

**Dean 2.0: The evolving role of academic leadership in the era of AI**

**Decano 2.0: El papel cambiante del liderazgo académico en la era de la inteligencia artificial**

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## **Abstract**

The role of the university dean is undergoing profound transformation in response to growing managerial complexity, heightened accountability, global competition, and the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education. This study explores how contemporary deans conceptualize their evolving responsibilities and leadership practices within this dynamic environment. Adopting a qualitative and exploratory design, the study reveals that deans increasingly operate at the intersection of academic leadership, managerial responsibility, stakeholder engagement, and technological transformation. Core areas of responsibility—faculty development, research strategy, student experience, internationalization, academic portfolio management, and reputation building—are now deeply influenced by digitalization and AI-driven governance. Participants emphasized the need for autonomy, institutional support, financial and data literacy, and AI fluency to lead effectively. AI was widely perceived as an augmentative while simultaneously raising ethical and cultural challenges.

The study contributes to existing literature on academic leadership by situating deanship within the emerging AI-enabled university. It highlights the shift from traditional collegial models toward comprehensive managerial requirements, and offers practical recommendations for leadership development in contemporary higher education

## **Key words**

Higher Education, Dean, Innovation, Quality, Faculty, Research, Educational Leadership, Management, Artificial Intelligence.

## **Resumen**

El papel del decano universitario está experimentando una profunda transformación en respuesta a la creciente complejidad de la gestión, el aumento de las exigencias de rendición de cuentas, la competencia global y la rápida expansión de la inteligencia artificial (IA) en la educación superior. Este estudio explora cómo los decanos contemporáneos conceptualizan la evolución de sus responsabilidades y prácticas de liderazgo en este entorno dinámico. Mediante un diseño cualitativo y exploratorio, el estudio revela que los decanos operan cada vez más en la intersección entre el liderazgo académico, la gestión administrativa, la relación con los grupos de interés y la transformación tecnológica. Las principales áreas de responsabilidad —desarrollo del profesorado, estrategia de investigación, experiencia estudiantil, internacionalización, gestión de la oferta académica y fortalecimiento de la reputación institucional— están ahora profundamente influenciadas por la digitalización y la gobernanza impulsada por la IA. Los participantes destacaron la necesidad de contar con autonomía, apoyo institucional, alfabetización financiera y de datos, así como competencias en IA para ejercer un liderazgo eficaz. La IA fue percibida principalmente como una herramienta de apoyo para la toma de decisiones, aunque también plantea desafíos éticos y culturales.

El estudio contribuye a la literatura sobre liderazgo académico al situar el decanato en el contexto de la universidad impulsada por la IA. Asimismo, pone de relieve la transición desde los modelos colegiados tradicionales hacia enfoques de gestión más integrales y ofrece recomendaciones prácticas para el desarrollo del liderazgo en la educación superior contemporánea.

## **Palabras clave**

Educación superior, decano, innovación, calidad, profesorado, investigación, liderazgo, gestión educativa, inteligencia artificial.

## **1. Introduction**

The role of the university dean has undergone significant transformation over the past decades, shaped by intensifying accountability demands, managerial complexity, global competition, and rapid technological change. Once primarily conceived as a collegial academic reference, the dean is now expected to function as a strategic leader, acting between institutional leadership, faculty, students, and external stakeholders.

At the same time, the digital transformation of higher education has added a new layer of complexity to academic leadership. Emerging research suggests that artificial intelligence (AI), data analytics, and digital platforms are reshaping governance, decision-making, and academic work, requiring leaders to develop new skills and forms of strategic and ethical oversight. Laufer et al (2025) found that leaders who exhibited trust by creating flat hierarchies, sharing decision-making, and ensuring a safe space for experimentation with educational technologies led to staff being intrinsically motivated to engage with technology and innovate with new formats, enhancing the positive contributions of their schools. Along these lines, Mah and Groß (2024) defend the role of faculty, and therefore the collaborative style of deans, in the definition of strategic priorities regarding the adoption of AI tools, as well as the need of constructive dialog within academic institutions in this respect, not just about the pedagogical aspects but also the ethical and practical implications of AI in education.

