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Research on the Effective Leadership for Resilience in Higher Education in China

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Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s). Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ARWU	Academic Ranking of World Universities
QS	Quacquarelli Symonds
THE	Times Higher Education World University Rankings
URAP	University Ranking by Academic Performance
USNWR	US News and World Report Best Global University Rankings
CWCU	Centre for World-Class Universities
RBV	Resource-Based View
ASERT	Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool
CI	Confucius Institute
CoP	Community of Practice
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HoDs	Heads of Departments
PD	Power Distance
SCD&RAC	Science of the Design along with Rationality of Action
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEER	Sustainable Enabling and Evaluating Reflective
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TPACK	Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge
UI	University-Industry
UNESC	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WEF	World Economic Forum
WOM	Word of Mouth

DMI	Document Method of Interpretation

Abstract

Maintaining a vibrant and enriched learning environment in higher education is becoming increasingly important worldwide. Given that importance, considerable leadership effort are being adopted to incorporating strategies, policies, and practices to ensure that institutes remain competitive. Having said that, higher education institutions are still facing novel challenges from both macro-environmental and internal perspectives, such as university reputation and ranking, fierce competition, international recruitment, scarce educational resources, graduate outcomes and student experiences.

While Higher Education literature indicates an increasing trend in the effort to enhance the understanding of leadership effort and resilience drive, most of the literature relates to western countries. There is distinct lack of attention on the appropriate leadership strategies to address the challenges and changes facing higher education in China. This research aims to contribute to filling this existent gap, the study will investigate leadership approaches to build resilience and competitive in higher education institutions in China. The study of leadership insights will be complimented by a large survey of students in Chinese Higher Education to understand the main determinant that enrich the student learning experience.

To achieve the aim of this research, a pragmatism philosophy was adopted. Within that philosophical grounding, a multi method research approach was applied. The qualitative tool of this study involved 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with different level university leaders among 6 public higher education institutions to understand effective leadership characteristics and how leaders address the challenges and changes that higher education institutions in China are facing. Subsequently, in the quantitative phase, a questionnaire was designed and the survey administered to students in Higher Education. The results yielded a very high response rate of 713 completed

questionnaires.

The findings from both the qualitative interviews and large survey reveal many significant findings that contribute to the current knowledge of leadership in HE and student satisfaction. This study provides a conceptual framework of effective leadership and student academic experience in higher education institutions in the Chinese context, extending the knowledge from authentic leadership theory, Kotter's change theory and related theories. From the student survey the regression results revealed a new hierarchy of factors that results in student satisfaction. These results have major implications in terms of the allocation of resources and priorities for Chinese Higher Education institutions to ensure they remain resilient and globally competitive.

The results from the leadership interviews emphasize the importance of authenticity, trust, inspiration, collaboration and support provided for leaders to make an enduring impact in their institute. The student survey results reveal that due consideration must be invested in promoting academic integrity, teaching quality, academic support and social experiences to enrich the student experience.

Keywords: authentic leadership, student experience, student satisfaction, higher education intuitions (HEIs), China

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Chapter One Introduction

1.1 Overview

As society's most resilient institutions, higher education institutions not only foster individual intellectual growth and personal development, but also play a significant role in a thriving society. Beyond knowledge acquisition, higher education institutions transform individuals into critical thinkers, problem solvers, and responsible citizens. From a societal perspective, higher education contributes to social progress by producing educated citizens who understand innovation and governance (Chen & Shih, 2025). Ensuring the continued impact of higher education requires a more sustainable approach. To embrace sustainability, higher education institutions (HEIs) require innovative management, openness, strategic planning, stakeholder capacity-building, and the establishment of multi-partner networks (Sanchez-Carrillo, Cadarso, and Tobarra, 2021).

Leadership plays a crucial role in organisational behaviour and development (Domínguez-Escrig, 2023; Durrah et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2025; Spector et al., 2025), and is critical to organisational success. The leadership concept has evolved over the last hundred years, yet difficult to define due to its complexity (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Wright et al., 2025). Multiple leadership theories have emerged, including distributed leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, visionary leadership, shared leadership, and ethical leadership (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Canterino et al., 2020; Nawaz et al., 2021; Turner, 2022; Vogel, 2022; Spector et al., 2025; Durrah et al., 2024).

Research has identified characteristics and skills critical to understanding leadership, for example, trust (Zhang, Bowers and Mao, 2021; Spector et al., 2025), respect (Williams, 2013), encouragement of decision-making (Xu et al., 2016; Durrah et al., 2024), and fairness, honesty, and open communication (Lesinger et al., 2017; Durrah et al., 2024). Other factors that may relate to leadership include leadership role (Doyle, 2018; Spector et al., 2025; Wright et

al., 2025) and leadership development (Tran & Nghia, 2020; Zulfqar et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2025).

Leadership discourse has predominantly focused on business organisations, with very little insight into higher education (Latif & Marimon, 2019; Wright et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025; Yuting et al., 2025). Furthermore, there is little empirical research on leadership for resilience in higher education in China (Zhang et al., 2025; Yuting et al., 2025). From the perspective of leadership significance in higher education, there is an increasing focus on identifying which leadership practices are most effective for addressing the challenges facing higher education in the 21st century. Despite increasing research effort, there is still a need for further research to enhance domain knowledge development (e.g., Zhang et al., 2025; Yuting et al., 2025; Spector et al., 2025; Durrah et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2025), in the Chinese setting (Zhang et al., 2025; Xu & Yang, 2024; Lu, 2024) and in the Chinese educational domain in particular (e.g., Zhang et al., 2025; Xu & Yang, 2024; Lu, 2024). This is an opportunity to undertake research and contribute to the effective leadership strategy for resilience in higher education in China.

This chapter firstly introduces the research background of leadership in higher education and student experience in higher education in Section 1.2. Then the gaps in leadership discourse in higher education are flagged in Section 1.3. The research rationale is described in Section 1.4. Research aim, questions, and research significance are presented in Sections 1.5 and 1.6, respectively. Finally, research structure is presented in Section 1.7.

1.2 Research Background

1.2.1 Challenges in Higher Education

With the emergence of the fourth industry, higher education institutions are facing multiple challenges. For example, the contemporary higher education leaders need to consider how to address the challenges regarding the fierce competition (Argento et al., 2020; Polyakov et al., 2020), technical investment

(Carless and Winstone, 2023; Leibold and Schwarz, 2022; Wolstencroft and Leanne, 2021), internationalization (Naidoo et al., 2022; Oladipo & Sugandi, 2022; Uzhegova and Baik, 2022), university ranking and reputation (Amado and Juarez, 2022; Khan and Hemsley-Brown, 2024; Polyakov et al., 2020), students experience (Amado, Guzmán and Cuero, 2023; Dean, Shubita and Claxton, 2020; D'Uggento et al., 2023) and graduate outcomes (Monterio and Almeida, 2021; Rees, 2021; Romgens, Scoupe and Beausaet, 2020). In particular, student experience and satisfaction are critical challenges in higher education institutions (Carless and Winstone, 2023; Khan & Hemsley-Brown, 2024; Wong & Chapman, 2023).

Since universities have realized the importance of student experience, diverse strategies have been proposed towards enhancing students learning, which is at the heart of higher education (Chan, 2023; Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024; D'Uggento et al., 2023). Several management and related initiatives shape the student experience throughout the educational journey, such as teaching-learning improvement, classroom design exploration, sufficient learning support and resource (Yap, Hew and Skitmore, 2022).

1.2.2 Leadership in Higher Education Institutions

It is essential that higher education institutions embrace effective leadership to survive and thrive in the future (Ekman, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2018). Nowadays, in order to achieve different outcomes in HEIs, various leadership styles and practices have been adopted in higher education, such as distributed leadership (Arar & Taysum, 2020; Floyd & Fung, 2017); authentic leadership (Soares & Lopes, 2020; Srivastava & Dhar, 2019); servant leadership (Nawaz et al., 2021; Turner, 2022) and other leadership styles (Penalva, 2021; Shaked, 2021; Vogel, 2022).

Distributed Leadership

Scholars argue that distributed leadership positively impacts organisational change (Canterino, Cirella and Shani, 2018). That viewpoint is supported by

prior literature (Jones & Harvey, 2017), which notes that distributed leadership enables leadership capacity building and improves people engagement in collaborative practices for sustainability. Floyd and Fung (2017) argue that staff in HEIs may prefer distributed leadership to other traditional leadership models.

Authentic Leadership

Another stream of literature associates positive organisational developments with authentic leadership. For example, Srivastava and Dhar (2019) contend that authentic leadership positively influences organisational behaviour and encourages leaders in educational institutions to make authentic, fair, and transparent decisions. This positive impact of authentic leadership is also suggested by Soares and Lopes (2020); however, with regard to academic performance in higher education.

Servant Leadership

A further stream in the leadership discourse argues that servant leadership will drive effective organisational operation. For example, Turner (2022) proposes that servant leadership could optimise wellbeing in higher education, while further literature (Aboramadan, Dahleez and Hamad Mohammed, 2021) argues that servant leadership improves task performance in HEIs by stimulating staff work engagement and affective commitment.

1.2.3 Changes Required for Effective Leaders in HEIs

Leal Filho et al. (2019) emphasise that when sustainable development initiatives are embraced in HEIs, considerable organisational changes occur. Leadership strategies in higher education are constantly evolving as the social structure changes and the nature of education is ever-dynamic (Ersozlu & Saklan, 2016). As noted by Lordache-Platis (2017), the leadership strategy in HEIs needs to be more student-focused because academic productivity is weighted more toward student satisfaction than toward university rankings. The need for greater focus on student satisfaction has been echoed in recent literature (e.g., Aman et al., 2023; Qureshi, 2021). According to Geschiwind

(2019), sensemaking and sense-giving are closely related to organisational change, and Degn (2018) explains how academics make sense of external pressure in HEIs. As organisational change gains greater emphasis within the sustainable development focus, deep and systemic learning also becomes more important within the organisation (Adams, Martin, and Boom, 2018). Resource allocation has been a key source of tension in university governance (Wang, 2019), and insights from Sweden (Finnveden et al., 2020) indicate that smaller HEIs may have fewer opportunities for resource allocation. As further literature (Barrett, Gaskins and Haug, 2018) noted, HEIs are tending to be more proactive in recognising measures of cultural change brought about by progress, such as international student enrolment, funding needs and placement retention. In a related contribution, Bolmsten and Kitada (2020) note that open and flexible management styles, including multiple worldviews for lifelong learning, are needed to foster cooperation among stakeholders in responding to sustainable development challenges.

1.2.4 Higher Education Institutions in China

The Chinese higher education system comprises two primary categories: regular higher education institutions (HEIs) and adult HEIs. After the economic reforms in 1978, the average annual growth rate of student enrolment was 8.5 per cent over approximately two decades. The post-reform era, especially from the 1990s onward, witnessed a pronounced acceleration in the expansion of higher education. This trajectory was further reinforced in 1998, when the Chinese government formally adopted the massification of higher education as a policy objective, precipitating a substantial surge in student enrolments across all institutional types within the sector (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2026).

HEIs in China are responding positively to the global challenges and international standards (Han, 2024; Marginson, 2017). Over the past decade, particularly in 2010 and 2020, China's higher education has experienced

significant development, gained international recognition, and established several world-class universities (Krishna, Zhang and Jiang, 2025). The Chinese state has concentrated national resources to propel a select group of universities toward global leadership through state-led elite university initiatives (Wong et al., 2024). In reflecting on these earlier schemes, policymakers recognised that achieving world-class status would require overcoming the inherent defects of a rigid, centrally controlled system—particularly its lack of competition and institutional dynamism (Wong et al., 2024). The autonomy of leading universities administered by the central government, and their vision to meet global standards and achieve international reputation, are inseparable from the government's coordinating role (Krishna, Zhang and Jiang, 2025).

To enable Chinese HEIs to compete globally, the Chinese government introduced three major policies: Project 211, Project 985, and Double First-class Universities (Krishna, Zhang and Jiang, 2025). The policy instrument ‘Overall Planning of Project 211 Construction’ was issued by the government in 1995. This policy instrument led to the construction of 112 universities and became the largest key higher education project since the founding of China (Lin & Wang, 2022; Krishna, Zhang and Jiang, 2025). Project 985 was officially launched alongside the ‘Education Revitalisation Action Plan for 2003–2007’ in 2004 (Lin & Wang, 2022; Krishna, Zhang and Jiang, 2025).

The leading universities in China are working to achieve world-class rankings under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (Bodenhorn, Burns and Palme, 2020). The implementation of the 211 Project and the 985 Project (‘211’ and ‘985’) has been regarded as one of the two most important policies since the 1990s (Lin & Wang, 2022). In 2015, the overall plan for promoting the World-class Universities Construction and First-class Disciplines (Double First-class Plan, for short) replaced the ‘211’ and ‘985’ plans and became the most important policy in higher education in China (Bodenhorn, Burns and Palme, 2020; Lin & Wang, 2022). Meanwhile, Chinese universities have implemented

systematic reforms to adapt to significant social and technological transformations over the last few decades (Cho et al., 2021; Han, 2024; Liu, 2023).

These developments benefit the elite university. One of the biggest benefits of being classified as a Project 985 or Project 211 University is the influx of government funds (Shu, Sugimoto and Larivière, 2021). This institutional stratification has put elite universities in a privileged position, in which they obtain the majority of government resources and their faculty have both better career advancement opportunities and greater access to the international community (Wong et al., 2024). Take Project 985 universities as an example; as the highest tier of elite universities in China, they were instrumental in nurturing top-tier talent, advancing frontier scientific research, fostering industry-academia-government partnerships, and bolstering institutions in underdeveloped areas and disciplines. The project has yielded remarkable outcomes. Many universities achieved new heights in discipline construction, with several fields nearing or attaining world-class levels through its focus on world-class university development and innovation platforms (Krishna, Zhang and Jiang, 2025).

However, it is argued that transparency and rigour should be advocated within the institutionalised stratification of the Chinese higher education system; otherwise, the artificial classification is likely to lead to the suppression of innovation and inefficiencies (Shu, Sugimoto and Larivière, 2021; Wong et al., 2024).

Additionally, within the Chinese context, Confucian culture constitutes the main body of Chinese traditional learning, with an emphasis on authority, hierarchy, obedience, rules, and neutral behaviour (Zhu & Engels, 2014), which places Chinese HEIs in a different context from those in Western countries. The significance of Confucianism in Chinese society is elaborated in Section 2.6.2.1.

1.3 Research Gaps

Leadership typically takes place in a dynamic economic, social and societal context (Stolez & Sailer, 2021). The existing literature has contributed to creating and constantly enriching the field of leadership. However, it mainly focuses on Western countries. The existing literature shows a lack of attention to the appropriate leadership strategies to address the challenges facing higher education. In particular, there is a lack of understanding of the key characteristics of successful leaders in HE and how leaders address the challenges facing higher education in China in the 21st century.

Secondly, while researchers have investigated the relationship between organisational change and leadership in higher education (Bolmsten & Kitada, 2020; Finnveden et al., 2020; Wang, 2019), it must be borne in mind that leadership practices in higher education are influenced by the contextual, relational and distributed factors (Dopson et al., 2019). HEIs' leaders have to manage change in accordance with their external and internal stakeholders (Geschwind, 2019). Yet, the existing management literature shows a lack of attention to what changes need to be managed in higher education from a dynamic perspective in China. To understand change management processes, it is important to examine how leadership practices influence team working and information sharing in teams (Zhang et al., 2025).

Thirdly, researchers have overlooked how higher education prepares students for future opportunities. Some scholars have focused on teaching and learning, feedback, skills development, and student support services (Bouhout, Askitou and Es-soufi, 2024; Carless & Winstone, 2023; Donnelly, Penny and Kynn, 2024; Govender & David, 2023). However, there is limited discussion on how to improve the student experience in Chinese higher education. There is a lack of a conceptual framework for the empirical investigation of how to satisfy students and improve the student experience.

Therefore, this study will address these research gaps in the existing literature, towards making theoretical and practical contributions regarding leadership in

higher education in China, with a focus on resource investment to enrich the students' experience.

1.4 Research Rationale

This study was triggered by challenges in higher education and, more critically, by additional technology-induced developments globally (Yuting et al., 2025). Leadership is a vital function within organisations (e.g. Spector et al., 2025; Domínguez-Escrig, 2023; Eva et al., 2018; Durrah et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025), and given that fact, much research effort has been invested into enhancing leadership theory. Despite this, more needs to be done to enhance general understanding of leadership theory (e.g., Spector et al., 2025; Yuting et al., 2025; Durrah et al., 2024), and in the educational sector in particular. There is an increasing practical need to understand leadership in HEIs and its impact on student learning performance and the enhancement of learning outcomes (e.g., Yuting et al., 2025; Adams & Velarde, 2021). Further research that targets the individual student experience through appropriate leadership within the complex social and technological environment is pertinent (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2022; Yuting et al., 2025). In a related perspective, further research emphasises the need for a better understanding of leadership practices in HEIs and their impact on student satisfaction (e.g., Aman et al., 2023; Qureshi, 2021).

There is a paucity of empirical research on leadership practices in HEIs in the Chinese context in the current literature (e.g., Liu, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025; Lu, 2024). Empirically examining the relationship between leadership styles and the student experience is a core premise towards bridging the gap in Chinese higher education research. There is a need to enhance understanding of leadership strategies for resilience in higher education in China by utilising various methodological approaches. This pertinence for research in the Chinese setting, and in the educational sector in particular, has been echoed in recent literature (e.g., Zhang et al., 2025). Further recent literature on the

Chinese educational setting emphasises the need for more research that illuminates students' experiences in the Chinese HEIs setting (Lau & Zheng, 2025). Inspired by the gaps in the literature, this research adopted a pragmatic approach to develop a resilient leadership framework for higher education in China.

1.5 Research Aims and Objectives

To date, the understanding of leadership in higher education is limited, and even more so in the particular case of HEIs in China (e.g., Liu, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025; Lau & Zheng, 2025). To help fill the gap in the literature, this research aims to understand the key behavioural characteristics of leaders who are developing strategies to ensure the continued relevance and resilience of higher education in China. To achieve this aim, this research was driven by the following objectives:

1) To understand what the key characteristics of a successful leader in HEIs are.
2) To understand how leaders can address challenges facing HEIs.
3) To identify what actions are required for leaders to manage change.
4) To determine a pragmatic solution for how universities can create an enriched learning experience environment for students.

Based on the above objectives, the following research questions are addressed in this study:

1) What are the key characteristics of successful leaders in HEIs?

2) What challenges are leaders in HEIs facing, and how are they addressing these challenges?

3) What actions are required for leaders to manage change in higher education?

4) What investments are required to create an enriched learning environment for students?

1.6 Research Significance

The contributions of this study are of theoretical and practical nature.

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

Academically, there are twofold contributions to the literature. Firstly, this research contributes to the authentic leadership and Kotter's change theory in higher education, particularly in the Chinese context. Secondly, this study contributes to students' experience understanding in Chinese HEIs through the theoretical lens of satisfaction.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

Practically, the study sheds light on effective strategic decisions that HEI leaders can make to achieve resilience in higher education in China. Firstly, the study helps leaders in higher education in China better understand how to address the challenges facing higher education. Secondly, the study helps leaders in higher education in China to better understand the actions required for resilient higher education. Finaly, this research illuminates student learning priorities. These insights offer critical resource for university leadership for achieving a resilient HEI.

1.7 Research Structure

This study consists of seven chapters, and Figure 1.1 (Research Flowchart) depicts the thesis structure.

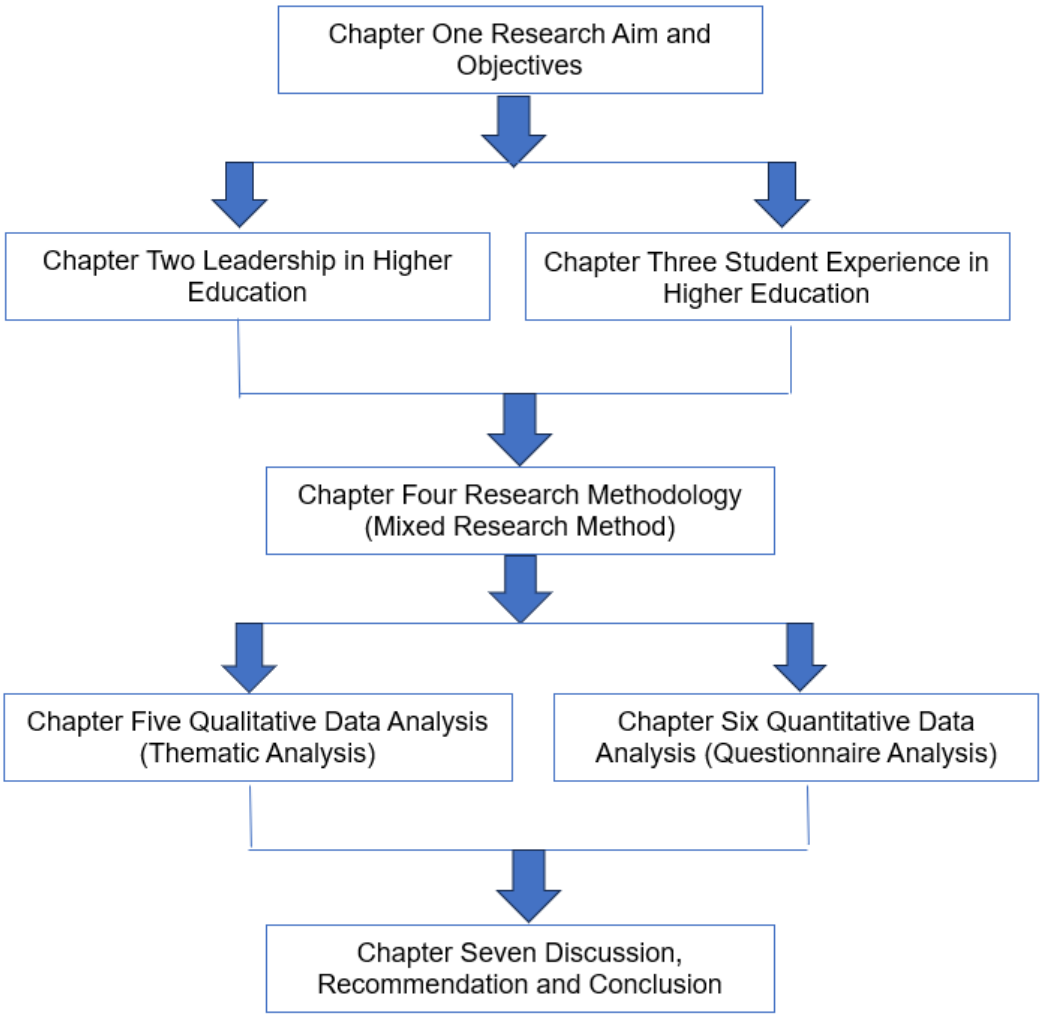


Figure 1.1 Research Flowchart

Source: Author

Chapter One of this thesis describes the research background, clearly outlining the underlying gaps for this research. Keeping in mind the challenges that HEIs are facing, the research aim and objectives are described in this chapter. The study aims to develop an effective leadership strategy towards achieving resilience in higher education in China. The rationale and significance of this research are also explained in this chapter.

Chapter Two reviews relevant literature on leadership in higher education. The chapter begins by addressing the challenges facing higher education, and subsequently discussed leadership style, leadership role, leadership development and the key leader characteristics. Furthermore, the relationship between change and effective leadership is considered in this chapter. Kotter's

change theory is introduced in the change management section, and leadership in higher education in China is reviewed. Confucian culture, the main body of Chinese traditional culture, which places Chinese HEIs in a different context from Western countries, is also considered in this chapter. Based on a critical analysis of previous literature, the first conceptual framework of effective leadership for resilience in higher education in China is presented.

Chapter Three reviews relevant literature on student experience in higher education. Recognising that the quality of higher education is influenced by students' perceptions and expectations, students' satisfaction is considered in this chapter. Other relevant themes considered in this chapter include teaching and learning, skills development, feedback, student support and services, social environment, and academic integrity. In addition, the university's reputation perception and internationalisation are discussed as they play important roles in the higher education landscape. The conceptual framework of student experience in higher education in China is presented. To conclude, the conceptual framing of this research is presented, showing how the core theories and concepts interrelate and collectively connect to the theoretical framing of this research.

Chapter Four introduces the research methodology, explaining research philosophy, methodological design, data collection methods, the researcher's role and reflexivity. Aligning with the pragmatism paradigm, a multi-method approach was adopted to gain deep insights into the leadership strategy and student experience in higher education in China. Firstly, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with leaders in higher education. Subsequently, a quantitative questionnaire was administered involving students in higher education institutions in China.

Chapters Five and Six present the data analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data, respectively. In Chapter Five, thematic analysis was utilised to make meaning out of the qualitative data. The six-step process for thematic

analysis was first explained; thereafter, the results were presented. The processes followed to ensure qualitative validity were explained, and the visual map showing links between themes and discussion was also presented.

Chapter six presents the quantitative data analysis and results based on the survey results.

In the last chapter (Chapter Seven), the key conclusions from the study are summarised. The emergent conceptual framework from this study is presented in this chapter. The theoretical and practical implications of this research are outlined, as well as the limitations of the study acknowledged. Lastly, future research directions and the personal reflection on the doctoral research journey are presented.

Chapter Two Leadership in Higher Education

2.1 Introduction

Leadership is important for organisational behaviour and success (Hughes et al., 2018; Northouse, 2016; Durrah et al., 2024). Though complex and difficult to define (Ishak & Kamil, 2016), the leadership concept has evolved considerably in the last century (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Wright et al., 2025). Multiple leadership theories have emerged, namely, distributed leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, visionary leadership, shared leadership, ethical leadership, etc (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Beyer, 2012; Canterino et al., 2020; Eva et al., 2018; Meuser et al., 2016; Northouse, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2025; Durrah et al., 2024). However, most leadership research has focused on business organisations, with relatively less attention to higher education (Latif & Marimon, 2019; Wright et al., 2025). Therefore, to fill the research gap, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of leadership in the higher education sector.

This chapter is one of two literature review chapters that explain the theoretical framing of this research. It is organised into five main sections. The chapter began by addressing the challenges that higher education institutions face. Following that, the key characteristics of a successful leader and how leaders can effectively address the challenges facing higher education are discussed. The analysis of what actions are required for leaders to effectively manage change in higher education is the focus of the third part. The chapter concludes with a review of the literature on effective leadership for resilience in higher education in China.

2.2 Challenges Faced by HEIs

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a critical role in the social transitions and advancements, especially from the beginning of the fourth industrial revolution (Gleason, 2018). Higher education institutions are considered the most resilient institutions in society (Gull, Parveen, and Sridadi, 2024). HEIs,

however, face major challenges of a macro-environmental and internal nature that undermine their resilience capacity. The typical challenges that HEIs face include fierce competition (Argento et al., 2020; Elrehail et al., 2018; Loomes et al., 2018; Polyakov et al., 2020), marketisation (Ferlie & Trenholm, 2017; Polyakov et al., 2020), scarce resource (Argento et al., 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2020; Okolie et al., 2019; Latif, 2019), digital technology capability (Akciland & Bastas, 2021; Butler-Henderson & Crawford, 2020; Singh et al., 2021; Srivastava, et al., 2020; WEF, 2020), international recruitment (Oladipo & Sugandi, 2022; Naidoo et al., 2022; Wu, 2019; Prysor & Henley, 2018; Loomes et al., 2018), university reputation and ranking (Polyakov et al., 2020; Sathiyaseelan, 2023). The increasing demand regarding student experience and satisfaction is a further major challenge that higher education leaders face (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Khan & Hemsley-Brown, 2024; Wong & Chapman, 2023).

2.2.1 International Student Recruitment

With increasing globalisation, higher education institutions can more easily access international markets to recruit students (Oladipo & Sugandi, 2022). For one thing, international students can be a valuable resource for the intellectual environment, bringing a global perspective and experience in student development (Wu, 2019). On the other hand, as higher education becomes increasingly commercialised, international student recruitment has become a big business and even forms a core economic contributor to universities, which is particularly evident in the USA, UK, Australia, Canada and some Western countries (Martisosyan et al., 2019; Naidoo et al., 2022).

However, as noted by Martisosyan et al. (2019), international students face financial, academic, and social adjustment challenges, including tuition affordability, language difficulties, and culture shock. Thus, the university-level support and service have been highlighted for international student success in host societies and universities (Martisosyan et al., 2019).

Consequently, some scholars have proposed strategies to attract international students (e.g., James and Derrick, 2019; Martisosyan et al., 2019). According to Martisosyan et al. (2019), various US universities and colleges are embracing innovative practices, such as language support, academic programs, career development, and mental well-being support, in their engagement with international students. In addition to social and cultural events organised by universities, study and employment opportunities may not only meet international students' financial needs but also facilitate their college engagement and social adjustment at host universities (Martisosyan et al., 2019).

On their part, James and Derrick (2019) suggest that many universities develop internationalisation strategies to attract international students through marketing and recruitment activities tailored to their individual cultures and settings. For example, in response to the dynamic market, many Western HEIs build international partnerships, expand programmes, and establish overseas campuses. Oladipo and Sugandi (2022) identify university collaboration, English-taught programmes, digital channels, and student advocacy as core international student recruitment strategies. Further, they suggest that higher education institutions should have a clear understanding of the target market and of how international students make choices about study content and location. Naidoo et al. (2022) note that market orientation and international experience help HEIs make suitable pricing strategies. The target students tend to make decisions based on university rankings and the programmes offered. Therefore, HEIs need to leverage the "reputation" angle to attract more prospective international students. Specifically, HEIs should make student offers selectively, improve the academic ranking and launch innovative programmes to enhance their competitiveness (Naidoo et al., 2022).

2.2.2 University Ranking

As competition among universities intensifies in the global educational services

market, universities are striving to improve their international rankings (Marginson, 2017; Polyakov, 2020). International university rankings are regarded as versatile, useful, and practically indispensable tools for systematic university comparison, indicating the performance and potential of leading universities and reflecting their status at the global level (Polyakov, 2020). According to Peters (2019), several global ranking systems have been used to measure university performance since 2003. The ranking systems include:

- Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) http://www.shanghairanking.com/
- QS World University Rankings (Quacquarelli Symonds, QS) https://www.topuniversities.com/qs-world-university-rankings
- Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE) https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings
- University Ranking by Academic Performance (Informatics Institute of Middle East Technical University, URAP)

http://www.urapcenter.org

- US News and World Report Best Global University Rankings (USNWR) https://www.usnews.com/education/best-global-universities

International university rankings strategically restructure the higher education system to reflect global status and competitiveness (Polyakov, 2020; Peters, 2019). However, there is some scepticism about the widespread use of international university rankings for marketing and management in HEIs (Fernández-Cano et al., 2018; Marginson, 2017; Peters, 2019). The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) was created by the Centre for World-Class Universities (CWCU) at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and has been copyrighted and published by Shanghai Ranking Consultancy since 2009 (Moed, 2017). Safon (2020) argues that university rankings are partially contaminated by the halo effect pervading citation practices and peer review processes. Marginson (2017) argues that reputation is the main driver of

ranking outcomes, and the competition mainly focuses on research performance. Ranking indicators refer only to certain activities at universities. As for research metrics, humanistic social science and scholarly work not in English are excluded. ARWU focuses mainly on research performance (Marginson, 2017); hence, Fernández-Cano et al. (2018) criticise ARWU's omission of three basic university missions: management, training, and service to the community. Moed (2017) points out that the current university ranking systems are one-dimensional and don't provide tools to observe multi-dimensional patterns. More insight is needed into how institutional coverage, indicator standards and selection, and rating methods influence institutions' ranking positions (Moed, 2017).

According to Marginson (2017), global, national, and local strategies are three world-class university strategies. Due to the different institutions' missions, scopes, and patterns, the trend of world-class university development is both convergent and divergent (Marginson, 2017). Universities should decide whether to be centred on teaching for underserved communities or on research, rather than being overly obsessed with rankings (Fernández-Cano et al., 2018).

2.2.3 Students Experience

Students are increasingly being viewed as customers in higher education, and Govender and David (2023) note that student experience positively influences overall student satisfaction at HEIs. Eather et al. (2022) suggest that assisted learning, tutoring and peer mentoring should be provided to improve student satisfaction in higher education, while Govender and David (2023) recommend that tailored student experiences should be created throughout the teaching and learning process. The frontline academics and administrative staffs are encouraged and empowered to provide students with timely, personal and relevant service to improve student experience and satisfaction with academic integrity maintained (Govender & David, 2023).

As technological advancement intensifies, it has been suggested that

appropriate infrastructure and faculty capacity for hybrid and blended learning be built, so that students can have an engaging and meaningful learning experience (Singh et al., 2021). Hybrid and Blended learning models refer to a combination of face-to-face and computer-mediated instruction, which were already in use in higher education before the pandemic (Ashraf et al., 2021; Saichaie, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). Students may have increased self-awareness, self-efficacy, autonomy, creativity and synergy in the flexible learning environment (Singh et al., 2021), thus hybrid learning models provide opportunities for sustainable, personalised, and independent student learning experiences (Graham, 2006).

There is a pivotal opportunity for universities to undergo transformation, as more and more university leaders need to be conscious of potential threats, as exemplified by the 2020 pandemic, including delayed capital works, unviable courses, and reduced executive remuneration (Bebbington, 2021). COVID-19 has changed the higher education landscape, in which hybrid and blended learning appear to be a rational and promising option due to global infection-induced movement restrictions (Singh et al., 2021; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). As the new instructional approaches emerge and digitalisation accelerates unprecedentedly, hybrid and blended learning can be regarded as an opportunity for the education sector (Akcil & Bastas, 2021; Skulmowski and Rey, 2020).

2.2.4 Graduate Skills and Outcomes

Graduate employability has become more crucial for universities and students (Rees, 2021; Romgens et al., 2020; Okolie et al., 2019; Clark, 2018) as resources become highly squeezed (Bastistic & Tymon, 2017). The definition “employability” which has been adopted by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) is “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the

community and the economy" (Yorke, 2006, p.8). As graduates' skills and competencies are strictly evaluated by the labour market (Wang et al., 2020), the realisation of employment depends on whether universities and industry have a clear understanding of industry's actual needs regarding graduates' qualifications and competencies (Sanchez-Carrillo et al., 2021). A core truth is that many graduates realise they have difficulties when entering the labour market (Ornellas et al., 2019).

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have the responsibility to design curricula to address the growing demands of different industrial sectors (Daley & Baruah, 2021). There is a need for effective curriculum design to help graduates develop key skills, including soft skills that employers desire, to enhance their employability (Finch et al., 2016). Drawing on internal and external expertise, learning curricula are suggested to be designed and should blend formal and informal methods for students' skill acquisition in the organisation (World Economic Forum, 2020). Magnell and Kolmos (2017) present four curricular strategies with different understandings of the education role and various perceptions of work-related learning activities, including add-on by someone else, add-on about the profession, integration of teaching and learning activities, and integration with additional value. An integration of different work-related learning activities throughout the programme is suggested for HEIs to enrich students' knowledge and prepare graduates for employment across academic environments, for example, internships courses, guest lecturers based on the work context, entrepreneurship, cases from external experts and challenging project management (Magnell & Kolmos, 2017).

2.3 Effective Leadership in HEIs

Higher education must embrace effective leadership given the increasing challenges it faces (Barrett et al., 2018). Reinforcing this point, Ekman, Lindgren, and Packendorff (2018) urge higher education institutions to implement effective leadership to survive and prosper in the future. There is a

substantial need for effective leadership to improve student learning outcomes in the educational sector (Gumus et al., 2018). Kok and McDonald (2017) note that leadership, management and governance are key concerns for higher education to excel in a turbulent environment. They investigate the relationships among behaviours, competencies, attitudes, and overall departmental performance, and identify eight core factors that drive the excellence model in higher education: leadership, change management, departmental culture, communication, strategy and shared values, research and teaching, rewards and staffing. In a supporting view, Morris and Laipple (2015) suggest that organisational productivity, progress and staff morale will be adversely affected by ineffective leadership. Further, they note that the well-being of many administrators in higher education is adversely affected by the administrative duties. Due to the contemporary transformations of HEI functions and social role, it is even more important to ensure effective university governance and leadership than before (Croucher et al., 2020). Moreover, Duignan (2014) notes that effective leadership is required by moral purpose in the real world of education. He explains that authenticity in educational leadership is a discernible trend that emphasises self-fulfilment with moral force, knowing the true self, thinking about the self in relationships, and recognising that authentic leaders operate in a real world with pressure and ethical challenges.

2.3.1 Effective Leadership for Sustainability in HEIs

Sustainable development has been an incorporated part of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) guideline since the 1970s (UNESCO Education Sector, 2017). Higher education for sustainable development is being shaped in accordance with the global sustainability agenda (Franco & Tracey, 2019; Franco et al., 2018). As noted by Elfert (2019), sustainability in higher education has been a major concern of the United Nations Sustainable Development Programme. Though the concept of sustainability is contested, Argento et al. (2020) define it as a multifaceted

concept that emphasises that people within organisations enforce sustainable practices to preserve the ecosystem in both the public and private sectors. Sonetti et al. (2019) note that the concept of sustainability has shifted to emphasise human-centric attributes rather than the traditional focus on resources and energy. Sustainability in higher education emphasises the soft side of organisational strategy to ensure lifelong learning, employee commitment, high-quality teaching, and optimal resource utilisation in the long term (Romgens, Scoupe and Beausaet, 2020; Bolmsten & Kitada, 2020; Dyer & Dyer, 2017; Bice & Coates, 2016).

Higher education needs management innovation, openness, planning, stakeholder training, and the establishment of a multiparty network to support its sustainability focus (Sanchez-Carrillo, Cadarso, and Tobarra, 2021). Stakeholders need to be guided through the critical connections between institutions to understand the situations and initiatives required for sustainability (Srivastava, 2020). Universities, as key culture change agents (Polyakov et al., 2020), play a particularly significant role in enforcing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to enhance society for the general good. Thus, implementing sustainability initiatives in higher education would benefit not only HEIs but also the community and society at large (Leal Filho et al., 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2019; Sanchez-Carrillo, Cadarso and Tobarra, 2021).

HEIs have the responsibility to position themselves as a “local reference node” to acquire new knowledge, share information, and gain diverse experiences within global sustainability networks (Ramísio et al., 2019). Aleixo et al. (2016) point out that the implementation of sustainability provides important clues about how leaders in Portuguese higher education cope with the challenges they face.

A sustainability focus requires that organisations prioritise the well-being of the community rather than the gains of large companies (Sanchez-Carrillo, Cadarso and Tobarra, 2021). Alahmari et al. (2019) recommend closer,

sustainability-focused engagement to enhance professional performance that benefits the community. As the use of the Community of Practice (CoP) model has extended across classroom teaching, professional learning, research groups, and organisational change, CoP is regarded as a collaborative learning experience involving networks, learning communities, and communities of interest (Warr Pedersen, 2017).

Mulà et al. (2017) advise that educators should make efforts to reinforce sustainable thinking and practices to transform society, including building sustainability understanding and transformation capability into the curriculum and wider learning opportunities. Supporting that logic, Franco et al. (2018) suggest that higher education for sustainable development can be strategically integrated into policy, curriculum, and practice based on a better understanding of target areas, existing gaps, and commonalities and differences among regional sustainable development agendas.

Exploring sustainable behaviour and the role of the individual in environmental, social, and economic sustainability, Pappas et al. (2015) suggest that students open their minds, overcome barriers through self-awareness, and build self-confidence to uphold society. Brundiers et al. (2021) summarise critical sustainability competencies in higher education to ensure that faculty development programs can be offered to enhance graduate employability. The competencies include intrapersonal competency (self-awareness and self-regulation), interpersonal competency (values-thinking competency, systems-thinking competency, futures-thinking competency, strategic-thinking competency, implementation competency) and integrated problem-solving competency (Brundiers et al., 2021). Furthermore, they note that competencies are developed not only naturally in teaching-learning settings but also in the workplace through targeted, ongoing efforts, which are applicable to both students and faculty. However, Sanchez-Carrillo et al. (2021) note that it is particularly worrying that there are ethical and long-term risks arising from the

lack of guidance on emotion management in HE students.

It is important to understand what makes leaders effective or ineffective (Hamlin & Patel, 2015). According to Davis and Jones (2014), activity, relationship and context are three factors that determine leadership effect in higher education. Further research has identified critical factors that may shape leadership effectiveness (or not) in higher education to include leadership styles and practice (Lekchiri et al., 2018; Penalva, 2021), leadership roles (Doyle, 2018; Tran & Nghia, 2020), leadership characteristics (Parrish, 2015; Aiston & Yang, 2017), leadership skills (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Hogfeldt et al., 2017; Prysor & Henley, 2018) and leadership development (Dopson et al., 2019; Jooste et al., 2018; Zulfqar et al., 2021).

2.3.2 Leadership Styles in HEIs

Leadership is a vital function within organisations and therefore attracts immense research interest (Spector et al., 2025). Spector et al (2025, p.196) further: “Academic thinking about leadership has evolved over time from initial theories dealing with traits and behaviours to more modern theories concerned with ethics and values. These modern theories, referred to as “ideological” (Mumford & Fried, 2014), “morally-based” (Lemoine et al., 2019) or “positive” (Lin et al., 2021), focus on how leaders emphasise ethical/moral behaviour in their interactions with followers. Thus, there has been a shift in the conceptual approach adopted by scholars in developing leadership theory.

Northouse (2016, p. 6) famously defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” by integrating several elements, including process, influence, involvement, goal achievement, and group context. Several leadership approaches have been explored, including also in the higher educational sector. Drawing on a broad leadership theorisation, such as behavioural theories and transactional-transformational models, Black (2015) proposed hierarchical, individualistic, collegial, collaborative, and transformative leadership paradigms and evaluated

leaders' competencies to address the challenges faced by HEIs. In a review of research trends, Gumus et al. (2018) argue that distributed leadership, instructional leadership, teacher leadership, and transformational leadership are the most studied leadership styles in educational research, with a particular focus on leaders' influence on institutional conditions and student performance. Next, the literature on several leadership styles relevant to this research is reviewed, organised as follows: distributed leadership (Section 2.3.2.1), authentic leadership (Section 2.3.2.2), servant leadership (Section 2.3.2.3), and other leadership styles (Section 2.3.2.4).

2.3.2.1 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership has been widely adopted as a strategy for change to enhance collaborative and collective capacity in educational settings since the 2000s (Printy & Lin, 2021; Floyd & Fung, 2017; Jones et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2013; Tian & Virtanen, 2020; Lu, 2024). Evidence has documented a positive relationship between distributed leadership and organisational improvement (Rikkerink et al., 2016; Gosling et al., 2012; Spillane, 2006), teachers' self-efficacy, trust and job satisfaction (Zheng et al., 2019; García Torres, 2018), teaching and learning (Jones et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2012). According to Spillane (2006), distributed leadership is a leadership practice focused on the interactions between leaders, followers, and the situations in which those interactions occur. In earlier research, Gronn (2002) described distributed leadership as a complex interaction involving agency and structure. As a unit of analysis, not merely the influence of structure but concertive patterns which are spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations and institutionalised practices are involved in distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002). The "concertive action" enables complex interactions among various stakeholders and other interested parties in the context of rules, labour division, and community (Jones et al., 2014). Gronn (2009) suggests "Hybrid leadership" as a term change to acknowledge the complex interaction between engaged

experts in educational leadership and formal leaders.

Hairon and Goh (2015) indicate that bounded empowerment, developing leadership, shared decision-making, and collective engagement are four useful factors for measuring the conceptual construct of distributed leadership in Singapore schools. On their part, Bush and Ng (2019) identify delegation, sharing the workload, decision-making, trust, consultation, and autonomy as six distinctive features of distributed leadership in Malaysian education settings.

On their part, Floyd and Fung (2017) suggest that distributed leadership practices are more likely to gain recognition in HEIs than in other organisations, as highly educated, intelligent, and autonomous academics may oppose traditional leadership models. Influenced by different organisational structures (Harion & Goh, 2015), distributed leadership may enhance flexible and collaborative relationships across hierarchies and traditional boundaries in an institutional structure (Woods and Woods, 2013). Boud et al. (2014) emphasise the coordination role of distributed leadership in research education, identifying coordination focused on influencing students, supervisors, and the institution.

Jones et al. (2012) present the Action Self-Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) as a distributed leadership approach to build leadership capacity in teaching and learning among academics, executives, and professional staff from a multi-level, cross-functional perspective in Australian universities. The research emphasises the importance of collective collaboration in distributed leadership rather than individual power and control. Jones et al. (2014) describe the elements of distributed leadership as including a shift from power to influence, from control to autonomy, and from individual to collective identity. It is suggested that distributed leadership be developed within a context of trust, respect for culture, collaborative relationships, and a commitment to integrating change across all employees (Jones et al., 2014).

Jones and Harvey (2017) present a distributed leadership process model, the Sustainable Enabling and Evaluating Reflective (SEER) approach, which offers

value in supporting effective change in response to the pressures higher education institutions face. The model supports paradigmatic change by linking criteria, values, dimensions, and actions in distributed leadership, enabling the best possible outcomes for teaching, learning, research, and communities. They analyse how distributed leadership may impact leadership capacity-building and people's engagement in collaborative practices for sustainable development. In addition, the effectiveness of output measurement and impact assessment of distributed leadership is analysed. Distributed leadership positively influences organisational change and mediates the relationships between person-centred orientation, task-centred leadership orientations, and change mobilisation (Canterino, Cirella, and Shani, 2018). Sharma et al. (2017) add that distributed leadership supports educational innovation to change tertiary science and mathematics teaching.

Floyd and Fung (2017) note that distributed leadership is facing a number of complex challenges in research-intensive HEIs amid rapid global change. For example, the institutional mission, including both education and research, is plural. The leadership roles shifting from line management to mentoring are diverse. The effective communication and influence of traditional academic identities and values need to be considered as well when leadership is distributed (Floyd & Fung, 2017). In addition, the context is critical for leadership practice (Zheng et al., 2019), especially for distributed leadership, which focuses on the interaction between leaders and followers (Spillane, 2006).

Tian et al. (2016) argue that the discussion of the effects of distributed leadership has been largely rhetorical and suggest that more empirical studies across different contexts are needed to make distributed leadership practice robust. In prior literature that also underlines the research pertinence regarding distributed leadership, Jones et al. (2014) emphasise the importance of uncoupling the leaders from their positional authority and formal roles in distributed leadership practice and as supported in further literature (Bush,

2019; Bush & Glover, 2014), disengage from the bureaucracy dominating leadership and management paradigm since the 19th century. The inherent bureaucracy and hierarchy culture make it difficult to achieve the shift from solo to distributed leadership practice in the Malaysian context as well (Bush & Ng, 2019). Distributed leadership does not easily fit organisational hierarchies (Hartley, 2010). Thus, it may be argued that distributed leadership, as conceptualised and addressed in Western contexts, is not relevant to Asian centralised societies. Thus, culture may significantly affect the suitability of distributed leadership practice. It is suggested that the relationship between educational policy and distributed leadership practice be further examined in the country context (Printy & Lin, 2021).

2.3.2.2 Authentic Leadership

One of the most popular modern leadership theories is authentic leadership (Spector et al., 2025). As noted further by Spector et al. (2025), this idea of leading authentically and ensuring behaviour in accordance with one's values has gained increasing attention from researchers and the general public.

Ahmad et al. (2023, p. 1) note that "authenticity is a crucial component of leadership for developing moral and ethical leaders in the public sector". Public organisation employees are expected to act in ways that meet the public's moral and ethical expectations. Reinforcing the 'values' importance, Avolio et al. (2004, p. 802) define authentic leaders as "as the persons who have achieved high levels of authenticity in that they know who they are, what they believe and value, and they act upon those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others''. This values-and-beliefs viewpoint is further supported by prior literature (Banks & Mhunpiew, 2012): authentic leaders' actions are consistent with their beliefs and values, which have been developed over time. While the aforementioned literature underlined the importance of 'values', much prior literature (e.g., Walumbwa et al., 2008; Ilies et al., 2005) emphasised more on core features that typify authentic leadership culture, a development that

reinforces the observation by Spector et al (2025) about leadership theory development (see Section 2.3.2). Walumbwa et al. (2008, p. 94) describe authentic leadership as ‘‘a pattern of leadership behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development’’. On their part, Ilies et al. (2005) note that authentic leaders display four typical behaviours/features: self-awareness, balanced processing, internalised moral perspective, and relational transparency.

An authentic leadership style builds and enhances employees' positive emotional and mental capabilities and fosters an ideal moral environment (Durrah et al., 2024). As noted in further literature, a key feature that distinguishes authentic leadership in its dealings with employees from other styles of overseeing workers is that it promotes improved self-awareness, an internal moral perspective, balanced information processing, and relational transparency (Chaudhary et al., 2018; Spector et al., 2025; Ahmed, 2024).

Self-awareness refers to the leader’s beliefs, true knowledge, and understanding of others’ views of them (Walumbwa et al., 2008), while balanced processing examines the leader’s competence before decision-making (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Durrah et al., 2024). Internalised moral perspective explains the leader’s behaviour, driven by his internal moral values and ethical standards, as an integrated and internalised form of self-regulation (Walumbwa et al., 2008), while relational transparency indicates that leaders share information openly and honestly (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Durrah et al., 2025).

Researchers argue that authentic leadership is positively related to followers’ task performance and organisational commitment (Wei et al., 2018; Wang, 2014; Durrah et al., 2024; Spector et al., 2025), employee trust (Zhang, Bowers

and Mao, 2021; Xiong et al., 2016; Ahmad, Zafar and Shahzad, 2015; Spector et al., 2025), work engagement and commitment (Srivastava et al., 2020; Hsieh & Wang, 2015; Duignan, 2014; Durrah et al., 2024; Spector et al., 2025), job satisfaction (Avolio et al., 2004; Rahimnia & Sharifirad, 2015; Spector et al., 2025) and well-being (Rahimnia & Sharifirad, 2015). Taking into consideration recent insights into the Brazilian setting (Rodriguez et al., 2024), which argue that authentic leadership drives positive behavioural reactions, the aforementioned organisational and employee outcomes of authentic leadership seem rational.

Insights from the academic setting suggest that authentic leaders will motivate academia and encourage them to grow through open communication, a balanced approach, transparent processes, and by recognising their weaknesses and seeking improvement (Ahmad, Zafar and Shahzad, 2015). Xiong et al. (2016) found a strong relationship between employees' trust and affective commitment when the level of authentic leadership is high in the organisation. They suggest that leaders should be educated to maintain a healthy image that reflects reliability and to show more positive emotions to gain subordinates' trust. As influential role models, authentic leaders' self-regulatory behaviours directly shape team collective behaviour during the team reflexivity process, leading therefore to team productivity and effectiveness.

In a study exploring the developing-country setting, Srivastava and Dhar (2019) contend that authentic leadership is suitable for developing countries characterised by high competition, increasing population, limited resources, and rising societal challenges, as authentic leaders guide their followers by setting examples with their inner strength and belief. The role of authentic leadership in driving collegiality has also been emphasised in the literature. In the educational setting, teaching is regarded as a collegial profession. It is impossible for leaders to achieve desired goals unilaterally, especially when faced with changes in the teaching and learning landscape (Duignan, 2014).

Leaders must work collegially and show a deep professional commitment. Positive psychology and well-being are key elements in leadership practices (Sharma et al., 2024), and Duignan (2014) argues that authentic leadership improves students' and teachers' performance outcomes in educational settings. Further literature emphasising the performance impact of authentic leadership points to a positive influence on information sharing (e.g., Zhang et al., 2025). The theoretical logic in Zhang et al. (2025) is enhanced by prior literature on authentic leadership in South Korea (Kim et al., 2022): communication satisfaction is significantly associated with initiative behaviour and task performance. Furthermore, emotional sharing and communication satisfaction significantly mediated not only the relationship between authentic leadership and initiative behaviour, but also the relationship between authentic leadership and task performance.

In a closely related perspective on authenticity, Hsiung (2012) suggests that authentic leadership positively influences employees' voice behaviour. Teachers' voice behaviour is critical to educational management reform, as it can drive initiatives to improve teaching and student learning (Zhang, Bowers, and Mao, 2021). Further views on this *positive psychology theory* suggest that when leaders embrace an authentic leadership style, teachers will perform with high commitment, loyalty, efficiency, and effectiveness in a positive climate (e.g., Srivastava and Dhar, 2016; Durrah et al., 2024). The inherent *psychological safety*, which Edmondson (1999) describes as the individual perception that the team or group is safe when taking interpersonal risk, affects individuals' willingness to work or express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally (Kahn, 1990). Thus, there is the notion that people benefit from relationships characterised by trust and respect within a given group, leading to enabled employee work engagement (Kahn, 1990). Psychological safety is important for people to understand how a shared outcome is achieved by collaboration (Edmondson, 2004; Edmondson, 1999), organisational learning

at the individual-group-organisational level, teamwork and employees' voice at the workplace (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Zhang et al., 2025). Exploring the effect of lecturer authentic leadership, psychological safety and network density on student academic performance, Soares and Lopes (2020) found a positive relationship between authentic leadership and academic performance in higher education. This psychological safety impact of authentic leadership is also reported in the Australian Information Technology industry (Durrah et al., 2024). Authentic leadership is strongly encouraged at top management levels across departments in HEIs, as it significantly impacts academic staff's creativity, which is mediated by intrinsic motivation and employee mood (Ahmad, Zafar and Shahzad, 2015).

As technological evolution intensifies and organisations increasingly embrace digital service models, there is growing concern about the impact of digital service growth on the workforce (McKinsey Global Institute, 2018). Butler-Henderson & Crawford (2020) suggest that academic leaders develop authentic leadership to improve students' digital literacy. In return, graduates with greater digital fluency would be more innovative and productive and better prepared for the digital service work (Butler-Henderson & Crawford, 2020).

Authentic leadership, however, is criticised by some scholars as a "soft" approach adopted by ambitious, aggressive, hard-nosed extroverts to deliver outcomes at any cost (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Elrehail et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2018). As commented by Alvesson and Einola (2019, p. 383), there is a positivity trap existing in authentic leadership, and the positivity impact claims, they argue, are due to (and based on) "shaky philosophical and theoretical foundations, tautological reasoning, weak empirical studies, nonsensical measurement tools, unsupported knowledge claims, and a generally simplistic and out of date view of corporate life". In a view that supports the non-positivity impact argument, Elrehail et al. (2018) argue that authentic leadership does not foster innovation through knowledge sharing in a non-Western country like

Jordan. Further, they argue that, to the contrary, there is seemingly unproductive authentic leadership behaviour and that authentic leadership is poorly understood and implemented, with training practices rarely related to it. They contend that the negative impact of authentic leadership may be explained by the study's setting in the Jordanian private higher education system, where many unethical management practices affect academic staff's innovation capacity. In their view (Wei et al., 2018), although authentic leadership is important for organisational citizenship behaviour and task performance, high-level leadership capability may not be directly achieved through authentic leadership. In reality, therefore, leadership effectiveness hinges on the boundary condition - the competency of the leader. As a result, authentic leadership should ideally be encouraged when the leaders are competent (Wei et al., 2018). Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) point out that the relational authenticity with other leaders, followers, peers, and students is complex; therefore, it is important to develop leaders who are familiar with the organisational culture and have the margins to keep pace with the increasing diversity of the student climate. Furthermore, a more inclusive environment and cross-cultural and supportive communities are essential so that authentic leaders could grow and thrive (Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2017).

2.3.2.3 Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf, regarded as the father of servant leadership, posits an extraordinary leadership style that focuses on motivating others to follow through serving them and meeting their needs (Greenleaf, 2002). Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) has been used to analyse how servant leaders enhance followers' commitment (Ling et al, 2017), which is based on the reciprocity in which leaders and their followers provide resources and support in exchange for resources and support received from each other. In their definition of servant leadership, Eva et al. (2019) emphasise the need to prioritise the psychological well-being of organisational stakeholders and the

larger community. According to the literature, servant leadership positively impacts employees' organisational commitment (Miao et al., 2014), commitment to change (Kool & van Dierendonck, 2012), perceived person-organisation fit (Irving & Berndt, 2017), and organisational citizenship behaviour focused on community (Liden et al., 2008). Further literature that connects to that foundation suggests that servant leadership fosters a culture of loyalty to unit and team goals (Okecha, 2019). Scholars associate that outcome with the motivational impact of servant leadership (Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2018; Jakada, 2024). Servant leaders invest time, effort, and key resources in developing, uplifting, and enhancing the overall well-being of employees for the benefit of accomplishing tasks and goals for the common good (e.g., Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2018; Aisha et al, 2025).

Wheeler (2012) notes that servant leadership is a good practice for academic institutions as it is grounded in a value system. In his opinion, servant leaders should serve others first, meet others' needs, heal their emotions, take responsibility for solving problems, be concerned about the means and the ends, keep an eye on the present and the future, and develop future servant leaders. Task performance in higher education could be improved by servant leadership as academics' work engagement and affective commitment are stimulated (Aboramadan et al., 2021).

Alonderiene and Majauskaite (2016) found that servant leadership significantly impacts job satisfaction in Lithuanian universities. However, in a study investigating how servant leadership affects academics' career and life satisfaction in Spanish Higher Education, Latif (2019) found no relationship between servant leadership and employee life satisfaction.

2.3.2.4 Other Leadership Styles

Other leadership styles have been described in the literature. For example, Gumus et al. (2018) describe contingency/situational leadership, while Lustre et al. (2021) describe relational leadership. Shared leadership is suggested by

Bilat et al. (2019) and focuses on taking charge of behaviours among teaching faculty, ensuring favourable work climate initiatives, and fostering psychological safety. Shared team leadership stimulates teachers to seek new knowledge and practices for sustainable innovation in higher education (Koeslag-Kreunen et al., 2017).

Transformational leadership has also been described in the literature (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023). Scholars note that transformational leaders motivate employees toward institutional long-term objectives, in which the leaders become an ideal (role model) through their attribute of idealised influence (e.g., Khan et al., 2023; Patnaik et al., 2013). It is essential for HEIs to embrace transformational leadership to generate long-term commitment toward organisational learning (Patnaik et al., 2013). Transformational leaders' behaviour is critical for nurturing employees' attitudes, which, in turn, supports team development (Kane, 2011).

Also featured in leadership discourse is the transactional leadership style (e.g., Khan et al., 2023; Bass & Bass, 2008). Transactional leaders inspire the workforce through rewards (Bass & Bass, 2008; Khan et al., 2023). While transformational leaders strive to stimulate the workforce intellectually, transactional leaders do so through contingent rewards and punishments (Avolio et al., 2009). In other words, while transformational leaders encourage workforces toward assigned tasks through individualised consideration, transactional leaders fulfil the same role through active management (Maryam et al., 2013).

Exploring the relationship between leadership styles and organisational learning at Syrian universities, Khalifa and Ayoubi (2015) found no significant impact of corrective behaviours, idealised influence, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration on organisational learning, which are transactional and transformational leadership features.

It has been emphasised that leadership style and knowledge management

positively influence the effectiveness of succession planning at Malaysian HEIs (Ishak & Kamil, 2016). Equally emphasised is the view that, due to the unique culture, structure, and processes of HEIs, the Lean Six Sigma leadership model is well-suited to HEIs by integrating traditional leadership models with continuous improvement (Lu et al., 2017).

Based on the theory-practice-policy relationship, Penalva (2021) proposes an innovation and leadership approach from the perspective of the Science of the Design and the Rationality of Action (SCD&RAC), emphasising that leaders in higher education should build “thinking communities”. Within this framework, collaboration hubs could be established to produce and share relevant knowledge among lecturers, researchers, practitioners, and industry professionals who are regarded as “intellectual partners” (Penalva, 2021).

2.3.3 Leadership Role in HEIs

The leadership role is important in HEIs (Ruben et al., 2018; Macfarlane et al., 2024). The formal leadership role is normally played by chairs, deans and provosts in HEIs, and the leadership structure is hierarchical and distributed among units, colleges and departments (Doyle, 2018). According to Branson et al. (2016), middle leadership positions in higher education comprise faculty or department heads, student enrolment advisors, discipline area coordinators and award level coordinators. From the faculty perspective, as recognised key brokers, middle leaders play a key role between the senior administrative team and academic staff. From a structural perspective, middle leadership roles appear defensible and sound for articulating the faculty function. The Head of Department is expected to support the collective development of investment, teaching, and research within the department, and academic work service within and beyond the university (Branson et al., 2016). Middle-level leaders are critical because they can aid or obstruct institutional change at the beginning (Boud et al., 2014).

2.3.4 Core Leaders' Characteristics in HEIs

2.3.4.1 Trust

According to Schoorman et al. (2007), trust is an important aspect of relationships for work attitudes and behaviours, especially those developed by leaders and their staff (Xiong et al., 2016). Trust is a critical factor in steering an effective team (Kotter, 2012). Leaders must trust employees and encourage them to participate in decision-making and communicate openly (Xu et al., 2016). When staff perceive their leaders as capable, benevolent, and trustworthy (Schoorman et al., 2007), they are more likely to transform their trust in supervisors into affective commitment (Xiong et al., 2016). At the same time, playing the agent role for the organisation, leaders should simultaneously increase their authenticity and treat both their employees and themselves honestly to shape a positive organisational culture (Xiong et al., 2016). Tian et al. (2016) suggest that building a climate of trust is essential for the implementation of distributed leadership; however, how to build trust may be contingent on cultural context. Hairon and Goh (2015) underline the importance of trust in the development of leadership among staff in Singaporean education settings.

It is important to maintain trust to achieve the change process in higher education (Skoumpopoulou et al., 2020). A high level of trust fosters empowerment and autonomy within higher education (Kok & McDonald, 2017). Trust is a relational and multi-directional construct, and it is important for leaders to be open, transparent, and honest to build trustworthiness (Branson, Franken, and Penny, 2015). For example, followers expect transparency when their Heads of Departments (HoDs) process resource allocations and budgetary issues. As highly educated people, academic staff would expect leaders to grant them the autonomy they need to make decisions and address challenges independently. Looking into such internal staff elements is important because, as noted by Jameson (2012), staff morale would be negatively

affected if university leaders focused solely on efficiency driven by external pressure. Therefore, he recommends that genuine, supportive leadership could build trust in English higher education and that leaders could foster a team culture as well.

2.3.4.2 Other Leaders' Characteristics and Skills

Analysing the relationship between leadership characteristics and good governance, Croucher et al. (2020) identify five critical aspects: stakeholder engagement, direction, monitoring, accountability, and values. As noted by Prysor and Henley (2018), leaders in higher education are required to lead and work across professional, disciplinary and institutional boundaries to maintain the influence both internally and beyond the institution with the increasing collaboration. Leaders discover new frontiers and achieve innovation and change by weaving and transforming practice. Takanashi and Lee (2019) investigated the impact of boundary spanning leadership on both knowledge and commercial performance of university-industry R&D projects in a Japanese university, and found that a key personal quality of project leaders is collaboration skills. Collaboration, they note, motivates the firms and academic partners to share common strategies, make goal commitments, resolve potential conflicts and tensions, align interests, coordinate resources, and communicate effectively by providing a nurturing interaction environment.

Parrish (2015) flags emotional intelligence as a key leader's skill, while Beeftink et al. (2012) underline strategic improvisation and self-efficacy. Parrish (2015) further states that leaders with stronger emotional intelligence will gain more respect from subordinates and peers. According to Beeftink et al. (2012), leaders' strategic improvisation and entrepreneurial self-efficacy are the main characteristics for effectively adapting to a dynamic, flexible environment.

