Building Future-ready Institutional Resilience in Challenging Times

DR. HAIFA REDA JAMALALLAIL
EFFAT UNIVERSITY

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The Evolution of Higher Education Governance

Typologies of HEI Governance and Leadership Frameworks

- **Decline of Legacy Structures:** Diminishing efficacy of traditional shared governance and siloed corporate-board-led systems.
- **Emergence of Modern Paradigms:** Structural transition toward managerial, strategic, market-oriented, and distributed network architectures.
- **The Agility Target:** Cultivating agile, adaptive, and hybrid governance matrices capable of rapid re-alignment.
- **Leadership Sync:** Explicitly mapping new governance typologies to advanced leadership roles, moving from consensus-seeking facilitators to integrative, ambidextrous, and change-capable executives.

The Saudi Arabian Context: A Hybrid System

Macro-Level Governance Reforms in Saudi Higher Education

- **The Decentralization Trajectory:** Strategic migration away from highly centralized, bureaucratic oversight toward autonomous, performance-driven models.
- **The Legislative Catalyst**: Implementation of the new Universities' Bylaws establishing a definitive, state-guided hybrid governance framework.
- **The Structural Balance**: Granting institutional autonomy and establishing localized Boards of Trustees, while retaining national strategic accountability via the Universities' Affairs Council.
- **The Operational Imperative**: Overcoming the execution challenge of translating formal legislative autonomy into genuine organizational agility while preserving academic quality.

Defining Institutional Resilience

Quantifying the Institutional Resilience Imperative

- **Strategic Capacity Building:** Defining resilience not as a tactical response to disruption, but as an ongoing capability embedded in strategy, budgeting, and culture.
- **The Global Execution Gap**: Identifying a critical deficit between theoretical strategy and actual institutional deployment.
- **EDUCAUSE Metric Baselines**:
  * 38% of institutions systematically embed resilience parameters within long-term strategies.
  * 18% integrate resilience targets directly into core mission and vision statements.
  * 16% utilize resilience metrics as a prerequisite for evaluating new capital proposals or strategic initiatives.

The Seven Pillars of Resilient Institutions

Architectural Criteria of the EDUCAUSE Resilience Matrix

- **Adaptive & Data-Fluent:** Cultivating rapid institutional learning and treating data as a high-value strategic asset.
- **Decisive & Courageous:** Enabling agile executive decision-making under uncertainty, backed by leadership that actively sponsors calculated innovation.
- **Interconnected & Prepared:** Intentionally dismantling structural silos while prioritizing advanced risk mitigation and macro scenario planning.
- **Trustworthy:** Securing long-term organizational buy-in through transparent, inclusive, and collaborative governance.

Sector-Based Resilience in Saudi Arabia

Variations Across Institutional Typologies

- **Public Universities (e.g., KSU):** Focus on Strategic Protection—shielding national academic objectives while dynamically optimizing large-scale state assets.
- **Private Universities (e.g., UBT):** Focus on Market-Facing Agility—deploying rapid programmatic re-engineering and aggressive commercial portfolio diversification.
- **Non-Profit Universities (e.g., Effat University):** Focus on Mission Preservation—safeguarding foundational educational charters through non-commercial, sustainable resource networks.

Leveraging Digital Transformation and Innovation

Digital Governance as a Vehicle for Performance Stability

- **Beyond Functional Digitization**: Rejecting the narrow view of technology as merely an administrative or remote-teaching tool.
- **The Enterprise Architecture Strategy**: Integrating artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, enterprise cybersecurity, and innovation ecosystems into core corporate governance.
- **National Infrastructure Synergy**: Capitalizing on the Kingdom’s robust national digital frameworks to anchor smart academic systems and responsible AI deployment.

Financial and Organizational Sustainability

Dual-Pronged Frameworks for Long-Term Institutional Viability

- **Fiscal Revenue Diversification:** Mitigating risk by building diversified revenue matrices including contract research, corporate joint ventures, professional executive education, internationalization, and endowments.
- **Strategic Portfolio Optimization:** Deploying data-driven resource allocation and continuous program portfolio assessment.
- **Organizational Continuity Capacity:** Cultivating distributed leadership frameworks, robust succession pipelines, and a change-capable, continuous-learning workforce.

Case Study: Effat University Strategy (2022–2027)

Operationalizing Resilience: The Effat University Model

- **Strategic Centricity:** The 2022–2027 institutional master plan positions innovation and digital transformation as core foundational pillars.
- **Structural Synergy:** Seamlessly pairing an active Board of Trustees with an agile University Council and comprehensive stakeholder representation.
- **The Mutual Reinforcement Matrix:** Establishing a closed-loop system where fiscal diversification, quality assurance, and a commitment to the UN SDGs directly fortify institutional performance.

