea evolved over the course of the 20th century and has become organically intertwined with concepts around senior management and corporate governance (Kouzes and Posner 2017). Strategic leadership integrates influence and motivation with strategy to make decisions that add value to the organization (Adobor et al. 2021; Ojogiwa 2021). According to (بشير et al. 2019). Strategic leadership involves envisioning a future for the organization, instilling an enabling culture, and helping employees develop competence for change and growth.

Strategic leadership is the capacity of the top hierarchy to interpret environmental changes and help organizations make decisions that integrate internal stability with external dynamics (Omondi et al. 2022), which is also key to organizational success and sustainability. This helps build a common purpose, energizes the team, and ensures operations are aligned with strategy. These goals involve setting the vision for an organization, ensuring alignment between strategic plans and everyday operations, enabling better change

through systems, and building foundational competencies. and fostering wisdom and durability (زابي et al. 2021). Visionary, decisive, inspiring, innovative, and adaptable to the challenges of your environment are qualities that set you apart from strategic leaders. According to Al-Saeedi and Khairy (2024), strategic leaders usually have in-depth domain information and seek to resolve team challenges directly, which promotes an elevated level of organisational commitment (Al-Saeedi and Khairy 2024). (Schoemaker et al. 2013) identify their superior capability to navigate social dynamics and negotiate between conflicting internal and external stakeholder pressure.

Strategic Leadership contributes to organizational competitiveness and institutional excellence by promoting operational efficiency, innovation, employee loyalty, and enhanced stakeholder satisfaction (including customers and suppliers). It further enhances organizational resilience to crises and unexpected changes while supporting talent recruitment and retention (Schoemaker et al. 2013). Strategic vision is one of the key dimensions of strategic leadership as it determines where the organization will go and how to allocate resources, communication skills refer to effective information exchange between people in an organization that make decisions based on that information, creating what can be regarded as stable decisions made within a complex environment and change leadership describes capacity for intentional transformations which includes unpredictable changes but ultimately result in outcomes at organizational level (بشير et al. 2019). Strategic direction, human capital, organisational culture, and internal control are highlighted as dimensions by (واصل et al. 2023), while (Hunitie 2018) focuses on leadership ethics, motivation, and competency investment as the basis.

The Study Environment

This study focuses on federal public universities in the United Arab Emirates, which are state-funded, registered with the Ministry of Education, and offer a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The UAE has eight public universities, including three large federal institutions, according to the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority's 2022/2023 Annual Report. 1880– United Arab Emirates University, the first national university, opened in 1976 and consists of nine colleges emphasizing scientific research. Zayed University was founded in 1998 and is an internationally accredited university with particular emphasis on the development of leadership and innovation programs. The Higher Colleges of Technology, founded in 1988 and delivering applied education across the emirates through 16 branches, is one of several major higher education institutions in the country (Al-Wahshi, 2020). The latest data records a total of 3,717 academic and administrative staff, including citizens and non-citizens (Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023; Academic Factbook 2023/2024).

In line with advancements in higher education, the UAE government has introduced the "National Higher Education Strategy 2030" to prepare future generations with applied and professional skills that support the national economy. The first is quality, ensured through international accreditation standards and the development of distinguished academic staff. Efficiency, in terms of increased productivity and graduation rates. Innovation through support and funding of scientific research geared towards the knowledge economy and alignment, by aligning education output with labour market needs and strengthening private sector collaboration (UAE Government Official Portal, 2023). The UAE's universities are a cornerstone in achieving this vision of an advanced knowledge economy.

The relationship between Strategic Leadership and Human Resource Management Practices

Strategic leadership plays a very important role in organizational management, helping organizations optimize resources, solve organizational problems, and guide them towards their vision, mission, and long-term goals. Meanwhile, human resource management is paramount to the creation of human capital in line with organizational strategies. One of the significant areas where strategic leadership and human resource management practices play a crucial role is in educational institutions, especially public universities, which are responsible for facilitating knowledge transfer to aid national development. The success behind effective talent acquisition, development, and motivation lies in the hands of strategic leadership. Accordingly, there is a need for systematic research to examine how dimensions of strategic leadership (vision, strategic direction/leadership (managing/sensing environment), change leadership, human capital, and organizational

culture) influence human resource practices. It can also explore how to enhance the convergence of leadership and human resource management for organizational excellence.

Literature has converged on strategic leadership as a significant determinant of human resource management practices, although the results are context-dependent and methodology-driven. Several studies have also linked leadership competencies to HR practices in the energy, healthcare, and service sectors (بشير et al. 2019), (واصل et al. 2023).

While studies have made important contributions, most take sector-specific approaches, making their results hard to generalize about higher education. Moreover, although many studies name communication skills as an important dimension of a successful leader, others show that their effects are indirect and that they run through organizational culture and employee engagement. It shows that there is no consensus on the specific mechanisms by which leadership impacts HRM practices.

Another significant gap concerns the scarcity of empirical studies in the UAE higher education context, as existing studies often focus on higher education systems that may not align structurally or strategically with those in the UAE. Furthermore, existing studies often consider strategic leadership as unidimensional without recognizing that its components, such as strategic vision, communication, and change leadership, can have different ramifications. Hence, this study bridges these gaps by developing a multidimensional conceptual framework appropriate to the UAE public universities.

