



Leadership Succession Planning in Higher Education: A Systematic Review

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Abstract. The sustainability of higher education institutions is critically contingent upon effective and continuous leadership, particularly within a challenging landscape of global competition and resource constraints. This study aimed to systematically review existing approaches, models, challenges, and future directions of leadership succession planning in higher education, with a focus on identifying best practices that support institutional sustainability and leadership readiness. A systematic literature review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and methodological rigor. Peer-reviewed studies published between 2018 and 2025 were sourced from leading academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Out of 830 initially retrieved records, 54 studies met the inclusion criteria and were critically analyzed. The review identified four dominant leadership succession models in higher education: the talent management model, leadership pipeline model, mentoring and coaching models, and hybrid/ad hoc models. These frameworks collectively enhance leadership continuity, improve institutional governance, and sustain organizational performance. However, the study also revealed persistent challenges, including the absence of formalized succession frameworks, limited leadership development opportunities, resource constraints, and inadequate administrative commitment. Emerging practices emphasize embedding leadership development into academic career pathways, fostering diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines, and utilizing data-driven technologies for talent management and informed decision-making. This study provides a comprehensive synthesis of leadership succession planning within higher education, presenting a holistic understanding of leadership succession dynamics. Furthermore, it proposes a roadmap for policy and practice aimed at strengthening institutional resilience and sustainability through strategic leadership development. The findings hold significant implications

for policymakers, higher education administrators, and human resource professionals. By institutionalizing succession planning as a strategic priority, HEIs can ensure smooth leadership transitions, preserve institutional memory, and enhance long-term sustainability. Such initiatives can also promote inclusive leadership cultures that reflect equity, innovation, and adaptability within academic governance.

Keywords: Leadership succession planning, Higher education, Institutional sustainability, Leadership continuity, PRISMA, Talent management, Governance.

1. Introduction

Leadership succession has become a critically important issue for higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide (Chia et al., 2021; Hoque & Zheng, 2024). Universities and colleges now operate in a rapidly changing environment characterized by intense competition, fluctuating funding, demographic shifts, and the overarching imperative for institutional resilience (Hassan et al., 2025; Leal Filho et al., 2020). These pressures necessitate effective leadership that can steer institutions toward innovation and sustainability while remaining aligned with their core academic missions (Ahmad et al., 2020). However, leadership turnover, whether through retirement, resignation, or unexpected departure, poses serious risks, including strategic disruption, operational instability, and the irreversible loss of institutional memory (Agwoje & Okeleke, 2023; Okoye & Onuorah, 2025).

In response to these risks, leadership succession planning has emerged as a vital strategic process (Fusarelli et al., 2018). It is broadly defined as the systematic identification, development, and preparation of individuals to assume key roles (Wobodo et al., 2020; Ghazali et al., 2021; Zeynoddini et al., 2023). This is a well-established practice in the corporate sector but has

only gained significant attention in higher education in recent decades (Ahmad et al., 2020). Unlike corporations, HEIs face unique governance structures, collegial cultures, and academic traditions that complicate the design and implementation of succession plans (Ahmad & Keerio, 2019; Ogunode & Abubakar, 2020). For instance, leadership transitions in universities involve not only administrative leaders, such as presidents and deans, but also academic leaders who must balance complex managerial and scholarly expectations (Kohtamäki, 2019).

Globally, institutions are adopting varied models of succession planning, ranging from formal talent management pipelines to informal mentoring and ad hoc replacement strategies (Oppong et al., 2016; Bano et al., 2021). The effectiveness of these approaches is a subject of ongoing debate, particularly regarding their influence on institutional performance, sustainability, and strategic continuity (Jackson & Allen, 2022). Substantial evidence suggests that without deliberate succession planning, universities risk leadership vacuums and the erosion of institutional knowledge (Abbasi et al., 2018; Ismail et al., 2022). Conversely, well-structured succession systems enhance leadership readiness, reduce uncertainty, and promote organizational stability by ensuring a steady supply of capable leaders (Fuentes, 2020; Barton, 2019).

Despite its strategic importance, succession planning in higher education remains inconsistently applied, under-researched, and poorly institutionalized in many regions (Kleto et al., 2021; Bano et al., 2023). Many HEIs continue to rely on reactive approaches, which result in governance disruptions and misalignment with institutional strategy (Keerio & Ahmad, 2024). Significant concerns persist regarding leadership gaps caused by an aging academic workforce, limited investment in development programs, and the failure to build diverse and inclusive leadership pipelines (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021; Dahlan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the absence of systematic frameworks fundamentally undermines institutional sustainability (Mazera, 2024; Yualinda et al., 2025; Leal Filho et al., 2020). While some universities in advanced economies have formal policies, many institutions, particularly in developing regions, face profound barriers including limited resources, governance constraints, and cultural resistance (Chia, Ghavifekr, & Razak, 2021).

The literature on this subject remains fragmented, with studies often focusing on specific institutions, regions, or leadership positions, but few synthesizing the evidence on global trends and prevailing models (Hoque & Zheng, 2024). This fragmentation creates a critical knowledge gap that this study seeks to address through a systematic review (Zeynoddini Bidmeshki, Adli, & Vaziri, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to conduct a systematic review of the literature on leadership succession planning in higher education. Specifically, the review seeks to:

- Identify the prevailing approaches and models of leadership succession planning adopted in universities and colleges worldwide.
- Examine the influence of succession planning on institutional performance, continuity, and sustainability.
- Analyze the challenges and barriers hindering effective implementation, recommend best practices and directions for future research.

This research significantly consolidates fragmented findings from across regions and institution types into a more coherent understanding of how succession planning operates in higher education. The insights will assist HEIs administrators, governing bodies, HR departments, and policy makers to design or refine succession frameworks that are contextually appropriate, inclusive, and effective. It will also draw attention to how diversity and equity can be embedded in leadership pipelines, ensuring that succession planning contributes not only to continuity but also to fairness.

