

Innovative Leadership Model for University Administrators in Hainan, China

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Abstract: *The proposed innovative leadership model for private university administrators in Hainan Province, China, to develop a conceptual framework of innovative leadership for administrators in private universities in Hainan Province, China. In recent years, these universities have faced strong pressure to improve quality and innovation while adapting to national digital transformation policies. However, no research related to innovative leadership has been found within the context of Hainan Province. The study uses a qualitative design based on document analysis and interviews. From 15 academic sources, leadership variables were extracted and compared with interview data from nine participants, including administrators and faculty members from private universities in Hainan Province. Thematic analysis and frequency analysis were used to identify, refine, and group the variables. Twenty-one initial variables were reduced to sixteen and classified into five main factors: Innovative Vision and Strategy, Collaborative and Supportive Environment, Digital and Technology Integration, Motivation and Performance, and Creative and Critical Thinking. The findings present an integrated framework that connects leadership vision, collaboration, technology, motivation, and creativity. The framework may serve as a reference or provide useful ideas for future research and practice in higher education leadership. Although the study is limited by its small sample size and qualitative approach, it offers a starting point for further exploration and model development.*

Keywords: Innovative Leadership, Higher Education, Private Universities, University Administrators, China

Introduction

The rapid development of science, technology, and industry in the 21st century has ushered the world into a new digital-intelligent era characterized by human-machine collaboration, cross-border integration, co-creation, and shared development (Zhuang, Yang, & Huang, 2020). Digital technologies have become deeply embedded in all dimensions of human society, transforming communication, education, work, and leadership. These shifts pose both opportunities and challenges for educational institutions, especially universities, which are highly sensitive to external technological and policy changes (Zhu & Hu, 2022). In this increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment, traditional leadership models are no longer adequate (Lu, Tubsree, & Intayot, 2018). Leaders must now embrace innovative leadership, which refers to the ability to foster experimentation, empower organizational learning, and lead transformation in dynamic contexts (Phromsri, 2018; Musaigwa & Misheck, 2023). Innovative leadership is not only a response to disruption but also a proactive approach

to promoting institutional sustainability and competitiveness in the knowledge economy (Chen & Yin, 2019; Tribhopsakul & Pichyangkru, 2021).

In China, the higher education sector is undergoing a digital transformation aligned with national strategic goals. Policies have emphasized technological innovation, digital infrastructure development, and smart campuses as engines of educational reform (Sziegat, 2025). The Chinese government's investment in R&D reached 3.613 trillion yuan in 2024, indicating a strong commitment to technological leadership (Yu, 2025). Private universities, which account for a significant portion of China's higher education system with over 9 million students enrolled (Liu, 2024) are central to this transformation.

Private universities in Hainan Province play a vital role in supporting the region's educational development, particularly under the strategic framework of the Hainan Free Trade Port initiative. These universities collectively emphasize applied education, industry-academic collaboration, and innovation-oriented talent development. However, amid national digital transformation efforts and growing expectations for educational quality, private universities in Hainan are facing mounting challenges.

Literature Review

Leadership and Innovative Leadership

Leadership involves influencing individuals or groups to achieve common goals. Cai, Murad, Ashraf, and Wang (2024) describe leadership as the ability to motivate and persuade others, fostering morale and satisfaction in achieving institutional objectives. Similarly, emphasizes leadership as a process that mobilizes group energy toward organizational success, while Wechanalak (2021) highlights the leader's capacity to build trust and collaboration through effective influence. These perspectives collectively underscore leadership as a relational and motivational process rather than a purely authoritative role.

In contrast, innovative leadership expands the traditional understanding of leadership by emphasizing creativity, transformation, and proactive change. Couros (2016) defines innovative leadership as the ability to inspire new and better ideas, promoting positive outcomes. Loader (2016) further argues that innovative leaders foster a culture of experimentation, strategic risk-taking, and continuous learning, which are essential for institutional renewal. Thummatasananon (2023) stresses its importance in navigating the complexities of the digital age, particularly in educational settings. Similarly, Wechanalak (2021) and Chaemchoi (2019) observe that innovative leaders integrate technology, nurture creativity, and encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration.