Despite this evolving environment and increasing demands over the figure of the dean, authors like Rehbock (2020), defend that there is still not enough research into leadership development in higher education. Maddock (2023) demonstrates that, though limited, there is an increasing amount of literature in the field of middle leaders in Higher Education. In her systematic review of higher education literature published in scholarly journals between 2010–2020, the author also describes how scholars implore universities to improve role clarity, resourcing and autonomy for academic middle leaders. The author also recommends future research exploring academic middle leading practices through contemporary lenses, which is what the present study will be aiming.

An increasing number of leadership development efforts can also be found, as well as research studies around it. In their comprehensive review, You et al. (2024) confirm a significant growth in higher education leadership research over the years, with 2188 Scopus indexed articles published between 2013 and 2023, interestingly distributed over numerous disciplines, not just social sciences or business. About half of these studies were published in the US, but an increasing number of other national contexts are researched. For instance, Jung (2022) investigated the authentic leadership practices of deans and directors in Korean universities and found that such authentic leadership significantly enhances organizational culture and trust, which in turn strengthens professors' commitment to their institutions. Research by Samson et al. (2023) examined how leadership styles exhibited by academic deans influence faculty job satisfaction in Tanzania, reporting that transformational leadership approaches are

particularly effective in shaping positive academic work environments. In the context of private universities in Mexico, Núñez- Acosta and Sánchez-García (2024) analyse the various factors affecting sustainable performance of academic staff, providing academic leaders like deans with valuable insights. According to the authors, satisfaction, motivation, research capabilities and morale constitute a virtuous circle that affects research performance of academic units.

Existing empirical studies of deans have tended to focus on single national systems or individual leadership roles, often relying on interviews or survey-based approaches. As a result, the authors of this paper believe that there is a need for research that captures collective reflection among practicing deans across diverse national contexts, particularly in regions that are underrepresented in the leadership literature and in relation to emerging challenges such as AI-enabled governance.

By integrating perspectives from deans, students, and senior institutional actors, and by explicitly situating deanship within the context of AI-driven change, this research complements existing scholarship on academic leadership. Rather than revisiting well-documented tensions between collegiality and managerialism, the study extends prior work by illuminating how deans conceptualize their responsibilities, challenges, strategic priorities and recommendations. In doing so, this paper will contribute empirically grounded insights and best practices that deepen and update current understandings of deanship in contemporary universities.

## **2. Description of the study and methodological approach**

The present study investigates how the role of the university dean is being reshaped by contemporary challenges in higher education, with particular attention to the influence of artificial intelligence. The primary objective of the study is to deepen understanding of the dean's evolving responsibilities, identify key leadership challenges, and formulate recommendations for future academic leadership practice. In addition, the study explicitly considers how AI-driven transformations affect governance, decision-making, and strategic leadership, while comparing emerging themes with perspectives from deans operating in Latin America, according to the study conducted recently between deans from the same university Alliance (the Cintana Alliance) operating in that region (Benito et al, 2026).

The research adopts a qualitative, exploratory design and is based on intensive, face-to-face engagement with academic leaders. Data were collected during a 2.5 day residential program involving 27 active deans from seven countries (Egypt, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam), supported by three facilitators with extensive international higher education leadership experience. The format allowed for formal working sessions as well as ice breaking meetings and social interactions that enhanced personal engagement and flowing communication.

The design of the study focuses on the identification of collective ideas and peer learning, employing collaborative methodologies rather than individual interviews alone. Additionally, reflections were enriched by the external voices of students and institutional leadership. Data sources include large-group and small-group discussions, a student panel focused on expectations of the dean's role, and an interview with a provost addressing institutional leadership perspectives. These multiple viewpoints allow the study to capture the dean's role as relational, context-dependent, and embedded within broader institutional ecosystems.

