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Driving Strategic Success in Private Universities: The Mediating Role of Innovation Adoption in the Context of Innovative Leadership "A Field study in Private Universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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A B S T R A C T

This study aimed to investigate the role of strategic success in private universities: the mediating role of innovation adoption in the context of innovative leadership, and analysing the relationship and impact of these variables and providing recommendations for the studied universities that would help them improve the quality of their educational performance. The primary tool for data collection was a questionnaire consisting of 44 items. The study focused on three main variables: innovative leadership and strategic success in addition to innovation adoption as Mediator variable. The selected sample for the practical part of the study included a group of private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. A total of 163 questionnaires were distributed to a sample of managers and department heads in 14 private universities in Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Of these, 152 questionnaires were retrieved, and 148 were found to be valid for analysis. The study reached a set of conclusions that highlighted the main findings and insights that shaped the interactions between innovative leadership and strategic success in a group of private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The study found that the effects of innovative leadership had an impact on the strategic success through the innovation adoption in the studied universities. The study also provided a set of recommendations, the most important of which is that these universities should direct resources towards supporting innovation, both in management and operations, as it is a critical factor in transforming all the resources into tangible and strategic success.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the past years the KRI experienced heightened growth in its private university sector because students required access to higher educational opportunities alongside curriculum development toward worldwide qualifications (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Private universities in the KRI encounter multiple obstacles such as budget breakdowns alongside regulatory oversight and market demand distinction. Institutional strategic success can be catalysed through innovative leadership which enables adaptation to environmental changes and promotes both academic quality standards and sustained long-term expansion (Avolio et al., 2009). Private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are increasingly recognizing the inspiring role of leaders in achieving long-term success. Leaders possess the capabilities, which include a variety of competencies and organizational resources, necessary to navigate a complex and competitive

academic environment. However, the full potential of these capabilities can only be realized through a leadership style that is characterized by innovation in its curricula and strategies in order to excel and adapt to the existing conditions and intense competition and that acts as a decisive moderating force. (Amabile & pratt, 2016) Innovative leadership is a dynamic strategy that promotes innovation, flexibility, and teamwork to propel organizational success in a setting that is changing quickly. Empathy, imaginative thinking, and a dedication to lifelong learning are among the essential traits it entails, empowering leaders to inspire and motivate groups of people to pursue challenging objectives (Murali et al.,2024).

In light of this understanding, private universities in the region were selected as a practical field for applying this study. This selection is driven by the current need to adopt a proactive approach to confront future crises and address environmental changes compared to competitors. To achieve better performance, competitive advantage, and strategic success, it is essential to build strategic talent and competencies. There is a wealth of research on how leadership influences organizational effectiveness in Western civilizations, but there is no similar study for Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2016). Adoption of innovation serves as a link between leadership and organizational success. It translates leadership strategies into tangible performance outcomes by promoting innovative processes, products, and behaviours (AlAnazi et al., 2021) (Rehman and Iqbal, 2020).

In the Kurdistan Region, improving organizational innovation skills is linked to increased strategic flexibility, which is essential for adjusting to changing circumstances and customer requirements (Abdulkhaliq et al., 2024). Despite the advantages, obstacles to innovation in higher education include resistance to change and insufficient information transfer mechanisms. Overcoming these obstacles requires strategic measures, such as fostering a supportive culture and improving cooperation between academia and industry. Short-term initiatives, including targeted interventions and strategic tools, can enable institutions to foster a dynamic culture of innovation (Diaconu and Salaj, 2024).

The major role of leadership in higher education remains understudied, with few research investigating how innovative strategies implemented through leadership effect strategic results in private higher education institutions in Iraq's Kurdistan Region (KRI). Bridging this knowledge gap is critical, since numerous universities in the area need a thorough grasp of how leadership styles influence strategic results in order to effectively manage growing educational systems. Given the KRI's unique climate and the growing private higher education sector, research into how creative leadership may generate institutional adaptation, academic quality, and long-term viability is critical. This study seeks to examine how creative leadership might influence the trajectory of regional higher education by closing a well-known academic gap. The significance of this study stems from its ability to shed light on the specific problems and possibilities confronting private institutions in an area undergoing political, economic, and social transition. Understanding the link between innovative leadership and strategic success is critical as these institutions try to improve their competitive position and educational quality. Effective leadership not only impacts institutional performance, but it also shapes the educational experience of students, professors, and staff.

In light of the intense debate currently taking place in research and academic circles, this study examines the mediating role of innovation adoption in the relationship between innovative leadership and strategic success. The possibility of devising management approaches that help universities succeed in a constantly changing business environment is a fundamental question posed by researchers and practitioners alike. To achieve this, they must employ leadership approaches that enable them to effectively improve their operations and achieve high performance. Consequently, the researcher felt it necessary to address these aspects in his current study, explore the concept of innovative leadership in depth, and consider its multiple aspects, uses, and consequences for the overall effectiveness of organizational strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Innovative Leadership

Innovation is critical to any thriving organization in the 21st century (Elkington & Booysen, 2015).

Innovative leadership is a complex concept that uses creativity, motivation, and direction to drive organizational innovation and success. It involves encouraging team members to generate new ideas and transform them into actual outcomes, goods, or services (Supriatna & Zulganef, 2023). Innovative leadership has a significant impact on follower attitudes, organizational commitment, and job engagement, serving as a key driver of procedural and organizational change within organizations (Viktora, 2022). Effective innovative leaders use a variety of leadership styles, including directive, supportive, and participatory styles, to build a culture of creativity and innovation in their businesses (AlAhmari, Abdulkhaliq, S. S., Abdullah, D., & Yousif, M. (2024) They are also skilled at managing the creative problem-solving process, leading individuals, teams, and organizations to ensure that new solutions are created and implemented effectively (Mumford et al.,2022).

