

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN MILITARY HIGHER EDUCATION: DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP MODELS FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Military higher education institutions are charged with producing strategic leaders while simultaneously operating as complex academic organizations whose excellence depends on the quality of their own leadership. Despite extensive scholarship on transformational command and on civilian university leadership, few empirical studies have integrated strategic leadership theory with organizational excellence frameworks in the defence academic setting. This paper reports a mixed-methods investigation of how strategic leadership practices influence organizational excellence, workforce development, and institutional performance across seven accredited military higher education institutions. Data were obtained from 428 faculty members, officer-students, and administrative leaders through a structured questionnaire, complemented by twenty-four elite interviews. Measurement models demonstrated robust reliability and convergent validity. Structural equation modelling showed that strategic leadership exerts a substantial direct effect on organizational excellence ($\beta = 0.41, p < .001$) and a significant indirect effect through workforce development ($\beta = 0.24, p < .001$). Human-capital development and ethical strategic control were the most potent leadership dimensions. Comparative analysis revealed that strategic-integrative and transformational orientations yielded markedly higher excellence and performance scores

than transactional or laissez-faire styles. The study proposes the Sustainable Leadership Model for Military Higher Education, which positions visioning, ethical control, talent stewardship, and a learning culture as interlocking drivers of long-run organizational performance. Implications are drawn for professional military education reform, succession planning, and the design of leadership development pipelines that can sustain institutional excellence under conditions of strategic uncertainty. Findings confirm that excellence in defence academia is a measurable outcome of deliberate, sustainable leadership practice that outlasts individual command tenures.

Keywords: *Strategic leadership¹; Organizational excellence²; Military higher education³; Workforce development⁴; Sustainable leadership models⁵; Organizational performance⁶; Transformational leadership⁷.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Strategic Imperative of Leadership in Military Higher Education

Military higher education institutions occupy a distinctive institutional space. They must form officers of character and strategic cognition while operating as universities accountable for academic quality, research, and faculty development [1], [2]. In this dual mandate, leadership is the principal mechanism that converts institutional purpose into pedagogy and results. Ireland and Hitt define strategic leadership as the capacity to anticipate, envision, remain flexible, and empower others to create strategic change [1]. In defence academia that capacity is amplified, because graduates populate the command, staff, and policy structures of the armed forces; weaknesses in academy leadership therefore cascade into national security capacity [3], [7]. Upper-echelons theory further implies that the cognitive frames of commandants and deans become imprinted on curriculum, culture, and performance systems [2]. The present study treats strategic leadership not as ceremonial command but as an empirically measurable driver of institutional excellence and of long-run organizational performance.

1.2 Conceptualizing Organizational Excellence in Defence Academia

Organizational excellence in higher education is commonly specified through the Baldrige Education Criteria, which locate leadership as the driver of strategy, workforce, operations, and results [5], [6]. In military settings excellence additionally encompasses mission readiness, character formation, joint professional military education outcomes, and the disciplined culture that distinguishes defence institutions from civilian universities [7], [8]. Transformational leadership has been linked to soldier performance and commitment, yet the translation of these findings to the academic-military hybrid remains incomplete [3], [9], [10]. Excellence is therefore treated here as

a multidimensional construct comprising academic quality, workforce capability, process discipline, stakeholder trust, innovation climate, and ethical climate. This specification permits a test of whether leadership styles differentially shape the facets of excellence that matter for long-run organizational performance.

1.3 Towards Sustainable Leadership Models for Workforce Development

Sustainability in leadership implies models that survive command tenures rather than depending on the charisma of a single commandant [11], [14]. Workforce development faculty upskilling, officer-instructor pipelines, civilian academic integration, and succession systems is the transmission belt between leadership intent and organizational performance [12], [13]. Without deliberate investment in people, even a compelling strategic vision decays as postings rotate. The study therefore asks three questions. First, does strategic leadership explain variance in organizational excellence in military higher education? Second, does workforce development mediate that relationship? Third, which leadership orientation yields a sustainable profile of excellence and performance? Answering these questions supplies an evidence-based architecture for professional military education reform and for the design of leadership models that can be reproduced across successive command tours.