The large group discussions addressed general thoughts, identification of challenges and opportunities of the dean's position, as well as general recommendations, mostly derived from the smaller group discussions. In the small group discussions, the participants were divided into three groups of 9 deans. Two of the following key responsibilities, central to contemporary deanship practice, were analysed in each group: Faculty and Research (group 1), Students and Academic reputation (group 2), Internationality and Academic Portfolio (group 3).

Discussions were facilitated by the three organizers, in a semi-structured format. Deans expressed their thoughts and experiences freely, mostly addressing the challenges each responsibility entails, the necessary resources and conditions for success, as well as personal opinions and recommendations.

Data consist of direct quotations, written proposals generated by groups of deans, and integrated observational notes from the three facilitators. The analysis combines discourse analysis with thematic synthesis techniques, including the use of word clouds to identify recurring concepts and shared concerns.

The study contributes to the literature by situating the dean's role within the emerging context of AI-enabled universities, extending earlier work that documented increasing managerial complexity, accountability pressures, and strategic expectations placed on academic leaders. Through collective reflection among practicing deans across diverse national systems, the research offers empirically grounded insights into how academic leadership is adapting to technological change while preserving core academic values. As such, it complements and extends existing scholarship on the evolving nature of deanship in contemporary higher education.

### **3. External voices**

#### **3.1 Student perceptions: cheerleader, facilitator and lighthouse**

Four students from Sunway University—three undergraduates and one postgraduate representing different academic disciplines—participated in a panel session during the Cintana Dean's Summit in Kuala Lumpur. Over the course of approximately thirty minutes, they were invited to reflect on the role of the university, the development of future-oriented skills, the impact of artificial intelligence (AI), and their perceptions of the dean's role.

In discussing the role of the university for both individuals and society, the students indicated that higher education serves as a formative space for personal growth and self-discovery. They reported that the university environment exposes them to diverse perspectives, new ideas, and meaningful interpersonal interactions, all of which contribute to shaping their future identities and aspirations. Participants further suggested that university life represents a developmental period in which making mistakes and learning from them is integral to clarifying personal purpose and direction.

Regarding preparation for future careers, students emphasized the importance of both soft and technical skills. They identified communication, teamwork, time management, intercultural

competence, and the ability to engage with diverse viewpoints as essential attributes for professional success. Several participants noted that such interpersonal and relational skills are less susceptible to replacement by AI technologies. At the same time, they stressed the growing importance of technical competencies, including coding and AI literacy, in an increasingly technology-driven labor market. Students described the university as responsible for aligning educational experiences with industry demands and for equipping graduates with relevant and competitive skills. They referred to initiatives such as industry-linked projects, embedded professional engagement during undergraduate studies, and opportunities to obtain micro-credentials as valuable mechanisms for enhancing employability.

When reflecting on the role of AI in their daily lives, students reported frequent use of AI tools for both academic and personal purposes. They indicated that AI supports idea generation, facilitates knowledge acquisition, enhances conceptual understanding, and provides a competitive advantage in the workforce. However, they also expressed expectations that universities should provide structured guidance on the ethical and responsible use of AI. Participants argued that students should be trained to balance AI use with the development of critical thinking and other core competencies. They recommended the design of assessments that encourage students to critically evaluate AI-generated outputs, as well as workshops tailored to specific professional contexts. Overall, they underscored the importance of graduating with strong AI literacy to remain competitive in evolving labor markets.

Finally, in describing the role of the dean, students portrayed the position as a form of inspirational and supportive leadership rather than hierarchical authority. They characterized their deans as individuals who create enabling environments for development and innovation, actively engage with students, listen to their concerns, and represent their interests within the institution. One participant metaphorically described the dean as “a cheerleader, a facilitator, and a lighthouse,” suggesting a leadership style that motivates, guides, and provides direction. More broadly, students emphasized that effective deans are visible, approachable, adaptable, and solution-oriented, while simultaneously empowering students to grow independently.

