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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Strategic Leadership, Innovative Performance, Change Management, Higher Education	This study aimed to examine that how strategic leadership can improve the innovative performance in higher education institutions, and to what extent, change management can ease relationship between strategic leadership and innovative performance. In the contemporary era, where globalization and technological advancement demands the change and innovation to meet stakeholders' expectations, the higher education, in this regard, can play important role to remain academically relevant and stable to ensure desired outcomes. The strategic leadership has been considered as dynamic forces influencing the vision, culture, and mobilization of resources towards innovation. Thus, applying the quantitative research design, the data was collected from academic leaders and teachers in the higher institutions to chase hypothesized relationships as extracted from theoretical framework backed by existing literature. The results provide significant information for reaching desired conclusion and making decisions. In practice, the findings can provide useful information to university leadership and policymakers aiming to enhance the innovative performance using strategic leadership practices with the help of systematic and inclusive change management diverse strategies.
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INTRODUCTION

The modern knowledge-based economy put more pressures than ever upon the higher education institutions in confronting technological change, globalization, aligning market needs & demands and heightened expectations from employees, students, governments and society in general (Khan, Rooh & Naveed, 2022). The higher education is playing the significant role in transforming the institutions for teaching and research be seen as effective knowledge-generating institution (Khan,

Gerald, Islam & Saif, 2023). The institutions are adopting dynamic teaching, research initiatives and embraced digital technologies proactively towards societal and economic challenges (Rahimi, Jones & Bailey, 2024). In this competitive and dynamic space, the innovative performance has become significant measure of institutional efficiency & sustainability (Pedraja, Ponce & Miranda, 2025). The strategic leadership, in contradiction of conventional methods of leadership, aimed at routine management, short-term goals, is based on long-term vision, environmental scanning, and integration of institutional resources with long-term orientation to ensure goals achievements and prolonged success.

The strategic leadership, in higher institution, is charged with the role by defining clear strategic direction by creating culture that promotes creativity, experimentation, and inspiring cooperation of the academics and administration for ensuring desired consequences (Maziti, Chinyamurindi & Marange, 2018). The innovative performance involves the capability of institutions to bring novel academic programs, modernize teaching and learning process, increase the research productivity and come up with innovative administrative and governance practices to enhance sustainability and prosperity of institutions (Khan & Saqib, Rehan & Hamid, 2020). The strategic leadership is critical in influencing the ability of institutions to attain and maintain innovation in performance for change (Avolio & Drummey, 2023). The change management helps institutions overcome such challenges by effectively planning change, communicating and executing change initiatives in a way that reduces resistance and fosters commitment among stakeholders (Ahmad, Nahed, Alaa, Shaker, Zragat & Alamad, 2024), overwhelmed at required sustainability and motivation towards desired success.

The strategic leadership in itself is not inevitably relevant to the increased innovative performance, rather it tends to be a change-resistant as change management assumed key issue in interpretation that how strategic leadership can be transformed into real innovative deliverables in institutions (Zainol, Kowang, Fei & Kadir, 2021). The strategic leaders with virtuous change management skills are in better position to pilot their institutions over period of change by streamlining institutional processes, human resources, and culture to strategies for innovation (Maqbool & Humayun, 2023). The strategic leaders, being transparent, involved in decision-making and supporting in continuous manner, appropriate change management will help build trust and psychological preparedness of workforces, that are vital in implementation of innovative practices (Ahmad et al., 2024). Thus, the change management is likely to attain sustainable performance since the innovations are not just introduced, but are institutionalized and improved (Phillips & Klein, 2023). In this regard, change management can be regarded as pivotal driver of strategic leadership that can have an impact on innovative performance.

Objectives & Hypotheses

1. There is positive and significant association amid strategic leadership, change management and innovative performance in higher education context (H₁).
2. There is significant mediating role of change management in linking strategic leadership, and innovative performance higher educational context (H₂).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The leadership, in higher education, is responsible for the smooth functioning of institutional actions and tasks related to teaching, research and administration thereby for ensuring desirability and commitment towards the excellence (Khan, Farhat, Minas & Munir, 2020). The strategic leadership helps in creating environment where innovation can thrive over empowerment, commitment and motivation of workforces and provision of access towards actual use of intellectual & technological resources (Nahak & Ellitan, 2022). The traditional features of institutions are strongly embedded with dynamic systems of professionalism, and practices that may impede introduction of innovative ideas towards desired changes (Khan, Gerald, Islam & Saif, 2023). The strategic leadership gives a sense of direction & determination whereas change management makes this intent more effective over translating strategic visions into actionable practices and institutional procedures (Ahmad, Nahed, Alaa, Shaker, Zraqat & Alamad, 2024). Thus, there is a need to develop better theoretical knowledge and understanding of leadership traits to improve the rate of desired innovation in more complex settings.