In light of these dynamics, systematically reviewing and synthesizing leadership succession planning models for higher education institutions becomes a critical academic and practical endeavor. Such a review will not only map the current landscape of approaches but also identify best practices, gaps, and opportunities for developing more effective, context-sensitive models that can advance the twin goals of sustainability and education.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopted a systematic review methodology to synthesize empirical and conceptual evidence on leadership succession planning in higher education institutions (HEIs). The method was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework (Page et al., 2021; Akinson et al., 2025). The PRISMA approach was selected to ensure methodological transparency, minimize bias, and enhance the reliability and replicability of the review process across all stages (Puspitarini, 2023; Bamiro et al., 2023; Ahmed et al 2025). The methodology employed adhered to established standards in educational and organizational research, emphasizing a structured, evidence-based approach to the selection and analysis of scholarly literature.

This section outlines the specific procedures, including the research design, data sources, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the processes for data extraction, analysis, and quality appraisal, adhering to established standards for systematic reviews in organizational and educational research.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive and systematic literature search was conducted across multiple reputable electronic

databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their broad coverage of academic and management research relevant to higher education leadership. The search strategy was formulated using combinations of keywords and Boolean operators to ensure inclusivity and precision. The search terms included: “Succession planning” OR “leadership continuity” OR “leadership transition” AND “higher education” OR “universities” OR “academic institutions” AND “organizational sustainability” OR “institutional performance.” This combination of search terms captured both conceptual and empirical studies related to leadership succession planning in HEIs. The search process also aimed to minimize the limitations associated with relying solely on a single database.

2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure methodological rigor and relevance, this review applied clearly defined inclusion and exclusion

criteria throughout the article selection process. Each study was thoroughly screened by title, abstract, and full text to confirm its alignment with the research objectives. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2018 and 2025 were included, provided they focused on leadership succession planning within higher education institutions, were written in English, and offered empirical, conceptual, or theoretical insights related to institutional performance, leadership continuity, or sustainability. Furthermore, eligible studies were required to contribute meaningfully to at least one of the research objectives of this review. In contrast, publications such as editorials, commentaries, monographs, book chapters, and unrefereed conference papers were excluded. Studies published before 2018, written in languages other than English, or addressing leadership planning outside the higher education context were also omitted from consideration. Table 1 presents the summary of the inclusion and exclusion criteria used in this review.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Eligibility	Exclusion
Country	Global	—
Source Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Editorials, book chapters, conference papers, and reports
Language	English	Non-English publications
Time Range	2018–2025	Before 2018
Theme	Succession leadership planning in higher education	Leadership succession not related to education

2.2 Screening and Selection Process

The screening and selection process commenced with an extensive database search that yielded 830 articles addressing leadership succession planning and leadership continuity in institution. After the removal of duplicate records, 715 articles proceeded to the initial screening stage, where titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance. Subsequently, 483 full-text articles were examined in detail to assess their methodological quality, contextual relevance, and alignment with the study’s objectives. Studies that were not peer-reviewed, written in languages other than English, or unrelated to the core research questions were excluded. Ultimately, 54 articles satisfied all inclusion criteria and were retained for the final synthesis.

Each selected study was systematically reviewed and analyzed based on the author(s), year of publication, geographical focus, research design, principal findings, and key implications. The extracted data were organized in a structured manner to ensure consistency and facilitate comparative evaluation across studies (Bamiro et al., 2024; Utaminingsih et al., 2023; Lawal et al., 2025). The entire process of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion adhered to the PRISMA 2020 framework, with the detailed procedure illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram presented in Figure 1.

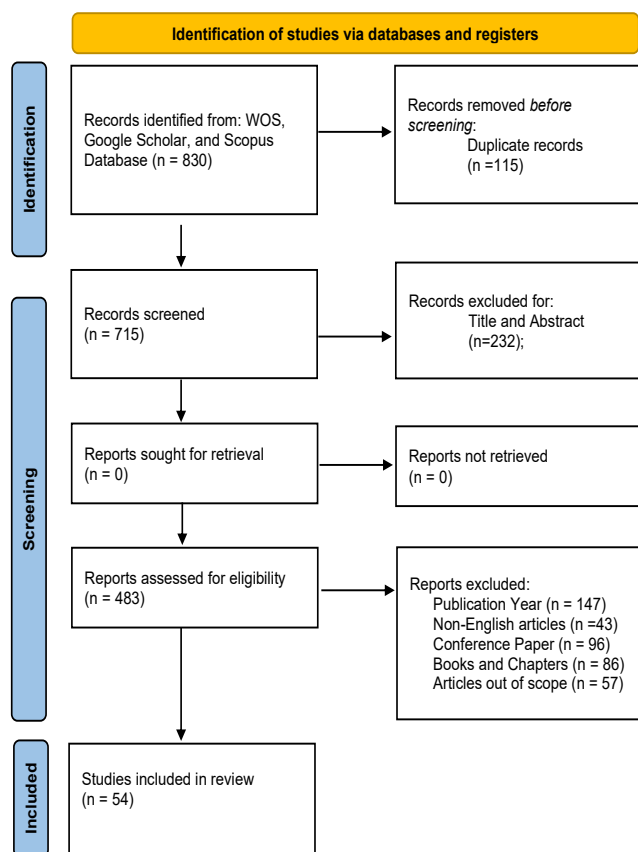


Figure 1: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram.

3. Results

Following the systematic review and synthesis of selected studies, the extracted data were organized to provide a concise yet comprehensive overview of the existing research on leadership succession planning in higher education institutions. The analysis focused on identifying patterns across authorship, publication year, methodological approaches, geographical distribution, corresponding journal, and key findings. This approach enables a clearer understanding of how different contexts and research designs have contributed to the discourse on leadership continuity, institutional performance, and sustainability within higher education institutions. The synthesized findings from the reviewed literature are systematically organized and presented in Table 2, which forms the basis for the ensuing discussion and interpretation.