2.3.5 Leadership Development

Effective leadership is closely tied to a leader's ability to navigate challenges and collaborate on activities. Leadership development in higher education

involves integrating competencies and fostering collaborative engagement (Gigliotti et al., 2017; Ruben et al., 2017). Institutional complexity in higher education institutions is ever-increasing; therefore, leadership development should be of core concern to HEI leaders (Dopson et al., 2019). For HEIs, taking that operational focus is important because there is a significant inter-relationship between leadership development and broader organisational development strategies, and the evaluation needs to be considered in the leadership development design (Dopson et al., 2019).

Hogfeldt et al. (2017) emphasise that the development of both informal leadership skills and formal structures should be supported by the institutions for academic leadership. In other words, the teachers' development, the curriculum and program design, and other organisational factors are core considerations in the education program design. Investing in and commitment to workforce planning should be emphasised so that future academic leaders can be equipped to meet university role requirements for the modern era (Loomes et al., 2018). Reinforcing this viewpoint, Jooste et al. (2018) emphasise the need to develop leadership skills among senior academics, as various skills are required for academic leadership positions. Supporting the academic leadership development viewpoint, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) suggest providing opportunities for leadership development for minorities and women in American higher education. In a further response, Tran and Nghia (2020) emphasise that such development initiatives should go beyond traditional professional development activities and embrace measures to enhance leadership capacities and practices to address the dynamic and complex nature of internationalisation in higher education.

2.4 Changes Required for Effective Leaders in HEIs

2.4.1 Leadership Strategy Change

Leadership takes place in the dynamic economic, social and societal context (Stolez & Sailer, 2021). Higher education leadership strategies are changing as

the nature of education becomes more dynamic and social structures constantly evolve (Ersozlu & Saklan, 2016). Leadership focus in higher education could shift away from the traditional focus on narrow individual outcomes toward broader leadership processes influenced by contextual, distributed, and relational factors (Dopson et al., 2019). The ideal leadership style should align with the organisational context (Adserias, Charleston, and Jackson, 2017). Thus, a strategic plan for driving organisational change is necessary to balance stakeholder expectations and institutional commitment goals (Aleixo et al., 2016). Doyle (2018) provides a clearer, more consistent framework, based on organisational change theory, for governance and leadership change in higher education. Lordache-Platis (2017) recommends that a leadership strategy should be driven by both academics' and students' perceptions, as the trend in HEIs has shifted from ranking positions to student satisfaction. In further literature, Skoumpopoulou et al. (2020) point out that organisational hierarchy, different responsibility levels and the role of internal stakeholder groups need to be recognised during change management. Examining two competing organisational strategies, Adserias et al. (2017) argue that the co-optative change strategy is the first-order change, while the cultural change strategy (a transformational change strategy) is the second-order change and is often difficult to achieve and sustain due to organisational complexity.

2.4.1.1 Organisational Change

Several scholars (Klein, Romos and Deutz, 2023; Odor, 2018; Pollack & Pollack, 2015) discuss organisational change, including change type, process and success factors when implementing changes. First-order change refers to minor adjustments within natural development and growth that do not change the core system (Levy & Merry, 1986), while second-order change refers to fundamental alterations in relation to an organisation's underlying mission, values, culture, and structure (Kezar, 2001).

According to Weick (1995), organisations are constructed by individuals who continuously create the significance of working life; hence, a meaningful change process should be implemented for people's engagement. Sensemaking and sense-giving are closely related to the change (Geschwind, 2019). For example, Degn (2018) illustrates how academics make sense of external pressure in HEIs.

Thus, organisational resources, structure, and size could be regarded as factors influencing organisational innovation prospects and performance (Zhu & Engels, 2014).

2.4.1.2 Resource Focus Change

Resource allocation has been a key source of tension in university governance (Wang, 2019; Serger et al., 2015). Finance, space, and time resources must be ensured to drive collaborative activities in the higher education landscape, which is becoming ever more challenging (Jones et al., 2014). Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) underline three core points relating to the *Resource Dependency Theory*: (1) organisations are affected by the environment, (2) environmental constraints shape the internal organisational dynamics, and (3) organisations make efforts to cope with the environmental constraints. Grounded in the resource dependency theory, Powell and Rey (2015) explored the processes for securing greater resources to support organisational survival and resilience in public higher education and emphasised the criticality of universities adapting to environmental change and increasing their capabilities. In a similar vein, Ramísio et al. (2019) propose a perspective that emphasises the efficient use of strategic resources to secure the economic, social, environmental, and cultural levels of resilience in HEIs. In a study examining online learning dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic, Singh et al. (2021) stressed the need to allocate resources to adequately address mental health challenges and to provide additional training in pedagogical methods to improve teaching and learning quality.

2.4.2 Kotter's Change Process and Principles

Effective leaders intuitively understand when and how to solve problems and demonstrate strong adaptability to threats and crises (Kotter, 2019). Kotter (2020) describes two fundamental goals driving transformation in organisations, namely, to ensure effective processes and ultimately to boost profits (and decrease costs). In earlier seminal work for change management, Kotter (1996) described eight stage process for leading change: 1) establishing a sense of urgency; 2) creating the guiding coalition; 3) developing a vision and strategy; 4) communicating the change vision; 5) empowering broad-based change; 6) generating short-term wins; 7) consolidating gains and producing more change; 8) anchoring new approaches in the culture. Despite its popularity, Kotter's (1996) change model has been criticised by other scholars (e.g. Pollack and Pollack, 2015; Appelbaum et al., 2012). For example, Appelbaum et al. (2012) argue that the model lacks adequate guidance and is not suitable for all circumstances. On their part, Pollack and Pollack (2015) add that there is limited understanding of how the process can be applied in practice, as few practitioners share their critical reflections on it.

The eight-step change process as described by Kottler (1996) occurs iteratively, continuously, and simultaneously rather than linearly. Thus, the urgency sense created at the first stage may persist throughout the change effort (Kotter, 2020). In the eight-step process foundation, four critical principles drive change success (Akthar & Kotter, 2019; Kotter, 2020):

1) Think about both "management" and "leadership". Though both are synonymous, the required change in behaviour is different. Focusing on the future, leadership is about motivating people to move toward an established direction by aligning them, and relevant management initiatives must be embraced for effective change implementation.
2) Take care of "head" and "heart". To lead change, it is important to motivate followers to take action by clarifying how the future may differ from now and

how it will be realised, in relation to the big opportunity. A “Big opportunity” is one that ignites followers from the head (rational) and heart (emotional) perspectives through effective identification, articulation, and communication. If people’s emotional side is invested, it is easy to overcome the change barrier. The more leaders account for people's feelings, the better the change outcome.

3) Create “want to” instead of “have to”. Change is difficult to sustain if there is a “have to” element in the change process. However, if the people “want to” achieve the goal by seizing the big opportunity, they will be ready to accept the need for change and stick with it, even in the face of challenges.
4) Establish a bigger network for problem-solving. It is beneficial to solve the problem creatively and inspiringly from diverse perspectives, such as across different levels and functions within the organisation.

Organisational culture is a core consideration in Kotter’s approach to leading change (Casey et al., 2012). When change initiatives are embedded in the organisational culture, change acceleration will be sustained (Kotter, 2020). Kotter’s change theory, its foundation and integration scope, are further explained in section 3.11.

Given its importance, both for the change implementation mentioned above and for understanding effective leadership, organisational culture is considered in Section 2.4.3.

2.4.3 Organisational Culture Change and Leadership in HEIs

Organisational culture was defined by Shein (1991) as “basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, and operate unconsciously”. In the literature, organisational culture has often been described as organisational values, shared philosophies, beliefs, ideologies, attitudes, and expectations (Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Hofstede, 2011; Schein, 2004). Schein (2004) proposes an organisational culture perspective comprising three levels. The first level refers to the physical components that

organisational culture relays, while the second level refers to the values that members of the organisation profess. The third level is regarding the organisation's tacit assumption. Based on Schein's three-level description of organisational culture, Gerras, Wong and Allen (2008) forward an organisational culture perspective as summarised in Figure 2.1 below.

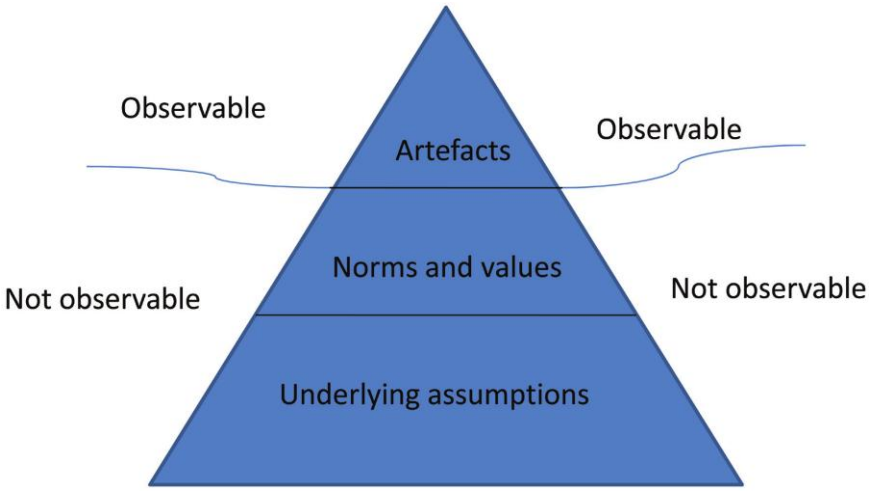


Figure 2.1 Schein's Model of Organisational Culture

Source: Gerras, Wong and Allen (2008)

Describing organisational culture, Cameron and Quinn (1999) suggest four core aspects, namely the adhocracy, clan, hierarchy and market culture, based on the open system model, the human model, the internal process model and the rational goal model, respectively. When employees are active in different departments and disciplines, subcultures emerge in the organisation. The characteristics of a hierarchy subculture are bonding based on the policies, clear expectations, rules and procedures for smooth operations, stability and predictability. By contrast, the adhocracy subculture is flexible and risky, emphasising bonding through a shared commitment to entrepreneurship, innovation, and new resource acquisition. Market subculture is characterised by bonding through goal orientation, competition superiority and production. The clan subculture emphasises bonding morale, commitment, loyalty, interpersonal cohesion and human resource development. It is argued that adhocracy and clan culture are people-oriented cultures, followed by market

(goal-oriented and competitive) and hierarchy (control-oriented and rigid culture) (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Cameron & Quinn, 1999).

In his cultural theory, Hofstede (2011) describes six national culture dimensions: Power/Distance, Uncertainty/Avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity, Long/Short-Term Orientation, and Indulgence/Restraint. Hofstede's (2001a, b) culture view identifies cultural individualism and collectivism are the opposite poles; one is focused on the personal objectives and achievements while the other one emphasizes the priority of group responsibilities and relationship. Power distance (PD) is a cultural dimension that refers to how much a culture accepts an uneven power distribution and privileged status among group members (Hofstede, 1980). In other words, people expect to accept more democratic and consultive leaders in lower PD organisations. People tend to be more obedient in organisations with higher PD. However, Williamson (2002) argues that Hofstede's theory may be premature if functionalist or interpretive approaches are not considered in examining cultural contexts. In summary, power distance refers to the extent to which members of an organisation who have less power expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. As a societal characteristic, and in contrast to individualism, collectivism refers to the degree to which members are integrated into groups.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to a society's tolerance for ambiguity and indicates the extent to which a culture makes its members feel comfortable or uncomfortable in unstructured situations. Masculinity versus Femininity refers to the division of emotional roles between men and women, while Long Term versus Short Term Orientation refers to people's tendency to be future or present oriented. Indulgence versus Restraint is related to the control of gratification versus basic human desires (Hofstede, 2011).

Power distance tends to be higher in Asian, Latin American, African, and Eastern European countries, and lower in German- and English-speaking

Western countries (Hofstede et al., 2010). Collectivism tends to be prevalent in developing and Eastern countries, while individualism is more common in Western and developed countries (Hofstede et al., 2010). Exploring the nature of culture change and synthesising Hofstede's national cultural dimensions and Inglehart's Theory of cultural change, Beugelesdijk and Welzel (2018) merge Hofstede's six-dimensional framework into a three-dimensional framework, which includes Collectivism–Individualism, Duty-Joy and Distrust–Trust. The dimension Collectivism–Individualism mimics Hofstede's Individualism dimension, which correlates with Power Distance. The second dimension, Duty–Joy, captures Hofstede's Restraint-Indulgence. The third dimension, Distrust–Trust, has a statistically significant relationship with Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance dimension.

Culture, as a pervasive construct, is a framework that provides a group with guidance and boundaries (Kargas & Varoutas, 2015). Some researchers have explored the relationship between organisational culture and leadership in higher education (Ruben et al., 2018; Ibrahim et al., 2016; Mittal & Elias, 2016; Kargas & Varoutas, 2015). Kargas and Varoutas (2015) assert that leadership and organisational culture are two of the most important elements for an organisation to achieve resilience. Leadership cultivates organisational culture (Kargas & Varoutas, 2015). On the other hand, culture substantially influences the leadership style, leaders' interpersonal skills and vision (Akanji et al., 2019). Commenting regarding the HEIs setting, Zhu and Engels (2014) describe seven dimensions namely goal orientation, innovation orientation, members' collaboration, shared vision, decision-making participation, structured and supportive leadership. In their exploration of the relationship between organisational culture and instructional innovation, they note that goal orientation and collegial relationships are the most influential factors, as learners and educators show greater interest in trying new things in a nurturing, collaborative environment. Acknowledging the study's limitation of exploring

organisational culture only from the teachers' and students' perspectives, they recommended that other stakeholders and actors in HE be considered in future research.

Wheeler (2012) proposed an organisational culture in universities linked to servant leadership. In his book, he writes, "If your goal is to create or enhance a culture that promotes service, individual and collective responsibility, positive and effective relationships, and strong ethics, servant leadership may be the means to your goals." (p. 14). Organisational rules and performance evaluation criteria are suggested for servant leadership behaviour (Wheeler, 2012). In more recent literature, Eva et al. (2019) recommend that future research should examine the culture and perceived organisational support in relation to a harmonious environment for servant leadership. A culture of autonomy and respect rather than control is typical in research education coordination, which is closely related to effective distributed leadership (Boud et al., 2014).

As noted by Schein (2004), effective leaders need to understand complex organisational beliefs and assumptions to change culture. Culture is constantly evolving under exerted pressures; thus, cultural change is not only a goal but also a process (Lumby & Foskett, 2016). Skoumpopoulou et al. (2020) note that organisational culture is the main reason for the failure of organisational change programmes, which may, in turn, delay organisational development. If the organisation's culture can't adapt to changes in management strategy, as embodied in its values, beliefs, and attitudes, the institution's transformation is unlikely to be successful (Mzangwa, 2019).

Culture transformation would be enabled if leaders recognise the resistance to culture change (Latta, 2015). In other words, resistance to change and facilitation of change are cohabitations during the culture change process rather than opposing forces. Barratt-Pugh et al. (2013) point out that leaders play an instrumental role in the organisational culture change process, as they serve as role models for the anticipated culture change. Kellis and Ran (2015)

emphasise a relational-based, distributed leadership, which significantly affects leadership effectiveness during the culture change process.

Recently, more and more higher education leaders are aware of the concept of culture and its significance in HEI's potential change and development. As HEIs have cultures distinct from those of corporations and other non-profit organisations, it is necessary to consider different measures of leadership effectiveness and culture change in HEIs (Barrett, Gaskins and Haug, 2018).

Next, the aspects of collaborative culture, organisational learning culture, diversity culture, and collegiality and consensus-seeking culture are considered in Sections 2.4.3.1, 2.4.3.2, 2.4.3.3 and 2.4.3.4, respectively.

2.4.3.1 Collaborative Culture

Collaboration is an ever-growing work culture in modern organisations. Franco et al. (2018) identify several major issues during the collaboration process, including limited involvement of key stakeholders and their capacity, a lack of communication among stakeholders, low accountability, and scarce funding opportunities for sustainability implementation. Penalva (2021) recommends that leaders in higher education embrace a culture of collaboration and partnership. Establishing e-channels, research-transfer platforms, and cross-sector research centres will bring teamwork research, and the research outcome could be utilised to improve practical operations. Authentic educational leaders create organisational cultures which value professional collaboration and collective commitment to lead change for high-performance achievement (Duignan, 2014). When leaders and teachers engage in collective improvement projects, a learning culture will be created to inspire and enrich the learning of both teachers themselves and students (Duignan, 2014).

2.4.3.2 Organisational Learning Culture

Examining the relationship between managerial practice and learning culture at university departments in New Zealand, Edgar and Geare (2013) argued that research outcomes are affected by managerial practices. On their part, in a

study that explored the effect of learning organisation culture on knowledge and research performance in HEIs at the individual, team, and organisational levels, Ponnuswamy and Manohar (2016) underline the importance of higher education enhancing its competitive advantage through continued learning promoted by leaders. The research model suggested that institutional interventions should focus on open communications, team learning, learning networks and professional learning communities. Organisational learning could foster the depth and breadth of trust within higher education institutions dedicated to learning development (Branson et al., 2016). Ornellas et al. (2019) suggest that higher education should consider authentic learning approaches when designing activities to develop graduates' employability skills. Students need to improve their awareness of individual responsibility to develop proactively and learn independently, thereby improving teamwork, self-management, communication, and critical thinking skills that may not be taught by university lecturers (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Ornellas et al., 2019).

2.4.3.3 Diversity Culture

Many universities in America are realising the importance of considering diversity-related strategies (Williams, 2013). For example, Adserias et al. (2017) point out that changes in organisational culture and climate are an imperative aspect of institutional diversity in higher education. Given this, they explored transactional, transformational and full-range leadership style paradigms in higher education. On their part, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) suggest that it is important for majority culture leaders to learn to engage authentically with their minority colleagues by creating formal or informal opportunities for cultural exchange. International and cross-cultural factors, as well as specific context, can influence trust (Schoorman et al., 2007). In terms of similarity with ecosystem change, the challenges in internationalisation mainly stem from cultural exchange and interaction. Thus, applying the metaphor of ecology, Lumby and Foskett (2016) suggest that leaders in higher education need to

preserve cultural distinctiveness and promote cultural equity to address the long-term challenges posed by internationalisation.

2.4.3.4 Collegiality and Consensus-seeking Culture

Collegiality could be a win-win approach to replace dysfunctional centralism, compatible with rapid central decision-making and effective change execution at the departmental level (Burnes et al., 2014). In particular, they suggest Lewin's Planned approach to help senior managers foster departmental collegiality in a changing environment, giving due consideration to field theory, group dynamics, action research, and the three-step model and four interrelated elements. The consensus-seeking culture is rooted in the collegiality tradition (Burnes et al., 2014). McGrath et al. (2019) argue that collegial leaders seek consensus through negotiation rather than systematically applying change theory to change practice in higher education. Identifying the five themes of how collegial leaders experience change from leadership role in conflict, negotiating, and something give up, timing of change, catalysing change and obscured theory perspective, McGrath et al. (2019) suggest middle-level leaders call for a balance between upper management accountability and collegiality.

2.5 The Resource-Based View (RBV)

In recent decades, the transformation of higher education in China has attracted substantial scholarly attention, particularly regarding the strategic role universities now play within national innovation systems (e.g., Su and Sohn, 2012), knowledge economies (Wang et al., 2024), and regional development (e.g., Su and Sohn, 2012). Chinese HEIs are no longer viewed as simply institutions for teaching and human capital creation; rather, they are increasingly considered entrepreneurial, innovation-driven organisations operating in highly competitive domestic and global educational environments (Wang et al., 2024). Given this trend, the Resource-Based View (RBV) has gained widespread recognition as a relevant theoretical framework for

understanding how universities achieve institutional effectiveness, competitive advantage, and long-term sustainability.

Theoretically rooted in strategic management, RBV contends that organisational performance hinges on the possession and effective deployment of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources (Barney, 1996, 2001). Incorporating RBV into higher education research has enabled scholars to better understand the strategic significance of organisational resources in areas such as global partnerships, digital innovation, and knowledge production (Wang, Criado, and van Hemmen, 2024). They note that in the Chinese context specifically, universities function as strategic actors capable of mobilising intellectual, technological, political, and organisational resources to shape educational outcomes and regional innovation systems (RIS).

Next, Section 2.5.1 elaborates on the origin of the RBV in higher education and highlights the RBV-related resources of universities. Following that, Section 2.5.2 outlines the strategic resources in Chinese universities. To conclude, Section 2.5.3 summarises the key challenges and limitations of the RBV in Chinese higher education.

2.5.1 The Resource-Based View in Higher Education: Origins and Core RBV Assumptions

In the strategic management discourse, the Resource-Based View became a dominant viewpoint during the late twentieth century and challenged external, market-oriented explanations of organisational success by emphasising the internal characteristics of organisations themselves. In the RBV framework, sustainable competitive advantage derives from resources and capabilities that cannot be easily imitated or acquired by competitors, nor substituted.

Universities are increasingly operating within a highly competitive global environment shaped by rankings, internationalisation, technological innovation, and market-oriented reforms, culminating in significant application of RBV within higher education.

Universities are no longer just educational institutions; rather, they are strategic organisations that possess distinct bundles of resources. RBV literature distils tangible and intangible resources (Wang, Criado and van Hemmen, 2024).

Typical tangible assets/resources include physical infrastructure, laboratories, technology, financial capital, and campus facilities (Wartini et al., 2024). On the other hand, intangible assets, which Wang, Criado, and van Hemmen (2024) argue are essentially important within higher education as they are neither easy to replicate nor develop cumulatively over long periods of institutional evolution, include organisational reputation, research capability, academic culture, intellectual capital, and collaborative networks.

RBV is particularly relevant in the Chinese context because universities operate in a highly stratified and state-driven system where institutional resources vary considerably according to political status, historical prestige, geographic location, and government investment (Wartini et al., 2024). For example, elite institutions such as Tsinghua University and Peking University access substantial tangible assets in the form of state-funded research facilities, advanced laboratories, and large-scale digital infrastructures, as well as benefit from intangible resources including global academic reputation, extensive research networks, and strong political connections (Wartini et al., 2024).

Wang, Criado, and van Hemmen (2024) suggest that intangible resources are socially complex and historically embedded and often produce more sustainable advantages. Institutional prestige, for example, cannot be rapidly reproduced by emerging universities regardless of financial investment. This observation is particularly important in China, where historical prestige and state designation programs such as Project 211 and Project 985 have concentrated resources within a relatively small number of elite universities (Wartini et al., 2024). Consequently, resource accumulation is often cumulative, reinforcing existing hierarchies within the higher education system.

The central contribution of RBV lies in its distinction between resources and capabilities. Resources alone do not guarantee organisational success; rather, institutions must develop capabilities that enable them to effectively coordinate and deploy those resources. As noted by Wartini et al (2024), university capabilities, which are embedded within institutional routines, organisational structures, and managerial practices, include human resource management, innovation management, quality assurance systems, digital transformation, marketing capability, and strategic leadership. Next (Section 2.5.2), strategic resources in Chinese universities are highlighted.

2.5.2 Strategic Resources in Chinese Universities

2.5.2.1 Institutional Size as a Strategic Resource

One significant theme in the RBV discourse relates to the strategic importance of institutional size within Chinese higher education. Wang, Criado, and van Hemmen (2024) demonstrate that larger universities possess significant advantages in relation to technological innovation, particularly in the production of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

Key indicators for measuring institutional size are faculty numbers, student enrollment, research output, and the quantity of post-doctoral programs, and large universities possess substantial access to resources that enable them to invest in technologically intensive projects requiring considerable financial and organisational commitment. This ability to develop MOOCs reflects broader institutional capabilities associated with digital transformation, technological infrastructure, and knowledge dissemination. Large universities are therefore able to spread costs across broader organisational structures while simultaneously attracting stronger academic talent and research funding. That finding aligns with broader strategic management literature suggesting that organisational scale contributes to operational flexibility, innovation potential, and market visibility (e.g., Coviello et al., 2024).

On the negative side, this emphasis on the importance of size raises critical

concerns regarding inequality within Chinese higher education. Since institutional size is a strategic advantage, smaller and regional universities may face structural disadvantages that are difficult to overcome. By implication, resource concentration within elite institutions risks creating educational hierarchies; thus, limiting opportunities for less prestigious universities.

2.5.2.2 Academic Human Capital as a Core Resource

Another critical strategic resource within Chinese universities is human capital. Faculty expertise, research capability, academic leadership, and student quality collectively contribute to institutional competitiveness and innovation capacity. Su and Sohn (2012) highlight the dramatic expansion of academic personnel within Beijing universities, noting a 490% increase in full-time faculty between 2003 and 2009, an expansion rate that is grounded in broader state investment in higher education and research development.

Within the RBV theoretical viewpoint, the role of academic staff reflects more than labour inputs; they function as knowledge-producing assets that also generate research outputs, technological innovation, and intellectual property (Wartini et al., 2024). High-performing faculty contribute directly to institutional prestige, global rankings, and research commercialisation.

The concentration of elite academic talent within major urban areas such as Beijing and Shanghai further reinforces regional disparities within Chinese higher education (Wartini et al., 2024). Prestigious universities attract superior researchers, funding opportunities, and international collaborations, creating cumulative advantages that strengthen institutional dominance. Human capital also contributes to regional innovation systems by facilitating knowledge spillovers between universities, industries, and local economies (Martinidis et al., 2022). Universities therefore function not merely as educational providers but as central nodes within innovation ecosystems.

2.5.2.3 Political Capital and State Support

A distinctive feature of Chinese higher education is the significant role the state

plays in shaping institutional resource distribution (Fedasiuk et al, 2022). Unlike many Western university systems characterised by greater institutional autonomy, Chinese universities operate within highly centralised political and administrative structures (Wartini et al., 2024). Su and Sohn (2012) argue that state sponsorship functions as a critical strategic resource enabling universities to access government funding, national research initiatives, policy support, and technological development programs.

Political proximity to Beijing and alignment with national development priorities often provide universities with preferential access to research investment and institutional prestige (Fedasiuk et al., 2022; Su & Sohn, 2012). State-driven initiatives such as the National Medium-and-Long-Term Talents Strategy (2010–2020) illustrate how political resources are integrated into university development strategies (CSET, 2022).

This close relationship between universities and the state produces both opportunities and constraints. On the positive side, government investment has enabled China to rapidly expand research capacity, technological innovation, and global university rankings. On the negative side, however, dependence on state support may limit institutional autonomy and encourage alignment with political priorities over independent academic inquiry. Furthermore, the concentration of political resources within elite institutions reinforces systemic inequalities across the higher education sector.

One key contribution of RBV scholarship in Chinese higher education relates to the role that universities play in regional innovation systems (RIS). Increasingly, universities function as engines of technological development, knowledge transfer, and economic modernisation.

Su and Sohn (2012) specify three mechanisms through which Chinese universities influence regional economies:

1. Traditional educational functions
2. Commercialisation activities

3. New firm creation through university spin-offs

Chinese universities operate within highly dynamic environments characterised by rapid technological change, evolving labour market demands, policy reform, and international competition. Wartini et al. (2024) identify environmental turbulence as a key feature of the Chinese university setting. Under RBV theory, institutions must continuously adapt internal capabilities to external challenges.

2.5.3 Major Challenges and Limitations of RBV in Chinese Higher Education

2.5.3.1 Resource Inequality and Institutional Stratification

One major criticism of the RBV in Chinese higher education concerns the unequal distribution of resources across institutions. Elite universities benefit disproportionately from state investment, political support, and academic prestige, creating cumulative advantages that reinforce institutional hierarchies (Fedasiuk et al., 2022; Wartini et al., 2024). Smaller HEIs often have limited access to research funding, technological infrastructure, and international collaboration opportunities, resulting in a clear competitive disadvantage.

2.5.3.2 Commercialisation and the Marketisation of Universities

Increasing commercialisation and entrepreneurialism have transformed the role of universities within Chinese society. While university-industry collaboration contributes to innovation and economic development, critics argue that excessive market orientation risks undermining traditional educational values (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2021). The drive for patents, industrial contracts, and commercial revenue may shift institutional priorities away from teaching quality, critical inquiry, and public service.

2.5.3.3 Marketing and Institutional Visibility

The literature documents that marketing capability is a critical factor of institutional performance (Wartini et al., 2024). Despite that fact, it must be noted that even universities possessing strong academic resources may struggle to compete globally if they fail to effectively utilise institutional strengths

and attract international partnerships. As noted further by Wartini et al (2024), the growing importance of branding and market visibility also reflects broader commercialisation pressures within global higher education systems. Furthermore, the excessive focus on rankings and reputation management may distort educational priorities and encourage superficial performance optimisation.

Embracing the Resource-Based View theory within Chinese higher education is useful towards understanding how universities achieve institutional competitiveness and innovation capacity in the drive to achieve resilience. Logically, Chinese HEIs increasingly function as strategic organisations capable of mobilising tangible and intangible resources to strengthen educational performance and contribute to national development. As documented in the literature, institutional size, academic human capital, political support, and technological capability are critical strategic resources within the Chinese context (Wartini et al., 2024). Leveraging these assets, Universities develop innovation systems, establish university spin-offs, ensure enhanced digital learning platforms, and boost their global competitiveness.

The literature, however, underlines that these resources alone do not guarantee institutional success (Wartini et al., 2024). Strategic coordination and the effective deployment of resources through strong organisational capabilities and appropriate institutional strategies are therefore decisive factors. Another key challenge is that the unequal distribution of these resources across universities leads to systemic inequality, while increasing commercialisation triggers the danger of higher education marketisation and the erosion of traditional academic values.

2.6 Leadership in Chinese HEIs

2.6.1 Policy in Chinese HEIs

According to the Higher Education Guidelines of the People's Republic of China, presidents of public universities are led by the Communist Party committee

(Serger et al., 2015). As explained by Zhu and Li (2018, p. 1152), higher education leadership in China falls under “the president’s responsibility system under the leadership of Party Committees”, which differs from the school system of principal responsibility in Western countries. In other words, the president’s responsibility system under the leadership of the Party Committees embodies the relationship of power and responsibility and the dialectical relationship between the collective and the individual (Zhu & Li, 2018).

With the national competition and development agenda, HEIs have become incubators for the knowledge economy in China (Wei & Johnstone, 2020). Led strictly by the Communist Party of China and Ministry of Education, Chinese higher education has been actively responding to the global challenges (Marginson, 2017). The Chinese government has expressed a desire to establish global-ranking universities that can reflect the nation’s overall position (Yang & Welch, 2012). Driven by the demands for international visibility (Serger et al., 2015), the government has implemented reforms to improve academic quality and enhance graduate skills, so that the objective of world-class universities can be achieved (Huang, 2015). Since 1993, over 100 top universities in China have been funded to reach a world-class standard in the 21st century through the 211 Higher Education Project (211 Project). In 1998, the 985 World-Class University Project (985 Project) was launched among a smaller number of top universities, so that high-level funding could be channelled directly to the goal (Hayhoe & Pan, 2015; Wei & Johnstone, 2020). In 2015, the overall plan for promoting the World-class Universities Construction and First-class Disciplines (Double First-class Plan, in short) replaced the ‘211’ and ‘985’ plans and became the most important policy in higher education in China (Bodenhorn, Burns, and Palme, 2020; Lin & Wang, 2022).

To attain the world-class university standard, the entire higher education system is being strengthened, and research outputs are being increased

(Altbach, 2004). It is easy for universities with high rankings to maintain autonomy, attract the world's top intellectuals, and secure adequate resources (Wei & Johnstone, 2020; Huang, 2015). However, this does not mean the university is the best in all respects, even if it is ranked at the top of the world (Altbach, 2004). Marginson (2017) points out that there are potential risks in the dynamic push to achieve high production and internalisation through reckless efforts across different universities in China. Huang (2015) adds that external evaluative instruments, such as ranking indicators, may result in an imbalance in resource allocation between universities; that is, elite universities benefit from high-level central resources, while the rest of the institutions thrive less due to a lack of resources. As funding incentives influence local decision-making, especially at top Chinese universities (Wei & Johnstone, 2020), disharmony among faculty members may also result from rapid, inconsistent funding changes (Song, 2018). Wang (2019) indicates that, in China, universities with extensive funding don't perform better in research, knowledge transfer, or patents than those with limited incentives. There have been potential corruption cases because some presidents and scholars have prioritised the industry's interests over those of Chinese HEIs, indicating governance shortcomings (Serger et al., 2015).

2.6.2 Chinese HEIs in Cultural Context

2.6.2.1Confucianism

Confucianism remains one of the most influential philosophical traditions shaping higher education in China (Zhu & Engels, 2014). Although originating over two millennia ago, Confucian philosophy continues to significantly influence educational policy, university culture, pedagogical practice, moral development, and conceptions of social responsibility in contemporary Chinese society. As a philosophical tradition originating with the great Chinese philosopher Confucius, Confucianism has been the dominant framework in Chinese education (Wei & Johnstone, 2020). Zhu and Engels (2014) note that

Confucian culture is at the core of Chinese traditional culture, emphasising respect for hierarchy, authority, obedience, rules, and neutral behaviour. According to Zhao and Roper (2011, p.273), “traditional Confucianism focuses on self-cultivation through exercise of the five virtues: benevolence (Ren) within the wider society; respecting those for whom respect is required by the relationship of righteousness (Yi); appreciating ritual forms (Li) of a particular place and time, and knowing how to express oneself properly in interactions with others; obtaining wisdom of knowing what is right and wrong (Zhi); and being faithful (Xin)”.

The philosophy has historically provided both the ethical framework and institutional logic underpinning Chinese educational systems, particularly through its emphasis on moral cultivation, social harmony, meritocracy, and reverence for learning. As Li and Hayhoe (2012) argue, Confucianism has historically defined the missions, curricula, and organisational foundations of Chinese higher education since its institutionalisation during the Han Dynasty.

Unlike Western educational culture, which is liberal and prioritises individual autonomy and disciplinary specialisation, Confucian educational philosophy prioritises collective harmony, moral self-cultivation, social order, and ethical responsibility (Bahtilla & Xu, 2021; Mustafa, 2024). Despite growing modernisation and globalisation, these principles remain a conditioning feature of institutional structures and pedagogical processes.

Despite major historical disruptions during the 20th century, Confucianism did not fade, a fact of enduring significance that is particularly noteworthy (Zreik & Haron, 2025). As noted by the literature (Li & Hayhoe, 2012), the New Culture Movement of the 1910s and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s sought to dismantle Confucian ideology, as it was viewed as incompatible with modernisation and revolutionary progress. Rather than fade away, Confucianism has been significantly reinterpreted and reintegrated within contemporary Chinese society. As Zreik & Haron (2025) suggest, Confucian

values have gained significance as cultural resources that support national identity, educational reform, social cohesion, and political legitimacy. A direct consequence is that contemporary higher education in China reflects a complex process of negotiation between historical philosophical traditions and global educational transformations. This negotiation becomes particularly evident in initiatives such as the “New Liberal Arts,” which seek to synthesise traditional Chinese intellectual values with contemporary interdisciplinary and globalised educational models (Li, Zhuoying, & Li, 2025).

As one of the oldest philosophical beliefs in the world, **humanism** is a central focus in Confucianism (Chou et al., 2013). According to Warner and Zhu (2002), Confucianism emphasises the importance of caring for followers so they can be highly committed to their organisations. Thus, humanity and benevolence are reflected in the relationship between the leader and follower (Roper & Weymes, 2007). By applying traditional Confucian values to Chinese managerial practice, Zhao and Roper (2011) show that well-being and social capital can be improved through community and personal efforts, particularly self-cultivation.

Collectivism is emphasised in Confucianism in Chinese society. That is, collective responsibilities for society and the group take priority over individual needs because individuals exist within the collective and group functions (Chou et al., 2013). Based on trust and focused on social well-being, Zhao and Roper (2011) contend that increased employee well-being will lead to a more productive, cohesive, and happier society, which reflects a more collective view of management.

Chou et al. (2013) note that Confucius has been engaged in establishing social order, arguing that when people are understood and respected, they will live in harmony. For mutual benefit, harmony can balance the interests of the individual and the group (Zhao & Roper, 2011). Thus, **hierarchy** in Chinese society has been created to maintain prosperity and harmony through

Confucianism (Wei & Johnstone, 2020).

Filial piety (xiao) is another principle entrenched in Confucianism (Chou et al., 2013; Mustafa, 2024), which may explain why elders and teachers are always followed and seldom questioned (Resick et al., 2011). In line with filial piety, it is important to display proper behaviour that is rooted in family focus (Chou et al., 2013). The rationality lies in the understanding that an individual's success and failure relate not only to the individual but also to the whole family. Yet, filial piety may suppress new ideas and result in a lack of innovation (Resick et al., 2011). Despite the criticism, it still fits well with traditional Chinese culture, in which respect for authority and elders is shaped and formed (Chou et al., 2013). Furthermore, as **group identity** is emphasised in Confucianism, other family members are closely involved in the Chinese family (Chou et al., 2013). The networks or relationships based on trust and respect are established within the family first, then extended to the wider community and society, which is called *Guanxi* (Zhao & Roper, 2011).

Confucianism breeds the cultivation of virtue and moral integrity through education, on the understanding that educated individuals would positively enhance society (Mustafa, 2024). Embedded in the ethos of contemporary Chinese education are key Confucian tenets: filial piety (xiao), respect for authority, and the relentless pursuit of knowledge (Mustafa, 2024). Core reflections of these enduring values, Mustafa (2024) notes, are the reverence accorded to teachers and the high regard for academic achievement. As educational practices evolved to match the requirements for a rapidly changing world in the modern China context, the integration of Confucian principles into these practices reflects the continuity between past and present. Notably, though, this continuity presents both opportunities and challenges (Mustafa, 2024).

Arguably, Onsman (2012) notes that it is neither stable nor meaningful to apply Confucian heritage to the analysis of potential and progress in the reform of

Chinese higher education, because Confucian thought may be altered to align with political perspectives. Wu (2009) points out that there is no spiritual cohesion and shared value among members in the organisational culture in Chinese HEIs, while Wei and Johnstone (2020) contend that there is no authentic academic spirit in Chinese universities, contrary to other global world-class institutions, although they have refined curricula giving due consideration to elevated international rankings. Apart from traditional Chinese culture, modern cultures are also inherently embedded in Chinese higher education (Zhu & Li, 2018).

2.6.2.2 Neoliberalism and Utilitarianism

Scott (2016) indicates that neoliberalism inevitably influenced higher education from an international perspective. Though the Chinese higher education sector is strongly under central planning, it is influenced by the Western market approach of globalisation (Wei & Johnstone, 2020). Neoliberalism has granted top institutions greater autonomy and raised the standards of higher education in China through engagement in global competition (Wei & Johnstone, 2020).

As noted by Bie and Yi (2014), the Chinese higher education sector needs to maintain a balance between utilitarian and non-utilitarian education amid fierce institutional competition for limited resources. Utilitarian education focuses on preparing students for market rules, given the relationship between higher education and economic development, while non-utilitarianism emphasises cultivating students' bodies and minds as the basic principle for developing higher education rather than the market rules (Bie & Yi, 2014).

2.6.3 Effective Leadership Framework in Higher Education in China

According to Peters (2019), the growing influence of international university rankings has led to collective anxiety among universities, particularly in Asian countries. Chinese universities have been strongly influenced by the international university ranking and have made rapid progress in elite university selection (Huang, 2015). Based on the QS World University Rankings, there

are eight key ranking indicators, namely “Overall rank & Score, Classifications, Academic Reputation (rank & score), Employer Reputation, Faculty Student, Citations per Faculty, International Faculty, International Students, International Research and Employment Outcomes” (QS, 2022). Notably, only five Chinese universities are listed among the top 50 in 2023 (see Table 2.1). Peking University is ranked 12, Tsinghua University is ranked 14, Fudan University is ranked 34, Zhejiang University is ranked 42, and Shanghai Jiaotong University is ranked 46, respectively. Thus, to gain global recognition and attract more international students, leaders in higher education in China should consider how to improve Chinese universities' rankings worldwide.

Table 2.1 Universities in China (mainland) in the Top 50 in the QS Ranking

Rank	University	Overall Score	Academic Reputation	Employer Reputation
12	Peking University	91.3	99.3	96.5
14	Tsinghua University	90.1	98.9	97.7
34	Fudan University	81.5	83.6	93.5
42	Zhejiang University	79.3	72.2	95.3
46	Shanghai Jiaotong University	77.4	82.7	90.2

Source: https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2023

As Pang (2018) indicates, Tsinghua University embarked on a reform to pursue academic excellence in the 1990s. Research productivity is greatly strengthened, and the university's reputation is enhanced through the development of new programs. For example, many visiting foreign scholars were recruited annually, and some full professors, associate professors, and senior researchers were hired from top American universities, who are part of the academic community that generates the reputation bias as authors and referees.

Taking the Confucius Institute (CI) programme as a benchmark, China is trying to enhance its status in the world knowledge system by using “outward-oriented’ HE internalisation based on Sino-foreign HE collaboration (Wu, 2019). Wu (2019) suggests that Chinese HEIs provide financial aid to international

students from developing countries and improve higher education quality, including also improving teachers' English language proficiency and students' living conditions.

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), power distribution in a high power distance society is determined by powerful members. Higher power distance and collectivism are well known in Chinese culture (Hofstede et al., 2010). As a relatively high-power distance culture shapes social interactions in the school context in China (Hofstede, 2010; Tang et al., 2014), leaders face a challenge in inspiring followers to offer suggestions. Leaders typically have few discussions with followers in reform programs, and subordinates have no choice but to obey authority. The challenges of bureaucratic structures, complex human relationships, tedious administrative tasks and the lack of autonomy are big concerns in Chinese higher education (Wu, 2009). Tutors in China normally accept the leaders' orders rather than asking questions or expressing disagreement (Shengnan & Hallinger, 2020). Unlike Western counterparts, a major characteristic of leadership in higher education in China is the emphasis on collectivism, hierarchy, and harmony (Lu & Smith, 2020; Lu, 2020). Sidani and Rowe (2018) suggest authentic leadership development and follower development by providing training interventions so that followers can express their true values openly and accurately, particularly in high-power distance cultures. Lu and Smith (2021) examined distributed leadership at the departmental level in a Chinese university and suggested that leadership distributed through an allocative practice is suitable for higher education leaders in China within a centralised context.

Within the literature, four main themes stand out as central for higher education leaders to achieve resilience and competitive advantage, namely students' wellbeing and experience (Dean & Gibbs, 2015; Sanchez-Carrillo et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020), graduate outcomes (Rees, 2021; Thomas et al., 2020; Romgens et al., 2020; Wang, 2020; Okolie et al., 2019),

staff morale (Kim & Rehg, 2018; Morris & Laipple, 2015), and university ranking (Polyakov et al., 2020; Peters, 2019; Fernández-Cano et al., 2018; Marginson, 2017). Thus, it can be suggested that changes in culture and resource focus are required for leaders to address the challenges facing higher education in China. In particular, key behavioural characteristics for leaders to develop strategies are identified, primarily through a combination of distributed and authentic leadership styles, to ensure resilience in higher education in China. Some essential leaders' characteristics include collaboration, trust, taking care of the "head" and the "heart", sharing information, self-awareness, self-regulation, inspiration, open-mindedness, and communication. The conceptual framework of leadership in HE in China is presented in Figure 2.1 below.

2.7 Summary

This chapter has reviewed leadership literature and conceptual and empirical research on leadership in higher education. Firstly, the challenges facing HE are presented, emphasising fierce competition, international student recruitment, university reputation and ranking, student experience and graduate skills and outcomes. Secondly, a detailed discussion of effective leadership in HE was undertaken. In this part, leadership theories were reviewed, including distributed leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership and other leadership styles. Specifically, distributed and authentic leadership styles are the two most popular leadership styles and are widely applied across various contexts today. Thirdly, what changes are required for leaders to manage change in higher education were discussed. Resource focus and organisational culture changes are the two main changes considered in this chapter. Finally, the proposed effective leadership framework for resilience in higher education in China was presented.

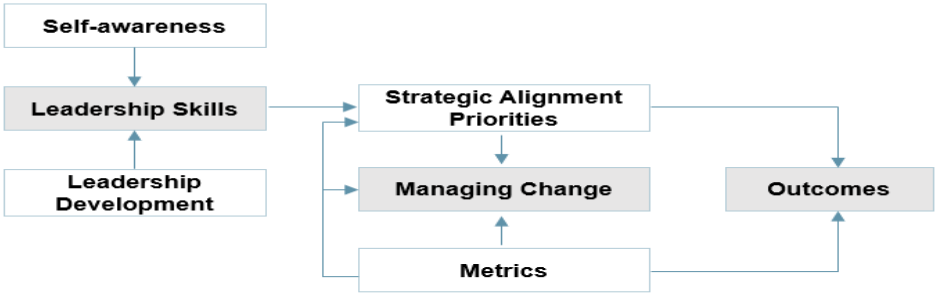


Figure 2.2 Conceptual Framework of Effective Leadership in HEIs in China

Source: Author

Chapter Three Student Experience in Higher Education

3.1 Introduction

As the influence of globalisation increases, Chinese HEIs, like other settings, are having to adopt measures to cope. Recognising the increasing pressure to cope, Chan (2014) asked, “Can China keep rising in the age of globalisation?” This study seeks to understand how Chinese HEIs are achieving resilience in today’s highly competitive educational landscape. In the theoretical framing of this research, Chapter Two reviewed literature on leadership and related aspects. Further, in regard to explaining the theoretical framing of this research, the literature review in chapter three covers the aspects of: teaching and learning; student satisfaction; technology and education; course design, teaching delivery and interactions; feedback; skills development; students' support services; social environment at university; and academic integrity. In reviewing literature on teaching and learning, pedagogy as a foundation is also considered.

Complex and evolutionary in nature, the student experience is at the heart of higher education (Amado, Guzmán and Cuero, 2023; D’Uggento et al., 2023, Tilley, 2025). Universities are recognising the importance of ensuring a positive student experience and are developing various strategies to improve students’ learning and overall study experience (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Xu et al., 2018). In the higher education context, student experience is understood as the value students derive from their university life (D’Uggento et al., 2023). Building on that viewpoint, Amado, Guzmán, and Cuero (2023) describe the student learning experience as the objective and subjective evaluations students make during their educational journey. It starts with the program choice and ends with graduation from the university, which is intentionally designed by the university faculty and administrators (Amado, Guzmán and Cuero, 2023). Matus, Rusu and Cano (2021) consider students’ commitment, engagement and well-being as core aspects of the student experience. Given

that it is a lengthy process, student experience requires continuous management and activities, such as improving teaching-learning processes, exploring classroom design, providing diverse support and sufficient learning resources to ensure the service quality throughout the educational journey (Yap, Hew and Skitmore, 2022).

3.2 Student Satisfaction and Experience

One of the most influential and contested concepts within contemporary higher education (HE) is student satisfaction (e.g., Dean, Shubita, and Claxton, 2020; Khan & Hemsley-Brown, 2024). As noted by scholars, one key measure of delivering students' valued experience is student satisfaction (e.g., Perez-Encinas et al., 2025; Khan & Hemsley-Brown, 2024). In the last three decades, the global higher education sector has experienced intensified market competition, ever-increasing tuition fees, digital transformation, and increasing governmental accountability mechanisms. Ultimately, universities are increasingly required to demonstrate institutional effectiveness through their academic outputs and research productivity, as well as through measurable indicators of the student experience (Burgess et al., 2018; Qureshi, 2021). Universities are therefore recognising the pertinence of considering student satisfaction surveys, institutional rankings, and quality assurance frameworks in their governance structures.

Although student satisfaction has been researched for decades, there is still no universally accepted definition of the term (Jereb et al., 2018; Qureshi, 2021). Conceptualised in various ways, student satisfaction is often described as a multidimensional psychological state arising from students' evaluations of their educational experiences, with scholars disagreeing on which dimensions should be prioritised and how to operationalise it (Qureshi, 2021; Amado, Guzmán and Cuero, 2023).

Several scholars have referred to students as customers (e.g., Khan & Hemsley-Brown, 2024; Govender & David, 2023; D'Uggento et al., 2023;

Amado, Guzmán and Cuero, 2023; Wong & Chapman, 2023), an operational viewpoint that has influenced perceptions and expectations regarding the quality of higher education. That viewpoint has been criticised by scholars who disagree with the description of students as customers, such as Dean, Shubita, and Claxton (2020), Calma and Dickson-Deane (2020), and Gibbs and Dean (2015).

Differences in how students are described have also shaped the understanding of the student experience. Adisa et al. (2022) contend that a customer-centric framing of students threatens the educator-learner dynamic, potentially compelling lecturers to value satisfaction scores above scholarly rigour and intellectual growth. The positive relationships between students and educators are central to satisfaction, as they foster trust, empathy, a sense of belonging, and emotional engagement (Bell, 2022).

Critics of describing students as customers, and of the resulting emphasis on student satisfaction, emphasise that student satisfaction alone might not improve the student experience. Assessing student satisfaction is important because it enables understanding of the impact of teaching, the quality of service provided, and other factors that shape the student experience (Ruda, 2025). However, Dean and Gibbs (2015) emphasise that it is more important to help students develop their profound happiness, while Raettig and Weger (2018) suggest that students' satisfaction is highly related to interest in course content, individual and group verbal contributions, and interaction experiences.

Wong and Chapman (2023) not only reinforce the argument for program content but also highlight additional aspects of student satisfaction: teaching, the institution, campus facilities, student support, own learning, the overall university experience, and life as a university student. These eight elements, they argue, are associated with different dimensions of interaction: student–student formal, student–student informal and student-instructor. Recent literature on the Chinese HEI setting (Xu, 2025) reinforces the suggestion that

institutions are a core element that conditions student satisfaction. This institutional logics-based viewpoint suggests that resource allocation shapes institutional logics, which in turn influence student satisfaction through their implementation.

Khan and Hemsley-Brown (2024) identify key factors that influence students' choices in higher education and their subsequent expectations and satisfaction levels. They conclude that the key aspects are university reputation, course design, service quality, campus social life, and perceptions of post-graduation employability. Furthermore, Khan and Hemsley-Brown (2024) argue that the perceptions of employability post-graduation affect the likelihood that students will recommend their institutions to others

De-Juan-Vigaray et al. (2024) reveal that the acquisition of competences and skill development greatly influences student satisfaction, as it is important for graduates' incorporation into the labour market. Furthermore, they emphasise that teaching quality directly impacts student satisfaction. Thus, skill acquisition, together with teaching methods, course management, class facilities, and staff development programs, is a motivational factor in achieving student satisfaction and loyalty.

Because universities differ from other product and service providers, students should be educated to realise their expectations for their money, make assessments, and achieve their potential (Gibbs & Dean, 2014). Additionally, it could be argued that higher education has a moral responsibility to challenge students to build resilience and integrity (Dean, Shubita and Claxton, 2020). Rather than treating students merely as customers, Dean, Shubita, and Claxton (2020) further suggest that leaders and managers in higher education should help students actively participate and embark on a dynamic learning journey with their responsibilities. Furthermore, Calma and Dickson-Deane (2020) emphasise the importance of students as active participants to co-create knowledge in the learning process. They advocate a shift away from a customer-centric model towards a more holistic, participatory approach in

higher education that promotes academic integrity and lifelong learning.

3.3 Pedagogy, Teaching and Learning

Before reviewing the literature on teaching and learning, it is important to introduce pedagogy, a foundation that encompasses several elements related to teaching and learning, as well as other educational themes considered in this chapter.

Pedagogy

In modern higher education, the delivery of engaging pedagogy has become a dynamic, relational, and technologically integrated process (Birdi et al., 2025). Understanding, therefore, the strategies for fostering engagement is of critical importance in modern higher education. Critical pedagogical themes to consider in this regard include emotional intelligence, soft-skill mastery, student-centred methodologies, educational technology, and the contextual challenges of diversity and employability (Birdi et al., 2025; Al Jaberi, Alzouebi Khurma, 2024).

Researchers have emphasised that the core predictors of pedagogical success are a tutor's psychological and relational competencies (Al Jaberi, Alzouebi and Abu Khurma, 2024; Edwin et al., 2025). These scholars suggest that demic achievement is intertwined with a tutor’s emotional intelligence, particularly their self-awareness and capacity for emotional regulation. Thus, emotionally intelligent educators are highly likely to lead and motivate their students toward a state of learning readiness. Recent research that resonates with that viewpoint (Gkintoni, Dimakos, and Nikolaou, 2024) found a consensus across sixty-four studies that ability-based emotional intelligence measures are higher predictors of academic outcomes than self-perceived trait measures. Furthermore, their ability to cognitively process emotions enables tutors to navigate complex classroom dynamics more effectively than those who rely solely on personality-driven rapport.

Empathy is another theme considered important in understanding the

pedagogical foundation. The empathy logic, which resonates with humanistic philosophy, suggests that when tutors demonstrate understanding of a student's emotional and academic experiences, they create a psychologically safe environment (Ocampo et al., 2025). Supporting that viewpoint, Liu, Yu, and McClean (2024) comment that international students perceive "friendliness" and "patience" as the most inspiring qualities in their lecturers.

In this discourse, which shows a clear transition from a "subject expert" to an "inspiring tutor", there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of soft skills. The literature identifies soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and teamwork as vital catalysts for general teaching competencies (Saleem et al., 2024; Karthick & Velmurugan, 2024). As noted by Karthick and Velmurugan (2024), faculty soft skills are multidimensional, encompassing cognitive-analytical dimensions alongside professional maturity. A further theme, emphasised in line with empathy, is active listening. As noted by Paramole, Adeoye, Arowosaye, and Ibikunle (2024), active listening is a transformative practice that validates student voices and builds essential trust.

Teaching and Learning

Dransfield, Wood, and Su (2022) describe the actual teaching and learning experience as the relationship between tutors and students and the curriculum design, which are interrelated components of inspiring teaching. Staff development initiatives help staff explore their own teaching philosophy, develop new practices, and learn and share with others. Inspiring teaching can be achieved through senior leadership support, teaching communities, and a positive culture (Dransfield, Wood, and Su, 2022). Adesola et al. (2019) recommend using targeted role models to stimulate students' entrepreneurial activity, as the positive impact stems from a self-relevant, attainable exchange perception between students and real-life entrepreneurs.

In the current competitive academic landscape, student satisfaction is a major factor of HEI's performance and expansion and universities should prioritise

student happiness and ensure improvement in the areas of *learning atmosphere*, cutting-edge teaching techniques, and academic support services provided (Aman, Aziz and Abbas, 2023). Academic staff in universities play a vital role in enhancing the quality of the student learning experience (Orozco, Giraldo-García, and Chang, 2023; Wong & Chapman, 2023). Nabaho, Oonyu and Aguti (2019) add that academics must ensure good student-centred teaching. Further, they emphasise that academic tutors should be knowledgeable, approachable, communicate effectively, demonstrate professionalism, undertake research-based teaching, and be organised.

In further literature that underscores the importance of teachers' approachability as a teaching element, Bell (2022) points out that relational pedagogy is key to student satisfaction because respectful, warm interactions build trust. In particular, the lecturer's approachability, empathy, caring, and sensitivity increase student satisfaction. As a good teaching characteristic, approachable academic staff are easily accessible to students and get along well with them. The open, beneficial, and professional relationship between academic staff and students enables students to consult tutors and tutors to learn from students (Nabaho, Oonyu, and Aguti, 2019).

Exploring dissatisfaction and neutrality metrics among UK undergraduate students, Langan and Harris (2024) contend that course management and teaching quality are the most important influential factors in student satisfaction. Bodenhorn (2020) argues that senior leaders in Chinese HEIs pay little attention to the academy's actual teaching and learning. De-administration, more transparent resource allocation practices, and more effective communication among work units are advocated to enable universities to embrace more modern management practices and a professional, service-oriented ethos (Bodenhorn, 2020).

The importance of addressing the esteem-related challenges that academic staff face is also emphasised as a step towards improving students' satisfaction

(Watson, Webb, and Cook, 2025). HEIs should carefully implement strategic approaches to increase staff esteem by creating equitable and transparent career paths, recognising and rewarding teaching excellence, and communicating clear value (Watson, Webb, and Cook, 2025). Watson, Webb, and Cook (2025) warn that focusing solely on teaching contracts, such as pedagogical innovation, is insufficient to enhance student satisfaction in HEIs.

Next, three aspects relevant to teaching and learning are summarised, namely, course design, teaching delivery and interactions (section 3.3.1), technology investment to aid teaching and learning (section 3.3.2), and artificial intelligence (AI) and learning (section 3.3.3).

3.3.1 Course Design, Teaching Delivery and Interactions

Eather et al. (2022) suggest that assisted learning, tutoring, and peer mentoring should be provided to improve student satisfaction in higher education, while Govender and David (2023) recommend that tailored student experiences be created throughout the teaching and learning process. Interactions between teachers and students in class, both online and offline, increase students' engagement in learning (Govender & David, 2023; Wong & Chapman, 2023). Equally, interactions among students, such as learning in small groups is important as well (Wong & Chapman, 2023).

3.3.2 Technology Investment to aid Teaching and Learning

With technological evolution, work processes are becoming increasingly technology-enabled, and this is also reflected in HEIs (McCarthy & Palmer, 2023; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020; Chugh et al., 2023). Commenting, Chugh et al. (2023) state: a key driver affecting the design and development of educational delivery mechanisms in HEIs is the rapid educational technology development, which is not only impacting institutions' technical capacity to infuse hardware and software solutions into existing learning infrastructure but also having significant implications for pedagogical practice, stakeholder acceptance of new technology, and HEI administrative structures.

Skulmowski and Rey (2020) emphasise that teaching and learning through emerging technology should be optimised for students' future vocation.

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the need for higher technology-enabled processes in work settings, including HEIs. It has been emphasised that COVID-19 has changed the higher education landscape, in which hybrid and blended learning appear to be safe and promising options (McCarthy & Palmer, 2023; Singh et al., 2021; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). Hybrid and blended learning models were in use in higher education before the pandemic, combining face-to-face and computer-mediated instruction (Ashraf et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021; Saichaie, 2020); however, their adoption has intensified in the aftermath of COVID-19. The accelerated adoption of hybrid and blended learning represents a pivotal opportunity for the education sector to undergo transformation (Akcil & Bastas, 2021; Bebbington, 2021; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). Appropriate infrastructure and faculty capacity in hybrid and blended learning increase students' self-awareness, self-efficacy, autonomy, creativity, and synergy in the flexible learning environment (Singh et al., 2021), providing students with a sustainable, personalised, and independent learning experience.

Scholars have warned that faculty and student computer compatibility, the cost of online software, and the integrity of individual learners could pose challenges for hybrid and blended learning models (Singh et al., 2021; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). In their view, O'Byrne and Pytash (2015) not only underscore the potential for challenges, noting that not all learners will be engaged and motivated by integrating technology in the classroom, but also emphasise that whether the hybrid learning model is the best instructional design depends on the pedagogical objectives and goals. On their part, McCarthy and Palmer (2023) emphasise that there is less emphasis on framework development and a lack of an effective, measured approach to blended teaching and learning. The instructional goal is the most important driver, providing the impetus for

reflection in the implementation of digital technology (Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). As educational delivery in higher education is increasingly multi-modal, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach to manage blended delivery to engage students, enhance their contemporary tertiary experience, and support their success (Bowden, 2022; McCarthy & Palmer, 2023).

3.3.3 AI and Learning

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has had a remarkable impact on teaching, and students may have a richer learning experience through AI adaptation (Mondal, Das, and Vrana, 2023; Singh & Hiran, 2022). There is a range of benefits AI brings to higher education, such as student engagement, accessibility, and collaboration (Cotton, Cotton, and Shipway, 2024). For example, the Chat API supports remote learning and enables student group work, while GPT-3 is used for language translation, summarisation, question answering, and text generation (Cotton, Cotton, and Shipway, 2024). With the help of AI, personalised or customised content is developed and distributed based on the assessment of students' abilities and needs. Meanwhile, tutors can finish administrative tasks, grade assignments, and provide students with feedback more quickly and effectively through AI-enabled support (Singh & Hiran, 2022). Recognising the growing capabilities of AI, Chan (2023) proposes an AI ecological education policy framework across three dimensions: pedagogical, operational, and ethical. This pedagogical dimension focuses on the teaching and learning aspects of AI integration, which mainly include a rethinking of assessment and examinations, the encouragement of a balanced approach to AI adoption, preparation for the AI-driven workplace, and the development of students' holistic skills and competencies. As the initiators of the pedagogical dimension, academic staff design and implement lesson plans, activities, and assessments using technology. In other words, teaching methods and assessment strategies can be adapted to enhance students' learning outcomes and develop their creativity, critical thinking and other essential skills, without

undermining academic integrity. Furthermore, Chan (2023) encourages universities to provide support, resources and training for tutors to foster an inclusive learning environment and equal access to AI technologies. Thus, the university can prepare students for the future AI-driven workplace (Chan, 2023). Aler Tubella et al. (2024) recommend that the course requirement be addressed in the course to bridge the gap between the course content and requirements, and that AI development methodologies be explicitly included in the curricula, such as record-keeping procedures, privacy-preserving data collection methods, and explainability tools. Meanwhile, the university must also set out clear learning outcomes describing the proficiency level expected of students (Aler Tubella et al., 2024).

3.4 Feedback

Considered a core and integral part, many researchers view feedback as a critical learning aspect for student development in higher education (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Chan & Luo, 2023; Leibold & Schwarz, 2022; Mather & Scheepers, 2025; Morris et al., 2021; Quinlan & Pitt, 2025; Rigopoulos, 2022). The role of assessment and feedback extends beyond the mere quantification of student attainment, encompassing instead a formative pedagogical function that actively influences learning practices (Rutherford et al., 2024; Williams, 2024).

Peer assessment is proposed as a strategy to develop feedback literacy and student agency. By involving students in evaluating one another's work, peer assessment aims to sharpen their understanding of academic standards and cultivate critical judgment (Fleckney et al., 2025; Williams, 2024), though some students prefer feedback from academic staff, who are perceived as more authoritative (Elsayed & Cakir, 2023).

However, as argued by Holt et al. (2024), the growing scale of higher education restricts educators' ability to offer detailed, individualised feedback, undermining the practicality of comprehensive formative assessment. Williams

(2024) posits that feedback should be regarded as a conversation rather than a product and should involve the active engagement of both educators and learners. Feedback should be timely, clear, actionable, easy to understand and with a purpose to support the improvement and development (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Holt et al., 2024; Leibold and Schwarz, 2022).

Henderson et al. (2019) identify several challenges that academic staff encounter when providing feedback to students, including increased workload, time constraints, a lack of expertise and motivation, and difficulties in catering to individual students in large classes.

Given the range of challenges associated with feedback, Nash (2025) underscores the need for mitigation initiatives to maximise student satisfaction in higher education. To ensure feedback quality and a positive impact on student satisfaction, HEIs must ensure appropriate measures. University leaders should keep in mind that a well-resourced and established organisational structure could enforce a stricter feedback regime (Nash, 2025).

Next, the forms of feedback are presented in section 3.4.1, while the characteristics of feedback are described in section 3.4.2. In the last sub-section (3.4.3), the technology used in feedback is explained.

3.4.1 Forms of Feedback

Feedback is data or information from another person, specific to a skill, assignment, or performance, that helps validate or explain performance gaps (Douglas et al., 2016). Generally speaking, feedback is defined in three paradigms: the teacher-centred transmission-oriented paradigm, the student-centred process-oriented paradigm, and the ecological-sociometrical paradigm (Chan & Luo, 2023).

Teachers' priority is to integrate student feedback literacy into the curriculum to encourage students to seek, use, and generate feedback by arranging assessment tasks and learning activities (Carless & Winstone, 2023). Tutors are encouraged to leverage feedback loops by fostering shared learning

efficacy beliefs and ensuring the class topic and content are captivating (Raettig & Weger, 2018).