The existing research on strategic leadership role in innovative performance indicates complicated and dynamically interconnected system of theoretical foundations that foresight the capability to allow institutions to maneuver unpredictability, motivate innovation and orienting institutional objectives with regard to the arising challenges (Alvi, Haider & Akram, 2020). This role is relevant especially in educational context wherein situations demand quality improvement, technological integration and competitive academic stand (Arar & Oplatka, 2022). The strategic leaders are not mere administrators, but builders of an institutional culture by creating and reinforcing climates that promote and reward creativity, risk-taking, and experimentation (Sivili & Boateng, 2023). Thus, leadership means a clear articulation of vision, long-term direction, mobilization of resources to strategic ends, and ability to create favorable climate to innovation performance in institutions (Khan & Khan, 2025). Thus, leadership and performance are leading predictors towards change in order to ensure the creativity and innovation for realizing the institutional tasks and related goals in competitive situations.

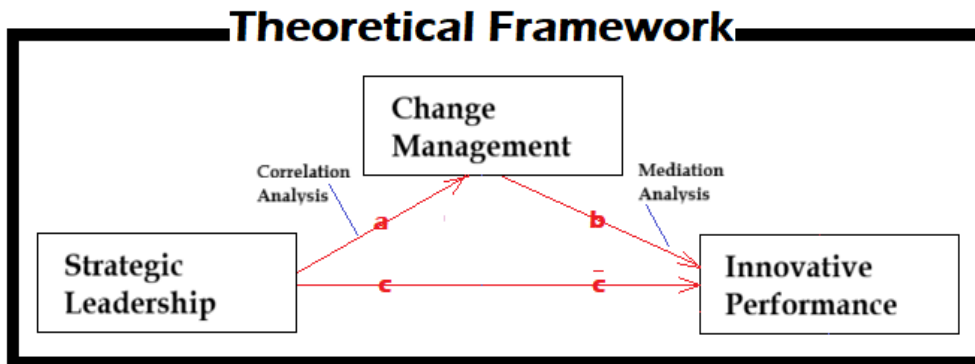
The theoretical positioning relies on strategic management theory and transformational leadership models and puts an emphasis on the role of leaders in determining value systems, involvement rates and institutional flexibility (Khan & Saqib & Idris, 2020). The literature in higher education shows that leadership is strongly linked to innovative performance measures meaning that leaders that are interested in long-term planning, proactive decisions and implementing strategic behavior can lead the institution in achieving measurable output in terms of institutional innovation processes (Khan, Farhat & Saqib, 2021). The leaders can take the performance outcomes of institution to the next level by establishing strategic priorities about innovation, involving the research productivity, curriculum modernization, and organizational learning instead of routine tasks and activities (Khan Idris & Mehmud, 2021). Similarly, the resistance to change and competing stakeholder interests are one of the problems that strategic leaders face (Ahmad et al., 2024), as leaders who are skillful in managing change initiatives assist institution to move from stability into transition thus opening the door of innovation.

The strategic management and leadership are the leading predictors towards change that ensures strong culture, workforces' creativity and institutional modernization over innovative performance thus influencing the desirability and commitment towards positive change (Doyle & Brady, 2018). The change management is based upon the need to create consistent structures of communication, involvement, and realization of shared objectives to facilitate change initiatives through formation of shared visions & common values (Zainol, Kowang, Fei & Kadir, 2021). The change management is conceptualized as procedural and cultural channel whereby leadership turns vision into creative actions, to see that how newly introduced policies, technologies and practices are institutionalized in institutional practices (Chukwuma, Govender & Onwubu, 2023). The literature revealed that leaders who are effective in managing change, making an inclusive process that includes capacity building and empower the institution to sustain a high degree of innovation, enhance performance, and take advantage of sustainable competitive advantage (Khan, Siddique & Khan, 2024), in the educational context.

The literature revealed that strategic management and leadership is challenged with contextual constraints including resource constriction, regulatory settings, and resistance towards changes by cultural norms and values (Doyle, T., & Brady, M. (2018). The strategic leaders are frequently called upon to balance the academic autonomy with change coordinated efforts to bring together various stakeholders to share innovation goals (Avolio & Drummey, 2023). The literature has identified strategic leadership as key force behind innovative performance in higher education and has found change management a vital mediating process (Ahmad, Nahed, Alaa, Shaker, Zragat & Alamad, 2024). The leaders influence the innovative behavior by creating visionary leadership, building conducive organizational cultures and capital leading organizations through the turbulent process of change (Alavi, Mortazavi & Jamshidv, 2025). Although empirical research in specific context of higher education is yet to grow, the research highlights the significance of leadership that does not simply express strategic priorities but is involved in actual process of managing transformative processes for innovation.

