

CHANGE LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS, RESISTANCE, AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

Higher education institutions face increasing pressures to adapt to technological development, policy reforms, changing stakeholder expectations, and institutional demands. This study examines the role of change leadership in shaping organizational readiness, resistance to change, and institutional transformation in higher education. A qualitative case study approach was employed using semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to change leadership, organizational readiness, resistance, and institutional transformation. The findings indicate that change leadership contributes to institutional transformation through strategic communication, participatory decision-making, organizational support, and continuous guidance. Organizational readiness was strengthened when institutional members understood the need for change and perceived adequate resources and leadership support. Resistance emerged primarily through uncertainty, workload concerns, reluctance to abandon established practices, and differences in perceptions of change. However, resistance also provided valuable feedback for improving communication, training, and implementation strategies. Institutional transformation was reflected in digital adaptation, procedural changes, academic innovation, and organizational learning. The study concludes that institutional transformation is an iterative process shaped by the interaction between leadership, organizational readiness, and organizational responses to

change. Higher education institutions therefore need to combine strategic leadership with participation, capacity building, and continuous organizational learning to sustain institutional transformation.

Keywords: *change leadership; organizational readiness; resistance to change; institutional transformation; higher education.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are operating in an increasingly complex environment characterized by technological development, changing student expectations, policy reforms, global competition, and growing demands for institutional accountability. These pressures require universities to continuously adapt their structures, academic practices, governance systems, and organizational capabilities. Recent research shows that organizational change in higher education has become an increasingly important field because universities are expected not only to respond to external pressures but also to develop sustainable capacities for continuous transformation (Alzahmi et al., 2025). In this context, institutional transformation cannot be understood simply as the implementation of new programs or technologies; it involves changes in organizational structures, cultures, practices, and human behavior.

One of the critical factors determining the success of organizational transformation is organizational readiness for change. Readiness reflects the extent to which organizational members perceive change as necessary, feasible, and supported by the institution. In higher education, readiness is particularly important because universities consist of diverse professional groups with different responsibilities, interests, values, and levels of autonomy. Recent evidence from higher education digital transformation indicates that perceptions of organizational readiness are influenced by leadership support, organizational context, characteristics of the change itself, and the conditions of the individuals affected by change (Sustainability, 2025). Consequently, institutional transformation requires more than strategic planning; it requires the development of organizational conditions that enable members to understand, accept, and participate in change.

At the same time, resistance to change remains a persistent challenge in higher education. Resistance may emerge through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses, including skepticism, uncertainty, disengagement, reluctance to adopt new practices, or active opposition. A systematic review by Khaw et al. (2022) demonstrates that organizational change frequently generates diverse reactions among organizational members and that these reactions should be understood as an important component of the change process rather than simply as an obstacle. In the Indonesian higher education context, recent evidence also demonstrates that resistance among academics can be influenced by both individual and contextual factors, including career advancement, job security,

research flexibility, trust, and the availability of information about organizational change (Yumarnia et al., 2025). This suggests that resistance should be examined within the broader organizational environment in which change takes place.

Within this context, change leadership becomes particularly important. Change leadership refers to leadership practices that create direction, communicate the rationale for change, mobilize organizational members, facilitate participation, and build the conditions necessary for adaptation. Recent systematic research on leadership and organizational change in education highlights the importance of leadership in shaping change preparedness, stakeholder engagement, communication, institutional support, and resource allocation (Jamal et al., 2026). In higher education, effective change leadership therefore involves not only making strategic decisions but also managing the human and organizational dimensions of transformation.

The relationship between leadership and resistance is especially significant. Change initiatives may encounter stronger resistance when organizational members receive insufficient information, perceive limited participation, or lack confidence in institutional support. Conversely, transparent communication, participation, trust, and appropriate leadership support can create more favorable conditions for organizational engagement. Research on the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) curriculum in Indonesian higher education, for example, found that change information was associated with lower resistance and that change leadership played a moderating role in this relationship (Mujib et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the view that leadership can influence not only the direction of institutional transformation but also how organizational members interpret and respond to change.

