

SHIFTING THE GOALPOST IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CHALLENGES FOR ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP IN PRIVATE INDIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

The market-oriented reforms 1991 stimulated the increase of private universities in India, presenting unique challenges and opportunities for academic leadership in these institutions. This research contributes to understanding and promoting effective leadership in private universities in India in the third decade of the 21st Century. It identifies essential competencies for the Vice-Chancellors and Deans, estimates the extent of existing gaps, and highlights priorities to achieve academic excellence with financial and social sustainability. A combination of methods are used in the study. A comparative literature review of academic leadership ascertained 25 critical competencies for effective leadership. Purposive sampling, its validation for reliability, was followed by in-depth interviews with 22 academic leaders in Indian private universities to obtain their views on these competencies, including their assessment of the current and required levels among academic leaders in Indian private universities today. The findings underscore the critical need to redefine strategic and effective leadership priorities. While traditional requirements such as academic excellence and research quality remain foundational, contemporary demands necessitate additional competencies. These include strategic foresight, change management proficiency, financial expertise and the ability to foster positive societal impacts. The analysis reveals significant gaps, particularly in visionary leadership, data-driven decision-making, and proactive change management for academic leaders in private universities in India.

Keywords: Academic Leadership Competencies, Challenges in Academic Leadership, Private Indian Universities, Leadership Development.

INTRODUCTION

Private universities in India have increased in numbers in the wake of the economic liberalisation and market-oriented policies of 1991, giving rise to three types of institutions: government self-financing organisations, government-supported private self-financing and private education foundations (Singh et al. 2020). Study of Privatisation in Indian Higher Education: Pros & Cons. *New Horizons in Management, IT & Commerce*, 91-95). The more recent 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) has broadened the scope of higher education “to address what it views as the “*many growing developmental imperatives*” in India (p.3). It fosters a culture of research and innovation in higher education institutions (Ravindra; Kulkarni 2020), encourages flexibility in curriculum and pedagogy (Sujatha, 2020) and emphasises high-quality standards in higher education (Pradeep, 2020). However, many private universities have often paid less attention to the importance of accreditation or quality rankings (Reddy et al., 2016). For example, in 2023, three of the top 10 universities in the NIRF ranking were private universities. Studies suggest that while there has been an increase

in private universities with a positive effect on associated employment and income opportunities, the costs have increased, and faculty and infrastructural quality often need to be improved Agarwal (2006).

The NEP has also noted the importance of promoting effective governance and leadership, which “*enables the creation of a culture of excellence and innovation in higher education institutions*” (p.49). Some studies have considered the qualities necessary for academic leadership in this changing environment. Misra & Aithal list important attributes for academic leadership involved with academics, administration, as well as research, publication and extension activities suggesting strategies to improve employee engagement in higher education (2023)¹. Also, Mukhopadhyay and Kumar have noted that effective academic leaders can realize the goals of the NEP 2020 by “*emphasizing the delicate equilibrium required between the pursuit of quality and the imperative of quantity*” involving “*a strategic re-evaluation of resource distribution, emphasizing the need for increased funding in alignment with the ambitious goals of the NEP*” 2023, 1187).

Most of these studies have not focused on opportunities and challenges confronting the academic leadership in private universities in contemporary India that need to optimise the quality and quantity of their academic offerings while ensuring efficiency of costs and increased growth in a growing competitive environment. These institutions are confronted by some restrictions: (a) public funding for all these aims is available for public institutions of higher learning, and (b) they must abide by the rules and regulations that guide the governance of all higher education. For example, the University Grants Commission (UGC) is the main body responsible for coordinating, determining and maintaining higher education standards in India. As the ‘*Chief Executives and Academic Heads*’, the Vice-Chancellors are expected to strictly adhere to their universities’ Acts, Statutes and Ordinances and comply with Acts, Regulations and Guidelines of the National Statutory/Regulatory bodies.