Table 2: Data Extraction

S/N	Authors & Year	Method	Country	Journal
	Abbasi et al. (2018)	Mixed	Iran	Iranian Journal of Management in the Islamic University
	Abbaspour et al. (2018)	Mixed	Iran	Journal of Research in Educational Systems
	Agwoje. (2023)	Quantitative	Nigeria	International Journal of Institutional Leadership, Policy and Management
	Ahaotu & Ogunode (2021)	Qualitative	Nigeria	Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy and Culture
	Ahmad et al. (2018)	Quantitative	Malaysia	The Journal of Social Sciences Research
	Ahmad & Keerio. (2019)	Quantitative	Malaysia	International Journal of Engineering and Advanced Technology
	Ahmad et al. (2020)	Qualitative	Malaysia	Journal of Education and e-Learning Research
	AlAjmi. (2025)	Qualitative	Kuwait	Studies in Higher Education
	Alam (2022)	Qualitative	Bangladesh	Sustainability,
	Alghofaily. (2019)	Qualitative	Saudi Arabia	Journal of Social Sciences
	Alotaibi (2025)	Quantitative	Saudi Arabia	Asian Women
	Anos (2025)	Qualitative	Global	Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
	Ayenalem & Taye (2025)	Qualitative	Ethiopia	Discover Education

NIU Journal of Educational Research

	Azman et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Global	<i>A Journal of Comparative and International Education</i>
	Bano et al. (2021)	Qualitative	Global	The European Journal of Social & Behavioural Sciences
	Bano et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Malaysia	Journal of Chemical Health Risks
	Barton (2019)	Qualitative	USA	<i>Christian Higher Education</i>
	Chia et al., (2021)	Qualitative	Malaysia	International Online Journal of Educational Leadership
	Dahlan et al. (2021)	Qualitative	Global	International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences
	Dahlan (2023)	Qualitative	Saudi Arabia	Cogent Business & Management
	Davenport et al. (2021)	Qualitative	Global	The western journal of emergency medicine
	Edward & Nichols, (2025)	Qualitative	USA	International Journal on Social and Education Sciences
	Ferguson & Wilmot (2025)	Qualitative	Jamaica	Caribbean Journal of Education and Development
	Fusarelli et al.,(2018)	Qualitative	USA	<i>Journal of Research on Leadership Education</i>
	Gandhi & Sen (2021)	Qualitative	India	Educational Management, Administration and Leadership
	George & Wooden (2023)	Qualitative	Global	Administrative Sciences
	Ghazali et al., (2021)	Qualitative	Malaysia	International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences
	Hassan et al., (2025)	Qualitative	Global	European Journal of Education
	Hoque & Zheng, (2024)	Qualitative	Global	<i>Human Resources Management and Services</i>
	Ismail et al. (2022)	Quantitative	Malaysia	Journal of Positive Psychology
	Iwai et al. (2023)	Quantitative	USA	<i>JAMA Surgery</i>
	Jackson & Allen (2022)	Qualitative	Global	International Journal of Educational Management
	Keerio & Ahmad (2024)	Qualitative	Malaysia	<i>Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education</i>
	Keerio et al., (2022)	Qualitative	Malaysia	<i>International Journal of Services and Operations Management</i>
	Kleto et al., (2021)	Mixed	Serbia	Sustainability
	Kohtamaki, (2019)	Qualitative	Finland	Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management
	Leal Filho et al., (2022)	Quantitative	Global	<i>Sustainability</i>
	Masehela, (2025)	Qualitative	South Africa	Perspectives in Education
	Moodly & Toni (2019)	Qualitative	South Africa	South African Journal of Higher Education
	Musakuro (2022)	Mixed	South Africa	<i>SA Journal of Human Resource Management</i>
	Musakuro & Klerk (2021)	Qualitative	South Africa	<i>SA Journal of Human Resource Management</i>
	Mzera (2024)	Mixed	Kenya	European Journal of Computer Science and Information Technology
	Nevins-Bennete, (2025)	Qualitative	Global	International Journal of Social Science Research and Review
	Ogunode et al., (2020)	Qualitative	Nigeria	Jurnal Sinestesia
	Ogunode, (2020)	Qualitative	Nigeria	Jurnal Sinestesia
	Ogunode & Abubakar, (2020)	Qualitative	Nigeria	International Journal on Integrated Education
	Ogunode & Omenuko, (2021)	Qualitative	Nigeria	International Journal of Development and Public Policy
	Okoye & Onuorah, (2025)	Quantitative	Nigeria	African Journal of Educational Management, Teaching and Entrepreneurship Studies
	Olayinka, (2018)	Qualitative	Nigeria	International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science
	Ritchie, (2019)	Qualitative	Global	Management in Education
	Torabi et al., (2019)	Mixed	Global	Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Management
	Wobodo et al., (2020)	Qualitative	Nigeria	London Journal of Research in Management and Business
	Yualinda et al., (2025)	Qualitative	Indonesia	Journal of Information Systems and Informatics
	Zeynoddini et al., (2023)	Quantitative	Iran	<i>Quarterly Journal of Research and Planning in Higher Education</i>

The methodological analysis of the 54 reviewed studies shown in Figure 2 below indicates a predominant reliance on qualitative research designs, with 39 studies (72%) employing exploratory and descriptive approaches to examine leadership succession planning within higher education institutions. In comparison, quantitative methods were utilized in 9 studies (17%), while mixed-methods approaches accounted for 6 studies (11%). This distribution underscores the field’s strong orientation toward capturing contextual, experiential, and interpretive dimensions of leadership continuity rather than emphasizing statistical validation. Nonetheless, the relatively limited use of quantitative and mixed-methods research highlights the need for more empirically grounded and integrative investigations that blend qualitative depth with quantitative precision. Such methodological diversification would strengthen the robustness, generalizability, and policy relevance of future studies on leadership succession planning in higher education.