The challenges become more complex when transformation involves digitalization and institutional restructuring. Digital transformation requires universities to modify established workflows, competencies, governance mechanisms, and organizational cultures. A recent systematic review identifies ineffective leadership, inadequate management support, and cultural and behavioral barriers as important challenges to digital transformation in higher education (Alzahmi et al., 2025). Similarly, research in Indonesian universities demonstrates that digital transformation involves interconnected dimensions of leadership, e-culture, change management, and organizational development rather than technology adoption alone (Anggoro et al., 2023). Thus, institutional

transformation requires leadership capable of integrating strategic objectives with organizational readiness and human responses to change.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to organizational change in higher education, an important research gap remains. Existing studies frequently examine leadership, organizational readiness, resistance, or digital transformation as separate dimensions, while fewer studies conceptualize these elements as interconnected components of a broader institutional transformation process. Recent literature mapping also indicates that research on organizational change in higher education remains fragmented across multiple themes and contexts (Alzahmi et al., 2025). Furthermore, the Indonesian higher education context presents distinctive institutional, regulatory, and cultural conditions that warrant further empirical investigation.

Therefore, this study examines change leadership in higher education by focusing on the relationship between organizational readiness, resistance to change, and institutional transformation. The study seeks to understand how leadership practices shape organizational preparedness, how organizational members respond to change, and how these processes influence institutional transformation. By connecting leadership, readiness, and resistance within a single analytical framework, the study aims to contribute to a more integrated understanding of how higher education institutions can manage and sustain organizational change.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Change Leadership in Higher Education

Change leadership refers to the leadership processes through which organizational leaders create direction, communicate the need for change, mobilize organizational members, and facilitate the implementation of new practices. In higher education, change leadership is particularly important because universities are complex professional organizations in which academics and staff possess considerable autonomy and may respond differently to institutional initiatives. Consequently, successful transformation requires leadership that combines strategic direction with communication, participation, trust, and organizational support.

Recent research emphasizes that leadership is an important determinant of organizational change because leaders influence how employees understand and respond to change. In the context of higher education, change leadership involves

more than formal decision-making; it includes creating shared understanding, coordinating resources, addressing concerns, and building commitment among stakeholders. Mujib et al. (2023), for example, found that change leadership was relevant to reducing resistance during the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) curriculum in Indonesian higher education institutions. Similarly, research on digital university transformation in Indonesia highlights the importance of leadership in coordinating technological, organizational, and cultural changes (Anggoro et al., 2023). Thus, change leadership can be understood as a strategic and relational capability that connects institutional objectives with the responses and participation of organizational members. Effective change leadership provides not only a vision for transformation but also the organizational conditions necessary for members to engage with change.

Organizational Readiness for Change

Organizational readiness for change refers to the extent to which an organization and its members are prepared and willing to implement a particular change. Readiness involves perceptions regarding the necessity of change, the organization's capacity to implement it, available resources, leadership support, and the confidence of organizational members in their ability to undertake new practices. In higher education, readiness is particularly significant because institutional change frequently affects multiple dimensions simultaneously, including governance, curriculum, technology, academic administration, professional roles, and organizational culture. A university may have a formally developed transformation strategy but still experience difficulties when organizational members do not perceive the change as necessary or believe that sufficient resources and support are unavailable.

Readiness should therefore be viewed as a multidimensional organizational condition rather than merely an individual's willingness to accept change. Leadership communication, participation, institutional support, professional development, and resource availability can contribute to stronger readiness. In digital transformation, for example, organizational readiness is influenced by leadership, organizational characteristics, the nature of the transformation, and individual conditions (Alzahmi et al., 2025). From this perspective, organizational readiness represents an important bridge between the formulation of institutional change and its actual implementation. High readiness does not guarantee

successful transformation, but insufficient readiness can make implementation considerably more difficult.

Resistance to Organizational Change

Resistance to change is commonly associated with negative reactions to organizational transformation. However, contemporary research suggests that resistance is more appropriately understood as a multidimensional response that may include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions. Khaw et al. (2022), through a systematic review, demonstrate that organizational members may respond to change through uncertainty, skepticism, anxiety, disengagement, or behavioral opposition. In higher education, resistance may arise because institutional change affects professional autonomy, established routines, workloads, career expectations, resource allocation, and perceptions of organizational fairness. Academic staff may therefore interpret the same change initiative differently depending on their experiences, interests, trust in leadership, and understanding of the proposed transformation.

Resistance should consequently not be treated solely as a problem to be eliminated. It can also provide information about organizational concerns, implementation weaknesses, communication gaps, or unintended consequences of change. From a change leadership perspective, understanding resistance enables leaders to identify barriers and develop more responsive strategies for institutional transformation. In the Indonesian higher education context, Mujib et al. (2023) demonstrated that communication concerning organizational change and change leadership were relevant to reducing resistance during curriculum transformation. This suggests that resistance is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by the organizational processes through which change is communicated and managed.