There are several assessment methods to evaluate students' learning. Most feedback is either verbal or written, and it can range from a simple correctness judgement to identification of answers for development, prior contribution review, and invitations to share ideas or opinions (Morris, Perry and Wardle, 2021). Verbal feedback is frequently situated within the dialogue context; thus, it is seen as a 'move' in a dialogic teaching and learning approach (Perry et al., 2020). Written feedback focuses more on ensuring correctness and providing additional information to further develop students' understanding rather than on teaching information (Morris, Perry, and Wardle, 2021). The literature is inconclusive about whether written feedback is more effective than verbal feedback (Wisniewski et al., 2020).

Formative assessment and feedback has also been described in the literature. Morris et al. (2021) note that formative assessment and feedback make students more aware of teaching and learning approaches that are likely to support their academic progress. Furthermore, they identify five general categories of feedback type, medium, and delivery: Content, Detail and delivery, Timing and spacing, Quizzing and Testing, and Peers and Technology. Their results suggest that low-stakes quizzes and tests are particularly powerful, as are peer and tutor feedback, though these depend on implementation factors. In addition, the evidence of feedback outcomes varies depending on grading and technology-based feedback (Morris et al., 2021). Sweeney (2023) argues it is difficult to overcome students' low academic competence even with various measures such as in-person and online writing support, extensive individual feedback, dedicated skills modules running in parallel with core modules and other support forms delivered via virtual learning environment, because students don't take full advantage of the formative assessment. Therefore, Crisostomo and Chauhan (2019) recommend that the teaching team provide

generic guidance on answering the question set, based on the feedback template model, as an equitable, time-efficient approach to ensure that all learners receive similar guidance.

3.4.2 Characteristics of Feedback

Mikheeva et al. (2019) investigated the role of politeness in instructions and found that politeness in instructions does not influence outcomes, whereas receiving polite feedback positively affects students' scores on chapter tests and final post-tests. On their part, Scalise et al. (2018) note that the potential promise of feedback activity encourages students to spend time thinking more deeply about their work. Ideally, feedback should be timely, clear, easy to understand and with a purpose to support the improvement and development (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Leibold and Schwarz, 2022). The timeliness of feedback is a function of students' perceptions of feedback as positive or negative (Leibold & Schwarz, 2022). Gredler (2018) notes that, in addition to being timely, feedback should include examples.

Chan and Luo (2023) suggest that students should take more responsibility in seeking and acting on feedback, which involves a dialogic process. Other scholars, for example, Carless and Boud (2018), have also argued that the effectiveness of feedback depends on students' feedback literacy, such as their ability to appreciate feedback, make judgments, manage emotions, and take action.

It is valuable for students to appreciate the value of composing and receiving feedback, and to engage in multiple cumulative peer feedback experiences (Harland, Wald, and Randhawa, 2017). Achieving that requires the importance of providing better training for students to properly understand the guidance in formative feedback to be recognised (Dwyer, 2021). Carless and Winstone (2023) recommend that tutor and student feedback literacy should be interplayed across the design, relational, and pragmatic dimensions, given the investment required in feedback processes from both parties. In their

framework, the design dimension refers to the assessment design that facilitates effective feedback processes, while the relational dimension refers to providing students with support for working with emotions productively from both communicative and relational perspectives. The pragmatic dimension implies that the tutor focuses on providing the most likely opportunities to support student learning and on managing the practicalities of feedback. When tutors and students share their purposes and responsibilities, there is an impetus for developing feedback. Carless and Winstone (2023) emphasise that communication and negotiation of feedback activities and processes bring mutual benefits for tutors and students. For one thing, tutors can reflect and refine their own feedback designs by appreciating students' perspectives. For another, students involved in purposeful practice in making judgments about their work help tutors reconsider and develop feedback literacy by sharing their challenges and successes as they gain, process, generate, store, and use information from various sources (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Woitt et al., 2025).

3.4.3 Technology Used in Feedback

AI is being embraced and accepted in the assessment processes as it is an integral part of the HEI context. As a key element of contemporary feedback practices, technology-enabled feedback offers advantages in timeliness, portability, convenience, and efficiency (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Leibold & Schwarz, 2022; Deepshikha, 2025; Yavariabdi et al., 2025). For example, ChatGPT could be used to provide feedback and grade assignments, enabling students to have a real-time, more personalised learning experience by granular performance data analysis, which is difficult to achieve by traditional pedagogical methods alone (Gao, 2021; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Yavariabdi et al., 2025).

Though it takes time for academic staff to learn a particular technology, staff workloads would be streamlined once they are accustomed to using it (Carless

& Winstone, 2023). Förster et al. (2018) point out that automated online quizzes could be a technological solution for managing feedback processes in large classes.

Parkes and Fletcher (2017) note that students prefer video feedback to written feedback, as audio feedback is a simple recording rather than an edited or sophisticated recording, which may take additional time to receive. The literature also indicates that video feedback improves students' writing, and students' comments show that the feedback helps them grow as writers and learn from their mistakes (Marshall et al., 2020). Wolstencroft and Leanne (2021) prefer an audio-based feedback method over written communication, which can increase both the number of students' feedback assessments and students' engagement.

Wang and Zhu (2019) report a negative experience with online exercise because there is no detailed feedback on answers. Thus, they suggest that tutors select appropriate course topics and content to ensure learning. That view is supported by Wang and Zhu (2019), who emphasise that detailed feedback answers should be provided to promote students' learning.

Alghamdi and Alghizzi (2025) indicate that teacher acceptance, ethical safeguards, and institutional support can effectively shape AI-automated feedback, a pedagogical intervention in HEIs. Liu and Deris (2025) call for a reimagining of pedagogically inclusive, reflective, and feedback-literate learning environments because AI feedback depends on intentional pedagogical design, educators' critical mediation, structural support, and students' capacity for interpretation, evaluation, and application.

In two video-based feedback experiments, Leton et al. (2018) found no difference in post-test performance between the two groups and no difference in students' attitudes toward the feedback methods. In a supportive tone, Morris et al. (2021) argue that there is little strong theoretical ground or empirical evidence to test the effectiveness of technologies for providing feedback.

When standardisation is a priority in large-scale educational contexts, AI-mediated assessment can reduce human variability and bias (Lyanda et al., 2024). Scholars have, however, flagged risks associated with integrating AI into feedback and assessment in higher education (Deepshikha, 2025; Lyanda et al., 2024; Yavariabdi et al., 2025). When students' work is presented in creative, interpretive, and context-dependent forms, AI systems struggle to evaluate students' higher-order cognitive skills, particularly in the humanities and social sciences (Yavariabdi et al., 2025).

Beyond technical limitations, scholars raise a range of ethical concerns related to AI adoption in assessment and feedback (Deepshikha, 2025; Lyanda et al., 2024; Yavariabdi et al., 2025). Yavariabdi et al. (2025) point out that students may not engage in genuine learning with AI assistance and may not understand how AI-generated feedback is produced, raising questions about originality, explainability, trust, transparency, and accountability.

The human educator continues to play a central role in academic identity and student engagement, as AI-driven feedback struggles to replicate empathy, motivation, trustworthiness, authenticity, and relational elements of human teaching (Rose et al., 2026; Russell et al., 2026).

Thus, it is suggested that the most viable option for future assessment and feedback is a carefully designed hybrid system that integrates human judgment with technological efficiency (Deepshikha, 2025; Rose et al., 2026; Yavariabdi et al., 2025).

3.5 Skills Development

3.5.1 Graduate Employability

Graduate employability has become an increasingly crucial factor for universities and students (Lundberg et al., 2024; Naseer et al., 2025; Hennings, van der Veen and Zhu, 2025; Monterio & Almeida, 2021; Rees, 2021). Employability is enabled by pedagogical approaches that facilitate students' positive engagement and active learning, combined with students' personal

knowledge and experience (Monterio & Almeida, 2021; Naseer et al., 2025; Otermans et al., 2025). Monterio and Almeida (2021) note that employable graduates integrate scientific subjects, transversal knowledge, and career competencies well.

Romgens et al. (2020) distil six aspects of the concept of employability in higher education: applying disciplinary knowledge, transferable generic skills, emotional intelligence, career development skills, self-management and self-efficacy. In previous contributions, Clark (2018) described the concept of graduate employability to include the core elements of human capital, social capital, individual attributes, individual behaviours, perceived employability and labour market factors, while Batistic and Tymon (2017) demonstrate that there is a positive relationship between networking behaviour and self-perceived employability. Finch et al. (2016) advocate that students need to reflect on both their intrinsic and learned resources, with dynamic capabilities integrated, to achieve competitive advantage, as intellectual, personality, meta-skills (interpersonal and organisational skills), and job-specific resources are important for university graduate students. Graduates are expected to demonstrate lifelong, evolving, complex and industry-aligned competencies to enable them to navigate volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environments, as academic credentials alone are no longer sufficient to ensure sustainable employability (Choi-Lundberg et al., 2024; Naseer et al., 2025).

3.5.2 Soft/Transferrable Skills and Skills Gap

Though the employer's perception may differ from students' perception, there has been an increased emphasis on soft skills over the last 5-10 years because soft skills are highly connected with graduate employability (Succi & Canovi, 2020). It is widely recognised that soft/transferable skills are vital for developing graduates' employability, adaptability, and flexibility in the face of rapid changes in the future labour market (Succi & Canovi, 2020). According to Cotronei-Baird (2020, p. 205), "Employability skills' should be defined beyond discipline

knowledge and technical skills, and should include the necessary and relevant skills required in the workplace, such as communication, problem solving, critical thinking, creativity and teamwork skills, as well as personal attributes, including proactive and self-efficacy. Cinque (2016) emphasised significant gaps in graduates' soft skills and recommended that soft skills, as expected outcomes, be listed in the university curriculum. According to the World Economic Forum (2020), employers emphasise the skills prominently considered in the lead up to 2025 include Analytical thinking and innovation, Complex problem-solving, Active learning and learning strategies, Technology use, monitoring and control, Resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility, Leadership and social influence, Persuasion and negotiation.

Teamwork, communication, interpersonal effectiveness, individual self-management skills and cognitive abilities, including critical thinking and problem-solving, are defined as five key domains of soft skills by Otermans et al. (2025). In a similarly close viewpoint, Zhang and Veecock (2024) describe seven interrelated employability factors: Mindset, Outlook, Character Dispositions, Innovation, Digital Literacy, Academic Literacy, and Social Skills by proposing the MIDAS framework. Bui et al. (2025) flag AI literacy as another core component of graduate employability. They conceptualise five dimensions of digital skills: information management, communication, content creation, digital safety, and digital empathy. This expanded definition moves beyond technical proficiency to include ethical and relational dimensions of digital engagement. They further demonstrate that the frequency of technology use is a stronger predictor of digital skill development than academic progression, suggesting that digital competence is shaped more by behavioural engagement than by formal educational structures. Bouhout, Askitou, and Es-soufi (2024) suggest that Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) and care are important for developing students' soft skills in online Higher Education. Thus, a student-centred, affective, and proactive approach to teaching that

develops students' character and skills is further highlighted.

As graduates' skills and competencies are strictly evaluated by the labour market (Wang et al., 2020), the realisation of employment depends on whether universities and industry share a clear understanding of the industry's actual needs regarding graduates' qualifications and competencies (Sanchez-Carrillo et al., 2021). Otermans et al. (2024) found that organisations often report difficulties recruiting graduates equipped with competencies, suggesting that HEIs may not be fully aligned with labour market needs. More and more employers prefer soft or transferable skills over purely technical knowledge (Naseer et al., 2025; Rubio-Andrés et al., 2023).

3.5.3 Curricular, Extracurricular and Co-Curricular Activities Participation

Many graduates realise they have difficulties when entering the labour market (Ornellas, Falkner, and Stalbrandt, 2019). According to Ornellas, Falkner, and Stalbrandt (2019), one key reason is that the educational contents and curriculum design are obsolete and not relevant to the ever-growing demands of the labour market. Griffiths et al. (2018) argue that the resourcing and support for employability skills are seldom taken into account during the learning design process, particularly regarding graduate identity awareness and employability self-perception. To some extent, HEIs have not been successfully preparing students for the workforce; therefore, scholars suggest that universities need to create better outcomes for students and broader HE stakeholders, such as government, employers, and communities (Small et al., 2022).

Drawing on internal and external expertise, learning curricula should be designed by blending formal and informal methods to support students' skill acquisition within the organisation (WEF, 2020). Higher Education Institutions are responsible for designing curricula to address the growing demands of different industrial sectors (Daley & Baruah, 2021). There is a need for better curriculum design to help graduates develop key skills, including soft skills, that employers desire to enhance graduate employability (Finch et al., 2016).

Magnell and Kolmos (2017) present four strategies for curricula, based on an understanding of the educational role and various perceptions of work-related learning activities, including add-on by someone else, add-on about the profession, integration of teaching and learning activities, and integration with additional value. An integration of different work-related learning activities throughout the program is suggested for HEIs to enrich students' knowledge and prepare graduates for employment across academic environments, for example, internship courses, guest lecturers based on the work context, entrepreneurship, cases from external experts and challenging project management (Magnell and Kolmos, 2017). Gunnels et al. (2024) demonstrate that students engaged in research-based projects outperform their peers by 40.7% in soft-skill development, particularly in critical thinking and information literacy. Widely recognised as one of the most effective mechanisms for developing employability skills in higher education, work-integrated learning provides important opportunities for students to develop professional identity, work competence, and industry networks (Choi-Lundberg et al., 2024; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022; Otermans et al., 2025).

Okolie et al. (2019) suggest innovative strategies for effective curriculum design and implementation, innovative pedagogy, and collaborative, problem-based, self-directed learning under the supervision of both academic and industry experts to motivate students to enhance the acquisition of relevant employability skills required by the labour market in HEIs in developing countries. Emphasising the engineering industry, Daley and Baruah (2021) note that there is a growing demand for engineering graduates equipped with both professional technical competencies and management and communication skills in organisations in the twenty-first century. Based on a case study of the Electronic Engineering Department at York University in the UK, Daley and Baruah (2021) recommend that universities develop a comprehensive teaching and learning approach that emphasises both technical and soft skills, including

the integration of leadership into engineering curricula. When that is done, industry needs could be well met through leadership skill development, along with academics and students in higher education.

On their part, Griffiths et al. (2018) suggest that universities should develop feedback loops through resources, challenges, and support to prepare graduates for the anticipated transition from education to professional communities in uncertain labour market landscapes. In addition, cooperation among different stakeholders is crucial for HEIs to identify the best training practices for teaching and learning; thus, universities are strongly recommended to build partnerships with industry, employers, and other universities to guide graduates and improve their knowledge, skills, and qualities (Griffiths et al., 2018). Doing that will enable graduates to adapt effectively to the changing labour market and improve their employability (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Okolie et al., 2019). Jackson and Tomlinson (2022) and Zhang and Veecock (2024) emphasise the participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, as these activities enhance students' communication skills, network capabilities and overall employability profiles.

Service-Learning has been recognised as a global pedagogical approach that offers students structured learning experiences by combining academic goals with community service to meet specific learning objectives (Shek et al., 2020, 2021). Mtawa and Nkhoma (2020) state that the holistic educational approach not only deepens students' academic understanding but also develops their critical consciousness, citizenship skills and the capability to contribute to society via the integration of civic and experientiaI education. As academic Service-Learning is integrated into curricula, there are structured opportunities for students to apply academic learning in real-world contexts through various Service-Learning activities, such as intensive Service-Learning courses, trips, and volunteer programs in Chinese universities (Hong et al., 2024). Ngoc Ha, Van Dyke, and Spittle (2025) point out that Micro-credentials could be an

effective way to meet emerging skill needs and enhance graduate employability, as both employers and students express strong interest in training in communication and leadership skills.

3.6 Student Support Services

In academic discourse, there is an increasing emphasis on providing support for students (e.g., Duraku et al., 2025; Gomis et al., 2024; Hallam, 2024; Mabwe et al., 2025; Nash, 2025; Ouyang & Wong, 2025; Tejero-Dakay, Lozano, and Ferolin, 2024). According to Yidana et al. (2023), student satisfaction increases when the institutional support services are met. In higher education, various support services are provided to improve students' learning experience. Students tend to be more engaged in institutional programs when they are more aware of available support (Ma et al., 2022). Tejero-Dakay, Lozano and Ferolin (2024) present a structured approach for transforming student service listings into strategic tools to enhance the student experience. To reinforce the agility and resilience of HEIs, they set the stage for future assessments and promote a continuous improvement cycle to dynamically and iteratively enhance student satisfaction. Okay-Somerville et al. (2020) suggest that the support provided by universities needs to meet the needs of individual students and cohorts. Examining the library information resources provided to disabled students in higher education in developing countries, Hallam (2024) recommends that personal tutoring, involving weekly group tutorials, be utilised to foster strong relationships between students and tutors, enhance the student experience, and motivate persistence. Recent literature (Mabwe et al., 2025) notes substantial geographical bias in existing research, as the majority of studies originate from Western contexts such as the United States, Australia, and Germany. Thus, support frameworks may not effectively translate into resource-constrained environments.

Next, three aspects of student support services are presented, namely;

1. Academic and administrative support service (Section 3.6.1),

2. Career support (Section 3.6.2), and
3. Mental health support (Section 3.6.3).

3.6.1 Academic and Administrative Support Service

Mabwe et al. (2025) categorise academic and non-academic support services. Academic support includes tutoring, mentoring, writing assistance, and academic advising, while administrative support, financial assistance, wellbeing programmes and disability services measures relate to non-academic support services (Mabwe et al., 2025).

Emerson (2025) emphasises that libraries should not only function as knowledge repositories but also be more student-centred, provide digital access, informal social spaces, and wellbeing environments, and connect students with wider institutional support services.

Williams-Ilemobola et al. (2022) note that one of the most important support services provided for students is by the course administration team, who need to embrace a service mentality. Further literature (Yidana et al., 2023) emphasises the importance of administrative service in shaping the quality of HEIs and student satisfaction. They contend that effective teaching and learning depend on robust administrative infrastructures, such as enrolment systems, student records management, library provision, information technology and disability support. Regrettably, however, administrative and non-academic staff are often excluded from systematic quality assurance processes, thus leading to unsupportive and inefficient administrative practice (Yidana et al., 2023).

3.6.2 Career Support

University career services are valuable resources for students' development (Khurumova & Pinto, 2023; Luke & Bartlett, 2024; Ma et al., 2022; Monteiro et al., 2020). HEIs must ensure effective career services and provide students with comprehensive developmental support, including long-term career planning, skills training, employability coaching, internship opportunities and networking

facilitation because students expect more than transactional employment information (Ma et al., 2022; Zilai, 2024). Career adaptability also positively influences student satisfaction. The career construction theory approach is widely adopted in institutional programs focused on students' career thinking, adaptability, communication, self-management skills, and networking (Monteiro et al., 2020). According to Khurumova and Pinto (2023), most students are open to using online and computer-assisted career guidance, although they prefer in-person interventions. They advise the university's career offices to identify new directions and opportunities, working with students' value demonstration to the academic community and the labour market. In the pursuit of a better workforce, intervention preferences and expectations for skills development could be connected through university career offices. Luke and Bartlett (2024) explore how career and learning support services are positioned within the third space of higher education, which is outside of administrative and traditional academic spaces, and they point out the significance of effective connection of distinct career development and learning advisory services to enhance graduate employability. Career guidance in universities is significantly shaped by national educational cultures and labour market structures across countries (Zilai, 2024). Ma et al. (2022) note that although a compulsory career course is offered to students, satisfaction rates on graduate surveys in China remain low.

3.6.3 Mental Health Support

Poor mental health among young people is a widespread global issue; thus, it is important to provide accessible, professional mental health support on campus (Bennett et al., 2024; Donnelly, Penny and Kynn, 2024; Hyseni Duraku, Davis and Hamiti, 2023; Sakız & Jencius, 2024). There are various personal factors that trigger students' emotional and psychological difficulties on campus, such as a new environment and academic requirement adaptation, remote learning, financial tensions, poor learning skills, academic anxiety, prolonged employment stress and insufficient support from the professors and academics

(Hyseni Duraku, Davis and Hamiti, 2023; Lisiecka, Chimicz and Lewicka-Zelent, 2023; Singh et al., 2021). In particular, HEIs have come to consider how to provide mental health services to students and have increased their commitment since the COVID-19 pandemic affected the world (Hyseni Duraku, Davis and Hamiti, 2023). With e-learning, mental health issues may be driven by fear from the use of technology, limitations in software knowledge and feelings of isolation during online learning (Singh et al., 2021; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). New students entering a new environment and facing different academic requirements may require additional psychological and academic support to adjust effectively and advance in their studies (Sheldon et al., 2021). Hyseni Duraku, Davis and Hamiti (2023) identify that students may avoid seeking mental health help due to fears of cultural taboos, limited mental health literacy and information, or concerns regarding social perception. On their part, focusing specifically on international students, Sakız and Jencius (2024) note that international students are likely to experience both general academic stress and acculturative stress arising from cultural displacement, social isolation and linguistic barriers.

In response to students' mental health problems, many forms of support are provided in HEIs, including free-of-charge coaching, web platforms, phone counselling, workshops, social networking support, psychotherapy, anti-stress therapies, and environmental interventions (Lisiecka, Chimicz and Lewicka-Zelent, 2023). Furthermore, students can seek help and support from faculty, year tutors, leaders, administrative staff in student affairs and services, and peers who may have had similar experiences before (Lisiecka, Chimicz and Lewicka-Zelent, 2023). Thus, academic support centres, student service centres, specific wellbeing services, or disability service centres are core resource options for providing mental health support (Lisiecka, Chimicz and Lewicka-Zelent, 2023).

Exploring the student perspective on mental health support in Ireland, Oti, Foley,

and Pitt (2025) recommend that HEIs improve the service-entry process by teaching students how to access support and what to expect from services, so that students' needs can be better met. Bennett et al. (2024) propose a "whole university" approach, in which they recommend that wellbeing should be embedded in teaching, campus culture and support provision. In other words, mental health support is a collective institutional responsibility involving academic staff, administrators, service professionals and peer communities. Prevention, early intervention, and environmental support, rather than solely crisis response, are emphasised (Bennett et al., 2024).

With rapid technological development, mental health services and interventions for students can be accessed online through web-based platforms in some countries (Lisiecka, Chimicz and Lewicka-Zelent, 2023; Aboujaoude et al., 2020; Barrable et al., 2018). Addressing mental health issues is important as providing appropriate psychological supports and resources would enhance students' wellbeing, boost academic success, and enable students to participate in education and life decision-making process actively, as well as aid in achieving a holistic development in higher education (Hyseni Duraku, Davis and Hamiti, 2023).

3.7 Social Environment at University

Lisiecka, Chimicz and Lewicka-Zelent (2023) emphasise the necessity for universities to prepare students mentally for future challenges by building an authentic university community and strengthening peer support. In other words, students should be motivated to participate in scientific, social, cultural, and sports activities to develop skills, establish satisfactory interpersonal relationships, adapt to change, and overcome psychological challenges.

Social experience in higher education contributes to students' academic persistence, emotional resilience, leadership development, employability outcomes and social belonging (Sá, 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2024). In line with that logic, Kumari (2024) argues that extracurricular participation significantly

improves students' social skills, including communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution. Wanjin (2024) adds that peer encouragement and role modelling are motivating factors for students to participate in social activities, underscoring the importance of social influence in participation decisions among university students.

Roy and El Marsafawy (2023), however, argue that many students may regard social activities as entertainment rather than developmental opportunities. Some students perceive it as necessary to participate in social activities to enhance their labour-market value rather than out of intrinsic passion.

Furthermore, Foley et al (2023) note that participation in social activities requires financial resources, substantial time and emotional investment. Thus, some students may miss out on the development benefits of engagement forms if they lack the resources.

Exploring the learning and social environments in a HEI from the perspective of disabled students, Nolan et al. (2023) point out that HEIs need to design spaces that are more inclusive by putting forward suggestions for greater use of green space, better furnishings and minimisation of distractions, towards increasing the students' health and welfare. In their research on the effectiveness of physical activity interventions in improving students' mental health and well-being in higher education, Donnelly, Penny and Kynn (2024) suggest interventions that include aerobics, dance, basketball and running. Mind–body exercises, including yoga, Tai Chi, and Qigong, may also be effective in certain contexts; however, the evidence is mixed (Donnelly, Penny and Kynn, 2024).

It is important to foster a positive social environment to support students' subjective well-being and academic achievement, as education is inherently social (Raettig & Weger, 2018). D'Uggento et al. (2023) assert that students will be proud and become genuine university ambassadors if they engage in a range of experiential activities and build personal relationships. Mallman et al.

(2021) suggest that a sense of belonging could be fostered through everyday social practices and interactions within the multicultural campus environment.

A sense of belonging is important for student success in higher education. It is the feeling of being encouraged, valued, accepted, and included by tutors and peers that makes students feel more engaged in the university and campus community (Allen et al., 2021; Knekta & McCartney, 2021). Additionally, the sense of belonging involves support from the program team and connection with academics (Brodie & Osowska, 2021; Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021). Li et al. (2015) note that positive and frequent interactions between tutors and students improve students' sense of belonging at the university, which in turn increases their learning engagement and persistence. Peacock and Cowan (2019) demonstrate that an active learning environment in higher education increases students' sense of belonging via social collaborations and interactions, while Meehan and Howells (2019) add that sense of belonging makes students know their study objectives and career plans clearly, which is built on the interactions from cognitive, environmental and social perspectives in the university. Online study research has also argued that feeling a part of an online learning community fosters a student's sense of belonging (Prodgers et al., 2022). In addition, if students' sense of belongingness at the university increases, their mental health will improve (Soong & Maheepala, 2023; Dost & Smith, 2023).

3.8 Academic Integrity

The literature on academic integrity is organised into three main sections. First, a general explanation of academic integrity is provided in section 3.8.1. Thereafter, section 3.8.2 focuses on AI and academic integrity. Section 3.8.3 concludes the literature review on academic integrity by highlighting measures to uphold it.

3.8.1 Academic Integrity and Academic Misconduct

Academic integrity has become a key factor in higher education (Abuadas & Albikawi, 2026; Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Jafry & Vorstermans, 2025; Karkoulian,

Sayegh and Sayegh, 2024). Academic integrity extends beyond the prevention of plagiarism or cheating; it is about honesty, which encompasses a broader ethical culture grounded in values such as honesty, fairness, trust, respect, responsibility and courage (Liuta et al., 2025; Okolo et al., 2025). Academic integrity implies truthful reporting and recognition of authorship. Academic misconduct and dishonesty are often addressed collectively in the policies and responses on academic integrity in HEIs. Bretag et al. (2019) point out that a range of behaviours are encompassed in academic integrity policies, which acknowledge the interconnected nature of the equity and fairness compromised in academic assessment.

The prevalence of academic misconduct in higher education institutions worldwide has been of major interest (Awasthi, 2019; Birks et al., 2020). Especially, perceptions and attitudes regarding academic misconduct have been emphasised (Ahmed, 2018; Lindahl & Grace, 2018). Academic misconduct is defined as any action that violates an institution's academic integrity, including plagiarism, cheating, and data fabrication. Kibler et al. (2019) report that 80% of students admit to having engaged in cheating behaviour at least once during their academic careers.

There are severe implications of academic misconduct. Tatum et al. (2018) report various reasons and forms of student dishonesty in HEIs. A student’s future career prospects and reputation will be damaged by academic misconduct. Even the institutional reputation and degree value will be undermined by academic misconduct (Birks et al., 2020). Thus, it is necessary to enforce penalties, such as suspension or expulsion from the university, once students are confirmed to have engaged in academic misconduct (Annemarie, 2023). Appropriate punishments are part of institutional responses to academic misconduct (Miles et al., 2022). Punishment approaches towards securing academic integrity need to be reconsidered, as ensuring academic integrity is a major challenge in today‘s complex world (Annemaire, 2023; Miles et al.,

2022).

Many factors can lead to academic misconduct, such as ineffective study habits (e.g., last-minute cramming and superficial reading practices); inadequate time management skills or academic overload; and psychological factors (e.g., perfectionism, fear of failure, and unrealistic expectations) (Birks et al., 2020; Kofinas et al., 2025). Furthermore, technology is another core factor in the consideration of academic misconduct, and section 3.8.2 focuses on the point of how AI relates to academic integrity.

3.8.2 AI Used in Academic Misconduct and Academic Cheating

AI tools have become an integral part of the 21st-century work environment and have profound implications for higher education (Karkoulian, Sayegh and Sayegh, 2024; Sparrow, 2022). For one thing, when used pedagogically soundly, AI tools enhance students' learning outcomes. On the other hand, it is widely emphasised that the introduction of AI tools, including advanced chatbots, such as ChatGPT, poses a threat to academic integrity (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024; Karkoulian, Sayegh and Sayegh, 2024; Sweeney, 2023). Even AI and commercial interests behind the systems may pose subversive risks in the higher education context, undermining the very purpose of higher education and ultimately leading to degree devaluation (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024; Moser et al., 2022).

There are many challenges when AI tools are used for assessment in HEIs, including the threat of plagiarism (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024). The availability of online resources enables students to plagiarise using electronic sources. For example, as Dehouche (2021) points out, students could use designed AI systems to generate essays based on prompts or parameters. Assignment cheating happens when students submit essays not written by them. For academic staff, it is difficult to adequately assess the students’ true level of understanding and their own writing when AI chatbots are applied to generate text (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024). Mitchell and Parnther (2018)

argue that the capability of using Turnitin and the challenges academics face with student plagiarism should be given due consideration.

3.8.3 Measures for Ensuring Academic Integrity

Utilising AI is now a fundamental part of the student experience. Cotton, Cotton, and Shipway (2024) point out that the contributions of AI technology need to be acknowledged in student work, while Sparrow (2022) reminds us that it is important to take necessary measures to respond to the growth of AI. Relevant policies and principles must be enforced against data or findings fabrication and plagiarism (Annemarie, 2023). Universities are encouraged to enforce transparent policies and guidelines when algorithmic software is incorporated into academic research and assignment preparation that may involve academic misconduct (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Cotton, Cotton, and Shipway, 2024; Sweeney, 2023). In other words, universities need to teach and communicate with students to make them clearly aware of the degree and extent of AI-enabled support that may not be tolerated in a specific assignment.

An academic integrity culture needs to be built on the commitment and cooperation of all members of the learning community (Miron et al., 2021). Administrators, academic staff and students are collectively responsible for academic integrity in HEIs (Miron et al., 2021). Academic course leaders and faculty need to make efforts to orient, teach, and engage students on academic integrity (Abuadas & Albikawi, 2026; Jafry & Vorstermans, 2025; Karkoulian, Sayegh, and Sayegh, 2024).

If students find that cheating is a widespread peer behaviour, they may regard dishonest behaviour as necessary to maintain competitiveness (Okolo et al., 2025). Given the growing integration of technology into modern life, banning the use of AI in higher education would be unrealistic (Gupta & Nyamapfene, 2025). Rather than relying on AI detection technologies, some institutions, such as Harvard and University College London, advocate adaptive approaches focused on ethical AI literacy and the redesign of assessment. Liuta et al. (2025)

emphasise that integrity initiatives must be actively supported by university leadership and embedded across the institutional ethical and shared-responsibility culture.

Universities are encouraged to implement transparent policies and guidelines for the use of algorithmic software in academic research and assignment preparation, particularly in cases involving academic misconduct (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Cotton, Cotton, and Shipway, 2024; Sweeney, 2023).

Academics play an important role in the teaching process by serving as role models with desired behaviours and possessing essential teaching skills to maintain academic integrity (Abuadas & Albikawi, 2026; Garza Mitchell & Parnther, 2018; Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019). However, Kofinas et al. (2025) demonstrated that academic staff are generally unable to distinguish AI-generated from student-authored work. For example, makers may erroneously penalise honest students when they suspect AI use (Kofinas et al., 2025). Therefore, group presentations, discussions or other interactive activities can be applied to improve students' independent learning and critical thinking skills (Gupta & Nyamapfene, 2025; Kofinas et al., 2025; Sweeney, 2023).

The value of process-based assessment is particularly emphasised by Gupta and Nyamapfene (2025), who argue that students should demonstrate developmental reasoning and progression rather than isolated final-product submissions. On the other hand, Kofinas et al. (2025) point out that GenAI systems can produce highly authentic and professionally sophisticated outputs. Thus, they propose the assessment should encompass oral defence, real-time interaction and collaborative knowledge generation.

Further contributors (Campbell & Waddington, 2024) call for active student participation in the design of integrity resources and policies. Liuta et al. (2025) warn that integrity training should be connected to the broader institutional culture; otherwise, students can't meaningfully internalise ethical principles in integrity modules. Zhu (2025) recommends fostering genuine ethical

understanding, as bureaucratic approaches to integrity may produce procedural conformity in the Chinese higher education context.

3.8.3.1 Academic and Administrative Staff Perspective

The ethical use of AI by tutors needs to be fostered (Chan, 2023). Academics play an important role in the teaching process by serving as models with desired behaviours and possessing essential teaching skills to maintain academic integrity (Abuadas & Albikawi, 2026; Garza Mitchell & Parnther, 2018; Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019). Tutors must possess relevant awareness and knowledge to educate students about the potential risks of using generative AI for learning, especially in assignments and assessments, such as plagiarism and the submission of AI-tailored assignments (Chan et al., 2023).

Garza, Mitchell, and Parnther (2018) suggest that providing initial tutorials is a good content foundation for ensuring student academic integrity. The content of integrity tutorials typically includes educating students about organisational support, processes, and behavioural expectations; thus, students may prepare for the requirements needed to behave with integrity in higher education (Miron et al., 2019). In their research, Miron et al. (2021) suggest that the implementation of academic integrity education across Canadian HEIs is inconsistent, and there are few links to classroom practice. Further insight into the HEI setting (Pirtheepal, 2019) suggests that assessment, plagiarism screening, and their effects on academic integrity can shape students' experience. Assessment tasks need to be developed to avoid AI-assisted plagiarism. Universities are encouraged to adopt creative measures to protect the integrity of the assessment process (Sweeney, 2023). Cotton, Cotton, and Shipway (2024) encourage academic staff to monitor students' work closely to ensure that students' effort and understanding are assessed accurately, including reading student assignments carefully, using plagiarism-detection tools to flag potential plagiarism, and asking students to present their work in the classroom. In addition to monitoring work, academic staff are encouraged

to apply various assessment techniques to accurately evaluate students' work quality, including manual and automated ones (Sweeney, 2023). For example, group presentations, discussions or other interactive activities can be applied to improve students' independent learning and critical thinking skills. Moreover, investment in advanced technology and techniques could be considered to detect the use of AI language models. The characteristics of AI-generated content could be recognised by academic staff if machine learning techniques are used to train algorithms (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024).

Harper et al. (2019) report that some staff admitted they don't impose any punishment when students are caught engaging in academic misconduct. Such negligence negates deterrence. Miles, Campbell, and Ruxton (2022) recommend that staff be educated on what they expect of their students, what they expect of themselves, and the institutional policy for dealing with misconduct cases. Thus, students can get the same information from staff, as staff understand how to report and determine the severity of misconduct cases (Miles, Campbell and Ruxton, 2022). Notably, necessary training and support are also emphasised for faculty to ensure that AI tools are used ethically and responsibly in higher education (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024; Karkoulian, Sayegh and Sayegh, 2024).

3.8.3.2 Students Perspective

Clark & Soutter (2016) note that students' integrity is a broad educational approach to addressing their moral, intellectual, civic, and performance development. As Miron et al. (2019) suggest, it is important to consider students from a more holistic perspective when designing and teaching academic integrity. The analysis of plagiarism and its drivers in universities could be facilitated by allowing the student voices to surface (Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019).

Tabsh et al. (2017) conducted a survey among engineering major students at an American university to understand students' perceptions of academic

dishonesty, such as plagiarism, examination cheating, copyright violations, and inappropriate collaborations. They found that, rather than punishment, students prefer softer approaches, including academic integrity education, lower-level examinations, and lenient deadlines. Cotton, Cotton and Shipway (2024) add that students should be educated and have a clear understanding of what plagiarism is and why it is wrong. Clear, detailed instructions need to be provided to students to ensure assignments are completed in a more coherent, structured manner. A written declaration stating that the work is the student's own work and that no AI tools were used should be required from every student. As AI tools are increasingly incorporated into high-level tasks, students need to indicate what has been created with the assistance of AI and what has been done entirely by themselves in their assignment (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024). In other words, proper citation, sources and AI attribution are required to be shown in the assignment (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024).

In their investigation of staff attitudes and experiences towards students' cheating, and their views on the individual, organisational, and contextual factors that support efforts to minimise cheating, Harper et al. (2019) reveal that cheating could be addressed by improving the teaching and learning environment. Harper et al. (2019) further add that improving relationships between students and staff is likely to enhance cheating detection and reduce the occurrence of cheating. When students have positive relationships with their instructors, they are less likely to engage in dishonest behaviour because they may feel more connected to what they have learned (Peters et al., 2019; Stoesz & Yudintseva, 2018). Students' ethical beliefs and actions are related to their organisational cultural landscapes in higher education (Young et al., 2018). HEIs need to make greater efforts to meet students' needs and help them understand ethical learning behaviour through intentional, integrated approaches, such as enacting clear, accessible policies and procedures, developmental and relational teaching and learning initiatives, and tutorials

(Miron et al., 2021). Further, Miron et al. (2021) recommend a more integrated and intentional approach to improve students' awareness of academic integrity, emphasising that ethical conduct in learning is related to the development of mental processes throughout formal education and takes time to cultivate.

3.9 University Reputation Perception

University's reputation perception is an important factor in a broader student experience (Kaushal et al., 2023; Khan & Hemsley-Brown, 2024; Dean & Gibbs, 2015). Aligned to the concept of corporate reputation, Amado and Juarez (2022) describe the concept of university reputation as "the result of the assessment made by both internal and external stakeholders of the performance and outcomes achieved in the management of their substantive functions, namely, teaching, research, and extension over a period of time". University reputation, perceived value, and student experience are significant in establishing university competitiveness nationally or internationally (Miotto et al., 2020). D'Uggento et al. (2023) argue that university reputation has a positive and direct effect on word of mouth (WOM), and that this relationship is mediated by students' brand experience and pride. They suggest universities should invest in branding efforts to develop a strong university identification among students, so that students will promote their university to others. Improving the core and supporting value activities and ensuring an exceptional student experience are critical to creating strong university identification (D'Uggento et al., 2023). In turn, Amado et al. (2023) suggest that universities should focus on enhancing the student experience and boosting perceived value, as institutional reputation is affected by these factors regardless of accreditation status.

Alumni Donations

Dean and McLean (2021) note that whether current students are willing to donate to their alma mater in the future depends on their experiences and perceptions of various aspects of student life, learning, social experience and career aspirations. In subsequent literature, Souto-Otero, Donnelly, and Kanol

(2024) argue that students who achieve better degree outcomes are more likely to donate, and that the association between participation in social experiences and donations is much stronger. Thus, the university should develop student-centred learning experiences to help students acquire the transferable skills required by industry and society and to guide them in achieving their future career aspirations (Liang, Su and Shang, 2023; Souto-Otero, Donnelly and Kanol, 2024). In doing so, current students could be donors in the future.

3.10 Summary to Chapter Three

This chapter has reviewed the literature on students' experiences in higher education. It commenced with student satisfaction, viewed from the perspective of students as customers, who influence perceptions and expectations of the quality of higher education. Recognising the importance of students as active participants in creating knowledge in the learning process, academic integrity and lifelong learning are emphasised in higher education today. The chapter also discussed student engagement from a teaching perspective, as teaching is an integral means of engaging students at university. The importance and form of feedback and assessment are discussed, as feedback is an important way to develop and motivate student learning. Developing students' soft skills is discussed, as soft/transferable skills are vital to graduates' employability in a competitive global labour market. Support and services provided to students to improve their learning experience are also discussed, including support for career adaptability and the student mental health service. The social environment, such as student belongingness, is discussed, as it is also an important part of the student experience. Academic integrity has become a concern in higher education and is also considered in the literature review, in line with AI development.

The conceptual premise considered in the conceptualisation of student experience in higher education is summarised in Figure 3.1. The conceptual framing in Figure 3.1 reflects five core aspects: the value component,

representing ethics and integrity; student engagement; feedback and assessment; the social environment and students' soft skills; and support and resources, including administrative support and infrastructure. All these aspects influence the students' experience in higher education. Technology is closely related to teaching, feedback and assessment, and the resources provided; therefore, investment in technology should be considered in higher education.

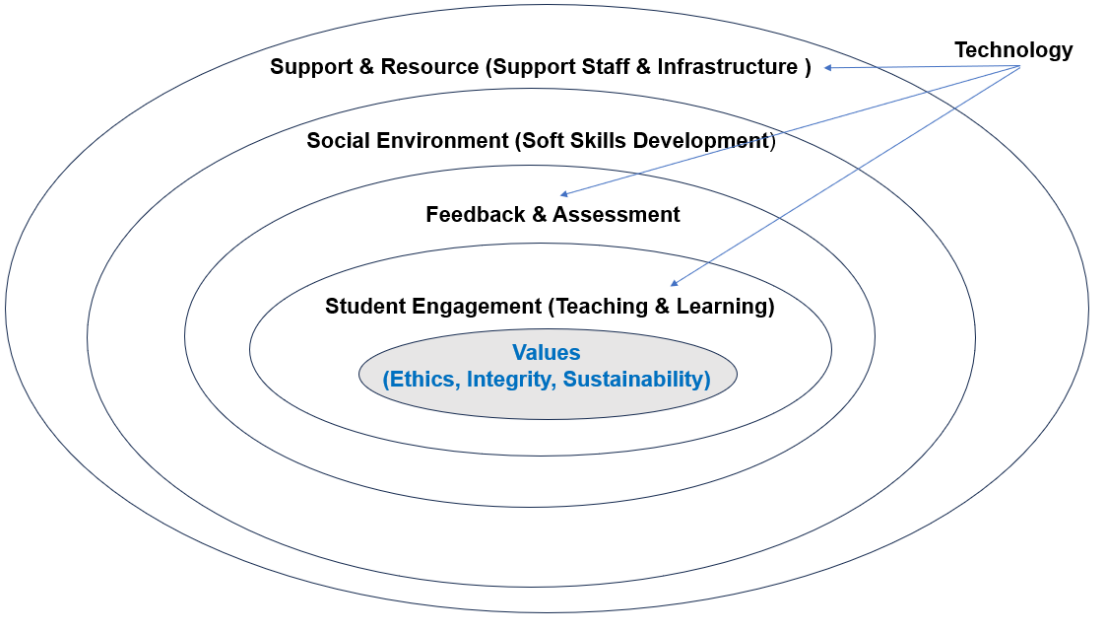


Figure 3.1 Conceptual Framework of Student Experience in HEIs in China

Source: Author

Next, Section 3.11 synthesises the theoretical premises from the literature review (Chapters 2 and 3) to explain the overall conceptual framework for this research.

3.11 The Conceptual Framing of this Research

The literature underpinning this research is structured across two domains: leadership in higher education (Chapter Two) and the student experience (Chapter Three). Though treated independently in existing scholarship, this literature stands are combined into a deliberate dialogue through an integrated conceptual framework. This integration is premised on the assumption that leadership practices are constitutive of, rather than peripheral to, the quality of the student

experience and the broader strategic positioning of higher education institutions (HEIs).

One of the central theories underpinning this research concerns leadership, including particularly authentic leadership, amongst others. The drive for authentic leadership arose from challenges faced by the public sector in meeting political pressures and public expectations of public organisations (Ahmad et al., 2023). Organisational leaders should practice authentic leadership, as it fosters an organisational climate in which followers are more aware, engaged, and committed, leading to growth and sustained performance (Ahmed, 2024).

Authentic leadership has overlapping features with other leadership concepts (Ahmad et al., 2023). Recognising the overlap, the features of other leadership concepts (transformational, connected and distributed) were considered within the framework of this research. Prior to the emergence of authentic leadership, transformational leadership was used to explain the leadership process among top leaders (Ahmad et al., 2023). Viewed as a resilience strategy, distributed leadership emphasises collective action and relational care (Girdharry and Wynstra, 2025). Connected leadership emphasises relational and connective approaches to driving an organisation (Kawalilak et al., 2023).

This study explores the HEIs setting in China, and at the centre of this research's framework is authentic leadership, which is critically positioned as a functional response to the increasing complexity and accountability pressures faced by contemporary universities. While literature frequently presents authentic leadership in aspirational terms -- emphasising transparency, ethical conduct, and relational engagement -- its operationalisation within higher education remains uneven and under-theorised. Consequently, this study takes a critical stance and argues that authentic leadership is not inherently transformative unless it is enacted in ways that actively reshape organisational cultures and power relations. In the Chinese HEIs context where hierarchical

governance structures and state influence remain salient, the extent to which authentic leadership can foster open dialogue and shared governance warrants careful scrutiny.

Therefore, as mentioned earlier, authentic leadership is not treated in isolation but examined in relation to complementary leadership paradigms, including transformational, distributed, and connected leadership. Transformational leadership contributes a strategic and visionary dimension; however, its emphasis on top-down influence risks reinforcing existing hierarchies if not balanced by more participatory approaches (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023). Offering a counterpoint, distributed leadership foregrounds collective agency and shared responsibility, yet its effectiveness is contingent upon institutional willingness to decentralise authority (e.g., Girdharry & Wynstra, 2025; Lu, 2024) -- an assumption that may not uniformly hold in the Chinese higher education system. Sharing close similarity with distributed leadership, connected leadership underscores relational dynamics and networked collaboration; though it may underestimate structural constraints that limit meaningful engagement across organisational boundaries. Integrating these perspectives, this research does not assume their seamless compatibility; rather, it interrogates the tensions between them and considers how they may be selectively mobilised to support institutional change.

The translation of these leadership approaches into sustained organisational transformation is examined through Kotter's 8-Step Change Model (Kotter, 1996). Though widely adopted for its clarity and sequential logic, Kotter's model has been critiqued for its linearity and implicit assumption of stable organisational contexts (e.g. Pollack and Pollack, 2015; Appelbaum et al., 2012). Acknowledging these limitations, this study reframes the model as a heuristic rather than a prescriptive sequence. In the context of Chinese HEIs, where change is often shaped by external policy directives as well as internal dynamics, the iterative and politically negotiated nature of reform must be

recognised. Kotter's emphasis on coalition-building, vision articulation, and cultural embedding remains analytically valuable, particularly when interpreted through the lens of authentic leadership, despite observed limitations.

Through its ethical and relational content, authentic leadership drives change, building trust in management and staff willingness to embrace reforms (Gardner et al., 2011; Ahmad et al., 2023). Authentic leadership emphasises a relational process that thrives on reciprocal interaction between leader and follower (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Kotter's change foundation offers a roadmap for ensuring sequence, effective communication, and the embedding of major initiatives, such as digital transformation, restructuring options, and internationalisation strategies (Kotter, 1996; Kang, 2020). This change orientation aligns well with a leadership focus on effectively driving higher education to meet global standards. HEIs can apply Kotter's change theory iteratively and in a participatory manner to achieve curricular success and governance reforms (Kang, 2020). By enforcing coalition-building and communication, change design can be implemented to meet diverse stakeholders' targets.

Specifically, authentic leadership is posited as a mediating mechanism that can enhance the effectiveness of key stages within Kotter's framework. For example, the formation of a guiding coalition (Step 2) is unlikely to be effective without trust-based relationships, while the communication of vision (Step 4) requires credibility and transparency to resonate with stakeholders. Importantly, the anchoring of change within organisational culture (Step 8) depends not only on structural adjustments but also on the internalisation of shared values—an area where authentic leadership is particularly salient. HEIs that effectively implement complex changes, such as new programmes, the digitisation of learning models, and international partnerships, would gain a competitive advantage by responding more quickly and effectively to external demands (Sittrop, 2021). When changes in culture and routines are successfully

anchored (step 8), this would drive improvements in teaching quality, student support, and research management (Kotter, 1996).

This study is however cautious about over-attributing causal power to leadership alone, recognising that systemic constraints, resource limitations, and policy environments also shape outcomes.

The integration of the Resource-Based View (RBV) introduces a necessary strategic dimension to the framework. RBV shifts the analytical focus from external pressures to internal capabilities, recognising the role of unique, difficult-to-imitate resources in sustaining competitive advantage. While this perspective is useful in highlighting institutional differentiation, it has been criticised for its relative neglect of external institutional forces and dynamic change processes. This research addresses this limitation by positioning RBV alongside leadership and change management theories, thereby linking internal capability development with the processes through which such capabilities are mobilised and transformed. The resource-based view is relevant to guiding a higher education focus on ensuring quality education that meets global standards. Embracing a resource-based view enables higher education institutions to pursue a strategy that does not chase generic trends but rather focuses on changes strategically designed to build and orchestrate capabilities that genuinely differentiate the institution (Barney, 1991; D'Oria et al., 2021).

As mentioned earlier, two literature review domains were covered in the theoretical framing of this research, namely leadership (Chapter Two) and student experience (Chapter Three). This study is grounded on the notion that the leadership approach will shape student experience. In the student experience conceptualisation in this study, the focus is on educational features that shape the student experience. Specifically, core educational features considered in understanding the student experience included support staff and infrastructure; social environment; feedback and assessment; student

engagement (teaching and learning); and values.

A key focus of leadership activities in the Higher Education setting should be to promote student learning performances and enhance learning outcomes (Adams & Velarde, 2021; Yuting et al., 2025). As mentioned earlier, the theoretical conceptualisation of this research was based on the thesis that authentic leadership anchors effective strategic Higher Education delivery for achieving students' satisfaction. The conceptualisation for this study integrated the foundational elements of Kotter's Change Theory, the Resource-Based View Theory, recognising also the relevant operational elements of transformational leadership, distributed leadership, and Connected leadership that can be achieved and sustained by authentic leadership (see Figure 3.2).

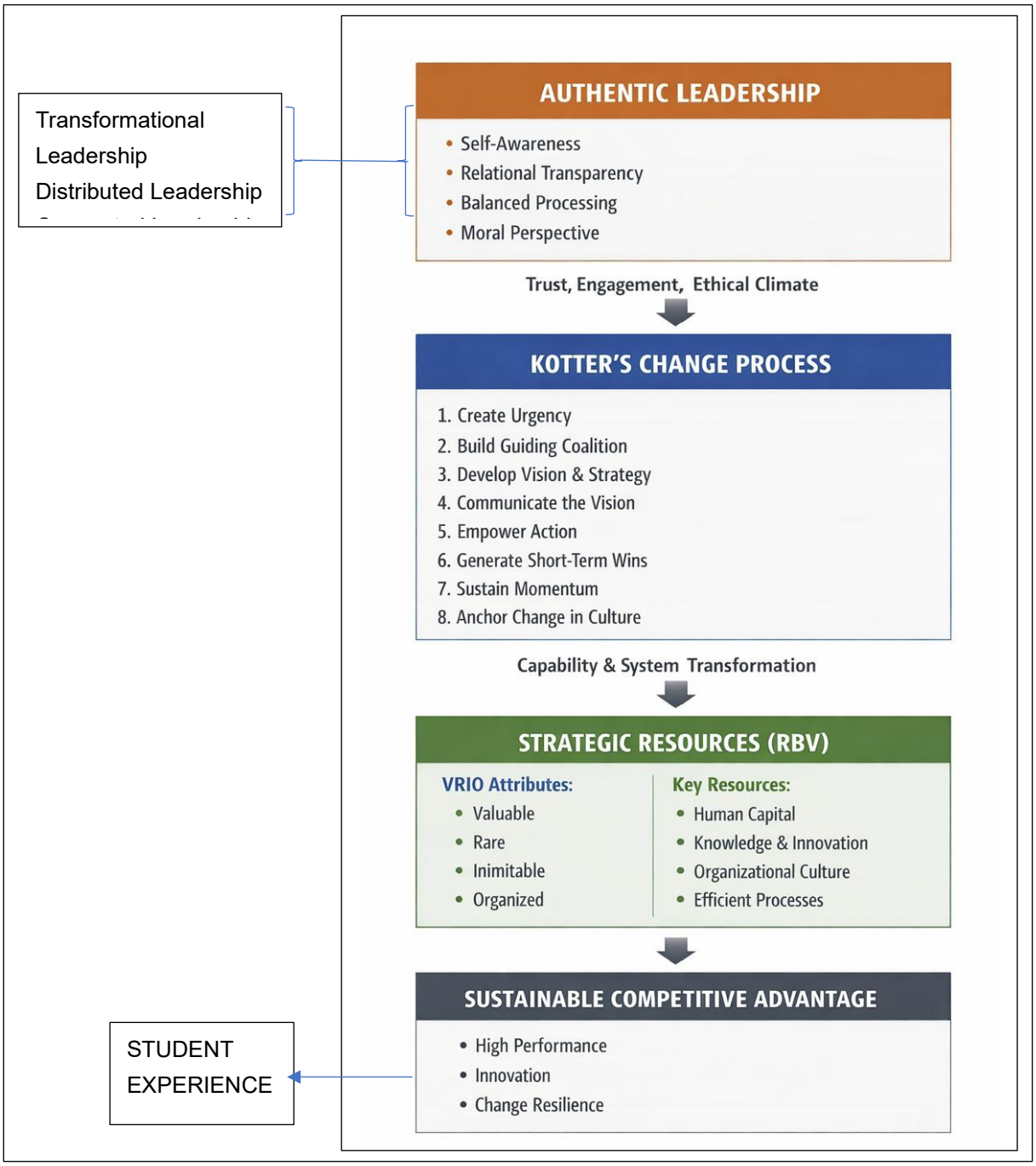


Figure 3.2 The Theoretical Framing of this Research

Source: Author

Figure 3.2 forwards authentic leadership as the anchor for that operational strategy. That theoretical framing draws on the understanding that authentic leadership builds trust, engagement and commitment among staff, work climate features that are central to quality, innovation and student outcomes (e.g.,

Cenkci & Bircan, 2024). When leaders demonstrate critical authenticity features such as self-awareness, relational transparency, an internalised moral perspective, and balanced processing, they are considered fair, ethical, and consistent, which reduces cynicism and resistance to change in the educational setting (Gardner et al., 2011; Cenkci & Bircan, 2024).

Within the Chinese higher education context, this integrated framework is particularly pertinent given the sector's dual imperatives: responding to global competitive pressures while aligning with national policy priorities. Efforts to improve student learning experiences, enhance global rankings, and attract international students are not merely technical challenges but are deeply embedded in organisational culture, governance structures, and resource configurations. The student experience, as conceptualised in this study, encompasses multiple interrelated dimensions -- including academic support, infrastructure, social environment, assessment practices, engagement, and institutional values -- each of which is shaped by leadership decisions and organisational priorities.

In this theoretical framing, this research suggests that embracing this approach would position HEIs to implement projects and build durable capability in the design and delivery of their educational programmes. This integrated use of leadership initiatives, incorporating aspects of change, would drive internal resource management that is closely aligned with its institutional mission and culture. Furthermore, this integrated use of leadership initiatives, structured change, and RBV -- focused capacity building would enable HEIs to compete more effectively in an increasingly demanding higher education landscape (Galbreath, 2005; D'Oria et al., 2021).

Importantly, this research challenges the implicit assumption that improvements in these areas can be achieved through isolated interventions. This study argues that meaningful and sustained enhancement requires a systemic approach in which leadership, change processes, and resource

allocation are strategically aligned. In this study, authentic leadership is viewed as a critical enabler that can facilitate coherence across these domains; recognising however that its effectiveness is hinges on its ability to operate within, and at times challenge, existing institutional norms and constraints.

In conclusion, this study advances a theoretically integrated and critically informed framework that positions authentic leadership at the intersection of organisational change and strategic capability development. By engaging with Kotter's 8-Step Change Model and the Resource-Based View in complementary yet critical ways, the research provides a nuanced account of how transformational change may be pursued within Chinese HEIs. It suggests that addressing key sectoral challenges -- enhancing the student experience, improving global rankings, and increasing internationalisation -- requires not only adopting established frameworks but also adapting them to context. Through this lens, transformational change is understood as an ongoing, contested, and context-dependent process rather than a linear or universally applicable model.

Chapter Four Methodology

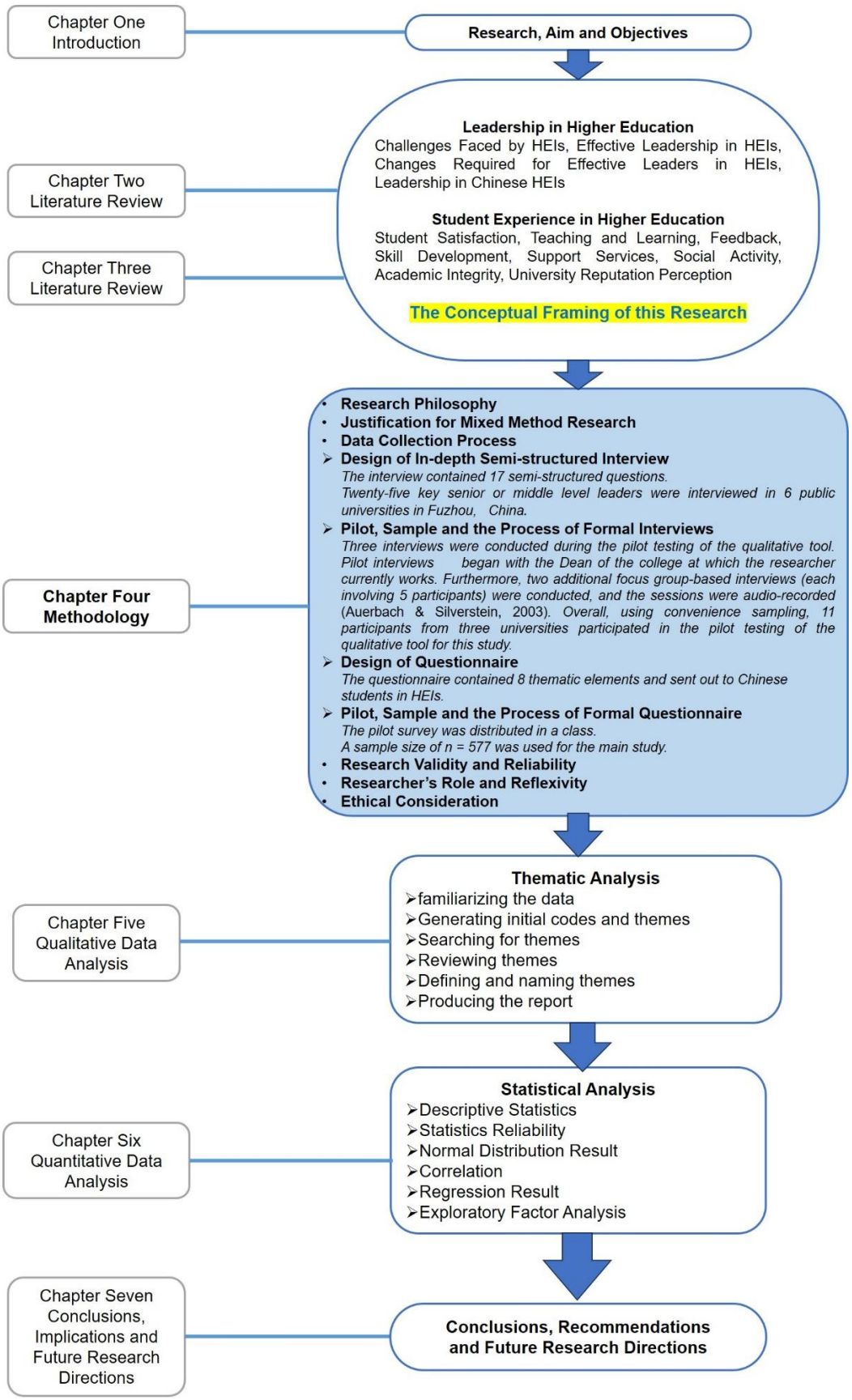


Figure 4.1 The Research Framework

Source: Author

4.1 Introduction

Figure 4.1 above displays the methodological steps for this research, including design, implementation and outcome. The focus of this chapter is twofold: to explain the philosophical/paradigmatic positioning of this research and the methodological implementation for achieving the focus of this research.

As shown in Chapter One, four research questions are addressed in this study, namely:

1) What are the key characteristics of a successful leader in HE?

2) What challenges are leaders in HE facing, and how are they addressing these challenges?

3) What actions are required for leaders to manage change?

4) What investments are required to create an enriched learning environment for students?

In line with the motivation for this study (Chapter one), the literature review for this study was undertaken (Chapters two and three). This chapter (four) explains the methodological approach for this study to ensure that the objectives of this research are adequately explored. To achieve that, several steps are taken in explaining the methodological approach for this study. This chapter is structured as shown below:

1. Research philosophy is explained, as well as the underlying research philosophy for this study described in Section 4.2.
2. Thereafter, the methodological design for this study is explained, showing how the methodological design used matches the paradigmatic grounding of this research (Section 4.3). The sampling strategy used in this study is also explained in that section.
3. The data collection steps for this research are detailed in Section 4.4. In doing so, relevant participants' demographics are provided. Following that,

the analytical process used in this study is specified. Also, the procedures taken to ensure methodological rigour, reliability, and validity are illustrated in this section.

4. In Sections 4.5 and 4.6, the researcher's role, reflexivity and ethical compliance are demonstrated and specified respectively.
5. In Section 4.7, the conclusion to this chapter is provided. Specifically, this section serves as a reminder of the chapter's central focus and briefly introduces the premise of the subsequent chapter.

4.2 Research Philosophy

It is important to identify philosophical ideas that underlie research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Research philosophy, also described as research paradigm (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Mertens, 2010; Dezin & Lincoln, 2003; Blaikie, 2000), was popularised by Thomas Kuhn, who first introduced the term 'paradigm' in 1970. According to Kuhn, a paradigm is a set of beliefs, values, and generalisations of a specialist community that shape how research is conducted (Kuhn, 1996). Drawing from Kuhn's (1996) conceptualisation, Morgan (2007) described paradigm as "shared belief systems that influence the kinds of knowledge researchers seek and how they interpret the evidence they collect" (p. 50). On their part, Lincoln and Guba (2011) refer to the term paradigm as the philosophical assumptions or a set of basic beliefs that define researchers' worldviews and guide their actions. In a further 2011 contribution, Neuman describes a paradigm as a framework that includes a set of assumptions and research techniques used to explain research.

Research paradigm, or research philosophy, refers to the worldviews that guide how researchers conduct research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Morgan, 2014). Worldview refers to "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Guba, 1990, p. 17), which is the general philosophical orientation of the research. As noted by Filstead (1970), the research paradigm plays three key roles:

(1) offers researchers a professional guide in highlighting core problems in the

discipline,

(2) enables explanatory schemes development, and

(3) defines appropriate methodologies, instruments, and data collection types.

Methodologists describe three main assumptions in the research paradigm process discourse (e.g., Guba and Lincoln, 1994): ontology, epistemology and methodology. While ontology concerns the study of existence or the theory of existence and describes the nature of reality within a paradigm, epistemology reflects the connection between the researcher and the objective world and focuses on how the investigator makes sense of the surroundings (Park, Konge and Artino, 2020). The third assumption - methodology relates to the process utilised in generating knowledge or reality, and determines a researcher's approach in the investigation of reality (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). In a more recent methodological viewpoint, Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2023) add a fourth element - axiology (see Table 4.1). According to them, axiology concerns the values and biases of research inquiries, referring to beliefs about the role of morals and values in research (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). Thus, these features (elements) of research paradigms are embraced by researchers as they conduct their inquiry into the nature of reality, the relationship between the researcher and the external world, and the production of new information (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

In the discourse on research paradigms, several categorisations have been proposed. For example, Creswell and Creswell (2023) describe four worldviews, namely postpositivism, constructivism, transformative, and pragmatism, while Creswell (2009) categorises postpositivism, constructivism, participatory action frameworks and pragmatism. Similarity is found in Crotty (1998), who described positivism, interpretivism, constructionism, critical realism and postmodernism. On their part, Guba and Lincoln (2009) also describe four paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and interpretivism. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2023) offer a perspective that reflects five categories (see Figure 4.2),

namely positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, post-modernism and pragmatism.

