

Managerial Competencies to Enhance Iran's Higher Education Performance (A Thematic Analysis)

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores managerial competencies to enhance higher education (HE) performance in Iran, a topic that has warranted focused attention. The authors conducted a qualitative review of articles that focus on managerial competencies in HE published between 2013 and 2023. We employed purposive sampling, and 134 titles selected. Thematic analysis was conducted on these articles, resulting in the identification of 100 initial items. We evaluated the content validity of these themes using both qualitative methods (based on opinions from 15 management experts) and quantitative methods (Content Validity Ratio (CVR)), and estimated reliability at 0.85 using the Holsti coefficient. Following that, a thematic network was constructed, comprising 3 global themes ('Excellence-driven,' 'Trailblazer,' 'Value Creator'), 9 organizing themes, and 29 basic themes. Managerial competencies are crucial to instill a culture of continuous improvement, innovation, and strategic value creation within HE. By emphasizing these global themes, leaders can drive excellence, pioneer transformative initiatives, and foster a dynamic environment that prioritizes quality education and societal impact, ultimately elevating the overall performance and reputation of higher education in Iran.

1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, the emergence of new generations of universities, characterized by their innovative approaches and adaptive structures, underscores the critical role of competencies in effective management. As these institutions grapple with intricate challenges and seize opportunities, the competence of their leaders emerges as a linchpin for steering strategic initiatives, fostering collaboration, and ensuring sustainable growth [1]. Competency is a multifaceted concept that has been studied and theorized by various scholars and researchers. Competency comprises the merger of knowledge, skills, and attitudes within an individual, enabling effective performance within a job or specific role as per standard expectations. These competencies not only serve as benchmarks for employee performance but also act as guiding principles for personal development. HR competencies can be categorized into two main types: visible competencies like knowledge and skills, and invisible competencies, also known as hidden competencies, which encompass aspects such as self-concept, traits, and motives, all falling under the umbrella of attitude variables [3]. In the context of strategic management, Hamel and Prahalad introduced the concept of core competencies, which are unique capabilities that enable the HE to differentiate itself and achieve competitive advantage [4]. Also, Ling's theory [5] involves identifying and mapping competencies within an organization to align individual and organizational goals, improve performance, and drive success.

By nurturing a diverse array of competencies, university administrators not only guide their institutions towards success but also cultivate a culture of excellence, innovation, and continual advancement in response to the evolving higher education landscape. Recognized as a competitive advantage amidst anticipated and unforeseen changes, leaders and university managers play a pivotal role in propelling higher education towards its aspirations. To excel in this dynamic environment, it is essential to identify the requisite competencies. Hence, the main goal of this research is to undertake a comprehensive study aimed at pinpointing the core competencies and skills essential for managers in higher education, serving as a driving force in both global and local educational contexts, with a specific focus on Iran's higher education domain.

2. Research Methodology

This practical research conducted thematic analysis of qualitative data [5]. The research environment includes all articles listed in Elsevier, Emerald, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and Springer databases between 2013 and 2023 in the field of managerial competency studies. Through purposive sampling, 134 titles selected. Initially, we transcribed the qualitative data and conducted a coding process and 175 primary items identified. By summarizing and removing similar items, 133 primary themes were extracted, resulting in 29 basic themes after coding and analysis. The content validity of these items was evaluated using both qualitative (15 management experts' opinions) and quantitative (Content Validity Ratio (CVR)) methods. In this way, the experts are requested to specify whether an item is necessary for managerial competencies in a set of items or not. To this end, we requested them to score each item from 1 to 3 with a three-degree range of “not necessary, useful but not essential, essential” respectively. CVR (1) varies between 1 and -1. The higher score indicates further agreement of members of panel on the necessity of an item in an instrument. The formula of content validity ratio is:

$$CVR = \frac{(Ne - \frac{N}{2})}{N/2} \quad (1)$$

in which the Ne is the number of panelists indicating "essential" and N is the total number of panelists. The numeric value of CVR is determined by Lawshe Table [6]. For example, in our study that is number of panelists 15 members, if CVR is bigger than 0.49, the item in the instrument with an acceptable level of significance will be accepted. Therefore 33 items were eliminated because their value was lower than 0.49. As a result, the number of items decreased from 133 to 100 primary items. And their reliability estimated 0.85 through the Holsti coefficient (2) that showed high reliability of items:

$$PAO = \frac{2M}{(n1+n2)} \quad (2)$$

$$PAO = \frac{2*100}{(133+100)} = 0.85 \quad (3)$$

M is the number of two coders' consensus decisions, and n1 and n2 are numbers of decisions coders have made respectively.