Institutional Transformation in Higher Education

Institutional transformation refers to substantial and sustained changes in the structures, processes, culture, capabilities, and practices of an organization. In higher education, transformation may involve curriculum reform, digitalization, new governance arrangements, organizational restructuring, changes in academic services, and the development of new institutional capabilities. Institutional transformation differs from incremental organizational adjustment because it involves changes that can reshape how an institution operates and creates value

for its stakeholders. Alzahmi et al. (2025) indicate that organizational change in higher education encompasses diverse themes associated with leadership, organizational development, technology, culture, and institutional adaptation. This indicates that transformation should be approached as a systemic process rather than as the implementation of an isolated program.

Digital transformation provides an important example. Anggoro et al. (2023) demonstrate that digital transformation in Indonesian universities involves not only technological implementation but also leadership, organizational culture, and change management. Similarly, Alenezi (2021) argues that digital transformation in higher education requires institutions to reconsider organizational structures, pedagogical practices, and institutional capabilities. Therefore, institutional transformation requires alignment between strategic objectives, organizational readiness, human resources, leadership, and organizational culture. Without such alignment, transformation initiatives may remain fragmented or fail to produce sustainable institutional change.

Relationship Between Change Leadership, Readiness, and Resistance

The literature suggests that change leadership, organizational readiness, and resistance are closely interconnected. Leadership can influence readiness by communicating the rationale for change, providing resources, involving organizational members, and building confidence in the institution's capacity to implement transformation. At the same time, leadership can influence resistance by addressing uncertainty, facilitating participation, and creating opportunities for dialogue.

Organizational readiness can subsequently shape how members respond to change. When organizational members perceive that change is necessary, feasible, and adequately supported, they may be more prepared to participate in implementation. Conversely, insufficient readiness may intensify uncertainty and resistance. Resistance itself can provide feedback regarding the adequacy of leadership and organizational preparation.

Change Leadership and Institutional Transformation

Change leadership ultimately becomes meaningful when it contributes to sustainable institutional transformation. Leaders must translate strategic visions into organizational practices while maintaining alignment between institutional objectives and the needs of organizational members. This requires continuous

communication, stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, monitoring, and organizational learning. In higher education, transformation is particularly dependent on collective participation because academics and professional staff are not simply recipients of institutional policies. They are active participants in teaching, research, community engagement, administration, and knowledge production. Consequently, sustainable transformation requires leaders to create an environment in which organizational members can understand, negotiate, and contribute to change. The literature therefore positions change leadership as an enabling mechanism through which institutional transformation can be initiated and sustained. Organizational readiness provides the conditions for implementation, while resistance represents both a potential barrier and a source of organizational feedback. The interaction among these dimensions determines how institutional change is experienced and implemented.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine change leadership, organizational readiness, resistance to change, and institutional transformation in higher education. The study was conducted at a higher education institution in Indonesia undergoing academic, administrative, technological, and organizational changes. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and included institutional leaders, academic or administrative unit heads, lecturers, and administrative staff with direct experience of the change processes.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Interviews explored participants' experiences and perceptions of change leadership, organizational readiness, resistance, and institutional transformation. Observations focused on leadership practices, organizational interactions, communication, and change implementation, while relevant institutional policies, strategic plans, regulations, curriculum documents, meeting minutes, and reports were analyzed to complement the primary data.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through the stages of familiarization, coding, categorization, theme development, review, and interpretation. The analysis identified patterns across participants and data sources while considering differences in perspectives among institutional leaders, lecturers, and administrative staff. The trustworthiness of the findings was

enhanced through data and source triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail, supporting credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Ethical principles were also maintained through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and protection of participant and institutional identities.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Results

The analysis identified four interconnected themes related to change leadership, organizational readiness, resistance to change, and institutional transformation. The findings indicate that institutional transformation was not experienced as a linear process but as a dynamic interaction between leadership practices, organizational conditions, and individual responses.

Change Leadership

The findings indicate that leadership played an important role in establishing direction and coordinating institutional change. Leaders communicated the rationale for organizational changes, provided guidance to academic and administrative units, and encouraged members to participate in implementation. Three prominent leadership practices emerged: strategic communication, participatory decision-making, and leadership support. Leaders used meetings and direct communication to explain changes, clarify institutional expectations, and address concerns. Participation in decision-making was also encouraged, particularly when changes affected academic and administrative practices. Leadership support was particularly visible when organizational members encountered difficulties in implementing new procedures or technologies. Rather than treating implementation problems solely as individual failures, leaders tended to approach them as organizational issues requiring discussion, additional guidance, and adjustment.