Innovative leadership, according to Shin and Erin (2012), is the introduction of a totally new completely new strategy, product, service, technology, or idea to meet individual needs and address current and future challenges. Thus, innovative leadership is a theory and technique that combines several leadership philosophies to inspire and motivate team members to create unique ideas, products, and services (Horth and Buchner, 2014).

An innovative leader is primarily responsible for implementing innovative leadership. In organizational development, innovative leadership is viewed as helping a group or organization achieve its goals. Innovative leaders possess a set of similar traits: including the leadership abilities, attitudes, and knowledge necessary to recognize present risks and foresee potential negative effects in the future (Shen and Erin, 2012). Additionally dedicated and visionary, innovative leaders work to improve the social, political, and economic well-being of the populace). To maintain its competitiveness and profitability in the face of changing procedures and technology, an organization must think creatively (Horth and Buchner, 2014). Leaders are essential in determining the success and character of innovation initiatives in order for an organization to be able to adjust to new developments in an efficient manner. Businesses that don't have creative leadership are more likely to fail.

Based on the researcher's evaluation of the overall situation in private universities inside the Kurdistan Region, several key dimensions have been consistently utilized by researchers such (De jong &Vermeulen ,2006 ; Al-Nadwi and Imran, 2015 ; Hafez and Abdullah, 2020; Al-Naimi & Hayyi, 2023; Mohsen, 2018). These dimensions include communication, leadership, change, strategy, and development. Given the consensus among these studies, this research will adopt these same dimensions, as they have proven to be both the most widely used and the most suitable for the current study's context. This may be due to the lack of research on these topics in private educational institutions in the Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, this model more comprehensively addresses leadership success and excellence in the field of strategic and organizational management. The Strategic Management Maturity Model, as defined in this article, includes seven different aspects of strategic management:

1. **Communication dimension** According to studies, good communication is critical to generating organizational innovation (Munna, 2023) ;(de Lange & Mulder, 2017) . Open internal communication has been highlighted by senior executives as an important driver of open innovation initiatives, emphasizing the need for transparent and clear communication channels (Wang et al., 2023). Moreover, research conducted at universities shows that good communication skills, such as clarity of thought and expression, are crucial to the development of leadership skills, emphasizing the relationship between communication competence and leadership qualities, as innovative leaders inspire, generate ideas, and ultimately drive innovation within their teams and companies by encouraging an open, transparent, and purposeful communication culture (Anuar et al., 2021).
2. **Entrepreneurial Dimension:** Innovation is still necessary to achieve leadership in the face of globalization's demands, particularly for businesses looking to keep their competitive advantage. Here, the strategy orientation is on ongoing adjustment to the demands of clients and rivals. At all organizational levels, employee ideas must be promoted and the required resources must be made available to support leadership. Innovative entrepreneurial involves

not just creating new goods and services but also enhancing an organization's capacity for fast decision-making. To discover new possibilities and encourage innovation, managers must cultivate a culture of experimentation and risk-taking in order to meet strategic objectives (De Jong & Vermeulen, 2006).

3. **Change Dimension:** According to Al-Nadawi, Imran, (2015) This refers to the organization's ability to lead change processes that promote innovation. This entails inspiring and convincing the team of the importance of change and urging them to implement it. Moreover, this leadership requires establishing the appropriate technological infrastructure and developing the necessary organizational structures. These efforts ensure that the organization's reforms are implemented successfully and efficiently (Doran, 2018) .
4. **Strategic Dimension:** Strategic dimension is a vital element of innovation leadership because it requires the ability to anticipate the future, develop successful strategies, and drive businesses toward their creative goals. Leaders with strategic talents are able to spot emerging trends, seize opportunities, and overcome problems, ensuring that their companies remain competitive and resilient in a changing environment. Strategic leaders drive the innovation process from idea development to implementation by allocating resources, cultivating a creative culture, and fostering collaboration. (Pisano, 2015).
5. **Developmental Dimension:** This endeavour involves trying to enhance the work environment within the organization, which involves coordinating the skills and abilities of the work team. This comprehensive approach entails designing a workspace that is physically conducive to productivity and psychologically supportive of employee well-being. Physical fabric considerations include improving workplace layouts, ensuring comfortable furniture, and maintaining a clean, safe, and visually appealing atmosphere. Equally important are the psychological elements, which include cultivating a culture of mutual respect, recognition, and support, meeting workers' personal needs and interests, and providing opportunities for professional growth and development.(De Jong & Vermeulen, 2006).

2.2 Strategic Success

Strategic success is a complex concept that does not have a single, universally agreed-upon definition. It involves achieving the organization's long-term goals through the effective formulation and implementation of its strategy. Evaluating strategic success requires considering different factors and perspectives ((Davila, et al., 2017). Many organizations are increasingly keen to develop strategic partnerships to protect the long-term continuity and profitability of their institutions. This method needs establishing a balance between sustainability and adaptability, which calls for creating performance evaluation metrics that are suitable for every phase of the organization's life cycle (Mahmoud, 2021).

Strategic success is defined as "the organization's ability to excel in work, adapt, respond, grow, and continuously learn, in line with the goals it seeks to achieve." This concept refers to the importance of successful leadership and management that recognizes the importance of the organization's existence and its interaction with the business environment, and is able to anticipate events and face challenges with a long-term vision, focusing on critical success factors, with the goal of competing in a way that adds value to both customers and stakeholders (Al-Anzai, 2010). This also includes the ability to increase vision, purpose and measurable goals, seek to build new models, diversify revenue sources, train employees, and ensure long-term performance through motivation, satisfaction, feedback, evaluation and review (Hafsi &Thomas, 2005).