Conclusion & Executive Call to Action

Anchoring the Future-Ready Higher Education Enterprise

Core Key Takeaways:

- Higher education institutions (HEIs) are transitioning from crisis-management mode to building proactive, institutional resilience directly into their strategy, governance, and culture. In Saudi Arabia, this involves shifting from centralized bureaucracy to a hybrid governance model that balances increased university autonomy with national alignment under Vision 2030.

- **The Agility Mandate:** Shifting permanently from reactive crisis planning to proactive institutional capability engineering.

- **The Governance Evolution**: Successfully deploying hybrid, autonomous governance models aligned with national performance metrics.

- **The Leadership Imperative**: Demanding integrative, courageous, and strategically ambidextrous executive execution.

1-How can universities enhance their ability to navigate uncertainty and withstand crises while protecting equitable access to education, advancing women's leadership, and ensuring that vulnerable groups are not left behind?

Universities can enhance their capacity to navigate uncertainty and withstand crises by embedding equity, inclusion, and diverse leadership directly into their core institutional frameworks. True institutional resilience requires shifting from short-term reactive measures to long-term strategic transformation that proactively safeguards vulnerable populations and elevates women to decision-making roles.

1. **Embedding Resilience into Institutional Strategy**
2. **Protecting Equitable Access for Vulnerable Groups**
3. **3. Advancing Women’s Leadership**

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- **To survive systemic shocks—**such as economic recessions, geopolitical conflicts, or climate disruptions—universities must anchor their risk-management protocols to their long-term social purpose.
- **Proactive Scenario Planning:** Leadership teams should regularly model the impacts of policy shifts, demographic declines, and economic crises on institutional funding and student retention before disruptions occur.
- **Decentralized Decision-Making**: Distributing governance responsibilities helps prevent operational bottlenecks during a crisis, allowing individual departments to respond dynamically while maintaining administrative continuity.
- **Robust Digital Architecture:** Investing in reliable digital infrastructure ensures that teaching, research, and basic student operations can transition seamlessly to remote or hybrid formats when physical campuses are compromised.

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2. Protecting Equitable Access for Vulnerable Groups:

Crises disproportionately affect historically marginalized, displaced, or economically disadvantaged students. Universities must establish structural safety nets to ensure equity is not sacrificed during periods of stress.

- **Targeted Affirmative Actions:** Institutions should utilize national mapping data to identify vulnerable student profiles (e.g., physical/mental disabilities, low-income, displaced status) and implement quota- or merit-based affirmative enrollment strategies.

- **Emergency Financial Frameworks:** Establishing protected emergency funds and tuition-relief schemes helps prevent vulnerable students from dropping out when sudden financial shocks hit their households.

- **Inclusive Campus Pedagogies:** Faculty must be trained in inclusive teaching methods, ensuring that asynchronous learning options, assistive technologies, and comprehensive mental health services remain fully accessible to all students.

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3. Advancing Women’s Leadership

Despite making up 44% of global academic staff, women hold only about 30% of higher education leadership roles and face significant gaps in institutional sponsorship. Diversifying leadership introduces broader perspectives, which directly enhances a university's problem-solving capacity during a crisis.

- **Systemic Sponsorship Programs:** Universities need to move past standard mentorship to active executive sponsorship, directly pairing mid-career women with senior leaders to champion their advancement.
- **Structured Leadership Pipelines:** Implementing dedicated development initiatives, such as the SHE Leads Program, helps cultivate executive-ready internal talent.
- **Unbiased Recruitment and Work Flexibility:** To overcome systemic career interruptions, institutions must normalize blind recruitment processes, mandate gender-diverse hiring committees, and offer flexible working arrangements.
- **Accountability Metrics :** Higher education governing bodies should explicitly integrate gender equality and representation goals directly into their social sustainability metrics and annual institutional reviews.

Direct Strategic Comparisons

The table below outlines how traditional crisis management compares to an equity-centered, resilient framework

Focus Area	Traditional Crisis Management	Equity-Centered Institutional Resilience
Primary Goal	Minimize immediate financial and operational disruption.	Secure long-term institutional health and equity.
Risk Planning	Reactive measures deployed after a shock occurs.	Accelerated scenario planning done well in advance.
Student Support	Uniform policies that assume equal student baselines.	Targeted interventions based on socio-economic vulnerability.
Leadership Mix	Often centralized, homogeneous executive teams.	Diverse, gender-balanced, and decentralized governance.

By actively linking social sustainability with operational risk management, universities can transform periods of systemic uncertainty into opportunities for progressive institutional growth.

