



Adaptive Leadership in Higher Education: Organizational Communication and Institutional Sustainability

Brandon Steve¹, Nurafni Surahman¹, Andi Batari Ghinaa Sarman¹, Rifky Wahyudi¹, M. Akbar Faiz Taufik¹, Novika Ayu Triany¹

¹Department of Management, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Ciputra Makassar, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: Novika Ayu Triany

Email: novika.ayu@ciputra.ac.id



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Abstract

This study examines the role of adaptive leadership in higher education and its relationship with organizational communication and institutional sustainability. A qualitative exploratory case study was conducted at STIE Ciputra Makassar, Indonesia. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that adaptive leadership enables institutions to respond effectively to external changes such as regulatory shifts, technological development, and increasing competition in higher education. Leadership adaptability is reflected in flexible decision-making, contextual problem solving, and continuous organizational adjustment. Organizational communication plays a central role in strengthening adaptive leadership through open communication, consistent information flow, and participatory coordination among leaders, lecturers, and staff. The study further reveals that institutional sustainability is shaped not only by financial performance but also by academic quality, institutional reputation, and stakeholder trust. Adaptive leadership contributes to sustainability by enhancing organizational adaptability, supporting human resource development, and promoting data-driven decision-making. The results indicate that adaptive leadership, organizational communication, and institutional sustainability are interrelated and form an adaptive organizational system. In conclusion, adaptive leadership supported by effective organizational communication is a key factor in ensuring the sustainability of higher education institutions. This study contributes to leadership theory in higher education and offers practical implications for strengthening institutional resilience and competitiveness.

Introduction

The transformation of the higher education environment in the twenty first century has compelled universities to be viewed not merely as academic institutions, but also as strategic organizations that must sustain institutional continuity amid dynamic social, economic, technological, and regulatory changes. Higher education institutions are currently confronted with multidimensional pressures, including intensified inter-institutional competition, shifting student behavior, the digitalization of learning systems, international accreditation demands, and increasing stakeholder expectations regarding educational service quality (Graham et al., 2023). Alenezi, (2023) revealed these conditions require higher education institutions to possess strong adaptive capacities to remain relevant, competitive, and sustainable in the long term. In this context, leadership becomes a strategic factor that determines an institution's

ability to manage change while simultaneously maintaining organizational stability (Bernard & Riggio, 2006).

Rapid external environmental changes have shifted the paradigm of higher education management from traditional administrative models toward more flexible, innovative, and collaborative approaches. Universities are expected not only to produce high-quality graduates, but also to strengthen institutional reputation, foster partnerships with industry, develop learning innovations, and maintain organizational sustainability both economically and socially (Pietsch & Kristin, 2024). This complexity places higher education institutions in conditions characterized by uncertainty, rendering rigid and bureaucratic leadership approaches increasingly ineffective in responding to contemporary organizational challenges (Gaol, 2021).

Within such dynamic organizational circumstances, adaptive leadership has emerged as a leadership approach capable of addressing environmental complexity and continuous change. Adaptive leadership emphasizes leaders' abilities to recognize change, manage uncertainty, build organizational flexibility, and encourage collective learning in response to emerging challenges (Ophilia & Hidayat, 2021). This approach focuses not only on formal decision making, but also on leader's capacities to create spaces for dialogue, build organizational trust, and develop both individual and institutional capabilities in a sustainable manner (Dolamore et al., 2025). In the context of higher education, adaptive leadership becomes particularly important because academic organizations are structurally complex, involve multiple stakeholders, and are continuously influenced by evolving external dynamics.

Studi Hanelt et al. (2021) highlighted the significance of adaptive leadership in higher education organizations has become increasingly evident following digital disruption and the transformation of learning systems in the post-pandemic era. Universities have been compelled to rapidly adapt to online learning systems, technology based academic services, and changing organizational communication patterns (Limniou et al., 2021). Under such circumstances, institutional success is determined not solely by technological sophistication, but also by leaders' abilities to effectively manage organizational transformation. Higher education leaders are therefore expected to foster open communication, create psychological safety among organizational members, and ensure that institutional change is collectively accepted and implemented by the academic community (Voronkova, 2023).