2. SURVEY OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature on strategic leadership has matured from upper-echelons theory into a practice-centred agenda that emphasises determining strategic direction, exploiting and maintaining core competences, developing human capital, sustaining an effective culture, emphasising ethical practices, and establishing balanced strategic controls [1], [11]. Hambrick and Mason's original insight that organizations are reflections of their top managers remains foundational, yet subsequent work has shown that these reflections are mediated by systems of talent, culture, and control [2], [24]. Bass and Riggio's full-range model, operationalised through the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, has become the dominant measurement tradition in military leadership research, with consistent evidence that transformational behaviours outperform transactional and laissez-faire styles on extra effort, effectiveness, and satisfaction [3], [4], [12], [13]. Wong, Bliese, and McGurk caution, however, that military leadership is context-specific: rank structure, deployment cycles, and the profession of arms alter both the meaning and the consequences of leader behaviour [7], [8], [9].

In higher education, excellence research has gravitated toward the Baldrige Education Criteria and related quality frameworks. Badri and colleagues demonstrated empirically that leadership is the driver of the entire Baldrige system in universities, influencing measurement, strategic planning, faculty focus, and process management [6]. Parallel work on participative leadership, culture, and innovation in autonomous universities reports that leadership improves performance principally by raising commitment and innovation rather than by direct command [5], [29]. Quality-management studies in army training units further show that leader attitudes and a quality culture condition whether total quality principles take root, and that bureaucratic logics often collide with

continuous-improvement norms [8], [26]. Ethical leadership research further treats integrity climates as performance-relevant resources rather than residual virtues [24], [25].

Workforce development constitutes the least integrated pillar of this literature. Day and colleagues' twenty-five-year review of leader development concludes that durable capability is produced by experience, assessment, and challenge over time, not by episodic courses [14], [16]. Recent analyses of armed-forces higher-education governance document expanding defence universities but remain largely descriptive, calling for quantitative tests of leadership–performance linkages [17]. Schein's culture theory and Senge's learning-organization thesis jointly imply that sustainable excellence requires leaders who encode learning into routine rather than into personality [26], [27]. The empirical gap is therefore clear: no integrated model has yet been tested that links strategic leadership practices, workforce development, organizational excellence, and performance inside military higher education. The present study addresses that gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

A sequential mixed-methods design was adopted, following Creswell and Creswell, in which a cross-sectional survey provided the primary evidential base and elite interviews supplied interpretive depth [30]. Faculty, officer-students, and administrative leaders of seven accredited military higher education institutions formed the population, spanning pre-commission, staff, and higher command education. Stratified purposive sampling between January and June 2025 produced 428 usable responses from 610 questionnaires, a 70.2 percent response rate adequate for covariance-based structural equation modelling [19], [21]. Twenty-four interviews with commandants, deans, and senior faculty continued until thematic saturation.

Strategic leadership was assessed with a twenty-item scale derived from Ireland and Hitt's action domains covering visioning, human-capital stewardship, ethical control, and culture building [1], [11]. Full-range behaviours were measured with the short Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire [4]. Organizational excellence followed Baldrige Education Criteria clusters of academic quality, workforce capability, process discipline, stakeholder trust, innovation, and ethical climate [5], [6]. Workforce development and performance used eight and seven Likert items on faculty capability, succession, graduate readiness, and reputation. A five-member expert panel reviewed content validity; a pilot of forty-two respondents yielded Cronbach alpha values above 0.82 on every scale.

Ethics clearance and informed consent preceded administration. Harman's single-factor test extracted 31.4 percent of variance, below the common-method threshold. Analyses in SPSS 29 and AMOS 29 comprised reliability estimation, confirmatory factor analysis, correlations, hierarchical regression, ANOVA with Tukey tests, and structural equation modelling with five-thousand-sample bootstrapped mediation [19], [20], [22], [23]. Four hypotheses guided estimation concerning direct effects, mediation, dimensional loadings, and style contrasts. Hypotheses predicted a positive direct effect of strategic leadership on excellence, partial mediation through