This paper contributes to understanding how academic leadership can be developed and improved in India’s contemporary private universities under these changing dynamics in the post-NEP 2020 context. It analyses and ranks the necessary competencies for such leadership under these changing circumstances and policies, evaluates the current competencies among Deans and Vice-Chancellors, and identifies critical gaps prioritised for action. The research lays the foundation for necessary programmes and practices for effective academic leadership that could support and sustain private universities in contemporary India.

METHODOLOGY

The discussion and argument are developed along the following lines. The introduction provided the context and key challenges facing private universities in the contemporary context. The following section (3) presents a review of relevant existing research on Academic Leadership to (a) list some key traditional competencies and (b) identify special competencies required for contemporary private universities to achieve academic excellence in a growing competitive context and in a cost-effective manner. Based on this review, a list of 25 essential competencies for Academic Leadership was created. The central analysis of the paper is elaborated in the following manner:

Section 4 deals with how these competencies were checked with 22 academic leaders/experts in Indian Higher Education. Expert random purposive sampling was used to select individuals from India. Some experts are currently in leadership roles in India’s higher education statutory bodies, and four have previously been vice-chancellors in universities. Another eight experts have previously led private universities; two have been on the steering committee of non-governmental education advocacy groups in India. Each expert deeply connects with higher education in India as a leader in organisations or committees.

The data was statistically tested for reliability, examining variations in responses across all respondents. It was found that 70% of the data fell within one standard deviation of the mean, with normal distribution curves derived in each case, affirming the reliability of the collected data for further investigation.

The experts rated the competencies on a scale of 1-5 and indicated the current gaps in private universities in India (Table 1).

Competency Parameter Value	Importance (A) for Effective Leadership Perspective	The Level (B) of Competence in Leadership currently
5	Very Critical	Very High
4	Critical	High
3	Important	Moderate
2	Desirable	Satisfactory
1	Good to have	Low

In-depth discussions were conducted with the expert academic leaders in face-to-face interviews of one to two hours each over 2022-2023 on their ratings and views on academic leadership in private universities.

Section 4 analyses the data in the following order:

1. Priority Competencies for a Leader in Private Higher Education
2. Current Levels of Leadership Competencies in Private Higher Education
3. The Gap between Required Level and Current Level of Competencies
4. Priority List of Competencies Mapped for Intervention
5. Competencies where Critical Intervention is required
6. Clustering of Academic Leadership Attributes

Based on these identifications and analyses, conclusions were drawn on the competencies that contemporary academic leadership in private universities in India needs to pursue to develop effective strategies that will gain these institutions competitive advantages by promoting, in addition to academic excellence, a combination of financial acumen and positive social impact.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

There has been a range of studies on leadership (Barker, 2001; Kezar et al., (2006), including trait theories, behavioural theories, power and influence theories, and contingency theories (Khan et al., 2016), as well as associated frameworks for leadership (Kezar et al., 2006; Middlehurst, 2012; Seters & Field, 1990). At a general level, leadership is the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organisations of which they are members (House R. et al., 2002; Abdalla et al., 2017) and capable of taking risks with high levels of imagination (Curtis et al., 2017). Leadership is viewed as particularly critical to developing sound visions and strategies. As noted by John Kotter, a renowned leadership expert, "*Leaders establish the vision for the future and set the strategy for getting there; they cause change.*" (Kotter, 1996).

While some of these characteristics are relevant for all leadership, it is clear that the context of higher learning institutions requires specific features such as academic excellence and research prowess. In principle, traditional academic leadership is meant to utilise the available resources and allocate them appropriately to target the predetermined educational

goals. (Ali et al., 2017), including promoting social impact, community engagement, labour market success, and institutional stability (Weber, 2016),. However, the changing competitive environment of the university exposes the limitations of traditional academic leadership (David et al., 2001), as there is increased pressure to focus on the efficiency and effective use of resources. As such, more corporate/managerial practices enter academic administration, leaders will need to have a sense of ownership and identity with the long-term interests of the organisation and the welfare of subordinates (Huy, 2001; Mintzberg, 2009). Contemporary Academic Leadership also needs to respond effectively to a culture of changing metrics, policy, audits and an emphasis on flexibility, transparency and marketisation ((Rowley et al., 2003; Anthony et al. 2017); Deem, 1998; Garforth & Kerr, 2009).