To secure their survival and success in their activity, several organizations have resorted to establishing strategic partnerships (Al-Tamimi and Al-Khashali, 2015). The idea of success in organizations is associated with environmental adaptation because growth and survival, as well as continuity and interaction in a changing environment, need flexibility and the establishment of equilibrium. Finding a performance evaluation metric that is suitable for each stage of the organization's life cycle is required to accomplish this (Al-Halama and Al-Azzawi, 2009). According to Thomas, (2014), strategic success is defined as effective administrative leadership that accomplishes the objectives of the company and the business

environment while confronting reality with a meaningful perspective on the client and all business owners. In addition to that, Chankoson, (2019) argued that organizations. A successful organization relies on accurate knowledge, integrated planning, and a clear strategy that is in line with its goals, vision, and values. This allows for high levels of continuity, prosperity, and strategic thinking. Continuous innovation requires organizations to prioritize efficiency, independence, social and human skills, professional growth, and comprehensive strategic planning. Furthermore, according to Davila, et al., (2017) , leaders must enhance the work environment, identify organizational problems, fix issues, and create an atmosphere that supports development by providing the resources needed to implement core processes and achieve long-term organizational goals.

Based on research and writings on the agreed-upon set of models and dimensions for measuring strategic success, researchers have differed in their view on the use of dimensions to measure them, due to the differences in environments and organizations in terms of size and activity. Most studies have focused on the dimensions of survival, adaptation, and growth. These dimensions are widely recognized by researchers, as indicated by (Katz & Green, 2009), (Khalil & Hamoud, 2019). These dimensions have been applied primarily to business organizations and the private sector, making them appropriate for our study that focuses on the same sector. As explained bellow:

2.2.1 Survival

A crucial component of strategic success is survival, especially for businesses navigating changing and competitive settings. Diverse tactics have been found to improve survival chances in various industries. For example, in the startup ecosystem, characteristics of service quality like tangibility, responsiveness, and dependability have a big impact on survival rates, with tangibility being quite important (Zhang & Song, 2024). Furthermore, in order to overcome market hurdles, startups utilize a variety of survival strategies, such as resource optimization and tactical partnerships. In addition, traditional MSMEs need supported services and interpersonal interactions to prosper in the digital era (Salleh et al., 2014).

2.2.2 Adaptation

Adaptation is a critical component of strategic success, allowing firms to adapt effectively to dynamic changes in their external environment. Companies must acquire resilience and flexibility in order to meet challenges such as globalization, technological advancements, and economic shifts. Organizations that adapt quickly to change can keep their competitive edge and increase their performance over time (Yin, 2023). In this setting, international corporations are frequently more adaptable owing to their emphasis on innovation and organizational learning (Varma et al., 2024).

2.2.3 Growth

Organizational growth is a critical component of strategic success, as emphasized in many research articles. Growth is viewed as a strategy for gaining competitive advantage and enhancing profitability. Yet, therefore, growth and profitability have been found to have an ambiguous empirical link by the research studies already conducted. Some people postulate that with large economies of scale and entrepreneurial advantages high growth rates are quite possible to be introducing more profitability, whereas others stress that growth has its internal implications – conflicts that hamper profitability, noting thereby the significance of strategic orientation in managing this relationship (Senderovitz et al., 2010).

2.3 Innovation adoption

The phenomenon of innovation adoption in higher education has been widely analyzed in current academic debate, which emphasizes the importance of institutional, technological, and human factors for its effective implementation. Kezar (2018) argues that strong institutional leadership is essential for fostering a culture of innovation, requiring administrators to define a strategic vision and allocate resources to foster innovative activities. Faculty resistance is a major obstacle, sometimes stemming from a lack of training or hesitation about educational reforms(Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013).

Furthermore, differences in technical skill might make it difficult for students to interact with new educational technologies, thereby their level of digital readiness is crucial in determining the efficacy of adoption (Margarian et al., 2011). Inadequate infrastructure and financial limitations make adoption more difficult, especially for

institutions with limited funding (Bates, 2015; Selwyn, 2016).

To overcome these challenges, researchers recommend implementing professional development programs (Porter et al., 2016), pilot evaluations and broad stakeholder engagement. These recommended techniques highlight the need for a systematic approach to innovation adoption that balances technological advancements with institutional readiness and user acceptance (Kezar, 2018)..

Several theoretical frameworks, such as the TAM, UTAUT, and DOI, have been used to study innovation uptake in higher education. These models are beneficial for understanding individual attitudes, such as perceived utility, perceived ease of use, and social influence, but they fail to take into account institutional elements at the macro level that are important for influencing uptake in university settings. Because higher education institutions are complicated and hierarchical. Kezar (2018) Institutional Innovation Adoption Model is especially pertinent to this research. It successfully combines organizational culture, policy, and leadership as important determinants of the adoption of sustainable innovation.

In contrast to TAM/UTAUT, which focus on individual opinions on utility and usability, Kezar's approach highlights the critical role that university leadership plays in promoting innovation via strategic vision, resources, and incentives. This claim is corroborated by Porter et al. (2016), who proved that the effective adoption of blended learning required the active promotion of administrators. Kezar's approach examines how official policies, incentive programs, and infrastructural capabilities can facilitate or hinder adoption, further integrating structural and policy assistance. Faculty resistance endures in the absence of mandatory training, and this approach addresses the limitations of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM).(Selwyn, 2016). The model also assesses organizational culture, including shared values, cooperation, and change readiness, which are critical in higher education institutions where entrenched norms affect the adoption of innovation. This aspect is not addressed by TAM/UTAUT but is supported by Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich, (2013).who found that cultures conducive to experimentation adopted EdTech more swiftly. Kezar's model is particularly pertinent to the university context, where innovations such as LMS, AI software, and competency-based education necessitate systemic change rather than individual adjustments, making it more appropriate than general technology-adoption models.