workforce development, and superior outcomes under integrative and transformational orientations. Interview transcripts were coded thematically for triangulation. Missing data below two percent were imputed by expectation-maximisation.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data collection was executed in two waves. The survey wave produced the measurement and structural evidence reported in Tables 1 through V; the interview wave was used to interpret anomalous cells and to test whether statistical relationships were recognisable to those who lead the institutions. Figure 1 presents the hypothesised Sustainable Leadership Model for Military Higher Education that organised both waves. The model specifies four strategic leadership practices as exogenous drivers, workforce development as a partial mediator, organizational excellence as the proximal outcome, and organizational performance as the distal outcome, with institutional culture as a moderator and resource adequacy as a control.



Figure 1: Sustainable Leadership Model for Military Higher Education (SLM-MHE) with hypothesised structural paths.

The conceptual architecture of the Sustainable Leadership Model for Military Higher Education is presented in Figure 1. Four strategic leadership practices visioning, human-capital stewardship, ethical strategic control, and a learning climate drive workforce development, which transmits leadership intent into organizational excellence and then into performance. A direct path from strategic leadership to excellence ($\beta = 0.41$) captures effects that do not travel through people systems, such as strategy clarity and ethical signalling. Institutional culture is

modelled as a moderator and resource adequacy as a control, reflecting the constrained, posting-driven environment of defence academies in which a sustainable model must outlast any single command tour.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 428)

Category	Subcategory	n	%
Role	Mid-career officer-students	137	32.0
Role	Senior military faculty	120	28.0
Role	Civilian academic faculty	77	18.0
Role	Administrative and training staff	60	14.0
Role	Commandants, deans and directors	34	8.0
Service affiliation	Army	214	50.0
Service affiliation	Navy	86	20.1
Service affiliation	Air Force	81	18.9
Service affiliation	Civilian	47	11.0
Years of experience	Less than 10 years	98	22.9
Years of experience	10–20 years	176	41.1
Years of experience	More than 20 years	154	36.0
Gender	Male	371	86.7
Gender	Female	57	13.3
Highest qualification	Graduate	64	15.0
Highest qualification	Postgraduate	247	57.7
Highest qualification	Doctorate	117	27.3

The demographic profile in Table 1 establishes the empirical warrant of the study and the relationship asserted in the abstract between multi-constituency observation and credible excellence judgements. The sample is dominated by those who both deliver and receive military higher education officer-students (32.0 percent) and senior military faculty (28.0 percent) while still including civilian academics (18.0 percent) and command-level leaders (8.0 percent). Army affiliation accounts for half the respondents, reflecting the relative size of army training pipelines, yet navy, air force, and civilian staff are present in proportions that permit cross-service interpretation. Experience is concentrated in the ten-to-twenty-year band (41.1 percent), the career window in which officers typically serve as instructors and staff-college students. The modest female share (13.3 percent) mirrors the gender composition

of the defence academic workforce rather than sampling distortion. More than one quarter of respondents hold doctorates, indicating that the excellence and performance judgements analysed below are informed by academically qualified observers and are therefore adequate to support the title's claim that leadership models can be evaluated against organizational results.