Following that, data reproducibility and similar codes identified in the text and analytical units (sentences) then 29 basic themes (Table I) created from that 100 primary items, providing a foundational understanding.

Table I: Basic Themes

No.	Basic Theme	Frequency
1	Systematic Attitude	30
2	Systematic Act-oriented	32
3	Mission-oriented	33
4	Logic-oriented	30
5	Knowledge-oriented	40
6	Cost Management	16
7	Transformational-oriented	49
8	Agile	48
9	Pragmatic	34
10	Progressive Policymakers	14

No.	Basic Theme	Frequency
11	Networker	32
12	Strategist	29
13	Standards-oriented	28
14	Insight-oriented	22
15	3 rd millennium literate	18
16	Stability-oriented	16
17	Action Planner	47
18	Supervisor and Auditor	28
19	Active Decision Maker	30
20	Resourceful Problem-solving	56
21	Dynamic Learner	90
22	Innovator	48
23	Focused on Internal Stakeholders	42
24	Focused on External Stakeholders	50
25	Competition-oriented	22
26	Moral Leader	32
27	Role-Creator	48
28	Culture-oriented	26
29	Collaborative Leader	40

At the third level, related basic themes combined into 9 larger, more comprehensive *organizing themes* for a broader perspective, as follows:

- 1- The organizing theme of a “*Systems thinker*” is assessed through two basic themes: 'systematic attitude,' consisting of 4 items, and 'systematic act-oriented,' also comprising 4 items (Table II)

Table II: The basic themes and their Items related to “systems thinker” organizing theme

Basic Themes	Items	
Systematic attitude	1	Having a comprehensive and long-term vision
	2	Identifying and managing the impacts of governments on the university
	3	Understanding the direct and indirect effects of interactions with other universities and organizations
	4	Understanding behaviors in complex systems, such as priorities, causal relationships, movement barriers, and critical points.
Systematic act-oriented	5	Establishing coordination for internal and international collaborations to analyze complex systems in higher education.
	6	Embracing and implementing "reengineering" in processes for the continuous improvement of system quality.
	7	Adapting internal diversities and complexities of the university to align with external environmental complexities.
	8	Steering the university in various functions (e.g., entrepreneurship, university commercialization...)."

2- The organizing theme of 'Wise Management' is assessed through four basic themes: 'Mission-oriented' with 4 items, 'Logic-oriented' with 4 items, 'Knowledge-oriented' with 3 items, and 'Cost Management' with 3 items (Table III)

Table III: The basic themes and their Items related to “wise management” organizing theme

Basic Themes	Items	
Mission-oriented	1	Anticipating the future missions and responsibilities of the University
	2	Creating new values and beliefs and investing in them.
	3	Believing in the role of higher education in economic, social, and cultural transformations.
	4	Adopting a multidisciplinary perspective encompassing government, business, and civil society to reform the university system.
Logic-oriented	5	Striking a reasonable balance between rationality and emotion, and avoiding hasty judgments.
	6	Fostering collective discipline at the university through self-discipline and cultivating discipline-oriented behaviors.
	7	Ensuring individual and organizational benefits through adherence to the rule of law.
	8	Avoiding dogmatism in addressing diverse phenomena.
Knowledge-oriented	9	Stressing the importance of knowledge management and information integration to foster knowledge-based activities at the university.
	10	Highlighting the use of data mining for uncovering tacit knowledge and generating new insights.
	11	Prioritizing knowledge and meritocracy based on professional ethics in the appointment and promotion of subordinates.
Cost Management	12	Possessing financial literacy for investment, financial analysis, and return on investment.
	13	Prioritizing the streamlining of administrative processes and the elimination of redundant procedures.
	14	Emphasizing "Target costing" prior to engaging in costly activities and services.

3- The organizing theme of “Change Leader” measured through 3 basic themes which are “Transformational-oriented” with 4 items and “Agile” with 4 items too, and also “Pragmatic” with 3 items (Table IV).

Table IV: The basic themes and their Items related to “Change leader” organizing theme

Basic Themes	Items	
Transformational-oriented	1	Emphasizing the recognition of restrictive barriers within the system.
	2	Being insight-oriented so that subordinates feel purposeful and valued.
	3	Influencing the motivation and performance of subordinates through value-oriented behaviors.
	4	Taking a proactive approach to change rather than reacting passively to changes.
Agile	5	Demonstrating high resilience against unexpected changes.
	6	Highlighting the establishment of a network of "autonomous teams" to facilitate effective changes.
	7	Identifying "Big Data and Information Systems" as the primary catalyst for universities' adaptability.