### **3.2 Insights from the Provost of Sunway University on the Contemporary Role of Deans**

An interview with the Provost of Sunway University, a highly respected academic leader and former dean, provides valuable reflections on the evolving role of deans in modern higher education. The provost emphasized that the dean’s position is no longer defined by a single function, but rather by a complex blend of responsibilities requiring adaptability, balance, and strategic leadership. When asked to describe a dean metaphorically as a colour, he suggested the image of a “rainbow,” highlighting the breadth of roles deans must perform simultaneously. He also compared the dean to a “chameleon,” reflecting the need for flexible communication styles and constant adjustment to shifting institutional demands.

The provost noted that deans are increasingly perceived as the “CEOs of their schools,” carrying substantial responsibility for academic quality, financial sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and

institutional alignment. One of the central challenges is navigating the dual identity of being both the leader of the school and an agent of the broader university mission. This requires what he described as being “visible and invisible at the same time,” constantly balancing competing expectations. Deans must prioritize students as their primary reason for existence, ensuring educational quality and student outcomes remain at the core of decision-making. At the same time, particularly in private institutions, deans must acknowledge the expectations of institutional owners and the necessity of maintaining financial viability, which can create tensions between educational ideals and operational realities

A recurring theme in the interview was the complexity of stakeholder management. While many groups influence the dean’s work—students, faculty, administrators, and external partners—the provost argued that not all stakeholders carry equal weight, and that “students come first.” He advocated for servant leadership as an effective approach, stressing empathy, approachability, and support. However, he also cautioned that servant leadership introduces challenges when boundaries are misunderstood or when expectations become unrealistic. Thus, the dean must balance openness with firm leadership limits

In defining success, the provost highlighted multiple indicators: financial sustainability through effective management of the school’s P&L responsibilities, strong student performance and outcomes, and institutional stability. Deans must also understand the backgrounds and needs of their student population, while simultaneously translate the vision of institutional owners, and developing the academic reputation of their school. Autonomy was identified as essential, as deans require sufficient decision-making authority to fulfil their responsibilities effectively. The provost further emphasized guiding principles such as equity, fairness, transparency, and accountability, including expectations that faculty contribute to income generation and responsible engagement with the institution in a much broader sense than just teaching or conducting research.

Regarding leadership practice, the provost recommended simplicity and clarity of mission. Strategic plans are only effective when faculty and staff align with them, requiring trust-building, recognition of contributions, and sustained relational leadership. He cautioned against transactional reward systems, advocating instead for consistent encouragement and appreciation as vital tools for cohesion. He also discussed cultural dynamics, noting that in many Asian contexts, faculty may exhibit stronger compliance and academic citizenship, reinforcing collective responsibility.

Finally, the provost addressed emerging opportunities such as generative artificial intelligence. He encouraged deans to view AI as an augmentative tool rather than a replacement, enhancing operational efficiency, simulating conversations, and improving responsiveness in areas such as online learning support. He reassured the academic community by saying ‘AI will only replace you if you stop using your brain’.

In managing organizational “noise” and conflict, he recommended proactive communication through regular town halls, transparent translation of leadership vision, and meaningful engagement with staff, including informal interactions. Importantly, he warned that the most frustrated individuals are often those least likely to speak up, underscoring the dean’s role as intermediary and cultural steward.

Overall, the interview illustrates that the contemporary dean operates at the intersection of academic leadership, managerial responsibility, and human-centred governance. The role demands versatility,

ethical grounding, and the capacity to balance institutional sustainability with student-centred educational integrity.

#### 4. Hard work pays off

On the final day of the Deans' Summit, participants were invited to reflect on what they considered the most rewarding aspect of serving as a dean. They first provided written responses, which were subsequently discussed in a plenary session characterized by a very positive tone, and expressions of belief and purpose. During this exchange, attention shifted away from the structural challenges and managerial complexities previously highlighted, toward the intrinsic motivations underpinning their leadership roles.

Most deans articulated a strong sense of purpose linked to student success and societal contribution. They described witnessing students' professional achievements and their positive impact on society as among the most fulfilling dimensions of their work. In addition, supporting the development of faculty, strengthening institutional capacity, and contributing to long-term organizational growth were frequently identified as meaningful sources of professional satisfaction.