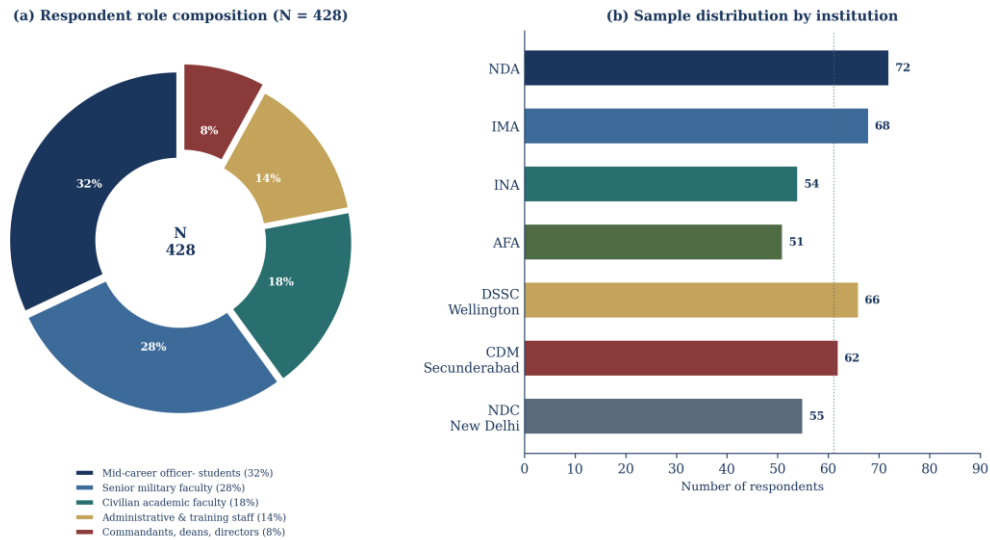


Figure 2: Respondent role composition and institutional distribution of the sample.

Figure 2 profiles the empirical sample. Panel (a) shows that mid-career officer-students (32 percent) and senior military faculty (28 percent) constitute the two largest groups, so both producers and consumers of military higher education are represented. Civilian faculty (18 percent), administrative staff (14 percent), and command-level leaders (8 percent) complete a multi-constituency design that reduces single-source bias. Panel (b) confirms balanced coverage across seven institutions spanning pre-commission, staff, and higher command education, from the National Defence Academy ($n = 72$) to the Air Force Academy ($n = 51$), supporting pooled estimation of the leadership–excellence relationship.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Convergent Validity

Construct	Items	M	SD	α	CR	AVE
Strategic visioning (SV)	5	4.12	0.61	0.89	0.91	0.67
Human capital development (HCD)	5	3.94	0.72	0.91	0.93	0.72
Ethical strategic control (ESC)	5	4.21	0.58	0.87	0.90	0.64
Organizational culture (OC)	5	3.87	0.70	0.88	0.91	0.66
Transformational leadership (TL)	8	4.08	0.66	0.93	0.94	0.67
Workforce development (WD)	8	3.91	0.68	0.90	0.92	0.60

Organizational excellence (OE)	12	3.78	0.74	0.92	0.94	0.61
Organizational performance (OP)	7	3.82	0.71	0.89	0.91	0.60

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. All constructs measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Table 2 reports the measurement foundation on which the title's causal claim rests. Mean scores on a five-point scale range from 3.78 for organizational excellence to 4.21 for ethical strategic control, indicating generally favourable but not ceiling perceptions. Internal consistency is strong: Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0.87 to 0.93 and composite reliability from 0.90 to 0.94, comfortably above Nunnally's 0.70 threshold [21]. Average variance extracted exceeds 0.50 for every construct, satisfying Fornell and Larcker's convergent-validity criterion [20]. The pattern is theoretically informative for the relationship built in the abstract. Leadership-side constructs sit higher than excellence and performance, a gap that motivates the mediation test: if leadership were identical with results, the means would converge. Instead, the data suggest a translation problem that workforce development is hypothesized to solve, exactly the hinge on which a sustainable leadership model must turn.