As a result, formalised training in leadership, educational management, research management, organisational culture, financial decision-making, strategic planning, and time management are critical components for one's professional competence, empowering academics working in administration to plan for their organisation's performance in an open and transparent world (Baker et al., 2019; Bisbee, 2007; Gmelch, 2013; Rowley & Sherman, 2003). In these ways, academic leaders will be able to identify the need for change, allocate resources to manage and facilitate the shift actively, monitor and motivate during the change and finally deliver change within higher education, both at the institutional level and the departmental/college level (Anthony et al., 2017). Critical administration and leadership responsibilities are planning, academic entrepreneurship, data-driven decision-making, revenue generation, creating professional and educational pathways for learners, curriculum development, and business development and marketing. As noted previously, the NEP has highlighted the importance of academic leadership in higher learning to bring about effective change in a changing environment in line with long-term development goals.

Based on the literature review, the following competencies (given below in Table 2) were identified as necessary for academic leadership in Private Universities. They are not ranked in order of importance.

Competency Serial No.	Description
1	Highly reputed academic credentials
2	Sound administration ability
3	Ability to conduct and promote research
4	Ability to create a sound vision (for the University/school)
5	Sound understanding of the market and regulations
6	Ability to create a strategy
7	Ability to plan (short and long-term)
8	Strong financial decision-making abilities
9	Ability to understand, allocate and utilise resources
10	Ability to identify the need to change
11	Ability to actively manage and deliver change
12	Ability to monitor work distributed
13	Ability to motivate
14	Ability to lead and influence people
15	Ability to achieve organisational goals
16	Ability to display the human side of business
17	Adept at networking and building relationships
18	Ability to improve reputation and rankings
19	Ability to increase social impact
20	Ability to encourage community engagement
21	Ability to maintain institutional stability
22	Ability to effectively manage human resources

23	Academic Entrepreneur
24	Data-driven decision maker
25	Adept in revenue generation

ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP ESSENTIALS

Priority Competencies for a Leader in Private Higher Education

Many competencies are necessary for Private University Leadership, with the ability to create a sound vision for the university/school, display the human side of the business, and be a data-driven decision-maker rating as most important. Competencies like a sound understanding of the market and regulations and an adeptness in revenue generation score lower in the priority list, but they, too, were rated between essential and critical. The Mean Value of the Importance of Competencies was 4.10 out of 5; 68% of the competencies had higher values than the mean, and 32% had values lower than the mean (Table 3).

No.	Description	Importance (A)
4	Ability to create a sound vision (for the University / school)	4.50
16	Ability to display the human side of business	4.50
24	Data-driven decision maker	4.50
3	Capability to conduct and promote research	4.40
13	Ability to motivate	4.40
15	Ability to achieve organisational goals	4.40
11	Ability to actively manage and deliver change	4.30
14	Capability of leading and influencing people	4.30
18	Capability to improve reputation and rankings	4.30
22	Capability of effectively managing human resources	4.30
1	Highly reputed academic credentials	4.20
2	Sound administrator	4.20
10	Ability to identify the need to change	4.20
6	Ability to create a strategy	4.10
7	Ability to plan (short and long term)	4.10
17	Adept at networking and building relationships	4.10
21	Ability to maintain institutional stability	4.10
9	Ability to understand, allocate and utilise resources	4.00
19	Ability to increase social impact	3.90
12	Ability to monitor work distributed	3.80
20	Ability to encourage community engagement	3.80
8	Strong financial decision-making abilities	3.60
5	Sound understanding of the market and regulations	3.50
23	Capable Academic Entrepreneur	3.50
25	Adept in revenue generation	3.50
	Mean value of responses	4.10
Number of Values Greater than equal to mean (68%)		
Number of Values Less than Mean (32%)		

Current Levels of Leadership Competencies in Private Higher Education

The existing levels of academic leadership competencies scored much lower than the required level, with a mean of 2.23 (satisfactory). The mean importance of competencies is 4.10 (between critical and highly critical) (Table 4).