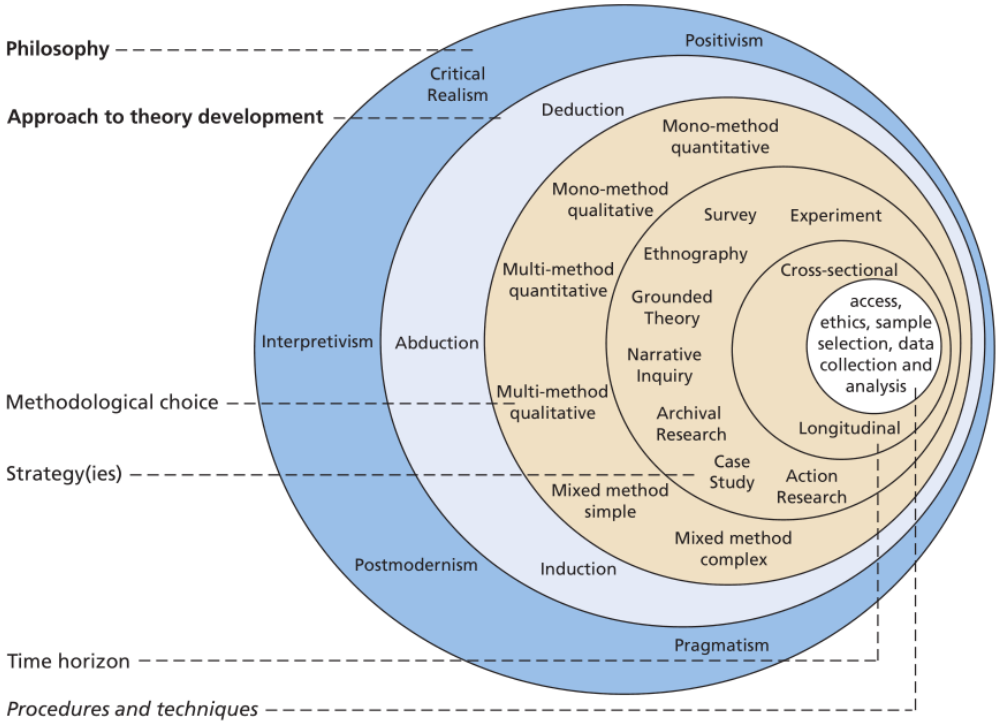


Figure 4.2 The 'Research Onion'

Source: Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, (2023, P. 131)

Embracing Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill's (2023) categorisation, Table 4.1 below presents five paradigmatic viewpoints (positivism, interpretivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and pragmatism) aligned with the three elements of ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

Table 4.1 Comparison of Five Research Philosophical Positions

Ontology (nature of realty or being)	**Epistemology (what constitutes acceptable knowledge)**	**Axiology (role of values)**
Positivism		
Real, external, independent, one true reality (universalism) Granular (things) Ordered	Scientific method, observable and measurable facts, law-like generalisations, numbers, causal explanation and prediction as contribution	Value-free research, researcher is detached, neutral and independent of what is researched, researcher maintains objective stance
Critical Realism/Theory		
Stratified/layered (the empirical, the actual and the real), external, independent	Epistemological relativism, knowledge historically situated and transient, facts are social	Value-laden research, researcher acknowledges bias by world views, cultural experience and upbringing,

intransient, objective structures, causal mechanisms	constructions, historical causal explanation as contribution	researcher tries to minimise bias and errors; researcher is as objective as possible
Interpretivism		
Complex, rich, socially constructed through culture and language, multiple meanings, interpretations, realities, flux of processes, experi-ences, practices	Theories and concepts too simplistic, focus on narratives, stories, perceptions and interpretations, new understandings and worldviews as contribution	Value-bound research Researchers are part of what is researched, subjective, researcher interpretations key to contribution, researcher reflexive
Postmodernism		
Nominal complex, rich, socially constructed through power relations, some meanings, interpretations, realities are dominated and silenced by others, flux of processes, experiences, practices	What counts as 'truth' and 'knowledge' is decided by dominant ideologies, focus on absences, silences and oppressed/repressed meanings, interpretations and voices, exposure of power relations and challenge of dominant views as contribution	Value-constituted Research, researcher and research embedded in power Relations, some research narratives are repressed and silenced at the expense of others, researcher radically reflexive
Pragmatism		
Complex, rich, external 'Reality' is the practical consequences of ideas, flux of processes, experiences and practices	Practical meaning of knowledge in specific contexts, 'true' theories and knowledge are those that enable successful action, focus on problems, practices and relevance, problem solving and informed future practice as contribution	Value-driven research, research initiated and sustained by researcher's doubts and beliefs, researcher reflexive

Source: Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023, P. 147

Next, these research paradigms/philosophies are briefly explained in Sections 4.2.1 to 4.2.5.

4.2.1 Positivism Paradigm

As a philosophical stance, positivism emphasises the importance of observing phenomena, based on the premise that knowledge is derived from logical and mathematical data that can be objectively measured (Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2018). Critically, positivism emphasises that the researcher should be objective, free from bias, and the research goal should be to establish generalisation through empirical data observation (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). Thus, quantitative methods are mainly employed in positivism

(Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). As noted by Silverman (2017), positivism is a research philosophy which treats social facts as independent activities of both researchers and participants. Positivists ensure the research findings are objective, replicable and generalisable (Silverman, 2017). However, positivism has been criticised for failing to fully capture complex social phenomena and subjective experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

4.2.2 Critical Realism/Theory Paradigm

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018):

"Critical theorists' critique normalised notions of democracy, freedom, opportunity structures, and social justice. They denounce systems of power and domination, including the transnational capitalist class and the political structures that support them. Critical theorists pursue questions of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, gender oppression, religious intolerance, and other systems of oppression." (p.203)

Guba and Lincoln (1994) note that historical realism grounds the ontological position of critical theorists, and critical theorists assume that there is an apprehendable reality, though conditioned over time by factors such as culture, politics, ethics and gender. Epistemologically, the critical theory/realism paradigm takes a transactional and subjectivist stance: the researcher and the researched object are considered interconnected, and the researcher's values inevitably influence the inquiry and ultimate research findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thus, a critical theory/realism-based study requires a dialogue between the researcher and the subject (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

4.2.3 Interpretivism Paradigm

While positivism seeks objective truths, interpretivism focuses on subjective understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Interpretivism is considered the appropriate framework for exploring complex phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Schwandt (2000) notes that the interpretivist paradigm focuses on the subjective meaning of social phenomena, aligning with the objective of

exploring participants' lived experiences in context. Interviews, observations, texts, coding, and theme identification are often involved in interpretivist research (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2017), and the study's conclusions may be heavily influenced by the researcher's own perspectives, experiences, and biases (researcher subjectivity) (Silverman, 2017). A major advantage of the interpretivist foundation is that it enables the use of qualitative strategies towards gaining an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

4.2.4 Post-Positivism Paradigm

Post-positivism is a philosophical position that "represents the thinking after positivism" (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 41) and questions the conventional belief in the absolute truth of knowledge (Phillis & Burbules, 2000). Post-positivism argues that, when studying human behaviour and activities, we cannot be completely assured of the validity of our claims to knowledge.

While post-positivists assume "reality" exists, they argue that processes should be critically examined as widely as possible to achieve the closest possible understanding; hence, ontologically, post-positivism is often described as critical realism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2023), a postpositivist grounded researcher believes that knowledge is conjectural and antifoundational, and this makes evidence imperfect and fallible.

4.2.5 Pragmatism Paradigm

Pragmatism originated as a uniquely American philosophical tradition in the late 19th century, with Charles Sanders Peirce laying its foundations and William James and John Dewey further developing and popularising it (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2024). John Dewey, one of the most influential American philosophers, further developed pragmatism, particularly in the context of education and social reform. Dewey's version of pragmatism, often called "instrumentalism," emphasised the role of experience, experimentation,

and reflection in the learning process. It is a key point that, as a philosophy, pragmatism goes beyond problem-solving and focuses on practicality in social research (Morgan, 2014). Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of knowledge relies on a process-based approach for knowledge inquiry (Morgan, 2014). Dewey's concept of inquiry is his philosophy of knowledge, in which actions for inquiry outcomes are the basis of beliefs. As Dewey describes, inquiry is both a form of experience and a self-conscious decision-making process for resolving uncertainty (Morgan, 2014). As Morgan (2014) states, John Dewey's work is the best way to understand the broad outlines of philosophy and problem-solving orientation in pragmatism. Morgan (2014) states that Dewey believes that ideas should be treated as instruments for action and problem-solving rather than as static truths.

Morgan (2014) summarises Dewey's system approach to inquiry in five steps: "1. Recognising a situation as problematic; 2. Considering the difference it makes in defining the problem one way rather than another; 3. Developing a possible line of action as a response to the problem; 4. Evaluating potential actions in terms of their likely consequences; 5. Taking actions that are felt to be likely to address the problematic situation" (p. 1047).

Pragmatism supports the combination of multiple methodological tools, and practitioners are encouraged to make full use of knowledge from multiple sources and to generate new knowledge from their experiences within the process model (Hothersall, 2017). Thus, recognising the disadvantages of individual quantitative and qualitative options, the pragmatism paradigm supports combining quantitative and qualitative tools in a single study to obtain a detailed understanding of reality (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). Hothersall (2019) recommends the five-stage process can be utilised to respond to different challenges or plan interventions. For pragmatists, an effective inquiry should achieve its purposes in both social work research and social life (Hothersall, 2019).

In Dewey's pragmatism, ontological arguments about either the essence of the outside world or people's conceptions of the world are likely to address the same or two sides of the coin (Morgan, 2014). In other words, the knower and known rely simultaneously both on belief and action, and they are inseparable in an inquiry process. As an epistemology, pragmatism is relevant and applicable in the real world of social work (Aiken & Talisse, 2016; Hardy, 2016). A major tenet of pragmatist epistemology is that each person's knowledge is shaped by their unique experience (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

As described in chapter one, the aim of this research is to address identified gaps in the literature and, in so doing, contribute to the understanding of leadership for resilient Higher Education in China. To achieve that target, this study adopts a pragmatist paradigm.

Justification for Use of Pragmatism Paradigm in this Study

1. It is important to consider the research methods based on the research objectives and requirements (Creswell & Clark, 2011). As noted by Hothersall (2019), one major advantage of pragmatism is its ability to combine multiple approaches to explore a phenomenon. Given that advantage, Hothersall (2019) notes that researchers are increasingly embracing the pragmatism philosophy. This study leverages this advantage to achieve its goal.
2. Oriented to practice and "what works", pragmatism has an association with mixed-methods research, which focuses on the research consequence and key importance of the question (Creswell & Clark, 2011). An experience-based, action-oriented framework is provided by pragmatism with the inquiry purpose and practice to address the issues people experience and understand the world (Hothersall, 2019). As higher education institutions face many challenges, leaders in Chinese universities need to understand the required changes and develop pragmatic solutions to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. Utilising a pragmatism-grounded

approach in this research would enable a better understanding of these challenges and facilitate the development of appropriate solutions.

3. There is limited understanding of how leadership in higher education is addressing contemporary challenges in China. To fill the gaps, this research aims to explore and identify the key behavioural characteristics of leaders who are developing strategies to ensure the continued relevance and resilience of higher education in China. In that regard, four research questions are addressed in this study (as reminded in Section 4.1). This study focuses on identifying the challenges and changes facing higher education and reflecting on the characteristics of effective leadership in China, which are critical considerations for different levels of stakeholders. This thesis adopts pragmatism as its epistemological stance and sheds light on leadership characteristics from diverse participants' perspectives, thereby enabling an understanding of resilient processes in higher education in China (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2019).
4. Utilising the pragmatism paradigm foundation in this research is suitable as it enables the combination of qualitative and quantitative tools to generate findings towards enabling the understanding and validation of the findings from each of the tools. For example, quantitative findings have provided supportive insights regarding the qualitative findings.

4.3 Methodological Design

Methodology refers to the shared understanding of the best way to obtain knowledge in the world (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 2011). As explained above, this research is grounded in the pragmatism philosophy; therefore, mixed methods are utilised in this study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Mixed methods research integrates both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Feilzer,

2010). This approach is increasingly popular in social sciences, education, healthcare, and other disciplines where the complexity of research questions requires both numerical data and deep contextual understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Mixed methods research combines qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study or a series of studies to capitalise on the strengths of both. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) describe mixed methods research as a research design that collects, analyses, and integrates qualitative and quantitative data to draw conclusions that might be missed when using a single method. The integration of data can occur at various stages of the research process, such as during data collection, analysis, or interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Mixed methods research is particularly valuable in fields where complex phenomena cannot be fully understood through a single methodological approach. Thus, mixed methods research enhances the validity of research findings through triangulation, in which the convergence of data from different methods bolsters the robustness of the conclusions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

4.3.1 Justification for Mixed Method Research in this Study

Using mixed methods is appropriate in this study for several reasons.

Firstly, each methodological approach has its limitations; therefore, a mixed-methods approach is a means of overcoming the limitations of a single-method approach (Harrigan, Ramsey and Ibbotson, 2012; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Offering a justification for combining qualitative and quantitative methods, Miles and Huberman (1984) emphasise that epistemological purity does not get research done; therefore, researchers should not focus much on the quantitative-qualitative debate but rather embrace mixed methods to adequately understand the phenomenon under study. Supporting that viewpoint, Reichardt and Rallis (1994) maintain that, despite contentions about incompatibility between methodological camps, researchers should forge ahead and use mixed methods.

Following methodological guidelines (Denzin, 1970; Morgan, 2014), the use of mixed methods is appropriate in this research. Combining qualitative and quantitative tools (two or more sources of data) to study the same phenomenon enables the researcher to achieve cross-validation or triangulation in order to gain a more complete understanding of it (Denzin, 1970), as well as achieving complementary results by leveraging the strengths of one method to enhance the other (Morgan, 2014).

Next, Section 4.3.1.1 explains how the mixed methods approach was implemented in this study.

4.3.1.1 Mixed Methods Implementation in this Research

As mentioned earlier, a mixed methods approach was used to achieve the focus of this research. Thus, a triangulation strategy was implemented in this research: a combination of different methods to study the same phenomenon, in which at least two vantage points enable greater accuracy (Flick, 2023, p. 186). This triangulation approach, which involved integrating qualitative and quantitative tools, was used because it enables researchers to gain a more complete picture of a phenomenon, as the strengths of the respective methods come to the fore (Dean, 2002, p. 170).

Triangulation was utilised in this study because it enables the development and extension of theories, as well as the testing of their application (Flick, 2023).

Using triangulation in research has several other benefits (Jick, 1979, pp.608-609; Heesen et al., 2019, pp.3070-3071):

- Interview-based qualitative data could be utilised for the creation of the quantitative survey.
- The qualitative-tool-based findings could enable better analysis and interpretation of the quantitative-based findings.
- The quantitative-tool-based findings can be verified and validated through the qualitative-based findings.

- The triangulation-based insights form the basis for deriving recommendations for action.
- Given the rigour in the implementation, triangulation enables researchers to have greater confidence in their findings.
- Triangulation can result in a holistic study and a more rigorous and nuanced understanding of the research topic.

Embracing the pragmatic logic of ignoring the individual limitations of the quantitative and qualitative tools as highlighted in the literature (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), the triangulation approach in this research was driven by the focus of using a methodological tool to better understand the results obtained from the other (Saunders et al, 2023). The literature on the implementation of mixed-methods approach identifies three possibilities (Creswell, 2014): Qual-Dominant, Quant-Dominant, 50-50. Further related literature suggests that quantitative and qualitative tools can be combined either in a 50% to 50% ratio or a 75% to 25% ratio (Steckler et al., 1992). It is important to note that the qualitative tool was used to understand the leadership aspect of this research, while the quantitative tool aimed to understand the students' experience aspect of this research.

Furthermore, methodologists in mixed-methods implementation (e.g., Morse, 1991) emphasise whether quantitative and qualitative tools and processes are implemented simultaneously or sequentially. The mixed-methods approach in this study followed the 50-50 description, and data collection and processes were conducted sequentially. The qualitative study was conducted first, followed by the quantitative study. The survey instrument (measurement items) and hypotheses for the quantitative study were derived primarily from cues identified in the qualitative study and were also enhanced by insights from the domain literature. The quantitative survey instrument and hypotheses are summarised in Section 4.4.2 and elaborated in Chapter Six (The Quantitative Study). The implementation of the mixed-methods approach in this study is

explained in the subsequent sections of this chapter and also highlighted in the relevant sections of Chapters Five and Six.

In implementing the mixed-methods approach in this study, the sequential method (Creswell, 2013) was followed. Thus, the qualitative study was undertaken before the quantitative study. Next, the qualitative research and quantitative research are explained in Sections 4.3.2 and 4.3.3, respectively.

4.3.2 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a crucial approach in social sciences for gaining deep insights into human experiences, behaviours, and social phenomena (Mohajan, 2018). Qualitative research aims to understand meanings, concepts, and subjective experiences through various methods such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnography (Creswell, 2013). Towards achieving the focus of this research, the interview tool was used in this study, and the implementation of the qualitative (interview tool) in this study is explained in Section 4.4 and subsections, as well as Chapter Five.

4.3.3 Quantitative Research

Quantitative research is a systematic approach to investigating phenomena by collecting numerical data and applying statistical methods to test hypotheses or examine relationships between variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Experimental design is a cornerstone of quantitative research, particularly in fields like psychology, medicine, and education. It involves manipulating one or more independent variables to determine their effects on dependent variables. Quantitative research has broad applications across disciplines, including the social sciences, health sciences, and education, for generating objective and generalisable findings. In the social sciences, quantitative research is essential for testing theories and examining social patterns and trends (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

4.4 Data Collection Process in this Study

In line with the mixed methods approach used in this study (see Section 4.3),

the data collection process for this study is explained in two sections, namely interview-based data collection (qualitative study) (Section 4.4.1), and questionnaire-based data collection (quantitative study) (Section 4.4.2).

4.4.1 In-depth Semi-structured Interview

Qualitative interviews could be unstructured or semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013). According to Young, Zubrzycki and Plath (2021), semi-structured interviews allow participants to reflect on their experiences and co-construct subjective reality with the interviewer. The semi-structured interview approach was used in this study, as it allows the researcher flexibility in directing questions to achieve a detailed understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually to capture participants' insights through open-ended questions and gain a deep understanding of the topic. Open-ended questions were used in this study to avoid prejudice and bias (Easterby et al., 2006), and informants were allowed to use their own words and expressions to present their viewpoints, describe lived experiences and demonstrate their practical experiences in their universities (Rahman, 2016). Furthermore, open-ended questions were considered ideal in this research, as they allow interviewees to influence the direction of the interview (the nature of follow-up questions) (Saunders et al., 2023). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Twenty-five key individual senior- or middle-level leaders were interviewed at public universities in China, including 211 Project and ordinary-level universities (211 Project indicating the high-quality level of universities authorised by the Ministry of Education in China). Six public universities in the researchers' hometown were chosen to represent the different quality levels authorised by the Ministry of Education in China: Fuzhou University (in Fuzhou, researchers' hometown) – 211 Project University; Fujian Normal University; Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University; Fujian Medical University, Fujian University of Chinese Medicine and Fujian Jiangxia University (the university where the researcher works) – ordinary level

university. Contacts were established with HEIs that indicated willingness to participate in the research project. The interviews for this research were conducted between March and July, 2023. The demographics of interview participants are displayed in Appendix 5, while a sample of the interview questions is shown in Appendix 1.

4.4.1.1 Design of Interview Process

As reminded in section 4.1, this study had four underlying research questions. To explore these research questions, the interview questions were generated from insights in the domain literature, aligned with the thematic features described in Table 4.2. The researcher reviewed existing literature and created a first draft of the interview questions. Subsequently, the interview questions were checked to ensure close alignment with the study's underlying objectives and theoretical focus, resulting in the finalised list shown in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2 Design of Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Questions Linked to Research Objectives	Questions from the Literature Review	Questions Linked to the Conceptual Framework	Questions Linked to the Themes
1. How is the university improving the student learning experience?	Research Objective 4	Student Experience	Student Experience; Graduate Employment; Stakeholder Engagement	Student Learning, Teaching and Graduate Employability
2. How is your university ensuring student academic integrity? (i.e. discouraging any unethical practices of plagiarism, etc from students)	Research Objective 4	Academic Integrity (Academic Misconduct, Academic Dishonesty and Academic Cheating, AI used, Measures Taken)	Academic Integrity; Student Experience	Student Learning, Teaching and Graduate Employability
3. How is your university addressing the skills needs of external stakeholders? (e.g. employers)	Research Objective 4	Graduate Skills and Outcomes	Student Experience; Graduate Employment; Stakeholder Engagement	Student Learning, Teaching and Graduate Employability
4. How are your students acquiring	Research Objective 4	Graduate Employment, Soft Skills	Student Experience;	Student Learning, Teaching and Graduate

skills to meet future needs of industry?			Graduate Employment; Stakeholder Engagement	Employability
5. What steps is your university taking to make your campus greener and more sustainable?	Research Objective 2	Green Campus	Sustainability	Sustainability and Social Responsibility
6. What steps is your university taking to make it more appealing for international students to study at your institute?	Research Objective 2	Internationali-sation	University Challenges (Internationalisation)	Institutional Strategy, Internationalisation and Competitiveness
7. How does your university leaders demonstrate authenticity?	Research Objective 1	Authentic Leadership	University Leadership Team	Leadership and Organisational Development
8. What are the key characteristics of an inspiring leader in university?	Research Objective 1	Authentic Leadership	University Leadership Team	Leadership and Organisational Development
9. How can university leaders build trust between management and academic staff?	Research Objective 1	Characteristics of Leadership -- Trust	University Leadership Team	Leadership and Organisational Development
10. How are the executive leaders, at your university, successfully managing change in your institution?	Research Objective 3	Kotter's Change Process and Principles	University Leadership Team	Leadership and Organisational Development
11. Why are some academic staff resistant to change and how can this be overcome?	Research Objective 3	Leadership Strategy Change	University Leadership Team	Leadership and Organisational Development
12. How are your university leaders building your research capacity?	Research Objective 2	Research Capacity	University Leadership Team	Leadership and Organisational Development
13. What would be the key challenges facing your university in the next 5 years?	Research Objective 2	Challenges Facing HE	University Challenges	Institutional Strategy, Internationalisation and Competitiveness
14. What are the challenges of improving your university ranking position (nationally and globally)?	Research Objective 2	Challenges Facing HE & University Ranking	University Challenges (University Ranking)	Institutional Strategy, Internationalisation and Competitiveness

15. What steps is your university taking to improve your university ranking?	Research Objective 3	University Ranking	University Ranking	Institutional Strategy, Internationalisation and Competitiveness
16. What improvements are needed to enable your university to become more globally competitive?	Research Objective 2	International-isation of Uni-versity	University Challenges (Internationali-sation) Stakeholder Engagement	Institutional Strategy, Internationalisation and Competitiveness
17. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding how universities in China are investing and prioritising their resources to ensure a resilient and enriching learning experience for their students and staff?	Research Objective 1 &4	Authentic Leadership; Resource Focus	University Leadership Team; Student Experience,	Institutional Resilience and Strategic Resource Prioritisation

Source: Author

4.4.1.2 Pilot, Sample and the Process of Formal Interviews

Creswell and Creswell (2023) highlight the significance of a pilot study, underscoring that it provides an opportunity for a researcher to test research tools, methods, materials, and procedures on a small scale before commencing the full-scale study. A pilot study is important as it increases the likelihood of research success, helps optimise the research design, refines the initial series of questions, and minimises risks (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). A pilot study enables the researcher to evaluate the viability of the qualitative instrument for capturing in-depth, insightful, and meaningful information (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). Thus, pilot testing helps ensure that the questions are phrased so that participants have the same understanding of them as the interviewer.

To fully utilise the pilot study to achieve the advantages mentioned above and adequately address the research questions, the researcher must ensure a suitable sample. Sampling in this study followed the logic of purposeful sampling (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Purposeful sampling refers to a sample

selection from the target population who have relevant experience and understand related theoretical features explored in a study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Participants in the pilot and main studies were selected based on their leadership positions at participating Higher Education Institutions. The selected participants had the functional background to provide relevant information on the core elements explored in this study.

Three interviews were conducted during the pilot testing of the qualitative tool. Pilot interviews began with the Dean of the college at which the researcher currently works. Furthermore, two additional focus group-based interviews (each involving 5 participants) were conducted, and the sessions were audio-recorded. Overall, using convenience sampling, 11 participants from three universities participated in the pilot testing of the qualitative tool for this study.

In implementing the pilot testing, a careful approach was taken to achieve critical pilot study benchmarks (e.g., Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010; Bryman, 2004): (1) ensuring an appropriate interview protocol, and (2) ensuring structured as well as grammatically organised interview questions for easy understanding by participants in this study (e.g., Kim, 2010). To achieve that, respondents were invited to suggest how the questions could be worded to better reflect their understanding. Furthermore, pilot testing was conducted to help the researcher identify potential problems that might arise during the main study. Pilot-testing the interview tool also enabled the researcher to learn and improve her interviewing skills (Kim, 2010).

At the start of the pilot testing, the researcher introduced herself, clearly specified the research purpose, and assured participants that their identities and information obtained during the pilot testing would be kept strictly confidential. In each pilot testing session, participants were given a list of questions, after which the researcher read each question aloud and prompted them to respond. In their responses, they offered suggestions for rephrasing questions that they deemed challenging to understand. In addition, they

commented on the technical aspects of the questions and provided insights from their personal experience at their individual universities. After the focus group sessions, the interview tool was revised to incorporate participants' input. The revised interview tool was confirmed to be appropriately worded by all pilot-testing participants, and the list of finalised interview questions used in the main study interviews is presented in Appendix 1.

For the main study interview, participants were selected from six public universities in the researcher's hometown, including the President, Vice-Chancellor, Deans, the Director of Student Recruitment and Employment, and the Academic Research Department.

The researcher obtained informed consent from interview participants in advance. The interviews with each participant lasted about 60 minutes and were audio-recorded. As noted by Glaser and Strauss (2017), when an investigator finds that new respondents provide no further new information or theoretical inspiration to add to the existing database, the point of data saturation is reached. Following that theoretical logic, 25 interviews were conducted, as no new insights emerged after this point.

4.4.1.3 Ensuring Research Credibility

According to Johnson et al. (2020), in any research, the risk of bias should be minimised, and the accuracy and credibility of the research findings should be maximised from design to dissemination. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2023) emphasise that reliability and validity are central to assessing research quality in the social sciences. The aspects of validity and reliability are explained next.

Validity

Validity refers to the extent to which measurement items truly measure what they are claimed to measure. Core measurement validity aspects relate to whether: (1) the measures used are appropriate for the intended purpose, (2) the findings and relationships are accurate, and (3) the findings can be generalised (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023).

Creswell and Miller (2000) point out that validity in qualitative research focuses on credible inferences from the data rather than the data itself. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate various perspective of validity have been recommended in qualitative literature and the understanding of validation has evolved along with quantitative research. Towards ensuring validity, the researcher needs to make careful decisions on the measurement, concept variables, population and the investigated domain (DeVellis, 2016). It is not easy to evaluate qualitative research applying the above principles as criteria. Efforts to improve the evaluation criteria in qualitative research are increasing. For instance, the document method of interpretation (DMI), introduced by Philipps and Mrowczynski in 2021, has been used to improve research validity by generating content and reconstructing implicit knowledge during interviews. This qualitative research focuses on interpreting participants' perspectives and attitudes to enhance understanding of resilience practices in HEIs in China. The theoretical domain considered in this study was grounded in gaps in the existing literature. Furthermore, to ensure the validity of the qualitative tool used in this study, the researcher sought to select personnel with appropriate technical backgrounds to participate. Informed consent was obtained from the participating HEIs and individuals (see Appendix 4), and participants were informed that they could opt out of the study at any time. Further to this point, the interview tool for this study was pilot-tested and confirmed suitable for the study population, and a reasonable number of participants (25) were selected to ensure the robustness of the evidence. Finally, participants' interview comments were reported verbatim in the qualitative findings (see Chapter five).

Reliability

Gibbs (2018) describes reliability in qualitative research as the consistency of evidence achieved through some credible procedures. To ensure reliability in this study, several steps were taken. The iterative approach enables the researcher to gain a more comprehensive understanding and capture diverse

perspectives and experiences in research (Lim, 2024). In this research, iterative logic was used, involving multiple readings of the transcripts to capture the full meaning of the data. Silverman (2017) suggests that it is not advisable to transcribe all interviews at once. A few need to be transcribed and analysed in detail first. That logic was also applied in the qualitative tool for this study to ensure reliable results. In transcribing the text in this study, Yin's (2018) guideline was taken into consideration. Yin (2018) notes that researchers should record the research steps in detail to ensure there is no obvious mistake in the transcribed text.

The researcher began transcribing the interviews after completing the first few. The researcher checked and reviewed the relevant data for translation accuracy and then fed back the transcripts to the interviewees via extensive notes. After the interview interpretation, the interview transcripts and results were sent to the corresponding respondents to ensure the contents and conclusions matched their views. Some respondents provided further insights, and the emergent conceptual framework was developed based on these insights, with participants agreeing with the interpretations of the data. During the data analysis, the researcher checked the codes repeatedly by comparing them with other interview interpretations to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the interpretations.

Creswell and Miller (2000) point out research credibility-enhancing initiatives, including triangulation, peer reviews, external audits, and thick description, towards achieving validity in research results. Triangulation involves using more than one data source and collection method to confirm the validity, credibility and authenticity of data analysis and interpretation (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023; Silverman, 2017). Thus, triangulation of methods or sources is needed to mitigate the limitation by providing a more comprehensive view (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), which helps the researcher to generate a better understanding of the results.

In explaining the research method used in this study, which was described as mixed methods (Section 4.3), it was emphasised that a sequential mixed methods approach was employed, in which the quantitative tool was used after the qualitative tool.

Once all the interviews had been completed and analysed, and core insights identified, a questionnaire on students' learning experiences was developed to test key hypotheses about the impact of leadership in HE in China. SPSS software was used to conduct quantitative data analysis in this study, and the quantitative process is explained in Section 4.4.2 and its sub-sections, while the statistical results are documented in Chapter Six.

4.4.2 The Quantitative Tool: Statement of Hypotheses and Questionnaire

After completing the interview-based qualitative study, the quantitative study was implemented. In doing so, a questionnaire-based survey with students was conducted to test key hypotheses and understand how students' learning experiences have been impacted by the initiatives of leaders in HEIs in China. Questionnaire distribution lasted over one month (from 20th September to 25th October).

Survey research is one of the most widely used quantitative methods, involving the collection of data from a large number of respondents through questionnaires (Fink, 2017). While surveys are advantageous because they enable researchers to gather data from large populations (Fink, 2017; Fowler, 2014), it is important to employ careful questionnaire design and sampling approach to ensure the reliability and validity of survey data (Fowler, 2014). In the quantitative part of this study, the main focus was to understand how leadership initiatives at the participating HEIS in China affected students' experiences. Several steps were taken in this study to ensure validity and reliability standards, and these are explained next.

In Chapters Two and Three, relevant literature was reviewed from the perspectives of leadership in HEIs and students' experiences in HEIs. Drawing

from relevant foundations as documented in these chapters, taking into consideration relevant cues from the qualitative insights, three core hypotheses were formulated in line with the focus for this research and these are specified next:

Hypothesis 1: Teaching has a major influence on student satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: The acquisition of soft skills has a major influence on student satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Academic integrity influences student satisfaction.

4.4.2.1 Design of Questionnaire

The design of the questionnaire for this study was based on a combination of insights from the reviewed literature, the research objectives, and insights gained from the qualitative study. The list of questions in the questionnaire was revised and confirmed as appropriate for the quantitative study sample through pilot testing. The questionnaire contained 8 thematic elements: Student Engagement/Learning, Skills Development, Support Resources, Feedback, Social Environment, Integrity, Overall Experience, and Demographics. Negative sentences were used in some questions to check pattern coding. For example, (1) Question 11 -- Academic staff DO NOT deliver classes that challenge me to think critically, and (2) Question 17 -- I have NOT matured personally, academically and professionally at university. The responses to these negative questions were reviewed to determine whether the respondent had provided pattern responses for a theme. If pattern responses were detected, the respondent's case was deleted from the sample survey.

Following Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill’s (2023) recommendation that researchers ask respondents additional questions at the end of the questionnaire for modification or improvement purposes, the researcher added one open-ended question: "Are there questions that require further clarification?" If yes, which questions? How could the questions be improved? Do you have any other suggestions to improve the questionnaire?

The Likert Scale is a common method for measuring attitudes in surveys, which consists of a series of statements expressing different opinions on the topic of interest (Tanujaya, Prahmana, and Mumu, 2022). A seven-point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire in this research. Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agree or disagree with each statement on a scale from very negative to very positive.

As the questionnaire was initially developed in English, two academics and professional translators were asked to translate it into Chinese before it was distributed online. The translation professionals ensured that the Chinese version of the questionnaire matched the original English version. The survey questionnaire is displayed in Appendix 2. An online survey was chosen as the method for this research because it is convenient for researchers to administer without time or distance constraints.

4.4.2.2 Pilot-testing of the Survey Formal Questionnaires

According to Fink (2017), pilot testing is purposed to examine whether the respondents have problems in understanding the questions and have followed all instructions correctly. The flaws or inadequacies in the research design, such as logistical challenges, impractical procedures and ambiguous survey questions, can be identified in the pilot study and then addressed (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). Thus, through pilot testing, the researcher would gain confidence and credibility in the methods and procedures before moving on to more resource-intensive, larger-scale research.

The survey instrument, as shown in Appendix 2, was pilot-tested to ensure its suitability for the study sample. The pilot survey was distributed in class to students registered for the academic year starting in September 2024. Following the convenience sampling logic (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023), 15 students at the university where the researcher was affiliated participated in the pilot-testing of the survey instrument. Overall, to participate in the pilot-testing and in the main survey, a student must satisfy the following

criteria:

1. Be a Chinese full-time student,
2. Be aged 25 years or below,
3. Be an undergraduate student, could participate in this study.

The students were asked to respond to the questions and suggest how they could be better framed for their understanding. A general overview of the research instrument and completion time was obtained through the pilot study, and the questionnaires were grammatically organised, incorporating input from pilot-testing participants, to ensure a common understanding between participants and the researcher. The main survey questionnaires were distributed online in early October 2024. The questionnaire for this study was created on a website, and the participating universities were asked to invite their students to complete the survey online.

4.4.2.3 Ensuring Research Credibility

To ensure the credibility of research, a quantitative researcher must address the key issues of validity and reliability (Field, 2009).

Validity: Validity refers to whether an instrument can accurately measure the examined content (Hair et al., 2019). Validity refers to the extent to which a measurement tool measures the conceptualised construct (Field, 2009). Methodological literature categorises internal and external validity. Internal validity is achieved if there are no uncontrolled influences that would adversely affect the measurement (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This means that the measured variation of the dependent variables can be attributed only to the experimental factor (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). On the other hand, external validity refers to the extent to which a test procedure can be generalised. In other words, it is possible to infer the target population from the observed sample (Flick, 2023). The questionnaire used in this study was generated from insights from the qualitative tool of this study and utilised in combination with validated scales in the domain literature, thus reflecting the

validity of the quantitative measurement tool. Furthermore, the validity of the measurement scales used to examine the constructs explored in this study was confirmed using descriptive statistics and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) (see Chapter Six).

Reliability: Reliability refers to the extent to which consistency is reflected in the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). To ensure consistency or repeatability of an instrument, the most important form of reliability for multi-item instruments is the instrument's internal consistency – the degree to which sets of items on an instrument behave in the same way (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Cronbach's alpha is the measure of the internal consistency of a scale, which delivers reliable measurement procedures in the form of a correlation coefficient (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). Thus, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess the reliability of the quantitative questionnaire results in this research. According to George and Malley (2003), the criteria for the Cronbach's alpha of quantitative results in attitudinal constructs are: Excellent ($\alpha>0.9$), Good ($0.7<\alpha<0.9$), Acceptable ($0.6<\alpha<0.7$), Poor ($0.5<\alpha<0.6$), Unacceptable ($\alpha<0.5$). The research could be regarded as reliable if the researcher can replicate an earlier research design and achieve the same findings (Fabrigar et al., 2019). As reported in Chapter Six, satisfactory reliability results (mean value, standard deviation, and Cronbach alpha) were achieved for all constructs considered in this study.

4.5 Researcher's Role and Reflexivity

Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2018) define reflexivity as the critical reflection process on the self as researcher. Charmaz (2017) note critical reflection can not only be conducted by reflecting on the impact of the researchers' own attitudes and behaviours on the researcher role, but also by integrating broader social assumptions and contexts, while Silverman (2017) suggests that reflexivity is a term derived from ethnomethodology where it was used to

describe the self-organising character of all interaction so that any action provides for its own context.

With over 15 years of teaching experience in higher education in China, the researcher has professional expertise in sustainable development in higher education and aims to contribute to higher education practice through this research. The researcher's learning and work experience have enabled her to focus and drive this research to completion, and, in doing so, she made an effort to remain objective and not allow her own perceptions and emotions to significantly shape the research outcome.

One key element to address from a reflexivity standpoint concerns interviews. Reflexivity requires that researchers develop more skills to respond appropriately during the qualitative inquiry, even in unforeseen situations (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Conducting successful interviews requires sufficient knowledge and accumulated experience. Drawing on her professional experience, the researcher took a careful approach in the interviewing process to ensure that participants were willing and comfortable engaging in the interviews. The researcher ensured that an open mind was maintained throughout the research process, which involved developing research questions, selecting a methodology, collecting data, analysing data, constructing a conceptual framework, and preparing the report of conclusions.

Regarding the interview, several challenges were encountered. Interviewing commenced with ten exploratory interviews. Analysis of these interviews, however, revealed a need to modify the approach taken, as only a limited number of codes were found in the first ten interview transcripts. Three explanations were found for the poor outcome for the first ten interviews: (1) inadequate preparation by the researcher, (2) the researcher’s inadequate skill set, and (3) failure to adequately record the interviewees’ responses.

Firstly, there was no adequate preparation before interviewing commenced. The researcher began interviewing in a hurry once the interview appointment

was confirmed; as a result, there was a lack of focus and direction during the interviews. The interview structure and, to a reasonable extent, the nature of the questions asked did not reflect a good understanding of the research objective and the questions intended to gather relevant and useful information during the interview. To address this error, the researcher revisited the literature review and revised the interview questions to better align with the research focus. For example, interview question no. 7, which related to authenticity, was revised after the researcher revisited the relevant body of literature (authentic leadership). Furthermore, heeding the supervisors' advice, the researcher read David Silverman's “Doing Qualitative Research” to deepen her understanding of qualitative research. Armed with these newly acquired qualitative skills, the researcher commenced the second round of interviews and, in the process, engaged more with academic journals and relevant sources on qualitative research to conduct effective interviews. Thus, for the second round of interviews, the researcher was well prepared and armed with a set of questions that closely aligned with the research objectives and the research questions. The researcher prepared a more detailed outline of the interview questions and, with an awareness of how to utilise the benefits of follow-up questions, ensured the quality of interviews.

Secondly, the researcher lacked adequate interview skills going into the first interview session, such as ensuring that questions are asked appropriately. In the first interview stage, in which the interviewees were university leaders at different levels, the researcher was very nervous, which negatively affected the interview outcome. A good questioning style is important. If the interviewee does not understand the interview questions, he or she will not be able to answer them correctly and in depth. When the interviewees’ responses deviated from the interview questions, the interviewer could not guide them back to the questions.

It is important to show sincerity, patience, and respect to the interviewee by

listening carefully and avoiding interruptions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Josselson, 2013). During the interview process, the researcher needs to be careful with the language and presentation, ensuring that simple, clear and easy-to-understand language is used (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). At the same time, the researcher needs to pay attention to tone and attitude to remain neutral and objective (Roberts, 2020). Effort should be made to ensure a flexible interview process. If some interviewees cannot understand the intended meaning of the question, the interviewer must take the necessary steps to clarify it and guide them (Irvine, Drew and Sainsbury, 2012). Some respondents may be reluctant to share their feelings. Depending on the interviewees' responses, the researcher may adjust the order of the questions and how they are posed and clarified (Irvine, Drew and Sainsbury, 2012). The researcher ensured these steps were taken in this study to ensure clear understanding on the part of the interviewees and to achieve overall quality. Furthermore, the researcher used probing questions during the interview process, such as "What do you mean by that?" Can you give me an example… As the interview progressed, the researcher found that interviewees became increasingly relaxed, and participants were willing to speak more.

Thirdly, the interviewer did not properly record the interviewees' responses, resulting in the loss of important information. The interviewer needs to take notes to extract useful information and ideas during the interview and reflect once the interview is finished (Mann, 2016). To address this problem, the researcher took the necessary steps in the second round of interviews: each interview was audio-recorded using a digital device, and the researcher also wrote memos during the interviews. After each interview, the researcher immediately wrote down her reflection, including what was gained from the interview, what was missing, what new insights and corrections emerged, what patterns were evident, and what needed to be done in the next interview. By engaging more with the literature and methodological foundations, the

researcher enhanced her interviewing skills and showed greater confidence in the interview process and in qualitative research in general.

4.6 Ethical Consideration

In conducting this research, ethical guidelines were taken into account. Given that Chinese HEIs were the setting for this research, the Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China, which came into force on January 1, 1999 and was amended in 2018, was followed. All research activities for this study were carried out in compliance with the Higher Education Law and other related policies and ethical considerations in China.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), at least three research stages should be covered in ethical considerations, including design, planning, data collection, and reporting. When collecting data, the researcher should obtain respondents' permission, ensure data privacy, and protect legal sensitivities. In line with methodological guidelines on confidentiality (e.g., Creswell and Creswell, 2023), the researcher did not ask any questions that would embarrass the interviewees nor require the respondents to reveal any personal information. However, where information of a confidential nature is critical to the research, formal approval (consent) was obtained from the participants and their organisations for such information to be included in the research when disclosed by the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The researcher's contact details were provided to participants if they wished to follow up with any queries or request the exclusion of any sections of the interview. In this research, the interviews included face-to-face and online sessions. As for the face-to-face interview, participants signed an appropriate informed consent form prior to the interview. Also, for the online interviews, participants provided informed consent before participating. All the participants were encouraged to read the statement and agree to it before responding to the open-ended (interview) questions and questionnaires.

Further to the point of confidentiality and anonymity, all collected data were

stored in a password-protected folder and on a laptop. In the informed consent, the participants were informed that the data collected would be used strictly for the purpose of this research and would not be accessed by third parties. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the research at any stage for any reason, and that, upon request, the data they provided would be deleted immediately. There is no disclosure of personal information in the questionnaire. Encryption was used when information was sent via the internet.

The researcher should comply with ethical, legal, and professional frameworks, obligations, and standards as required by statutory and regulatory authorities and by employers, funders, and other relevant stakeholders (Israel, 2015). Interviewees' personal details and organisational information have been anonymised in this research, including participants' names, job titles, contact details, and gender. In this research, the researcher complied with GDPR ethical guidelines and data protection rules in China, in accordance with the "Draft Measures on Data Security Management" released on May 28, 2019.

4.7 Conclusion to the Chapter

This chapter explains the methodological approach followed in this study. Grounded in the pragmatism paradigm, this study combined qualitative and quantitative methods to address the research questions. The methodological details for each of these tools have been explained from the point of study participants, sampling approach, and overall data collection implementation. In doing so, the steps taken to ensure ethical conformity and reliability, as well as validity measures, have also been explained in this chapter. Next, qualitative data analysis and findings are presented in Chapter Five, while the quantitative data analysis and findings are presented in Chapter Six.

Chapter Five Qualitative Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a second-order thematic analysis of qualitative data collected through interviews with university staff and administrators. Unlike the first-order analysis (see Appendix 6) that reported each interview question separately, this chapter synthesises the 17 interview questions into five overarching themes: (1) Student Learning, Teaching and Graduate Employability; (2) Leadership and Organisational Development; (3) Institutional Strategy, Internationalisation and Competitiveness; (4) Sustainability and Social Responsibility; and (5) Institutional Resilience and Strategic Resource Prioritisation.

Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative analysis to process qualitative data. Qualitative approaches are nuanced, complex and diverse. Braun and Clarke (2006) point out that thematic analysis is a foundational approach for qualitative analysis, and one of its benefits is its flexibility. Differing from grounded theory and other theoretically structured analytic approaches, thematic analysis is more accessible for inexperienced researchers who do not have prior knowledge of theory or technological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As coding evolves during the analysis process, thematic analysis could be applied across a range of research questions, different research paradigms and methods (Ozuem et al., 2022; Guest et al., 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this research, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guideline for qualitative data analysis was utilised. The steps include (1) Familiarisation with the data, (2) Generating initial Codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the report. The implementation of these six steps in this study was explained in the first-order thematic analysis process, while the focus in this current Chapter is to present the thematic evidence structured along the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

5.2 Theme 1: Student Learning, Teaching and Graduate Employability

(Synthesising Q1–Q4)

5.2.1 Theme Introduction

The findings indicate that respondents viewed student learning as a multidimensional construct extending beyond classroom teaching to encompass curriculum relevance, academic integrity, employability, digital learning, industry engagement and lifelong learning. Rather than considering these as independent institutional initiatives, participants consistently described them as mutually reinforcing components of educational quality. Consequently, student learning experience emerged as an institutional ecosystem in which teaching innovation, ethical academic behaviour and industry engagement collectively enhance graduate readiness.

Unlike the first-order analysis that reported each interview question separately, the second-order analysis demonstrates that respondents perceived educational quality as the outcome of interactions between institutional resources, curriculum innovation, staff capability and employer engagement.

5.2.2 Second-Order Thematic Hierarchy

Second-Order Theme: Student Learning, Teaching and Graduate Employability

Table 5.1 First-Order Themes and Representative Codes in Theme 1

First-Order Themes	Representative Codes
Learning Experience	digital learning, innovative teaching, student-centred learning
Academic Integrity	ethics, plagiarism prevention, assessment integrity
Industry Engagement	employer collaboration, internships, curriculum alignment.
Graduate Employability	future Skills, practical learning, critical thinking

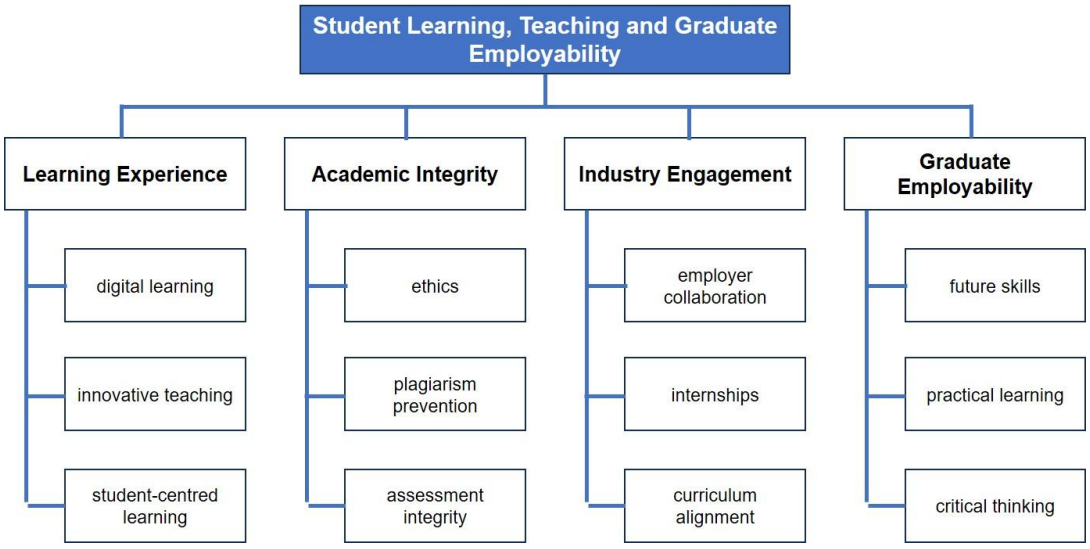


Figure 5.1 Theme 1 Core Features and Representative Codes

5.2.3 Higher-Order Interpretation

The analysis suggests educational quality is not achieved solely through effective teaching. Instead, respondents repeatedly linked four institutional capabilities: innovative pedagogy, ethical academic culture, industry responsiveness and graduate employability. These components appear sequentially related as shown below:

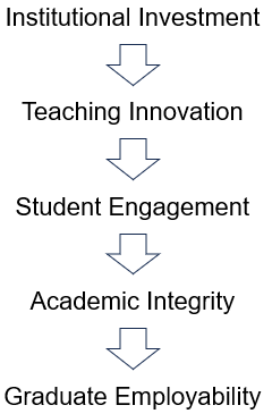


Figure 5.2 Higher-Order Interpretation in Theme 1

The model illustrates respondents' perception that institutional investments towards improvements in teaching quality enable student engagement, which strengthens ethical learning behaviours and ultimately enhances graduate employability.

5.2.4 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Learning Experience and Teaching Quality

One respondent observed that:

"The innovation of the teaching mode has brought about an obvious positive effect on the students' learning experience." (Respondent #19)

That observation demonstrates that innovation was viewed not merely as technological change but as an enabler of deeper learning. In terms of Learning Resources and Facilities, respondents indicated a preference for online learning resources as they help students learn more independently and resiliently.

> *"The **online learning resources** stimulate students' learning interest and classroom participation. Take **Mooc**, for example. Students can arrange their own learning more independently, at any time and from any place, and choose their own learning content. The rapid advancement of online courses has clearly enhanced the experience of **sustainable and resilient learning** for teachers and students, especially during the COVID-19 quarantine time."* (Respondent #19)

Similarly, another participant explained:

> *"Students can **obtain information through more channels;** for example, they can **read cutting-edge research literature** via **electronic library databases**. There is also a need to ensure that students' learning environments are supported via the provision of **advanced laboratories, study rooms** and **intelligent classrooms**. Students study comfortably in the study room with **air conditioning**."* (Respondent #18)

This suggests that digital learning was perceived as increasing learner autonomy rather than simply improving access. Rich electronic databases enable students to obtain cutting-edge literature and gain more information. Advanced laboratories, classrooms and study rooms are important learning facilities that ensure students have a good learning environment.

Participants expressed their views regarding Learning Incentives and Interest thus:

> *"As lifelong learning is now advocated, universities should create an **atmosphere of active learning** for students. For example, our university provides a wide range of **diversified cross-curricular programs and choices for student**, so that they can choose programs based on their own interests and goals."* (Respondent #17)
>
> *"The university creates a **co-learning and shared learning atmosphere** by establishing **learning clubs** and various **interest groups**."* (Respondent #6)
>
> *"We establish **contacts with enterprises** (school-enterprise cooperation), **hiring experts** such as entrepreneurs and managers in the field, to give lectures. If students have a certain understanding of the workplace and **clear direction for learning**, they will increase their **learning interest** and **internal motivation**."* (Respondent #4)
>
> *"The university strengthens its **cooperation with enterprises and industries**. We provide students with **practical training courses** and **internship** opportunities."* (Respondent #15)

Respondents indicated that active learning and building a shared learning atmosphere increase students' learning incentives and interests. If universities establish more contact with enterprises, students may have a clear understanding and direction via practical training courses and internships. Once the learning target is clear, students will be stimulated internally. Most respondents agreed that providing diverse cross-curricular programmes, learning clubs and interest groups for students will not only make students enjoy learning but also steer their learning desire. These perceptions find logical support in Aman, Aziz and Abbas (2023), who recommend that universities need to improve the learning atmosphere, adopt cutting-edge teaching techniques, and enhance academic support services.

The importance of teaching quality was also strongly underlined by participants:

*"The university attaches great importance to **the quality of teaching**, and regularly organises a number of **teaching skills competitions** to help teachers learn from the mature teaching experience every semester. Teachers are encouraged to use technology to explore **innovative teaching modes**, such as the **flipped classroom**."* (Respondent #4)

*"We focus on improving the quality of teaching through the training of dual-teacher teachers and innovative teaching modes. We pay attention to the **personalisation of students** and **diversify the forms** of teaching according to the needs of each individual. The classroom focuses on **teacher-student interaction**. For example, we strengthen **digital teaching, bilingual teaching, case study teaching and problem-based learning** and so on."* (Respondent #15)

*"I believe that the teaching process is a **lifelong learning process**, and the improvement of teaching standards is also a lifelong process of **reflection and refinement**. Students' evaluation of the flipped classroom indicates that students' willingness to learn has increased significantly. We have ushered in an era of **digital innovation in teaching and learning**. In the **flipped classroom**, the teacher plays the role of a knowledge **transmitter**, classroom **manager**, and a **guide** and **facilitator** of learning."* (Respondent #20)

*"The university has a whole set of these **feedback mechanisms** for teaching and learning. We carry out a **teaching inspection** every semester, and hold a **symposium** to have **face-to-face communication** on teaching and learning."* (Respondent #9)

*"In my own teaching process, I have used some **information technology**, including the introduction of **Learning Pass, Mooc** and so on. The **innovation of the teaching mode** has brought about an obvious positive effect on the students' learning experience."* (Respondent #19)

Respondents believe innovative teaching modes, such as flipped classrooms, have had a clear positive effect on students' learning experiences. Technology is strongly encouraged to support innovative teaching modes. Pedagogy

delivery has become a technologically integrated, dynamic and relational process (Birdi et al., 2025). Teaching quality is the most influential factor in student satisfaction among undergraduate students in the UK (Langan & Harris, 2024). Tutor-student interaction is important in teaching; thus, tutors need to pay attention to students' personalisation and apply diverse teaching methods in the classroom, such as bilingual teaching, case study teaching and problem-based learning. Tutors' approachability, empathy, caring, respect, and warm interactions improve student satisfaction (Bell, 2022; Nabaho, Oonyu, and Aguti, 2019). Respondents recommended universities organise teaching skill competitions, teaching inspections and training to improve teaching skills. Feedback mechanisms are proposed to establish insights for tutors to reflect and refine their communication with students. This is consistent with the findings by Carless and Winstone (2023); they note that feedback activities and processes bring mutual benefits for tutors and students (Carless & Winstone, 2023).

5.2.5 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Industry Engagement (Practice, Activities and Curriculum)

Respondents further linked learning with labour market preparation:

> *"We encourage students to participate in **social and youth voluntary service practice activities**, such as the **green campus, intelligent campus**, etc. We cultivate the **spirit of collectivism** and raise their **teamwork and communication ability**."* (Respondent #6)
>
> *"Students are encouraged to participate in **interdisciplinary programs** and **various innovative and entrepreneurial projects** to develop different skills."* (Respondent #4)

Respondents indicated that students are encouraged to participate in various practices and activities to develop their skills, such as voluntary service activities and green and intelligent campus activities. Teamwork and communication ability, creativity and entrepreneurship ability, interdisciplinary

learning ability, and collectivism spirit are very important qualities for graduate students.

On curriculum system updates, Respondent 7 commented thus:

> *"The university **integrates the demands** of society and enterprises directly into the curriculum system. If teachers are not capable, we will **hire talents** from enterprises to teach."* (Respondent #7)

Daley & Baruah (2021) emphasise the responsibility of HEIs to meet the growing demands of society and industry through curriculum design. Respondents in this study indicated that universities should raise student learning as a way of integrating the needs of industry and enterprise. In the literature, scholars agree that work-integrated learning improves graduate employability as an effective mechanism to develop students' professional identity, work competence and industry networks (Choi-Lundberg et al., 2024; Otermans et al., 2025). Universities and enterprises can jointly develop and build the curriculum to enhance students' learning. Effective curriculum design and implementation are recommended to help graduates enhance relevant employability skills (Okolie et al., 2019). It is necessary to adjust the existing talent training system, syllabus and course content, and introduce new skills into the curricula, so that students can master the skills required by society in the future. Hong et al. (2024) also illustrate that in Chinese HEIs, graduates have structured opportunities to apply academic learning in a real-world environment through Service-Learning activities, volunteer programs and trips.

5.2.6 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Academic Integrity

Academic integrity also emerged as an essential supporting mechanism. Rather than viewing plagiarism as merely a disciplinary issue, respondents associated academic integrity with the development of responsible graduates capable of ethical professional practice.

> *"We have **clear integrity rules** and a **regulated system**, so that the students know the consequences if dishonest."* (Respondent #6)

*"We have professional **plagiarism detection software** to test the papers submitted by students."* (Respondent #16)

*"The university provides students with **integrity education** and conduct **awareness-raising campaigns**, such as **class sessions with counsellors**. The importance of academic integrity is emphasised to students. The student should develop a sense of integrity because integrity is a key characteristic affecting a person's life development."* (Respondent #16)

*"The university also requires **instructors** to better **guide** students throughout the process to identify problems and help students better comply with the requirements of academic integrity."* (Respondent #17)

*"Students are encouraged to participate in **community service and extra-curricular activities** to develop their civic awareness and sense of social responsibility."* (Respondent #14)

*"We raise students' **academic integrity awareness** via **self-monitoring and self-education**."* (Respondent #15)

*"It is also important for teachers to **set good examples**. If mentors do not behave with integrity in their own teaching and research, it is difficult for students to behave with academic integrity."* (Respondent #11)

*"The university has relevant **penalties** for unethical behaviour. For example, if plagiarism is detected, all the **scholarships and loans will be withdrawn**. Even the student will not be allowed to successfully obtain the degree."* (Respondent #17)

*"The university provides **academic support** services, such as **creating writing centres** and **searching for study partners** to help students acquire the necessary **academic skills** and improve their **academic writing**. The university **upgrades databases** so that students can read the latest literature."* (Respondent #17)

*"We grant the students some degree of **trust**, so that students learn to **self-monitor** and **self-manage** their integrity."* (Respondent #6)

Respondents overall agree that universities need to play their role in enhancing

students' academic integrity awareness via class sessions with counsellors, self-monitoring and self-education. Instructors' guidance, community service and extra-curricular activities, and good examples set by tutors are other effective integrity and moral education approaches. According to Miron et al. (2021), administrators, academic staff and students are collectively responsible for academic integrity in HEIs. University leaders and faculty need to make efforts to orient, teach, and engage students on academic integrity (Abuadas & Albikawi, 2026; Jafry & Vorstermans, 2025). Respondents are conscious that universities have penalties for unethical behaviour. Academic support such as writing centres, study partners, and updated databases is essential and could improve students' academic skills and boost student confidence in undertaking academic work ethically. Rather than punishment, students prefer softer and more integrated approaches to improve students' awareness of academic integrity, such as academic integrity education (Miron et al., 2021; Tabsh et al., 2017). Creative measures and various assessment techniques are recommended to improve students' independent learning and critical thinking skills, thereby enhancing academic integrity (Sweeney, 2023). Students are also accorded a good measure of trust to self-monitor and self-manage their integrity.

5.2.7 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Graduate Employability and Skills

Respondents identified a range of skills students need to acquire to meet future industry needs:

> *"Students can also improve their **interpersonal, teamwork and communication skills** by **participating in second classroom, clubs and Student Union activities**."* (Respondent #4)
>
> *"Students can **participate in STEM projects or engineering projects** to enrich their **technical skills** and analytical **problem-solving abilities**."* (Respondent #6)
>
> *"Students participate in various **extracurricular activities and clubs** to develop good **communication skills and teamwork spirit**. They actively participate in*

*various **academic competitions** to develop **independent thinking and critical thinking skills**, etc."* (Respondent #20)

*"Students should have some forward-looking expectations and understand the trend of future industry development. They can develop **creativity and entrepreneurship** through **competitions and projects**. **Innovation ability and adaptability** to society can be developed by **choosing interdisciplinary courses**."* (Respondent #18)

*"For students, the first level should be mastering the **professional knowledge** and theories in the classroom, including understanding the history and development of the industry and occupations."* (Respondent #19)

*"First of all, students should have excellent **professional knowledge**. **Learning in the classroom** is their primary channel. In addition, our university enhances the students' practical and hands-on ability through the **practical training courses** or in-depth **internships** to better meet the needs of enterprises."* (Respondent #11)

*"Students learn about the needs of society and the industry through various channels such as **internships and practices**. They obtain various **skill certificates** to improve various **professional skills**."* (Respondent #20)

*"Students can improve their **digital literacy** by **participating in learning programming courses, online training** and so on. **Digital information courses** can be set up for students to learn."* (Respondent #18)

*"The needs of the industry in the future are interactive, which requires students to integrate their knowledge in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math. The **ability** to learn **cross-disciplinary** becomes important."* (Respondent #6)

Respondents consider soft skills important for students to meet the future needs of industry, including interpersonal, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, independent and critical thinking skills. Naseer et al. (2025) and Rubio-Andrés et al. (2023) report that more and more employers prefer soft or transferable skills over purely technical knowledge. Otermans et al. (2025) describe five key dimensions of soft skills, namely, teamwork, communication, interpersonal

effectiveness, individual self-management skills and cognitive abilities, including critical thinking and problem-solving. Additionally, Bui et al. (2025) highlight AI literacy as another core component of graduate employability. Learning programming courses and online training would help students improve their digital literacy. Participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities enhances students' communication skills, networking capabilities, and overall employability profiles (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022; Zhang & Veecock, 2024). Students can develop creativity and entrepreneurship via competitions, projects and interdisciplinary courses. Practical training courses and internships are critical tools for enhancing students' professional knowledge, and the ability to learn across disciplines is important for meeting industry expectations in the future. In team-working settings, such cross-disciplinary training drives team alignment and a uniform focus on goals (Opute, 2014).

5.2.8 Cross-Theme Interpretation

The first-order themes are highly interconnected:

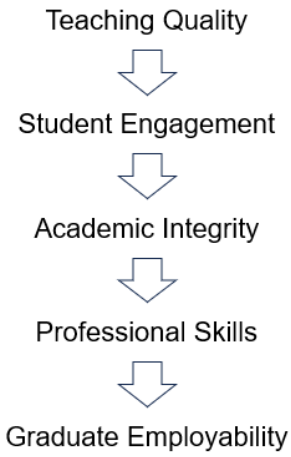


Figure 5.3 Cross-Theme Interpretation in Theme 1

Respondents therefore conceptualised learning as a developmental process rather than a collection of independent educational initiatives.

5.2.9 Analytical Discussion

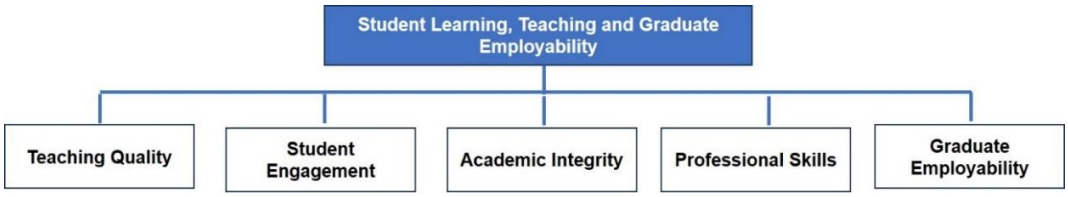


Figure 5.4 Visual Representation in Theme 1

As Figure 5.2 shows, a core insight emerging from this synthesis is the integration of employability with educational quality. Respondents rarely discussed employability independently; instead, they consistently linked it to curriculum relevance, authentic assessment, ethical learning and industry collaboration. However, graduates are expected to be equipped with evolving, industry-aligned competencies to navigate the labour market (Choi-Lundberg et al., 2024; Naseer et al., 2025). To address the growing demands of the industry and society, graduate employability is greatly enabled by teaching, students' positive engagement, professional knowledge and skills development and academic integrity (Naseer et al., 2025; Otermans et al., 2025). These insights also find resonance in Magnell & Kolmos (2017), who indicate that it is important for the university to update the curriculum system and integrate different work-related learning activities to prepare graduates for employment, including internships, entrepreneurship programs, guest lecturers, and invitations from experts. Thus, the insights from this study reinforce prior research that suggests universities increasingly perceive graduate employability as an institutional responsibility rather than merely an individual student outcome.