In the context of Hainan's private universities, innovative leadership represents the capacity of administrators to translate national policies on digital transformation into practical institutional strategies. It requires leaders to rethink conventional administrative routines, empower faculty innovation. However, existing studies with limited attention to local cultural, economic, and institutional factors. This shows the need for a context-specific framework that reflects the realities of private higher education in Hainan Province.

University Administrators in Higher Education

University administrators play a pivotal role in shaping institutional direction, academic quality, and organizational culture. Their leadership decisions: ranging from

resource allocation to faculty development, directly influence the effectiveness of teaching and learning environments (Zhang & Espiritu, 2023). Saharudin (2021) views administrators as facilitators and coordinators who manage institutional growth and ensure quality assurance. Babatola (2022) distinguishes between administrative and academic leadership, noting that administrators often serve dual functions as educators and strategic decision-makers. Zhang and Espiritu (2023) further emphasize that administrators must support faculty innovation, coordinate cross-departmental collaboration, and sustain professional development.

As globalization and digitalization intensify, administrators are increasingly expected to demonstrate technological proficiency and openness to interdisciplinary approaches (Worapongpat, 2024). Yet, these expectations often exceed the resources and training available in private institutions. In Hainan's private universities, many administrators must simultaneously manage limited budgets, comply with government regulations, and foster innovation, challenges that demand both managerial competence and visionary leadership.

Objectives

Private universities in Hainan Province face persistent challenges, including a lack of innovative vision and strategic leadership, weak collaboration and co-construction mechanisms, limited digitally skilled talent, and inadequate institutional support for faculty development (Hainan Provincial Government, 2021; Li, 2025; Yan & Zhou, 2018; Wang, 2023). These issues constrain their capacity to align with national digital transformation and educational reform goals.

Innovative leadership model for private university administrators in Hainan Province focuses on 9 private universities: University of Sanya, Haikou University of Economics, Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Sanya City College, Hainan Technology and Business College, Sanya Aviation and Tourism College, Sanya Institute of Technology, Hospitality Institute of Sanya, and Hainan Health Management College. While innovative leadership has been recognized as essential in higher education (Ma, 2024; Subruangthong, 2023; Tongrugjun, Chullasap, & Atiwithayaporn, 2023), few context-specific frameworks explain how it functions and develops within Hainan's private universities. Therefore, this study aims to:

Synthesize key variables of innovative leadership from existing literature and insights gathered from administrators and faculty members of Hainan's private universities; Develop a conceptual framework representing the dimensions of innovative leadership applicable to this context.

Methodology

Innovative leadership model for private university administrators in Hainan Province employs a qualitative exploratory design to develop a conceptual framework of innovative leadership for administrators of private universities in Hainan Province, China. Data were collected from 2 sources: documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews.

The documentary data consisted of 15 academic and policy sources published between 2014 and 2025, focusing on innovative leadership. Key references included studies by Phakamach et al. (2025), Chanprasert et al. (2023), Graham-Leviss (2016), and

the European University Association (2023), among others. These documents were reviewed to identify recurring concepts and variables related to innovative leadership. Through manual coding, 21 preliminary variables were extracted and categorized according to frequency and conceptual similarity.

To validate and refine these findings, interviews were conducted with 9 key informants, including 3 administrators and 6 faculty members from private universities in Hainan Province. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their administrative or academic experience and active involvement in institutional innovation. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically to capture recurring ideas about the essential components of innovative leadership. The findings from both data sources were compared and synthesized to ensure conceptual consistency. The frequency of each variable was also analyzed. Innovative Vision was the most frequently mentioned variable, appearing 12 times, while Observant was the least frequent, mentioned only once. overlapping and low-frequency variables were eliminated, and similar concepts were merged, variables mentioned 4 times and more were retained for further synthesis. resulting in 16 key variables organized into 5 factors representing the component of innovative leadership. Excel software was used to assist with frequency tabulation and clustering. All participant information was kept confidential, and ethical approval was obtained to ensure compliance with research standards and the protection of individual rights.