Basic Themes	Items	
	8	Managing individuals' responses to changes through proactive thinking and building trust
Pragmatic	9	Employing Win-Win negotiation strategies in both formal and informal bilateral interactions.
	10	Continuously evaluating the progress and efficacy of changes
	11	Acknowledging the social responsibility of professional decisions' impact on society.

4- The organizing theme of the 'Futurist' is assessed through 6 basic themes, which include 'Progressive Policymakers' with 4 items, 'Networker' with 3 items, 'Strategist' with 3 items, 'Standards-oriented' with 2 items, 'Insight-oriented' with 3 items, and '3rd millennium literate' with 3 items (Table V).

Table V: The basic themes and their Items related to "Futurist" organizing theme

Basic Themes	Items	
Progressive Policymakers	1	Possessing insight into designing and leading future policies.
	2	Institutionalizing futurism within the policy-making and decision-making systems
	3	Demonstrating flexibility in universities' structures, activities, planning, and policies
	4	Emphasizing policy-making based on sustainable development.
Networker	5	Identifying and investing in internal and external strategic allies.
	6	Establishing an integrated information observatory at the university.
	7	Creating conditions for team-building among stakeholders.
Strategist	8	Paying attention to weak links and potential events when designing future strategies
	9	Utilizing Research and Development in a knowledge-based economy for investment decisions.
	10	Employing scenario planning, reflection, and data analysis tools for predicting the future and decision-making.
Standards-oriented	11	Highlighting international standards of higher education to globalize the university
	12	Developing management standards at a world-class level.
Insight-oriented	13	Understanding the complexities of today's world.
	14	Having insight into "pre-emptive action" in an era of complexity.
	15	Possessing dynamic self-regulation (the ability to adjust behavior based on changing internal and external conditions to achieve goals).
3 rd millennium literate	16	Having media literacy.
	17	Having digital literacy
	18	Demonstrating critical literacy (the ability for open-minded reasoning, interpretation, and decision-making).

- 5- The organizing theme of 'Pioneer Planner' is evaluated through 4 basic themes, including 'Stability-oriented' with 5 items, 'Action Planner' with 3 items, 'Supervisor and Auditor' with 2 items, and 'Active Decision Maker' with 3 items (Table VI).

Table VI: The basic themes and their Items related to “Pioneer Planner” organizing them

Basic Themes	Items	
Stability-oriented	1	Encouraging the commercialization of university research and social services.
	2	Having literacy in environmental sustainability.
	3	Applying metatheories instead of theories
	4	Actively participating in national and regional research projects.
	5	Providing conditions to attract international scientists.
Action Planner	6	Recognizing the importance of operational programs for stakeholders and employees to ensure their implementation.
	7	Emphasizing the realistic alignment of appropriate tools with operational implementation (time, resources, etc.).
	8	Designing coherent operational programs to prevent brain drain and immigration.
Supervisor and Auditor	9	Focusing on individual performance to identify the most talented individuals at the university.
	10	Highlighting "employee performance evaluation based on their active role" in the organizational learning process.
Active Decision Maker	11	Emphasizing the use of external resources to prevent subjectivity in decision-making.
	12	Encouraging free-thinking in group decision-making to avoid the "bandwagon" phenomenon.
	13	Utilizing various decision-making tools, including mathematical models and decision matrices, in accordance with governing principles.

- 6- The organizing theme of 'Problem-oriented' is evaluated through 3 basic themes, including 'Resourceful Problem-solver' with 4 items, 'Dynamic Learner' with 5 items, and 'Innovator' with 3 items (Table VII).

Table VII: The basic themes and their Items related to “Problem-oriented” organizing theme

Basic Themes	Items	
Resourceful Problem-solver	1	Ability to redefine challenges to improve or redesign services.
	2	Utilizing collective wisdom and elite experiences to enhance creative thinking and problem-solving strategies
	3	Addressing and managing the "Dynamic Challenges" faced by the university and stakeholders.
	4	Identifying uncertainties.
Dynamic Learner	5	Capacity to generate knowledge and cultivate a talent pool.
	6	Creating synergy in internal and external collaborations at the university
	7	Enhancing growth and expertise in human resources skills.
	8	Developing university capacity in alignment with scientific and social advancements.
	9	Prioritizing the increase of organizational intelligence to expedite environmental information analysis.