5.3 Theme 2: Leadership and Organisational Development

(Synthesising Q7–Q12)

5.3.1 Theme Introduction

This theme represents the largest and most conceptually rich section of the interviews. Rather than discussing authenticity, trust, leadership, change and research separately, respondents described them as components of effective organisational leadership.

5.3.2 Second-Order Thematic Hierarchy

Second-Order Theme: Leadership and Organisational Development

Table 5.2 First-Order Themes and Representative Codes in Theme 2

First-Order Themes	Representative Codes
Authentic Leadership	Cares, Transparency, Fairness, Empathy, honesty
Inspiring Leadership	Trust, Support, Virtuousness, Decision-making, vision
Trust Building	Respect, Transparent communication, Fairness, support
Change Management	Goals, Communication, Decision-making participation, Overcoming resistance
Managing Resistance	Communication, Training and support, Incentives, comfort
Research Capacity	Teamwork, Resource and support, Incentives, collaborations



Figure 5.5 Theme 2 Core Features and Representative Codes

5.3.3 Higher-Order Interpretation

Leadership emerged as the central mechanism through which organisational capability develops:



Figure 5.6 Higher-Order Interpretation in Theme 2

Rather than viewing trust as an outcome, respondents positioned trust as a mediator between leadership behaviour and organisational performance.

5.3.4 Major Codes

These codes occurred repeatedly throughout Questions 7–12.

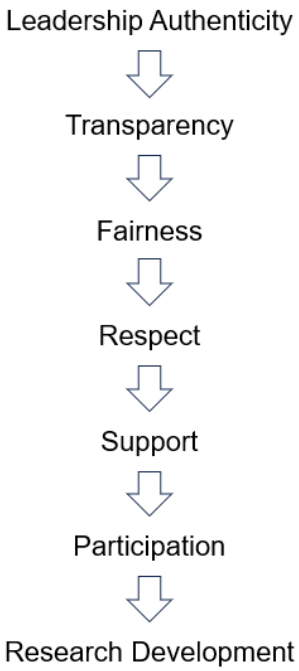


Figure 5.7 Major Codes in Theme 2

5.3.5 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Authentic Leadership

In their responses, the participants not only underlined the importance of authentic leadership culture but also highlighted related initiatives:

Participant 16 noted:

> *"The President came to our Faculty of Business and Economics and had a long and detailed discussion with our Dean on student recruitment and employment in May. He **cares about** staff development and tries to **understand the needs and difficulties** of his subordinates."* (Respondent #16)

This illustrates that authenticity was primarily interpreted through relational leadership behaviours rather than positional authority.

> *"Leaders **provide opportunities** for teachers' training and development and give them **resources** and **psychological support** when needed."* (Respondent #18)

Similarly, respondents commented:

> *"We seek **transparency** by **sharing information** on the **university's official website** homepage, such as the Tuition Fee Pledge and the Sunshine Enrolment Pledge. Every semester, the President has a face-to-face communication with staff and students. In addition, there is a **President's Mailbox**, which allows staff and students to write anonymously to the President. The President responds to issues and resolves them promptly."* (Respondent #15)
>
> *"Our **ratings or appraisals system** has **clear and objective indicators**, which are provided on **open documentation**."* (Respondent #4)
>
> *"Leaders are open and willing to communicate with teachers and students. For example, our leaders often have tea parties, breakfast, and lunch with faculty and students. They participate in activities with students and faculty to develop a **rapport**. By participating in activities together, they are able to **get advice and feedback** from students and faculty."* (Respondent #1)

Transparency therefore features as an operational expression of authentic leadership.

On fairness:

*"The leader can't produce **discrimination** against colleagues. That is to say, treat every staff member fairly. The teachers' research performance should be shown **fairly and truthfully**."* (Respondent #2)

In their responses, Respondents 6 and 4 emphasise empathy and honesty respectively:

*"Leaders are **empathetic**. They always carefully listen to the staff and students and think about their needs. They try their best to help faculty and students solve problems."* (Respondent #6)

*"As a middle-level leader in charge of research in the college, firstly, I should pass on all the information to every teacher in our college **truthfully**."* (Respondent #2)

*"Leaders are **honest** in expressing their true feelings. They are brave enough to admit their mistakes and take timely corrective action."* (Respondent #4)

Respondents reported that university leaders care about staff development, try to understand staff needs and difficulties, and provide resources and psychological support when needed. Open and transparent communication, fairness, empathy and honesty are considered important in authentic leadership. Leaders seek transparency by sharing information and using ratings or appraisal systems with clear and objective indicators. Transparency and trustworthiness enhance employees' happiness and motivation (Asghar et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023). They are empathetic, show care and understanding, and utilise feedback from staff to help them solve problems. They show fairness to staff and are honest in expressing their true feelings.

5.3.6 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Inspiring Leadership

Core terms used in explaining inspiring leadership included trust, support, virtuousness, decision-making, and vision.

Interviews with respondents provided further highlights: trust was strengthened through participation. Respondents commented thus:

*"Leaders are approachable and empathetic. If leaders have a close relationship with staff and build **trust** with staff, they can lead the university toward the same goals."* (Respondent #17)

*"**Trust** between team members is important for leaders. They give students and teachers a **sense of belonging**."* (Respondent #16)

Responding in this regard, respondents flagged the importance of support:

*"The inspiring leader brings a lot of resources to the university and provides staff with good **resource support**."* (Respondent #4)

*"Full **support is** provided to the staff in their **recognition**."* (Respondent #7)

Equally flagged when explaining inspiring leadership is virtuousness:

*"**Fairness** is the most important."* (Respondent #17)

*"The leader should be both **virtuous** and talented. He should be of **high moral character**."* (Respondent #11)

*"Leaders must have **feelings of home and country**. When leading and teaching, he should **set himself as an example**."* (Respondent #15)

*"Leaders **take sincere care for teachers and students** and **create maximum value** for them."* (Respondent #6)

Emphasising the point of decision-making, Respondent 15 commented thus:

*"The leader is able to **make appropriate decisions** based on the interests of the team and the current situation."* (Respondent #15)

Furthermore, Respondent 15 commented regarding vision thus:

*"The leader has a good **vision**, not pompous, yet **pragmatic**, grounded and up-to-date."* (Respondent #15)

Respondents identify trust as important, as it creates a sense of belonging and enables harmonisation and common goal focus amongst staff. Inspiring leaders provide staff with good resource support and attract staff recognition. Inspiring leaders are of high moral character and have role model status. They show fairness, take sincere care and create maximum value for students and staff.

Inspiring leaders always make appropriate decisions to match their prevailing circumstances and display visionary traits.

5.3.7 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Trust Building Between Management and Academic Staff

One core feature mentioned in this regard is respect:

> *"We **respect** them. The **interests** of the professors and academic staff need to be **taken into full consideration**. Let the professors who understand academics decide and manage academic affairs. For example, if we need to bring in a talented academic staff member, his academic achievements will be determined by the academic community and the Academic Council of Professors."* (Respondent #10)
>
> *"I **respect** their expertise. I **know each professor's area of research**. For example, who works on ammonia-hydrogen energy conversion catalysts, who works on electronic chemicals and batteries. I know them thoroughly."* (Respondent #11)
>
> *"The leaders need to **respect** the academic staff and give them **ample free space** to carry out their research projects."* (Respondent #16)

Also, participants emphasised the point of transparent communication:

> *"Information **disclosure** system is necessary."* (Respondent #15)
>
> *"Some rules and regulations must be **open and transparent**. Establishing an **information collection system** that is not subject to human interference is also an important basis for building trust. The **division** of **responsibilities** between managers and academic staff should be very **clear**. It is necessary to maintain a **transparent and open communication** with academic staff. For example, leaders convey important information to staff and listen to their feedback. We understand academic staff needs and help them to solve their difficulties."* (Respondent #4)

Respondents 3 and 16 commented thus on fairness:

> *"Leaders should be able to **allocate** academic resources **fairly**. Leaders may often contact governmental institutions and organisations, and they have a lot of resources at hand. Leaders should **disclose** the resource allocation to everyone.*

*There should be **an authoritative third party** to ensure fairness in the selection. If academic staff feel that it is not fair, the sense of trust will definitely be lost."* (Respondent #3)

*"The principle of **fairness and equity** in the allocation of research resources and funds should be abided by."* (Respondent #16)

Also mentioned regarding trust building between management and academic staff is support:

*"Leaders ensure the academic staff carry out their research and teaching work with **resources and support**."* (Respondent #16)

*"Leaders attach importance to the welfare and development of academic staff. They **create opportunities** and **platforms** for academic staff to go for further studies and gain **personal growth and progress**."* (Respondent #3)

On decision-making participation:

*"Leaders provide channels to **encourage** academic staff to **participate** in the **decision-making** process. For example, the academic staff can express their suggestions and opinions at the **faculty representative meetings**."* (Respondent #2)

Ensuring a good measure of mutual respect is one critical step in building trust, ensuring that personnel have ample space to carry out their duties without interference. It is important to maintain transparent and open communication with academic staff. Clear information collection and disclosure systems are necessary for transparency. The delineation of responsibilities between managers and academic staff should be very clear. Leaders should allocate resources fairly and provide support and opportunities for academic staff's personal growth. Participation in decision-making is encouraged to build trust. These findings connect to Hsu et al.'s (2024) findings, which indicate that trust enhances employees' creativity as trust is fostered by an open and genuine communication style. Trust improves well-being and job satisfaction; thus, trust,

team support, fair rewards, and transparency are crucial in the organisation (Czerw et al., 2025).

5.3.8 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Change Management

The responses regarding change management related to aspects of goals, communication, decision-making participation, overcoming resistance, and support.

On goals, respondents commented thus:

> *"The university should have a clear **goal** so that the faculty and staff can be informed why the change is necessary. For example, our college hopes to improve the graduate outcomes to better serve society and the local community. We have to carry out **digital teaching reforms** and provide students with more real **career practice opportunities**."* (Respondent #15)
>
> *"Our college is striving to **improve its discipline rankings**. The leader considers which disciplines need to recruit talents and how to attract high-quality talents."* (Respondent #11)
>
> *"At present, the change goal of our university is to **improve the university quality and level**. We should insist on **being teacher-student oriented**. At the same time, the **internationalisation** of higher education is also the goal of our university, which strives to attract advanced and excellent educational resources to raise the **research capacity**."* (Respondent #16)

In discussing change management, the respondents also emphasised the importance of communication:

> *"Leaders actively maintain **communication** with employees about why the change is needed, so that everyone can understand the vision and goals. For example, we **update the change information** through working platforms, meetings, emails and WeChat."* (Respondent #6)
>
> *"**Suggestions and feedback** are important to the change to some extent. For example, last year I made a suggestion about asset management, and then the*

University Asset Management Office actually explained to me why it wasn't done." (Respondent #4)

In addition, the importance of decision-making participation and overcoming resistance was also underlined as shown in the respective comments of Respondents 14 for the former and 16 and 6 for the latter:

"Leaders encourage faculty and students to ***participate*** *in the* ***decision-making*** *process, which can* ***increase engagement and support*** *for change and reduce potential resistance."* (Respondent #14)

"There is resistance to any change, and it is difficult to achieve it in one step. Leaders need to make change ***gradually according to the actual situation****. A degree of foresight is required to* ***control risks****, and an evaluation of the change is needed."* (Respondent #16)

"Leaders accept ***feedback*** *from their employees, which in turn leads to positive* ***improvements****. We often have to do* ***pilot*** *and* ***allow for trial and error****."* (Respondent #6)

Finally, the importance of support was also underlined:

"Leaders need to give their employees the appropriate ***training and guidance*** *to ensure that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt to the change."* (Respondent #16)

5.3.9 Cross-Theme Interaction

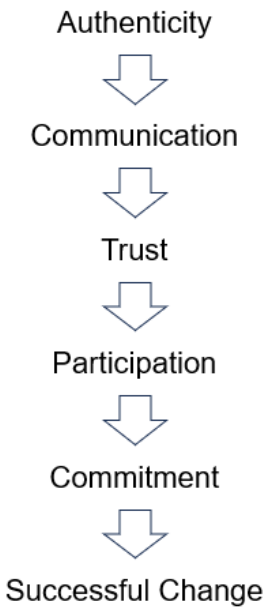


Figure 5.8 Cross-Theme Interaction in Theme 2

5.3.10 Second-Order Interpretation

Respondents did not perceive organisational change as primarily structural. Instead, change was viewed as fundamentally relational. Successful change depended upon trust, communication, support, participation and capability development. In HEIs, authentic leaders foster staff's sense of moral obligation to support organisational change by improving employee commitment during organisational transformations (Nasir et al., 2024). Resistance to change consequently emerged not as opposition to organisational reform but as a response to uncertainty, inadequate communication and insufficient institutional support.

5.3.11 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Managing Resistance

Resistance featured as one key element in managing change, and respondents commented on several aspects relating to managing resistance. On reasons for resistance:

> *"The first reason why academic staff **resist change** is that change **violates their interests**. Because of **uncertainty** and **fear** of personal gain or loss. Resistance to change is called 'fear of competence'. The person dares not to change because of his own **lack of competence**."* (Respondent #15)

In their responses, Respondents 1 and 6 emphasised the importance of communication to overcoming resistance:

> *"I think the first thing to do is to **communicate** with the academic staff regarding the need for change. Secondly, we have to **explain** to the staff the possible **benefits** of the change, including long-term benefits."* (Respondent #1)
>
> *"Positive **communication** mechanisms improve academic staff's **understanding of the change**. Make academic staff realise that he will be better after this change through communication. The **concerns** of academic staff need to be **addressed**."* (Respondent #6)

Training and support are equally important factors in managing resistance:

> *"It is important to provide academic staff with the necessary training and support, such as sending them to other universities for **further study**, attending international **academic conferences**, and becoming more **involved in industry enterprises** to improve their research skills so that they are no longer afraid of change. **Facility support** is provided for academic staff in their workplaces (e.g., **labs and library databases**) so that the academic staff can adapt to and participate in change."* (Respondent #7)
>
> *"Leaders **invite cutting-edge experts** to give academic staff adequate **training**, so that staff are familiar with the **latest academic developments**. At the same time, leaders focus on the personal development of academic staff, providing them with **personalised guidance** and **emotional support**. Leaders provide academic staff with **resources** and **research funding**. Teamwork activities help them share with each other and learn new skills."* (Respondent #10)
>
> *"Leaders build **networking support** for them and ensure academic staff do not feel emotionally isolated."* (Respondent #14)

On incentives, as a key factor in managing resistance, Respondents 20 and 14 commented thus:

*"There are a variety of **honour scholars** in the university. Take Dragon River Scholars for an example. It is a **recognition** of the status of scholars. Meanwhile, it is a kind of **incentive** for academic staff."* (Respondent #20)

*"The university provides academic staff with various **incentives**, such as **promotion opportunities and bonuses**, to stimulate them and encourage them to proactively participate in the change process."* (Respondent #14).

Finally, comfort was also mentioned as a factor:

*"Change **costs** academic staff a lot of money. If academic staff are in their comfort zone and are **psychologically comfortable** with the status quo, they don't want to change."* (Respondent #4)

Natural resistance and comfort with old practice are some of the reasons why some academic staff resist change. According to Kotter (2020), to lead a successful change, it is important to motivate, communicate, and support employees during the change process. To overcome resistance to change, leaders can communicate with staff and help them understand the change needed, the reasons, and the benefits. Training and support are important for staff during change, improving academic staff skills so they can adapt to the change. Personalised guidance, funding, and networking support help staff feel less isolated and more encouraged to participate in the change. As Cenkci and Bircan (2024) point out, in higher education, authentic leadership positively reduce employee workplace loneliness with the training and support provided. Incentives such as honour titles, promotion opportunities and bonuses could stimulate a positive attitude of staff to engage in the change.

5.3.12 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Research Capacity

Research capacity similarly appeared as the outcome of effective leadership. Respondents consistently associated stronger research performance with mentoring, collaboration, resources and support, funding, incentives and teamwork.

On teamwork, respondents commented thus:

*"The university encourages **teamwork**. Firstly, we have recruited a number of outstanding professors and PhD talents who can bring in big projects. The projects are divided into smaller directions through teamwork. It is possible for fresh researchers to **access** the projects and **be mentored**. Stronger **individual research skills are developed** via teamwork."* (Respondent #11)

*"The spirit of **teamwork**, interdisciplinary research and knowledge sharing are encouraged."* (Respondent #1)

The importance of resources and support was underlined thus:

*"We **introduce** some famous **scholars** and leading **experts** to the campus, who deliver the staff cutting-edge information."* (Respondent #20)

*"The university provides various research projects with **financial support** to encourage teachers to publish papers in quality journals at home and abroad."* (Respondent #16)

Furthermore, Respondents 16, 13 and 20 underlined the importance of incentives, while Respondents 20 and 16 underlined the importance of collaboration:

*"The university provides **material incentives** to teachers with significant research achievements."* (Respondent #16)

*"The university grants title **promotions and incentive** payments to teachers with outstanding research achievements."* (Respondent #13)

*"The university **stimulates the enthusiasm** of researchers. Establishing a better **research evaluation system** is always on the way."* (Respondent #20)

On collaborations:

*"It is very important to strengthen the **cooperation between industry, academia and research**. We are establishing the **university-government and university-enterprise co-operation**. We **build platforms** for teachers to have **academic exchanges** in multiple fields."* (Respondent #20)

*"The university encourages **interdisciplinary research** and **collaboration among teachers**. Teachers are sent to prestigious research institutes domestically or abroad to further their studies as **visiting scholars**."* (Respondent #16)

5.3.13 Analytical Discussion

Leaders build research capacity via teamwork, resource support, incentives and established collaborations. Teamwork improves individual research skills and encourages interdisciplinary research and knowledge sharing. With resource and financial support, academic staff can deliver cutting-edge research that could be disseminated in academic and professional journals. Incentives stimulate researcher enthusiasm. University-government and university-enterprise co-operation is important for academic staff, providing more opportunities and platforms for academic staff to expand their research networks and publication output. Soares and Lopes (2020), Ahmed (2024), and Almutairi et al. (2025) confirmed the positive relationship between authentic leadership and academic performance in higher education. The visual representation in Theme 2 is shown in Figure 5.4.



Figure 5.9 Visual Representation in Theme 2

5.4 Theme 3: Institutional Strategy, Internationalisation and Competitiveness

(Synthesising Q6 and Q13–Q16)

5.4.1 Theme Introduction

This higher-order theme demonstrates how respondents perceived universities responding strategically to increasing global competition.

5.4.2 Higher-Order Framework



Figure 5.10 Higher-Order Framework in Theme 3

5.4.3 Major Second-Order Codes

- International student recruitment
- Global partnerships
- Reputation
- Rankings
- Strategic planning
- External collaboration
- Future challenges

Table 5.3 Themes and Representative Codes in Theme 3

Themes	Representative Codes
International Student Recruitment	publicity, service & support, collaborations, exchange
University Ranking	rankings, support
Institutional Reputation	reputation
Global Competitiveness	exchange, future challenges
Strategic Sustainability	strategic planning

5.4.4 Interpretation

Respondents consistently viewed internationalisation as considerably broader than student recruitment. Instead, internationalisation represented institutional visibility achieved through collaborations, exchanges, international conferences,

scholarships and academic reputation. These institutional capabilities subsequently influenced competitiveness and ranking performance.

5.4.5 Integrated Quotation Analysis: International Student Recruitment

Core aspects emphasised in this regard included publicity, discipline characteristics, service and support, collaboration, and exchanges.

Responding on publicity, Participant 10 commented thus:

> *"Attracting international students is core to increasing the international visibility of the university. We rely on external* ***publicity****; for example, we participate in some* ***international education exhibitions*** *every year to increase the international visibility."* (Respondent #10)

The characteristics of the discipline is another aspect that plays a role in international student recruitment, as noted by Respondent 10:

> *"We have our own* ***discipline characteristics*** *to attract international students. Taking Chinese Medicine University as an example. If the international students from our university improve the local medical standards and better serve their countries."* (Respondent #10)

Respondents also emphasised the importance of service and support:

> *"We provide high-quality* ***services*** *for international students, offering a diverse range of* ***courses and language services*** *to meet the needs of students from different countries and regions.* ***Good accommodation*** *and* ***medical insurance*** *are provided."* (Respondent #10)
>
> *"We also provide* ***flexible enrolment policies****, such as* ***credit transfer****."* (Respondent #1)
>
> *"****Scholarships and subsidies*** *are offered to international students. Outstanding international students can apply for Fujian Provincial Government Scholarship in our university."* (Respondent #15)

Respondents 14 and 1 emphasised the aspects of collaborations and exchanges respectively:

*"Currently we are also establishing **collaborations with overseas universities**, such as with British universities. Of course, we will continue to expand the international influence and co-operate with more overseas institutions."* (Respondent #14)

*"We hope more overseas students will know our school. We encourage teachers to participate in **international academic conferences**, and we encourage students to participate in **exchange projects**, which promotes academic cooperation as well as **cross-cultural exchanges**."* (Respondent #1)

5.4.6 Analytical Discussion



Figure 5.11 Visual Representation in Theme 3

Universities can increase visibility via external publicity to attract international students. In their study, Oladipo and Sugandi (2022) noted that university collaboration, English-taught programmes, digital channels, and student advocacy are the key international student recruitment strategies. More international students would be motivated to enrol when they are convinced that universities offer high-quality services and support, such as language services, good accommodation, medical insurance, flexible enrolment policies, credit transfer scholarships and subsidies. The findings from this current study support prior literature. For example, Sakız and Jencius (2024) recommended that HEIs provide special support and services for international students, as international students are likely to experience various stresses arising from language barriers, cultural conflict, and social isolation. On their part, Naidoo et al. (2022) indicate that HEIs enhance their competitiveness by improving university rankings, collaborations and the launch of innovative programmes. Collaborations with overseas institutions and cross-cultural exchanges also make universities more appealing for international students to study at.

5.5 Theme 4: Sustainability and Social Responsibility

(Synthesising Q5)

5.5.1 Theme Introduction

In discussing environmental practices, respondents conceptualised sustainability as institutional culture. Empirically, sustainability was perceived not as a standalone initiative but as an integrated approach encompassing awareness, behaviour, campus practices, research and institutional commitment.

5.5.2 Higher-Order Coding



Figure 5.12 Higher-Order Coding in Theme 4

5.5.3 Second-Order Thematic Hierarchy

Second-Order Theme: Sustainability and Social Responsibility

Table 5.4 First-Order Themes and Representative Codes in Theme 4

First-Order Themes	Representative Codes
Energy Saving	Energy-saving, Emission reduction, Water conservation, Solar energy, Rainwater collection
Recycling	Textbooks reused, Paperless office, Waste recycling
Sustainability Awareness	Campus activities, Low-carbon awareness, Integration into curriculum, training
Research & Project	Student projects, Teacher research on green low-carbon

Campus Construction	Plant cover, Environmentally friendly materials, Energy-efficient system

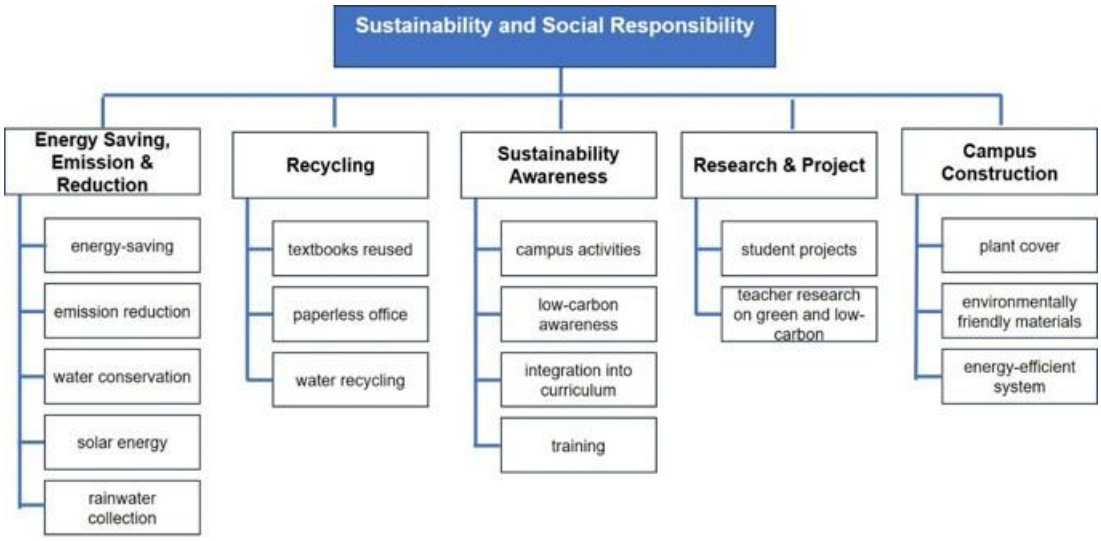


Figure 5.13 Theme 4 Core Features and Representative Codes

5.5.4 Five Interrelated Dimensions

Five interrelated dimensions emerged from the analysis:

- Sustainability awareness
- Energy conservation
- Recycling
- Green research and projects
- Sustainable campus construction

The respondents described a closely interwoven dynamic when explaining these five aspects. Respondents repeatedly linked awareness campaigns with behavioural change, and behavioural change encouraged environmentally responsible campus practices. Institutional investment then reinforced sustainable behaviour through green infrastructure.

5.5.5 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Energy-Saving, Emission and Reduction

A core aspect emphasised in respondents' comments relates to energy-saving and emission reduction:

*"The **textbooks** of older students can be **reused** by new students. Now we have conducted **innovative electronic file management** in the office. **A paperless office also reduces** office supplies consumption."* (Respondent #15)

*"The campus has implemented a policy to **conserve electricity and water**. During **Earth Hour**, **lights** are all **switched off** on campus in March every year. The air-conditioners and lights in buildings are switched off promptly after use."* (Respondent #4)

*"We also encourage all to choose **public transport** for travelling, and **save** the **power and food**."* (Respondent #7)

*"The school promotes **energy-saving and emission reduction** measures, such as the **use of rainwater collection systems**, making full use of **solar energy**."* (Respondent #14).

Typical corrective measures that respondents mentioned include universities encouraging textbook reuse, a paperless office approach, switching off lights, using public transport, and commencing rainwater collection systems as well as using solar energy to save energy and reduce emissions.

5.5.6 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Recycling

When discussing Recycling, respondents emphasised that universities embrace a more committed approach to recycling on campus. The importance of a recycling focus is communicated, and there is a committed effort to implement a recycling culture.

*"We pay attention to reducing waste, and we promote waste **recycling** on campus."* (Respondent #7)

In the campus, recycling is implemented via a multi-pronged approach that combines clear policies, infrastructure improvement, and community engagement to reduce waste and increase diversion rate. Universities make it more accessible for students to do proper recycling. They are creating systems for various materials, including food waste, cardboard and paper, glass, soft plastics, and electronic waste.

5.5.7 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Sustainability Awareness

The responses from the participants suggested a strong emphasis on sustainability Awareness:

> *"My university carries out **various campus activities** to strengthen teachers' and students' **awareness of low-carbon, green and environmentally sustainable development**, and to advocate for students to save water and electricity. For example, **each student is informed** that there are certain targets for how much electricity and water they can use in each term, and they have to pay if they exceed them. The canteen reminds students to **save food** via **a publicity slogan: 'Please save the food.'"*** (Respondent #15)
>
> *"We **integrate** the green and sustainable development concepts into our **personnel training program, curricula, lectures**, as well as in the **habits** of our students in their daily lives. For example, the **bulletin board** is always **pasted** with pictures of the green earth. Every semester, we raise teachers' and students' awareness of the importance of sustainable development."* (Respondent #4)
>
> *"**Slogans** such as 'Please switch off the lights', 'Please take the rubbish away' and 'Please save food' are posted in public places to remind teachers and students to save energy, reduce emissions and protect the environment."* (Respondent #7)

The need for sustainability awareness to be strongly emphasised in various campus activities was underlined. The green and sustainable development concepts can be integrated into personnel training programs, curricula, and lectures. Promotional campaigns can be posted on campus to remind students and tutors of the importance of sustainability behaviour.

5.5.7 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Research and Project

Equally mentioned was the aspect of Research and Project:

> *"The university strongly encourages **students** to participate in green, low-carbon **projects**, and encourages **teachers** to participate in green and low-*

*carbon **research**, which contributes to the green development of the local community and society."* (Respondent #17)

As underlined by respondents, universities would need to make more efforts to encourage students and tutors to participate in sustainability research projects to contribute to building a campus community committed to sustainability awareness.

5.5.8 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Campus Construction

Campus Construction was also emphasised in discussions of keeping the campus greener and sustainable:

*"The university has invested a lot of money in a green campus, such as the **plant cover, flowers and trees**."* (Respondent #17)

*"We use **environmentally friendly construction materials** in the new laboratory building."* (Respondent #14)

*"**Energy-efficient lighting systems** and **water-saving equipment** are used in all buildings to reduce the environmental impact of energy consumption."* (Respondent #7)

As noted by respondents, universities have invested reasonably in campus construction to make the campus green and sustainable, such as using environmentally friendly construction materials and energy-efficient systems and equipment.

5.5.9 Representative Quotation

When responding, Participant 4 communicates the view that a broad focus is taken in ensuring sustainability orientation:

"We integrate sustainable development concepts into curricula, lectures and daily habits." (Respondent #4)

Respondent 4's comment demonstrates sustainability extending beyond infrastructure into educational philosophy.

5.5.10 Visual Representation of Theme Interactions

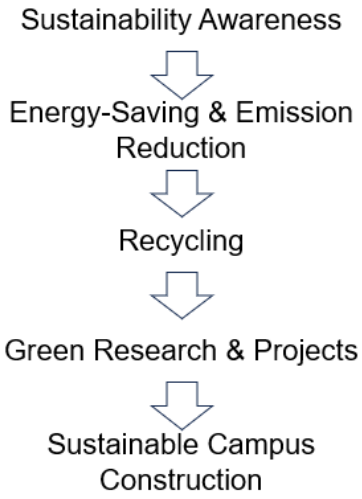


Figure 5.14 Theme Interactions in Theme 4

5.5.11 Analytical Discussion



Figure 5.15 Visual Representation in Theme 4

As Figure 5.7 shows, sustainability awareness is important to make the campus greener and more sustainable. Management innovation, stakeholder training, openness, and support networks are involved in sustainable development in HEIs (Sanchez-Carrillo, Cadarso, and Tobarra, 2021). As pointed out by Cadarso and Tobarra (2021), sustainability implementation in higher education benefits not only the HEIs but also society and the community. Human-centric attributes rather than the traditional focus on resources and energy is emphasised in the concept of sustainability (Sonetti et al., 2019). Universities ensure sustainability awareness through several options: integrating the concept of sustainable development into personnel training programs, curricula, lectures, and campus slogans. Energy-saving, emission reduction, recycling, and green research and projects are encouraged. Furthermore, universities use environmentally friendly construction materials and energy-efficient systems to reduce the carbon footprint of buildings. The integration of sustainability

concepts across institutional domains suggests that respondents perceived sustainability as a core institutional value rather than an ancillary environmental initiative. These findings are consistent with the research by Franco et al. (2018). They recommend that sustainability implementation in HEIs can be strategically integrated into policy, curriculum and practice.

5.6 Theme 5: Institutional Resilience and Strategic Resource Prioritisation

(Synthesising Q17 with all preceding themes)

5.6.1 Theme Introduction

The final interview question provides the highest-order abstraction of the qualitative findings. Institutional resilience emerged as the product of integrating all preceding themes rather than a standalone construct. When asked about how universities in China are investing and prioritising their resources to ensure a sustainable and enriching learning experience for students and staff, respondents provided responses that synthesised the key themes from the entire interview.

5.6.2 Second-Order Thematic Hierarchy

Second-Order Theme: Institutional Resilience and Strategic Resource Prioritisation

Table 5.5 First-Order Themes and Representative Codes in Theme 5

First-Order Themes	Representative Codes
Learning Resources & Facilities	Integration and sharing of resources, Learning environment, Facilities & equipment, Digital platforms
Campus Culture	Cultivate moral character, culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, positive and inclusive learning atmosphere
Inspiring Leadership	Student- and tutor-oriented, Sense of achievement, Sense of identity
Trust	Open and fair mechanism, Transparent resource allocation



Figure 5.16 Theme 5 Core Features and Representative Codes

5.6.3 Analytical Interpretation

One key insight consistently underlined by respondents is that resilient universities do not rely upon isolated initiatives. Rather, resilience is achieved through strategic investment in educational quality, leadership capability, research excellence, sustainability and international competitiveness. Institutional resilience therefore emerges as a dynamic organisational capability, underpinned by effective leadership and continuous investment in people, knowledge and infrastructure.

5.6.4 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Learning Resources and Facilities

On the point of Learning Resources and Facilities, many respondents indicated that universities need to ensure a better plan in distributing limited resources:

> *"Since the resources are limited, we can consider **integration and sharing of the resources** between colleges."* (Respondent #13)
>
> *"The university provides students with an excellent **learning environment**, high-quality campus **facilities** and teaching **equipment**, and makes full use of **digital platforms and resources** to improve their learning experience."* (Respondent #16)

The university should ensure that students are provided with better learning environments, facilities, equipment and digital platforms.

5.6.5 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Campus Culture

Responding regarding Campus Culture, most respondents emphasised the need to invest in a campus culture of innovation and entrepreneurship to create a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere for students:

> *"For example, our university's motto is 'Learning from literature, cultivating moral character'. The motto is taken from the Analects of Confucius, which says, 'A gentleman learns from the literature, and is courteous', and from the University, which says, 'Cultivate oneself, unify one's family, rule the country, and pacify the world', and 'Ke Ming De', and so on. When a teacher's sense of value is reflected, student learning experience will be improved."* (Respondent #2)
>
> *"The university promotes a **campus culture of innovation and entrepreneurship**, which encourages students to carry out innovative and entrepreneurial projects with the help of mentors during their school years."* (Respondent #17)
>
> *"We create a **positive and inclusive learning atmosphere** for students to be self-motivated and lifelong learners."* (Respondent #12)

Thus, participating universities recognise the need to ensure a campus culture that gives due attention to cultural values as well as innovation and an entrepreneurship mindset.

5.6.6 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Inspiring Leadership

Inspiring leadership also featured as a core resilience factor considered by participating universities. The respondents also emphasised the importance of an inspiring leader:

> *"Colleges and universities are to be **teacher-oriented, student-oriented**. Then the sense of acquisition of teachers is very important. From the students' perspective, through professional education and extracurricular second classrooms, we provide students with a **sense of achievement**."* (Respondent #14)
>
> *"First of all, we should promote **student-centred and tutor-centred** teaching. We help students establish a **sense of identity**. Emphasis should be placed on **development** and the **cultivation of students' abilities,** such as problem-solving as well as innovative thinking."* (Respondent #15)

Many respondents emphasised that the university should be more Student- and Tutor-oriented so that, over time, this will trigger a closer sense of identity on their part towards the university.

5.6.7 Integrated Quotation Analysis: Trust

The need for more to be done in the area of trust was emphasised:

> *"Only an **open and fair mechanism** will ultimately make it possible for our resources to be truly allocated to where they are most needed, to staff and students."* (Respondent #7)

Several respondents emphasised the need for an open and fair approach to ensure that limited resources are fairly allocated to staff and students.

> *"Without the **openness** and **transparency**, we risk creating a system where resources don't flow to where they are most needed. "* (Respondent #2)
>
> *"When resource allocation is arbitrary or **unfair**, it breeds resentment and undermines the sense of community. For students, it might mean questioning whether they have the same opportunities as their peers. For staff, it can feel like their work isn't valued or that they have to compete against colleagues in an unspoken battle for support. "* (Respondent #10)

5.6.8 Visual Representation of Theme Interactions

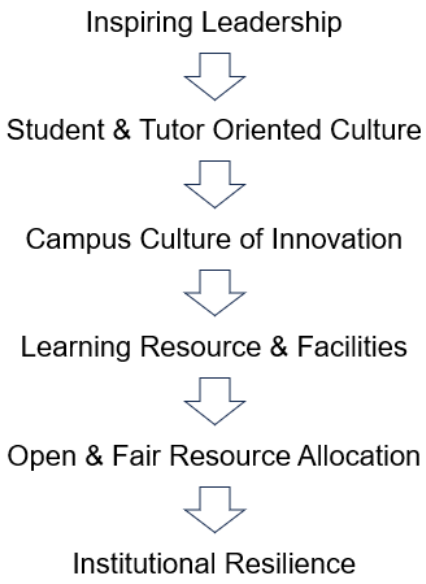


Figure 5.17 Theme Interactions in Theme 5



Figure 5.18 Visual Representation in Theme 5

5.6.9 Summary of Key Factors

Figure 5.18 depicts six key factors with some levels of interactions between them:

- Student and Tutor Orientation: The need for the university to be more Student and Tutor Oriented was emphasised, with inspiring leadership playing a critical role in making staff and students develop a closer sense of identity towards the university.
- Learning Environment: The university should seek to provide students with better learning environments by investing in facilities, equipment and digital platforms that aid their development.
- Campus Culture: Moral character cultivation, campus culture of innovation and entrepreneurship that contributes to a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere for students should be embraced.
- Resource Allocation: Open and fair mechanisms for the allocation of resources are required to enrich student and tutor experiences.

5.6.10 Higher-Order Integration

The synthesis of Q17 with all preceding themes reveals that institutional resilience is not a discrete outcome but emerges from the integration of:

- Leadership capability (Theme 2)
- Teaching excellence (Theme 1)
- Research capacity (Theme 2)
- International competitiveness (Theme 3)
- Sustainability (Theme 4)

These components are mutually reinforcing. Effective leadership enables teaching excellence and research capacity. Teaching excellence attracts international students and enhances reputation. Research capacity contributes to sustainability and global competitiveness. Internationalisation brings resources that support teaching and research. Sustainability ensures long-term institutional viability. Taken together, these integrated capabilities produce institutional resilience.



Figure 5.19 Higher-Order Integration in Themes

5.6.11 Analytical Discussion

The highest-order interpretation emerging from this analysis is that respondents perceived institutional resilience as a dynamic capability requiring continuous strategic investment across multiple domains. Rather than viewing resilience as the ability to withstand external shocks, respondents conceptualised resilience as the capacity to adapt, innovate, and grow through deliberate resource prioritisation and the strategic integration of teaching, research, leadership, sustainability, and international engagement.

This conceptualisation suggests that universities in China are increasingly adopting a holistic approach to institutional development, recognising that no

single initiative -- whether in teaching quality, research capacity or sustainability -- can independently ensure long-term viability. Instead, resilience emerges from the synergistic interaction of these institutional capabilities, underpinned by effective leadership and transparent, fair resource allocation. Collating the findings, the relationships in the themes are shown in Figure 5.20.


Leadership and Organisational Development
Authenticity
Trust
Staff Engagement
Successful Change
Research Capacity
Student Learning, Teaching and Graduate Employability
Teaching Quality
Student Engagement
Academic Integrity
Professional Skills
Graduate Employability
Institutional Strategy, International and Competitiveness
Internationalisation
Institutional Reputation
University Ranking
Global Competitiveness
Strategic Sustainability
Sustainability and Social Responsibility
Sustainability Awareness
Energy-saving & Emission Reduction
Recycling
Green Research & Projects
Sustainable Campus
Institutional Resilience and Strategic Resource Prioritisation
Inspiring Leadership
Student& Tutor Oriented Culture
Campus Culture of Innovation
Learning Resources & Facilities
Open & Fair Resource Allocation
Institutional Resilience

Figure 5.20 the Relationships in the Themes

Source: Author

Chapter Six Quantitative Data Analysis

6.1 Introduction

As a reminder, three core hypotheses were examined in the quantitative part of this research, namely:

Hypothesis 1: Teaching has a major influence on student satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: The acquisition of soft skills has a major influence on student satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Academic integrity influences student satisfaction.

This chapter explains the analytical approach and the findings from the quantitative tool of this research. Firstly, the data cleaning process is explained. Secondly, the descriptive evidence of the data is presented. Statistical evidence documenting reliability and validity of data are also presented, keeping in mind the six core themes explored in this study: teaching, skills development, support resources, feedback, social environment and integrity. Finally, the regression results for examining the conceptualised relationships are presented.

6.2 Data Cleaning

713 students responded to the online survey. As stated in the guidelines for this research, only Chinese full-time students aged 25 years and below and who were undergraduate students could participate in this study. Preliminary screening of the received questionnaires revealed that some participants did not meet the age requirement, while others were postgraduate students. It was also found that some participants were not full-time students, and some were not of Chinese nationality. All participants who did not meet the specified criteria for participation in this study were excluded, and the final sample size for data analysis is n=577.

6.3 Demographics of the Data

The first step in quantitative data analysis is to take demographic statistics which provide a general understanding of the data (Greasley, 2008). 95.5% of the participants are accommodated in the university premises during the term.

Gender-wise, there was a fair balance of males (38.8%) and females (61.2%). As for the age of student, it varied from 18 to 23. Only full-time and undergraduate students of Chinese origin participated in this study.

6.4 Theme 1 Analysis -- Teaching

6.4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics (Mean, Median and Standard Deviation) for the sample groups are presented next.

Table 6.1 Descriptive Statistics of Teaching

Statistics (N=577)

	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Q1 Academic staff are approachable	**5.93**	**6.00**	**1.167**	**-1.225**	**1.818**
Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	**5.95**	**6.00**	**1.143**	**-1.241**	**1.693**
Q3 Academic staff inspire me	**5.49**	**6.00**	**1.341**	**-0.855**	**0.616**
Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	**5.28**	**5.00**	**1.364**	**-0.524**	**-0.203**
Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	**5.76**	**6.00**	**1.231**	**-1.015**	**0.982**
Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	**5.81**	**6.00**	**1.174**	**-1.042**	**1.186**
Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	**5.65**	**6.00**	**1.308**	**-1.033**	**1.043**
Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	**5.77**	**6.00**	**1.146**	**-0.877**	**0.744**
Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	**5.45**	**6.00**	**1.360**	**-0.786**	**0.288**
Q10 Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures	**5.02**	**5.00**	**1.647**	**-0.670**	**-0.242**
Q11 Academic staff delivery classes that challenge me	**4.16**	**4.0000**	**1.90575**	**-0.067**	**-1.142**
Q12 Academic staff provide guidance on how to use AI	**5.21**	**5.00**	**1.417**	**-0.691**	**0.160**
Q13 Overall, satisfied with learning experience	**5.37**	**6.00**	**1.357**	**-0.841**	**0.642**

6.4.2 Reliability

According to methodological guideline for confirming internal consistency of a factor (Field, 2018), values of 0.6-0.7 indicate an acceptable level of reliability, and 0.8 or greater indicate a very good level of reliability.

Table 6.2 shows a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.917 for teaching, which fulfils the

benchmark for confirming internal consistency for a factor (Field, 2018).

Table 6.2 Reliability Statistics of Teaching

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.917	**13**

6.4.3 Normal Distribution Result

As Table 6.1 shows, the skewness values were both between -2 to +2, indicating the data is normally distributed (George and Mallery, 2024). Also, the kurtosis values are satisfactory.

6.4.4 Correlation

According to Field (2018), Pearson's test is considered the most suitable method for testing the correlation between variables. Specifically, it is used to measure whether there is a linear relationship between two variables and the degree of linear relationship. The Pearson correlation coefficient is between -1 and 1. If the Pearson correlation coefficient is a positive number and sig.< 0.05 ($p<0.05$), there is a positive correlation between variables. If the value is negative and sig.< 0.05 ($p<0.05$), there is a negative correlation between variables. And a value of 0 indicates no relationship between the two variables. As it can be seen (see Table 6.3), for theme 1 Teaching, Q3 (inspiration) has a strong correlation (0.790) with Q4 (student attention), Q7 (learning material) has a strong correlation (0.739) with Q8 (teaching method). Additionally, there are many other strong (0.7 to 0.799) and good correlations (0.6 to 0.699) between different questions (see Table 6.3).

Table 6.3 Correlations between Questions in Teaching

Variable A	Variable B	N	Sig.	Correlation Coefficient
Q1 Academic staff are approachable	Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	**577**	**0.000**	**0.731**
Q1 Academic staff are approachable	Q3 Academic staff inspire me	**577**	**0.000**	**0.717**
Q1 Academic staff are approachable	Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	**577**	**0.000**	**0.605**
Q1 Academic staff are approachable	Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	**577**	**0.000**	**0.620**

Q1 Academic staff are approachable	Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	**577**	**0.000**	**0.627**
Q1 Academic staff are approachable	Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	**577**	**0.000**	**0.554**
Q1 Academic staff are approachable	Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	**577**	**0.000**	**0.587**
Q1 Academic staff are approachable	Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	**577**	**0.000**	**0.534**
Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	Q3 Academic staff inspire me	**577**	**0.000**	**0.723**
Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	**577**	**0.000**	**0.629**
Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	**577**	**0.000**	**0.669**
Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	**577**	**0.000**	**0.662**
Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	**577**	**0.000**	**0.621**
Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	**577**	**0.000**	**0.644**
Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	**577**	**0.000**	**0.607**
Q3 Academic staff inspire me	Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	**577**	**0.000**	**0.790**
Q3 Academic staff inspire me	Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	**577**	**0.000**	**0.690**
Q3 Academic staff inspire me	Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	**577**	**0.000**	**0.679**
Q3 Academic staff inspire me	Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	**577**	**0.000**	**0.651**
Q3 Academic staff inspire me	Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	**577**	**0.000**	**0.686**
Q3 Academic staff inspire me	Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	**577**	**0.000**	**0.664**
Q3 Academic staff inspire me	Q10 Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures	**577**	**0.000**	**0.577**
Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	**577**	**0.000**	**0.712**
Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	**577**	**0.000**	**0.669**
Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	**577**	**0.000**	**0.640**

Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	**577**	**0.000**	**0.655**
Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	**577**	**0.000**	**0.628**
Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	Q10 Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures	**577**	**0.000**	**0.604**
Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	**577**	**0.000**	**0.710**
Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	**577**	**0.000**	**0.626**
Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	**577**	**0.000**	**0.688**
Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	**577**	**0.000**	**0.624**
Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	**577**	**0.000**	**0.660**
Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	**577**	**0.000**	**0.724**
Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	**577**	**0.000**	**0.643**
Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	**577**	**0.000**	**0.739**
Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	**577**	**0.000**	**0.735**
Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	Q10 Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures	**577**	**0.000**	**0.574**
Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	**577**	**0.000**	**0.733**
Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	Q10 Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures	**577**	**0.000**	**0.571**
Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	Q10 Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures	**577**	**0.000**	**0.674**
Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	Q12 Academic staff provide guidance on how to use AI	**577**	**0.000**	**0.520**
Q10 Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures	Q12 Academic staff provide guidance on how to use AI	**577**	**0.000**	**0.522**

6.4.5 Regression Result of Teaching

Field (2018) points out that regression analysis is a statistical technique used to estimate the causal relationship between variables and multiple linear

regression analysis is used to predict result values based on several predictive factor. The regression results revealed an R squared value of 0.613 and a significant F value of 74.585 which indicated it was a significant model of prediction.

Table 6.4 Regression Results of Teaching

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	-0.144	0.234		-0.614	0.539	-0.603	0.316
Q1 Academic staff are approachable	0.107	0.050	0.092	2.151	0.032	0.009	0.204
Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	0.164	0.054	0.138	3.056	0.002	0.058	0.269
Q3 Academic staff inspire me	0.062	0.053	0.061	1.159	0.247	-0.043	0.166
Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	0.156	0.048	0.157	3.222	0.001	0.061	0.251
Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	-0.077	0.049	-0.070	-1.565	0.118	-0.174	0.020
Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	0.187	0.052	0.162	3.609	0.000	0.085	0.288
Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	0.098	0.046	0.094	2.107	0.036	0.007	0.189
Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	-0.114	0.057	-0.096	-1.998	0.046	-0.226	-0.002
Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	0.140	0.048	0.140	2.918	0.004	0.046	0.234
Q10 Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures	0.141	0.032	0.172	4.360	0.000	0.078	0.205
Q11 Academic staff delivery classes that challenge me	0.008	0.020	0.011	0.386	0.700	-0.031	0.046
Q12 Academic staff provide guidance on how to use AI	0.136	0.031	0.142	4.323	0.000	0.074	0.198

a. Dependent Variable: Overall, satisfied with learning experience

Based on Table 6.4, the five most significant indicators of teaching and learning are:

- Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures (t=4.360)
- Academic staff provide guidance on how to use AI (t=4.323)
- Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory (t=3.609)
- Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention (t=3.222)
- Academic staff are knowledgeable (t=3.222)

6.4.6 Summary of Findings for Theme 1

For Chinese students, the most important variable for teaching and learning is inviting practitioners as guest lecturers. The second variable the students value is the AI guidance academic staff provided, while the third most valued variable is academic staff utilise real life materials (real world examples) to explain theory. Thus, Chinese students are very practical oriented. They prefer practical knowledge over theoretical knowledge.

6.5 Theme 2 Analysis – Skills Development

6.5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 6.5 presents the descriptive evidence for Skills Development.

Table 6.5 Descriptive Statistics of Skills Development

Statistics (N=577)

	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Q14 Confident in communicating	**4.74**	**5.00**	**1.492**	**-0.373**	**-0.288**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	**4.96**	**5.00**	**1.341**	**-0.362**	**-0.098**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	**4.86**	**5.00**	**1.407**	**-0.339**	**-0.164**
Q17 I have matured personally, academically and/or professionally	**4.84**	**5.0000**	**1.71325**	**-0.436**	**-0.813**
Q18 Improved my EI	**5.20**	**5.00**	**1.259**	**-0.562**	**0.424**
Q19 I am very self-confident	**4.67**	**5.00**	**1.406**	**-0.175**	**-0.287**
Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	**5.18**	**5.00**	**1.212**	**-0.541**	**0.435**
Q21 I am disciplined with my time	**5.09**	**5.00**	**1.343**	**-0.493**	**-0.033**
Q22 I am confident in analysing data	**4.73**	**5.00**	**1.278**	**-0.077**	**-0.239**
Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**4.96**	**5.00**	**1.189**	**-0.166**	**-0.198**
Q24 I am confident in using technology	**4.83**	**5.00**	**1.297**	**-0.314**	**-0.118**
Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	**4.36**	**4.00**	**1.671**	**-0.295**	**-0.678**

Q26 Overall, satisfied with skills acquired	**5.01**	**5.00**	**1.358**	**-0.470**	**0.010**

6.5.2 Reliability

The Cronbach's Alpha result for skills development is 0.931 (see Table 6.6), which indicates satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 6.6 Reliability Statistics of Skills Development

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.931	**13**

6.5.3 Normal Distribution Result

Table 6.5 confirmed satisfactory skewness and kurtosis values, which implies normal distribution for Skills Development.

6.5.4 Correlation

As Table 6.7 shows, satisfactory correlation results were achieved for Skills Development. Q15 (teamworking) has a very strong correlation (0.8) with Q16 (creative solution), Q22 (data analysis) has a strong correlation (0.772) with Q23 (critical thinking).

Table 6.7 Correlations between Questions in Skills Development

Variable A	Variable B	N	Sig.	Correlation Coefficient
Q14 Confident in communicating	Q15 Very good at teamwork	**577**	**0.000**	**0.715**
Q14 Confident in communicating	Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	**577**	**0.000**	**0.718**
Q14 Confident in communicating	Q18 Improved my EI	**577**	**0.000**	**0.606**
Q14 Confident in communicating	Q19 I am very self-confident	**577**	**0.000**	**0.615**
Q14 Confident in communicating	Q19 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	**577**	**0.000**	**0.537**
Q14 Confident in communicating	Q20 I am confident in analysing data	**577**	**0.000**	**0.552**
Q14 Confident in communicating	Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**577**	**0.000**	**0.538**
Q14 Confident in communicating	Q24 I am confident in using technology	**577**	**0.000**	**0.536**
Q14 Confident in communicating	Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	**577**	**0.000**	**0.542**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	**577**	**0.000**	**0.800**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	Q17 Improved my EI	**577**	**0.000**	**0.607**

Q15 Very good at teamwork	Q18 I am very self-confident	**577**	**0.000**	**0.673**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	**577**	**0.000**	**0.600**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	Q21 I am disciplined with my time	**577**	**0.000**	**0.533**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	Q22 I am confident in analysing data	**577**	**0.000**	**0.623**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**577**	**0.000**	**0.618**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	Q24 I am confident in using technology	**577**	**0.000**	**0.655**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	**577**	**0.000**	**0.504**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	Q18 Improved my EI	**577**	**0.000**	**0.610**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	Q19 I am very self-confident	**577**	**0.000**	**0.674**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	**577**	**0.000**	**0.574**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	Q21 I am disciplined with my time	**577**	**0.000**	**0.506**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	Q22 I am confident in analysing data	**577**	**0.000**	**0.631**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**577**	**0.000**	**0.636**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	Q24 I am confident in using technology	**577**	**0.000**	**0.643**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	**577**	**0.000**	**0.545**
Q18 Improved my EI	Q19 I am very self-confident	**577**	**0.000**	**0.607**
Q18 Improved my EI	Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	**577**	**0.000**	**0.621**
Q18 Improved my EI	Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**577**	**0.000**	**0.568**
Q18 Improved my EI	Q24 I am confident in using technology	**577**	**0.000**	**0.543**
Q19 I am very self-confident	Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	**577**	**0.000**	**0.630**
Q19 I am very self-confident	Q21 I am disciplined with my time	**577**	**0.000**	**0.523**
Q19 I am very self-confident	Q22 I am confident in analysing data	**577**	**0.000**	**0.641**
Q19 I am very self-confident	Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**577**	**0.000**	**0.663**
Q19 I am very self-confident	Q24 I am confident in using technology	**577**	**0.000**	**0.618**

Q19 I am very self-confident	Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	**577**	**0.000**	**0.532**
Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	Q21 I am disciplined with my time	**577**	**0.000**	**0.615**
Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	Q22 I am confident in analysing data	**577**	**0.000**	**0.623**
Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**577**	**0.000**	**0.682**
Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	Q24 I am confident in using technology	**577**	**0.000**	**0.616**
Q21 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	Q22 I am confident in analysing data	**577**	**0.000**	**0.600**
Q21 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**577**	**0.000**	**0.592**
Q21 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	Q24 I am confident in using technology	**577**	**0.000**	**0.558**
Q22 I am confident in analysing data	Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**577**	**0.000**	**0.772**
Q22 I am confident in analysing data	Q24 I am confident in using technology	**577**	**0.000**	**0.713**
Q22 I am confident in analysing data	Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	**577**	**0.000**	**0.543**
Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	Q24 I am confident in using technology	**577**	**0.000**	**0.707**
Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	**577**	**0.000**	**0.533**
Q24 I am confident in using technology	Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	**577**	**0.000**	**0.590**

6.5.5 Regression Result of Skill Development

The regression results revealed an R squared value of 0.660 but a significant F value of 91.114 which indicated a significant prediction model.

Table 6.8 Regression Results of Skills Development

	Unstandardized Coefficients		**Standardized Coefficients**			**95.0% Confidence Interval for B**	
	B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**	**t**	**Sig.**	**Lower Bound**	**Upper Bound**
(Constant)	**-0.203**	**0.179**		**-1.134**	**0.257**	**-0.554**	**0.148**
Q14 Confident in communicating	**0.126**	**0.036**	**0.139**	**3.490**	**0.001**	**0.055**	**0.197**
Q15 Very good at teamwork	**0.056**	**0.047**	**0.055**	**1.181**	**0.238**	**-0.037**	**0.148**
Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	**0.019**	**0.045**	**0.020**	**0.423**	**0.673**	**-0.069**	**0.107**

Q17 I have matured personally, academically and/or professionally	**0.087**	**0.020**	**0.110**	**4.278**	**0.000**	**0.047**	**0.127**
Q18 Improved my EI	**0.147**	**0.039**	**0.136**	**3.724**	**0.000**	**0.069**	**0.224**
Q19 I am very self confident	**0.095**	**0.038**	**0.098**	**2.480**	**0.013**	**0.020**	**0.170**
Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	**0.114**	**0.044**	**0.102**	**2.586**	**0.010**	**0.028**	**0.201**
Q21 I am disciplined with my time	**0.062**	**0.035**	**0.062**	**1.804**	**0.072**	**-0.006**	**0.130**
Q22 I am confident in analysing data	**0.031**	**0.047**	**0.030**	**0.675**	**0.500**	**-0.060**	**0.123**
Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	**0.000**	**0.051**	**0.000**	**0.009**	**0.993**	**-0.101**	**0.102**
Q24 I am confident in using technology	**0.219**	**0.043**	**0.209**	**5.060**	**0.000**	**0.134**	**0.304**
Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	**0.114**	**0.027**	**0.140**	**4.221**	**0.000**	**0.061**	**0.167**

a. Dependent Variable: Overall, satisfied with skills acquired

The regression results revealed an R squared value of 0.660 and a significant F value of 91.114 which indicated a significant prediction model. As evident in Table 6.8, the five most significant indicators of teaching and learning are:

- I am confident in using technology (t=5.06)
- I have matured personally, academically and/or professionally (t=4.278)
- I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills (t=4.221)
- I have improved my EI (t=3.724)
- I am confident in communicating (t=3.49)

6.5.6 Summary of Findings for Theme 2

For Chinese students, the most important variable for skill development is being confident in using technology, while having matured personally, academically and professionally at university was the second most important. Third was participating in visits or undertaking internships and entrepreneurship to develop practice skills. Thus, Chinese students at university attached much

importance to participating in various activities to develop their skills. Improving own EI and communicating confidently were also considered important.

6.6 Theme 3 Analysis – Support Resources

6.6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 6.9 Descriptive Statistics of Support Resource

Statistics (N=577)

	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Q27 Ample spaces to study on campus	**5.41**	**6.00**	**1.369**	**-0.893**	**0.675**
Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	**5.45**	**6.00**	**1.323**	**-0.942**	**1.094**
Q29 Career support services for students	**5.17**	**5.00**	**1.384**	**-0.552**	**-0.042**
Q30 Mental wellbeing support services for students	**5.47**	**6.00**	**1.311**	**-0.848**	**0.753**
Q31 I have received support from peers (students)	**5.26**	**6.00**	**1.75347**	**-0.816**	**-0.407**
Q32 Regularly informed about information relating to my course	**5.43**	**6.00**	**1.245**	**-0.692**	**0.473**
Q33 Support / ADMIN staff very friendly	**5.56**	**6.00**	**1.149**	**-0.521**	**-0.104**
Q34 Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services	**5.40**	**6.00**	**1.268**	**-0.596**	**0.149**
Q35 Course has a good administrative support	**5.25**	**5.00**	**1.413**	**-0.809**	**0.511**
Q36 Overall, satisfied with support services	**5.40**	**6.00**	**1.286**	**-0.722**	**0.492**

In Table 6.9, Mean, Median and Std. Deviation showed satisfactory reliability.

6.6.2 Reliability

The Cronbach's Alpha result for support resource was 0.918, which indicated a high internal consistency (see Table 6.10).

Table 6.10 Reliability Statistics of Support Resources

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.918	**10**

6.6.3 Normal Distribution Result

As Table 6.9 shows, satisfactory skewness and kurtosis values were achieved

for Support Resources; thus, supporting normal distribution conclusion.

6.6.4 Correlation

The correlation evidence (see Table 6.11) support satisfactory conclusion. For theme 3 Support Resource, there are several strong and good correlations between different questions. The highest correlation is 0.835 -- Q27 (ample spaces) with Q28 (sufficient resources). The second highest correlation is 0.766, which is between Q33 (friendly support staff) and Q34 (feedback opportunity).

Table 6.11 Correlations between Questions in Support Resources

Variable A	Variable B	N	Sig.	Correlation Coefficient
Q27 Ample spaces to study on campus	Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	**577**	**0.000**	**0.835**
Q27 Ample spaces to study on campus	Q29 Career support services for students	**577**	**0.000**	**0.694**
Q27 Ample spaces to study on campus	Q30 Mental wellbeing support services for students	**577**	**0.000**	**0.562**
Q27 Ample spaces to study on campus	Q32 Regularly informed about information relating to my course	**577**	**0.000**	**0.597**
Q27 Ample spaces to study on campus	Q33 Support / ADMIN staff very friendly	**577**	**0.000**	**0.628**
Q27 Ample spaces to study on campus	Q34 Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services	**577**	**0.000**	**0.603**
Q27 Ample spaces to study on campus	Q35 Course has a good administrative support	**577**	**0.000**	**0.613**
Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	Q29 Career support services for students	**577**	**0.000**	**0.735**
Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	Q30 Mental wellbeing support services for students	**577**	**0.000**	**0.608**
Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	Q32 Regularly informed about information relating to my course	**577**	**0.000**	**0.616**
Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	Q33 Support / ADMIN staff very friendly	**577**	**0.000**	**0.662**
Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	Q34 Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services	**577**	**0.000**	**0.610**
Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	Q35 Course has a good administrative support	**577**	**0.000**	**0.659**

Q29 Career support services for students	Q30 Mental wellbeing support services for students	**577**	**0.000**	**0.634**
Q29 Career support services for students	Q32 Regularly informed about information relating to my course	**577**	**0.000**	**0.592**
Q29 Career support services for students	Q33 Support / ADMIN staff very friendly	**577**	**0.000**	**0.635**
Q29 Career support services for students	Q34 Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services	**577**	**0.000**	**0.652**
Q29 Career support services for students	Q35 Course has a good administrative support	**577**	**0.000**	**0.636**
Q30 Mental wellbeing support services for students	Q32 Regularly informed about information relating to my course	**577**	**0.000**	**0.570**
Q30 Mental wellbeing support services for students	Q33 Support / ADMIN staff very friendly	**577**	**0.000**	**0.601**
Q30 Mental wellbeing support services for students	Q34 Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services	**577**	**0.000**	**0.601**
Q30 Mental wellbeing support services for students	Q35 Course has a good administrative support	**577**	**0.000**	**0.516**
Q32 Regularly informed about information relating to my course	Q33 Support / ADMIN staff very friendly	**577**	**0.000**	**0.700**
Q32 Regularly informed about information relating to my course	Q34 Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services	**577**	**0.000**	**0.691**
Q32 Regularly informed about information relating to my course	Q35 Course has a good administrative support	**577**	**0.000**	**0.608**
Q33 Support / ADMIN staff very friendly	Q34 Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services	**577**	**0.000**	**0.766**
Q33 Support / ADMIN staff very friendly	Q35 Course has a good administrative support	**577**	**0.000**	**0.689**
Q34 Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services	Q35 Course has a good administrative support	**577**	**0.000**	**0.675**

6.6.5 Regression Result of Support Resources

The regression analysis captured R squared value of 0.774 and a significant F value of 215.771 which indicates a significant prediction model.