Discussion

The results of Innovative leadership model for private university administrators in Hainan Province, China reveal 5 factors that characterize innovative leadership among administrators of private universities in Hainan Province, China. These factors emerged from the synthesis of documentary and interview data and represent the integration of theoretical concepts with practical insights from university leaders. The 5 dimensions: Innovative Vision and Strategy, Collaborative and Supportive Environment, Digital and Technology Integration, Motivation and Performance, and Creative and Critical Thinking, reflect how innovative leadership manifests in institutional transformation within regional higher education.

Factor 1 Innovative Vision and Strategy. This factor emphasizes administrators' capacity to articulate and implement a clear innovation-oriented vision. It comprises 3 variables: Innovative Vision, Innovative Strategies, and Innovative Ability, which together describe a forward-looking and adaptable leadership approach (Tongrugjun et al., 2023; Phakamach, Panjarattanakorn, & Seenonlee, 2025). Administrators who align innovation goals with institutional strategies are more capable of guiding universities through digital and organizational transformation.

Factor 2 Collaborative and Supportive Environment. This factor includes Teamwork and Collaboration, Team Building, and Provide Resource Support. Teamwork and Collaboration emphasize shared goals and mutual support among staff (Ariratana, Keow Ngang, & Sirisooksilp, 2019), while Team Building involves creating participatory and diverse teams that stimulate creative thinking (Couros, 2014). Provide Resource Support refers to ensuring adequate material and emotional resources for innovative activities (European University Association, 2023; Chu & Suo, 2024). Together, these

elements describe how a collaborative and well-resourced environment empowers faculty and administrators to engage collectively in institutional innovation.

Factor 3 Digital and Technology Integration. This factor consists of 4 variables: Technology Use, Models Learning, Innovation Network, and Communication and Openness. Technology Use refers to leveraging digital infrastructure to enhance efficiency and innovation (Subruangthong, 2023). Models Learning emphasizes demonstrating continuous learning behaviors that inspire faculty adaptation to new tools (Graham-Leviss, 2016). Innovation Network focuses on building partnerships within and across institutions to foster shared technological advancement (Jin, 2023). Communication and Openness highlight transparent and inclusive dialogue that supports digital collaboration (Horth & Buchner, 2014). Together, these dimensions reflect how technological integration reinforces innovative capacity across organizational systems.

Factor 4 Motivation and Performance. This factor highlights administrators' ability to inspire faculty and staff toward innovative goals through motivation, recognition, and role modeling. It consists of three variables: Personality and Role Performance, Rewards and Benefits, and Risk Management. Personality and Role Performance reflect the leader's exemplary traits and adaptability that stimulate others to pursue improvement (Phakamach et al., 2025). Rewards and Benefits focus on recognizing and incentivizing contributions that advance institutional innovation (Chanprasert, Prayuth, & Chalard, 2023). Risk Management involves encouraging experimentation and learning from setbacks as part of continuous improvement (Ariratana et al., 2019).

Factor 5 Creative and Critical Thinking. This factor emphasizes administrators' capacity to cultivate creativity and analytical reflection in institutional development. It comprises 3 variables: Creative Thinking, Innovative Atmosphere, and Team Management. Creative Thinking involves encouraging idea generation and flexible approaches to problem-solving (Jin, 2023). Innovative Atmosphere refers to building a positive environment that supports experimentation and open exchange of ideas (Nampradit et al., 2019). Team Management highlights the importance of coordinating and empowering teams through inclusive and participatory leadership (Horth & Buchner, 2014).