2-How can universities foster a culture of innovation and adapt curricula and skills development to prepare graduates for a rapidly changing world shaped by AI and automation?

Universities can foster a culture of innovation and adapt AI literacy across all disciplines while aggressively prioritizing uniquely human cognitive and emotional skills. Because AI and automation excel at finding answers and processing information, higher education must evolve to train students in evaluation, ethical deployment, and problem-framing. To successfully navigate this disruption, institutions are adopting strategies across three core areas:

1. **Curricular Redesign & "AI+X" Integration**

2. **Prioritizing Enduring "Human" Skills**

3. **. Structural & Ecosystem Adaptation**

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1. Curricular Redesign & "AI+X" Integration

Instead of limiting AI education to computer science departments, universities are treating tech fluency as a foundational utility.

- **Universal AI & Data Literacy:** Embedding basic AI mechanics, data fluency, and prompt engineering into humanities, business, arts, and sciences.
- **Mandatory Digital Ethics:** Integrating discussions on data privacy, algorithmic bias, and responsible automation into core coursework.
- **Modular Micro-Credentials:** Partnering with industry leaders (e.g., Google, IBM) to offer short, stackable skill certifications that update faster than traditional four-year degree timelines.

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2. Prioritizing Enduring "Human" Skills

As routine technical tasks are automated, the premium on human-centric skills has dramatically increased. Curricula are pivoting toward traits that technology cannot replicate:

- **The "Conjecture and Kill" Feedback Loop:** Moving away from punishing failure to normalized experimentation, prompting undergraduates to propose ambitious hypotheses and learn iteratively from failures.
- **High-EQ and Judgment Coaching:** Using studio- and lab-based environments to cultivate empathy, leadership, intercultural context, and ethical decision-making—skills heavily sought after by executives hiring in an automated landscape.
- **Critical Question-Asking:** Shifting exam formats from answering structured prompts (which AI can do instantly) to requiring students to accurately frame complex, ambiguous problems.

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3. **Structural & Ecosystem Adaptation:**

True innovation requires internal administrative and structural reform over mere technology spending.

- **Co-Created Ecosystems:** Transitioning classroom structures from passive lectures to active, project-based labs built around real-world data and live challenges provided by tech and industrial partners.
- **Breaking Departmental Silos**: Funding interdisciplinary research and degrees—such as computational linguistics or bio-automation ethics—to address multidimensional global challenges.
- **AI-Augmented Faculty Support:** Utilizing adaptive AI learning assistants to manage grading and basic tutoring, freeing professors to act primarily as mentors, researchers, and drivers of human connection.

2-How can universities foster a culture of innovation and adapt curricula and skills development to prepare graduates for a rapidly changing world shaped by AI and automation?

Traditional Framework	Future-Ready AI Framework
Focus on content memorization and knowledge transfer	Focus on value creation, critical thinking, and synthesis
Disciplinary silos (e.g., Computer Science vs. Philosophy)	Cross-disciplinary integration (e.g., AI Ethics across all majors)
Rote testing and a low tolerance for academic failure	Experiential learning, project-based capstones, and managed failure
Rigid, four-year rigid degree pathways	Agile, stackable micro-credentials updated in real-time

3. How can university leaders create a culture in which faculty, staff, and students feel able to challenge established practices and test new ideas without undermining institutional standards?

To create a culture where faculty, staff, and students feel empowered to challenge established practices and test new ideas without undermining institutional standards, university leaders must look beyond rigid management structures and intentionally design a culture of structured innovation. By balancing psychological safety with explicit operational guardrails, leaders can foster an environment where community members feel confident taking calculated risks while upholding academic and regulatory excellence:

1. **Establish Psychological Safety as a Core Tenet**

2. **Define "Safe Sandboxes" for Experimentation**

3. **Incentivize and Structure Constructive Challenge**

3. How can university leaders create a culture in which faculty, staff, and students feel able to challenge established practices and test new ideas without undermining institutional standards?

1. Establish Psychological Safety as a Core Tenet:

People will not challenge the status quo if they fear career or academic repercussions. Leaders must explicitly destigmatize well-intentioned failure.

- **Normalize "Intelligent Failure":** Publicly share stories of past institutional or academic setbacks that ultimately led to successful breakthroughs to build systemic resilience.
- **Adopt Adaptive Leadership:** Shift away from an authoritarian, top-down approach. When leaders "lead with questions" rather than immediately prescribing solutions, they signal that every stakeholder's perspective holds value.
- **Address Culture Enemies Directly:** Swiftly eliminate micro-management, perceived favoritism, and toxic behaviors that quietly erode campus trust.

3. How can university leaders create a culture in which faculty, staff, and students feel able to challenge established practices and test new ideas without undermining institutional standards?