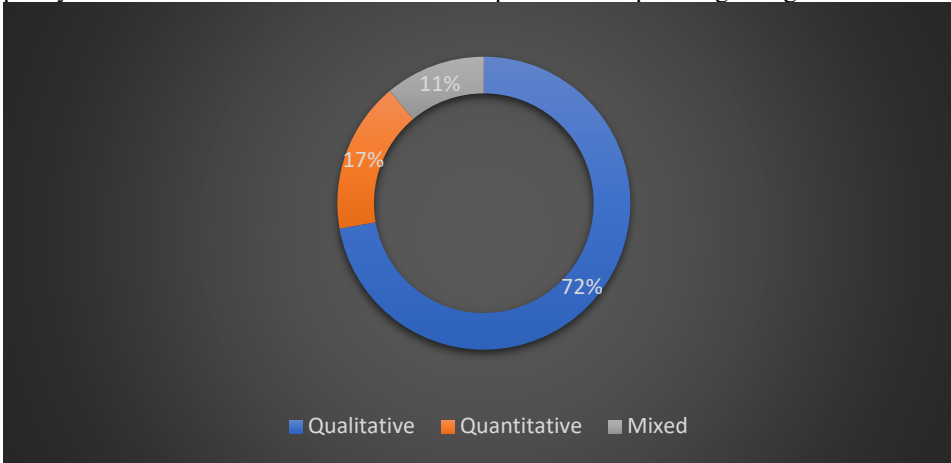


Figure 2: Methodological Distribution of the Reviewed Studies

The selected scholarly articles that satisfied the inclusion criteria span the period from 2018 to 2025, providing a comprehensive overview of the evolution of research on leadership succession planning in higher education. This temporal range facilitates the identification of key patterns, methodological developments, and shifts in research focus across the years. Notably, 2025 recorded the highest number of publications, totaling eleven, reflecting a growing academic interest and heightened awareness of leadership continuity and sustainability in higher education governance. The year 2021 also demonstrated substantial research activity, with 10 publications, while 2019 and 2023 each contributed 7 articles, followed by 2022 with 6, and 2018 and 2020 with 5 each. The trend in Figure 3 illustrates a progressive increase in scholarly engagement, particularly in the later years, suggesting that leadership succession planning has emerged as a central theme in educational leadership discourse amid global institutional transformations.

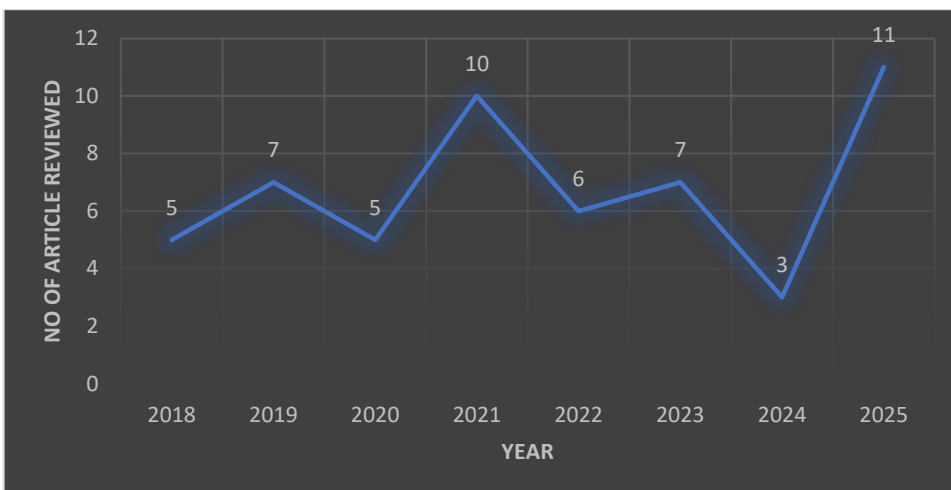


Figure 3: Distribution of Reviewed Studies by Publication Year (2018–2025)

The geographical distribution of the reviewed literature demonstrates a diverse global representation. Malaysia and Nigeria recorded the highest scholarly contributions, each with nine studies, indicating a growing emphasis on leadership succession and governance practices within these regions. Additionally, thirteen studies adopted a global or comparative perspective, reflecting an increasing recognition of leadership succession planning as a universal concern in higher education. Moderate research outputs were observed from Saudi Arabia, Iran, South Africa, and the United States, while

countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Finland, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya, Kuwait, and Serbia contributed a single study each.

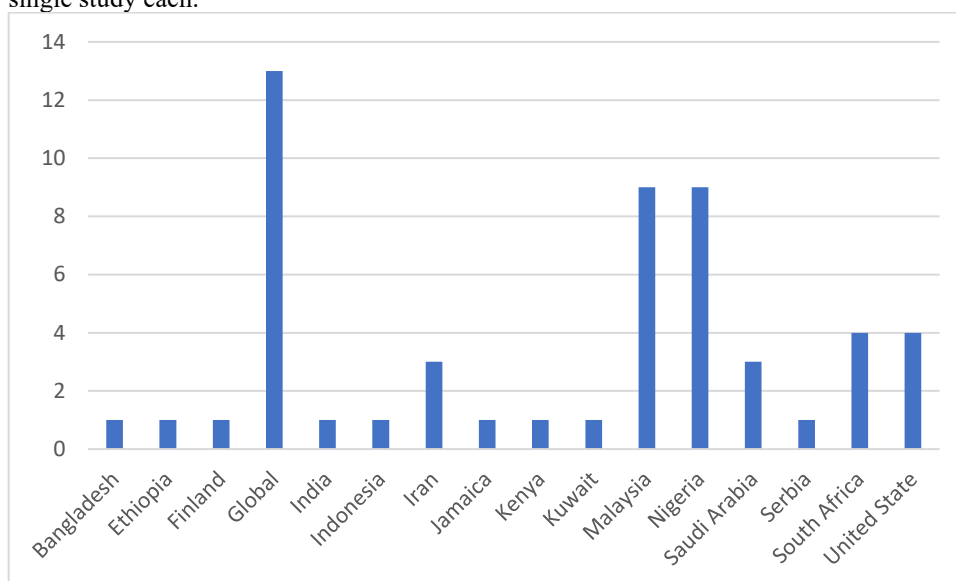


Figure 4: Geographical Distribution of Reviewed Studies

4. Discussion

4.1 Prevailing Approaches and Models of Leadership Succession Planning

Leadership succession planning in higher education draws from a variety of theoretical models and practical approaches. While the models provide the conceptual foundation for leadership development, the approaches translate these frameworks into concrete strategies for ensuring institutional continuity and sustainability. A review of the literature shows four dominant models: Talent Management, Leadership Pipeline, Mentoring and Coaching, and Hybrid Models, each of which finds practical expression in higher education institutions through approaches such as developmental succession, emergency/replacement planning, phased transitions, and interim-to-permanent arrangements.