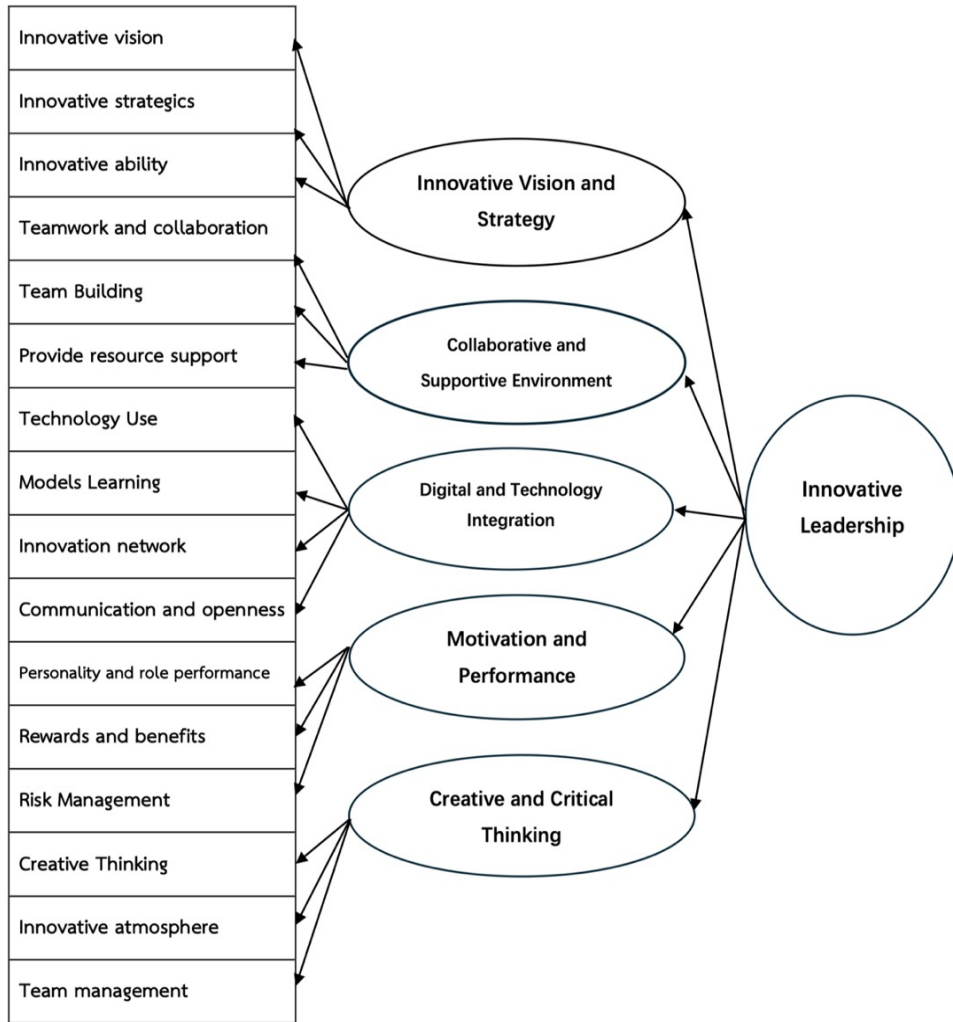


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of innovative leadership for administrators of private universities in Hainan Province.

The 5 factors identified in innovative leadership model for private university administrators in Hainan Province form an integrated framework of innovative leadership for administrators in private universities in Hainan. The framework shows how vision, collaboration, technology, motivation, and creativity work together to enhance innovation in higher education. It combines theoretical perspectives with practical experiences and reflects the current situation of private universities in Hainan.

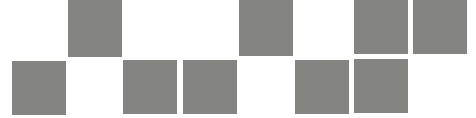
Innovative leadership model for private university administrators in Hainan Province helps explain how innovative leadership appears in universities that are adapting to digital transformation. By analyzing both documents and interviews, the study identifies the main skills and behaviors that enable administrators to lead creative and flexible institutions. The results provide a useful foundation for leadership training and future research in higher education. Future studies can apply this framework in other contexts or use larger samples to confirm its usefulness.

There are also some limitations. The number of interview participants was small, and all were from private universities in Hainan, which limits the diversity of views. In addition, the study used qualitative methods and did not include statistical testing. Future research should include a wider range of institutions and use quantitative or mixed methods to verify and expand this framework.

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