A thematic review of their written responses revealed recurrent emphasis on terms such as *student*, *faculty*, *success*, *achievement*, *growth*, *impact*, and *university*, underscoring the relational and developmental focus of their leadership identity. The accompanying word cloud visually represents the frequency of these key concepts across participants' reflections



Created by <https://wordart.com/create>

A few of the quotes the deans provided are shown below:



*“I find it most rewarding to create opportunities for growth and success, both for students and faculty.”*

*“Seeing the transformation of young people who are uncertain about their futures when entering as freshmen to people who have hope and a clear direction when they graduate.”*

*“Seeing the faculty succeed in achieving the targets set by the university, bringing the faculty to a best position that has an impact not only on achieving excellent rankings or accreditation but also has an impact on the development of science, improving global quality and student experience. The most rewarding part is when i meet alumni who are successful in the industry.”*

*“The greatest reward is that all the students have jobs right after their graduation and that all of the faculty members are pleased with what they are doing.”*

*“The most rewarding part about being a dean is when you contribute to your institution’s strategic direction and see the students grow, learn and achieve their goals.”*

*“The ultimate reward is seeing our successful graduates, now licensed professionals, come back to express their gratitude”*

*“When I see the graduates and the faculty achieve excellence and contribute to the development of the society.”*

*“Empowering and facilitating the dreams of students and the aspirations of faculty, and creating legacy brands for the University.”*

## **5. Description and recommendations regarding the multiple responsibilities of Deans**

### **5.1 Faculty**

In their leadership role, deans highlighted their team as the most important factor for the success of their school. From the deans’ perspective, it is their responsibility to interpret and manage overlapping pressures while aligning faculty efforts with institutional strategy and positive impact.

The deans started the discussion describing what they consider the most challenging aspects of leading faculty, including academic readiness and capabilities, performance issues and professional development of their teams. Deans also referred to organizational barriers that can often undermine academic work, like bureaucratic processes, financial pressures, and governance and structural complexity. It was agreed that it can be difficult to ensure that academic quality will be sustained if budget limitations and institutional reforms are taking a protagonist role. Student success concerns, and its links to faculty performance was also discussed. Inevitably, the disruptive impact of rapid technological change, requiring faculty to adapt teaching and research methods was also addressed. Deans indicated that digital transformation, as a distinct challenge, is not merely a technical issue, but

organizational and cultural, affecting pedagogy, assessment, research methods, and workload distribution.

As the discussion evolved, the debate about challenges evolved into concrete institutional requirements. Robust management systems, reliable information and data, active support from the HR departments and backing from leadership were at the top of the list of priorities deans cited to be able to lead faculty effectively. Connection and networks, and adequate budget and financial resources were considered key as well. These needs point to faculty dependence on institutional infrastructure to function effectively in a complex academic environment. Rather than focusing on individual capacity, the emphasis is on enabling conditions: access to data for decision-making, coherent administrative systems that augment the deans' role, financial resources to support teaching and research, and the sponsorship of institutional leaders to legitimize change.

Despite the challenges digital transformation can embody, the deans highlighted the opportunity that AI represents for their schools in helping faculty improve efficiency in daily academic and administrative tasks, and emphasised the need to integrate AI tools into curriculum and instruction. For faculty, AI can offer practical support by automating routine tasks, enhancing teaching design, and enabling improvements in student learning. Additionally, for deans, AI can support evidence-based leadership by providing comparative insights, performance indicators, and predictive analyses that inform planning and resource allocation.

During the discussion about faculty, deans also mentioned interesting recommendations, like open door policy, newsletters, mentoring programs, interdisciplinary projects, formal connections of faculty with external world through advisory boards and industry relations or specialization of profiles maximising skills and interests.

## **5.2 Research**

The discussion about Research as a key responsibility of deans was very rich, with engaging conversations that evidenced full commitment from the deans with research, and clear understanding of its importance and the role it plays in the quality and reputation of any school.