Talent Management Model and Developmental Succession Planning

The talent management model provides a strategic framework for ensuring leadership continuity through the systematic identification, development, and retention of high-potential employees (Hoque & Zheng, 2024; Ahmad et al., 2020). In higher education, this model is operationalized through developmental succession planning, a proactive and long-term approach where universities cultivate robust leadership pipelines by strategically investing in targeted training programs, mentorship, and job rotations (Zeynoddini et al., 2023; Musakuro, 2022). For instance, future leaders are often given strategic "stretch" assignments to broaden their managerial and strategic competencies, thereby preparing them to assume complex senior roles (Wobodo et al., 2020). This comprehensive approach not only nurtures a culture of continuous learning but

also directly minimizes disruptive leadership gaps and strengthens long-term institutional resilience by ensuring a steady, internal supply of capable and well-prepared leaders (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021).

Leadership Pipeline Model and Phased Transition Planning

The leadership pipeline model provides a structured framework for systematically moving individuals through successive leadership levels by progressively equipping them with the necessary skills, values, and experiences (Fuentes, 2020). Within the context of higher education, this model often manifests through phased or overlapping transition planning, an approach particularly common for senior executive roles like vice-chancellors and presidents (Jackson & Allen, 2022; Barton, 2019). In this model, outgoing and incoming leaders work collaboratively during a defined transition period, a process that is critical for facilitating the seamless transfer of invaluable institutional knowledge, strategic priorities, and key external relationships (Anos, 2025). By ensuring this direct and guided handover, phased transitions significantly reduce operational disruption, enhance the stability of institutional governance, and ultimately safeguard the strategic continuity of the university.

Mentoring and Coaching Models and Interim-to-Permanent Bridge

Mentoring and coaching models are fundamentally rooted in the principle that effective leadership development requires relational and experiential learning, where seasoned leaders provide dedicated guidance to emerging talent. In higher education, this approach is frequently operationalized through interim-to-permanent bridge arrangements, wherein internal

candidates serve in acting roles while receiving structured mentorship and being evaluated for long-term appointments (Dahlan et al., 2021). This model offers a dual benefit: it allows institutions to authentically assess leadership capabilities under real-world conditions while simultaneously providing aspiring leaders with targeted coaching and direct exposure to complex institutional decision-making (Nevins-Bennett, 2025; Cohall, 2021). The efficacy of this relational approach is underscored by research across diverse contexts, from historically Black colleges and universities to South African research-intensive institutions, which highlights how structured mentorship programs are critical for professional socialization, skill development, and building academic resilience (Edwards & Nichols, 2025; Masehela, 2025; Ferguson & Wilmot, 2025). By integrating mentorship directly into the succession pathway, universities can cultivate a more prepared, confident, and contextually aware leadership pipeline.

Hybrid/Ad Hoc Models and Emergency/Replacement Planning

Hybrid or ad hoc models of succession planning combine elements from various structured frameworks, often shaped by institutional needs, resource availability, and specific contextual challenges (Oppong et al., 2016; Wobodo et al., 2020). The most visible manifestation of this pragmatic approach is emergency or replacement planning, a reactive yet essential strategy where institutions identify immediate backups for critical positions to mitigate risks from sudden departures (Bano et al., 2021). As noted in studies of leadership transitions, this model is fundamentally risk-averse, focusing on organizational resilience in the face of unforeseen disruptions (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Barton, 2019). Although it is less developmental than long-term, pipeline-based approaches, emergency planning serves a vital function by ensuring operational continuity and protecting institutional performance during periods of unexpected leadership vacuums, thereby providing a foundational layer of stability upon which more strategic succession efforts can be built.

Despite their differences, effective leadership succession planning models and approaches share common best practices: identifying critical roles, assessing talent through performance reviews and competency evaluations, aligning succession planning with institutional strategy, promoting transparency, and ensuring diversity in leadership pipelines (Gallo, 2020). Increasingly, technology such as talent management systems and analytics tools are being leveraged to monitor leadership readiness, career aspirations, and succession risks (Cappelli & Keller, 2017).

In sum, leadership succession planning in higher education is not a one-size-fits-all process. Institutions often adapt and combine models with practical approaches to balance long-term development with short-term continuity needs. The choice of model and approach is influenced by institutional size, governance

structures, resource availability, and cultural context, underscoring the importance of flexibility and strategic alignment

4.2 Influence of Leadership Succession Planning on Institutional Performance, Continuity, and Sustainability in Higher Education

Leadership succession planning has become an essential strategic process for shaping institutional performance, ensuring leadership continuity, and promoting organizational sustainability within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Keerio et al., 2022). In an era increasingly defined by globalization, demographic transitions, and rapid technological advancement, universities are recognizing the critical importance of structured succession systems as vital mechanisms for preserving institutional stability and sustaining academic excellence (Hassan et al., 2025; Ogunode & Omenuko, 2021). This section synthesizes existing literature to examine the multifaceted impact of leadership succession planning, arguing that its influence extends across institutional performance, continuity, and long-term sustainability. As emphasized by Ahmad et al. (2020), an effective succession strategy is foundational to this endeavor. The discussion, therefore, posits that succession planning extends far beyond a traditional human resource function; it represents a fundamental strategic imperative that directly influences an institution's future direction, resilience, and capacity for adaptation in a complex and changing landscape

Effective leadership succession planning serves as a direct catalyst for improved institutional performance by ensuring that leadership transitions do not disrupt strategic momentum or operational efficiency. When potential leaders are systematically identified and developed through structured talent pipelines, they acquire the necessary competencies to sustain and enhance institutional productivity (Wobodo et al., 2020; Azman et al., 2023). For instance, these proactive systems promote the innovation, responsiveness, and sound governance essential for achieving key performance indicators, from research output to student satisfaction (Zaynoddini et al., 2023). Furthermore, institutions that implement structured succession frameworks report improved decision-making and greater faculty engagement, as staff are demonstrably motivated by transparent career progression opportunities (Ogunode, 2020; Ismail et al., 2022). By embedding leadership development into the core of organizational strategy, as advocated by Ghazali et al. (2021), universities ensure that future leaders possess the specific competencies required to drive institutional goals such as global competitiveness and research excellence. In this sense, far from being a mere administrative procedure, strategic succession planning becomes a powerful driver of institutional innovation and long-term organizational agility.