2.4 Innovative Leadership and Strategic Success

Leadership as a factor of innovation can be regarded as the determining factor in the strategic success of an organization. Managers who practice and encourage innovation ensure organization improves on its ability to adapt, innovate, and sustain change in an ever-evolving economic world. The essential characteristics of organizations that have been identified are: ability to address environmental changes, ability to develop, and the identification of competitive position at least once a year. This flexibility is always attributed to managerial work strategies that assist the organization to adapt to the market terrain and improved technology (Barney & Hesterly, 2019). The study also shows how such leaders can potentially start generating new ideas and how their contributions are instrumental in crafting firm-wide strategies, which are both long-term in focus and can bend enough to accommodate short-term crises. These executives know how to leverage the new information technology, create awareness of newer ways of working among the people and engage in acts that lead to positive change within the organization. Thus, the result is beneficial for the organizations with the leaders who apply innovations, just because the proper management of innovations and the exploration of new opportunities indirectly guarantee a strategic success (Damanpour and Schneider, 2010; Vaccaro et al., 2012). For instance, Rosen et al. (2011) specify that innovative leaders are invaluable in organizing the top management team in order to set the right balance between exploration and exploitation. Overall, this dual view allows organizations to create new ideas for operational improvement and execute and enhance those ideas, thereby achieving sustainability in competitive advantage. It is these that should be balanced to support true strategic success over the long term because they embrace innovation and the best of current operation. Integrated technology adopters include innovative leaders who need to implement new technology in

the working of organizations. Avolio et al (2009) posited that transformational leaders, which he also referred to as innovative leaders, use influence tactics to champion the use of new technologies and practices. This technology adoption is a good-timed strategy since it proactively ensures an organization gets to enjoy improved efficiency and productivity, and enhanced responsiveness to the market, all of which are critical in strategy implementation success. Therefore, in light of the above discussion, the following hypotheses are put forward regarding the relationship between innovative leadership and strategic success:

H1: Innovative leadership significantly relates to strategic success. and the following hypotheses arise from it:

H1a: Communicative dimension significantly relates to strategic success.

H1b Entrepreneurial dimension significantly relates to strategic success.

H1c: Change dimension significantly relates to strategic success.

H1d: Strategic dimension significantly relates to strategic success.

H1e: Developmental dimension significantly relates to strategic success.

2.5 The relationship between innovative leadership, innovation adoption, and strategic success

The relationship between innovative leadership, innovation adoption, and strategic success in universities can be described as creating a supportive environment for innovation adoption, which in turn leads to strategic success. Visionary orientation, risk-taking, and empowerment (Avolio et al., 2014), constitute innovative leadership upon which organizational change is built, as they encourage creativity and a willingness to embrace new ideas. Innovation adoption is an indirect effect of this leadership style, as innovation can be understood as the application of new technologies, methods, or management practices at the macro-level (Rogers, 2003). Universities that successfully embrace innovation are better positioned to increase operational efficiency, academic excellence, and competitiveness. (Damanpour and Schneider, 2010).

Embracing innovation is a critical facilitator, linking leadership behaviors to actual strategic outcomes, facilitating the implementation of innovative visions, and driving sustainable change (Besant and Teed, 2015).The results of empirical studies show that in the absence of innovation adoption as an intermediary process, innovative leadership functions toward strategic success may be more declarative than practical (Gümüsloğlu and Elsev, 2009).

The strategic success of Universities requires the deliberate development of innovative leaders who implement change and create systems for continuous innovation, producing a dynamic and innovative academic culture.

H2: Innovative leadership significantly impacts strategic success through Innovation adoption.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 *Methodology*

The methodology of this study is quantitative, with data collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of four parts. Section (A) focuses on the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while sections (B), (C), and (D) use a five-point Likert scale to assess the extent to which respondents agree with the study items.

3.2 Proposed model Conceptual Framework

A study model was created based on existing literature and theoretical arguments, as well as the study's aims, questions, and hypotheses to emphasize the main factors that serve as the foundation for this research. The model provides a preliminary understanding of the interactions, correlations, and possible impacts between the study's variables. The major goal of this study is to investigate the way innovative leadership improves strategic success through innovation adoption at the private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. To experimentally evaluate the concept, the researcher used SPSS software (version 27) to analyse data. Figure 1 depicts the proposed model for the investigation. The figure 1. illustrated proposed model of this study.

Figure 1. Proposed Model (**Source:** Researcher deveploed)