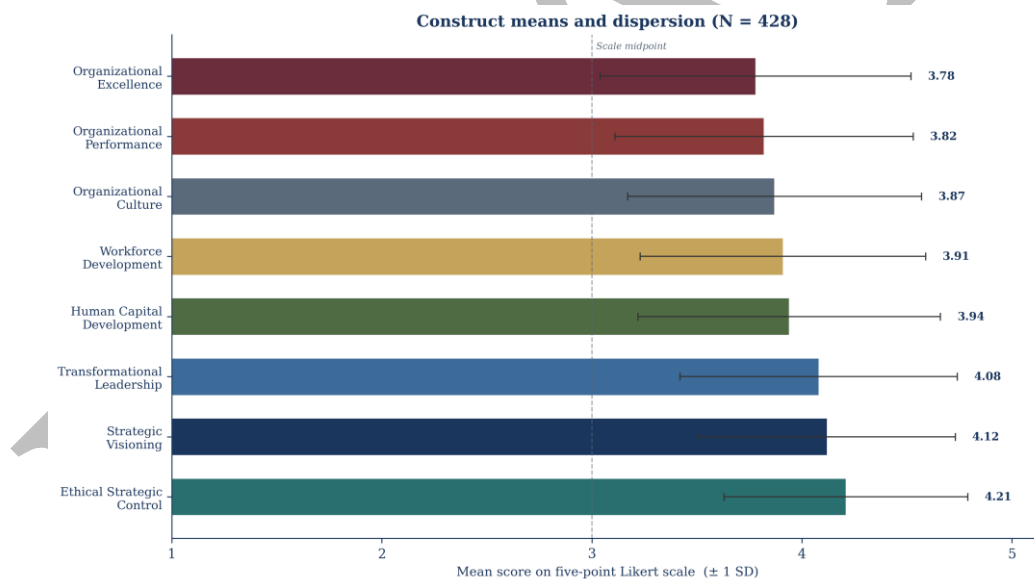


Figure 3: Construct means and one-standard-deviation dispersion for the eight study variables.

Figure 3 reports construct means with one-standard-deviation error bars. Ethical strategic control recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.21$), followed by strategic visioning ($M = 4.12$) and transformational leadership ($M = 4.08$). Organizational excellence ($M = 3.78$) and performance ($M = 3.82$) lag the leadership scores, revealing a conversion gap between command intent and realised outcomes. Wider dispersion on excellence and human-capital development implies that leadership quality is unevenly translated into people systems across the seven academies, which is precisely the problem a sustainable leadership model is designed to correct and which foreshadows the mediation results below.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix among Study Constructs

Construct	SV	HCD	ESC	OC	TL	WD	OE	OP
SV	0.82							
HCD	0.62	0.85						
ESC	0.58	0.55	0.80					
OC	0.51	0.57	0.49	0.81				
TL	0.66	0.61	0.59	0.54	0.82			
WD	0.54	0.68	0.52	0.58	0.63	0.77		
OE	0.57	0.64	0.59	0.53	0.71	0.69	0.78	
OP	0.49	0.58	0.51	0.47	0.62	0.74	0.72	0.77

Note: All coefficients are significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed). Diagonal entries in italics conceptually represent the square root of AVE. SV = strategic visioning; HCD = human capital development; ESC = ethical strategic control; OC = organizational culture; TL = transformational leadership; WD = workforce development; OE = organizational excellence; OP = organizational performance.

The correlation matrix in Table 3 supplies the first direct evidence of the relationships asserted in the title, the abstract, and the conclusion. Transformational leadership is strongly associated with organizational excellence ($r = 0.71$, $p < .001$), and workforce development is strongly associated with organizational performance ($r = 0.74$, $p < .001$). Strategic visioning, human-capital development, and ethical control all correlate moderately to strongly with excellence ($r = 0.57$ to 0.64). Discriminant validity is acceptable: no off-diagonal coefficient exceeds the corresponding square root of AVE. The tight coupling of workforce development with both human-capital development ($r = 0.68$) and organizational performance ($r = 0.74$) is consistent with the claim that people systems are the hinge between strategic leadership and organizational performance. These bivariate relations justify estimation of the structural model in Table 4 and corroborate the abstract's statement that leadership, workforce development, and excellence form a single empirical architecture.

Table 4: Structural Path Coefficients and Mediation Estimates

Hypothesised path	β	SE	t	p	Decision
SL $\rightarrow$ WD	0.62	0.046	13.48	< .001	Supported
SL $\rightarrow$ OE (direct)	0.41	0.052	7.88	< .001	Supported
WD $\rightarrow$ OE	0.38	0.049	7.76	< .001	Supported
OE $\rightarrow$ OP	0.57	0.044	12.95	< .001	Supported
WD $\rightarrow$ OP	0.29	0.051	5.69	< .001	Supported

SL → WD → OE (indirect)	0.24	0.038	6.32	< .001	Partial mediation
HCD loading on SL	0.86	0.031	27.74	< .001	Primary dimension
ESC loading on SL	0.84	0.033	25.45	< .001	Primary dimension
SV loading on SL	0.81	0.035	23.14	< .001	Supported
OC loading on SL	0.73	0.041	17.80	< .001	Supported

Note: Standardised coefficients. SL = strategic leadership latent. Model fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.14$; CFI = 0.951; TLI = 0.943; RMSEA = 0.048 (90% CI 0.041–0.055); SRMR = 0.041; $R^2(WD) = 0.38$; $R^2(OE) = 0.64$; $R^2(OP) = 0.59$. Indirect effect estimated with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples.