Table 6.12 Regression Results of Support Resources

	Unstandardized Coefficients		**Standardized Coefficients**			**95.0% Confidence Interval for B**	
	B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**	**t**	**Sig.**	**Lower Bound**	**Upper Bound**
(Constant)	**-0.116**	**0.144**		**-0.805**	**0.421**	**-0.398**	**0.167**
Q27 Ample spaces to	**0.127**	**0.035**	**0.135**	**3.569**	**0.000**	**0.057**	**0.196**

study on campus							
Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	**0.066**	**0.040**	**0.068**	**1.642**	**0.101**	**-0.013**	**0.145**
Q29 Career support services for students	**0.031**	**0.031**	**0.034**	**1.001**	**0.317**	**-0.030**	**0.093**
Q30 Mental wellbeing support services for students	**-0.009**	**0.028**	**-0.009**	**-0.316**	**0.752**	**-0.064**	**0.046**
RQ31 I have received support from peers (students)	**0.035**	**0.015**	**0.048**	**2.283**	**0.023**	**0.005**	**0.065**
Q32 Regularly informed about information relating to my course	**0.098**	**0.032**	**0.095**	**3.066**	**0.002**	**0.035**	**0.161**
Q33 Support / ADMIN staff very friendly	**0.134**	**0.041**	**0.120**	**3.301**	**0.001**	**0.054**	**0.213**
Q34 Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services	**0.227**	**0.036**	**0.224**	**6.339**	**0.000**	**0.157**	**0.297**
Q35 Course has a good administrative support	**0.318**	**0.028**	**0.350**	**11.186**	**0.000**	**0.262**	**0.374**

a. Dependent Variable: Q36 Overall, satisfied with support services

As Table 6.12 shows, the five most significant indicators for Support Resources are:

- Course has a good administrative support (t=11.186)
- Opportunity to provide FEEDBACK on support services (t=6.339)
- Ample spaces to study on campus (t=3.569)
- Support / ADMIN staff very friendly (t=3.301)
- Regularly informed about information relating to my course (t=3.066)

6.6.6 Summary of Findings for Theme 3

For Chinese students, the most important variable for support resource is good administrative support provided, while the second variable that students value most is opportunity to provide feedback on support services. Third most valued variable is ample spaces to study on campus. Fourthly, the students value friendly support staff. Lastly, students value the regularly information relating to the course. Thus, administrative and support staff are important resource for students. The students enjoy the amble study spaces and hope to get feedback and regular course information.

6.7 Theme 4 Analysis -- Feedback

6.7.1 Descriptive Statistics

In Table 6.13, Mean, Median and Std. Deviation indicate satisfactory reliability.

Table 6.13 Descriptive Statistics of Feedback

Statistics (N=577)

	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Q37 Academic staff use a range of assessment methods	**5.47**	**6.00**	**1.181**	**-0.650**	**0.508**
Q38 Academic staff provide clear and constructive feedback	**5.41**	**5.00**	**1.243**	**-0.644**	**0.393**
RQ39 Academic staff are available for feedback	**5.1161**	**6.0000**	**1.78206**	**-0.693**	**-0.641**
Q40 Academic staff respond quickly to any queries	**5.24**	**5.00**	**1.389**	**-0.561**	**0.010**
Q41 Academic staff write clear assessment instructions	**5.66**	**6.00**	**1.189**	**-0.835**	**0.800**
Q42 Overall, satisfied with level of feedback	**5.55**	**6.00**	**1.179**	**-0.651**	**0.276**

6.7.2 Reliability

The Cronbach's Alpha result for feedback was 0.828 (see Table 6.14) which indicates satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 6.14 Reliability Statistics of Feedback

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.828	**6**

6.7.3 Normal Distribution Result

Table 6.13 confirms satisfactory skewness and kurtosis values indicates normal distribution for the data for feedback.

6.7.4 Correlation

Table 6.15 reports satisfactory correlation coefficients for 4 Feedback. At the highest correlation level of 0.845, Q37 (assessment methods) has a very strong correlation with Q38 (clear and helpful feedback). Second highest at correlation of 0.649, Q38 (clear and helpful feedback) has a good correlation with Q40 (quick response).

Table 6.15 Correlations between Questions in Feedback

Variable A	Variable B	N	Sig.	Correlation Coefficient
Q37 Academic staff use a range of assessment methods	Q38 Academic staff provide clear and constructive feedback	**577**	**0.000**	**0.845**
Q37 Academic staff use a range of assessment methods	Q40 Academic staff respond quickly to any queries	**577**	**0.000**	**0.596**
Q37 Academic staff use a range of assessment methods	Q41 Academic staff write clear assessment instructions	**577**	**0.000**	**0.634**
Q38 Academic staff provide clear and constructive feedback	Q40 Academic staff respond quickly to any queries	**577**	**0.000**	**0.649**
Q38 Academic staff provide clear and constructive feedback	Q41 Academic staff write clear assessment instructions	**577**	**0.000**	**0.620**
Q40 Academic staff respond quickly to any queries	Q41 Academic staff write clear assessment instructions	**577**	**0.000**	**0.551**

6.7.5 Regression Result of Feedback

Satisfactory regression results were achieved for Feedback at R squared value of 0.731 and a significant F value of 309.671; thus, confirming significant prediction.

Table 6.16 Regression Results of Feedback

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	**0.288**	**0.145**		**1.986**	**0.048**	**0.003**	**0.574**

Q37 Academic staff use a range of assessment methods	**0.120**	**0.042**	**0.121**	**2.863**	**0.004**	**0.038**	**0.203**
Q38 Academic staff provide clear and constructive feedback	**0.319**	**0.041**	**0.337**	**7.714**	**0.000**	**0.238**	**0.401**
RQ39 Academic staff are available for feedback	**0.032**	**0.015**	**0.049**	**2.181**	**0.030**	**0.003**	**0.061**
Q40 Academic staff respond quickly to any queries	**0.157**	**0.025**	**0.185**	**6.244**	**0.000**	**0.108**	**0.207**
Q41 Academic staff write clear assessment instructions	**0.334**	**0.029**	**0.337**	**11.341**	**0.000**	**0.276**	**0.392**

a. Dependent Variable: Q42 Overall, satisfied with level of feedback

As evidenced in Table 6.16, the three most significant indicators of feedback are:

- Academic staff write clear assessment instructions (t=11.341)
- Academic staff provide clear and constructive feedback (t=7.714)
- Academic staff respond quickly to any queries (t=6.244)

6.7.6 Summary of Findings for Theme 4

For Chinese students, the most important variable for Feedback is that academic staff write clear assessment instruction for students. Second to that, the students desire that academic staff provide clear and helpful feedback to improve their learning. Thirdly, the students desire that academic staff quickly respond to their queries. Therefore, academic support is very important for students. The students hope to get clear, constructive feedback and quicky response from academic staff so that they can improve their learning at university.

6.8 Theme 5 Analysis – Social Environment

6.8.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 6.17 reports satisfactory mean, median and standard deviation values; thus, confirming reliability for Social Environment.

Table 6.17 Descriptive Statistics of Social Environment

Statistics (N=577)

	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Q43 I have joined a sporting club	**3.85**	**4.00**	**2.028**	**-0.022**	**-1.234**
Q44 I have joined social activity clubs/societies	**5.15**	**6.00**	**1.818**	**-0.951**	**0.026**
Q45 I have made lifelong friends	**5.06**	**5.00**	**1.510**	**-0.580**	**-0.098**
Q46 I participate in organising social events	**4.77**	**5.00**	**1.815**	**-0.538**	**-0.673**
Q47 Overall, satisfied with social activities	**5.20**	**5.00**	**1.396**	**-0.621**	**0.165**

6.8.2 Reliability

At Cronbach's Alpha result of 0.813, internal consistency is confirmed for Social Environment (see Table 6.18).

Table 6.18 Reliability Statistics of Social Environment

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.813	**5**

6.8.3 Normal Distribution Result

Table 6.17 reports satisfactory skewness and kurtosis; therefore normal distribution for Social Environment was achieved.

6.8.4 Correlation

Table 6.19 shows the correlation results for theme 5 Social Environment. Q44 (social activity participation) has a correlation with Q45 (lifelong friends) at (0.550), while Q45 (lifelong friends) has a correlation with Q46 (social events organized) at (0.503).

Table 6.19 Correlations between Questions in Social Environment

Variable A	Variable B	N	Sig.	Correlation Coefficient
Q44 I have joined social activity clubs/societies	Q45 I have made lifelong friends	**577**	**0.000**	**0.550**
Q45 I have made lifelong friends	Q46 I participate in organising social events	**577**	**0.000**	**0.503**

6.8.5 Regression Result of Social Environment

Satisfactory regression results were achieved at R squared value of 0.619 and a significant F value of 232.356 which indicates a significant prediction model.

Table 6.20 Regression Results of Social Environments

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	1.281	0.136		9.405	0.000	1.013	1.548
Q43 I have joined a sporting club	-0.034	0.020	-0.050	-1.696	0.090	-0.074	0.005
Q44 I have joined social activity clubs/societies	0.077	0.025	0.100	3.060	0.002	0.028	0.126
Q45 I have made lifelong friends	0.502	0.031	0.543	16.447	0.000	0.442	0.562
Q46 I participate in organising social events	0.234	0.025	0.304	9.488	0.000	0.185	0.282

a. Dependent Variable: Q47 Overall, satisfied with social activities

The two most significant indicators of social environment (see Table 6.20) are:

- I have made lifelong friends (t=16.447)
- I participate in organizing social events (t=9.488)

6.8.6 Summary of Findings for Theme 5

For Chinese students, the most important variable for social environment is making lifelong friends, while students think participation in organizing social events is the second most important variable. Logically, the students' value of their social event participation connects with their value that they participate in various activities to improve and develop their skills at university.

6.9 Theme 6 Analysis – Integrity

6.9.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 6.21 reports satisfactory mean, median and standard deviation values; thus, confirming reliability for integrity.

Table 6.21 Descriptive Statistics of Integrity

Statistics (N=577)

	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Q48 University provides clear guidelines on Academic Misconduct	**5.55**	**6.00**	**1.317**	**-0.871**	**0.682**
Q49 I know the penalty for Academic Misconduct	**5.58**	**6.00**	**1.339**	**-0.896**	**0.592**
Q50 Academic tutors uphold integrity in their work	**5.80**	**6.00**	**1.191**	**-0.942**	**0.801**
Q51 Classes explain student ethical responsibilities	**5.40**	**6.00**	**1.558**	**-1.063**	**0.742**
Q52 I am aware of other students plagiarising work/data	**3.46**	**4.00**	**1.862**	**0.187**	**-1.054**
Q53 I am more aware of global environmental challenges	**5.07**	**5.00**	**1.402**	**-0.437**	**-0.135**
Q54 In work, I will challenge unethical behaviour	**5.39**	**6.00**	**1.302**	**-0.607**	**0.130**
Q55 I am aware of steps University is taking to reduce its carbon footprint	**5.37**	**6.00**	**1.341**	**-0.654**	**0.142**
Q56 Overall, uni has made me more committed to integrity	**5.51**	**6.00**	**1.263**	**-0.750**	**0.509**

6.9.2 Reliability

The achieved Cronbach's Alpha for integrity was 0.812 (see Table 6.22), which indicates a satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 6.22 Reliability Statistics of Integrity

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.812	**9**

6.9.3 Normal Distribution Result

Table 6.21 reports satisfactory skewness and kurtosis values; thus, evidencing normal distribution of data.

6.9.4 Correlation

For theme 6 Integrity, it can be seen (Table 6.23) that Q49 (penalty) has a good correlation with Q50 (tutors uphold integrity). Also, Q53 (environmental awareness) has a good correlation with Q54 (unethical behaviour challenge). The correlations are 0.668 and 0.610 respectively.

Table 6.23 Correlations between Questions in Integrity

Variable A	Variable B	N	Sig.	Correlation Coefficient
Q48 University provides clear guidelines on Academic Misconduct	Q49 I know the penalty for Academic Misconduct	**577**	**0.000**	**0.597**
Q48 University provides clear guidelines on Academic Misconduct	Q50 Academic tutors uphold integrity in their work	**577**	**0.000**	**0.593**
Q49 I know the penalty for Academic Misconduct	Q50 Academic tutors uphold integrity in their work	**577**	**0.000**	**0.668**
Q49 I know the penalty for Academic Misconduct	Q55 I am aware of steps University is taking to reduce its carbon footprint	**577**	**0.000**	**0.544**
Q50 Academic tutors uphold integrity in their work	Q54 In work, I will challenge unethical behaviour	**577**	**0.000**	**0.602**
Q50 Academic tutors uphold integrity in their work	Q55 I am aware of steps University is taking to reduce its carbon footprint	**577**	**0.000**	**0.550**
Q53 I am more aware of global environmental challenges	Q54 In work, I will challenge unethical behaviour	**577**	**0.000**	**0.610**
Q53 I am more aware of global environmental challenges	Q55 I am aware of steps University is taking to reduce its carbon footprint	**577**	**0.000**	**0.535**
Q54 In work, I will challenge unethical behaviour	Q55 I am aware of steps University is taking to reduce its carbon footprint	**577**	**0.000**	**0.594**

6.9.5 Regression Result of Integrity

The regression results for Integrity had R squared value of 0.593 and a significant F value of 103.649, confirming a significant prediction model.

Table 6.24 Regression Results of Integrity

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	**0.652**	**0.214**		**3.042**	**0.002**	**0.231**	**1.073**
Q48 University provides clear guidelines on Academic Misconduct	**0.022**	**0.034**	**0.023**	**0.651**	**0.515**	**-0.045**	**0.090**
Q49 I know the penalty for Academic Misconduct	**0.007**	**0.037**	**0.008**	**0.200**	**0.842**	**-0.066**	**0.080**

Q50 Academic tutors uphold integrity in their work	**0.185**	**0.046**	**0.175**	**4.059**	**0.000**	**0.096**	**0.275**
Q51 Classes explain student ethical responsibilities	**0.026**	**0.026**	**0.033**	**1.005**	**0.315**	**-0.025**	**0.078**
Q52 I am aware of other students plagiarising work/data	**-0.015**	**0.019**	**-0.022**	**-0.781**	**0.435**	**-0.052**	**0.022**
Q53 I am more aware of global environmental challenges	**0.070**	**0.032**	**0.077**	**2.175**	**0.030**	**0.007**	**0.133**
Q54 In work, I will challenge unethical behaviour	**0.267**	**0.038**	**0.276**	**6.954**	**0.000**	**0.192**	**0.343**
Q55 I am aware of steps University is taking to reduce its carbon footprint	**0.322**	**0.035**	**0.342**	**9.194**	**0.000**	**0.253**	**0.391**

a. Dependent Variable: Q56 Overall, university has made me more committed to integrity

In Table 6.24, three most significant indicators of social environment are shown:

- I am aware of steps University is taking to reduce its carbon footprint (t=9.194)
- In work, I will challenge unethical behaviour (t=6.954)
- Academic tutors uphold integrity in their work (t=4.059)

6.9.6 Summary of Findings for Theme 6

For Chinese students, the most important variable for integrity is awareness of steps the university is taking to reduce the carbon footprint. Secondly, students will challenge unethical behaviour in their future career, while third most important variable is academic tutors uphold integrity in their work. Therefore, the lower carbon footprint steps taken by the university and academic staff integrity upheld are important values in students' view of integrity. Additionally, the integrity raised at the university will help students challenge any unethical

behaviour in their future career.

6.10 Factor of Analysis

Factor analysis implied the way that the students answered the questionnaire. The key question is ‘was the pattern of response for the factors’? In this study, KMO value of 0.967 was achieved (see Table 6.25). The KMO was greater than 0.5 and the significance level of Bartlett's spherical test was less than 0.05, which implies the data were sufficient for factor analysis.

Table 6.25 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		**0.967**
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	**21812.713**
	df	**1225**
	Sig.	**0.000**

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was carried out in this study. 50 components (variables) were included in the component analysis, and factor rotation was carried out to maximise the factor output (Field, 2018). The eigenvalue used in factor analysis helps determine the number of factors to be kept with necessary information (Field, 2018). As Figure 6.1 below shows, after the point seven, the line becomes straight. From the scree plot, at the point of eigenvalue of 1, six factors were extracted. As Table 6.26 shows, explained variance after rotation was 63.741 cumulatively. Thus, at the cumulative explained variance of 63.741, six factors were extracted for this study. In Table 6.27, there were six components which were described as teaching, skills, university support services, integrity, academic support and social respectively. In addition, the relationship between factors and correspondent items is presented in Table 6.28.

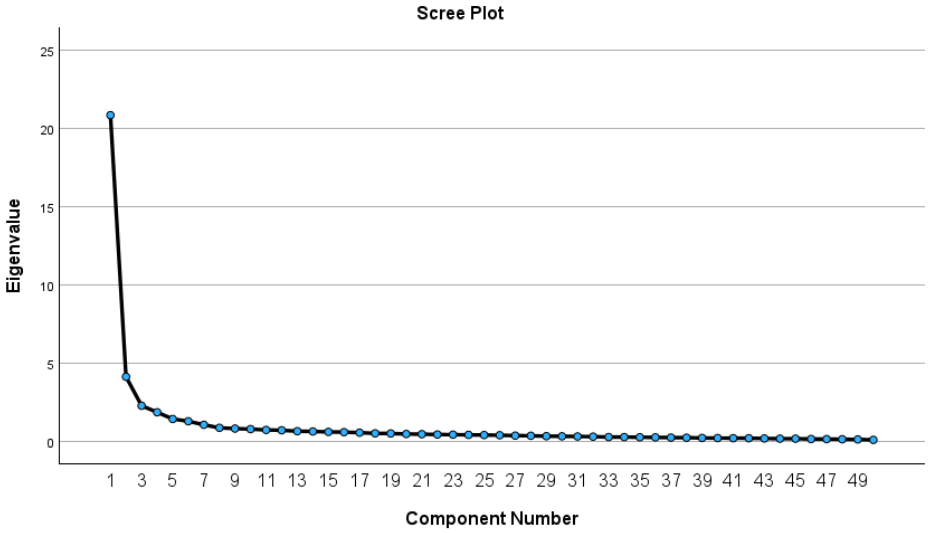


Figure 6.1 Scree Plot

Table 6.26 Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	20.837	41.673	41.673	20.837	41.673	41.673	8.766	17.531	17.531
2	4.136	8.271	49.945	4.136	8.271	49.945	7.837	15.673	33.204
3	2.288	4.576	54.520	2.288	4.576	54.520	5.052	10.105	43.309
4	1.871	3.741	58.261	1.871	3.741	58.261	4.807	9.614	52.923
5	1.442	2.884	61.145	1.442	2.884	61.145	2.990	5.980	58.903
6	1.298	2.596	63.741	1.298	2.596	63.741	2.419	4.839	63.741
7	1.071	2.142	65.884						
8	0.878	1.756	67.639						
9	0.829	1.659	69.298						
10	0.796	1.593	70.891						
11	0.742	1.483	72.374						
12	0.721	1.442	73.816						
13	0.662	1.324	75.141						
14	0.645	1.291	76.431						
15	0.618	1.235	77.667						
16	0.601	1.202	78.869						
17	0.568	1.136	80.005						
18	0.525	1.049	81.054						
19	0.516	1.033	82.087						
20	0.483	0.966	83.053						
21	0.472	0.943	83.996						
22	0.450	0.900	84.896						
23	0.441	0.882	85.778						
24	0.429	0.859	86.637						
25	0.416	0.832	87.469						

26	0.405	0.810	88.279						
27	0.378	0.756	89.036						
28	0.371	0.741	89.777						
29	0.344	0.689	90.466						
30	0.337	0.674	91.139						
31	0.325	0.650	91.789						
32	0.314	0.629	92.418						
33	0.289	0.578	92.996						
34	0.287	0.574	93.570						
35	0.276	0.552	94.122						
36	0.269	0.538	94.660						
37	0.254	0.507	95.167						
38	0.247	0.494	95.662						
39	0.231	0.461	96.123						
40	0.224	0.449	96.572						
41	0.216	0.431	97.003						
42	0.213	0.427	97.430						
43	0.198	0.396	97.826						
44	0.186	0.372	98.198						
45	0.185	0.370	98.569						
46	0.164	0.327	98.896						
47	0.158	0.316	99.213						
48	0.148	0.295	99.508						
49	0.137	0.274	99.782						
50	0.109	0.218	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Table 6.27 Rotated Component Matrix[a]

	Component					
	Teaching	Skills	University Support Services	Integrity	Academic Support	Social
Teaching1	0.828					
Teaching2	0.803					
Teaching3	0.761					
Teaching4	0.742					
Teaching5	0.738					
Teaching6	0.730					
Teaching7	0.730					
Teaching8	0.728					
Teaching9	0.702					
Teaching10	0.642					
Skills1		0.797				
Skills2		0.794				
Skills3		0.777				
Skills4		0.758				
Skills5		0.745				
Skills6		0.710				
Skills7		0.708				
Skill8		0.652				
Skills9		0.652				
Skill10		0.633				
Skills11		0.617				
University Support and Services1			0.798			
University Support and Services2			0.795			
University Support and Services3			0.639			
Integrity1				0.693		
Integrity2				0.666		
Integrity3				0.650		
Integrity4				0.637		
Academic Support1					0.795	
Academic Support2					0.746	
Academic Support3					0.717	
Academic Support4					0.657	
Social1						0.708
Social2						0.639

"Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization."

Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

Table 6.28 Factors and Correspondent Items

Factors	Items	No.
Teaching	Q3 Academic staff inspire me	Teaching1
	Q4 Academic staff deliver classes that hold my attention	Teaching2
	Q8 Academic staff use a variety of teaching methods	Teaching3
	Q5 Academic staff are happy to be contacted	Teaching4
	Q6 Academic staff use real world examples to explain theory	Teaching5
	Q9 Academic staff use the latest technologies in their classes	Teaching6
	Q2 Academic staff are knowledgeable	Teaching7
	Q7 Academic staff upload their material on university platform	Teaching8
	Q1 Academic staff are approachable	Teaching9
	Q10 Academic staff invite practitioners for guest lectures	Teaching10
Skills	Q23 I am confident in critical thinking	Skillls1
	Q19 I am very self-confident	Skillls2
	Q22 I am confident in analysing data	Skillls3
	Q24 I am confident in using technology	Skillls4
	Q16 Confident in developing creating solutions	Skillls5
	Q15 Very good at teamwork	Skillls6
	Q20 I am more self-aware of my capabilities	Skillls7
	Q25 I have participated in activities to develop my practical skills	Skillls8
	Q14 Confident in communicating	Skillls9
	Q21 I am disciplined with my time	Skillls10
	Q18 Improved my EI	Skillls11
University Support Service	Q28 Sufficient resources (books/computers) on campus	University Support Service1
	Q27 Ample spaces to study on campus	University Support Service2
	Q29 Career support services for students	University Support Service3
Integrity	Q54 In work, I will challenge unethical behaviour	Integrity1
	Q49 I know the penalty for Academic Misconduct	Integrity2
	Q50 Academic tutors uphold integrity in their work	Integrity3
	Q48 University provides clear guidelines on Academic Misconduct	Integrity4
Academic Support	RQ 31 I have received support from peers (students)	Academic Support1
	RQ39 Academic staff are available for feedback	Academic Support2
	RQ17 I have matured personally, academically and/or professionally	Academic Support3
	RQ11 Academic staff delivery classes that challenge me	Academic Support4
Social	Q44 I have joined social activity clubs/societies	Social1
	Q43 I have joined a sporting club	Social2

6.11 Multiple Regression Analysis

After factor analysis was carried out to test parameters to ensure all factors were measuring distinct constructs as conceptualised, regression analysis was carried out (Field, 2018). Multiple regression analysis was carried out in this study and the dependent variable was 'Student Satisfaction'.

The regression results of Factor Groups by Student Satisfaction revealed an R square value of 0.638 and a significant F value of 167.376 which indicate satisfactory prediction model. In that Table, the achieved Beta coefficients and *p*-value (significance level) are reported.

Table 6.29 Regression Results of Factor Groups by Student Satisfaction

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	**5.395**	**0.032**		**168.974**	**0.000**	**5.332**	**5.458**
Teaching	**0.512**	**0.032**	**0.404**	**16.014**	**0.000**	**0.449**	**0.575**
Skills	**0.502**	**0.032**	**0.396**	**15.718**	**0.000**	**0.440**	**0.565**
Support Resources	**0.469**	**0.032**	**0.370**	**14.683**	**0.000**	**0.406**	**0.532**
Integrity	**0.446**	**0.032**	**0.352**	**13.950**	**0.000**	**0.383**	**0.509**
Academic Support	**0.187**	**0.032**	**0.148**	**5.854**	**0.000**	**0.124**	**0.250**
Social Activities	**0.239**	**0.032**	**0.189**	**7.492**	**0.000**	**0.177**	**0.302**

a. Dependent Variable: Satisfied with learning experience

The regression results in Table 6.29 support the following hypotheses that were assumed in the research methodology chapter.

Hypothesis 1: Teaching has a major influence on student satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: The acquisition of soft skills has a major influence on student satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Academic integrity influences student satisfaction.

The regression results of Factor Groups by Student Happiness revealed an R square value of 0.556 and a significant F value of 119.124, statistical evidence that indicates satisfactory prediction model. Similar to the hypotheses for student satisfaction, the results for student happiness support the conceptualised hypotheses (see Table 6.30).

Table 6.30 Regression Results of Factor Groups by Student Happiness

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	5.276	0.038		140.096	0.000	5.202	5.350
Teaching	0.515	0.038	0.381	13.671	0.000	0.441	0.589
Skills	0.526	0.038	0.390	13.963	0.000	0.452	0.600
Support Resources	0.474	0.038	0.351	12.573	0.000	0.400	0.548
Integrity	0.370	0.038	0.274	9.822	0.000	0.296	0.444
Academic Support	0.190	0.038	0.141	5.041	0.000	0.116	0.264
Social Activities	0.274	0.038	0.203	7.275	0.000	0.200	0.348

a. Dependent Variable: Happy with learning experience

The regression results Factor Groups by Student being Proud of University revealed an R square value of 0.585 and a significant F value of 134.087, supporting significant prediction model. Again, similar to the hypotheses for student satisfaction, the results for students' being proud of university support the hypotheses (see Table 6.31).

Table 6.31 Regression Results of Factor Groups by Student Proudness

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	5.262	0.036		145.760	0.000	5.191	5.333
Teaching	0.472	0.036	0.352	13.066	0.000	0.401	0.543
Skills	0.557	0.036	0.416	15.413	0.000	0.486	0.628
Support Resources	0.464	0.036	0.346	12.845	0.000	0.393	0.535
Integrity	0.436	0.036	0.326	12.077	0.000	0.365	0.507
Academic Support	0.135	0.036	0.101	3.745	0.000	0.064	0.206
Social Activities	0.305	0.036	0.228	8.448	0.000	0.234	0.376

a. Dependent Variable: Q59 Proud of university

6.12 Summary

All conceptualised hypotheses have been examined and result have been presented in this chapter. Next (Chapter Seven), the overall results are discussed and implications specified.

Chapter Seven Conclusions, Implications and Future Research Directions

7.1 Introduction

Understanding leadership in higher education is limited, and even more so in the particular case of HEIs in China (e.g., Liu, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025; Lau & Zheng, 2025). To contribute to domain literature, this research sought to understand the key behavioural characteristics of leaders who are developing strategies to ensure the continued relevance and resilience of higher education in China. This chapter specifically highlights the conclusions and explains the implications of the findings from this study. This chapter is structured as explained below. Firstly, the conclusions from this study are specified (Section 7.2). Secondly, the contributions of the study are explained (Section 7.3). Thirdly, the limitations of the study are pointed out (Section 7.4). Fourthly, future research directions are pinpointed (Section 7.5). To conclude, a reflection on the research journey is presented (Section 7.6).

To achieve the aim of this research, four main objectives (shown below) were considered, and the conclusions from this study are organised based on these objectives in Section 7.2 and sub-sections.

1. To understand what the key characteristics of a successful leader in HE are.
2. To understand how leaders can address challenges facing HE.
3. To identify what actions are required for leaders to manage change.
4. To determine a pragmatic solution for how universities can create an enriched learning experience environment for students.

7.2 Study Conclusions

In pinpointing the conclusions from this study, two steps are taken. First, the conceptual model that emerged from this study is presented (Section 7.2.1). Following that, the conclusions, organised based on the research objectives, are summarised in Section 7.2.2 and sub-sections.

7.2.1 The Emergent Conceptual Framework Model

Combining analytical evidence from both the quantitative and qualitative tools

for this study, a conceptual framework emerged as shown in Figure 7.1 below. The Figure highlights the core operational elements considered by participating HEIs in China in their efforts to ensure resilience in their institutions. In addition to the contextualisation features considered at the participating HEIs, the Figure also shows the relationship among university challenges, characteristics of successful leaders, enriched student experience, and achievement of outcomes. These contextualisation features and linkages between the factors are further highlighted in sub-sections 7.2.2.1 to 7.2.2.4.

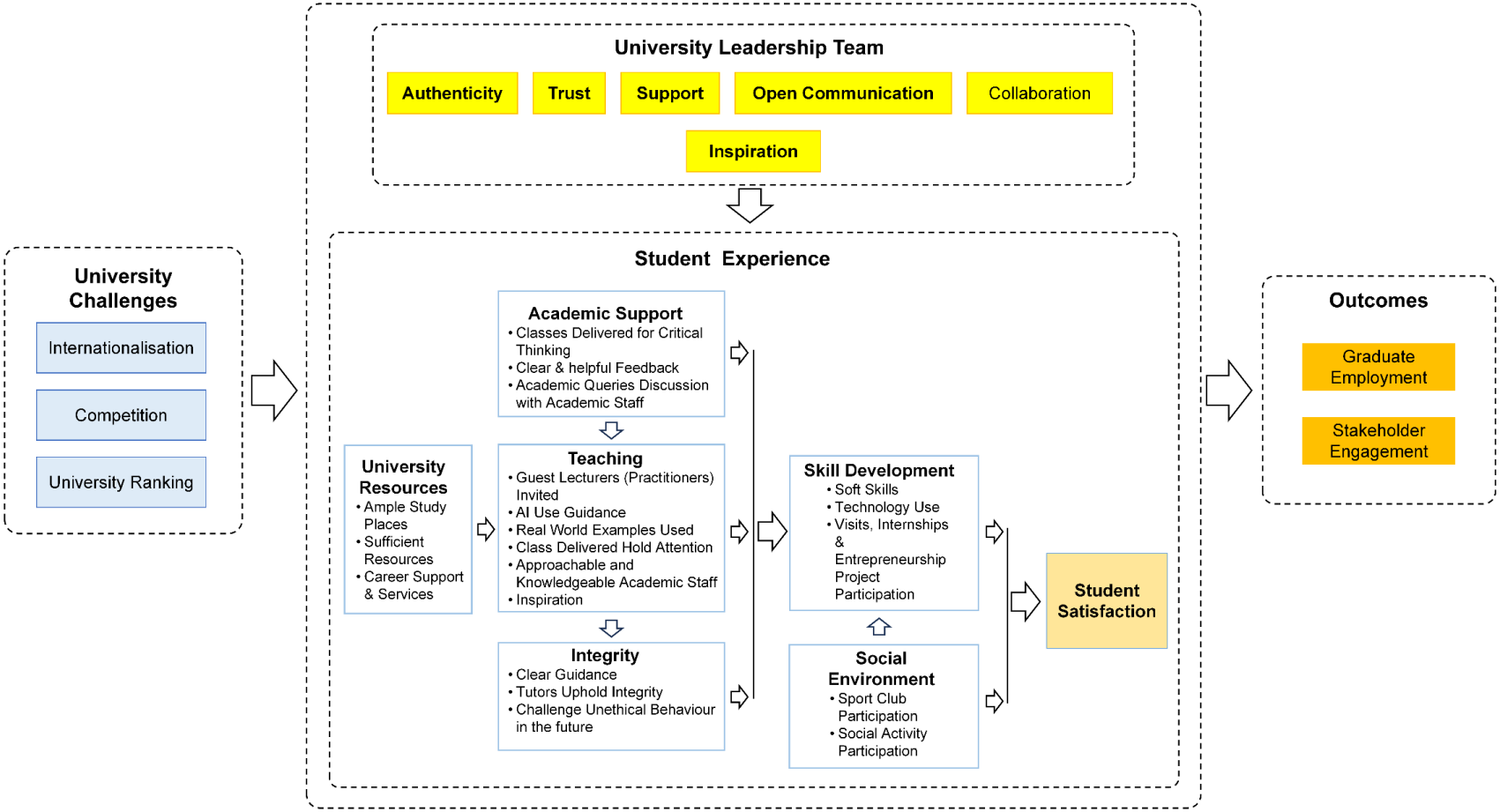


Figure 7.1 Final Conceptual Framework of Leadership for Resilience in Higher Education in China

Source: Author

7.2.2 Core Conclusions Based on the Research Objectives

The core conclusions from this study, based on combined qualitative and quantitative evidence, as well as insights generated through reviewed literature, are presented in sub-sections 7.2.2.1 to 7.2.2.4. Thereafter, the contributions of this study, theoretically (as summarised in Table 7.1) and practically, are explained.

7.2.2.1 Objective 1 -- The Key Characteristics of Successful Leaders in HE

Table 7.1 Core Conclusion for Research Objective 1

Research Objective 1: The Key characteristics of Successful leaders in HEIs.		
Gaps in knowledge	**Contribution to knowledge**	**Empirical Evidence: Qual. /Quan. /LitRev.**
Understanding clearly the core characteristics of successful leaders in the Chinese HEIs setting.	This study identified an authenticity leadership approach that embraces the features of care and support, open and transparent communication, empathy, honesty and fairness as instrumental in driving a resilient focus in HEIs in China. Table metrics for each university mission group.	Qualitative and Quantitative Evidence.

Authenticity

Qualitative evidence identified **authenticity** as a critical leadership trait in the participating Chinese HEIs. Core authenticity features included HEIs' leaders showing care and support for staff and students, having open and transparent communication with staff and students, and showing empathy, honesty, and fairness (see Table 5.2 and Figure 5.5). This evidence connects in several ways to previous literature that authentic leadership is demonstrated through four dimensions: self-awareness, relational transparency, internalised moral, and balanced processing (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

In the quantitative tool that reflected the student perspective, the result identifies that “the integrity upheld by academic staff” helps students increase their

integrity awareness (see Table 6.24). Students benefit from role models who exemplify honesty, empathy, fairness, and open and transparent communication even in their future career life. The combined results from the qualitative and quantitative parts of the study stress the importance of authenticity in leadership in higher education.

Trust

Qualitative evidence identifies trust as a key leadership characteristic and shows that leaders build trust among academic staff by showing respect, fairness, and support, and by establishing open, transparent communication and participation in decision-making (see Table 5.2 and Figure 5.5). Clear information collection, transparent disclosure, and fair resource allocation help leaders earn the trust of academic staff. This finding aligns with prior literature suggesting effective trust-building approaches include face-to-face communication, promise, fairness, objectivity, honesty, openness, support, love, and respect (Branson, Franken and Penny, 2016; Lesinger et al., 2017). People tend to believe that they will benefit from a relationship characterised by trust and respect in an organisation (Kahn, 1990). The support and opportunities provided for staff growth also enhance trust among academic staff (Jameson, 2012).

Thus, trust in leadership is a critical factor influencing organisational success in HEIs. Academic staff tend to trust leaders who align their actions with their words and values. Leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, and accountability are more likely to earn academic staff's confidence. Leaders with open, transparent, clear, honest and consistent communication make academic staff feel informed and valued, reduce uncertainty and foster a culture of trust.

Inspiring

Also captured as a core leadership characteristic is the skill to **inspire**. Qualitative insight reveals that inspiring leaders are virtuous and always set themselves as an example. An inspiring leader provides staff with good

resource support and a drive to achieve targets. An inspiring leader has a clear vision and makes appropriate decisions based on the circumstances. Inspiring leaders maintain ethical standards to foster **trust** within the academic community and enhance the institution's credibility (see Table 5.2 and Figure 5.5).

Inspiring leaders encourage faculty and students to participate actively in decision-making. They show trust in staff, which gives staff a sense of belonging and motivates them to contribute to the same goal. Likewise, good resources and support are not only recognition for staff but also inspiration.

Strangely, though, the quantitative insights suggest that students don't value that academic staff inspire them to achieve their full potential most (see Table 6.4). This outcome could be attributed to several reasons. Firstly, the Chinese education system heavily emphasises test scores; many students enter university with the mindset that academic success is primarily about grades rather than personal growth or inspiration. This can lead to a lack of intrinsic motivation, where students see education as a requirement rather than an opportunity to be inspired. Secondly, many students prioritise securing a job after graduation over academic exploration. Given the intense job market competition, students often focus on internships, networking, and employability skills rather than valuing professors' mentorship. Third, in many Chinese universities, classes are large, making it difficult for professors to build close, mentor-like relationships with students. Without personal connections, students may not recognise or appreciate academic staff's efforts to inspire them. Furthermore, the traditional Chinese education system maintains a strong hierarchy, where students often view professors as authority figures rather than mentors. Specifically, in Chinese culture, inspiration and encouragement are sometimes indirect, rather than explicitly communicated. Contrary to the Western university context where professors encourage open discussions and

critical thinking, many Chinese students may feel that expressing their thoughts freely or engaging deeply with professors is not the norm.

Support

In this study, "**care and support**" are emphasised as core authentic leadership features, an insight that enhances authentic leadership literature (see Table 5.2 and Figure 5.5). Empirically, authentic leaders are student- and tutor-oriented, and they prioritise ethical behaviour, transparency, fairness, consistency and support in their actions and decisions. It would therefore be rational to expect that authentic leadership contributes to the long-term success of universities, as academic integrity, ethical governance, and a culture of trust are fostered. Institutions led by authentic leaders tend to have strong reputations, engaged communities, and sustainable growth, a view supported by domain literature that suggests a positive relationship between authentic leadership, academic optimism and academic performance in higher education (Soares & Lopes, 2020; Srivastava & Dhar, 2019).

7.2.2.2 Objective 2 -- How Leaders Address Challenges Facing HEIs

Table 7.2 Core Conclusion for Research Objective 2

Research Objective 2: How Leaders Address Challenges Facing HEIs.		
Gaps in knowledge	**Contribution to knowledge**	**Empirical Evidence: Qual. /Quan. /LitRev.**
There is a need to understand the critical factors that leaders consider in responding to the challenges that HEIs in China face.	This study identified five operational challenges that Chinese Universities view as critical in their drive to internationalise and stay competitive: graduate outcomes, resources and budget, competition, technology, and internationalisation.	Qualitative Evidence.

Qualitative findings identified five key challenges participating universities face now and would continue to face going forward, namely graduate outcomes, resource and budget, competition, technology and internationalisation. The

challenges related to graduate outcomes concern ensuring academic rigour to cultivate quality talent and overall educational quality. In that regard, a further challenge relates to limited resources and budget. Competition is another challenge. The academic industry is becoming increasingly competitive, and participating universities are also feeling this pressure. Technological evolution is increasingly changing the academic landscape. Coping with that increasing trend is a challenge for every university. Lastly, universities are internationalising, and this brings several challenges. To highlight how leaders are addressing these challenges, the findings are structured along these themes: university ranking, research capacity, global competitiveness, international students, and sustainable and green awareness and resources.

University Ranking

Interview insights identified different indicators involved in university ranking position, of which graduate outcomes and discipline development seem to be the most critical indicators (see Figure 5.1). Most ranking criteria are set by Western universities, and internationalisation was found to be a major challenge for Chinese universities. In particular, there is insufficient financial support for universities to improve their rankings. Given the investment required for research capacity, high-level talent recruitment, new development and internationalisation, high international student recruitment and exchange program collaboration are focused on to improve the university ranking (see Figure 5.11).

Research Capacity

The findings in the qualitative part on research capacity reveal that leaders are building research capacity via established collaborations, teamwork, resource support and incentives (see Figure 5.5). Academic staff consider the university-government and university-enterprise co-operation important as these collaboration options provide more opportunities and platforms for academic staff to grow. **Collaboration** is found to be an option to address challenges

faced by the participating HEIs. University-government and university-enterprise co-operation is important for academic staff as these collaborations provide more opportunities and platforms for academic staff to grow.

This finding on "**collaboration**" resonates with prior research (Prysor & Henley, 2018), which recommends that leaders in higher education lead and work across professional, disciplinary, and institutional boundaries both internally and beyond the institution. This collaboration finding connects to the viewpoint that university-industry (UI) collaborations are important for enhancing both university and industry capabilities and fostering innovative dynamism (Takanashi & Lee, 2019). Social capital among faculty members will be improved by international partnership operations in HEIs, as boundary spanning facilitates the transmission of resources and individual knowledge, commitment, and the creation of cohesion (Bordogna, 2019).

Global Competitiveness

Another insight generated through the qualitative tool for this study relates to the importance of internationalisation, the Alumni Association, and serving the local community in enabling the HEIs to be more globally competitive (see Figure 5.11 and Sections 5.4.4, 5.4.5 and 5.4.6). Core steps are being taken to improve global competitiveness, such as international research cooperation, international cultural exchanges, jointly organised campuses, international students' recruitment, recruiting domestic students to study in overseas branch campuses, joining global education alliances, etc.

International Student

The findings in the qualitative part reveal external publicity, high quality of service and **support** provided, such as courses and language services, good accommodation, medical insurance, flexible enrolment policies, credit transfer scholarships and subsidies and **collaborations** with the overseas institutes as further steps taken in addressing the challenges faced by the HEIs (see Sections 5.4.5 and 5.4.6). As further documented in the interview findings,

discipline characteristics and cross-cultural exchanges make it more appealing for international students to study in Chinese HEIs. Thus, efforts are being made to ensure high-quality service and support to make the educational packages more appealing to international students.

Sustainability & Green Awareness

The qualitative insights also show that the HEIs understand the importance of sustainability awareness, as this makes the campus greener and more sustainable. Various activities raise sustainable awareness, including integrating the concept of sustainable development into personnel training programs, curricula, lectures, and slogans posted in public areas. In addition, energy-saving, emission reduction, recycling, green research and projects, environmentally friendly construction materials, energy-efficient systems and equipment in campus construction are given due consideration (see Table 5.4 and Figure 5.13). This finding has been validated by quantitative research in which students show a positive attitude and are aware that the university is reducing its carbon footprint (Tanavade et al., 2023).

Resource

The qualitative findings show that participating HEIs are showing committed initiatives towards enhancing the learning experience of the students (see section 5.2.4). A resilient and enriched learning experience is ensured in a way that both staff and students achieve a sense of acquisition and achievement. An excellent learning environment, facilities, equipment, and digital platforms, as well as moral character cultivation, a campus culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, and a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere are ensured to give students a satisfying learning experience (see Table 5.5 and Figure 5.16). Initiatives taken in that regard include inviting famous and leading scholars to deliver cutting-edge academic materials. Furthermore, the HEIs provide various research projects with funding to enable lecturers to engage in research, publish in international peer-reviewed journals, and utilise the

research findings to drive knowledge and enhance students' learning experience. Lastly, and in the funding point, open and fair measures are enforced to ensure that the resources are allocated fairly to staff and students (see Figure 5.18).

7.2.2.3 Objective 3 -- Managing Change

Table 7.3 Core Conclusion for Research Objective 3

Research Objective 3: Actions required by Leaders to Manage Change in Higher Education		
Gaps in knowledge	**Contribution to knowledge**	**Empirical Evidence: Qual. /Quan. /LitRev.**
There is a need to understand the changes HEIs in China are making and how they manage potential resistance.	This study contributes to understanding the changes Chinese HEIs are making to internationalise and stay competitive, and highlights the initiatives they are adopting to manage potential resistance.	Qualitative Evidence

From the qualitative findings in this study, participants revealed that resistance and comfort are reasons some academic staff resist change. To overcome resistance to change, staff need to understand the change needed, the reason, and the benefit, and leaders must communicate them effectively. Personalised guidance, funding and network **support** help staff adapt to the change (see Table 5.2 and Figure 5.5). Executive leaders in HEIs have clear goals and communicate well with staff, enabling them to manage change successfully. They provide staff with **support** and training and also encourage them to participate in decision-making (see Figure 5.5). Thus, good communication, training and support, and incentives are important for the staff to participate in the change. These results resonate with Kotter (2019 and 2020): Good identification, articulation and communication ignite the follower's acceptance of change and then generate better change outcomes from a head (rational) to heart (emotional) perspective (Kotter, 2020). It was also found that "training and

networking support" are core initiatives, a further finding that connects to Kotter's (2020) suggestion. Kotter notes that establishing a larger network for problem-solving across different levels and functions in the organisation helps solve change-management problems from diverse perspectives.

Notably, an important word participants repeatedly used when responding to the question on necessary changes was "goal". For example, interviewed leaders referred to goals of change as "curriculum reform to meet the needs of industry and society, industry-academia collaboration strengthened, integration of technological and digital innovations, international collaboration and exchange enhanced". There was clear recognition of the importance of change management, with the understanding that a clear goal ensures appropriate direction for future higher education development. A central goal element was also ensuring that the staff easily understood what they should do and how they should engage themselves in the change process.

7.2.2.4 Objective 4 – How to Create an Enriched Learning Experience Environment for Students

Table 7.4 Core Conclusion for Research Objective 4

Research Objective 4: Investments Required to create an Enriched Learning Experience for Students		
Gaps in knowledge	**Contribution to knowledge**	**Empirical Evidence: Qual. /Quan. /LitRev.**
There is a need to enhance understanding of initiatives to ensure an enhanced learning experience for students.	This study contributes to knowledge and highlights core steps taken to ensure an enriched learning experience for students.	Qualitative Evidence + Quantitative Evidence

Student Learning Experience/Student Satisfaction

A core research gap that inspired this research is the limited understanding of students' learning experience perspective, including students' satisfaction. In highlighting the contributions of this study relating to research question 4, both

students' learning experience and satisfaction would be considered.

The qualitative insights suggest that university leaders improve the student learning experience by improving teaching quality, providing learning resources and facilities, stimulating student learning incentives and interests, organising practices and activities and updating curriculum systems (see Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1).

The quantitative findings show that teaching is a major influence on student satisfaction. The acquisition of soft skills also strongly influences student satisfaction. Academic integrity also influences student satisfaction (see Tables 6.29 and 6.30, supported by descriptive statistics in Tables 6.4, 6.5, 6.9, 6.13, among others).

These insights connect to existing literature on the focus of the student choices and their subsequent satisfaction level, which includes the key aspects like university reputation, course design, lecturers' teaching content, service quality, own learning, campus facilities and campus social life and post-graduation employability perceptions (Khan & Hemsley-Brown, 2024; Wong & Chapman, 2023). Govender & David (2023) underline that overall student satisfaction is positively influenced by student experience at HEIs.

Next, the findings regarding student experience are organised under integrity, teaching, feedback, academic support, skill development, social environment and university resources.

Integrity

The qualitative finding shows the universities are embracing several measures to ensure student academic integrity, such as integrity and moral education (community service and extra-curricular activities, good examples set by academic staff), academic ability support (writing center, study partner and updated database), guidance and detection (clear integrity rules, professional plagiarism detection software and assessment), disciplinary awareness and trust (see Figure 5.1).

This finding on “community service and extra-curricular activities” supports Miron et al. (2021), who noted that an academic integrity culture must be built on the commitment and cooperation of all members of the learning community, including administrators, academic staff, and students. Similarly, this study's findings on integrity are supported by Govender and David (2023) regarding academic support. They found that both academic staff and administrative staff are encouraged and empowered to provide relevant, timely, and personal service to improve student satisfaction and experience.

The qualitative findings on “guidance and detection” resonate with prior literature, which suggested that relevant transparent policies, principles and guidelines are necessary to be shown to prevent data or finding fabrication and plagiarism when algorithmic software tools are employed for academic research and assignments (Annemarie, 2023; Chan, 2023; Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024). Garza Mitchell and Parnther (2018) and Miron et al. (2021) also found that tutorials support student academic integrity by educating students on organisational support, processes, and behavioural expectations.

Further on the point of integrity, the qualitative findings noted ethical academic culture amongst the participating HEIs. One core integrity mechanism relates to plagiarism awareness and implementation. HEIs use professional plagiarism detection software to ensure compliance and academic integrity. This finding on “professional plagiarism detection software and assessment” aligns with suggestions from Cotton, Cotton and Shipway (2024) and Sweeney (2023). Both studies encourage academic staff to monitor students’ work more closely, develop appropriate assessments, use various assessment techniques, and use plagiarism detection tools to flag potential plagiarism.

As the qualitative findings further indicate, noncompliance attracts disciplinary measures, an approach that aligns with suggestions in prior literature (Annemaire, 2023; Miles, Campbell and Ruxton, 2022).

The finding about “integrity upheld by academic staff” is highlighted in both the

qualitative and quantitative (see Table 6.23) evidence. It is consistent with the literature that academics serve an important role as role models, demonstrating desired behaviours in teaching and research conduct to maintain academic integrity (Garza Mitchell & Parnther, 2018; Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019).

Teaching

Based on the qualitative results, innovative teaching modes, such as the flipped classroom, positively improve the students' learning experience. The teaching approach emphasises teacher-student interaction. The classroom uses diverse teaching methods, such as bilingual teaching, case study teaching, and problem-based learning, which improve teaching quality. Teaching skill competitions, teaching inspections and training, and feedback mechanisms are also used to improve teaching skills (see Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1).

The finding on the use of these “innovative teaching” options resonates with recent literature suggesting that AI has had a remarkable effect on rich teaching and learning experiences in higher education, such as student engagement, accessibility and collaboration (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024; Mondal, Das and Vrana, 2023). Secondly, the finding on “interactions” aligns with the view that interaction between teachers and students in class, both online and offline, increases student engagement in learning (Govender & David, 2023).

The statistical results for student experience further reinforce the importance of teaching. Statistically, the results on teaching show that students value the input from guest lecturers and AI guidance from academic staff. Students are happy that academic staff utilise real-life examples to explain the theory in the teaching (see Table 6.4). The findings suggest students prefer **practical knowledge**, which is consistent with literature that an integration of different work-related learning activities, such as internship courses, guest lecturers based on the work context, entrepreneurship, cases from external experts and challenging project management, are important to enrich the student experience and improve graduate outcomes (Magnell & Kolmos, 2017).

Support Resource

Regarding Support Resource, the survey findings reveal that friendly administrative support staff improve student satisfaction, and students hope to receive course information (see Table 6.12). Empirically, good **administrative support** is a critical factor in student learning experiences, an insight that relates logically to Amadao Guzmán and Cuero's (2023) that students learning experience is based on their objective and subjective evaluation on the program designed by both university faculty and administrators, in which the key role of administrators has been emphasised. The second thing the students value is the opportunity to provide feedback on support services.

Feedback

Qualitative insights indicate that feedback mechanisms are good for teachers to improve teaching quality (see Section 5.2.4). The examples provided by the respondents are teaching inspections every semester and face-to-face communication symposiums. Thus, teachers leverage cues from students' feedback to design curriculum content that benefits both tutors and students (Carless & Winstone, 2023). In addition, tutors can reconsider and develop feedback literacy when students share their challenges and successes (Carless & Winstone, 2023).

Quantitative evidence on feedback shows that students value clear assessment instructions, helpful feedback, and quick responses from academic staff to improve their learning (see Tables 6.12, 6.13 and 6.15). These insights are supported by existing literature: many scholars have asserted that university students make progress with clear, easy-to-understand, timely, and constructive feedback and assessment. For example, Pan and Shao (2020) indicate that feedback can improve students' learning engagement and motivation. Effective feedback loops improve students' learning efficacy and keep topics and content engaging for the class (Raettig & Weger, 2018). Carless and Winstone (2023) note that students seek, use, and generate

feedback through the design of assessment tasks when academic staff integrate student feedback literacy into the curriculum. Assessment and feedback make students more aware of teaching and learning methods that are likely to lead to greater academic progress (Morris, Perry and Wardle, 2021). Especially in the AI era, technology enhances contemporary feedback practices in higher education by improving timeliness, efficiency, and convenience (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Leibold & Schwarz, 2022).

Skill Development

Qualitatively, participants indicate the importance of integrating industry and enterprise needs to improve the student learning experience in HEIs. They emphasise several ways to address the skill needs of external stakeholders. It is important to establish a close relationship with the external stakeholders to update the **curriculum** system (see Section 5.2.5). For example, building platforms together, inviting experts to give lectures in class, and sending tutors and students to visit the enterprise are all effective practices to improve teaching quality and graduate outcomes. This finding is in line with Ornellas, Falkner, and Stalbrandt (2019), who emphasise the need to utilise the benefits of hands-on deck practices to enhance curriculum design for meeting the needs of the labour market, an operational logic that also finds support in productive entrepreneurship literature (Opute et al., 2023). That is, the existing talent training system, syllabus, and course content need updating to align with universities' focus on designing curricula that address the growing demands of different industry sectors (Daley & Baruah, 2021).

In addition, many respondents point out that soft skills are important for students to meet the future needs of society and industry, including critical thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal communication, teamwork, creativity and entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and cross-disciplinary learning. To develop students' soft skills, students are encouraged to participate in various extracurricular activities, sports and clubs, STEM projects and academic

competitions (see Section 5.2.7), insights that resonate with the view that soft/transferrable skills are essential and vital to meet future labour market needs (Succi & Canovi, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020). According to WEF (2020), employers regard the skills rising prominently in the lead-up to 2025 as: technology use, analytical thinking and innovation, complex problem-solving, active learning and learning strategies, monitoring and control, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility, leadership and social influence, persuasion and negotiation.

Quantitative evidence further underscores the importance of participation in various activities for skill development. Quantitatively, Chinese students report confidence in their use of technology and personal, academic, and professional growth at university (see Tables 6.5 and 6.8). In other words, Chinese university students often participate in various activities to develop their skills. This finding is consistent with Bouhout, Askitou and Es-soufi (2024), who suggest that students' soft skills can be developed by Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) and care in online Higher Education.

Social Environment

Qualitative findings reveal various practices and activities organised at the university for students to participate in, thereby developing their skills (see Table 5.1, Figures 5.1 and 5.4). For example, voluntary service activities and green and intelligent campus activities (see Table 5.4 and Figure 5.13). It is well known that teamwork and communication skills, creativity and entrepreneurial ability, interdisciplinary learning ability, and a collectivist spirit are very important qualities for graduate students.

The survey study suggests that students actively participate in sport and various social events at university, which aligns with the skill development theme, as students report participating in activities organised by the university to improve their practical skills (see Tables 6.17 and 6.20).

Combined, qualitative and quantitative findings resonate with the view that a

good social environment improves both students' well-being and academic achievement, as education is an inherently social process (Dost & Smith, 2023; Lisiecka, Chimicz, and Lewicka-Zelent, 2023; Soong & Maheepala, 2023). Students are encouraged to participate in social and sports activities to establish satisfactory interpersonal relationships and overcome psychological challenges (Lisiecka, Chimicz and Lewicka-Zelent, 2023; Penny & Kynn, 2024). Furthermore, the survey results (see Table 6.20) suggest that students make lifelong friends during their university years by participating in social activities and clubs. This aligns with the literature, which argues that students build personal relationships and cherish their friendships when they engage in experiential activities (D'Uggento et al., 2023). In addition, social interactions contribute to students' personal development (Chimicz & Lewicka-Zelent, 2023).

University Resources

Regarding university resources, the qualitative findings revealed that online learning resources are important for students because they help them learn more independently, at their convenience, and more effectively. A rich electronic database enables students to access cutting-edge research outputs and study materials. Advanced laboratories, modern and adequately equipped classrooms, and ample study rooms are important learning facilities that ensure students have a good learning environment and experience (see Table 5.1 and Section 5.2.4). The quantitative finding suggests students value ample spaces to study on campus (see Table 6.12). Universities provide rich databases and ensure advanced laboratories and modern, adequately equipped classrooms to support a good learning environment and experience for students.

The finding on "career support" is consistent with the literature that university career service is a valuable resource in students' development (Ma et al., 2022; Monteiro et al., 2020). Ma et al. (2022) point out that career planning, self-career development, job-seeking strategies, occupational adaptation, and development are necessary for students in higher education. Additionally, prior

literature has argued that psychological supports and resources, academic support centres, student service centres, specific wellbeing services, or disability service centres are suggested mental health supports for students (Duraku, Davis and Hamiti, 2023; Lisiecka, Chimicz and Lewicka-Zelent, 2023). In this study, quantitative findings indicate that Chinese students are not convinced that their universities provide much mental health support for them (t=-0.316 in Table 6.12), which resonates with Duraku, Davis and Hamiti's (2023) argument that there are limited appropriate mental health strategies introduced to identify and prevent mental health problems in higher education in developing countries.

7.3 Contributions of the Study

This study's contributions are organised into two sections: theoretical contributions (Section 7.3.1) and practical implications (Section 7.3.2). Before elaborating the theoretical contributions, Table 7.5 highlights key aspects of the theoretical contribution.

Table 7.5 Knowledge Contribution Table

Research Objectives	Key Findings from Literature Review	Main Findings from Qualitative Research	Significant Results from Quantitative Research	Contribution to Knowledge System	Implications for Higher Education Management
To understand the key characteristics of a successful leader in HEIs	Authentic Leadership (2.3.2.2) Support (2.3.2.2) Inspiring (2.3.3.2) Open communication (2.3.3.2) Trust (2.3.4.1)	Care and support, open and transparent communication, fairness, empathy, honesty and inspiration are the ways for leaders to demonstrate authenticity. To inspire staff, the leader should be virtuous. He has vision, shows trust and support, and makes appropriate decisions. To build trust between management and academic staff, leaders should show respect, fairness and support, maintain open and transparent communication and encourage decision-participation.		Enriches the authentic leadership theory and provides new insights of characteristics of successful leaders on resilience achievement in higher education in China.	Communicate openly and honestly, show authenticity, trust, care, support, empathy, fairness and inspiration to staffs to make them feel valued and go beyond routine responsibilities. Collaboration is recommended as well.
To understand how can leaders address challenges facing HEIs	Challenges Facing in HE (2.2) Effective Leadership in HE (2.3) RBV in HEIs (2.5.1, 2.5.2, and 2.5.3)	Graduate outcomes, resource & budget constraints, competition, technology and internationalization and the key challenges university facing in the next 5 years. To improve university ranking, the university need to improve research capacity, recruit high-level talent, recruit more international student and participate in the cooperations and exchange programs with foreign universities. To become more globally competitive, the university need to strengthen the international cooperations and exchanges, the Alumni Association and serve the local community by contributing to the regional employment and development.		Provides a conceptual framework on the effective leadership for resilience in HEIs in China upon the understanding of the challenges Chinese HEIs facing.	Be student-tutor centered. Adopt transparent approaches to optimize university resources. Improve research capacity, increase internationalisation by collaborations. Strengthen the association with Alumni Association and serve the community.

To identify what actions are required for leaders to manage change	Kotter's Change Process and Principles (2.4.2)	To successfully manage change, leaders should set goals first, have active communication with staff, show support and training and help staff overcome resistance.		Enriches the Kotter's Change theory and provides new insights on change management implementation.	Set a clear goal, have open communication, provide support to overcome the resistance in change management.
To determine a pragmatic solution of how universities can create an enriched learning experience environment for students	Student Satisfaction (3.2) Teaching and Learning (3.3) Feedback (3.4) Skills Development (3.5) Student Support Services (3.6) Social Environment (3.7) Academic Integrity (3.8)	The university can improve the student learning experience by improving teaching quality and providing learning resources and facilities, and by stimulating student learning incentives and interests by investing in facilities, equipment and digital platforms. Open and fair mechanisms for the allocation of resources are required to enrich student and tutor experiences. Integrity & moral education, academic support, guidance & detection and trust are the effective ways to ensure academic integrity. Cultivating graduates according to the needs of society, the curriculum system update, a close relationship establishment with the external stakeholders, sending students and tutors to visit the enterprise, teaching quality improvement and students practice & activities encouraged are all the effective ways to improve graduate outcomes.	Teaching strongly influences student satisfaction. The acquisition of soft skills has a major influence on student satisfaction. Academic integrity influences student satisfaction (see Table 6.26, t=16.014, t=15.718, t=13.950 respectively). Chinese students prefer practical knowledge. They value guest lecturers, AI guidance and academic staff use real world examples when teaching. They value their participation in organizing social events and they value academic tutors uphold integrity in their work and will challenge the unethical behavior in the future career. They enjoy ample study spaces, and hope to get clear and helpful feedback and regular course information.	Contributes to the literature on the student experience in HEIs in Chinese context. Based on the measurement of student satisfaction, the themes are developed namely, academic integrity, teaching, academic support, skill development, social environment and university resources.	Create a resilient student experience environment by ensuring integrity, improving teaching, organising various extracurricular activities, providing academic support, and optimising university resources. Enriched student experience improves student satisfaction.

Source: Author

7.3.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes in three ways to the discourse on leadership in HEIs and student experience.

Firstly, this study contributes to literature by highlighting foundational aspects that connect to authentic leadership and Kotter's change theory. This study offers insights on characteristics of successful leaders and change management and resilient practices in Chinese HEIs. In highlighting these resilient practices, this study also offers insights that contribute to the resource-based view. These contributions are clearly pinpointed next.

An important conclusion in this study, closely related to authenticity, concerns **trust**. Trust is a key leadership characteristic, and the results show that leaders build trust among academic staff by showing respect, fairness, and support; establishing open and transparent communication; and involving staff in decision-making. These findings align with prior literature that identifies effective ways to build trust, such as face-to-face communication, promise, fairness, objectivity, honesty, openness, support, love, and respect (Branson, Franken and Penny, 2016; Lesinger et al., 2017). In line with related literature, this study supports the view that authentic leadership positively influences employee trust, engagement, and overall workplace morale (Zhang, Bowers and Mao, 2021). Higher authentic leadership would lead to higher employee trust and affective commitment in the organisation (Xiong et al., 2016).

The survey findings reveal that students do not perceive academic staff as inspiring them to meet their targets, although the qualitative findings identified the ability to inspire as a core leadership characteristic. Considered in tandem, it could be suggested that there is a close relationship between trust, inspiring and authentic leadership, a conclusion that finds support in Ahmad et al. (2015), who contend that authentic leadership inspires and encourages the staff in the HEIs.

This research also identified support as another core feature of authentic

leadership. Because authentic leaders focus on students and teachers, they know what students and staff need. They support student and staff success by addressing academic and personal development needs, supporting student initiatives, and fostering inclusive learning environments. When university leaders show genuine concern for academic growth, faculty members are more likely to express their true feelings and commit to their work, leading to higher productivity and innovation.

From a change management perspective, this study also contributes to the literature. This study highlighted the importance of personalised guidance, funding, and network support; encouraging participation in decision-making; training; and clear, effective communication of problems and problem-solving initiatives as critical steps in managing change and potential resistance. This combination of insights resonates with Kotter's work (2019 and 2020).

Further on the change management point, a focused approach that involved ensuring a clear goal focus was found. In line with previous literature, this emergent insight builds on Kotter (2020) by clarifying the change goals in HEIs. Identifying goals in the change process in contemporary HEIs in China contributes to knowledge and enhances Kotter’s process and principles of change theory.

Second, this study contributes to the higher education literature by deepening understanding of the student experience in HEIs in the Chinese context. The study reveals the relationship between student satisfaction and student experience. As measures of student satisfaction, the themes developed in this study are academic integrity, teaching, academic support, skill development, social environment, and university resources. This study contributes to understanding how to enhance students’ learning experience. As a critical contribution, and because enhancing students’ learning experience has received limited attention in recent research, this study highlights several initiatives HEIs can adopt to foster a positive learning experience for students.

This study suggests that university leaders improve the student learning experience by improving teaching quality, providing learning resources and facilities, stimulating student learning incentives and interests, organising practices and activities and updating curriculum systems; these theoretical narratives enhance prior literature.

These narratives resonate closely with prior literature on the focus of student choices and their subsequent satisfaction level, which includes the key aspects like university reputation, course design, lecturers' teaching content, service quality, own learning, campus facilities and campus social life and post-graduation employability perceptions (Khan & Hemsley-Brown, 2024; Wong & Chapman, 2023). This study's findings also support Govender & David (2023), who noted that academic integrity influences student satisfaction and that overall student satisfaction is positively influenced by the student experience at HEIs.

Self-thinking-driven teaching, as well as innovative teaching, technology-based and independent learning, professional skills and ´sustainability awareness focus in educational curricula were emphasised as core aspects that enhance students' learning experience, insights that find respective support in previous literature (e.g., Mladenovici et al., 2022; Bhardwaj et al., 2025).