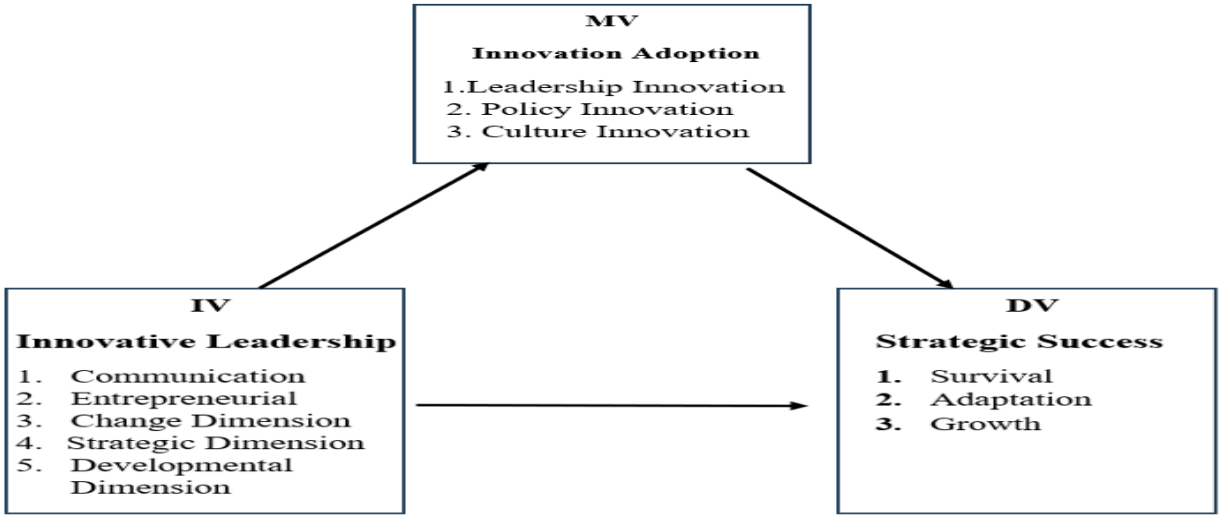

Figure 1. Proposed Model (**Source:** Researcher deveploed)

3.2 Data collection and sample selection

The data were used to achieve the study objectives, and sample data were collected using questionnaires. Arabic and Kurdish are the official languages in higher education institutions in the Kurdistan Region to ensure that participants understand them. The current study population, individuals who hold administrative positions and work in private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, were examined. (163) Administrative leaders in private universities in the region were selected, and the researcher used the random sample method, as (163) questionnaires were distributed to them, (158) questionnaires were returned, and (4) questionnaires were removed due to the failure to meet the required conditions for answering the questionnaire questions. Thus, the number of questionnaires subject to the research is (148) questionnaires, which is a percentage of (90.79%), which is a high percentage and suitable for conducting the analysis.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY SAMPLE AND ITS VARIABLES

4.1 Demographic of Respondent Profile

Sample demographic data included gender, age, years of employment, academic qualifications, job title, and current work experience. Table 1 presents all demographic data of the respondents. A total of 148 academic and administrative officials from private institutions in the Kurdistan Region participated in the survey. The study's respondent population comprises, mostly male (67.57%), with the majority aged between 41–50 years (40.54%), followed by those aged 31–40 (25.68%) and 51 and above (23.65%). Middle-to-senior career males are assumed to be occupying leadership positions in these universities' administrative functions. At the level of employment tenure, the majority of respondents (29.05%) had 6–10 years of service, while 25.68% had 11–15 years, indicating substantial institutional experience. A notable proportion of individuals had a bachelor's degree (33.78%) or a master's degree (24.32%), while 14.86% held doctorate degrees, reflecting a high level of education. Furthermore, over half (47.30%) had over 11 years of experience in their present positions, hence enhancing their knowledge with university administration processes. The profiles indicate that the respondents are seasoned, highly skilled individuals, therefore possessing more capacity to influence decision-making in innovation adoption and strategic leadership within their universities. Their professional positions significantly influence their comprehension of creative leadership and the acceptance of innovations, which are crucial for achieving strategic success in private universities.

Table 1. Respondents' profiles

Respondent characteristics		Frequency (N = 162)	Percentage (%)
Gender			
	Male	100	67.57%
	Female	48	32.43%
Total		**148**	**%100**
Age			
	21-30	**15**	10.14%
	31–40 years	38	25.68%
	41–50 years	**60**	40.54%
	51 and above	35	23.65%
Total		**148**	**%100**
Job Experience			
	Less than 5 years	36	24.32%
	6-10 years	43	29.05%
	11-15 years	38	25.68%
	16 and over	27	18.24%
Total		**148**	**%100**
Qualification			
	Secondary or less	**10**	6.76%
	Diploma	**20**	13.51%
	Higher Diploma	10	6.76%
	Bachelor	50	33.78%
	Master	36	24.32%
	Doctorate	**22**	14.86%
Total		**148**	**%100**
Experience in current job			
	Less than 5 years	22	14.86%
	6-10	56	37.84%
	11 and over	70	47.30%
Total		**148**	**%100**

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on the output of SPSS

4.2 The Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 2 illustrate the primary trends in administrative leaders' perceptions of innovative leadership, strategic achievement, and innovation implementation, with entrepreneurial (M=4.25, SD=0.56) and developmental (M=4.13, SD=0.68) aspects of innovative leadership receiving the highest scores, indicating a pronounced emphasis on active and developmental strategies, while the change dimension (M=3.68, SD=0.52) received a lower score, suggesting challenges in facilitating organisational change. From a strategic success perspective, adaptation (M=4.03, SD=0.62) was rated best, indicating institutional flexibility, followed by growth (M=3.92, SD=0.67) and survival (M=3.80, SD=0.77), demonstrating a balanced emphasis on expansion and stability. The adoption of innovation ranked culture innovation (M=4.13, SD=0.86) highest, underscoring the significance of an innovation-friendly environment. Policy innovation (M=3.98, SD=0.68) and leadership innovation (M=4.01, SD=0.76) were also highly rated, affirming the influence of policy and leadership in facilitating change. The mean score for innovation adoption (M=3.95, SD=0.67) indicates that, while advancements have been achieved, there is still considerable potential for enhancing the full institutionalisation of new methods. The results individually indicate that innovation adoption mediates the relationship between creative leadership and strategic success in private colleges, with leadership practices and cultural adaptability serving as key drivers of institutional progress.