Organizational communication constitutes a central element in the implementation of adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership cannot be separated from leaders' communication capabilities in articulating vision, constructing shared meaning, and managing relationships among organizational members (Nouri, 2024). Within higher education organizations, communication functions not only as a mechanism for administrative information dissemination, but also as a strategic instrument for strengthening coordination, collaboration, and organizational commitment. The effectiveness of organizational communication significantly influences institutional capacities to manage change, minimize resistance, and enhance the engagement of lecturers and academic staff in achieving institutional objectives (Alenezi, 2023).

The collegial characteristics of higher education organizations position leadership communication as a crucial factor in maintaining organizational stability. Universities cannot be governed solely through authoritarian approaches, as academic processes involve intellectual autonomy and active participation from lecturers and other academic stakeholders (Pietsch & Kristin, 2024). Consequently, higher education leaders require communication competencies that are not only instructional, but also participatory, collaborative, and empathetic (Gaol, 2021). Within the adaptive leadership framework, organizational

communication serves as an instrument for building trust, strengthening leadership legitimacy, and fostering organizational cultures that are open to change (Beth, 2024).

At the same time, institutional sustainability in higher education is no longer measured solely through academic achievement, but also through institutions' capacities to maintain organizational competitiveness comprehensively (Gallagher, 2023). Institutional sustainability encompasses universities' abilities to preserve organizational stability, enhance institutional reputation, maintain student enrollment, develop academic innovation, and establish strategic relationships with various stakeholders. Private higher education institutions, particularly in developing countries, face more complex challenges because they must balance academic ideals with organizational sustainability from a financial perspective (Alenezi, 2023).

In this regard, adaptive leadership plays a strategic role in supporting institutional sustainability. Adaptive leaders are generally more capable of integrating academic needs with educational market demands without compromising the fundamental values of higher education (Hanelt et al., 2021). Adaptive leadership enables institutions to become more responsive to changing student needs, developments in learning technologies, and evolving competition among universities (Sott & Bender, 2025). Furthermore, adaptive leadership contributes to the development of innovative and resilient organizational cultures, which serve as critical foundations for long-term institutional sustainability.

Although adaptive leadership has received growing attention in organizational and educational management studies, most previous research has primarily focused on corporate settings, business organizations, and the public sector in general (Hanelt et al., 2021). Research examining adaptive leadership within higher education contexts remains relatively limited, particularly studies that simultaneously investigate adaptive leadership, organizational communication, and institutional sustainability (Bernard & Riggio, 2006). Existing studies have predominantly emphasized the relationship between adaptive leadership and organizational innovation, change management, or individual effectiveness, while limited attention has been given to organizational communication as a strategic mechanism for fostering sustainability in higher education institutions (Hou, 2022).

Moreover, research on adaptive leadership in higher education institutions within developing countries, particularly Indonesia, remains limited. The characteristics of higher education institutions in developing countries differ substantially from those in developed nations, especially regarding resource constraints, regulatory dynamics, educational market competition, and uneven digital transformation. Private universities in Indonesia face considerable pressure to maintain institutional sustainability amid intensifying competition, changing student preferences, and increasing educational quality demands (Azaz et al., 2024). These conditions position adaptive leadership as a strategic issue that warrants deeper scholarly examination.

The limitations of previous studies are also reflected in the lack of research exploring how adaptive leadership is implemented through everyday organizational communication practices within higher education institutions. Most prior studies have adopted quantitative approaches that focus on statistical relationships among variables, thereby failing to capture the complexity of adaptive leadership dynamics within academic organizations (Werder et al., 2018). The implementation of adaptive leadership is highly influenced by social context, organizational culture, communication patterns, and interactions among organizational members, all of which are inherently complex and dynamic (Campos et al., 2020).

Based on these conditions, this study seeks to examine adaptive leadership within higher education institutions by positioning organizational communication as a strategic mechanism that supports institutional sustainability. This research does not merely focus on leaders' capacities to respond to organizational change but also explores how organizational communication is utilized to strengthen coordination, foster collaboration, enhance lecturers' work effectiveness, and sustain higher education institutions. Accordingly, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among adaptive leadership, organizational communication, and institutional sustainability within the context of higher education (Hou, 2022).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of adaptive leadership scholarships within higher education organizations, particularly through the integration of organizational communication and institutional sustainability perspectives (Werder et al., 2018). This research also expands the understanding of adaptive leadership, which has largely been examined within corporate and business organizational contexts (Campos et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study provides conceptual contributions regarding the importance of organizational communication as a foundational element in implementing adaptive leadership within academic environments.