Feedback is another feature that respondents often emphasised when discussing how students' learning experience can be enhanced. Empirically, students valued clear assessment instructions, helpful feedback, and quick responses from academic staff to improve their learning. These insights support previous understanding that university students make progress with clear, easy-to-understand, timely, and constructive feedback and assessment (e.g., Pan & Shao, 2020; Raettig & Weger, 2018; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Assessment and feedback make students more aware of teaching and learning methods that are likely to lead to greater academic progress (Morris, Perry and Wardle, 2021). Especially in the AI era, technology enhances contemporary

feedback practices in higher education by improving timeliness, efficiency, and convenience (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Leibold & Schwarz, 2022).

This study suggests that participating universities are embracing necessary and appropriate teaching initiatives to provide students with a good learning experience. For example, not only are highly qualified professionals used as guest lecturers, but teaching content is also contextualised with experiential elements that students receive well, as their practical understanding is enhanced. Students anticipate and appreciate that academic staff use real-life examples to explain theory in teaching. These findings lend support to prior literature that argues that an integration of different work-related learning activities, such as internship courses, guest lecturers based on the work context, entrepreneurship, cases from external experts and challenging project management, is important to enrich student experience and improve graduate outcomes (Magnell & Kolmos, 2017).

This study emphasises the significance of **soft skills**. The qualitative findings suggest that curricula should be updated to meet society's needs, which resonates with prior literature (Daley & Baruah, 2021; WEF, 2020). Quantitative findings show that Chinese university students often participate in various activities to develop their skills and are confident using technology. This finding confirms prior literature that students' soft skills can be developed through Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) and care in online higher education (Bouhout, Askitou and Es-soufi, 2024).

Further, regarding enhancing students' learning experience, qualitative and quantitative insights from this study indicate that universities recognise the importance of ensuring adequate **resources and support mechanisms**. To make the educational package more appealing to the students, efforts were made to ensure high quality of **service and support**. The finding on "high quality of service and support" is in alignment with the literature on interactions with domestic students, training programs provided by both academic and

administrative staff, pre-arrival planning, student orientation assistance (Arkoudis et al., 2019), mentorship and counselling (Arther, 2017) as positive to enhancing international students' life and study.

The research highlights that **academic integrity** is a fundamental pillar of higher education, ensuring that learning institutions maintain a culture of honesty, trust, fairness, and respect for knowledge. Integrity is recognised as a cornerstone of academic excellence, public trust, and institutional reputation. "Integrity upheld by academic staff" is confirmed in both the qualitative and quantitative parts. This aligns with the literature that academics play an important role in modelling desired behaviours in teaching and research to maintain academic integrity (Garza Mitchell & Parnther, 2018; Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019). Empirical findings suggest that moral education, guidance and detection, and academic support are effective ways for universities to ensure academic integrity, which is consistent with the literature (Annemarie, 2023; Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024; Sweeney, 2023).

Thirdly, the study provides a conceptual framework on effective leadership for resilience in HEIs in China. By examining the challenges Chinese HEIs face, the study identifies graduate employment and stakeholder engagement as key outcomes. The framework not only identifies factors within complex university challenges, university leadership teams, student experience, and outcomes in HEIs, but also explores the dynamic interconnections among integrity, teaching, skills development, the social environment, university resources, and student satisfaction in the AI era. This theoretical integration provides future research direction for higher education management in China from multiple perspectives.

7.3.2 Contributions to Practitioners

This study offers a thorough understanding of how HEIs can enhance student learning experiences through effective leadership, which is critical for HEI management practitioners. The study's practical contributions relate to how university leaders address the challenges facing higher education and what

actions are required to manage change. Equally important in navigating the dynamics is the focus on internationalisation. From a practical perspective, firstly, successful leaders in Chinese higher education should focus on students' and tutors' needs and development by demonstrating authenticity, trust, support, open communication, collaboration and inspiration (see Section 7.3.2.1). Second, to ensure an enriched learning environment for students in Chinese HEIs in the modern AI era, university leaders should focus on management strategies that prioritise academic integrity, effective teaching, academic support, skill development, the social environment, and university resources (see Section 7.3.2.2).

7.3.2.1 Effective University Leadership Team that reflects Authenticity, Trust, Support, Open Communication, Collaboration and Inspiration

Authenticity

This study captured **authenticity** as a central leadership quality in fostering institutional resilience within HEIs in China. When leaders are grounded in ethical principles and make decisions transparently, they gain respect across hierarchical and stakeholder lines, including faculty, staff and students.

In the unique cultural and political context of Chinese higher education, authenticity helps leaders navigate ambiguity while maintaining integrity. HEI leaders in China are encouraged to invest in their own leadership development, focusing on self-reflection, emotional intelligence, and value-based decision-making. Institutions should consider embedding authenticity as a key criterion in leadership development, performance evaluation, and succession planning. With authenticity, deeper, more meaningful connections across the institution will be fostered. When leaders listen actively, communicate honestly, and show empathy and fairness, they will create a relational environment where staff and students feel valued and heard. These relationships form the foundation for collective resilience and long-term commitment. In doing so, authentic leaders

in Chinese HEIs lay the groundwork for more resilient institutions and more human-centred, ethical academic communities.

Trust

This research identifies **trust** as a cornerstone of effective leadership and institutional resilience in Chinese HEIs. Trust underpins organisational cohesion, supports adaptive capacity, and enhances stakeholder commitment during periods of change or disruption. Authentic leaders build **trust** by aligning words with actions and being consistent in their values, especially during institutional change. When leaders are trusted, their decisions are more likely to be accepted, and institutional change is implemented more smoothly. Institutions where trust is embedded in the leadership culture are more likely to maintain morale, retain talent, and recover quickly from adversity. Trust strengthens social cohesion and psychological safety within HEIs, helping staff and students stay engaged and confident in the institution's direction. HEIs' leaders who communicate openly, act consistently, and align their behaviour with institutional values foster an environment where trust can flourish. Transparent decision-making, especially in difficult times, signals credibility and reinforces belief in the leadership's integrity. On the other hand, trust encourages collaboration among faculty, staff, and students. Where trust is strong, individuals are more likely to share ideas, take initiative, and support one another.

Especially in the Chinese context, where hierarchy and deference to authority are culturally significant, trust becomes particularly vital for bridging top-down leadership with grassroots engagement. Embedding trust into institutional leadership practices not only supports resilience but also cultivates a culture of long-term shared success. Leaders in Chinese HEIs should view trust-building as a deliberate, ongoing process that requires consistency, integrity, and empathy. Thus, leaders in HEIs are recommended to show respect, communicate openly, act fairly, and provide support and opportunities, with a

genuine interest in the welfare of academic staff, to foster mutual trust across all levels of the institution.

Support

This study provides practical insights for leaders in HEIs seeking to enhance institutional effectiveness through improved support mechanisms. It highlights the critical role of organisational support in sustaining leadership effectiveness, particularly facing complex challenges such as digital transformation and evolving student expectations.

In this regard, it is critical to ensure clear, consistent communication and accessible resources from senior management. When staff feel supported by transparent processes, adequate staffing, and well-defined roles, they are better positioned to participate in the change process and embrace innovation. Furthermore, universities should establish support networks such as leadership development programs, coaching opportunities, and cross-departmental forums that foster shared learning and professional growth. Practitioners should equally prioritise mental well-being and work-life balance by recognising the pressures inherent in the work. Encouraging openness about challenges and creating safe spaces for dialogue can significantly enhance institutional performance. Thus, HEI leaders and policy-makers should invest in comprehensive support structures that go beyond technical training, addressing both the personal and professional needs of academic staff to ensure long-term success and resilience.

Open Communication

Another key insight from this study on how Chinese HEIs can enhance students' learning experience is open communication. This study offers valuable insights for HEI leaders by emphasising the strategic importance of **open communication** as a driver of effective leadership and institutional cohesion. In increasingly complex academic environments, transparent and inclusive communication practices are essential for fostering trust, aligning stakeholders,

and facilitating innovation. For leaders in HEIs, it is recommended that they ensure good communication to build trust with staff. Two-way communication is encouraged in HEIs across all levels of the institution, which may include transparent information collection systems, anonymous feedback tools, collaborative planning sessions, and open-door policies. Leaders may manage change effectively by sharing information clearly, inviting feedback, and acknowledging diverse perspectives. Open communication practices not only improve decision-making but also strengthen a sense of ownership and boost academic and administrative staff morale. Thus, HEI leaders are encouraged to establish open communication with staff not simply as a management tool, but as a core leadership competency that fosters resilience, engagement, and long-term institutional success.

Collaboration

This study provides meaningful insights for leaders in HEIs by emphasising the strategic value of **collaboration** in driving institutional resilience. In the face of increasing complexity within the higher education sector, including resource constraints, interdisciplinary research demands and global competitiveness, collaboration is no longer optional but essential. Effective collaboration goes beyond teamwork; it involves creating a resilient environment that supports shared goals and collective problem-solving. Leaders in HEIs are recommended to promote collaboration across departments, faculties, and administrative units to foster stronger alignment and encourage innovation by leveraging diverse perspectives. Strong scientific research platforms and university-style think tanks are recommended. The HEIs should build government-industry-academia-research innovation platforms with the government and the industry. Thus, collaboration is encouraged for leaders to establish and strengthen institutional cohesion, enhance adaptability, and enable HEIs to meet complex challenges more effectively with long-term success.

Inspiration

This study offers important insights for leaders in HEIs; it emphasises **inspiration** as a powerful leadership skill that drives engagement, motivation, and a shared sense of purpose. Inspiration in leadership goes beyond charisma. In an era marked by rapid change and growing uncertainty, inspiration is essential for cultivating resilience, creativity, and long-term institutional commitment among staff and faculty.

For practitioners, inspiration means engaging in intentional behaviours that uplift and motivate. Leaders who inspire others will create a sense of belonging that energises teams and fosters a culture of excellence. Leaders in HEIs should articulate a clear, hopeful vision; recognise and celebrate achievements; tell compelling institutional stories; and demonstrate personal integrity and passion. When staff feel inspired, they are more likely to embrace change, contribute innovative ideas, and go beyond routine responsibilities. Inspiration may be cultivated at all levels of the institution, not just among senior executives. Department heads, deans, and program leaders who lead with purpose and empathy can transform their teams and the institutional climate. Thus, HEIs in China encourage inspiration as a key dimension of effective leadership, empowering individuals and driving positive institutional outcomes.

7.3.2.2 Create an Enriched Student Learning Experience Environment

Integrity was underlined as a critical factor in building resilience in Chinese HEIs. Integrity is a core foundation for the university leadership team and is also critical for student skill development. University leaders should focus on developing student skills, as students' skills contribute to increased student satisfaction in higher education in China. To develop and improve student skills, universities need to improve teaching quality to engage students in learning and provide academic support, a supportive social environment, and university resources.

Ensure Academic Integrity

This study provides practical guidance for HEI leaders on embedding a culture of **integrity** across institutional practices. Especially in an AI era, academic integrity is vital in higher education as it preserves the credibility of academic institutions, promotes intellectual growth, ensures fairness, and prepares students for ethical professional conduct. When students engage in ethical practices, for example, they produce original work, citing sources correctly, and avoiding plagiarism, they contribute to the credibility and reliability of academic achievements. Integrity not only ensures academic success but also prepares individuals for ethical decision-making in their future careers. Employers seek graduates who demonstrate integrity, as it reflects their ability to uphold ethical standards in the workplace. Maintaining academic integrity promotes fairness and equality in education and ensures that all students are evaluated based on their own merit and efforts.

Leaders in HEIs are encouraged to set clear expectations and lead by example to foster a campus culture of honesty, accountability, and ethical responsibility. Role models are important in education. Students' integrity awareness will be established if tutors uphold integrity. Academic and administrative practices must be ethical, credible, and aligned with the public trust placed in higher education. From the academic staff perspective, they should uphold integrity when teaching and conducting research. Leaders also need to ensure clear integrity policies or rules to align with institutional values. They should implement honour codes and provide plagiarism detection tools. All students must be informed of the consequences of violating academic integrity. Clear guidance not only deters academic misconduct, such as plagiarism, cheating, and data falsification, but also promotes positive values such as fairness, transparency, and academic rigour. Furthermore, rather than relying solely on punishment, institutions should implement proactive educational initiatives and academic support strategies. For example, integrity training, orientation programs, detailed assessment design, supportive learning environments

(writing workshops) and accessible reporting mechanisms are effective ways to ensure integrity. Thus, with ethical education, guidance, detection and academic support, HEIs will enforce academic integrity.

Improve Teaching Quality

This study also identified teaching as a core element in enhancing students' learning experience. University teaching staff can raise integrity awareness and guide students on how to use AI tools appropriately in HEIs. Furthermore, because students value practical knowledge, academic staff should use real-life examples to explain theory in teaching. Curriculum structure should be updated to meet the needs of society and industry. It is recommended to increase university-enterprise co-operation, establish internship bases and industrial colleges. HEIs can invite guest lecturers to class and send academic staff and students to enterprises to visit and learn. To motivate students' focus during lectures, HEIs should apply diverse teaching methods, such as bilingual teaching, case study teaching, and problem-based learning, to improve teaching quality. The interaction between academic staff and students is also encouraged. In particular, HEIs should leverage AI-driven educational tools, such as blended teaching, MOOCs, smart classrooms, virtual simulation, and other digital resources, to offer customised learning experiences that make teaching more accessible and adaptive to student needs. Teaching skill competitions, teaching inspections and training, and feedback mechanisms are also encouraged to improve teaching skills. 'Teaching Excellence Award' may be established to increase the weight of teaching achievements in performance allocation. Furthermore, this study suggests a shift in academic culture that emphasises personal growth, creativity, and innovation rather than just grades. Chinese HEIs should move beyond rote memorisation and exam-driven education by incorporating active learning strategies, such as case studies, project-based learning, and interactive discussions, to strengthen students' critical thinking and creativity. Finally, approachable, knowledgeable academic

staff will help students stay engaged. Academic staff are encouraged to be more approachable, knowledgeable, and inspiring to students. Thus, practical input from guest lecturers, real-world examples, AI guidance, diverse teaching methods, teaching training, feedback mechanisms, and approachable, knowledgeable, and inspiring academic staff are all effective ways to improve teaching quality.

Provide Academic Support

Academic support services are recognised as a critical factor in student satisfaction. First, academic staff are encouraged to deliver classes that stimulate critical thinking to ensure graduate competencies and a positive student experience. Second, because clear, helpful feedback is important for student progress, feedback and assessment are encouraged to evaluate and enhance academic support programs. Especially in the AI era, digital tools and personalised learning technologies have extended the reach and relevance of academic support services. Technology-enabled feedback is recommended because of its timeliness, portability, convenience, and efficiency (Carless & Winstone, 2023). Third, because students value discussing academic queries with academic staff, it is recommended that academic staff actively engage in discussions with students. Meanwhile, the university may consider regularly gathering student feedback through surveys, focus groups, and advisory boards to ensure continuous improvement in student services. Furthermore, the university needs to provide accessible academic resources, including online learning platforms, tutoring centres, and mentorship programs, to help students cope with the rigorous academic environment and improve overall performance. Thus, HEIs could enhance student satisfaction and institutional excellence by providing academic support, such as delivering classes on critical thinking, clear and helpful feedback and discussing academic queries.

Develop Student Skill

This study reinforces that **skill development** is critical to higher education's value proposition, and it offers strategic insights for leaders in HEIs on designing and enhancing skill development initiatives that prepare students for academic success, employability and lifelong learning. Soft skills enable graduates to navigate dynamic job markets and emerging industries. Student digital literacy is emphasised in the AI era.

Leaders in HEIs are strongly encouraged to ensure curricula reflect both academic rigour and real-world relevance. In line with the value of strategic partnerships with industry to align graduate attributes with labour market needs, HEI leaders are advised to engage stakeholders in curriculum design, internships, and experiential learning opportunities that foster work-ready competencies. The industry-Academia Collaboration could be strengthened. The university can invite industry experts for workshops and guest lecturers to share practical insights, and create joint certification programs with enterprises to enhance students' employability. Leaders also need to ensure programs are accessible, culturally responsive, and tailored to diverse student needs. Various extracurricular activities, STEM projects, entrepreneurship projects, skill competitions, student unions, and clubs are recommended to be organised for students to participate in. Finally, leaders are encouraged to invest in professional development and incentivise innovative pedagogy that integrates skill development. It is important to integrate interdisciplinary learning to enhance students' versatility. Thus, HEIs should recognise the importance of soft skills, further Industry-Academia collaboration and organise a greater variety of activities to develop students' skills.

Create Social Environment

This research underscores the importance of creating an environment where all students feel valued, respected, and included. The social environment is important for personal skill development and emotional well-being, especially as sports activities support students' mental health and well-being. However,

universities in China seem to focus too much on academic achievement, and students have limited extracurricular opportunities. More extracurricular activities need to be organised to encourage participation, so students can develop stronger soft and practical skills. Thus, HEI leaders are encouraged to foster a sense of belonging and support co-curricular activities, student unions and sport clubs.

Optimise University Resources

This study provides practical guidance for HEI leaders on planning, managing, and optimising **university resources**. Resource stewardship advances the mission and impact of higher education institutions. It is recommended that Chinese HEIs align resource allocation with other institutional priorities such as teaching quality, academic support, digital transformation and student skill development. Strategic investments in staff upskilling, faculty development, and technology infrastructure are closely linked to student satisfaction and help institutions remain resilient and competitive in a rapidly evolving education landscape. Leaders are encouraged to adopt transparent, data-informed approaches that direct resources where they can create the greatest value. As the professional development of academic support staff becomes increasingly important, leaders must consider capacity building and training to ensure staff are equipped to meet the evolving demands of higher education. Also, given intense academic pressures, universities should prioritise student mental health support. According to Duraku, Davis and Hamiti (2023), there is limited appropriate mental health support provided in Chinese HEIs at the moment. Universities should emphasise and expand counselling services (e.g., free coaching, phone counselling, web platforms), anti-stress therapies, sports, awareness campaigns, and other well-being initiatives integrated into campus life. Fourth, institutions should develop career support services. Institutions can collaborate with industries to offer internships, job shadowing, career counselling, and skill-building workshops to prepare students for the

competitive job market and align their education with workforce demands. Lastly, updating technological infrastructure is important. Smart classrooms equipped with interactive technologies are needed to support hybrid learning. Libraries and digital resources need improvement. For example, it is suggested to expand library collections with access to international journals, e-books, and research databases. Study spaces can be equipped with modern technology, including computer labs and group discussion rooms. Thus, responding to the emerging student needs, leaders in HEIs should manage university resources more strategically and effectively, ensuring that institutional assets, including human, financial, technological, and physical ones, are leveraged to drive resilience and equitable student outcomes.

To sum up, it is important for university leaders to improve student satisfaction by creating an enriched and resilient student learning experience environment. For HEIs, graduate employment is a critical measure of effectiveness and societal contribution, and it is no longer solely a reflection of academic excellence. Thus, HEI leaders should embed graduate outcomes in strategic plans to align curriculum, pedagogy, institutional support, and resource allocation with evolving real-world demands. On the other hand, HEIs have a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including students, tutors, employers, local communities, government agencies, industry partners, and alumni. To prepare students effectively for the workforce, HEI leaders must prioritise robust stakeholder engagement to ensure HEIs remain resilient and keep pace with labour market shifts.

7.4 Limitations of the Research

Every research has its limitations. In this section, the limitations of this study, which are of conceptual and methodological nature, are acknowledged.

The first limitation of this study, of methodological nature, relates to the geographical setting of this research. This research considered a single context: HEIs in China. Countries are characterised by unique cultural features

(Hofstede, 1980; Opute & Madichie, 2017), and, as noted in further literature, context is unique, with its social structure, culture, economic, and demographic differences (Triandis, 1989). Thus, caution is needed when applying this study's findings to other contexts. Further on the point of culture, given that China is a collectivist culture society, the findings from this study may not have relevance for individualist culture societies.

Even within the Chinese context, care must be taken when transporting the findings from this study. China is a vast country with diverse features and significant regional differences (Yang et al., 2021). The education system is a highly specific sector. Most higher education leaders who participated in the interview in this research are from southeastern China, which may lead to geographically conditioned results. In this study, HEIs were treated as a homogeneous group, and potential differences arising from regional variation in China were not considered.

A further methodological limitation relates to the study sample. China is a massive country with a large number of registered universities, and the number of university students enrolled in China is large and diverse. In fact, China had a total of 3,117 registered universities as of 20th June 2024. There are 2,868 ordinary institutions of higher education, including 1,308 undergraduate schools and 1,560 higher vocational (specialist) schools, and 249 are adult institutions of higher education (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2025).

Although this study adopted a mixed-methods approach (a methodological advantage), it still has a limitation: the sample cannot represent all students in China's higher education sector, which limits the generalisability of the findings.

Another methodological limitation relates to the qualitative tool used. Although this study combined quantitative and qualitative tools, it first used a qualitative, interview-based approach, which is subject to researcher subjectivity. Thus, the researcher’s subjective interpretation and analysis of qualitative data may

influence the overall findings.

Another limitation relates to the study's conceptualisation. In this study of resilience in higher education, the conceptual framing considered only aspects such as university resources, teaching content, academic support, integrity, social environment, and student satisfaction. Thus, this research did not consider several aspects relevant to understanding resilience in the university context.

7.5 Future Research Directions

By exploring the Chinese context, this study contributes to understanding higher education institutions (HEIs) and resilience. From a contribution perspective, this study flags directions for future research. To better understand resilience in HEIs, more research is needed.

One core step in advancing the general understanding of resilience literature in HEIs is to address this study's conceptual limitations. Resilience in HEIs involves several key aspects, and future research could adopt a conceptual framing that considers aspects ignored in this study. For example, future research could consider internationalisation processes, university reputation perception features and implications, and university image aspects.

Future research could also address the methodological limitations of this study, with several options to consider. First, the sampling issues for each tool used in this research could be addressed. Although this study adopted a mixed-methods approach, it still has a methodological limitation: the sample cannot be considered representative of all students in China's higher education sector. Larger samples could be utilised to validate this study. Future studies could validate these findings with a larger sample to improve generalisability. The questionnaire, which is a universal instrument in this research, would need to be replicated across different geographical regions to validate its structure. Future research could consider more universities in China ensuring that a representative consideration of multiple regions in China is done given the

cultural heterogeneity that characterises China's diverse population, with its mix of multiple ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions, and how these may influence resilience features and outcomes. Beyond the Chinese context, future research could also explore HEIs in other geographical contexts. Comparative studies across several countries that reflect varying cultural contexts could also be carried out.

Finally, from a methodological standpoint, several options could be considered when exploring this topic.

7.6 Reflection on the Research Journey

I embarked on my DBA journey more than five years ago, driven by passion and curiosity. However, I soon encountered several challenges in the doctoral research journey. I must admit that, because of these challenges, I often felt self-doubt and frustration, and I even considered quitting at one point.

The doctoral journey is like a marathon. One skill I gained during the DBA journey is perseverance, which has been integral to my personal growth during this period. The research journey is not always smooth. With a positive mindset and persistent effort, challenges and failures have gradually shaped me and strengthened my research skills.

Secondly, communication plays a crucial role in the research journey. I know how important the support and help from my supervisors and peers have been. I communicate well with my supervisors and respond positively to constructive feedback. Sometimes, I even ask my peers for help when I have difficulties. Engaging in discussions and interacting with supervisors and peers not only enhanced my academic ability but also strengthened my confidence as a researcher and communicator.

Thirdly, I find my problem-solving ability has also improved during the research journey. To meet doctoral research standards, I had to revise my thesis draft repeatedly. Rather than feeling worried and helpless, I needed to find ways to solve problems that arise under pressure and difficulty. I learned to immerse

myself in searching for and reading relevant literature. I learned how to conduct interviews with experts and administer questionnaires in the research journey. Also, I learned how to use NVIVO and SPSS software to analyse data, analytical territories that were unimaginable to me prior to this research.

Life is an endless learning process. As I reflect on this journey, I have recognised its profound impact on both my personal and professional growth. The DBA study has been an immense journey of learning, resilience, and self-discovery for me. I have discovered myself anew at every stage of the research journey. I cherish my development as well as the great support and help from my supervisors and family. A doctoral degree is not the end but just the beginning of my academic career. I will leverage what I have gained to move forward and actively seek collaboration with other scholars at home and abroad. I will continue to deepen my professional knowledge and endeavour to contribute more to research in higher education institutions with greater enthusiasm in the future.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Research on the effective leadership for resilience in higher education in China

1. How is the university improving the student learning experience?
2. How is your university ensuring student academic integrity? (i.e. discouraging any unethical practices of plagiarism, etc from students)
3. How is your university addressing the skills needs of external stakeholders? (e.g. employers)
4. How are your students acquiring skills to meet future needs of industry?
5. What steps is your university taking to make your campus more green and sustainable?
6. What steps is your university taking to make it more appealing for international students to study at your institute?
7. How does your university leaders demonstrate authenticity?
8. What are the key characteristics of an inspiring leader in university?
9. How can university leaders build trust between management and academic staff?
10. How are the executive leaders, at your university, successfully managing change in your institution?
11. Why are some academic staff resistant to change and how can this be overcome?
12. How are your university leaders building your research capacity?
13. What would be the key challenges facing your university in the next 5 years?
14. What are the challenges of improving your university ranking position (nationally and globally)?
15. What steps is your university taking to improve your university ranking?
16. What improvements are needed to enable your university to become more globally competitive?

17. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding how universities in China are investing and prioritising their resources to ensure a resilient and enriching learning experience for their students and staff?

Appendix 2: Online Questionnaire

Student Experience Questionnaire

This questionnaire hopes to learn about your personal experience at your University. All answers will be treated in the strictest of confidence and no student can be identified from their responses. Please select the response answers that you agree with. Please note sometimes the survey asks questions that you may disagree with. Many thanks.

Student engagement / learning

	How would you rate the teaching and learning experience at your university?	**Strongly Disagree**						**Strongly Agree**
1	Academic Staff are **approachable**……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	Academic Staff are very **knowledgeable** about their subject…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	Academic Staff **inspire me** to achieve my full potential……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	Academic Staff deliver lectures and seminars that **have my attention** for the entire class……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	Academic Staff are **happy to be contacted** to discuss academic matters…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	Academic Staff **use examples** of how topics are applied in the real world and that I can relate to……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	Academic Staff provide **(upload) sufficient learning** material on the university online learning portal to assist with self-learning……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	Academic staff know how to **apply different teaching methods** (case studies, exercises, groupwork, presentations, etc) to engage students……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	Academic staff **use the latest technologies (**online videos, real time quizzes, simulations, AI, etc) to enrich the learning experience…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10	Academic staff **invite practitioners** to convey how concepts are applied in industry……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11	Academic staff **DO NOT** deliver classes that challenge me to think critically…...	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12	Academic staff should provide more guidance on **how to use AI** for learning….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13	**Overall**, I am satisfied with the learning experience at my university……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Skills Development

	How would you rate the skills you have acquired at your university?	**Strongly Disagree**						**Strongly Agree**
14	I am confident in **communicating** (presentation and writing)……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

15	I am a very good at **working in a team……..**	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16	I am confident in **developing creative solutions** to problems……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17	I have **NOT** matured personally, academically and professionally at university….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18	I have improved my **emotional intelligence skills** (e.g. empathy, patience, etc)…	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19	I am very self-confident……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20	I am more **self-aware** of my capabilities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21	I am very **disciplined** in making sure **assignments** are completed before time	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22	I am confident in **analysing data……**	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23	I am confident in my **critical thinking** when assessing a problem……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24	I am confident in **using technology** (AI, online platforms, etc) for learning……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25	I have participated in visits or undertake **internships and entrepreneurship projects** to gain practical skills……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26	**Overall,** I am satisfied with the skills I have developed at university…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Support Resources

	How would you rate the support services at your university?	**Strongly Disagree**						**Strongly Agree**
27	There are amble spaces to **study on campus……**	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28	Academic staff provide clear and helpful feedback to improve my learning……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29	Academic staff are **NEVER** available to discuss any academic queries…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30	Academic staff respond within **THREE** days to any Email queries……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
31	Academic staff write clear assessment instructions of what students must do…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
32	I am regularly **informed** about information relating to my course……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
33	The support staff are **very friendly……**	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
34	The university provides **opportunities for feedback** on the support services……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
35	**Overall,** there is good administration of my course……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
36	**Overall,** there are a lot of support services for students at university……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Feedback

	How would you rate the feedback from your tutors?	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
37	Academic staff use a range of assessment methods to evaluate student learning…	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
38	Academic staff provide clear and helpful feedback to improve my learning……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
39	Academic staff are **NEVER** available to discuss any academic queries…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
40	Academic staff respond within **THREE** days to any Email queries……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
41	Academic staff write clear assessment instructions of what students must do…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
42	**Overall,** I am satisfied with the level of feedback provided by the academic staff..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Social Environment

	How would you rate the social experiences at your university?	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
43	I have **joined a sporting club** at my university……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
44	I have joined other **social activity clubs** / **societies** at my university…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
45	I have made many new **lifelong friends** during my time at the university……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
46	I participate in **organising** social events……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
47	**Overall,** I am satisfied with my engagement with social activities……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Integrity

	How would you rate Academic Integrity at your university?	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
48	The university provides **clear guidelines about Academic misconduct** (plagiarism, copying, using AI, etc) when students submit their work…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
49	I know the **penalty** for student Academic Misconduct (plagiarism, etc)…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
50	My **tutors uphold Integrity** in everything they do (teaching and research)……	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
51	There are classes that explain **student ethical responsibility** at university…….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
52	I am aware of other **students** who are **plagiarizing** work/ data result findings…...	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
53	I have become more **aware of global environmental issues** …….	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
54	In my future career, I **will challenge** any unethical behaviour in the organization..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
55	I am aware of the steps my university is adopting to **reduce its carbon footprint.**	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

56	**Overall,** my university experience has made me a more ethical person……..	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Overall Experiences

	How much do you agree with the following statements?	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
57	Overall, I am **satisfied** with my university learning experience……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
58	Overall, I am **happy** with my learning experience at university……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
59	Overall, I am **proud** to be part of my university……..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
60	Overall, I am confident I will achieve my **career aspirations……**	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
61	Overall, I have improved my **career prospects** by going to university……...	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
62	Overall, I have experienced **mental health issues** while studying at university…..	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Demographics

63	Do you intend to start your own business?.....	Yes…..[ ] No…[ ]
64	Would you recommend your course to family/friends/ others?	Yes…..[ ] No…[ ]
65	I intend to donate money/time to my university in the future...	Yes…..[ ] No…[ ]
66	Do you live in your family home during term time?.....	Yes…..[ ] No…[ ]
67	Are you.……	Male…[ ] Female....[ ]
68	How old are you?.....	
69	What qualification are you studying for?.....	Undergraduate Degree [ ] Masters[ ] PhD[ ]
70	Do you study.……	Full-time [ ] Part-time [ ]
71	Are you a student from.……	China [ ] Asia [ ] Overseas [ ]
72	What **Subject / Major** are you studying?...	
73	What university do you study at:……	
74	What is your year of study?……	1 2 3 4 5 6 (please circle)

Notes:

75. Are there any questions that needed clarification? If yes, which questions?
76. How could the questions be improved?
77. Do you have any other suggestions do improve the questionnaire?

Appendix 3: Invitation Letter

Invitation Letter

邀请信

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Mengjun Chen, who is conducting the doctoral research at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. I work in Economics and Trade School of Fujian Jiangxia University. In fulfilment of this degree, I would like to conduct interviews with leaders in higher education in China. You are being invited to consider taking part in my research study **Research on the effective leadership for resilience in higher education in China**. This research is under the auspices of UWTSD.

Before you decide whether or not to take part in, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will be involved. Please take time to read the information carefully and feel free to ask me any questions if needed.

尊敬的领导，

我是来自英国威尔士三一圣大卫大学的陈孟君。我就职于福建江夏学院经济贸易学院。为了完成博士论文写作，我需要对中国高等教育的管理者进行访谈。我的研究课题是中国高等教育韧性领导力研究，很高兴能邀请到您参与到我的研究工作中。本研究全程由威尔士三一圣大卫大学支持和指导。在您决定是否参与访谈之前，请辛苦阅读本信息单。如您有任何疑问，或您想要了解更多信息，可以随时与我联系。

Study Title: Research on the effective leadership for resilience in higher education in China

研究名称：中国高等教育韧性领导力研究

Purpose of the Research:

The study intends to fill in the knowledge gaps in the literature and contribute to the understanding of the effective leadership strategy in higher education sector.

研究目的：本研究旨在填补文献中的知识空白，并有助于理解高等教育部门的有效领导策略。

Why have you been chosen?

It will be appreciated if you can participate in my research. As a leader, you have been invited in my research interview because you have related experiences and insights in higher education. Your kind participation will definitely help me gain an understanding of higher education and develop the resilicence of higher education in China.

为何邀请您参与本研究？

非常感谢您能在百忙中抽空参与我的课题研究并给与指导。我很想听听作为高校领导者的您在高等教育管理中的经验和见解。您的参与将有助于研究者更好地了解高等教育，并推动中国高等教育韧性发展。

What will you have to do and how long will it take?
You will be asked some questions around my research objectives. The interview will last about an hour. It will cover both your thoughts about your personal experience and your insights being a leader in higher education.
In the face-to-face (online) interview, you will be provided with the information sheet and a consent form. The researcher will ensure that you understand the ethical issues relating to the research and your consent to participate. In an online interview, the electronic version of information sheet and consent form will be sent to you before.

涉及事项和时长：

在访谈中，我会围绕研究目的对您进行提问，您可自由回答。访谈时长约为60分钟，问题主要包括您作为高校管理者的个人经验和见解。

在面对面（在线）的访谈中，您将收到一份（纸质）信息表和知情同意书。我将和您说明与研究相关的伦理问题，获您同意后，访谈将正式开始。如是在线访谈，信息表和同意书的电子版会提前发给您。在正式在线访谈开始前，我会询问您是否同意参加本研究，当您给出肯定的回答，即表示同意时，访谈将正式开始。

What will happen to the information collected?
The personal information will be conducted anonymously. All data will be stored on the University cloud—One Drive and the researcher's personal laptop protected by passwords—which will not be shared. Only the researcher and his supervisors have access to the data generated by the research activity. The information collected will be used by the researcher to write a research report for the credit of doctoral degree. It is possible that a doctoral thesis, articles, and presentations may be the outcome of the research.
收集到的信息如何处理?

任何涉及您个人信息的资料将被匿名处理。所有数据将存储在受密码保护的个人笔记本电脑上和大学的云盘上，所有数据都不会被共享。只有我和我的导师可以访问研究活动产生的数据。收集到的信息将被分析并用于博士学位论文中，也可能被用于论文发表和研究报告中。

Declaration to participants
If you take part in the survey, you have the right to:
● Refuse to answer any particular question, and to withdraw from the interview before completion.
●Ask any further questions via email about the interview that occurs to you during your participation.
● Be given access to a summary of report findings when it is concluded.
参与者权利：
如果您参与调查,您有以下权利：

●拒绝回答某些问题，及在访谈结束前退出

●通过电子邮件询问有关本次访谈的关切问题

●在研究完成时，可查阅研究发现的总结

Who's responsible?

If you have any questions or concerns about the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

相关责任人：

如果您对项目有任何疑问或担忧，无论是现在还是将来，请随时联系：

Researcher 研究人员	**Lead Supervisor** 一导	**Supervisor** 二导
Mengjun Chen 陈孟君	**Doctor Aftab Dean**	**Doctor Abdullah Promise Opute**
1905034@student.uwtsd.ac.uk **10269357@qq.com**	**a.dean@uwtsd.ac.uk**	**a.opute@uwtsd.ac.uk**

Appendix 4: Consent Form

Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

CONSENT FORM / 同意书

Title of Project / 项目名称: Research on the effective leadership for resilience in higher education in China

Name and contact details of researcher / 研究人员信息:

姓名：Mengjun Chen 邮箱：1905034@student.uwtsd.ac.uk; 10269357@qq.com

Please tick box if you agree with the statement / 如您同意，请在下列方格内打勾

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
   本人确认已阅读并理解上述信息单，并获得了提问的机会。 ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
   我知道我的参与是自愿的，且我可在任何时候退出。 ☐

3. I agree to take part in this study.
   我同意参加这项研究。 ☐

4. I understand that data collected about me during this study will be anonymized before it is submitted for publication.
   我知道在本次研究中收集到的关于我的数据在提交发表前将被匿名处理。 ☐

5. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.
   我同意将访谈录音。 ☐

6. I agree to allow the dataset collected to be used for future research projects.
   我同意将收集的数据集用于未来的研究项目。 ☐

7. I agree to be contacted about possible participation in future research projects.
   我同意研究者就进一步的研究联系我。 ☐

Mengjun Chen	/ 03 /2023	
Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 5: Profile of Interviewed Participant

Profile of Interviewed Participant

No.	Leader Level	Gender	Age
1	Low	Male	55
2	Low	Male	53
3	Low	Male	42
4	Middle	Male	45
5	Low	Male	40
6	Low	Male	41
7	High	Male	58
8	Middle	Male	46
9	Middle	Male	40
10	Middle	Male	45
11	Middle	Male	46
12	High	Male	50
13	High	Male	52
14	High	Male	56
15	High	Male	55
16	High	Male	57
17	Low	Female	43
18	Middle	Male	47
19	Low	Female	30
20	Middle	Female	48
21	Middle	Male	46
22	Low	Male	35
23	Low	Male	38
24	Low	Male	39
25	Low	Female	37

Appendix 6: First-Order Analysis in Each Interview Question

Question#1 - How is the university improving the student learning experience?

Table 5.2 Theme and Codes for Q1

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Learning Resources & Facilities	online learning resources, obtain information by more channels, electronic library databases, advanced laboratories, study rooms, intelligent classrooms, air conditioning	15
Learning Incentives & Interest	active learning atmosphere, clear goal for learning, learning interest, internal motivation, diverse cross-curricular programmes provided, co-learning and share learning atmosphere, learning clubs, interest groups, co-operation with enterprises and industries, practical training courses, internships	13
Teaching Quality	teaching skills competitions, innovative teaching modes, digital innovation in teaching and learning, teacher training, teacher-student interaction, personalisation of students, diverse teaching methods, students' learning willingness, lifelong learning, reflection and refinement, feedback mechanisms, teaching inspection	12
Practice & Activities	social and youth voluntary service practice activities, green campus, intelligent campus, spirit of collectivism, teamwork and communication ability, interdisciplinary programs, various innovative and entrepreneurial projects	12
Curriculum System Updated	integrates the demands	6

Excerpts from respondents' comments and emerging Keywords and Discussions presented next:

Learning Resources & Facilities

Table 5.3 Quotes on Learning Resources & Facilities

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The online learning resources stimulates students' learning interest and classroom participation. Take Mooc for an example, Students can arrange their own learning more independently, at any time and any place to choose their own learning content. The rapid advancement of online courses has clearly enhanced the experience of sustainable and resilient learning for teachers and students especially during the Covid-19 quarantine time.	online learning resources, Mooc, learning more independently, sustainable and resilient learning	Respondent #19
Students can obtain information by more channels, for example, they can read cutting-edge research literature via electronic library databases. There is also a need to ensure that students' learning environments via the provision of advanced laboratories, study rooms and intelligent classrooms. Students study comfortably in the study room with air conditioning.	obtain information by more channels, read cutting-edge research literature, electronic library databases, advanced laboratories, study rooms, intelligent classrooms, air conditioning	Respondent #18

Discussion:

From the responses, we can see that in terms of Learning Resources and Facilities, the respondents indicates a preference for online learning resource as it helps student learn more independently, and resiliently. Rich electronic

database will enable students to obtain cutting-edge literature review and gain more information. Advanced laboratories, classrooms and study rooms are important learning facilities for students, which ensure the students have a good learning environment.

Learning Incentives & Interest

Table 5.4 Quotes on Learning Incentives & Interest

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
As lifelong learning is now advocated, universities should create an atmosphere of active learning for students. For example, our university provides a wide range of diversified cross-curricular program and choices for student, so that they can choose programs based on their own interests and goals.	atmosphere of active learning, diverse cross-curricular program and choices for student	Respondent #17
The university create co-learning and share learning atmosphere by establishing learning clubs and various interest groups.	co-learning and share learning atmosphere, learning clubs, interest groups	Respondent #6
We establish contacts with enterprises (school-enterprise cooperation), hiring experts such as entrepreneurs and managers in the field, to give lectures. If students have a certain understanding of the workplace and clear direction for learning, they will increase their learning interest and internal motivation.	contacts with enterprises, experts hired, clear direction for learning, learning interest, internal motivation	Respondent #4
The university strengthens their co-operation with enterprises and industries. We provide students with practical training courses and internships opportunities.	co-operation with enterprises and industries, practical training courses, internships	Respondent #15

Discussion:

With regard to Learning Incentives and Interest, as evident in Table 5.4 above, respondents indicate active learning and building a sharing learning atmosphere increase students learning incentives and interests. If university establishes more contact with enterprise, the students may have clear understanding and direction via practical training courses and internships. Once the learning target is clear, the students will be stimulated internally. Based on overall interview outcome, most respondents are of the view that providing diverse cross-curricular program, learning clubs and interest groups for students, will not only make student enjoy learning but also steer their learning desire.

Teaching Quality

Table 5.5 Quotes on Teaching Quality

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university attaches great importance to the quality of teaching, and regularly organises a number of teaching skills competitions to help teachers learn from the mature teaching experience every semester. Teachers are encouraged to use technology to explore innovative teaching modes, such as the flipped classroom.	the quality of teaching, teaching skills competitions, innovative teaching modes, flipped classroom	Respondent #4
We focus on improving the quality of teaching, through the training of dual-teacher teachers, innovative teaching mode. We pay attention to the personalisation of students and diversify the forms of teaching according to the needs of each individual. The classroom focuses on teacher-student interaction. For example, we strengthen digital teaching, bilingual teaching, case study teaching and problem-based learning and so on.	the quality of teaching, training of dual-teacher teachers, innovative teaching mode, personalisation of students, diversify the forms, teacher-student interaction, digital teaching, bilingual teaching, case study teaching, problem-based learning	Respondent #15
I believe that the teaching process is a lifelong learning process, and the improvement of teaching standards is also a lifelong process of reflection and refinement. The students' evaluation on flipped classroom indicates students' learning willingness has increased significantly. We have ushered in an era of digital innovation in teaching and learning. In the flipped classroom, the teacher plays the role of a knowledge transmitter, classroom manager, and a guide and facilitator of learning.	lifelong learning process, reflection and refinement, students' evaluation, students' learning willingness, digital innovation in teaching and learning, flipped classroom, transmitter, manager, guide, facilitator	Respondent #20
The university has a whole set of these feedback	feedback mechanisms, teaching	Respondent #9

mechanisms for teaching and learning. We carry out a teaching inspection every semester, and hold a symposium to have face-to-face communication on teaching and learning.	inspection, symposium, face-to-face communication	
In my own teaching process, I have used some information technology, including the introduction of Learning Pass, Mooc and so on. The innovation of the teaching mode has brought about an obvious positive effect on the students' learning experience.	information technology, Learning Pass, Mooc, innovation of the teaching mode	Respondent #19

Discussion:

From Table 5.5, it can be seen that in terms of teaching quality, respondents believe innovative teaching mode, such as flipped classroom has brought an obvious positive effect on the students learning experience. Technology is greatly encouraged towards embracing innovative teaching mode. Tutor-student interaction is important in teaching, thus tutors need to pay attention to students' personalisation and apply diverse teaching methods in the classroom, such as bilingual teaching, case study teaching and problem-based learning. Respondents recommended universities to organise teaching skill competition, teaching inspection and training to improve teaching skills. Feedback mechanisms are proposed to establish insights for tutors to reflect and refine their communication with students.

Practice & Activities

Table 5.6 Quotes on Practice & Activities

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We encourage students to take participate in social and youth voluntary service practice activities, such as the green campus, intelligent campus, etc,. We cultivate the spirit of collectivism and raise their teamwork and communication ability.	social and youth voluntary service practice activities, green campus, intelligent campus, spirit of collectivism, teamwork and communication ability	Respondent #6
Students are encouraged to participate in interdisciplinary programs and various innovative and entrepreneurial projects to develop different skills.	interdisciplinary programs, various innovative and entrepreneurial projects	Respondent #4

Discussion:

From the point of Practice & Activities, respondents indicate that students are encouraged to participate in various practices and activities to develop their skills, such as voluntary service activities, green and intelligent campus activities. Also, teamwork and communication ability, creativity and entrepreneurship ability, interdisciplinary learning ability, collectivism spirit are very important qualities for graduate students.

Curriculum System Updated

Table 5.7 Quotes on Curriculum System Update

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university integrates the demands of the society and enterprises directly into the curriculum system. If teachers are not capable, we will hire talents from enterprises to teach.	integrates the demands, talents hired	Respondent #7

Discussion:

In terms of Curriculum System Update, respondents indicate the university should integrate the needs of industry and enterprise to raise the students learning. University and enterprises can jointly develop and build the curriculum to enhance students' learning. It is necessary to adjust the existing talent training system, syllabus and course content, and introduce new skills into the curricula, so that students can master the skills required by the society in the future.

Visual map showing links between themes for Q1:

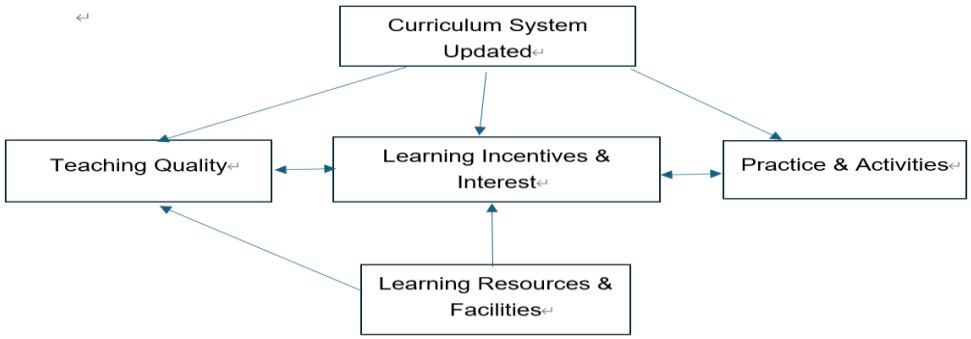


Figure 5.1 Visual Map for Q1

Summary:

As it can be seen from the visual map above, the university can improve the student learning experience by improving teaching quality, providing learning resources and facilities, stimulating student learning incentives and interests, organising practices and activities and updating curriculum systems. if curriculum system is updated by integrating the need of the society, the teaching quality, learning incentives and interest and practice and activities will be enhanced. Good teaching quality, practice and activities participation will drive students' learning incentives and interest. If students show learning willingness, tutors will be inspired and teaching quality will be improved. Learning interests and incentives influence the practice and activities organised by the university. Learning resource and facilities, such as online learning resource and flipped classroom will impact students' learning incentives and interests. Additionally, the digital learning resources and flipped classroom as part of innovative teaching and learning will enhance teaching quality and learning outcome.

Question#2 - How is your university ensuring student academic integrity? (i.e. discouraging unethical practices of plagiarism, etc by students)

Table 5.8 Theme and Codes for Q2

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Academic Integrity (Guidance and Detection)	Guidance and Detection clear integrity rules, regulated system, plagiarism detection software	15
Academic Integrity (Integrity and Moral Education)	Integrity and Moral Education integrity education awareness-raising campaigns, class sessions with counsellors, instructors, guide, community service and extra-curricular activities, academic integrity awareness, self-monitoring and self-education, good examples set	13
Academic Integrity (Penalty)	Penalty scholarships and loans will be gone	12
Academic Integrity (Academic Ability Support)	Academic Ability Support create writing centres, search study partners, academic writing skills, upgrade databases	12
Academic Integrity (Trust)	Trust self-monitor, self-manage	6

Excerpts from Respondents' Comments and emergent Keywords, and Discussions presented next:

Firstly, the excerpts for academic integrity are presented.

Guidance and Detection

Table 5.9 Quotes on Guidance and Detection

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We have clear integrity rules and regulated system, so that the students know the consequences if dishonest.	clear integrity rules, regulated system	Respondent #6
We have professional plagiarism detection software to test the papers submitted by students.	plagiarism detection software	Respondent #16

Discussion:

Table 5.9 shows that from the point of Guidance and Detection, the respondents think it is necessary to set clear integrity rules and regular system. Professional plagiarism detection software is a kind of useful supervision tool when the students' papers or assignments submitted.

Integrity and Moral Education

Table 5.10 Quotes on Integrity and Moral Education

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university provides students with integrity education and conduct awareness-raising campaigns, such as class sessions with counsellors. The importance of academic integrity is emphasized to students. The student should develop a sense of integrity because integrity is a key characteristic affecting a person's life development.	integrity education, awareness-raising campaigns, class sessions with counsellors	Respondent #16
The university also requires instructors to better guide students throughout the process to identify problems and help students better comply with the requirements of academic integrity.	instructors, guide	Respondent #17
Students are encouraged to participate in community service and extra-curricular activities to develop their civic awareness and sense of social responsibility.	community service and extra-curricular activities	Respondent #14
We raise students academic integrity awareness via self-monitoring and self-education.	academic integrity awareness, self-monitoring and self-education	Respondent #15
It is also important for teachers to set good examples. If mentors do not behave with integrity in their own teaching and research, it is difficult for students to behave with academic integrity.	good examples set	Respondent #11

Discussion:

From the point of terms of Integrity and Moral Education, respondents reasonably agree that the universities need to play their role in enhancing the students' academic integrity awareness level via class sessions with counsellors, self-monitoring and self-education. Instructors' guidance, community service and extra-curricular activities and good examples set by tutors are the other effective integrity and moral education approaches to encourage and improve the students' academic integrity.

Penalties

Table 5.11 Quotes on Penalties

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university has relevant penalties for unethical behavior. For example, if plagiarism is detected, all the scholarships and loans will be gone. Even, the student will not be able to successfully obtain the degree.	penalties, scholarships and loans will be gone	Respondent #17

Discussion:

Regarding terms of Penalties, respondents are conscious that the university has penalties for unethical behaviour. For example, the scholarship and loans will be withdrawn when plagiarism is confirmed.

Academic Ability Support

Table 5.12 Quotes on Academic Ability Support

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent

The university provides academic support services, such as creating writing centres and searching study partners to help students acquire the necessary academic skills and improve their academic writing. The university upgrades databases so that students can read the latest literature.	academic support, create writing centres, search study partners, academic skills, academic writing, upgrade databases	Respondent #17

Discussion:

Regarding Academic Ability Support, respondents identify academic support as important to improving students' academic ability. Critical aspects emphasised in that regard include the writing centre, study partners and updated databases. These are essential aspects that could improve students' academic skills and contribute to boosting student confidence in undertaking academic work ethically.

Trust

Table 5.13 Quotes on Trust

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We grant the students while a degree of trust, so that students learn to self-monitor and self-manage their integrity.	trust, self-monitor, self-manage	Respondent #6

Discussion:

On the point of Trust, respondents indicate that the students enjoy a good measure of trust that they need to self-monitor and self-manage their integrity.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q2:

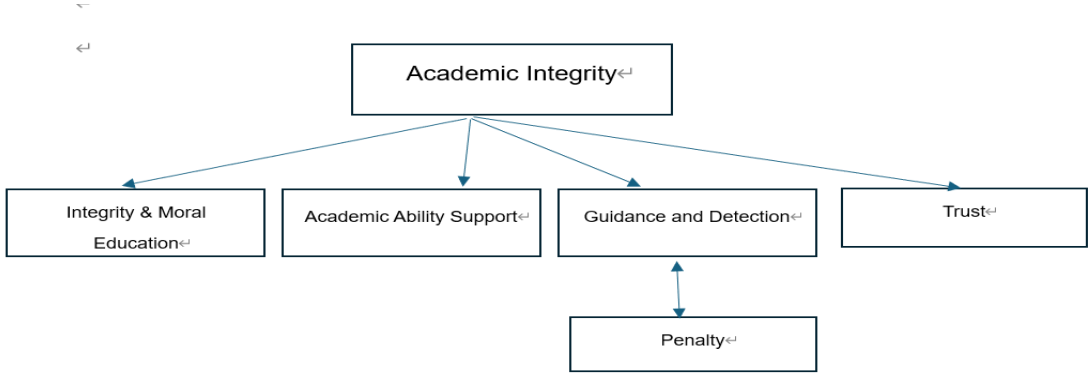


Figure 5.2 Visual Map for Q2

Summary:

As Figure 5.2 shows, the university can ensure student academic integrity in multiple ways. Firstly, it is important to provide students with integrity & moral education to raise the student academic integrity awareness, through guidance, community service and extra-curricular activities and good examples set by teachers. Secondly, mechanisms such as writing centre, study partner and updated database, can be used by the university to support student academic integrity. Thirdly, it is necessary to supervise the students via clear integrity rules set and professional plagiarism detection software. If unethical behaviour is detected, the students will receive clear guidelines on penalties. Lastly, from the positive perspective, giving the students a good measure of trust would help them to self-monitor and self-management.

Question#3 - How is your university addressing the skills needs of external stakeholders? (e.g. employers)

Table 5.14 Theme and Codes for Q3

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Cultivate Graduates According to the	Curriculum System Updated According to the Needs,	15

Needs (Curriculum)	close partnership with external stakeholders, content of the programs meets the needs of society	
Practice & Activities	Internships	13
Cultivate Graduates According to the Needs (Partners)	Partners platforms built together, strengthen the co-operative relationship, establish practice bases and industrial colleges, joint courses	12
Cultivate Graduates According to the Needs (Industry)	Industry experts are invited, give lectures, formulate talent training programs and syllabuses, improve our teaching	12
Teaching Quality	Teachers Visting the Enterprise teachers visit and work in enterprises, study tours	6

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions provided next:

Cultivate Graduates According to the Needs - Curriculum

Table 5.15 Quotes on Cultivate Graduates According to the Needs – Curriculum

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Teaching plans, syllabus and curriculum system should be updated according to the needs of the job market and the employers.	curriculum system updated according to the needs	Respondent #16
The university establishes a close partnership with external stakeholders to ensure the content of the programs taught meets the needs of society.	close partnership with external stakeholders, content of the programs meets the needs of society	Respondent #11

Discussion:

From the point of nurturing Graduates, respondents point to the need to update curriculum system and teaching program to meet the needs of the society. In this regard, respondents also see the need for the universities to engage closely with external stakeholders.

Practice & Activities

Table 5.16 Quotes on Practice & Activities

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university not only focuses on cultivating the transmission of theoretical knowledge, but also on the practical operation and problem-solving ability of students. Internships are organized for students to acquire relevant skills in the working environment. Practical trainings help students to understand the needs of the society.	Internships practical trainings	Respondent #18

Discussion:

On the point of Practice & Activities, respondents indicate that in order to address the external stakeholders needs, internship and practical training in the working environment are important for students to acquire relevant skills.

Nurturing Graduates to meet Needs - Partners

Table 5.17 Quotes on Cultivate Graduates According to the Needs – Partners

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We strengthen the co-operative relationship with enterprises, industries and local communities by establishing practice bases and industrial colleges.	strengthen the co-operative relationship, establish practice bases and industrial colleges	Respondent #15
We organize joint courses which are taught by both university and enterprise teachers. The real cases of enterprises are integrated into the curriculum, so that students can learn the latest skills.	joint courses	Respondent #18

Discussion:

A further point considered in understanding how graduates are nurtured relates to the interest of partners. Here, respondents emphasise the need for the universities to strengthen the collaborations with enterprises, industries and local communities and build teaching platforms together, such as establishing practice bases, industrial colleges and joint course.

Nurturing Graduates to meet the Needs - Industry

Table 5.18 Quotes on Cultivate Graduates According to the Needs – Industry

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Industry experts are invited regularly to give lectures. They help us to formulate talent training programs and syllabuses to improve our teaching.	experts are invited, give lectures, formulate talent training programs and syllabuses, improve our teaching	Respondent #4

Discussion:

On the industry aspect, respondents perceive the need for experts from the industry to be invited to help the universities design training programs and improve the teaching quality.

Teaching Quality

Table 5.19 Quotes on Teaching Quality

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Teachers are encouraged to visit and work in enterprises to understand the needs of the society and make necessary adjustments in their teaching. During holidays, the university also arranges study tours in related industries (for example, in 2018 Summer, teachers took students to visit the Putian Wholesale Commodity Market).	teachers visit and work in enterprises, study tours	Respondent #20

Discussion:

As Table 5.19 shows, respondents perceive the need for improving teaching quality. In their view, tutors will have a better understanding of the society needs and improve the teaching quality by visiting, and acquiring relevant practical experience in the industry.

Visual map showing links between themes and codes for Q3:

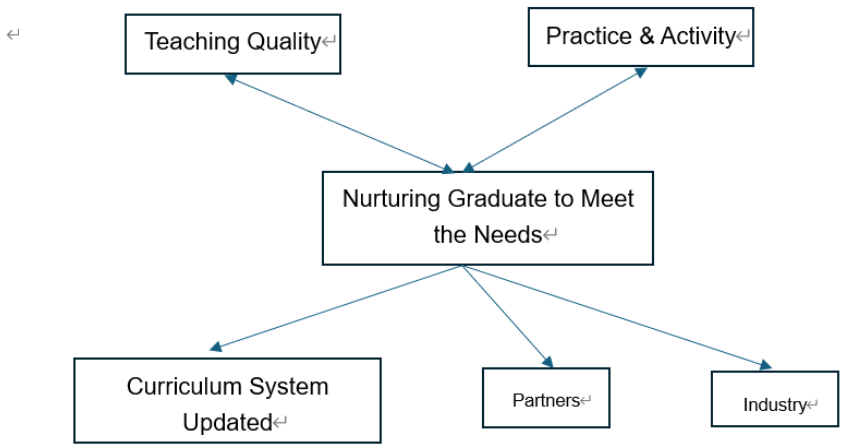


Figure 5.3 Visual Map for Q3

Summary:

Figure 5.3 points to several ways to enhance teaching quality towards meeting needs of external stakeholders. First, the university should nurture graduates to meet the needs of society by updating the curriculum system. Furthermore, the universities could establish a close relationship with the external stakeholders by building platforms together, inviting experts to give lectures, and also providing opportunities for students and tutors to experience practical industrial procedures. Tutors visiting the enterprise enriches teaching quality while students working in enterprises improves students' practical awareness. Both teaching quality and students practice & activities affect the graduate outcomes.

Question#4 - How are your students acquiring skills to meet future needs of industry?

Table 5.20 Theme and Codes for Q4

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Graduate Outcomes (Soft Skills)	Soft Skills interpersonal, teamwork and communication skills, participate in second classroom, clubs and Student Union activities, participate in STEM projects, engineering projects, technical skills, problem-solving abilities, extracurricular activities and clubs, communication skills, teamwork spirit, academic competitions, independent thinking and critical thinking skills	10
Graduate Outcomes (Entrepreneurship)	Creativity and Entrepreneurship competitions and projects, Innovation ability and adaptability, choosing interdisciplinary courses	5
Graduate Outcomes (Digital Literacy)	Digital Literacy participate in learning programming courses, online training, digital information courses	4
Graduate Outcomes (Professional Knowledge)	Professional Knowledge learning in the classroom, practical training courses, internships and practices, skill certificates, professional skills	4
Graduate Outcomes (Cross-disciplinary Learning Ability)	Cross-disciplinary Learning Ability	2

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions presented next:

Soft Skills

Table 5.21 Quotes on Soft Skills

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Students can also improve their interpersonal, teamwork and communication skills by participating in second classroom, clubs and Student Union activities.	interpersonal, teamwork and communication skills, participate in second classroom, clubs and Student Union activities	Respondent #4
Students can participate in STEM projects or engineering projects to enrich their technical skills and analytical problem-solving abilities.	participate in STEM projects, engineering projects, technical skills, problem-solving abilities	Respondent #6
Students participate in various extracurricular activities and clubs to develop good communication skills and teamwork spirit. They actively participate in various academic competitions to develop independent thinking and critical thinking skills, etc.	extracurricular activities and clubs, communication skills, teamwork spirit, academic competitions, independent thinking and critical thinking skills	Respondent #20

Discussion:

Table 5.21 documents a range of soft skills that are considered relevant in the context of this study. Respondents consider soft skills important for students to meet the future needs of industry. The emphasised soft skills reflect interpersonal, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, independent and critical thinking skills features. Students can participate in various extracurricular activities and clubs, STEM projects, engineering projects and academic competitions to develop their soft skills.

Creativity and Entrepreneurship

Table 5.22 Quotes on Creativity and Entrepreneurship

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Students should have some forward-looking expectations and understand the trend of future industry development. They can develop creativity and entrepreneurship through competitions and projects. Innovation ability and adaptability to the society can be developed by choosing interdisciplinary courses.	creativity and entrepreneurship, competitions and projects, Innovation ability and adaptability, choosing interdisciplinary courses	Respondent #18

Discussion:

On the point of Creativity and Entrepreneurship, respondents perceive that students can develop Creativity and Entrepreneurship via competitions, projects and interdisciplinary courses.

Professional Knowledge

Table 5.23 Quotes on Professional Knowledge

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
For students, the first level should be master the professional knowledge and theories in the classroom, including understanding the history and development of the industry and occupations.	professional knowledge	Respondent #19
First of all, students should have excellent professional knowledge. Learning in the classroom is their primary channel. In addition, our university enhances the students' practical and hands-on ability through the practical training courses or in-depth internships to better meet the needs of enterprises.	professional knowledge, learning in the classroom, practical training courses, internships	Respondent #11
Students learn about the needs of the society and the industry through various channels such as internships and practices. They obtain various skill certificates to improve various professional skills.	internships and practices, skill certificates, professional skills	Respondent #20

Discussion:

A key skill emphasised by students was described as professional knowledge. As Table 5.23 shows, respondents emphasise that practical training courses and internships are critical tools for enhancing students' professional knowledge.

Digital Literacy

Table 5.24 Quotes on Digital Literacy

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Students can improve their digital literacy by participating in learning programming courses, online training and so on. Digital information courses can be set up for students to learn.	digital literacy, participate in learning programming courses, online training, digital information courses	Respondent #18

Discussion:

On the point of Digital Literacy, respondents suggest learning programming courses and online training would help

students improve their digital literacy.

Cross-disciplinary Learning Ability

Table 5.25 Quotes on Cross-disciplinary Learning Ability

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The needs of the industry in the future are interactive, which requires students need to integrate their knowledge in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math. The ability to learn cross-disciplinary becomes important.	ability to learn cross-disciplinary	Respondent #6

Discussion:

Cross-disciplinary Learning Ability was also captured as a critical feature. In this regard, the respondents emphasise the pertinence for students to raise the ability to learn across disciplines to meet the expectations of industry in the future.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q4:

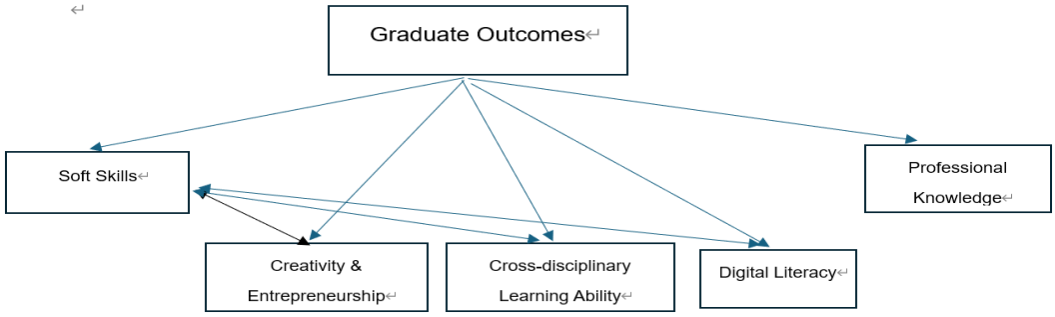


Figure 5.4 Visual Map for Q4

Summary:

As Figure 5.4 shows, students could acquire relevant skills to equip them adequately for future needs of industry through several options. For one thing, soft skills are important for students to meet the need of industry. This requires core features relating to interpersonal, communication skills, teamwork and critical thinking abilities. Students can participate in various activities, competitions and projects to improve creativity and entrepreneurship. Additionally, students can obtain professional knowledge through training and internships.