The present research seeks to examine strategic leadership in facilitating innovative performances within higher education institutions through mediation role of change management. The available literature studied leadership and innovation separately, but it has not fully discussed mechanisms through which the leadership behaviors influence the outcome of innovation (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021). The literature revealed that there is a need for more integrated approaches that may view change management as transitional process amid strategic leadership and innovative performance (Maqbool & Humayun, 2023). Through the empirical study of these relationships, research aims to add to the literature of leadership and higher education by providing more profound insight into the way strategic leadership leads to innovation by proper change management practices (Ahmad et al., 2024). The research results will be of great interest to university leaders, administrators, and policymakers because they will highlight the need to integrate strategic leadership with organized and involving change management procedures to attain the long-term innovative performance in higher education.

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The quantitative research design was used to conduct the study and chase the objectives related with examination of association among strategic leadership, change management and innovative performance and mediating role of change management in linking the strategic leadership, and innovative performance in particular context by using the positivism approach aligned with aims of study through structural equation modeling. The positivism approach is playing a crucial role in quantitative studies by emphasizing the objectives' measurement, hypothesis testing, and use of the statistical analysis to identify generalizable causal relationships based on observable & empirical data. The primary data was collected from workforces hailing from higher education institutions in southern region, KP, Pakistan. The sample of 320 was selected through the statistical formula for collecting data over structured questionnaire adapted from the previous research studies (Yamani, 1967). Similarly, the simple random technique was used to access the sample through population to ensure the desired generalizability. By using survey approach, both secondary and primary data were analyzed through different statistical procedures to fund the answers of research questions and reaching the conclusion. The present study ensured all the ethical considerations as required for systematic study; results are produced in results section to extract the required information for desired conclusion.

RESULTS OF STUDY

The results section is important in research wherein main findings are presented and wherein the decisions are made about acceptance and rejection of hypotheses. The results of study are produced in systematic manner to extract required information needed for making suitable decisions about the hypotheses as extracted from theoretical framework to produce desired information as used for decision making.

Table 1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Variables	Items	CM	Alpha	CR(RHO_A)	CR(RHO_C)	AVE
Strategic Leadership	SL1	0.901	0.941	0.942	0.955	0.809
	SL2	0.929				
	SL3	0.929				

	SL4	0.856				
	SL5	0.879				
Change Management	CM1	0.886	0.794	0.809	0.866	0.619
	CM2	0.740				
	CM3	0.797				
	CM4	0.711				
Innovative Performance	IP1	0.898	0.742	0.743	0.886	0.795
	IP2	0.885				

Table 2 Discriminant Validity

HTMT	CM	IP	SL
CM			
IP	0.880		
SL	0.739	0.543	
Fornell-Larcker	CM	IP	SL
CM	0.786		
IP	0.689	0.891	
SL	0.667	0.455	0.899

The PLS-SEM was used for statistical analysis to check the reliability and validity of scales. Table 1 presents factor loadings, as Cronbach alpha values and composite reliability and average variance extracted. While Table 2 presents the HTMT ratio and Fornell-Larcker criteria for the discriminant validity. Threshold for loadings given by [Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle and Gudergan \(2018\)](#) is each item must score loading higher than 0.70; alpha >0.70, composite reliability >0.70 and AVE >0.50, Table 1 shows that all items of strategic leadership, change management and innovative performance met the criteria, moreover, [Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt \(2015\)](#) and [Hair et al., \(2018\)](#) criteria for HTMT and [Fornell and Larcker \(1981\)](#) criteria for discriminant validity is also met in the study. Hence, it is assumed that scales used in this study are reliable and valid for ensuring the accuracy and internal consistency for understanding the results in more systematic manner, keeping in view the outcomes from the analysis.