No.	Description	Level (B)
22	Capability of effectively managing human resources	3.00
21	Ability to maintain institutional stability	2.90
12	Ability to monitor work distributed	2.80
1	Highly reputed academic credentials	2.70
16	Ability to display the human side of business	2.60
13	Ability to motivate	2.50
15	Ability to achieve organisational goals	2.50
17	Adept at networking and building relationships	2.50
18	Capability to improve reputation and rankings	2.50
2	Sound administrator	2.40
9	Ability to understand, allocate and utilise resources	2.40
14	Capability of leading and influencing people	2.40
3	Capability to conduct and promote research	2.30
6	Ability to create a strategy	2.20
5	Sound understanding of the market and regulations	2.10
11	Ability to actively manage and deliver change	2.10
10	Ability to identify the need to change	2.00
7	Ability to plan (short and long term)	1.90
19	Ability to increase social impact	1.90
4	Ability to create a sound vision (for the University / school)	1.80
20	Ability to encourage community engagement	1.80
25	Adept in revenue generation	1.80
8	Strong financial decision making abilities	1.60
23	Capable Academic Entrepreneur	1.50
24	Data-driven decision maker	1.50
	Mean value of responses	2.23
Number of Values Greater than equal to mean (52%)		
Number of Values Less than Mean (48%)		

52% of the values were more significant than the mean, and 48% were lesser than the mean. The experts found that current leaders adequately display leadership competencies such as managing human resources, maintaining institutional stability, and monitoring and distributing work. Still, they need to gain the ability to make decisions based on data, academic entrepreneurship, and financial-making abilities.

Gap between Required Level and Current Level of Competencies

No.	Gaps in Academic Leadership Competencies (Decreasing order)	A-B
24	Data-driven decision maker	3.00
4	Able to create a sound vision for the department / school	2.70
7	able to plan - short and long term	2.20
10	identify the need to change	2.20
11	actively manage and deliver change	2.20
3	able to do and promote research	2.10
23	be an academic entrepreneur	2.00
8	strong financial decision making	2.00
20	encourage community engagement	2.00
19	increase social impact	2.00
6	able to create a strategy	1.90
14	capable of leading and influencing people	1.90
13	able to motivate	1.90

15	able to achieve organisational goals	1.90
16	display the human side of business	1.90
2	good administrator	1.80
18	improve reputation and rankings	1.80
25	adept in revenue generation	1.70
9	ability to understand, allocate and utilise resources	1.60
17	adept at networking and building relationships	1.60
1	highly reputed academic	1.50
5	understanding of the market and regulations	1.40
22	effectively manage human resources	1.30
21	maintain institutional stability	1.20
12	monitor work distributed	1.10
	Mean value of responses	1.88
Number of Values Greater than equal to mean (52%)		
Number of Values Less than Mean (48%)		

The above table 5 shows the competencies with the highest gap between the desired and existing levels. The mean value of the gaps is 1.88 out of 5, with 52% of the gap values being more significant than the mean and 48% being less than the mean. Some of the most critical gaps were in the ability to be a data-driven decision-maker and the ability to create a sound vision for the department/school. However, expectations were met in areas like their ability to monitor work distribution and maintain institutional stability.

Percentage Gap between Competencies Required and Current Level

A further analysis was done on the percentage gap between the importance of each competency and its current levels in leaders to indicate which competencies are critical to developing leadership success in Private Universities today. These are classified as very critical (50%), Critical (40 – 50%) and Essential (less than 40%) (Table 6).