Table 2. Descriptives statistics for Latent Variables

Constructs	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Innovative Leadership			
Communication Dimension	148	3.9001	.76589
Entrepreneurial Dimension	148	4.2543	.56231
Change Dimension	148	3.6823	.52001
Strategic Dimension	148	3.9812	.78414
Developmental Dimension	148	**4.1287**	**.67543**
Strategic Success			
Survival	148	3.8012	.77001
Adaptation	148	4.0301	.62311
Growth	148	3.9201	.66901
Innovation Adoption			
Leadership Innovation	148	4.0122	.76123
Policy Innovation	148	3.9812	.68133
Culture Innovation	148	4.1261	.861811
Total	**162**	**3.9532**	**0.67123**

Source: Researcher based on the results of the statistical analysis

4.3 Reliability and Validity

The questionnaire's reliability and validity were established through a series of statistical analyses using Smart-PLS software (version three). The internal consistency of the items was assessed via the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which ranged from 0.780 to 0.881, all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.60, as advised by Sekaran and Bougie (2016). Composite reliability (0.872-0.910) was determined to exceed 0.70, hence deemed good according to (Hair et al., 2010).

To verify the validity of the questionnaire items, both convergent validity across items for each variable and discriminant validity across variables were assessed. Convergent validity facilitates the evaluation of the correlation among items within each variable (Hair et al., 2010). The convergent validity test was performed by analysing factor loadings, which ranged from 0.767 to 0.870, all above 0.70. Any paragraph that fell below the "acceptable statistical threshold" criterion was excluded from the final research model. The average variance extracted (AVE) was computed, with values ranging from 0.700 to 0.627. Since the output values exceeded 0.50, all components of the variables demonstrated convergent validity, hence validating their usage for statistical testing. They are enumerated in Table (3).

Table 3. Reliability of Overall Measurement Model

Variable	Paragraph Code	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Communication Dimension	CD1	0.765	0.807	0.887	0.645
	CD2	0.812			
	CD3	0.794			
	CD4	0.828			
Entrepreneurial Dimension	ED1	0.874	0.780	0.870	0.632
	ED2	0.861			
	ED3	0.798			
	ED4	0.801			
Change Dimension	CHD1	0.816	0.784	0.876	0.701
	CHD2	0.842			
	CHD3	0.867			
	CHD4	0.806			
Strategic Dimension	SD1	0.809	0.881	0.905	0.580
	SD2	0.775			
	SD3	0.782			
	SD4	0.791			

Developmental Dimension	DD1	0.834	0.815	0.878	0.649
	DD2	0.788			
	DD3	0.801			
	DD4	0.772			
Survival	S1	0.784	0.805	0.866	0.628
	S2	0.797			
	S3	0.773			
	S4	0.811			
Adaptation	A1	0.826	0.812	0.881	0.653
	A2	0.792			
	A3	0.814			
	A4	0.799			
Growth	G1	0.801	0.803	0.869	0.610
	G2	0.783			
	G3	0.789			
	G4	0.774			
Leadership Innovation	LI1	0.808	0.816	0.882	0.642
	LI2	0.785			
	LI3	0.829			
	LI4	0.798			
Policy Innovation	PI1	0.814	0.822	0.886	0.655
	PI2	0.831			
	PI3	0.788			
	PI4	0.793			
Culture Innovation	CI1	0.807	0.828	0.890	0.668
	CI2	0.822			
	CI3	0.836			
	CI4	0.799			

Source: Researcher based on Smart pls output

The Fornell and Larcker (1981) technique is the most common statistical approach to check for discriminant validity that helps make sure that two variables aren't strongly related (Alvarez et al., 2016). The Fornell and Larcker (1981) method says that the square root of the AVE should be larger than the variable's ratio to the other variables. We have examined this, and Table (4) shows that the numbers on the diagonal are the square root of the AVE and the other numbers are the Pearson correlation coefficient between the variables themselves. Table (4) demonstrates that discriminant validity has been obtained, which suggests that the variables may be utilized for statistical analysis.

Table (4) Discriminant Validity using fornell & Larcker Method

	CD	ED	CHD	SD	DD	S	A	G	LI	PI	CI
Communication Dimension	**0.803**										
Entrepreneurial Dimension	0.612	**0.795**									
Change Dimension	0.588	0.625	**0.837**								
Strategic Dimension	0.563	0.601	0.663	**0.761**							
Developmental Dimension	0.522	0.558	0.611	0.546	**0.806**						
Survival	0.497	0.513	0.574	0.502	0.541	**0.793**					
Adaptation	0.544	0.529	0.589	0.563	0.527	0.603	**0.808**				

Growth	0.486	0.577	0.603	0.588	0.509	0.556	0.578	**0.781**			
Leadership Innovation	0.605	0.648	0.649	0.618	0.598	0.577	0.623	0.609	**0.801**		
Policy Innovation	0.528	0.592	0.608	0.577	0.538	0.531	0.584	0.552	0.666	**0.809**	
Culture Innovation	0.519	0.574	0.582	0.531	0.523	0.512	0.571	0.538	0.627	0.644	**0.817**

Source: Researcher based on Smart pls output

4.4. Structural Model

Based on the results of the measurement model, the validity and reliability of this model were confirmed. The structural model monitors the

Table (5) Results of R^2, Q^2, and f^2 for the Structural Model

Endogenous Variable	**R^2**	**Q^2**	**f^2 (Innovative Leadership)**	**f^2 (Innovation Adoption)**	**Interpretation**
Innovation Adoption	0.254	0.540	—	—	Moderate explanatory power (R^2)
Strategic Success	0.483	0.560	2.071	0.261	Moderate explanatory power (R^2); strong/ medium effect sizes

predictive relevance of the model and the relationships between the constructs. The structural model is evaluated through the coefficient of determination (R2), the predictive relevance of the model (Q2), the effect size (f2), the path coefficient (β value), the T-statistic, and the variance inflation factor (VIF).