Question#5 - What steps is your university taking to make your campus greener and sustainable?

Table 5.26 Theme and Codes for Q5

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Sustainable & Green Campus (Energy Saving)	Energy-saving, Emission & Reduction textbooks reused, innovative electronic file management, paperless office, electricity and water conserved, Earth Hour, lights switched off, public transport, power and food saved, energy-saving and emission reduction, use of rainwater collection systems, solar energy	18
Recycling	Recycling	15
Sustainable & Green Campus (Awareness)	Sustainability Awareness various campus activities, awareness of low-carbon, green and environmentally	12

	sustainable development, student informed, food saved, publicity slogan, integration into personnel training programs, curricula, lectures and habits, bulletin board pasted, slogans	
Sustainable & Green Campus (Research)	Research & Project student projects, teacher research	10
Sustainable & Green Campus (Campus)	Campus Construction plant cover, flowers and trees, environmentally friendly construction materials, energy-efficient lighting systems, water-saving equipment	10

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Energy-saving, Emission & Reduction

Table 5.27 Quotes on Energy-saving, Emission & Reduction

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The textbooks of older students can be reused by new students. Now we have conducted innovative electronic file management in the office. Paperless office also reduces the office supplies consumption.	textbooks reused, innovative electronic file management, paperless office	Respondent #15
The campus has implemented policy to conserve electricity and water. During Earth Hour, lights are all switched off on campus in March every year. The air-conditioners and lights in buildings are switched off promptly after use.	electricity and water conserved, Earth Hour, lights switched off	Respondent #4
We also encourage all to choose public transport for travelling, and save the power and food.	public transport, power and food saved	Respondent #7
The school promotes energy-saving and emission reduction measures, such as the use of rainwater collection systems, making full use of solar energy.	energy-saving and emission reduction, use of rainwater collection systems, solar energy	Respondent #14

Discussion:

A core aspect emphasised in the respondents' comments relates to Energy-saving, Emission and Reduction. Critical corrective measures suggested by respondents in this regard include universities encouraging textbooks to be reused, a paper-less office approach, switching off lights, use of public transport, and commencing rainwater collection systems as well as using solar energy to save energy and reduce emissions.

Recycling

Table 5.28 Quotes on Recycling

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We pay attention to reduce waste and we promote waste recycling on campus.	recycling	Respondent #7

Discussion:

With regard to Recycling, respondents emphasise that the universities embrace a more committed approach to recycling on campus to reduce the waste.

Sustainability Awareness

Table 5.29 Quotes on Sustainability Awareness

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
My university carries out various campus activities to strengthen teachers' and students' awareness of low-carbon, green and environmentally sustainable development, and to advocate students to save water and	various campus activities, awareness of low-carbon, green and environmentally sustainable development,	Respondent #15

electricity. For example, each student is informed that there are certain targets for how much electricity and water they can use in each term, and they have to pay if they exceed them. The canteen reminds students to save food via publicity slogan "Please save the food".	student informed, food saved, publicity slogan	
We integrate the green and sustainable development concepts into our personnel training program, curricula, lectures, as well as in the habits of our students in their daily lives. For example, the bulletin board is always pasted with pictures of the green earth. Every semester, we raise teachers' and students' awareness of the importance of sustainable development.	integration into personnel training program, curricula, lectures and habits, bulletin board pasted	Respondent #4
Slogans such as "Please switch off the lights", "Please take the rubbish away" and "Please save food" are posted in public places to remind teachers and students to save energy, reduce emissions and protect the environment.	slogans	Respondent #7

Discussion:

Sustainability Awareness was also emphasised in the respondents' comments. The need for that to be strongly emphasised in various campus activities was underlined. The green and sustainable development concepts can be integrated into the personnel training program, curricula, and lectures. Promotional campaigns can be posted on the campus to remind the students and tutors of the importance of sustainability behaviour.

Research & Project

Table 5.30 Quotes on Research & Project

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university strongly encourages students to participate in green, low-carbon projects, and encourages teachers to participate in green and low-carbon research, which contributes to the green development of the local community and society.	student projects, teacher research	Respondent #17

Discussion:

Equally mentioned was the aspect of Research & Project. As underlined by respondents, universities would need to make more efforts to encourage students and tutors to participate in research on sustainability projects to contribute to building a campus community committed to sustainability awareness.

Campus Construction

Table 5.31 Quotes on Campus Construction

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university has invested a lot of money on green campus, such as the plant cover, flowers and trees.	plant cover, flowers and trees	Respondent #17
We use environmentally friendly construction materials in the new laboratory building.	environmentally friendly construction materials	Respondent #14
Energy-efficient lighting systems and water-saving equipment are used in all buildings to reduce the environmental impact of energy consumption.	energy-efficient lighting systems, water-saving equipment	Respondent #7

Discussion:

Campus Construction was also emphasised in their discussion of keeping the campus greener and sustainable. The respondents noted that the universities have invested reasonably on campus construction to make the campus green and sustainable, such as using environmentally friendly construction materials and energy-efficient systems and equipment.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q5:

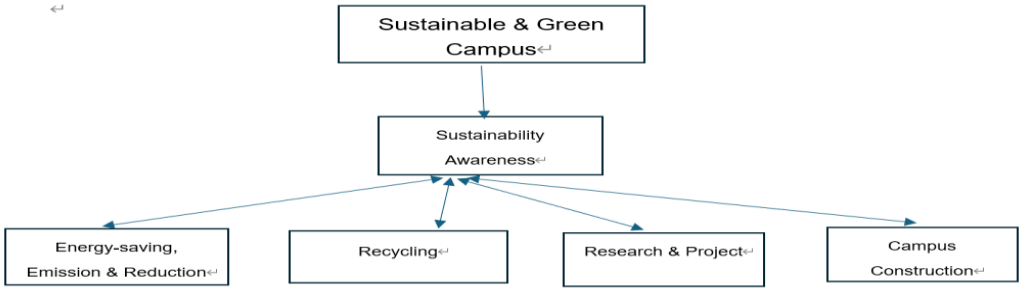


Figure 5.5 Visual Map for Q5

Summary:

As Figure 5.5 shows, sustainability awareness is important to make the campus greener and more sustainable. The universities ensure sustainability awareness through several options: integrating the concept of sustainable development into the personnel training programs, curricula, lectures and slogan posted on campus. Secondly, energy-saving, emission and reduction, recycling, green research and projects are encouraged. Furthermore, the universities use environmentally friendly construction materials and energy-efficient systems to reduce the carbon footprint of buildings.

Question#6 - What steps is your university taking to make it more appealing for international students to study at your institute?

Table 5.32 Theme and Codes for Q6

Theme	Codes	Frequency
International Student Recruitment (Publicity)	Publicity international education exhibitions	8
International Student Recruitment (Discipline)	Discipline discipline characteristics	8
International Student Recruitment (Services and Support)	Service & Support services, courses and language services, good accommodation, medical insurance, flexible enrolment policies, credit transfer, scholarships and subsidies	7
International Student Recruitment (Collaborations)	Collaborations collaborations with overseas universities	4
International Student Recruitment (Exchanges)	Exchanges international academic conferences, exchange projects, cross-cultural exchanges	4

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Publicity

Table 5.33 Quotes on Publicity

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Attracting international students need to increase the international visibility of the university. We rely on external publicity, for example, we participate in some international education exhibitions every year to increase the international visibility.	publicity, international education exhibitions	Respondent #10

Discussion:

On the point of Publicity as one of the actors that may make a university appealing to international students, respondents largely perceive that external publicity, such as international education exhibitions, increase the university

visibility, and therefore increases the interest of international students to a university.

Discipline Characteristics

Table 5.34 Quotes on Discipline Characteristics

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We have our own discipline characteristics to attract international students. Taking Chinese Medicine University as an example. If the international students from our university improve the local medical standards and better serve their countries.	discipline characteristics	Respondent #10

Discussion:

Whether a university would be appealing to international students also hinges on the academic package on offer (Discipline Characteristics). Respondents emphasise that it is important for international students to consider universities that offer academic programs that match with the students' desire.

Service and Support

Table 5.35 Quotes on Service & Support

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We provide high quality services for international students, offering a diverse range of courses and language services to meet the needs of students from different countries and regions. Good accommodation and medical insurance are providing.	services, courses and language services, good accommodation, medical insurance	Respondent #10
We also provide flexible enrolment policies, such as credit transfer.	flexible enrolment policies, credit transfer	Respondent #1
Scholarships and subsidies are offered to international students. The outstanding international students can apply for Fujian Provincial Government Scholarship in our university.	scholarships and subsidies	Respondent #15

Discussion:

Service & Support also featured as a factor of consideration. Respondents note that high service and support should be provided to attract international students. For example, language services, good accommodation, medical insurance, flexible enrolment policies, credit transfer scholarships and subsidies.

Collaborations

Table 5.36 Quotes on Collaborations

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Currently we are also establishing collaborations with overseas universities, such as with British universities. Of course, we will continue to expand the international influence and co-operate with more overseas institutions.	collaborations with overseas universities	Respondent #14

Discussion:

On the point of Collaborations, respondents also pointed out that the extent to which a university engages with international higher education institutions also determines its appeal to international students. For example, collaborations with overseas universities would attract international students.

Exchanges

Table 5.37 Quotes on Exchanges

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We hope more overseas students to know our school. We encourage teachers to participate in international academic conferences and we encourage students to participate in	international academic conferences, exchange projects,	Respondent #1

exchange projects, which promotes academic cooperation as well as cross-cultural exchanges.	cross-cultural exchanges	

Discussion:

Also flagged as a factor that determines the appeal of a university to international students is exchanges offered by the university. Respondents suggest international academic conferences and cross-cultural exchanges to make the university more attractive for international student.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q6:

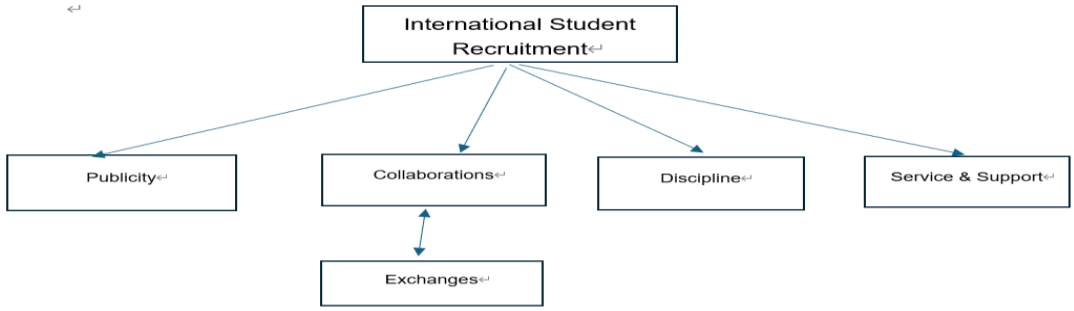


Figure 5.6 Visual Map for Q6

Summary:

Figure 5.6 above suggests that universities can increase the visibility via external publicity to attract the international students. For example, the university can organise or attend some international education exhibitions. In addition, more international students would be motivated to enrol into universities when they are convinced that the universities offer high quality of services and support, such as language services, good accommodation, medical insurance, flexible enrolment policies, credit transfer scholarships and subsidies. Collaborations with overseas institutes, and cross-culture exchanges also make universities more appealing for international students to study at the institutions.

Question#7 - How do your university leaders demonstrate authenticity?

Table 5.38 Theme and Codes for Q7

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Authenticity (Care)	Cares & Supports cares, understand the needs and difficulties, opportunities provided, resources and psychological support	18
Authenticity (Transparency)	Open & Transparent Communication transparency, sharing information, university's official website, face-to-face communication, President's Mailbox, ratings or appraisals system, clear and objective indicators, open documentation, rapport, get the advice and feedback	16
Authenticity (Fairness)	Fairness no discrimination, performance shown fairly and truthfully	5
Authenticity (Empathy)	Empathy	4
Authenticity (Honesty)	Honesty truthfully, honest	3

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Cares & Supports

Table 5.39 Quotes on Care & Supports

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The President came to our Faculty of Business and Economics and had a long and detailed discussion with our Dean on the student recruitment and employment in May. He cares about staff development and tries to understand the needs and difficulties of his subordinates.	cares, understand the needs and difficulties	Respondent #16
Leaders provide opportunities for teachers' training and development and give them resources and psychological support when needed.	opportunities provided, resources and psychological support	Respondent #18

Discussion:

Respondents reasonably flagged Cares & Supports as core consideration elements. Most of the respondents indicated that leaders care about staff development, try to understand their needs and difficulties and provide resources and psychological support when needed.

Open & Transparent Communication

Table 5.40 Quotes on Open & Transparent Communication

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We seek transparency by sharing information on the university's official website homepage, such as the Tuition Fee Pledge and the Sunshine Enrolment Pledge. Every semester the President has a face-to-face communication with staffs and students. In addition, there is a President's Mailbox, which allows staffs and students to write anonymously to the President. The President responds to issues and resolves them promptly.	transparency, sharing information, university's official website, face-to-face communication, President's Mailbox	Respondent #15
Our ratings or appraisals system has clear and objective indicators, which are provided on open documentation.	ratings or appraisals system, clear and objective indicators, open documentation	Respondent #4
Leaders are open and willing to communicate with teachers and students. For example, our leaders often have tea parties, breakfast, lunch with faculty and students. They participate in activities with students and faculty to develop a rapport. By participating in activities together, they are able to get the advice and feedback from students and faculty.	rapport, get the advice and feedback	Respondent #1

Discussion:

Open & Transparent Communication was also underlined in the interviewees' responses. Most respondents indicated that leaders seek transparency by sharing information and open documentation. They have a good rapport with students and staff to seek advice and feedback.

Fairness

Table 5.41 Quotes on Fairness

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The leader can't produce discrimination against colleagues. That is to say, treat every staff fairly. The teachers' research performance should be shown fairly and truthfully.	no discrimination, performance shown fairly and truthfully	Respondent #2

Discussion:

Another factor that featured in the interviewees' responses relates to Fairness. Respondents (however, relatively few) suggested that there was no discrimination against any staffs and that staff performance was being evaluated fairly and truthfully.

Empathy

Table 5.42 Quotes on Empathy

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Leaders are empathetic. They always carefully listen to the staffs and students and think about their needs. They try their best to help faculty and students solve problems.	empathetic	Respondent #6

Discussion:

On the point of Empathy, some respondents indicated that their leaders are empathetic as they always carefully listen to the staff and students, think about their needs and help them solve problems.

Honesty

Table 5.43 Quotes on Honesty

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
As a middle-level leader in charge of research in the college, firstly, I should pass on all the information to every teacher in our colleges truthfully.	truthfully	Respondent #2
Leaders are honest to express their true feelings. They are brave enough to admit their mistakes and take corrective action timely.	honest	Respondent #4

Discussion:

Regarding honesty, some respondents indicated that leaders truly pass information to staff. Furthermore, they indicate that leaders are honest to express their true feelings and brave to admit and correct their mistakes.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q7:

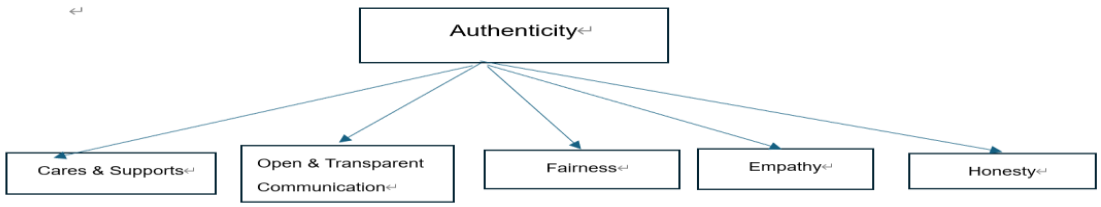


Figure 5.7 Visual Map for Q7

Summary:

As Figure 5.7 above shows, authenticity is reflected through five main features: care and support, open and transparent communication, fairness, empathy and honesty. Respondents reported that the university leaders care about staff development, and try to understand staff needs and difficulties and provide resources and psychological support when needed. Open and transparent communication, fairness, empathy and honesty are also considered important in authentic leadership as well. Leaders seeking transparency by sharing information and using ratings or appraisals system with clear and objective indicators. Being empathetic, they try to show care and understanding and utilise feedback from staff and help them solve problems. They show fairness to the staff and they are honest to express their true feelings.

Question#8 - What are the key characteristics of an inspiring leader in university?

Table 5.44 Theme and Codes for Q8

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Inspiring Leader (Trust)	Trust sense of belonging	9
Inspiring Leader (Support)	Support resource support, recognition	6
Inspiring Leader (Virtuous)	Virtuous fairness,	6

	high moral character, feelings of home and country, set himself as an example, take sincere care for teachers and students, create maximum value for them	
Inspiring Leader (Decision-making)	Decision-making make appropriate decisions	4
Inspiring Leader (Vision)	Vision pragmatic	2

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Trust

Table 5.45 Quotes on Trust

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Leaders are approachable and empathetic. If leaders have a close relationship with staffs and build trust with staffs, they can lead the university toward the same goals.	trust	Respondent #17
Trust between team members is important for leaders. They give students and teachers a sense of belonging.	trust, sense of belonging	Respondent #16

Discussion:

Respondents identify trust as important as trust creates a sense of belonging and enables harmonisation and common goal focus amongst the staff in the university.

Support

Table 5.46 Quotes on Support

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The inspiring leader brings a lot of resources to the university and provide staffs with good resource support.	resource support	Respondent #4
Full supports provided to the staffs win their recognition.	supports, recognition	Respondent #7

Discussion:

Respondents also emphasised Support as a key point. Most respondents indicated that inspiring leaders provide staffs with good resource support. In their views too, providing support attracts staffs' recognition.

Virtuousness

Table 5.47 Quotes on Virtuousness

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Fairness is the most important.	fairness	Respondent #17
The leader should be both virtuous and talented. He should be of high moral character.	Virtuousness, high moral character	Respondent #11
Leaders must have feelings of home and country. When leading and teaching, he should set himself as an example.	feelings of home and country, set himself as an example	Respondent #15
Leaders take sincere care for teachers and students and create maximum value for them.	take sincere care for teachers and students, create maximum value for them	Respondent #6

Discussion:

Most respondents are of the view that their leaders are virtuous. They suggest that inspiring leaders are of high moral character and have role model status. They show fairness, take sincere care and create maximum value for students and staffs.

Decision-making

Table 5.48 Quote on Decision-making

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The leader is able to make appropriate decisions based on	make appropriate decisions	Respondent #15

the interests of the team and the current situation.		

Discussion:

The respondents also commented on the point of Decision-making. Majority are even of the opinion that inspiring leaders always make appropriate decisions to match their prevailing circumstances.

Vision

Table 5.49 Quotes on Vision

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The leader has a good vision, not pompous, yet pragmatic, grounded and up-to-date.	Vision, Pragmatic	Respondent #15

Discussion:

On the point of Vision, most respondents are convinced that their leaders are displaying visionary traits.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q8:

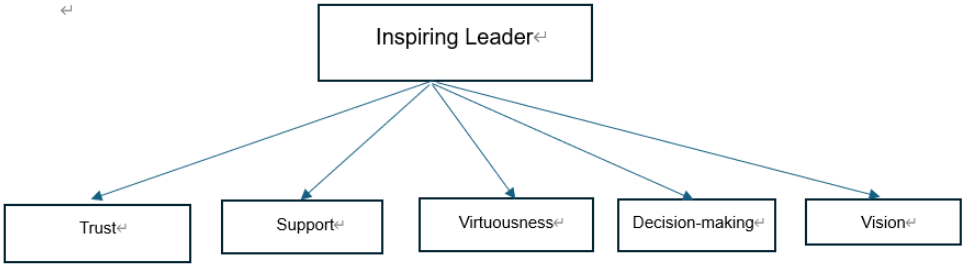


Figure 5.8 Visual Map for Q8

Summary:

Figure 5.8 identifies five key characteristics that the respondents consider critical in evaluating an inspiring leader. In their view, an inspiring leader in university builds trust between staff, a critical outcome (trust) creates a sense of belonging and leads staff, in the university, to work towards a common goal. Also, inspiring leaders provide staff with good resource support. Inspiring leaders display virtuous traits and have a role model function. They have good vision and make appropriate decisions to fit their circumstances.

Question#9 - How can university leaders build trust between management and academic staffs?

Table 5.50 Theme and Codes on Q9

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Trust (Respect)	Respect interests taken into full consideration, know each professor's area of research, ample free space given	11
Trust (Transparent)	Open & Transparent Communication disclosure, open and transparent rules and regulations, information collection system, clear division of responsibilities, transparent and open communication	10
Trust (Fairness)	Fairness fair allocation, disclose, an authoritative third party, fairness and equity	7
Trust (Support)	Support resources and support, opportunities and platforms created, personal growth and progress	6

Trust (Decision-making)	Decision-making Participation decision-making participation encouraged, faculty representative meetings	6

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Respect

Table 5.51 Quotes on Respect

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We respect them. The interests of the professors and academic staffs need to be taken into full consideration. Let the professors who understand academics decide and manage academic affairs. For example, if we need to bring in a talented academic staff, his academic achievements will be determined by the academic community and the Academic Council of Professors.	respect, interests taken into full considerations	Respondent #10
I respect their expertise. I know each professor's area of research. For example, who works on ammonia-hydrogen energy conversion catalysts, who works on electronic chemicals and batteries. I know them thoroughly.	respect, know each professor's area of research	Respondent #11
The leaders need to respect the academic staff and give them ample free space to carry out their research projects.	respect, ample free space given	Respondent #16

Discussion:

In building trust between management and academic staff, respect was identified as one of the core consideration points. Most respondents identify mutual respect between the two levels of personnel as important. In this respect culture, each allows the other ample space to carry out their tasks without interference.

Transparent Communication

Table 5.52 Quotes on Transparent Communication

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Information disclosure system is necessary.	disclosure	Respondent #15
Some rules and regulations must be open and transparent. The establishment of an information collection system that is not subject to human interference is also an important basis for building trust. The division of responsibilities between managers and academic staffs should be very clear. It is necessary to maintain a transparent and open communication with academic staff. For example, leaders convey important information to staff and listen to their feedback. We understand academic staff needs and help them to solve their difficulties.	open and transparent rules and regulations, information collection system, clear division of responsibilities, transparent and open communication	Respondent #4

Discussion:

A further factor that was identified in trying to understand how trust is achieved between both levels relates to Open and Transparent Communication. Most respondents emphasised the importance for maintaining a transparent and open communication with academic staff to build trust. Clear Information collection and disclosure system are necessary. The separation of responsibilities between managers and academic staffs should be very clear.

Fairness

Table 5.53 Quotes on Fairness

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Leaders should be able to allocate academic resources fairly. Leaders may often contact governmental institutions and organizations and they have a lot of resources at hand. Leaders should disclose the resource allocation to everyone. There should be an authoritative third party to ensure the fairness in the selection. If academic staff feel that it is not fair, the sense of trust will definitely be lost.	fair allocation, disclose, an authoritative third party	Respondent #3
The principle of fairness and equity in the allocation of research resources and funds should be abided.	fairness and equity	Respondent #16

Discussion:

Demonstrating fairness also featured as a key factor. Most respondents flagged the need for leaders to allocate resources fairly. Towards achieving that fairness, an authoritative third party may be necessary.

Support

Table 5.54 Quotes on Support

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Leaders ensure the academic staff carry out their research and teaching work with resources and support.	resources and support	Respondent #16
Leaders attaches importance to the welfare and development of academic staff. They create opportunities and platforms for academic staff to go for further studies and gain personal growth and progress.	opportunities and platforms created, personal growth and progress	Respondent #3

Discussion:

Majority of respondents also emphasised that leaders should provide resources and support to academic staff and create opportunities and platforms for their personal growth.

Decision-making Participation

Table 5.55 Quotes on Decision-making Participation

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Leaders provide channels to encourage academic staff to participate in the decision-making process. For example, the academic staff can express their suggestions and opinions on the faculty representative meetings.	decision-making participation encouraged, faculty representative meetings	Respondent #2

Discussion:

From the point of Decision-making Participation, a few respondents indicated that decision-making participation is encouraged. For example, leaders could encourage academic staff to offer suggestions at faculty meetings.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q9:

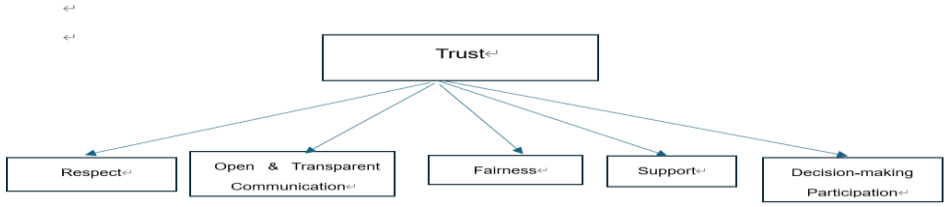


Figure 5.9 Visual Map for Q9

Summary:

Figure 5.9 shows clearly the core factors that are considered in the effort to build trust between the management and academic staff. Ensuring a good measure of mutual respect is one critical step, ensuring that the personnel have ample space to carry out their duties without interference. Secondly, it is important to maintain a transparent and open communication with academic staff. Clear Information collection and disclosure systems are necessary for transparency. The delineation of responsibilities between managers and academic staffs should be very clear. Furthermore, leaders should allocate resources fairly and provide support and opportunities for academic staff's personal growth. Finally, decision-making participation is encouraged to build trust.

Question#10 - How are the executive leaders, at your university, successfully managing change in your institution?

Table 5.56 Theme and Codes for Q10

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Change Management (Goals)	Goals digital teaching reforms, student career practice opportunities, improve discipline rankings, improve the university quality and level, teachers-students oriented, internationalization, research capacity	12
Change Management (Communication)	Communication update the change information, working platforms suggestions, feedback	10
Change Management (Decision Making)	Decision-making/Participation decision-making participation, engagement and support increased	5
Change Management (Overcoming Resistance)	Overcoming Resistance gradually according to the actual situation, control risks, evaluation	5
Change Management (Support)	Support feedback, improvements, pilot, trial and error allowed	4

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Goals

Table 5.57 Quotes on Goals

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university should have a clear goal so that the faculty and staff could be explained why the change is necessary. For example, our college hopes to improve the graduate outcomes to better serve the society and the local community. We have to carry out digital teaching reforms and provide students with more real career practice opportunities.	goal, digital teaching reforms, student career practice opportunities	Respondent #15
Our college is striving to improve its discipline rankings. Leader considers which disciplines need to recruit talents and how to attract high-quality talents.	improve its discipline rankings	Respondent #11
At present, the change goal of our university is to improve the university quality and level. We should insist on teachers-students oriented. At the same time, the internationalisation of higher education is also the goal of our university, which strives to attract advanced and excellent educational resources to raise the research capacity.	improve the university quality and level, teachers-students oriented, internationalization, research capacity	Respondent #16

Discussion:

Several factors were identified as important with regards to managing change, and one of them was described as goals.

Majority of the respondents noted that in order to effectively manage change, such goals must be clearly specified.

Communications

Table 5.58 Quotes on Communication

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Leaders actively maintain communication with employees about why the change is needed, so that everyone could understand the visions and goals. For example, we update the change information through working platforms, meetings, emails and WeChat.	Communication, update the change information, working platforms, meetings, emails, WeChat	Respondent #6
Suggestions and feedback are important to the change to some extent. For example, last year I made a suggestion	Suggestions, feedback	Respondent #4

about asset management, and then the University Asset Management Office actually explained to me why it wasn't done.		

Discussion:

Table 5.58 shows core points that are considered important regarding the aspect of communications. Some respondents indicated that leaders need to let staff understand the changing goal, reason and benefits via effective communication. The information needs to be updated through work platforms, meetings, emails and WeChat. Leaders are encouraged to get suggestions and feedback from staff during periods of change in the institutes.

Decision-making Participation

Table 5.59 Quotes on Decision-making Participation

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Leaders encourage faculty and students to participate in the decision-making process, which can increase engagement and support for change and reduce potential resistance.	decision-making participation, engagement and support increased	Respondent #14

Discussion:

Decision-making Participation was flagged as important. Most respondents indicated that leaders need to encourage decision-making participation so that staff will engage actively during the change process.

Overcoming Resistance

Table 5.60 Quotes on Overcoming Resistance

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
There is resistance to any change, and it is difficult to achieve it in one step. Leaders need to make change gradually according to the actual situation. A degree of foresight is required to control risks and evaluation on the change is needed.	gradually according to the actual situation, control risks, evaluation	Respondent #16
Leaders accept feedback from their employees, which in turn leads to positive improvements. We often have to do pilot and allow for trial and error.	feedback, Improvements, pilot, trial and error allowed	Respondent #6

Discussion:

Respondents also emphasised the need to overcome change related resistance. To achieve that, the tools of evaluation and feedback would need to be effectively used.

Support

Table 5.61 Quotes on Support

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Leaders need to give their employees the appropriate training and guidance to ensure that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt to the change.	training and guidance	Respondent #16

Discussion:

To ensure the effectiveness of the change management, it is also important that leaders provide necessary support such as training and guidance to improve the staff skills and knowledge during change management.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q10:

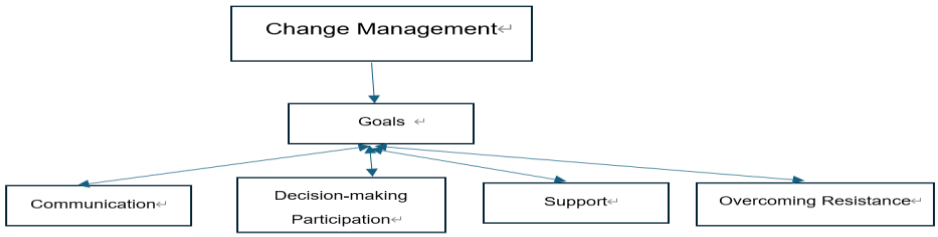


Figure 5.10 Visual Map for Q10

Summary:

As Figure 5.10 shows, to effectively manage change, leaders need to set clear goals. Then, leaders also need to actively communicate with staff about the reason for change, so that the staff can understand the purpose and target of change. With support such as training and guidance provided, decision-making participation, staff will more likely be engaged in the change. Lastly, change should be managed gradually according to the situation.

Question#11 - Why are some academic staffs resistant to change and how can this be overcome?

Table 5.62 Theme and Codes for Q11

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Change Management (Resistance)	Resistance to Change interest violation, uncertainty, fear lack of competence	16
Change Management (Communication)	Communication explain benefits, understanding of the change, concerns addressed	15
Change Management (Training & Support)	Training & Support further study, academic conferences, involved in industry enterprises, facility support, labs and library databases, invites cutting-edge experts, adequate training, latest academic developments, personalized guidance, emotional support, resources, research funding, networking support	12
Change Management (Incentives)	Incentives honour- scholars, recognition, promotion bonuses	10
Change Management (Comfort)	Comfort costs, psychologically comfortable	6

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Resistance

Table 5.63 Quotes on Resistance

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The first reason why academic staff resist change is that change violates their interests. Because of uncertainty and fear of personal gain or loss. Resistance to change is called "fear of competence". The person dares not to change because of his own lack of competence.	resistance to change, interest violation, uncertainty, fear lack of competence	Respondent #15

Discussion:

To ensure effective change management, the need to show awareness of change resistance and address that resistance is also emphasised. Most respondents indicated academic staff may be resistant to change because they lack competence and or fear uncertainty.

Communication

Table 5.64 Communication

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
I think the first thing to do is to communicate with the academic staff regarding the need for change. Secondly, we have to explain to the staff the possible benefits of the change, including long-term benefits.	communicate, explain benefits	Respondent #1
Positive communication mechanisms improve academic staff's understanding of the change. Make academic staff realize that he will be better after this change through communication. The concerns of academic staff need to be addressed.	communication, understanding of the change, concerns addressed	Respondent #6

Discussion:

Respondents also underlined the need for leaders to communicate with staff as positive communication aids staff to understand the need and benefit of the change.

Training & Support

Table 5.65 Quotes on Training & Support

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
It is important to provide academic staff with the necessary training and support, such as sending them to other universities for further study, attending international academic conferences, and becoming more involved in industry enterprises to improve their research skills so that they are no longer afraid of change. Facility support is provided for academic staff in their workplaces (e.g., labs and library databases) so that the academic staff can adapt to and participate in change.	training and support, further study, academic conferences, involved in industry enterprises, facility support, labs and library databases	Respondent #7
Leaders invites cutting-edge experts to give academic staff adequate training, so that staff are familiar with the latest academic developments. At the same time, leaders focus on the personal development of academic staff, providing them with personalized guidance and emotional support. Leaders provide academic staff with resources and research funding. Teamwork activities help them share with each other and learn new skills.	invites cutting-edge experts, adequate training, latest academic developments, personalized guidance, emotional support, resources, research funding	Respondent #10
Leaders build networking support for them and make academic staff do not feel emotionally isolated.	networking support	Respondent #14

Discussion:

The importance of Training and Support in the change management effort was also emphasised. Several respondents emphasised that leaders need to provide staff with the necessary training and support to help them understand, adapt to and participate in the change.

Incentives

Table 5.66 Quotes on Incentives

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
*There are a variety of honor- scholars in the university. Take Dragon River Scholars for an example. It is a recognition of the statu*s of scholars. *Meanwhile, it is a kind of incentive for academic staff.*	honor- scholars, recognition, incentive	Respondent #20
The university provides academic staff with various incentives, such as promotion opportunities, bonuses, to	Incentives, promotion,	Respondent #14

stimulate them and encourage them to proactively participate in the change process.	bonuses	

Discussion:

Also mentioned by respondents is Incentives, Majority of respondents suggested that leaders need to provide staff with incentives, such as honour titles, promotion opportunities and bonuses. With such recognitions, academic staff will be stimulated to engage actively in the change.

Comfort

Table 5.67 Quotes on Comfort

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Change costs academic staff a lot of money. If academic staff are in their comfort zone and are psychologically comfortable with the status, they don't want to change.	costs, psychologically comfortable	Respondent #4

Discussion:

In their response on the question of change management, a word that was mentioned by respondents relates to 'Comfort'. Few respondents indicate that some staff have become comfortable with existing practices and are resistant to change.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q11:

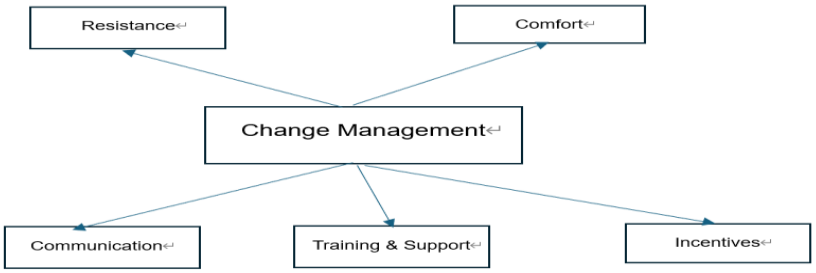


Figure 5.11 Visual Map on Q11

Summary:

Figure 5.11 summarises the insights on change management. Natural resistance and comfort with old practice are some of the reasons why some academic staff resist change. To overcome resistance to change, leaders can communicate with staff and help them understand the change needed, reason and benefits. Secondly, training and support are important for staff during change. Such training and support improve academic staff skills so that they can adapt to the change. Personalized guidance, funding and networking support make staff not feel isolated but rather feel encouraged to participate in the change. Thirdly, incentives such as honour titles, promotion opportunities and bonuses could stimulate a positive attitude of staff to engage in the change.

Question#12 - How are your university leaders building your research capacity?

Table 5.68 Theme and Codes for Q12

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Research Capacity (Teamwork)	Teamwork access, be mentored, individual research skills are developed	10
Research Capacity (Resources)	Resource & Support financial support, introduce scholars and experts	8
Research Capacity	Incentives	6

(Incentives)	material incentives, promotions, stimulates the enthusiasm, research evaluation system	
Research Capacity (Collaborations)	Collaborations cooperation between industry, academia and research, university-government and university-enterprise co-operation, build platforms, academic exchanges, interdisciplinary research, collaboration among teachers, visiting scholars	4

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Teamwork

Table 5.69 Quotes on Teamwork

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university encourages teamwork. Firstly, we have recruited a number of outstanding professors and PhD talents who can bring in big projects. The projects are divided them into smaller directions through teamwork. It is possible for fresh researchers to access to the projects, to be mentored. Stronger individual research skills are developed via teamwork.	teamwork, access, be mentored, individual research skills are developed	Respondent #11
The spirit of teamwork, interdisciplinary research and knowledge sharing are encouraged.	teamwork	Respondent #1

Discussion:

The point of Teamwork was also emphasised. Respondents emphasised that individual research skills are developed via teamworking. Teamwork spirit encourages interdisciplinary research and knowledge sharing.

Resource and Support

Table 5.70 Quotes on Resource & Support

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We introduce some famous scholars and leading experts into campus, who deliver the staff cutting-edge information.	introduce scholars and experts	Respondent #20
The university provides various research projects with financial support to encourage teachers to publish papers in quality journals at home and abroad.	financial support	Respondent #16

Discussion:

Respondents also emphasised that in building research capacity, Resource and Support play significant role. Majority of respondents indicated that academic staff are encouraged through financial support to undertake research individually and in collaboration (internally and externally) for cutting-edge outputs for dissemination through globally recognised academic journals.

Incentives

Table 5.71 Quotes on Incentives

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The university provides material incentives to teachers with significant research achievements.	material incentives	Respondent #16
The university grants title promotions and incentive payments to teachers with outstanding research achievements.	promotions, incentive	Respondent #13
The university stimulates the enthusiasm of researchers. Establish a better research evaluation system is always on the way.	stimulates the enthusiasm, research evaluation system	Respondent #20

Discussion:

In terms of Incentives, most respondents emphasised the necessity for providing material incentives to stimulate researcher enthusiasm. In addition, the need for better research evaluation system was emphasised.

Collaborations

Table 5.72 Quotes on Collaborations

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
It is very important to strengthen the cooperation between industry, academia and research. We are establishing the university-government and university-enterprise co-operation. We build platforms for teachers to have academic exchanges in multiple fields.	cooperation between industry, academia and research, university-government and university-enterprise co-operation, build platforms, academic exchanges	Respondent #20
The university encourages interdisciplinary research and collaboration among teachers. Teachers are sent to prestigious research institutes domestic or abroad to further their studies as visiting scholars.	interdisciplinary research, collaboration among teachers, visiting scholars	Respondent #16

Discussion:

On the point of Collaborations, most respondents emphasised the importance of strengthening the cooperation between industry, academia and research. Interdisciplinary research, collaboration among teachers and academic exchanges are encouraged.

Visual map showing links between theme and codes for Q12:

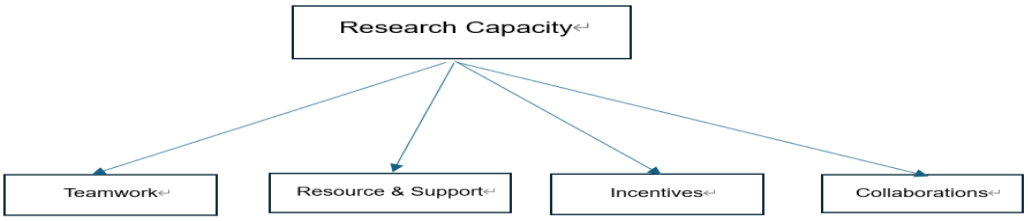


Figure 5.12 Visual Map for Q12

Summary:

Leaders are building research capacity via teamwork, resource, support, incentives and established collaborations (see Figure 5.12). Firstly, teamwork improves individual research skills and encourages interdisciplinary research and knowledge sharing. Secondly, with resource and financial support, academic staff can deliver cutting-edge research for journal publications. Thirdly, incentives stimulate the researcher enthusiasm. Lastly, the university-government and university-enterprise co-operation is important for academic staff. The collaborations provide more opportunities and platforms for academic staff to expand their research networks and publication output.

Question#13 - What would be the key challenges facing your university in the next 5 years?

Table 5.73 Theme and Codes for Q13

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Graduate Outcome	homogenization majors, update their curricula construction, raise the education level, master's degree program, teaching direction and mode detached from reality	10
Resource & Budget	sources of funding	9
Competition	declining population, increasing competition, recruitment strategies teaching ability, scientific research capacity, and service ability to the society, competitiveness	8

Technology	artificial intelligence, research across disciplines, teaching models, advanced technologies, teaching and management, digital literacy	4
Internationalisation	attract more international students, co-operation with international institutions	2

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Graduate Outcomes/Quality

Table 5.74 Quotes on Graduate Outcomes/Quality

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The graduate students are under pressure in the employment market, so we need to improve the graduate outcome. At present, there is a serious problem of homogenisation of majors in different colleges.	graduate outcome, homogenisation of majors	Respondent #16
New disciplines are constantly emerging, and graduate outcomes should be better adapted to the needs of the industry. Universities should update their curricula construction.	graduate outcomes, update the curricula construction	Respondent #7
Taking our college as an example, one of the biggest challenges we face in the next five years is to raise the education level. Now we are applying for master's degree program. We will engage in undergraduate and postgraduate education in the future.	raise the education level, master's degree program	Respondent #13
The teaching direction and mode in some majors are still as the same as 10 or 20 years ago, which has been seriously detached from reality.	teaching direction and mode detached from reality	Respondent #18

Discussion:

In trying to understand the key challenges that participating universities may face in the next 5 years period, one point that was repeatedly emphasised relates to Graduate outcome. Majority of the respondents emphasised that the universities need to raise their educational and teaching quality to achieve graduate outcomes that meet the needs of the society and industry. The universities should update their curricula to align with future expectations of Higher Education Institutions.

Resource and Budget

Table 5.75 Quotes on Resource & Budget

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We are under pressure to find diversified sources of funding to maintain the sustainability of our programs, especially after the three years of the epidemic.	sources of funding	Respondent #16

Discussion:

Resources and Budget were also mentioned in the interviewees' responses. Most respondents noted that although it was obvious that funding and support were critical in driving forward the sustainability target, it was also clearly obvious that the universities are facing major resources and budget constraints that undermine sustainable development effort.

Competition

Table 5.76 Quotes on Competition

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
With a total of just over 9 million births in China this year, we are faced with the challenges posed by a declining population in our society and increasing competition from higher education institutions. As a result, our university need to adopt more competitive and attractive recruitment strategies.	declining population, increasing competition, recruitment strategies	Respondent #6
We need to improve the teaching ability, scientific research	teaching ability, scientific	Respondent #2

capacity, and service ability to the society, which is a reflection of the university's overall competitiveness.	research capacity, and service ability to the society, competitiveness	

Discussion:

On the point of Competition, several respondents indicated that the universities are facing increasing competition. Thus, universities need to improve the overall competitiveness and work out more effective recruitment strategies.

Technology

Table 5.77 Quotes on Technology

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
In the context of artificial intelligence, universities are challenged to collaborate on scientific research across disciplines, to provide teaching models that are up-to-date and more flexible, and to apply advanced technologies in teaching and management.	artificial intelligence, research across disciplines, teaching models, advanced technologies, teaching and management	Respondent #7
Technology brings challenges to higher education as well. For example, we have previously talked about a term called digital literacy.	technology, digital literacy	Respondent #18

Discussion:

Technology was also flagged as a critical factor to consider in modern-day HEIs dynamics. Respondents indicated that technology brings challenge to higher education and the university should improve digital literacy of students and apply advanced technology in teaching and management.

Internationalisation

Table 5.78 Quotes on Internationalisation

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
With the development of globalisation, we face the challenges posed by internationalisation. Our university needs to attract more international students and seek more opportunities for exchanges and co-operation with international institutions.	Internationalisation, attract more international students, co-operation with international institutions	Respondent #22

Discussion:

On the point of Internationalisation, majority of respondents emphasised that globalisation creates challenge for higher education. Thus, universities should engage in more collaborations with international institutions to attract more international students.

Visual map showing links between themes for Q13:

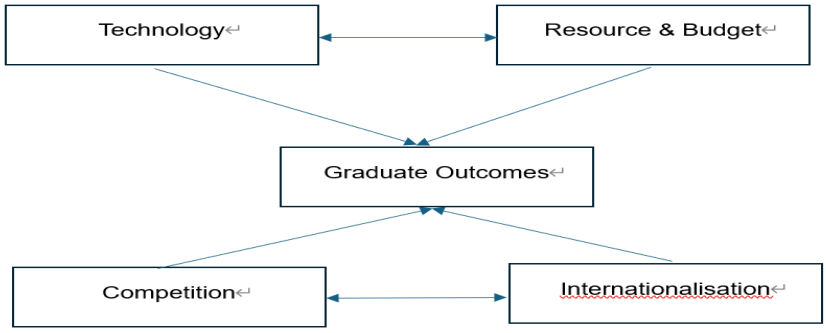


Figure 5.13 Visual Map for Q13

Summary:

Figure 5.13 demonstrates the key challenges facing the universities in the next 5 years: graduate outcomes, resource & budget constraints, competition, technology and internationalisation. Firstly, resource and budget are limited, which affects the university graduate outcomes. Secondly, technology brings associated challenges for higher education; however, universities utilise the technologies to facilitate teaching, resource management and graduate outcomes. Thirdly, the university is facing increasing competition. The university can improve their competitiveness through graduate outcomes to attract more students. Fourthly, internationalization is another challenge universities are facing. The university should establish collaboration with international institutions and aim to recruit more international students.

Question#14 - What are the challenges of improving your university ranking position (nationally and globally)?

Table 5.79 Theme and Codes for Q14

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Graduate Outcomes	cultivating high quality talents, education quality	7
University Ranking (Indicators)	Indicators disciplines, teaching, faculty, research, influence, international cooperation, reputation	5
University Ranking (Discipline)	Discipline	4
University Ranking (Financial Support)	Financial Support sufficient funds	4
Internationalisation	international students, few channels, international exchange and co-operation	3

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

<u>Graduate Outcomes</u>

Table 5.80 Quotes on Graduate Outcomes

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Improving the graduate outcomes is the primary task of colleges and universities. Cultivating high quality talents is very important to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.	graduate outcomes, cultivating high quality talents	Respondent #11
Our university need to ensure the quality of education by passing the relevant assessment and accreditation, for example, we are applying for master's programs.	education quality	Respondent #18

Discussion:

Regarding the question of challenges faced by the universities in improving their rankings, one point that was flagged by respondents relates to Graduate Outcome. Many respondents indicated that to improve university ranking, the university needs to improve the education quality and graduate outcomes.

Indicators

Table 5.81 Quotes on Indicators

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
There are different indicators for university ranking. The evaluation of universities ranking is all-round and multi-angle, involving disciplines, teaching, faculty, research, influence, international cooperation, reputation and so on. We should first of all pay attention to the ranking because it is recognised by the community, the public and parents. But we should not ignore it and be led by the ranking.	indicators, disciplines, teaching, faculty, research, influence, international cooperation, reputation	Respondent #15

Discussion:

Responses from interviewees indicated that core indicators for university includes disciplines, teaching, faculty, research, influence, international cooperation, reputation and so on. University leaders need to invest time and resources to understand the resource and impact implication of each ranking indicator.

Discipline

Table 5.82 Quotes on Discipline

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Whether the institution's level of disciplinary development is competitive internationally or nationally, is the main challenge in improving university rankings. Discipline is a sign of the quality of a university's development. As for the competitiveness of discipline, it includes high-level talents, technicians and administrators.	discipline development, discipline	Respondent #20

Discussion:

On the point of Discipline, majority of respondents were of the opinion that discipline development influences university ranking. To improve a disciplines competitiveness, the university needs to recruit high-level talents, technicians and administrators.

Financial Support

Table 5.83 Quotes on Financial Support

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We need a great deal of financial support to improve the teaching quality and research capacity. We need sufficient funds to attract outstanding teachers and academic staff, and we need to provide students with advanced library and laboratory facilities.	financial support, sufficient funds	Respondent #6

Discussion:

In discussing university ranking, a factor that was repeatedly mentioned as affecting the ranking position of universities is Financial position. Some respondents indicated that the university lacks sufficient funds to attract outstanding staffs and provide students with advanced learning facilities, to improve their university ranking.

Internationalisation

Table 5.84 Quotes on Internationalisation

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Most of the ranking criteria are set by western universities, so internationalisation is challenging for Chinese universities. It is difficult for our university to attract international students. Nowadays, more and more university teachers are required to have study abroad experience, but there are still very few channels for Chinese universities to have international research collaboration.	Internationalization, international students, few channels, international research collaboration	Respondent #18
We should establish good capacity for international exchange and co-operation, including the development of international talent training, international scientific research co-operation, international faculty building, and international cultural exchanges.	international exchange and co-operation	Respondent #20

Discussion:

For Chinese HEIs, the internationalisation procedures seem to be contributing to the negative ranking positions of Chinese universities. As respondents noted, most ranking criteria are determined by Western universities and that makes internationalisation challenging for Chinese universities.

Visual map showing links between themes and codes for Q14:

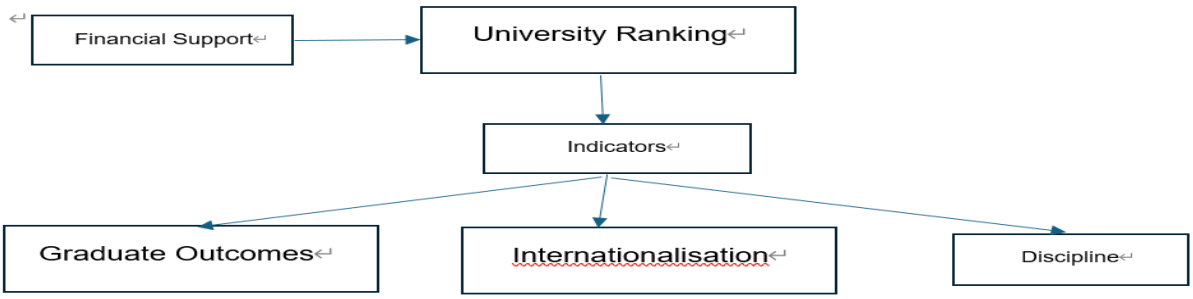


Figure 5.14 Visual Map for Q14

Summary:

As it can be seen from the visual map above, there are many indicators for university ranking. Graduate outcomes and discipline development are critical factors towards improving university ranking. As most of the ranking criteria are determined by western universities, it is challenging for Chinese universities to compete with regard to international recruitment and collaboration.

Question#15 - What steps is your university taking to improve your university ranking?

Table 5.85 Theme and Codes for Q15

Theme	Codes	Frequency
University Ranking (Talent Recruitment)	Talent Recruitment introduce doctoral students and high-level talents	12
Research Capacity	research platforms, combination, academic conferences	11
Internationalisation	co-operation with foreign universities	6
University Ranking (New Development)	New Development development of cutting-edge trends, cutting-edge scientific research	3

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Talent Recruitment

Table 5.86 Quotes on Talent Recruitment

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We take effective measures to introduce and train a larger number of doctoral students and high-level talents. We promote high-level talents to play a greater role in the university's discipline construction, team building and academic breakthroughs.	introduce doctoral students and high-level talents	Respondent #20

Discussion:

Respondents indicate that Talent Recruitment is given due consideration by the universities towards the target of improving university ranking.

Research Capacity

Table 5.87 Quotes on Research Capacity

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
To improve research ability, we build strong scientific research platforms, such as provincial Collaborative Innovation Centre, social science research bases, key laboratories, new type Think Tanks with university characteristics, engineering research centres, engineering technology research centres, public service platforms, etc. We build government-industry-academia-research innovation platforms with the government and the industry. We strive to promote the combination of industry, academia, research and application, actively strive for the	research ability, research platforms, combination, academic conferences	Respondent #20

establishment of horizontal projects, patent authorisation and application. We host academic conferences at the provincial level and above.		

Discussion:

Research Capacity is another factor that is considered in the focus on university ranking. Majority of respondents indicated that it is important to establish collaboration between industry, and academia for research.

Internationalisation

Table 5.88 Quotes on Internationalization

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We actively promote co-operation with foreign universities. We have co-operative relationships with a number of universities, such as United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other countries and regions. We introduce the British Higher Education Diploma SQA-(HND) AD programs, and cooperate with Australia and other countries to open online exchange programs to improve teaching quality.	co-operation with foreign universities	Respondent #20

Discussion:

On the point of Internationalisation, majority of respondents indicated that universities are actively participating in cooperations and exchange programs with foreign universities to improve the teaching quality and subsequently university ranking.

New Development

Table 5.89 Quotes on New Development

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Leaders should have the foresight to be able to really make a judgement on the development of cutting-edge trends in society, which will help to better position the university.	development of cutting-edge trends	Respondent #7
We encourage our faculty to conduct cutting-edge scientific research.	cutting-edge scientific research	Respondent #11

Discussion:

Responses also indicated that the universities are giving due considerations to New Developments. Majority of respondents suggested that the universities are investing on cutting-edge trends.

Visual map showing links between themes and codes for Q15:

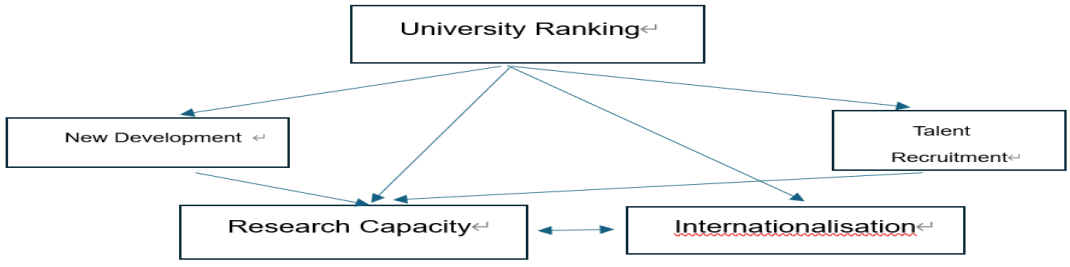


Figure 5.15 Visual Map for Q15

Summary:

The visual map above (Figure 5.15) shows university ranking and related factors. To improve university ranking, the universities need to improve research capacity, ensuring collaboration between industry, academia and research.

Secondly, high-level talent recruitment improves research capacity and university ranking. Thirdly, internationalisation such as international student recruitment and exchange programs helps improving university ranking and research capacity. Lastly, cutting-edge scientific research is encouraged to improve university ranking.

Question#16 - What improvements are needed to enable your university to become more globally competitive?

Table 5.90 Theme and Code for Q16

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Global Competitiveness (Internationalisation)	Internationalisation international research cooperation, international cultural exchanges, jointly organize campuses, recruit international students, recruit domestic students to study in overseas branch campus, join some global education alliances, international vision or experience	14
Global Competitiveness (Alumni)	Alumni Association strengthen our ties with alumni, alumni association centres, invite famous alumni back, loyalty and a sense of gratitude	4
Global Competitiveness (Serving Community)	Serving Community serve the country well, employment, regional economic development	3

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Internationalisation

Table 5.91 Quotes on Internationalisation

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
We need to strengthen international research cooperation. Teachers should endeavor to publish academic papers in foreign journals or work with renowned foreign scholars in scientific research cooperation. We also need to strengthen international cultural exchanges. If possible, universities jointly organise domestic and overseas branch campuses. We strive to recruit a wide range of international students to study in the domestic branch campuses of foreign universities, or recruit domestic students to study in overseas branch campuses.	international research cooperation, international cultural exchanges, jointly organize campuses, recruit international students, recruit domestic students to study in overseas branch campus	Respondent #20
If our university can join some global education alliances, and then bring in some overseas scholars and administrators, or even invite some people who have experience in university management to be vice-chancellors.	join some global education alliances	Respondent #5
We hope our teachers and staff have more international vision or experience and carry out cutting-edge research.	international vision or experience	Respondent #16

Discussion:

To be globally competitive, universities would need to intensify their internationalisation efforts. Majority of respondents indicated that international collaborations and exchanges need to be strengthened to become globally competitive.

Alumni Association

Table 5.92 Quotes on Alumni Association

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
The alumni association is a very valuable resource. We need to strengthen our ties with alumni and accept their donations. Through co-operation with alumni, we can make use of their resources and platforms to obtain more financial and resource support, as well as support from various forces in the community. For example, we have set up alumni association centres in different districts. We send invitation letters to alumni to invite them to return to their	alumni association, strengthen our ties with alumni, alumni association centres, invite famous alumni back	Respondent #17

alma mater on the occasion of university celebrations. On weekdays, we also invite famous alumni back to give lectures and share their experiences of growth. The valuable experience of alumni will better help the growth of younger students and the development university.		
We hope all alumni to have a sense of gratitude to their alma mater. Loyalty and a sense of gratitude to their alma mater will also inspire students who are now in campus to study.	loyalty and a sense of gratitude	Respondent #5

Discussion:

Respondents also flagged Alumni Association as an important factor when considering global competitiveness capacity of universities. Most respondents indicated that alumni association is a very valuable resource for universities, thus the connection to Alumni Association needs to be strengthened by setting up alumni association centre and inviting famous alumni back to share their growth experience.

Serving Community

Table 5.93 Quotes on Serving Community

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
If the university can serve the country well, solve the problem of national employment and regional economic development, it will naturally be more global competitive.	serve the country well, employment, regional economic development	Respondent #11

Discussion:

Serving Community: Many respondents suggested that to be more globally competitive, the universities need to serve the local community by contributing to regional employment and development.

Visual map showing links between themes and codes for Q16:

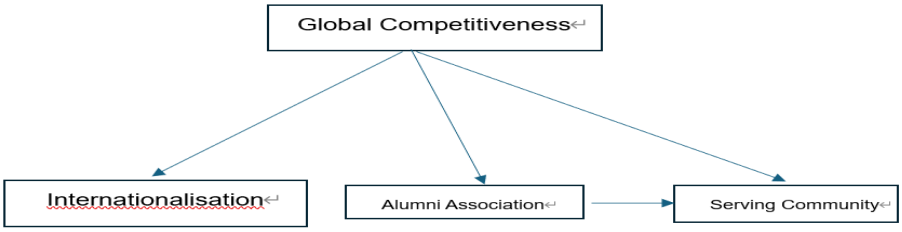


Figure 5.16 Visual Map for Q16

Summary:

As Table 5.16 shows, three factors are considered by the respondents to be important in exploring the areas of improvement towards enhancing the global competitiveness of participating universities. As noted by respondents, to stay globally competitive, the universities need to intensify their international cooperations and exchanges. Also, universities could consider joining the global education alliance. Secondly, universities needs to strengthen the association with Alumni Association. For example, the university could set up an alumni association centre and invite famous alumni back to share their growth experience. Thirdly, the university needs to serve the local community by contributing to regional employment and development.

Question#17 - Is there anything else you would like to add regarding how universities in China are investing and prioritising their resources to ensure a sustainable and enriching learning experience for their students and staffs?

Table 5.94 Theme and Code for Q17

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Learning Resources and Facilities	Resource	9

	integration and share of resources, learning environment, facilities & equipment, digital platforms and resources	
Campus Culture	cultivate moral character campus culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, positive and inclusive learning atmosphere	4
Inspiring Leader	Students & Tutor Oriented sense of achievement, sense of identity, development and the cultivation of students' ability	3
Trust	Transparent & Fair open and fair mechanism	2

Excerpts from respondents' comments, Keywords and Discussions are presented next:

Learning Resources and Facilities

Table 5.95 Quotes for Learning Resources and Facilities

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Since the resources are limited, we can consider integration and share of the resources between colleges.	integration and share of the resources	Respondent #13
The university provides students with an excellent learning environment, high-quality campus facilities and teaching equipment, and makes full use of digital platforms and resources to improve their learning experience.	learning environment, facilities & equipment, digital platforms and resources	Respondent #16

Discussion:

On the point of Learning Resources and Facilities, many respondents indicated that the universities need to ensure a better plan in distributing the limited resources. The university should ensure that students are provided better learning environment, facilities, equipment and digital platforms.

Campus Culture

Table 5.96 Quotes for Campus Culture

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
For example, our university's motto is "Learning from literature, cultivating moral character". The motto is taken from the Analects of Confucius, which says, "A gentleman learns from the literature, and is courteous", and from the University, which says, "Cultivate oneself, unify one's family, rule the country, and pacify the world", and "Ke Ming De", and so on. When a teacher's sense of value is reflected, student learning experience will be improved.	cultivate moral character	Respondent #2
The university promotes a campus culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, which encourages students to carry out innovative and entrepreneurial projects with the help of mentors during their school years.	campus culture of innovation and entrepreneurship	Respondent #17
We create a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere for students to be self-motivated and lifelong learners.	positive and inclusive learning atmosphere	Respondent #12

Discussion:

Regarding Campus Culture, most respondents emphasised the need to invest in a campus culture of innovation and entrepreneurship to create a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere for students.

Inspiring Leader

Table 5.97 Quotes on Inspiring Leader

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Colleges and universities are to be teacher-oriented, student-oriented. Then the sense of acquisition of teacher is very important. From the students' perspective, through professional education and extracurricular second classrooms, we provide students with a sense of achievement.	tutor-oriented, student-oriented, sense of achievement	Respondent #14

First of all, we should promote student-centred and tutor-centred teaching. We help students establish sense of identity. Emphasis should be placed on development and the cultivation of students' ability such as problem-solving as well as innovative thinking.	student and tutor centred, sense of identity, development and the cultivation of students' ability	Respondent #15

Discussion:

The respondents also emphasised the importance for an Inspiring Leader. Many respondents emphasised that the university should be more Student and Tutor Oriented so that overtime this will trigger a closer sense of identity on their part towards the university.

Trust

Table 5.98 Quotes on Trust

Quotes	Keywords	Respondent
Only an open and fair mechanism will ultimately make it possible for our resources to be truly allocated to where they are most needed, to staff and students.	open and fair mechanism	Respondent #7

Discussion:

The need for more to be done in the area of trust was emphasised. Several respondents emphasised the need for an environment of open and fair approach in ensuring that the limited resources are fairly allocated to staff and students.

Visual map showing links between themes and codes:

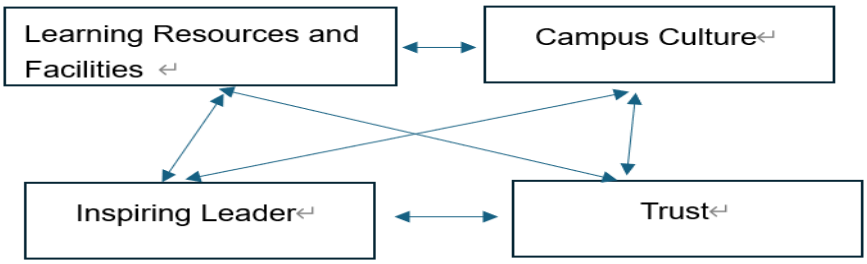


Figure 5.17 Visual Map for Q17

Summary:

Figure 5.17 displays the key factors and the interactions between them. The need for the university to be more Student and Tutor Oriented was emphasised as well as the importance for the leader to be inspiring. An inspiring leader would play a critical role in making staff and students to develop a closer sense of identity towards the university. Also, the university should seek to provide students better learning environment, by investing in facilities, equipment and digital platforms. Furthermore, moral character cultivation, campus culture of innovation and entrepreneurship that contributes to a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere for students, should be embraced. Lastly, open and fair mechanisms for the allocation of resources are required to enrich student and tutor experiences.