No	Description	A Importance	B Level	A-B	%Gap (A-B)/A * 100
24	Data-driven decision maker	4.50	1.50	3.00	66.67
4	Ability to create a sound vision	4.50	1.80	2.70	60.00
23	Capable Academic Entrepreneur	3.50	1.50	2.00	57.14
8	Strong financial decision-making abilities	3.60	1.60	2.00	55.56
7	Ability to plan (short and long-term)	4.10	1.90	2.20	53.66
20	Ability to encourage community engagement	3.80	1.80	2.00	52.63
10	Ability to identify the need to change	4.20	2.00	2.20	52.38
19	Ability to increase social impact	3.90	1.90	2.00	51.28
11	Ability to actively manage and deliver change	4.30	2.10	2.20	51.16
25	Adept in revenue generation	3.50	1.80	1.70	48.57
3	Capability to conduct and promote research	4.40	2.30	2.10	47.73
6	Ability to create a strategy	4.10	2.20	1.90	46.34
14	Capability of leading and influencing people	4.30	2.40	1.90	44.19
13	Ability to motivate	4.40	2.50	1.90	43.18
15	Ability to achieve organisational goals	4.40	2.50	1.90	43.18
2	Sound administrator	4.20	2.40	1.80	42.86
16	Ability to display the human side of business	4.50	2.60	1.90	42.22
18	Capability to improve reputation and rankings	4.30	2.50	1.80	41.86
9	Ability to understand, allocate and utilise resources	4.00	2.40	1.60	40.00
5	Sound understanding of the market and regulations	3.50	2.10	1.40	40.00
17	Adept at networking and building relationships	4.10	2.50	1.60	39.02
1	Highly reputed academic credentials	4.20	2.70	1.50	35.71

22	Capability of effectively managing human resources	4.30	3.00	1.30	30.23
21	Ability to maintain institutional stability	4.10	2.90	1.20	29.27
12	Ability to monitor work distributed	3.80	2.80	1.10	28.95
	Mean value of responses	4.10	2.23	1.88	
GAP Classification					
Very Critical (More than 50 %)					
Critical (More than 40% and Less than 50%)					

Nine of the 25 identified academic leadership competencies have a critical gap and require urgent intervention. Five competencies show a gap of less than 40%, indicating that, though essential, these competencies may be a low priority for intervention.

PRIORITY LIST OF COMPETENCIES MAPPED FOR INTERVENTION

The identified percentage gaps in leadership competencies are grouped into Very Critical for Intervention, Critical, and Essential based on their percentages. Within each priority group, the competencies are sorted by importance level in descending order as rated by the experts (Table 7).

Competencies where Very Critical Intervention is Required – Percentage Gap of More than 50% Sorted by Descending Order of Individual Competencies

	Description	A	B	A-B	%Gap
24	Data-driven decision maker**	4.50	1.50	3.00	66.67
4	Ability to create a sound vision**	4.50	1.80	2.70	60.00
11	Ability to actively manage and deliver change**	4.30	2.10	2.20	51.16
10	Ability to identify the need to change**	4.20	2.00	2.20	52.38
7	Ability to plan (short and long-term)**	4.10	1.90	2.20	53.66
19	Ability to increase social impact*	3.90	1.90	2.00	51.28
20	Ability to encourage community engagement*	3.80	1.80	2.00	52.63
8	Strong financial decision-making abilities*	3.60	1.60	2.00	55.56
23	Academic Entrepreneur*	3.50	1.50	2.00	57.14
Representation:					
**Very Critical High Importance					
*Very Critical Moderate Importance					

The analysis shows that academic credentials are the most critical area for developing and selecting a Vice-Chancellor or Dean at a private university. The data shows that though this continues to be necessary, there are far more critical interventions and competency development areas. The need to be a data-driven decision-maker, the ability to create a sound vision, identify the need to change and actively manage and deliver change are critical to the university's success. The senior leadership of private universities who have risen to the position because of their academic prowess continue to focus on research and academics.