Practically, this study is expected to serve as a strategic reference for higher education leaders in developing leadership models that are more adaptive, communicative, and sustainability oriented. Amid intensifying competition in higher education and accelerating digital transformation, educational institutions require leaders who are not only capable of making strategic decisions, but also capable of fostering organizational cultures that are flexible, collaborative, and innovative (Azaz et al., 2024). Therefore, adaptive leadership should be understood not merely as an individual leadership capability, but also as an organizational process constructed through communication, participation, and continuous collective learning.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to analyze how adaptive leadership is implemented within higher education organizations, how organizational communication supports institutional adaptation processes, and how these two dimensions contribute to institutional sustainability. This research is expected to provide both academic and practical contributions to the development of higher education leadership strategies that are relevant to contemporary organizational challenges.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach with an exploratory case study design to investigate the implementation of adaptive leadership within higher education institutions and its relationship with organizational communication and institutional sustainability. The qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate because the phenomenon of adaptive leadership involves complex organizational interactions, social interpretations, communication dynamics, and contextual experiences that cannot be comprehensively understood through quantitative measurement alone. Adaptive leadership within educational institutions is closely associated with organizational culture, leadership behavior, institutional values, and the subjective experiences of organizational members. Therefore, an interpretive qualitative approach enabled a deeper exploration of how leadership practices are constructed, experienced, and interpreted within the organizational environment of higher education institutions.

The exploratory case study design was selected because this study sought to generate an in-depth understanding of adaptive leadership practices within their real institutional context. The

case study approach allowed the researchers to examine leadership processes holistically while considering the organizational, social, and environmental conditions influencing institutional adaptation. In addition, the exploratory nature of the study was relevant because research examining the integration of adaptive leadership, organizational communication, and institutional sustainability within Indonesian higher education institutions remains relatively limited. Consequently, this study aimed not only to describe organizational phenomena but also to construct contextual interpretations regarding how adaptive leadership contributes to institutional sustainability through communication processes within higher education organizations.

Research Setting and Context

The study was conducted at STIE Ciputra Makassar, Indonesia, a private higher education institution recognized for its entrepreneurial orientation and adaptive educational management practices. The institution was selected purposively because it represents a higher education organization operating within a dynamic and highly competitive educational environment. As a private university, the institution faces substantial pressures related to student recruitment, institutional reputation, organizational sustainability, academic innovation, and digital transformation. These organizational conditions make the institution highly relevant for examining adaptive leadership practices in higher education contexts.

The institutional context also reflects broader transformations occurring within Indonesian higher education. Rapid technological development, changing student expectations, increasing accreditation demands, and intensified competition among universities have compelled higher education institutions to continuously adapt their organizational strategies and management systems. Within this environment, leadership becomes a critical factor in maintaining organizational flexibility and institutional sustainability. STIE Ciputra Makassar was therefore considered an appropriate setting because the institution has actively implemented organizational transformation initiatives, strengthened digital learning systems, and promoted collaborative organizational communication as part of its institutional development strategy.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on their involvement in leadership activities, organizational coordination, academic management, and institutional development processes. Purposive sampling was employed because the study required participants who possessed substantial knowledge and direct experience related to adaptive leadership and organizational communication within the institution. The selection of participants was guided by the objective of obtaining rich, relevant, and contextually grounded data regarding leadership practices and institutional adaptation.

The participants consisted of institutional leaders, heads of study programs, lecturers, administrative staff members, and students. The inclusion of participants from multiple organizational levels was intended to capture diverse perspectives regarding leadership communication, organizational dynamics, institutional adaptation, and sustainability practices. Institutional leaders provided insights into strategic decision-making and organizational transformation processes, while lecturers and academic staff contributed perspectives related to organizational communication, work coordination, and academic implementation. Students were included to provide additional understanding regarding institutional responsiveness and communication effectiveness from the perspective of educational service recipients.