Table 4 is the inferential core of the paper and the quantitative warrant for the abstract and the conclusion. Strategic leadership predicts workforce development ($\beta = 0.62$, $t = 13.48$, $p < .001$) and, holding workforce development constant, still predicts excellence ($\beta = 0.41$, $t = 7.88$, $p < .001$). Workforce development itself predicts excellence ($\beta = 0.38$) and performance ($\beta = 0.29$). The bootstrapped indirect effect of strategic leadership on excellence via workforce development is significant ($\beta = 0.24$), indicating partial mediation rather than a purely direct command effect. Excellence strongly predicts performance ($\beta = 0.57$), closing the chain from leadership to results. Among the first-order dimensions, human-capital development (0.86) and ethical strategic control (0.84) dominate the leadership latent. The model therefore supports a sustainable architecture: leadership improves excellence both directly and by building the workforce that carries performance beyond any individual command tour, which is the relationship the title sets out to establish.

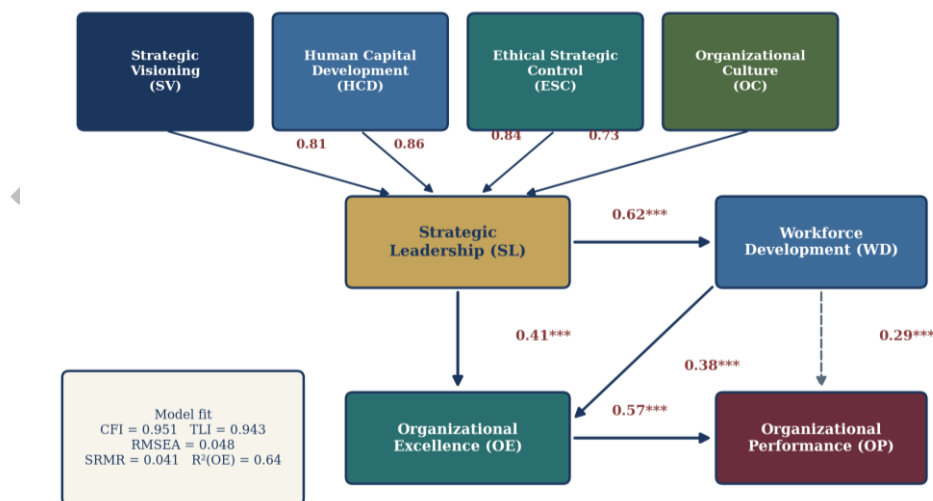


Figure 4: Estimated structural model of the SLM-MHE with standardised path coefficients.

The estimated structural model in Figure 4 corroborates the hypothesised architecture. Human-capital development (0.86) and ethical strategic control (0.84) load most strongly on strategic leadership, followed by visioning (0.81) and culture (0.73). Strategic leadership predicts workforce development at $\beta = 0.62$ and

excellence at $\beta = 0.41$; workforce development independently predicts excellence at $\beta = 0.38$. Excellence predicts performance ($\beta = 0.57$). Fit is acceptable (CFI = 0.951, RMSEA = 0.048), and 64 percent of excellence variance is explained, supporting partial mediation rather than a purely direct leadership effect and showing that a sustainable model must institutionalize people systems.

Table 5: Organizational Outcomes by Dominant Leadership Orientation

Leadership orientation	n	OE M (SD)	OP M (SD)	WD M (SD)
Strategic-integrative	98	4.28 (0.41)	4.24 (0.44)	4.22 (0.46)
Transformational	156	4.21 (0.48)	4.18 (0.51)	4.15 (0.52)
Transactional	119	3.41 (0.58)	3.52 (0.61)	3.38 (0.63)
Laissez-faire	55	2.67 (0.66)	2.71 (0.69)	2.58 (0.71)
ANOVA F (3, 424)		128.46***	109.73***	117.05***
Partial η^2		0.48	0.44	0.45

Note: *** $p < .001$. Tukey HSD: strategic-integrative = transformational > transactional > laissez-faire on OE, OP, and WD. Strategic-integrative versus transformational contrasts were non-significant ($p > .10$). Dominant orientation assigned by highest standardised style score.