Leadership continuity is a cornerstone for maintaining strategic direction and institutional stability in higher education. Effective succession planning directly minimizes disruptive leadership vacuums by ensuring that capable and prepared successors are readily available to assume key roles, a process that is only possible through a structured talent pipeline (Chia et al., 2021; Wobodo et al., 2020). Without such a system, universities risk operational paralysis, policy reversals, and profound stakeholder uncertainty when senior leaders depart, a risk that is acutely heightened in the absence of formal succession policies (Hoque & Zheng, 2024; Okoye & Onuorah, 2025). Structured succession frameworks, which can include phased transition approaches where outgoing and incoming leaders overlap, are therefore essential for facilitating the smooth transfer of critical institutional knowledge and preserving governance integrity (Agwoje & Okeleke, 2023). This continuity is particularly crucial in the academic environment, where leadership transitions can otherwise disrupt multi-year research initiatives, complex funding cycles, and strategic partnerships. Furthermore, a visible and planned succession process instills confidence among faculty, students, and external stakeholders by signaling institutional foresight and robust governance. The resulting stability not only safeguards academic quality but also strengthens the university's public reputation and bolsters the trust essential for its long-term sustainability (Leal Filho et al., 2020).

From a long-term perspective, leadership succession planning is fundamental to the sustainability of higher education institutions, as sustainable universities are those capable of maintaining leadership excellence, financial stability, and social responsibility across generations (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Leal Filho et al., 2020). Succession planning contributes directly to this sustainability by systematically embedding leadership development within the institutional culture and aligning it with long-term strategic priorities (Dahlan et al., 2021). This strategic alignment ensures that emerging leaders are prepared to address contemporary challenges such as funding limitations, global competition, and digital transformation. Furthermore, as Jackson and Allen (2022) suggest, the value of succession planning is realized when it is critically evaluated and well-integrated, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. Crucially, succession systems that proactively prioritize diversity and inclusion contribute to institutional sustainability by cultivating a leadership base that reflects a wide range of perspectives and experiences. Such inclusivity is a key driver of innovation and enhances an institution's resilience in the face of an evolving academic landscape.

Integrating succession planning into the core of institutional strategy transforms it from a reactive personnel management exercise into a central element of strategic governance. When leadership development is explicitly aligned with an institution's mission and

vision, universities cultivate a sustainable leadership culture that underpins long-term academic and administrative continuity. This strategic integration, as research in diverse contexts confirms, involves embedding succession planning within performance evaluation systems, structured mentoring programs, and clearly defined leadership competency frameworks to ensure institutional goals are consistently pursued across leadership generations (Ahmad et al., 2018; Torabi et al., 2019). As emphasized by Ritchie (2019), this approach fosters accountability by establishing clear expectations for leadership readiness at all levels. Furthermore, comprehensive models demonstrate that such integration enhances overall institutional coherence by creating a direct link between leadership pipelines, career planning, and strategic objectives (Abbaspour et al., 2018). The cumulative effect of this strategic alignment is a significant enhancement in organizational decision-making, operational efficiency, and resilience.

In essence, leadership succession planning acts as both a stabilizing and transformative force within higher education institutions. It stabilizes performance by reducing leadership disruptions and builds institutional capacity for long-term sustainability through talent development and strategic foresight. By aligning leadership development with institutional vision and values, succession planning ensures that higher education institutions remain resilient, competitive, and mission-driven in an ever-evolving educational landscape.

4.3 Challenges and Barriers to Effective Leadership Succession Planning in Higher Education

While the strategic value of leadership succession planning in higher education institutions (HEIs) is widely acknowledged, its effective implementation remains constrained by numerous organizational, cultural, and structural challenges. Universities operate in complex environments where leadership succession is often influenced by deeply rooted academic traditions, bureaucratic processes, and competing stakeholder interests, a dynamic observed in different contexts (Kohtamäki, 2019; Abbasi et al., 2018). Consequently, as noted in studies on implementation challenges, many HEIs struggle to develop and sustain systematic succession frameworks that ensure leadership continuity and institutional resilience (Bano et al., 2023). This section critically examines the major barriers hindering effective leadership succession planning in higher education, including organizational culture and resistance to change, inadequate institutional frameworks, limited leadership development mechanisms, resource constraints, and issues of diversity, transparency, and governance.

Organizational Culture and Resistance to Change

One of the most pervasive barriers to leadership succession planning in higher education is entrenched

institutional culture. HEIs often operate within deeply rooted collegial and academic traditions that emphasize autonomy and tenure, a climate that can inadvertently discourage proactive, centralized leadership planning (Abbasi et al., 2018). Within this context, academic leaders and faculty members may perceive formal succession initiatives as a threat to established hierarchies or even as an encroachment on academic freedom (Ahmad & Keerio, 2019). This cultural resistance is compounded by a frequent absence of shared understanding regarding the strategic importance of succession planning, a factor identified as critical in models linking organizational culture to succession outcomes (Keerio et al., 2022; Keerio and Ahmad, 2024). The resulting resistance often manifests in ad hoc or politically driven appointments rather than merit-based, competency-oriented selections, a dynamic that can be particularly pronounced and exclusionary in gendered institutional cultures (Moodly & Toni, 2019; Ogunode & Omenuko, 2021). Ultimately, transforming such deeply held cultural norms requires sustained leadership commitment and a deliberate reframing of succession planning as a collective, developmental process rather than a simple replacement exercise.