Basic Themes	Items	
Innovator	10	Fostering an innovative spirit.
	11	Encouraging teams to take risks and providing support when errors occur.
	12	Supporting researchers, entrepreneurs, and the founders of knowledge-based companies and research and development centers

- 7- The organizing theme of '*Customer-oriented*' is assessed through 3 basic themes, which include 'Focused on Internal Stakeholders' with 4 items, 'Focused on External Stakeholders' with 3 items, and 'Competition-oriented' with 3 items (Table VIII).

Table VIII: The basic themes and their Items related to “Customer-oriented” organizing theme

Basic Themes	Items	
Focused on Internal Stakeholders	1	Viewing students and faculty as partners in the process of creating knowledge and values to enhance university services.
	2	Recognizing subordinates as stakeholders to work towards a common goal.
	3	Considering the ratio of full-time faculty members to students.
	4	Identifying and prioritizing the gains or losses of internal university stakeholders.
Focused on External Stakeholders	5	Recognizing influential external stakeholders impacted by higher education (positively or negatively, directly or indirectly).
	6	Identifying commercial metrics for effective collaboration outside the university
	7	Encouraging foreign participation and investments in the university.
Competition-oriented	8	Prioritizing customer knowledge management to create a competitive advantage for the university.
	9	Enhancing the university's competitive capacity through a competency-based approach.
	10	Monitoring the capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses of competing organizations and universities (Competitive Intelligence)

- 8- The organizing theme of '*Ethical Empowerment Leader*' is evaluated through 2 basic themes, which include 'Moral Leader' with 4 items and 'Role-Creator' with 3 items (Table IX).

Table IX: The basic themes and their Items related to “Ethical Empowerment Leader” organizing theme

Basic Themes	Items	
Moral Leader	1	Emphasizing ethical standards alongside professionalism.
	2	Avoiding collusive behavior with subordinates when making decisions or taking action.
	3	Enhancing the mental well-being of subordinates at the university through quality working conditions
	4	Possessing high moral intelligence.
Role- Creator	5	Cultivating a sense of justice and commitment to the university among subordinates through fair treatment.
	6	Managing conflicts and disagreements among individuals, groups, and within groups effectively.
	7	Encouraging subordinates to take initiative and practice self-regulation

9- The organizing theme of 'Integrated leader' is evaluated through 2 basic themes, which include 'Culture-oriented' with 4 items and 'Collaborative Leader' with 3 items (Table X).

Table X: The basic themes and their Items related to “Integrated leader” organizing theme

Basic Themes	Items	
Culture-oriented	1	Embracing cultural pluralism in the era of globalization and cultural integration
	2	Preventing organizational blindness
	3	Combating scientific and administrative corruption by upholding ethical principles
	4	Fostering a culture of gender equality at the university
Collaborative Leader	5	Building trust among subordinates to share tacit knowledge
	6	Promoting a team-oriented approach to harness collective insights and intelligence
	7	Emphasizing the enhancement of individuals' diverse skills to advance their career trajectories

Lastly, organizing themes synthesized to form overarching global themes that encapsulated the core managerial competencies which are including of 'Excellence-driven', 'Trailblazer', and 'Value Creator' (Figs 1, Fig 2, Fig 3).

3. Findings

In this research, after reviewing 134 titles of articles, books, and websites and conducting thematic analysis, 100 primary themes with 29 basic themes were identified and then categorized into 9 organizing themes within 3 global themes. In the arrangement of the matrix, the network design of themes as shown in Figs Fig 1Fig 2Fig 3 was utilized.

A. Excellence-driven

The global theme of 'Excellence-driven' encompasses the 'qualities of being a systems thinker, wise manager, and a change leader (Fig 1). Being a 'System Thinker' excels in understanding and optimizing complex systems, fostering collaboration, driving continuous improvement, and strategically navigating internal and external dynamics to enhance university performance and sustainability. Their systematic approach and strategic mindset enable them to identify opportunities, mitigate risks, and lead the university towards excellence and success in a dynamic and interconnected environment. A 'Wise manager' combines a mission-oriented approach with logical reasoning, knowledge management, and sound cost management practices to lead effectively, foster a culture of excellence, and drive organizational success in a dynamic and competitive environment; and a 'Change Leader' combines transformational orientation, agility, and pragmatism to effectively lead organizational change initiatives. By recognizing barriers, fostering insight and motivation, promoting resilience and adaptability, and employing pragmatic strategies, the change leader navigates complex change processes with a focus on positive outcomes, stakeholder engagement, and long-term success.