Proposed Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

This paper develops a conceptual framework to define the relationship between strategic leadership and human resource management practices in UAE public universities. Existing studies indicate that strategic leadership dimensions-strategic vision, communication skills, and change leadership-significantly influence human resource management practices. Accordingly, the research framework was constructed as illustrated in Figure 1.

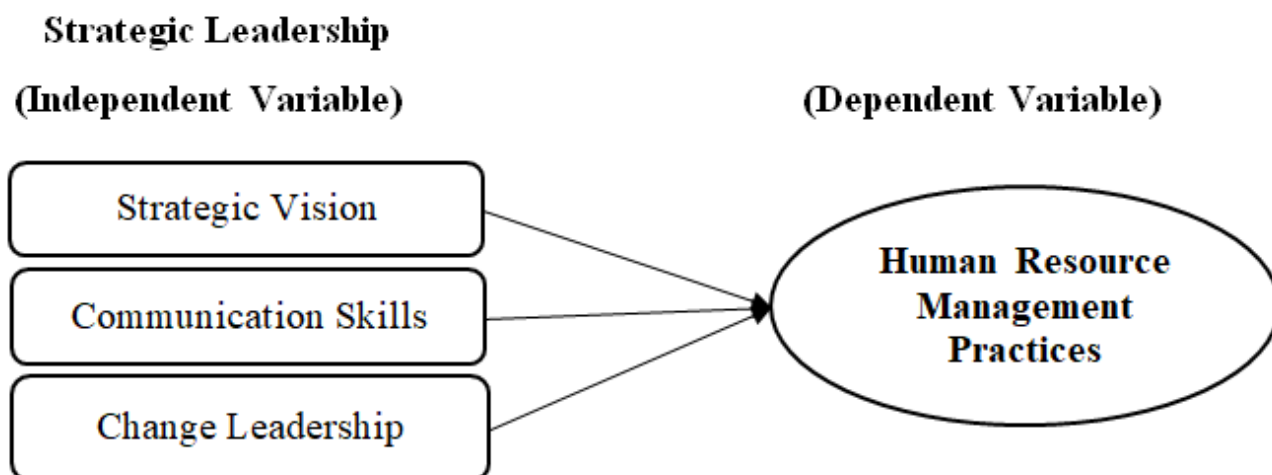


Figure1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

The study proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between the strategic vision dimension and human resource management practices.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between the communication skills dimension and human resource management practices.

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive relationship between the change leadership dimension and human resource management practices.

CONCLUSION

The study recommends that future studies investigate the relationship between strategic leadership and human resource management (HRM) practices in public universities in the United Arab Emirates. The study reports that strategic leadership is a core and dynamic component that influences the effectiveness of HRM systems across contexts, based on a literature review. Simultaneously, while the review identifies gaps in prior research regarding contexts, constructs, and treatments of leadership dimensions, a comprehensive, integrated framework that contextualizes leadership is notably absent. Next, it has been well documented that the role of strategic leadership encompasses much more than planning and developing a vision; in fact, a strategic leader possesses the skill set to shape an organization's culture, develop employee potential, and encourage creativity (Buchanan and Badham 2008). Although studies indicate a statistically significant, positive relationship between leadership practices and HR outcomes, they are mainly conducted outside education and thus have limited applicability in colleges or universities. Additionally, most studies treat strategic leadership as a single superordinate construct and do not explore the unique contributions of its core dimensions-strategic vision, communication skills, and change leadership.

To address these deficiencies, this research contributes to the scholarship by offering a multidimensional conceptual framework grounded in Strategic Leadership Theory, Human Capital Theory, and the Resource-Based View (RBV). The framework essentially offers a theoretically transferable mechanism through which specific leadership capabilities can shape HRM practices within the unique institutional and strategic environment of UAE public universities.

The potential results will also indicate that the relationship between strategic leadership and HRM practices is dynamic and mutually reinforcing rather than linear. Strategic leadership shapes direction, alignment, and intent while HRM practices translate these into recruitment, training, and performance management systems. This interdependence underscores the need to coordinate leadership development initiatives with human resources strategies to sustain institutional performance and achieve effective organizational outcomes over time. In practice, the study underscores that higher education institutions need to invest in supporting subsequent leaders in developing strategic skills, especially in communication, change management, and long-term strategic vision. Simultaneously, the design and implementation of HR policies should aim to enhance flexibility, innovation, and alignment with national strategic priorities, thereby increasing institutional resilience and competitiveness.

Future Research Directions and Empirical Validation

Since this work is conceptual, future studies are needed to empirically test the proposed framework. This study proposes a quantitative research design and, therefore, gathers data using a structured questionnaire administered to academic and administrative staff in UAE public universities.

Future studies should consider using probability sampling techniques to ensure representativeness, while dimensions of strategic leadership and HRM practices can be measured using established, validated scales available in the literature. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is a more appropriate method for data analysis, as it allows the exploration of interdependencies among latent variables and enables the user to test multiple hypotheses simultaneously (Al-Tahitah, A. et al. 2024; Al-Tahitah, A. et al. 2020).

Additionally, future studies may include mediating and moderating variables, such as organizational culture, as well as factors such as digital transformation and strategic agility, to provide a more holistic view of the mechanisms through which strategic leadership affects HRM practices. Data from such empirical investigations will not only validate the proposed model but also refine its application across varying institutional contexts.

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