They find it challenging to lead the organisation in a changing environment. Developing leaders who understand and increase the value of the university's impact on the community and environment is critical. The impact could be through applied research, projects, environmental initiatives, industry training, and community interventions. The ability to think and act like an entrepreneur and make sound financial decisions has also shown percentage gaps above 50%, demonstrating the urgent need for development initiatives.

In today's environment, the role of a university has continued to evolve, and knowledge creation with a purpose and effectiveness has shifted the goalpost for university leaders and the university—solving more significant multidisciplinary problems and achieving financial independence has become critical. That said, universities need leaders with a new set of competencies today, and intervention is vital.

Competencies where Critical Intervention is required – (Percentage Gap of 40 – 50%) sorted by Descending order of Importance of Individual Competencies

	Description	A	B	A-B	%Gap
16	Ability to display the human side of business**	4.50	2.60	1.90	42.22
3	Ability to conduct and promote research**	4.40	2.30	2.10	47.73
13	Ability to motivate**	4.40	2.50	1.90	43.18
15	Ability to achieve organisational goals**	4.40	2.50	1.90	43.18
14	Ability to lead and influence people**	4.30	2.40	1.90	44.19
18	Ability to improve reputation and rankings**	4.30	2.50	1.80	41.86
2	Sound administrator**	4.20	2.40	1.80	42.86
6	Ability to create a strategy**	4.10	2.20	1.90	46.34
9	Ability to understand, allocate and utilise resources*	4.00	2.40	1.60	40.00
25	Adept in revenue generation*	3.50	1.80	1.70	48.57
5	Sound understanding of the market and regulations*	3.50	2.10	1.40	40.00
Representation:					
**Critical High Importance					
*Critical Moderate Importance					

The next set of data describes the competencies where the gap percentage between the importance stated by the experts and the current level in the market is between 40 and 50. In these competencies, the importance levels are still very high, and intervention is critical to displaying the human side of business and achieving organisational goals. Without this, the organisation will suffer. Deans and Vice Chancellors must be able to conduct and promote research, create a strategy, and lead and influence people (Table 8).

Competencies where Moderate Intervention is required – (Percentage Gap of below 40) sorted by descending order of importance of individual competencies

CI	Description	A	B	A-B	%Gap
22	Capability of effectively managing human resources	4.30	3.00	1.30	30.23
1	Highly reputed academic credentials	4.20	2.70	1.50	35.71
17	Adept at networking and building relationships	4.10	2.50	1.60	39.02
21	Ability to maintain institutional stability	4.10	2.90	1.20	29.27
12	Ability to monitor work distributed	3.80	2.80	1.10	28.95

The third and final set of competencies is still essential, but there is no urgent need to create an intervention. These include managing human resources and having high academic credentials. We should take these competencies for granted in Academic Leaders. They are essential but a given, and based on the expert data, they do not need immediate focus, as the above two sets did (Table 9).

Clustering of Academic Leadership Competencies

Experts discussed that some of these competencies are linked and overlap. For example, no. 8, strong financial decision-making, is associated with no. 9, the ability to understand, allocate and utilise resources, linked to no. 25, adept in revenue generation. Similarly, no.10, identifying the need to change, is related to no. 4, actively managing and delivering change, which could directly give rise to no 15, able to achieve organisational goals. These were further discussed with the experts to gain insights and group them into clusters.

Six clusters of knowledge areas grouping similar competencies were created based on the experts' input. These knowledge clusters and their characteristics, as listed in Table 10, are enumerated below (Table 10).

	Cluster Description	Components
A	Academic Excellence	1,3,18
B	Leadership and Inspiration	13, 14, 17
C	Management Strategy	4, 6, 10, 11, 22, 23
D	Planning & Administration	2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 15, 21, 24
E	Financial Acumen	8, 25
F	Service to Society	16, 19 , 20

The section below represents discussions with the experts on each of these clusters and can be used to create a better understanding of the same.