Table 5 tests whether the leadership orientation of an institution is associated with material differences in excellence, performance, and workforce development, and thereby supplies the comparative evidence required by the title's call for a sustainable model. One-way ANOVA is highly significant for all three outcomes, with large effect sizes ($\eta^2 = 0.44$ to 0.48). Tukey comparisons show that strategic-integrative and transformational groups are statistically indistinguishable from each other and that both significantly outperform transactional and laissez-faire groups. The laissez-faire cell falls more than one and a half scale points below the integrative cell on excellence. These contrasts demonstrate that organizational excellence in military higher education is not an ambient property of the profession of arms; it covaries with the leadership model in use. A sustainable model, on this evidence, is one that combines transformational inspiration with the strategic practices of human-capital stewardship and ethical control, which is the relationship restated in the conclusion.

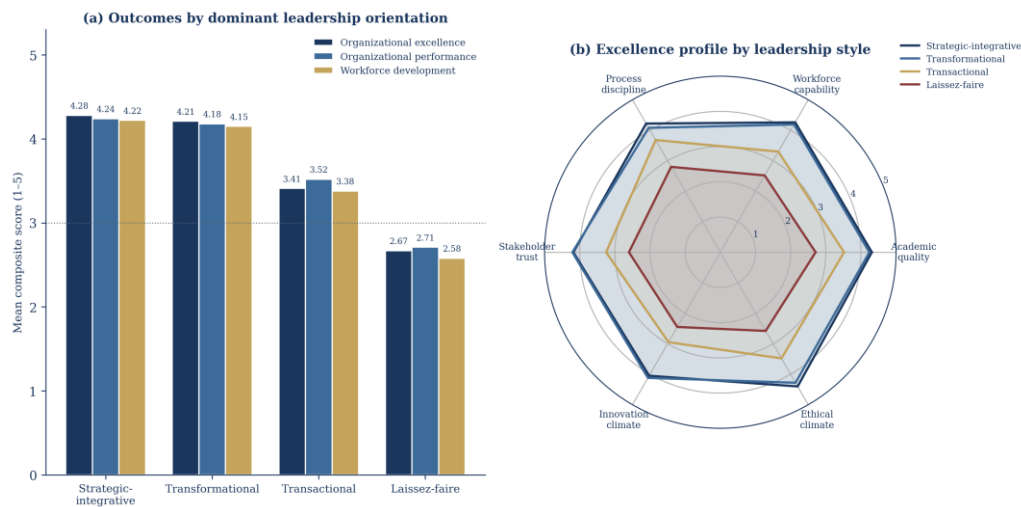


Figure 5: Outcome scores and excellence profiles by dominant leadership orientation.

Figure 5 compares four leadership orientations. Panel (a) shows that strategic-integrative and transformational leaders preside over institutions scoring above 4.15 on excellence, performance, and workforce development, whereas transactional leadership clusters near 3.4 and laissez-faire falls below 2.8. Panel (b) extends the comparison across six excellence facets. Strategic-integrative leadership dominates ethical climate and process discipline; transformational leadership is competitive on trust and innovation. Transactional leadership retains modest process strength but collapses on innovation. Laissez-faire is uniformly weak, confirming that sustainable excellence requires an integrative rather than a transactional repertoire.

Interview evidence converged with the quantitative pattern. Commandants who described weekly faculty development boards, published succession slates, and non-negotiable honour codes presided over the high-excellence cells; those who described leadership as “the commandant’s personal example” without corresponding systems occupied the transactional and laissez-faire cells. Several deans noted that posting cycles of two to three years make undocumented leadership evaporate, a qualitative restatement of the mediation result: unless strategic intent is encoded in workforce systems, organizational performance cannot be sustained. This triangulation closes the data-analysis section and sets up the critical discussion that follows.