Organizational Readiness for Change

Organizational readiness was reflected in members' awareness of the need for change, perceived institutional support, availability of resources, and confidence in implementing new practices. The findings suggest that readiness was stronger when organizational members understood the reasons for change

and perceived that institutional leaders were committed to supporting implementation. However, readiness was not uniform across organizational units or individuals. Differences were associated with previous experience, familiarity with new systems, perceived workload, and confidence in adapting to new procedures. Members who had greater exposure to previous institutional changes tended to demonstrate greater familiarity with adaptation processes, while those with limited experience required more guidance and support. The results therefore suggest that organizational readiness should be understood as a developing organizational condition rather than a fixed characteristic. Communication, training, resource provision, and leadership support contributed to strengthening readiness during the implementation process.

Resistance to Change

Resistance emerged primarily through uncertainty, concerns about workload, reluctance to modify established practices, and differences in perceptions regarding the necessity of change. Rather than taking the form of direct opposition, resistance was more frequently expressed through hesitation, delayed adoption, questions about new procedures, and preferences for previously established practices. The analysis also indicates that resistance was not necessarily permanent. When organizational members received clearer information, opportunities to express concerns, technical assistance, and adequate time for adjustment, some initial resistance gradually decreased. These findings suggest that resistance can function as organizational feedback. Concerns expressed by lecturers and staff identified areas where institutional communication, training, resources, or implementation procedures required improvement.

Institutional Transformation

Institutional transformation was reflected in changes in academic and administrative practices, increased use of digital systems, adjustments to organizational procedures, and the development of new approaches to institutional management. The transformation process was supported by organizational learning, collaboration, and continuous adaptation. Four forms of transformation were particularly evident: digital adaptation, procedural adjustment, academic innovation, and organizational learning. Digital adaptation involved increased use of information systems and technology-supported administrative and academic processes. Procedural adjustment occurred when

existing workflows were modified to accommodate new institutional requirements. Academic innovation was reflected in efforts to improve teaching, assessment, curriculum implementation, and student services. At the organizational level, experiences gained during implementation were increasingly used as references for subsequent improvements.

The four themes demonstrate a strong interrelationship rather than independent organizational processes.

Table 1. the Interrelationship of four themes

Dimension	Main Finding	Contribution to Transformation
Change Leadership	Communication, participation, guidance, and support	Creates direction and mobilizes organizational members
Organizational Readiness	Awareness, commitment, resources, and confidence	Establishes capacity for implementation
Resistance to Change	Uncertainty, hesitation, workload concerns, and reluctance	Reveals organizational barriers and areas requiring intervention
Institutional Transformation	Digitalization, procedural change, innovation, and organizational learning	Represents the outcomes of the change process

The findings indicate that change leadership strengthened organizational readiness by providing direction, communication, and support. Greater readiness facilitated engagement with institutional changes, while resistance highlighted areas requiring further communication, training, and organizational adjustment. Consequently, institutional transformation developed through an iterative process in which leadership responses, organizational readiness, and resistance continuously influenced implementation.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that institutional transformation in higher education is closely associated with the interaction between change leadership,

organizational readiness, and resistance to change. Rather than functioning as independent factors, these dimensions form a dynamic process through which institutional members interpret, negotiate, and implement organizational change.

The findings indicate that change leadership plays a central role in creating direction and mobilizing organizational members. Communication, participatory decision-making, leadership support, and problem-solving were particularly important in facilitating institutional change. This finding is consistent with research showing that higher education transformation requires leadership capable of coordinating organizational, cultural, and technological dimensions of change (Anggoro et al., 2023).

Recent research further emphasizes that higher education institutions may differ substantially in their readiness for change and that leadership is important in moving institutions from general willingness toward genuine readiness. Leaders need to articulate a clear vision, engage stakeholders, and address organizational barriers rather than relying solely on formal policies (Montgomery et al., 2025).

The findings therefore suggest that change leadership should not be reduced to the authority to introduce institutional policies. Its more significant function is to create the conditions under which organizational members understand the purpose of change and feel supported in implementing it. In this sense, leadership operates as a bridge between institutional strategy and organizational action.