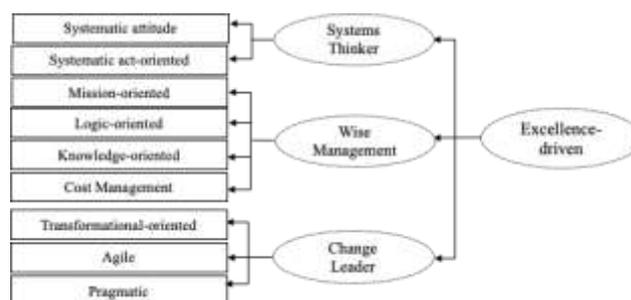


Fig 1: “Excellence- driven” global theme

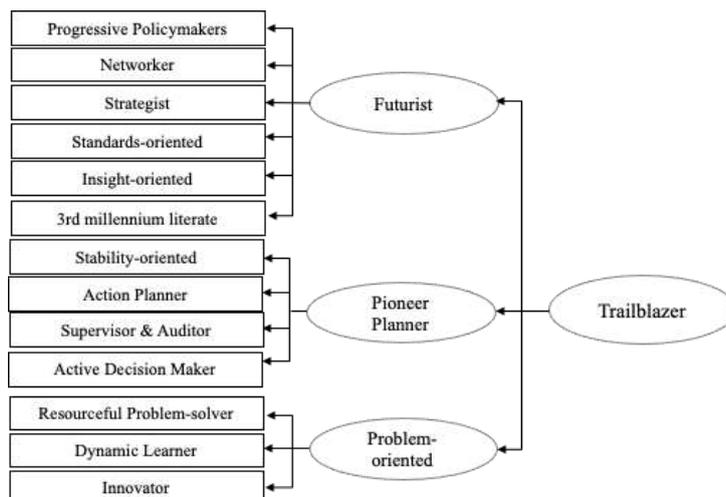


Fig 2: “Trailblazer” global theme

B. Trailblazer

The global theme of ‘Trailblazer’ includes of being futurist, pioneer planner and problem-oriented (Fig 2). Being a ‘Futurist’ as a managerial competency demonstrates a unique blend of visionary thinking, strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and adaptability, enabling them to navigate complexities, anticipate future trends, and lead their organization towards sustainable growth and success in a rapidly changing world. Being a ‘Pioneer Planner’ embodies qualities of innovation, strategic vision, talent development, and effective decision-making, steering the organization towards sustainable growth, operational excellence, and global relevance; and a ‘Problem-oriented’ manager excels in problem-solving, continuous learning, and innovation. They are adept at addressing challenges, fostering a culture of creativity and collaboration, and supporting initiatives that drive growth and development. By embracing uncertainty and promoting a culture of innovation, they lead their organization towards resilience, agility, and sustained success in a dynamic and competitive environment.

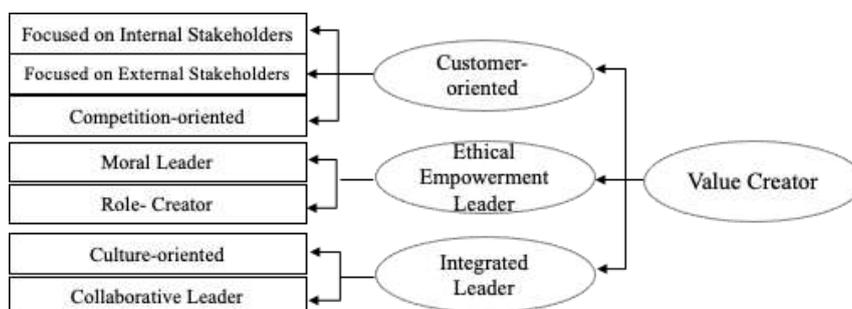


Fig 3: “Value Creator” global theme

C. Value creator

The global theme of ‘Value creator’ encompasses the qualities of being a customer-oriented, ethical empowerment leader, and integrated leader (Fig 3). By combining a focus on internal and external stakeholders with a competition-oriented mindset, a ‘Customer-oriented’ manager can drive organizational success by fostering collaboration, innovation, and competitiveness, ultimately leading to enhanced services, sustainable growth, and stakeholder satisfaction. also, the ‘Ethical empowerment leader’ not only upholds ethical standards and moral values but also creates a supportive and empowering environment where individuals feel valued, engaged, and motivated. By promoting fairness, fostering well-being, and encouraging autonomy and self-regulation, the leader empowers individuals to contribute meaningfully, collaborate effectively, and drive positive change within the university; and the ‘Integrated leader’ creates a cohesive and inclusive organizational culture that values diversity, fosters collaboration, and encourages continuous learning and growth. By embracing