Cluster: Academic Excellence

(Highly reputed academic credentials, ability to conduct and promote research, ability to improve reputation and rankings).

All the respondents highlighted the value of having Vice-Chancellors and Deans who are reputed academics as key to respecting their judgements and advice. “*You cannot force respect*”, said a past All India Universities Association chairman – “*academics will only respect their leader if he has earned it with his academic prowess*”. As discussed in the literature review, this competency aligns with what has been indicated worldwide. The respondents also agreed that an academic leader should be able to do and promote research. Research is crucial for the reputation and rankings of the university, and this is one of the responsibilities of the vice chancellor and dean. Two experts suggested that doing research is different from developing a research strategy, and the latter is an area that could require greater attention and be developed further in academic leadership.

Cluster: Leadership and Inspiration

(Ability to motivate, ability to lead and influence people; adept at networking and building relationships).

The literature review has also highlighted the importance of an inspiring leader in stimulating and motivating academics, non-academics, and students. Leadership is a competency that the experts identified as a gap in existing Vice-Chancellors and Deans. They recognised that leadership abilities can be improved, and academics needed more exposure or training in leadership. Many scholars get promoted as university leaders because of their academic achievements. They had to then deal with broader demands, such as motivating people and generating a more expansive vision for the institution. A senior Department of

Science and Technology official noted, “No wonder these people feel out of their depth”. This lack of competence in leadership, particularly in creating vision and influence, contrasts with the corporate sector, where the leaders are given extensive training and coaching on these topics.

Cluster: Planning and Administration

(Sound administrator, understanding of the market and regulations, ability to plan - short and long term, ability to understand, allocate and utilise resources, ability to monitor work distributed, to achieve organisational goals, maintain institutional stability, data-driven decision maker)

Administration has always been a part of the role of an Academic Leader. Like government organisations and hospitals, education institutes depend on administrators to formulate plans, frame policies and set objectives. The experts interviewed placed importance on achieving organisational goals and data-driven decision-making. One of the experts said that it is often difficult to balance academic and administrative priorities. Another focused on the availability of data and the ability to use this to determine critical decisions. He recommended that training be given to high-potential faculty on the management track so that they are adept at dealing with data. One expert who works with a statutory body said that his academic stature was the main focus when he was selected as a Dean. He needed more planning and administration competence.

Cluster: Financial acumen

(Strong financial decision-making, adept in revenue generation)

Revenue and financial stability are essential for a university in the Private Sector. As the university's leaders, the Deans and Vice-chancellors are expected to be adept at financial decision-making. Experts emphasised that this is an essential competency that often needs to improve in academics. A leader from the Association of Indian Universities pointed out that promoters of private universities usually place a person at the university to look after the financial strategy and operation. Even so, Vice-Chancellors need to understand the impact of various decisions on the economic stability and growth of the organisation. Multiple financial decisions like how much money to allot for the promotion of research, how much is enough for the upkeep of the campus and faculty salaries are day-to-day decisions that have to be taken by the Vice Chancellors and Deans.

Cluster: Management and Strategy

(Ability to create a sound vision for the university, ability to develop a strategy, ability to identify the need for change, ability to manage and deliver change actively, ability to manage human resources effectively, able academic entrepreneur)

All the experts said that it was essential for university leaders to be capable of creating a sound vision for the university/department. They emphasised that, over the last decade, management competencies have increased in importance. At the same time, they also recognised that these competencies only existed among a few university leaders. In addition, there were some differences and controversies regarding how these qualities could be expressed in universities, as there were different expectations in the private and government sectors. For example, apart from the academic vision, a university leader is expected to create an overall vision, positioning, and branding for the university and has yet to gain experience, training or knowledge of how to do this. In addition, as noted by a former vice chancellor now with an advocacy group, “There is often a change of vice-chancellors in private

universities, so there is no motivation to create and implement a vision or work towards long-term change". University leadership must also be familiar with and even undertake market research, market penetration, positioning, and other relevant processes to develop and promote strategy, which was often not prevalent.