Lack of Formal Institutional Frameworks

A critical institutional weakness in many higher education institutions (HEIs) is the absence of formal policies and frameworks governing leadership succession. As noted in systematic reviews of the field, many institutions continue to rely on informal or reactive methods to fill leadership vacancies, a process often triggered by sudden departures or political appointments rather than strategic foresight (Ogunode, 2020; Ahaotu & Ogunode, 2021). This lack of a codified succession framework leads to significant discontinuities in strategic direction and the loss of critical institutional knowledge during leadership transitions (Agwoje & Okeleke, 2023). Furthermore, Okoye & Onuorah (2025) highlighted that the ambiguity surrounding succession procedures can foster perceptions of bias and favoritism, which erodes staff morale and undermines institutional credibility. Therefore, establishing a structured succession framework that is formally anchored in institutional policy and governance documents is crucial for ensuring transparency, maintaining consistency, and securing alignment with an institution's long-term strategic goals (Hoque & Zheng, 2024).

Inadequate Leadership Development and Talent Management Systems

A fundamental challenge undermining succession planning in higher education is the frequent absence of a well-designed leadership pipeline, which requires systematic talent identification and capacity-building programs that many institutions lack (Fuentes, 2020). This systemic gap is exacerbated by the fact that academic promotions are often based predominantly on scholarly achievements rather than demonstrated

leadership competencies, creating a significant mismatch between administrative demands and the actual preparedness of new leaders (Kohtamäki, 2019; Anos, 2025). These issues are compounded by limited structured mentorship and professional development opportunities, which further weaken the talent pool, a challenge noted in contexts ranging from South Africa to Iran (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021; Abbasi et al., 2018). The cumulative effect of this inadequate pipeline development, as observed in studies of tertiary institutions, results in critical skill gaps, leadership vacuums, and inconsistent institutional performance during transitions (Wobodo et al., 2020). Therefore, embedding intentional leadership development into standard academic career pathways is essential to mitigate these challenges by preparing potential successors early and continuously.

Resource Constraints and Financial Limitations

The implementation of structured succession planning in higher education institutions (HEIs) is often hindered by significant financial constraints, particularly in developing countries. These initiatives require substantial investment in leadership training, capacity development, and institutional research; however, competing budgetary priorities often divert funds toward immediate academic and infrastructural needs, leaving little room for long-term human capital planning (Abdullah, 2017; Leal Filho et al., 2020). This scarcity of resources limits access to critical assets such as external consultants, specialized training programs, and sophisticated succession management technologies (Chia et al., 2021). As noted in Azman et al. (2023), a study of ASEAN countries, these financial limitations pose a fundamental challenge to developing a robust leadership pipeline in public higher education (Azman et al., 2023). Consequently, instead of sustainable strategies, institutions are often forced to rely on short-term or reactive solutions that ultimately fail to ensure stable leadership continuity.

Governance and Political Interference

Governance dynamics and political interference constitute a significant barrier to effective succession planning, particularly in public universities. A primary challenge is that leadership appointments are often influenced by external political or governmental interests rather than being based on institutional merit or strategic priorities (Ogunode, 2020; Alam, 2022). This external interference directly undermines transparency and can discourage potential internal candidates, thereby destabilizing institutional planning processes (Ogunode et al., 2020; Keerio et al., 2022). In contexts where leadership tenure is politically determined, as noted in the Nigerian context by Olayinka (2018), succession planning becomes inherently uncertain and rendered ineffective. Consequently, establishing robust governance autonomy and enforcing merit-based selection criteria is widely recognized as an essential

precondition for fostering sustainable and effective leadership succession (Ogunode & Omenuko, 2021; Keerio & Ahmad, 2024).

Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Challenges

A critical failure in many succession planning processes within higher education is their inadequate reflection of diversity across gender, ethnicity, and generational representation (Gandhi & Sen, 2020; Daveenport et al., 2023). Consequently, leadership roles in universities remain disproportionately occupied by homogeneous demographic groups, which inherently limits the potential for inclusive and innovative governance (Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020; Iwai et al., 2023). This systemic exclusion, particularly of women and early-career academics from formal succession pipelines, not only perpetuates institutional inequality but also deprives universities of the diverse perspectives that are critical for strategic adaptation and creative problem-solving (Dahlan, 2023; Alotaibi, 2025). Addressing these deeply embedded disparities therefore necessitates the implementation of deliberate institutional policies that promote diversity, establish robust mentorship programs, and ensure equitable access to leadership development opportunities (AlAjim et al., 2025).

Limited Awareness and Commitment Among Senior Leaders

A significant impediment to effective succession planning is a pervasive lack of awareness and commitment among incumbent leaders (Bano et al., 2023). Senior administrators frequently prioritize immediate operational demands over the long-term investment of leadership development, a tendency often compounded by a reluctance to identify successors due to perceived threats to their own authority or position (Ghazali et al., 2021; Ahaotu & Ogunode, 2021). This leadership myopia results in a failure to institutionalize succession planning as a core component of organizational strategy, a concern echoed by Jackson and Allen (2022), who question the universal application of succession models without deep cultural integration. To counter this, building executive awareness through targeted capacity-building programs and embedding performance-linked accountability mechanisms are critical steps toward establishing succession planning as a collective, strategic responsibility (Ismail et al., 2022).

In summary, the challenges hindering effective leadership succession planning in higher education are multidimensional—spanning cultural, structural, financial, and governance domains. The persistence of informal leadership transition practices, coupled with limited development systems and external interference, continues to impede institutional progress toward sustainable leadership continuity. Addressing these barriers requires deliberate institutional reforms that integrate succession planning into broader strategic

frameworks, foster leadership capacity at multiple levels, and promote a culture of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Overcoming these obstacles is not only vital for leadership stability but also essential for sustaining performance, innovation, and resilience in the ever-evolving landscape of higher education.

4.4 Future Research Directions and Best Practices for Strengthening Leadership Succession Planning in Higher Education

As higher education institutions (HEIs) evolve within a rapidly transforming global landscape, the need for robust, evidence-based leadership succession planning has become increasingly critical (Dahlan et al., 2021). Although extensive research has examined leadership development and organizational sustainability, empirical studies focusing specifically on succession planning within the higher education context remain limited and fragmented (Zaynoddini et al., 2023; Hoque & Zhang, 2024). Future scholarship must therefore move beyond descriptive and conceptual analyses to explore more nuanced, context-sensitive frameworks that address emerging leadership challenges in universities. This section discusses promising directions for future research and synthesizes best practices that can enhance the design and implementation of effective leadership succession planning in HEIs worldwide. These practices integrate both strategic and operational dimensions, ensuring sustainability and alignment with institutional goals.