Participants were selected based on several criteria, including having a minimum of three years of institutional experience, active involvement in academic or organizational activities, and

direct exposure to institutional changes or adaptation initiatives. The researchers continued the participant recruitment process until data saturation was achieved. Saturation was identified when additional interviews no longer generated substantially new information or thematic insights relevant to the research focus. This process ensured that the collected data were sufficiently comprehensive to support meaningful interpretation and thematic development.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis to obtain a comprehensive understanding of adaptive leadership practices and organizational communication within the institution. The use of multiple data collection methods allowed the researchers to strengthen the credibility of the findings through methodological triangulation and contextual interpretation.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method because they enabled participants to express their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations in a flexible and reflective manner. The interviews explored various issues related to leadership responses to organizational change, communication patterns between leaders and organizational members, institutional adaptation strategies, organizational challenges, and institutional sustainability efforts. The semi-structured interview format allowed the researchers to maintain consistency across participants while also providing opportunities to explore emerging issues during the interview process. Each interview lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes and was conducted face-to-face in environments considered comfortable and conducive for open discussion. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and accuracy of the data.

In addition to interviews, non-participant observation was conducted to examine organizational interactions and communication practices occurring within the institutional environment. Observation enabled the researchers to directly observe leadership behaviors, coordination processes, organizational interactions, and communication dynamics that may not have been fully articulated during interviews. The observations focused on leadership communication during formal meetings, informal interactions among organizational members, inter-unit coordination processes, and organizational responses to institutional challenges. Field notes were systematically documented throughout the observation process to capture contextual situations, interaction patterns, and organizational atmospheres relevant to the research objectives.

Document analysis was also employed to support data triangulation and enrich contextual understanding regarding institutional leadership and organizational sustainability. The analyzed documents included institutional strategic plans, organizational policies, accreditation reports, institutional performance documents, internal communication materials, academic regulations, and official institutional publications. These documents provided additional insights into the institution's organizational priorities, communication structures, and adaptation strategies. Document analysis also enabled the researchers to compare formal organizational narratives with participants lived experiences and interpretations.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic and flexible analytical approach for identifying, interpreting, and constructing patterns of meaning within qualitative data. This analytical approach was considered appropriate for examining the

complex relationships among adaptive leadership, organizational communication, and institutional sustainability within higher education institutions.

The analysis process began with repeated readings of interview transcripts, observation notes, and organizational documents to develop familiarity with the data and gain an initial understanding of emerging organizational patterns. During this stage, the researchers immersed themselves in the data to identify meaningful statements and recurring experiences related to leadership practices and institutional adaptation. Initial coding was then conducted by systematically labeling relevant segments of data that reflected significant organizational experiences, communication dynamics, leadership responses, and institutional strategies.

Following the coding process, similar codes were grouped into broader categories representing recurring themes and organizational patterns. The researchers continuously compared and refined these categories to ensure conceptual coherence and analytical consistency. Emerging themes were subsequently reviewed and interpreted in relation to the research objectives and theoretical perspectives underlying the study. The final stage of the analysis involved constructing interpretive narratives explaining how adaptive leadership practices influence organizational communication and contribute to institutional sustainability within the higher education context.

Throughout the analytical process, the researchers employed iterative interpretation by continuously revisiting the data to ensure that thematic development remained grounded in participants' experiences and organizational realities. This process allowed the researchers to produce contextual and theoretically informed interpretations regarding leadership and organizational sustainability.

Result and Discussion

Adaptive Leadership in the Higher Education Context

The findings indicate that adaptive leadership plays a significant role in enabling the institution to respond to the increasingly dynamic higher education environment. Based on the interviews, participants perceived that institutional leadership demonstrated strong adaptability in responding to regulatory changes, technological developments, and educational market demands. Leadership was not viewed merely as an administrative function, but rather as a strategic process involving the interpretation of environmental changes and the adjustment of institutional strategies according to situational conditions. One participant explained:

"The changes in the education sector are very fast nowadays. University leaders cannot keep using the old ways. Whenever there are regulatory changes or shifts in student needs, the institution always tries to adjust its strategies and working systems." (Head of Study Program)

This finding suggests that adaptive leadership within higher education institutions is strongly associated with leader's abilities to continuously evaluate external conditions and translate them into organizational responses.