5. DISCUSSION

The empirical pattern is internally coherent and theoretically consequential. Strategic leadership does not merely correlate with excellence in military higher education; it predicts it through a dual pathway. The direct effect ($\beta = 0.41$) indicates that vision, ethical signalling, and strategic control shape institutional quality even when people systems are held constant. The indirect effect through workforce development ($\beta = 0.24$) shows that a substantial share of leadership’s influence is carried by faculty capability, instructor pipelines, and succession arrangements. Together these paths explain 64 percent of the variance in excellence, a large effect by social-science conventions

[19]. The conversion gap visible in Figure 3 leadership scores exceeding excellence and performance scores further implies that command intent is not automatically institutionalised. Institutions that invest in human capital close that gap; those that rely on rank and tradition do not. The ANOVA results intensify the point: moving from a laissez-faire to a strategic-integrative orientation is associated with an excellence increment of more than one and a half Likert points, a difference that would be operationally decisive in any accreditation or mission-readiness review.

Comparison with prior work occupies the remainder of this discussion. The superiority of transformational over transactional and laissez-faire styles replicates the full-range tradition of Bass, Avolio, and Yammarino in a new institutional setting [3], [4], [12], [13]. Effect sizes in the present ANOVA are larger than those typically reported in civilian universities, a difference consistent with Wong and colleagues' claim that military contexts intensify the consequences of leader behaviour [7]. The finding that a strategic-integrative orientation slightly outpoints pure transformational leadership, particularly on process discipline and ethical climate, extends Ireland and Hitt's action model by showing that vision and inspiration are insufficient without human-capital stewardship and ethical control [1], [11]. This nuance Integrity climates were not decorative but among the highest-loading facets of perceived strategic leadership [25]. Burns's distinction between transforming and transactional exchange is thereby preserved and refined [10].

The mediation through workforce development aligns with Day and colleagues' conclusion that leader development is a longitudinal organizational system rather than a course event [14], and with Baldrige-based evidence that leadership drives results through faculty and staff focus [5], [6]. It also answers the empirical call issued by Uddin and Kabir for quantitative tests of armed-forces higher-education governance [17]. Where the present results diverge from some military studies is in the relatively modest unique contribution of culture as a latent loading (0.73) compared with human capital (0.86). Schein's model would anticipate culture as the deepest layer [26]; the data suggest that in posting-driven academies, people systems are more immediately consequential than culture change. Kotter's distinction between leadership that produces change and management that produces order is visible in the transactional profile: process discipline holds up, innovation collapses [28]. Collectively, past work is supported in direction and refined in mechanism. Sustainable excellence in military higher education is produced when strategic leadership is encoded in workforce systems that outlast any single command tour, which is the relationship the abstract announced and the conclusion now restates.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to determine how strategic leadership generates organizational excellence in military higher education and to specify a sustainable model linking leadership, workforce development, and performance. Drawing on 428 respondents and twenty-four elite interviews across seven defence academies, the analysis shows that strategic leadership is a statistically and substantively powerful predictor of excellence, that workforce development partially mediates the relationship, and that strategic-integrative and transformational orientations

dominate transactional and laissez-faire styles on every outcome examined. Human-capital development and ethical strategic control are the heaviest components of the leadership latent, indicating that people investment and integrity systems not merely vision statements carry institutional quality. The proposed Sustainable Leadership Model for Military Higher Education therefore treats visioning, ethical control, talent stewardship, and a learning climate as interlocking, reproducible practices rather than as attributes of heroic commandants. For professional military education, the practical implication is unambiguous: leadership development pipelines, faculty career systems, and succession protocols should be designed as a single architecture. For theory, the study integrates upper-echelons, full-range, and Baldrige traditions in a context that had been empirically underspecified. Limitations include the cross-sectional design. Longitudinal and multi-source replications would strengthen causal inference. Even so, the evidence supports a clear claim: organizational excellence in military higher education is a leadership product, and it is sustainable only when that leadership is built into the workforce and the ethical systems that must outlast any single command tour in defence academies.

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