2. Define "Safe Sandboxes" for Experimentation

To protect fundamental institutional standards, leaders should clearly demarcate where experimentation is encouraged versus where compliance is non-negotiable.

- **Create Isolated Testing Zones:** Designate specific pilot programs, localized curriculum trials, or internal seed grants where standard bureaucratic rules are temporarily relaxed to allow for trial and error.
- **Utilize Continuous Improvement Models**: Frame new ideas around iterative frameworks like the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) model. This structures testing so that any unintended negative impacts on students or compliance standards are caught and corrected early.
- **Let Data Decide**: Evaluate pilot initiatives based on predefined, objective data metrics rather than personal intuition, ensuring that scaling an idea is grounded in evidence.

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3. Incentivize and Structure Constructive Challenge:

Incentive structures in higher education often reward conformity or siloed disciplinary success. Leaders must intentionally reward collaborative, forward-thinking risks.

- **Fund Grassroots Innovation:** Provide dedicated internal grants, matching funds, and "Think Time" for cross-departmental teams to collaboratively tackle institutional friction.
- **Incorporate Innovation into Review Frameworks:** Update performance evaluations and student recognition standards to value creative problem-solving, process improvements, and successful cross-silo initiatives.
- **Build Transparent Feedback Loops:** Create formal, responsive channels where stakeholders can critique existing practices. Leaders must visibly act on this feedback so the community knows that speaking up results in tangible change, not silence.

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4. Foster Collaborative Alignment over Silos:

A strong institutional culture is built on a shared mission that unites disconnected departments, faculties, and student bodies.

- **Overcome Faculty Silos:** Encourage challenge-based learning and interdisciplinary research initiatives that force stakeholders out of historical departmental fiefdoms.

- **Practice Distributed Governance**: Decentralize some level of decision-making, giving faculty, staff, and students authentic ownership over the preservation and evolution of their immediate campus environment

Comparative Framework: Balancing Innovation with Standards

Strategic Objective	How to Foster Innovation	How to Maintain Standards
Leadership Style	Distributed & Servant: Empower grassroots ideas and collaborative cross-silo projects.	Accountable: Enforce transparency, consistent ethical norms, and clear institutional values.
Resource Allocation	Innovation Grants: Fund speculative, high-reward pilots and allocate dedicated "Think Time".	Rigorous Evaluation: Require clear, data-driven metrics and evidence-based reporting before scaling.
Risk Management	Psychological Safety: De-risk constructive failures by treating them as data-gathering milestones.	Guardrails: Keep core compliance, external accreditations, and core student deliverables non-negotiable.

4. If you could recommend one concrete institutional decision or investment that Arab universities should prioritise over the next 12 months to strengthen their resilience and remain relevant over the next decade, what would it be?

To strengthen resilience and ensure long-term relevance over the next decade, Arab universities must prioritize a single, transformative institutional investment over the next 12 months: the establishment of centralized, faculty-led AI Integration and Digital Pedagogy Hubs. Rather than treating Artificial Intelligence and advanced digital infrastructure as an IT upgrade or a standard learning management system (LMS) extension, institutions must view this as a core academic and operational pivot.

Why This Investment Takes Priority?

- Future-Proofing Employability:
- Operational Resilience:
- Bridging the Faculty Gap:

Critical Trade-offs to Consider

- Capital Allocation vs. Infrastructure Needs
- Institutional Inertia vs. Rapid Adoption

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- **Future-Proofing Employability:** The regional labor market is rapidly shifting toward automation and data-driven economies, particularly within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and larger North African hubs. Universities that fail to deeply embed AI literacy into every discipline—from the humanities to engineering—within the year risk producing graduates with obsolete skills.

- **Operational Resilience:** Centralized hubs provide the blueprint for agile curriculum redesign, allowing institutions to rapidly adapt to shifting market demands, economic fluctuations, or regional disruptions without tearing down traditional faculty structures.

- **Bridging the Faculty Gap:** The success of any digital transformation hinges on the educators. A dedicated hub focuses heavily on upskilling existing faculty, transforming them from traditional lecturers into facilitators of hybrid, tech-augmented learning.

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Critical Trade-offs to Consider:

- **Capital Allocation vs. Infrastructure Needs**: Directing significant funding to an AI and pedagogy hub may divert resources away from traditional physical infrastructure projects (like new campus buildings or physical labs) that are highly visible but less impactful for long-term digital resilience.

- **Institutional Inertia vs. Rapid Adoption**: Forcing rapid integration across conservative academic departments can trigger friction. The hub must balance strict technical alignment with a highly collaborative, empathetic approach to training faculty who may be resistant to changing their established teaching methods.

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Thank You