Cluster: Service to Society

(Increase social impact and encourage community engagement)

The traditional role of education has been to develop knowledge that could help improve society and the world. Thus, universities have historically promoted what one might refer to as the "human" aspect of life. As one of the experts from a prestigious government department noted, *"The university's role is to develop knowledge that will serve society"*. Another confirmed, *"Academic leaders usually focus on engaging with social causes and are deeply interested in people and society"*. In private universities, however, such priorities could conflict with the need for financial sustainability. As a result, the traditional roles of universities must change in line with market logic. A balance between human and commercial interests would be ideal. As noted by an expert – previously Dean and Vice-Chancellor: it is essential to include people with disability and from underrepresented sections of society. Such insights highlight the need for further discussion on the role of a university in addressing more societal concerns such as sustainability, equity, and inclusion and whether and whether our university leaders are competent to promote these ideas.

Cluster-wise Average Values and Prioritisation for Intervention

Each cluster's mean importance and current values were calculated and further analysed based on the mean percentage gap (Table 11).

CI	Knowledge Cluster	Cluster-wise average values sorted by importance and gap			
		A	B	A-B	(A-B)/A*100
		Importance	Current State	Gap	% Gap
C	Management Strategy	4.31	2.20	2.119	49.11
F	Service to Society	4.10	2.20	1.900	46.39
E	Financial Acumen	3.84	1.91	1.925	50.16
A	Academic Excellence	4.44	2.46	1.983	44.65
B	Leading / Inspiring People	4.49	2.57	1.921	42.80
D	Planning & Administration	4.18	2.39	1.794	42.93
	Mean Values	4.23	2.29	1.94	46.01

Looking at the clusters above and the mean values of importance, current state, and percentage gaps, one can see that the critical development requirements of Deans and Vice Chancellors have changed dramatically. Previously, academic excellence, planning and administration, and leading and inspiring people were the main areas where a University Leader required developing competency.

The data shows that today, it is more critical for the Vice-Chancellors and Deans to be well-equipped with management strategies. They should have financial acumen and understand the university's impact on society. Service to humanity is becoming relevant—research, patents, sustainability, and servicing local needs are ways to differentiate one university from another.

Within the percentage gaps of the cluster means, prioritising was done based on critical competencies and the importance of cluster means.

Table 12 shows the top-priority competencies and clusters where urgent intervention is required.

Intervention	Cluster, Competency
Top Priority (Most Immediate)	C4, C6, C10, C11, C22, F16
Priority (Immediate)	C23, F19, F20, E8, E25, A1, A3, A18
Essential	B13, B14, B17, D2, D7, D15, D21, D24
Progressive	D5, D9, D12

CONCLUSIONS - SHIFTING THE GOALPOST

The increase of private universities in India in the 21st century has resulted in key opportunities and challenges for their academic leadership. Based on expert feedback, this study explores the gaps between the required competencies and clusters of competencies for strong leadership in private universities and the existing levels of these in India. This study underscores the critical need for leadership competencies beyond academic excellence and research prowess. It highlights the essential role of strategic foresight, financial acumen, and social impact initiatives in navigating the complexities of contemporary higher education. The data shows that the most severe gaps relate to clusters of competencies around financial acumen, management strategy, and service to society. Individual competencies that need critical attention for development are the ability to make decisions based on data, create a vision, and identify and manage change.

As private universities increasingly blend corporate strategies with educational goals to foster innovation and lasting impact, the challenge lies in harmonizing these diverse objectives. Balancing the pursuit of academic excellence with the imperative to adapt to evolving societal needs remains pivotal. Addressing these leadership gaps enhances institutional resilience and positions private universities to fulfil their broader missions in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

END NOTES

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