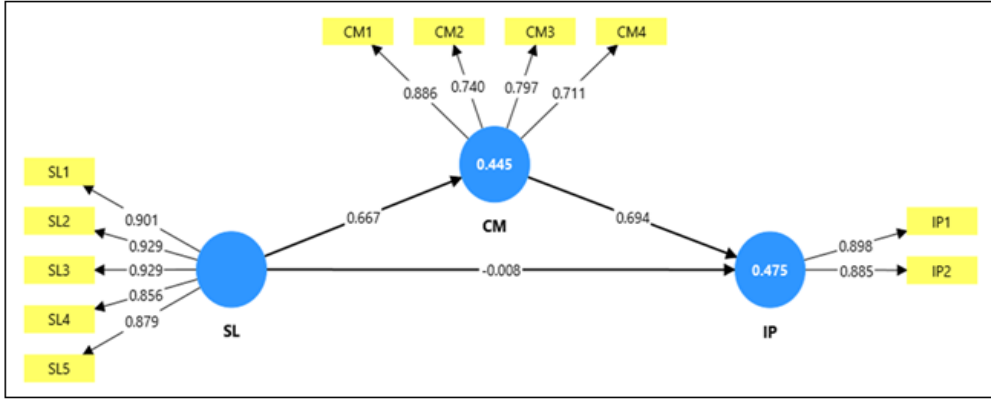
Table 3 Correlation Analysis

Variables	Mean	SD	SL	CM	IP
Strategic Leadership	3.1971	.75908	1 322 .492**	1	
Change Management	3.3376	.68010	.000 322	322	
Innovative Performance	3.3297	.61987	.671** .000 322	.528** .000 322	1 322

The correlation procedure was used to association amid strategic leadership, change management and innovative performance. Above tables presents the mean, standard deviations and correlation

among predictors, mediator, and criterion variables. The mean value of strategic leadership is $M_{SL} = 3.1971$, $SD = 0.759$, further analysis of results shows that mean score of change management $M_{CM} = 3.3376$, $SD = 0.68010$, likewise, mean score of innovative performance $M_{IP} = 3.329$, $S.D = 0.619$. the relationship between strategic leadership (SL) and change management (CM) ($r = 0.492^{**}$, $p < 0.01$); SL and innovative performance (IP) ($r = 0.671^{**}$, $p < 0.01$); CM and IP ($r = 0.528^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, hypothesis is accepted in study.

Figure 2 Measurement Model (CFA)



The table 3 provides the findings of direct effects. The direct effect of SL on IP ($\beta = -0.008$, $SE = 0.054$, $t = 0.147$, $LLCI = -0.110$, $ULCI = 0.098$) is insignificant. On contrary, CM and IP ($\beta = 0.694$, $SE = 0.047$, $t = 14.838$, $LLCI = 0.596$, $ULCI = 0.780$); is significant, it implies that one percent increase in change management could possibly change IP up to 69.4%. Also, SL & CM ($\beta = 0.667$, $SE = 0.030$, $t = 22.186$, $LLCI = 0.602$, $ULCI = 0.720$) found significant, 66.7% change is expected in change management due to strategic leadership.

Table 4 Direct Effects

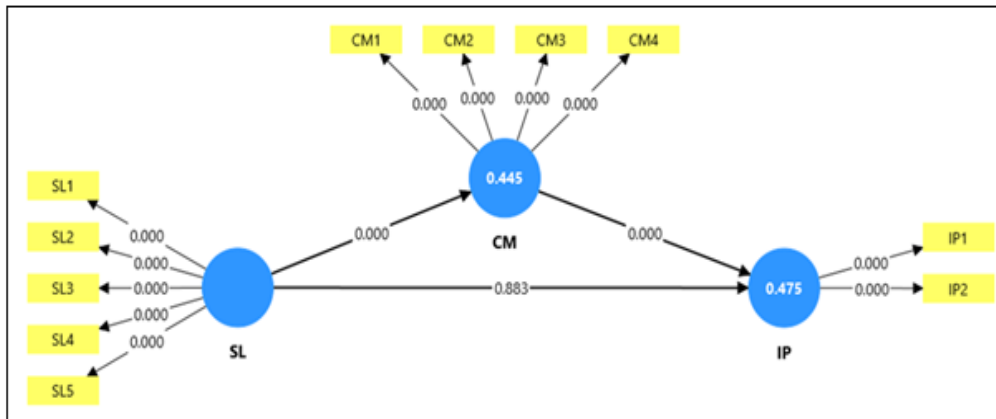
Relationships	β	SE	T	P	LLCI	ULCI	Support
SL \rightarrow IP	-0.008	0.054	0.147	0.883	-0.110	0.098	No
CM \rightarrow IP	0.694	0.047	14.838	0.000	0.596	0.780	Yes
SL \rightarrow CM	0.667	0.030	22.186	0.000	0.602	0.720	Yes

Tale 5 Indirect Effects

Relationships	β	SE	T	P	LLCI	ULCI	Support
SL \rightarrow CM \rightarrow IP	0.463	0.037	12.438	0.000	0.392	0.537	Yes

The mediating effect of change management on the relationship between strategic leadership and innovative performance ($\beta = 0.463$, $SE = 0.037$, $t = 12.438$, $p < 0.05$, $LLCI = 0.392$, $ULCI = 0.537$) implies that change management could possibly bring 46.3% change in the relationship between SL and IP.