The interviews also revealed that leadership flexibility was reflected in the ability to adjust managerial approaches according to organizational needs and human resource characteristics. Participants explained that leadership did not apply a single rigid leadership style across all institutional situations. Instead, leaders demonstrated situational flexibility by combining directive approaches, supportive communication, collaborative coordination, and motivational strategies depending on institutional circumstances. A lecturer stated:

“The leadership here is not rigid. When there are academic or administrative problems, the approach is usually adjusted based on field conditions. So, the leadership style is more flexible.” (Lecturer)

Such flexibility enabled organizational leaders to maintain institutional stability while simultaneously encouraging innovation and adaptation within the academic environment.

Participants further highlighted that prior leadership experience contributed substantially to organizational adaptability. Institutional leaders were perceived as possessing the capacity to anticipate organizational challenges and encourage institutional innovation because of their previous experiences in educational management and organizational development. One administrative staff member noted:

“The leaders’ experience is very helpful when the institution faces changes. Usually, they can already anticipate potential challenges and immediately look for solutions before the problems become bigger.” (Administrative Staff)

Another important finding relates to the institution’s responsiveness toward technological advancement and market expectations. Participants explained that institutional policies, particularly those associated with curriculum development and learning systems, were continuously adjusted to align with industry trends and student needs. One participant stated:

“The curriculum is always evaluated to ensure it matches industry needs and digital developments. Students’ needs today are also very different compared to a few years ago.” (Head of Study Program)

This finding supports the argument that adaptive leadership contributes to organizational flexibility and institutional competitiveness within contemporary higher education systems.

From the lecturer’s perspective, institutional leadership was perceived as facilitative and solution-oriented in addressing organizational challenges. Participants described leadership as supportive rather than authoritarian, particularly when academic units encountered obstacles related to performance targets or institutional demands. One lecturer explained:

“When there are obstacles in achieving targets, the leaders usually do not immediately blame us. Instead, we are invited to discuss and find the most appropriate solution.” (Lecturer)

This condition contributed to a more constructive organizational climate and strengthened organizational trust among lecturers and academic staff.

These findings demonstrate that adaptive leadership within higher education institutions extends beyond policy flexibility and managerial responsiveness. Adaptive leadership also involves leaders’ abilities to maintain organizational balance between institutional values, academic responsibilities, market demands, and technological transformation. In this regard, leadership adaptability becomes a critical organizational capability supporting institutional sustainability amid increasingly complex educational environments.

Organizational Communication and Academic Work Culture

The findings reveal that organizational communication constitutes a central element supporting institutional coordination and academic work effectiveness. Participants consistently described leadership communication within the institution as open, accessible, and relatively non-hierarchical. Communication patterns characterized by minimal structural barriers enabled lecturers and staff members to communicate directly with institutional leaders without experiencing excessive bureaucratic distance. One lecturer explained:

“Communication with the leadership is quite open. We can express our input or challenges without going through overly complicated procedures.” (Lecturer)

Such communication conditions contributed to the creation of a more collaborative and psychologically safe organizational environment.

Participants explained that communication openness strengthened organizational relationships because organizational members felt more comfortable expressing concerns, discussing institutional issues, and sharing ideas related to academic or operational activities. Informal communication interactions were perceived as particularly important in accelerating organizational coordination and reducing delays in problem-solving processes. A staff member stated:

“Sometimes problems are solved faster through informal communication rather than waiting for formal meetings.” (Administrative Staff)

This finding indicates that organizational communication within adaptive leadership environments extends beyond formal administrative communication and functions as a strategic mechanism for maintaining institutional responsiveness and collaboration.

The interviews further revealed that communication consistency contributed significantly to organizational stability. Participants emphasized that leadership communication remained relatively consistent in terms of coordination patterns, institutional direction, and organizational priorities. One participant explained:

“The directions from the leadership are usually clear and consistent, so we understand the institution’s priorities.” (Lecturer)

Such consistency reduced uncertainty among organizational members and facilitated clearer understanding regarding institutional expectations and performance targets.

The study also found that organizational coordination was supported through regular inter-unit communication mechanisms. Routine meetings and continuous coordination processes enabled organizational units to discuss operational challenges collectively and align institutional objectives more effectively. The participant stated:

“Each unit usually conducts regular coordination to ensure that institutional targets are achieved according to the plan.” (Head of Study Program)

Participants perceived that these communication practices strengthened organizational integration and reduced fragmentation between academic and administrative functions.