Effective leadership succession planning begins with the institutionalization of clear policies and governance frameworks (Keerio et al., 2022). Universities must develop comprehensive succession management policies that outline well-defined procedures, timelines, and accountability structures to guide leadership transitions (Ghazali et al., 2021; Chia et al., 2021). Integrating succession planning into broader strategic and human resource management systems ensures institutional continuity, coherence, and stability across leadership cycles (Keerio & Ahmad, 2024). A well-formalized governance structure also helps to minimize disruptions during leadership changes, promoting transparency and institutional resilience (Alam, 2022).

Furthermore, embedding leadership development within academic pathways is vital for cultivating a steady pipeline of competent leaders (Fuentes, 2022). In the study by Cohall (2021), succession planning should be closely aligned with leadership development initiatives that identify, mentor, and prepare potential leaders at multiple organizational levels. By integrating leadership competencies into faculty development and administrative promotion systems, institutions can foster a culture of continuous professional growth and readiness (Edward & Nicholes, 2025; Ferguson & Wilmot, 2025). Structured mentorship programs, executive coaching, and cross-functional assignments

further enhance leadership capacity and ensure that potential successors are adequately prepared to assume critical roles when required (Jackson & Allen, 2022; Anos, 2025).

An equally important dimension of succession planning involves promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in leadership pipelines. Effective succession planning should intentionally incorporate diversity objectives that ensure equitable representation of underrepresented groups in leadership positions (Alghofaily, 2019; Ayenalem & Taye, 2025). This approach not only enhances institutional legitimacy but also strengthens decision-making through diverse perspectives (Iwai et al., 2023; Davenport et al., 2022). Inclusive leadership development programs and transparent recruitment and advancement criteria contribute to building trust, fairness, and shared ownership among institutional stakeholders (Ghandi & Sen, 2021; Iwei et al., 2023).

In the contemporary digital era, leveraging data analytics and technology is increasingly essential to strengthening leadership succession systems (Kleto et al., 2021). Data-driven tools and talent management platforms enable institutions to systematically track performance, identify skill gaps, and anticipate future leadership needs (George & Wooden, 2023; Attamimi et al., 2024). The use of technologies such as competency-mapping software and AI-based assessment tools enhances decision-making transparency, mitigates bias, and optimizes leadership placement processes (Yualinda et al., 2025). Integrating these technologies also facilitates evidence-based evaluation and supports the long-term sustainability of succession strategies (Mzera, 2024).

Equally, top-level commitment and governance support are fundamental to the success of leadership succession planning. Senior administrators, governing councils, and boards of trustees must champion succession planning as a strategic institutional priority (Ritchie, 2019; Torabi et al., 2019). Their involvement ensures adequate allocation of resources, the incorporation of leadership development into institutional key performance indicators (KPIs), and the establishment of accountability systems that reinforce leadership continuity (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Wobodo, 2020). Without active executive engagement, succession initiatives risk being treated as peripheral rather than integral to institutional growth and sustainability (Nevis-Bennett, 2025).

Additionally, cultivating a learning and mentorship culture within the institution provides a strong foundation for leadership continuity. A thriving mentorship ecosystem promotes knowledge sharing and supports the transfer of institutional memory across generations of leaders (Mazerolle et al., 2018; Masehela, 2025). Establishing leadership academies, fellowship programs, and peer learning communities encourages collaboration, innovation, and institutional

cohesion. Such initiatives not only prepare future leaders but also embed leadership development within the organizational culture (Edward & Nichols, 2025).

Finally, regular review and evaluation of succession planning frameworks are critical to maintaining their relevance and effectiveness. HEIs operate in dynamic environments influenced by policy shifts, demographic changes, and evolving academic priorities (Kohtamaki, 2019; Azman et al., 2023). Therefore, continuous monitoring through leadership audits, feedback systems, and performance evaluations ensures that succession planning processes remain adaptable and evidence-based (Bano et al., 2023; Hassan et al., 2025). By institutionalizing evaluation mechanisms, universities can identify emerging challenges early and refine their succession strategies accordingly (Ogunode & Abubakar 2020; Ahmad et al., 2020).

In summary, strengthening leadership succession planning in higher education requires a multifaceted approach that integrates strategic vision, inclusive practices, technological innovation, and continuous improvement. Future research should build on these foundations by developing empirically tested models and context-specific frameworks that can guide institutions toward sustainable leadership continuity and long-term organizational excellence.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review underscores the growing significance of leadership succession planning as a cornerstone for ensuring continuity, institutional stability, and sustainable development in higher education. By synthesizing diverse models and frameworks across different geographical, organizational, and cultural contexts, the study identified key approaches such as talent management, leadership pipeline development, mentorship and coaching models, and hybrid succession strategies that collectively enhance leadership preparedness and organizational resilience. These models have proven effective in fostering institutional performance, strengthening governance structures, and maintaining academic excellence during leadership transitions.

However, the review also revealed persistent challenges that limit the effectiveness and institutionalization of succession planning practices. These include organizational culture and resistance to change, inadequate institutional frameworks, limited leadership development mechanisms, resource constraints, and issues of diversity, transparency, and governance. Despite these constraints, the study highlights emerging opportunities through data-driven talent management systems, inclusive leadership pipelines, strategic policy frameworks, and digital transformation initiatives that can support the next generation of academic leaders.

Ultimately, effective leadership succession planning in higher education must move beyond ad hoc replacement processes to embrace a strategic, systems-thinking approach that integrates leadership development, institutional governance, and sustainability principles. Strengthened policy support, capacity building, and continuous mentorship will be vital to embedding leadership succession into the strategic culture of higher education institutions. By doing so, universities can not only ensure seamless leadership transitions but also cultivate resilient, visionary leaders capable of advancing innovation, equity, and sustainable growth in the academic landscape.

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