Figure 3 Structural Model for Testing Hypotheses



DISCUSSION

The findings of study provide significant information for developing the linkages among leadership practices, change processes and institutional innovation outcome. The results suggest that strategic leadership has direct impact on innovative performance, that supports the theoretical hypothesis that the leaders who practice long-term vision, ensure environment, and align resources can thrive innovation (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021). The findings of study highlight the biasedness of the direct impact of strategic leadership on innovation, with the results that change management process is a significant mediating variable (Ahmad et al., 2024). The mediating influence indicates that success of strategic leadership in promoting innovation is depending on the planning, communication and implementation of change initiatives in the institutions (Ferede, Endawoke & Tessema, 2024). The change management is operationalization of strategic intent, a system to convert abstract strategic demands into actionable channels to be adopted by workforces through leadership and innovation (Santa, Torres, Sarmiento & Morante, 2025), for ensuring the desirability towards excellence in the diverse circumstances.

By investing in strong change management models, considered by participative planning, shared involvement, capacity building and active management, strategic leaders increase institutional resilience towards innovative practices (Magbool & Humayun, 2023). The research also shows that effectiveness of communication and involvement in decision-making are certain aspects of change management that have significant influence in mediating the relationship between leadership and innovations (Ahmad et al., 2024). These results are consistent with organizational change theory, which is relevant to the assumption that effectiveness of change initiatives strongly depends on the extent of stakeholders' engagement and communication effectiveness (Phillips & Klein, 2023). The involvement in decision-making fosters feeling of ownership in the stakeholders that is essential in academic settings whereby professional autonomy and collegialism in the governance are greatly valued (Khan & Khan, 2025). The leadership and innovation are thus greatly supported by change management in different contexts including higher education for ensuring the sustainability in the competitive environments.

The change management seems to be greater in institutions, where decision-making process is more decentralized, that implies that when strategic leadership decentralized authority and empowered units in form of structured change processes, innovation becomes more prone to succeed (Ahmad et al., 2024). The fact that leadership and change processes are interdependent supports significance of incorporating visionary leadership and virtuous change management practices in an integrated manner (Chukwuma, Govender & Onwubu, 2023). To institutional leaders, it means that they will have to not only pursue the development of strategic leadership capabilities but also put in place institutionalization of change management capabilities (Magbool & Humayun, 2023). The change leadership, communication and stakeholder engagement can reinforce the institutions' ability to overcome challenges of innovation (Santa, Torres, Sarmiento & Morante, 2025). The findings offer empirical evidence to support the institutions for the models of organizational change that focus on the symbiotic relationship between the strategic leadership vision and the smart implementation innovative practices.

CONCLUSION

The findings of present study confirms that strategic leadership is vital in improving the innovative performance in higher education institutions through creation of vision, promotion of innovation-supportive culture and making institutional resources congruent with long-term objectives. The results indicate that change management is important as facilitator through which strategic leader affects innovation and facilitates institutions to optimally complete transitions, minimize resistance and institutionalize innovative ideas and practices. When strategic leaders become change agents and lead change processes in an active way through communication, stakeholder engagement and consistent learning they provide environment, that enhances innovation and overall performance of an institution. The interrelatedness of strategic leadership and efficient change management can become critical in context of higher education institutions that aim to attain sustainable innovation, flexibility and competitiveness within ever-evolving educational setting. Thus, the study provides significant information about the hypothesized relationships among strategic leadership, change management, innovative performance in higher education context to produce new information and contribute knowledge.

Recommendations

1. The institutions need to invest in strategic leadership skills of academic and administrative leadership through significant training programs & counselling that may focus on visionary thinking, innovation facilitation, and long-term strategic thinking for realizing the desired and leading outcomes.
2. The institutions ought to incorporate holistic change management models that support open communication, stakeholder engagement, motivation, commitment & resilience for change that may be helpful in turning strategic efforts into novel practices for ensuring the desired and leading success.
3. The culture of academic leadership must be innovation-supportive, and it must inspire the experimentation, interdisciplinary teamwork & positive utilization of feedback to preserve the on-going process of improvement in teaching, research and administration in institutions for required reputation.

4. The academics and policymakers ought to harmonize institutional policies and performance evaluation systems and resource distribution mechanisms with the strategic leadership and performance for change management goals to boost innovative performance and long-term institutional sustainability.

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