Despite the openness of organizational communication, participants acknowledged that lecturers remained individually responsible for achieving their respective academic and institutional targets. Leadership communication was therefore perceived as facilitative rather than controlling. One lecturer explained:

“The leadership provides room for independent work, but we still have responsibilities that must be fulfilled according to institutional targets.” (Lecturer)

This balance between communication support and individual accountability contributed to the development of a more adaptive and performance-oriented academic work culture.

Adaptive Leadership and Lecturer Performance

The findings demonstrate that adaptive leadership contributes positively to lecturers’ performance, particularly in relation to the implementation of the tridharma of higher education

encompassing teaching, research, and community service. Participants explained that institutional leadership actively supported lecturers' academic development through organizational facilitation, professional mentoring, and resource provision. One lecturer noted:

"The institution provides good support for research and community service activities. There is funding assistance and mentoring so that lecturers can be more productive."
(Lecturer)

Such support was reflected in the availability of research funding, institutional assistance for community engagement activities, and support for lecturers pursuing advanced academic studies.

Participants perceived that institutional leadership was committed to strengthening lecturers' academic capacities and professional growth. Leadership support reduced administrative and financial constraints that could potentially hinder lecturers' academic productivity. Another lecturer explained:

"The leadership pays attention to lecturer development, including further study and other academic activities." (Lecturer)

This finding indicates that adaptive leadership within higher education institutions involves not only organizational management but also the empowerment and development of academic human resources.

Another significant finding concerns leadership recognition of individual lecturer capacities and professional strengths. Participants explained that institutional leadership attempted to align academic responsibilities and organizational tasks according to lecturers' expertise and competencies. One participant stated:

"Tasks are usually assigned according to each lecturer's expertise and field so that the results can be more optimal." (Head of Study Program)

Such flexibility enabled lecturers to develop their academic potential more effectively while simultaneously contributing to institutional objectives.

The interviews further revealed that although institutional performance targets were considered relatively demanding, leadership approaches remained supportive and solution oriented. Participants reported that institutional leaders encouraged discussion and evaluation whenever organizational units encountered challenges in achieving targets. One lecturer explained:

"The targets are quite high, but the leadership usually helps us find solutions when we face difficulties in achieving them." (Lecturer)

This finding demonstrates that adaptive leadership contributes to balancing institutional performance expectations with organizational support mechanisms.

Participants also highlighted the existence of responsible academic autonomy within the institution. Lecturers were provided with opportunities to innovate in teaching, research, and academic activities as long as their initiatives remained aligned with institutional values and organizational objectives. One lecturer noted:

"We are given freedom to develop teaching methods as long as they are still aligned with the institution's vision." (Lecturer)

This finding supports the argument that adaptive leadership encourages the development of organizational cultures characterized by flexibility, learning, and professional empowerment.

Adaptive Leadership and Institutional Sustainability

The findings further reveal that adaptive leadership contributes significantly to institutional sustainability and organizational competitiveness within higher education contexts. Participants emphasized that institutional leadership increasingly relied on data-driven decision-making processes in organizational planning and institutional evaluation. One participant explained:

“Nowadays, decisions are mostly based on data, especially regarding student numbers, program evaluation, and market needs.” (Institutional Leader)

Organizational data related to student enrollment, institutional performance, and operational conditions were consistently utilized as the basis for strategic decision-making.

Participants explained that integrated digital systems facilitated institutional monitoring and organizational responsiveness. Leadership was able to evaluate institutional performance more efficiently and identify organizational challenges at earlier stages. A staff member stated:

“The digital system helps the institution monitor academic and administrative progress more quickly than before.” (Administrative Staff)

This finding demonstrates that adaptive leadership within higher education institutions is closely associated with organizational responsiveness and evidence-based management practices.

The study also found that adaptive leadership contributed to strengthening institutional image and public trust. Participants perceived that institutional recognition and student enrollment had increased because of organizational responsiveness and continuous institutional development. One participant explained:

“The public now sees the institution as more developed because it quickly adapts to changes and student needs.” (Head of Study Program)

Leadership adaptability toward educational trends, technological innovation, and student expectations strengthened institutional competitiveness within the higher education sector.