The results indicate that organizational readiness develops when institutional members understand the need for change, perceive sufficient support, and have confidence in their ability to implement new practices. This supports recent research demonstrating that readiness in higher education involves more than willingness to change. Institutions may recognize the importance of transformation while remaining insufficiently prepared in terms of resources, culture, leadership, processes, and human capacity (Montgomery et al., 2025). The findings also indicate that readiness is not uniform across organizational members. Differences in previous experience, technological familiarity, workload, and confidence can influence how individuals respond to institutional initiatives. This is consistent with recent evidence from higher education digital transformation showing that perceived organizational change readiness is influenced by leadership support, organizational context, characteristics of the change, and

characteristics of the change targets (Sustainability, 2025). Therefore, institutional readiness should be treated as a process that can be strengthened through communication, training, resource allocation, participation, and continuous organizational learning. Readiness is not simply a prerequisite for transformation; it can also develop through the implementation process itself.

Resistance emerged in the form of uncertainty, concerns about workload, reluctance to abandon established practices, and hesitation toward new procedures. These findings are consistent with Khaw et al. (2022), who demonstrate that reactions to organizational change may involve cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Importantly, the findings suggest that resistance should not automatically be interpreted as rejection of institutional transformation. Resistance can reveal weaknesses in communication, inadequate preparation, insufficient resources, or concerns about how change affects professional roles. When leaders provide information, opportunities for dialogue, technical assistance, and sufficient adjustment time, resistance may become less pronounced.

This interpretation is also supported by research on the implementation of the MBKM curriculum in Indonesian higher education. Mujib et al. (2023) found that change information and change-oriented leadership were relevant to reducing resistance during institutional change. Thus, resistance can serve as a diagnostic mechanism through which leaders identify aspects of change that require clarification, negotiation, or additional support.

One of the important findings of this study is that leadership, readiness, and resistance should not be understood through a simple linear model. Change leadership can strengthen readiness, but leadership responses may also be influenced by resistance expressed during implementation. Similarly, increased readiness may reduce uncertainty and facilitate participation, while resistance may indicate areas where readiness remains inadequate. This dynamic relationship is particularly relevant to higher education because universities are complex institutions with different professional groups, organizational units, and levels of autonomy. Recent research describes higher education institutions as having potentially different internal states of willingness and readiness, meaning that some units may be prepared for change while others remain resistant or only partially prepared. The implication is that institutional leaders should avoid

assuming that a single change strategy will produce the same response across the institution. Change strategies need to consider differences in organizational units, professional roles, previous experiences, and levels of readiness.

The findings show that institutional transformation was reflected in digital adaptation, procedural changes, academic innovation, and organizational learning. These changes demonstrate that transformation extends beyond the introduction of new technologies or policies. It involves changes in organizational routines, capabilities, relationships, and ways of working. This interpretation is consistent with research on Indonesian public universities, which shows that institutional transformation requires effective leadership and change-management strategies across complex organizational environments. A recent study involving 125 Indonesian public universities specifically examined leadership and change management in relation to transformation toward world-class university status. The findings also reinforce the argument that sustainable transformation requires institutions to develop internal capacity rather than simply adopt externally defined models. Transformation becomes more sustainable when organizational members participate in the process, learn from implementation experiences, and use those experiences to improve subsequent practices.

Theoretically, this study contributes an integrated perspective by connecting change leadership, organizational readiness, resistance, and institutional transformation within a single analytical framework. The findings suggest that institutional transformation is best understood as an iterative organizational process rather than a linear sequence from policy implementation to organizational outcomes.

Practically, higher education leaders should strengthen communication about the rationale and expected outcomes of change, involve relevant stakeholders in implementation, assess organizational readiness before major initiatives, and treat resistance as a source of information. Regular readiness assessments, professional development, adequate resources, participatory decision-making, and structured feedback mechanisms can help institutions respond more effectively to organizational change.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that institutional transformation in higher education is shaped by the interaction of change leadership, organizational readiness, and resistance to change. Effective leadership provides direction, communication, participation, and support, thereby strengthening organizational readiness. Meanwhile, resistance reflects concerns and implementation barriers that can provide valuable feedback for improving change strategies. Institutional transformation consequently emerges as an iterative process involving organizational learning, adaptation, innovation, and continuous improvement rather than simply the implementation of new policies or technologies.

Higher education leaders should strengthen transparent communication, participatory decision-making, and continuous support throughout the change process. Institutions should assess organizational readiness before implementing major changes and provide adequate training, resources, and opportunities for feedback. Resistance should be treated as constructive organizational feedback rather than merely an obstacle. Future research should examine these relationships across different higher education institutions using comparative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches.

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