4.4.1. Measuring R2, f2, and Q2

The coefficient of determination measures the overall effect size and explained variance in the endogenous model. The R2 results indicate that the endogenous path model is 0.483 for strategic Success, while it is 0.254 for the innovation adoption construct in this model. As suggested by the researchers (Cohen, 1998), an R2 value of 0.75 is considered statistically significant; An R2 value of 0.50 is considered moderately significant; an R2 value of 0.26 is considered weakly significant. Therefore, the R2 value for strategic Success and innovation adoption in this study is statistically significant.

The f2 effect occurs as a result of a change in the R2 value when an extraneous variable is removed from the model. An f2 value of 0.35 is considered strongly significant, 0.15 is moderately significant, and 0.02 is weakly significant In this study, innovative leadership had the greatest impact on strategic success with an f2 value of 2.071, followed by innovation adoption with an f2 value of 0.261. The results of the predictive accuracy of the (Q2) model showed that the accuracy of the path model was acceptable, with Q2 values of 0.560 for innovative leadership and 0.540 for innovation adoption. The results show that the Q2 values for this study model are above the minimum threshold of (0), confirming that the predictive relevance of the path model was sufficient for internal validity. As showed in Table

4.4.2. Path Coefficient Estimation and Hypothesis Testing

The significance of the hypotheses was determined using a retest.

In this study, the significance of the path coefficients and t-statistics was tested using a retest using 5,000 subsamples. Hypothesis testing was conducted in two stages: a partial hypothesis test to assess the significance of the direct relationships between the variables; and a simultaneous hypothesis test to assess the indirect

effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable using a mediator. Table 6 and figure 2. summarizes the results of the main and partial hypothesis testing.

Overall, these findings indicate that private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq benefit greatly from leaders who exhibit strong communication, entrepreneurial spirit, adaptability, strategic thinking, and a focus on development. These dimensions of Innovative Leadership significantly contribute to the institutions' ability to achieve strategic success, ensuring their long-term sustainability and competitiveness in a rapidly evolving educational landscape. The results also highlight the importance of cultivating diverse leadership skills to navigate the unique challenges faced by private universities in the region.

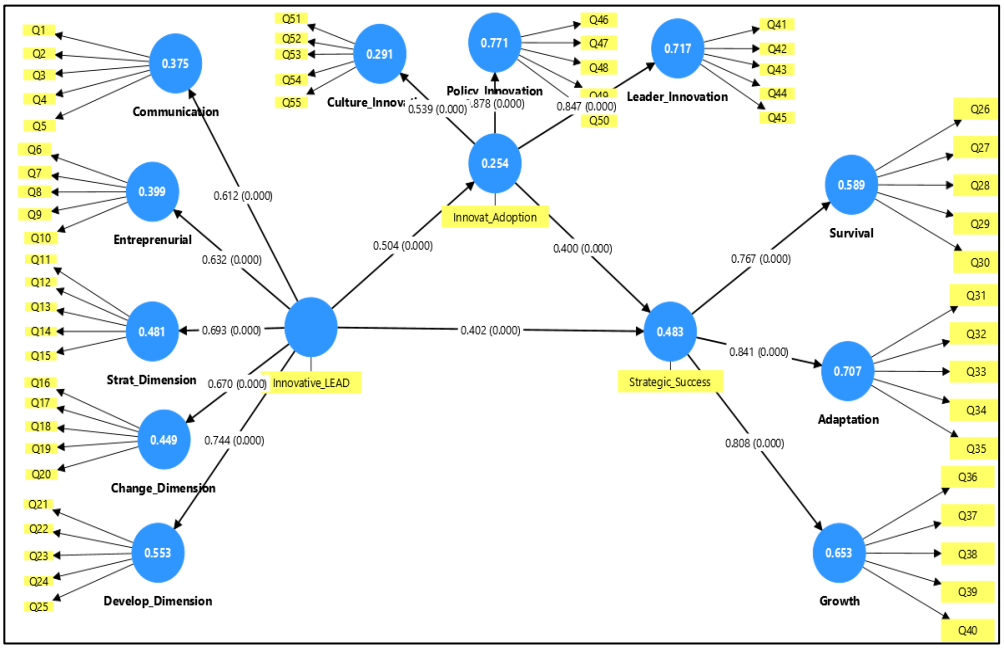

Figure (2). Structural model of this study

The structural model findings revealed the validity of the study's four key assumptions, which were tested on a sample of administrative leaders from private colleges in Iraq's Kurdistan Region. These hypotheses examined the influence of creative leadership on strategic success via the lens of innovation adoption. The findings supported the first hypothesis, which established a direct and statistically significant association between inventive leadership and strategic success. The coefficient ($\beta = 0.504$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that leaders who embrace innovative techniques produce an organizational climate that promotes innovation adoption and execution. The third hypothesis, that innovation adoption has a direct influence on strategic success, was likewise verified.

The findings indicated that the route value between them reached ($\beta = 0.400$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that universities that accept innovation as a strategic choice have a stronger potential for adaptation, expansion, and sustainability. The fourth hypothesis, regarding the mediating role of innovation adoption, revealed a statistically significant indirect effect of innovative leadership on strategic success through innovation adoption, with a value of ($\beta = 0.202$), indicating that part of the impact of innovative leadership is exerted through the promotion of organizational innovation practices. This mediating impact suggests the presence of a partly causal link, demonstrating the role of innovation as a conduit for conveying leadership influence to strategic results.

Consequently, this indicates the innovative leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing the strategic Success of private universities in the area through both direct and indirect relationship. The

overall impact of innovative leadership on strategic success (direct and indirect) amounted to (β = 0.604).