Another important finding concerns leadership responsiveness toward educational market demands. Participants explained that institutional policies, curricula, and learning approaches were continuously adjusted according to industry developments and student needs as educational service users. One lecturer stated:

“Students today need more practical and technology-based learning, so the institution must continue to adapt.” (Lecturer)

The findings also indicate that institutional sustainability within higher education institutions extends beyond financial considerations alone. Participants consistently associate sustainability with organizational adaptability, institutional reputation, academic quality, student trust, and organizational resilience. One participant explained:

“Institutional sustainability is not only about finance, but also about maintaining academic quality and public trust.” (Institutional Leader)

These findings reinforce previous arguments suggesting that adaptive leadership is increasingly important within contemporary higher education environments characterized by uncertainty and continuous transformation. In the context of Indonesian private higher education

institutions, adaptive leadership appears to function not merely as an individual leadership competency, but as an organizational process embedded within communication practices, institutional culture, and collaborative academic relationships. Consequently, institutional sustainability is achieved not only through managerial efficiency, but also through leadership adaptability and organizational communication capable of maintaining institutional flexibility and organizational cohesion amid increasingly dynamic higher education environments.

The findings of this study indicate that adaptive leadership is a crucial capability for higher education institutions facing regulatory change, technological transformation, and increasing competition. Adaptive leadership enables institutional leaders to adjust strategies, respond to uncertainty, and maintain organizational direction without relying on rigid administrative patterns. This supports previous studies showing that higher education institutions require flexible, innovative, and responsive leadership to survive in rapidly changing educational environments (Alenezi, 2023; Azaz et al., 2024; Gaol, 2021; Sott & Bender, 2025). The findings also align with Hanelt et al. (2021) and Beth (2024), who emphasize that organizational transformation requires leadership that can integrate digital change, institutional strategy, and organizational agility.

Organizational communication was also found to be an important mechanism that strengthens adaptive leadership. Open, consistent, and participatory communication helps leaders build trust, reduce resistance, and improve coordination among lecturers, staff, and institutional units. This finding is consistent with Ophilia and Hidayat (2021), who argue that leadership communication is essential during organizational change, and Dolamore et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of empathy in organizational communication during uncertain conditions. Similarly, Werder et al. (2018), Hou (2022), and Nouri (2024) emphasize that strategic and participatory communication supports shared understanding, collaboration, and organizational commitment. In this study, communication functions not only as information delivery, but also as a strategic instrument for building an adaptive academic work culture.

The study further shows that adaptive leadership contributes to lecturer performance through institutional support, professional development, task flexibility, and academic autonomy. These findings are in line with Campos et al. (2020), who note that leadership development can improve organizational capacity and social impact, and Gallagher (2023), who emphasizes that adaptive capacity is built through leadership strategies that support individual and institutional growth. Leadership support for teaching, research, and community service also reflects the importance of empowering academic human resources in higher education. This confirms that adaptive leadership is not only concerned with institutional survival, but also with strengthening lecturer competence, motivation, and productivity.

Institutional sustainability in this study is understood as a multidimensional outcome that includes academic quality, organizational resilience, institutional reputation, stakeholder trust, and financial stability. This finding supports Graham et al. (2023) and Limniou et al. (2021), who show that digital readiness and learning transformation are closely related to institutional improvement in higher education. It also corresponds with Pietsch and Kristin (2024) and Voronkova et al. (2023), who argue that educational institutions must develop digital mindsets and adaptive strategies to remain relevant in the era of technological change. Therefore, the integration of adaptive leadership and effective organizational communication becomes a key foundation for building sustainable, competitive, and resilient higher education institutions.

Conclusion

This study concludes that adaptive leadership plays an essential role in strengthening higher education institutions' ability to respond to regulatory changes, technological transformation, stakeholder expectations, and increasing institutional competition. In the context of STIE Ciputra Makassar, adaptive leadership is reflected through flexible decision-making, contextual problem-solving, support for lecturer development, and data-driven institutional planning. These leadership practices enable the institution to maintain organizational stability while continuously adjusting to external pressures and internal development needs.

The findings also show that organizational communication is a key mechanism that supports the effectiveness of adaptive leadership and contributes to institutional sustainability. Open, consistent, and participatory communication strengthens coordination, trust, academic work culture, and collective commitment among institutional members. Therefore, institutional sustainability in higher education should not be understood only from a financial perspective, but also through academic quality, organizational resilience, institutional reputation, and stakeholder trust. Overall, adaptive leadership supported by effective organizational communication is a fundamental factor in building resilient, competitive, and sustainable higher education institutions.

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