cultural pluralism, preventing organizational blind spots, upholding ethical principles, fostering equality, building trust, promoting teamwork, and enhancing diverse skills, the leader facilitates synergy, innovation, and sustainable success within the organization.

4. Conclusion

The research has delved deeply into the competencies and qualities associated with effective leadership within the university setting. The identified global themes of excellence-driven, trailblazer, and value creator encapsulate the multifaceted managerial competencies and attributes that leaders must embody to navigate the complexities of a dynamic and interconnected educational landscape in higher education (Fig 4).

The future, with all its upheavals, ambiguities, and uncertainties, is undoubtedly the only space that harbors advanced opportunities. Naturally, those who are most prepared, positioned, and have practiced for various situations have the greatest chance of seizing these opportunities. The exponential growth of information and communications, rapid changes and transformations, have presented diverse challenges to the higher education system. Universities serve as enlightening forces and command centers of societal thought, exerting significant and widespread effects on the fabric of society in social, cultural, economic, and political realms. They lay the groundwork for intellectual growth and development and serve as the cornerstone for the maturity and realization of human capacities, making them one of the most pivotal social institutions in the creation and management of knowledge.

It is natural that assuming university positions, considering their critical present and future missions, requires possessing competencies and capabilities that, through appropriate utilization of capacities, can bring about the most desirable future. Selecting and appointing university managers cannot be limited solely to scientific and experiential capabilities; instead, possessing specific competencies, approaches, and a more comprehensive criterion is considered essential for them to act effectively, efficiently, and flexibly in transformative and unpredictable future conditions. These fundamental characteristics enable them to be proficient in fulfilling their duties effectively.

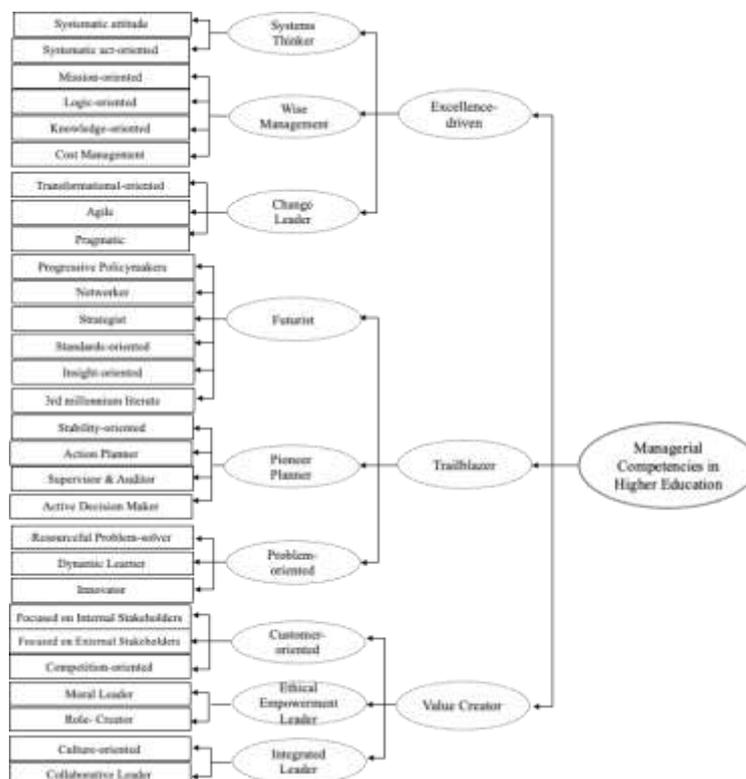


Fig 4: Managerial Competencies in Higher Education

To implement the identified managerial competencies effectively in Iranian higher education, institutions should design tailored training programs, establish mentorship initiatives, integrate competencies into performance evaluations, promote continuous learning, collaborate with industry partners for insights, create leadership development schemes, and support research and innovation endeavors. These actions will cultivate a culture of excellence and drive sustainable growth in the academic landscape.

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