Table (6) Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Relationship	Beta	standard D.	T-Statistics	P-Values	Decision
H1	Innovative Leadership -> SS	0.**402**	0.091	8.234	**0.000**	**Supported**
H1A	Communication D. -> SS	0.405	0.076	4.800	**0.002**	**Supported**
H1B	Entrepreneurial D. -> SS	0.398	0.065	3.232	**0.006**	**Supported**
H1C	Change D. -> SS	0.334	0.051	2.672	**0.003**	**Supported**
H1D	Strategic D. -> SS	0.310	0.320	2.087	**0.012**	**Supported**
H1E	Developmental D. -> SS	0.**504**	0.037	1.890	**0.007**	**Supported**
H2	Innovative Leadership ->IA	0.341	0.076	9.019	**0.000**	**Supported**
H2A	Communication D. -> IA	0.334	0.096	3.320	**0.001**	**Supported**
H2B	Entrepreneurial D. -> IA	0.398	0.079	3.382	**0.002**	**Supported**
H2C	Change D. -> IA	0.434	0.086	5.452	**0.000**	**Supported**
H2D	Strategic D. -> IA	0.473	0.142	4.087	**0.001**	**Supported**
H2E	Developmental D. -> IA	0.298	0.037	1.890	**0.007**	**Supported**
H3	Innovative Adoption-> SS	0.**400**	0.102	8.419	**0.000**	**Supported**
H2A	Leadership Innovation -> SS	0.791	0.280	9.191	**0.000**	**Supported**
H3B	Policy Innovation-> SS	0.409	0.110	6.361	**0.000**	**Supported**
H3C	Culture Innovation-> SS	0.501	0.212	3.432	**0.000**	**Supported**
H4	Innovative Leadership -> IA -> SS	0.**202**	0.083	6.1231	**0.000**	**Supported**
	Total direct and indirect effect	0.604				

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on the results of the statistical analysis

Note: SS (Strategic Success), IA (Innovation Adoption)

5.DISCUSSION

The study emphasizes how important creative leadership is to achieving strategic goals, especially when it comes to private universities in Iraq's Kurdistan Region. ramifications for leadership practices in private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The results are consistent with and build upon earlier organizational and educational leadership studies. Innovative leadership greatly improves strategic performance both directly and indirectly by encouraging innovative adoption, according to the favorable evidence for all hypotheses. This supports the findings of Gumusluoglu and Ilsev (2009), who discovered that transformational (innovative) leaders foster innovation and creativity, which in turn leads to the success of their organizations. The findings of this research further support the assertion made by Damanpour and Schneider, (2010), that leadership is essential to the adoption of innovations, which in turn influences organizational success. Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations Theory, which holds that leadership affects the pace at which innovations are adopted and therefore affects institutional results, is also compatible with the mediating function of innovative adoption.

Moreover, the results show that innovative leadership significantly improves the organizational environment by fostering a culture that is flexible and willing to embrace new concepts and methods. This leadership approach encourages operational alignment with long-term strategic objectives, as well as creativity. Notably, the results reinforce the idea that innovation adoption is a key mediating factor in the relationship between innovative leadership and strategic success. In other words, a proactive and systematic approach to adopting innovation is essential for strategic success, even in the presence of strong, innovative leaders. According to previous studies, innovative and transformational leaders play a key role in fostering organizational cultures that encourage trial and error, considered risk-taking, and continuous improvement (Kurniawan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, studies have identified transformational leadership, often considered a key component of innovative leadership in universities, as an important factor associated with greater process and product innovations (known to drive positive organizational performance outcomes) (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2016). Equally

important, studies have noted that the innovation adoption process required for any form of innovative leadership has the potential to play a mediating role in leadership success by generating trust, engagement, and commitment from institutional members (AlAnazi et al., 2021; Halvorsen, 2011). Consequently, this research further demonstrates that, ideally, strategic success in higher education institutions requires an integrated model that balances forward-thinking leadership with a systematic commitment to innovation adoption.

6. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study demonstrated that innovative leadership can have a significant impact on achieving strategic objectives, with innovation adoption being a key factor. As this study demonstrates, universities must develop innovative leadership skills, not only to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and contribute to improving student learning. but also, to contribute to developing an innovative culture to enhance overall efficiency and manage organizational change.

Instead, while the study focuses on the benefits of innovative leadership, it is also necessary to consider any potential challenges that may hinder the successful adoption of innovations, such as faculty resistance to change or resource disparities across institutions.

Focusing on leadership development that fosters innovation, strategic thinking, and adaptability can better position universities to navigate the ever-changing landscape of higher education. Skilled leadership can facilitate organizational growth, increase competitive advantage, and improve overall effectiveness. There are some limitations to the study. First, because the study was limited to private colleges, claims may be limited to this specific type of activity, to other sectors, and/or to the context of public institutions. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study provides a snapshot of a single moment in time, but future studies may be able to consider longitudinal effects. Future research could include a broader sample of different types of educational institutions or geographic regions, use a more complex model that accounts for external and changing conditions (e.g., economic conditions, government regulations, etc.), and consider the long-term effects of leadership development programs on strategic outcomes.

7. CONCLUSION

This study emphasized the vital role of innovative leadership in achieving strategic success by fostering the adoption of innovation in private universities in Iraqi Kurdistan. The findings provided reliable evidence of a close relationship between innovative leadership and the dimensions of their strategic success (survival, adaptability, and growth). Furthermore, effective leadership, strategic thinking, and internal communication emerged as significant influencers of university performance in a changing educational context. Universities should consider implementing an ongoing leadership development program, facilitating a strategic culture among stakeholders, leveraging technology to enhance communication, and supporting resilience through adaptive leadership practices. The study concluded that a holistic approach, combining leadership, strategy, and communication, would have a greater overall impact on strategic success.

By focusing on these areas, private universities not only enhance their leadership capabilities but also position themselves for sustainable success in a context of increasing competition. Ultimately, leadership innovation will help these institutions address challenges, seize opportunities, and achieve their strategic objectives**.**

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