Deans conceive their role in research as fundamentally strategic and directional. They agreed on a series of central goals, starting with the definition and communication of a clear research vision, first identifying *who their school is* in research terms and *where it intends to go*. This central goal involves setting priorities, articulating a shared direction, and ensuring alignment between individual research activities and institutional strategy. Deans also highlighted the importance of ranking strategy and research outcomes, suggesting that they should describe research goals and performance in relation to quality indicators, visibility, and impact.

Another stated goal was to encourage, motivate, and support research engagement across the academic community. This includes defining incentive plans, supporting recognition mechanisms, and fostering inspiration and trust. The deans explicitly alluded the need to engage externally—with industry and other external partners—indicating that research goals must transcend internal productivity to

include relevance, collaboration, and societal engagement. Collectively, these goals position the dean as a steward of both research identity and long-term research capacity.

During the discussion, deans were able to identify and share some of the practices regarding the research activities that had worked for them in the past and could be transferred to other schools. Central among these recommendations was the collection and development of research ideas among faculty, making sure they are in alignment with the school vision. They also emphasized communication and transparency with academic staff, signalling that open processes are essential for building trust and alignment around research priorities.

Team-based and interdisciplinary approaches were explicitly noted, alongside the importance of connecting internal and external stakeholders. Best practices also included establishing mentorship programs, and rewarding research outcomes, while safeguarding quality and integrity. Deans expressed the importance of monitoring and follow-up—such as tracking progress and providing feedback—as an ongoing responsibility rather than a one-time intervention.

Additional practices include conflict resolution and mediation, indicating that deans play a role in managing tensions related to research resources, recognition, or collaboration. Finally, deans referred to the importance of balancing individualized and team goals, including specific attention to students and early-career researchers, and support for international mobility. These practices collectively portray the dean as an enabler of structured, fair, and sustainable research environments rather than a direct controller of research activity.

### **5.3 Student Experience**

During the working group sessions, the Deans actively discussed their experiences and opinions about various relevant topics related to their positions. One of them was their students' experience in terms of their goals as Deans, the main initiatives carried out, some of the challenges that arise and resources they needed, and how AI can help them with those.

When the Deans remembered their students, one repeated goal they shared was to support their students in their development as good human beings through the power of education. In order to achieve this and considering the variety of programs they study, they identified other objectives to achieve this main goal: to design updated curricula by benefiting from the content and other initiatives from Arizona State University: to make the curricula industry relevant and to include interdisciplinary courses that allow students to broaden their horizons and to develop new ideas; to enhance their research skills which encompass the development of many other necessary skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, analytical skills, etc; and to involve students in community-based projects for them to be aware of societal needs and challenges and how they can contribute to them.

To accomplish the goals identified above, the Deans listed some of the initiatives that have worked well in their institutions and others that are planning to develop such as capacity building programs between faculty and students, advisory sessions to gain their feedback and to support them academically and in other aspects such as registrar, finance, student life, etc., to help students build their own digital e-

portfolio since their first steps in university contributing to their professional career, and to arrange sessions where alumni and industry can network.

Some of the challenges identified by the Deans were related to budgeting for the development of some initiatives mentioned above and the existing bureaucracy to make these happen. When it came to students well-being and academic progress, some mentioned language constraints (for international students and for English programs) as well as the transition phase between high school and university and how these two impact attrition during the first years. The need to find the right faculty members, complying with relevant regulations for each program, and administrative resources to support the students through their entire journey, academically mentally and financially, where other challenges that were reviewed.

To try to overcome those challenges, the Deans identified a variety of resources that could help such as finding competent lecturers, counting on other departments in the university to support the students in administrative and extracurricular tasks, updating policies and create ethics committees to best serve current situations and support students in their understanding, their importance and their application, receiving the necessary budget and establishing collaboration with other partner universities to support each other. While discussing what they need, AI was seen as a tool that could help them in various ways; for example, developing personalized learning and tutoring systems, as well as engagement with students through academic and social media platforms. They also pinpointed how AI could support them in the analysis of data to make better decisions to continue supporting their students the best way possible.

## **5.4 Academic reputation**

During the second day of the Deans' Summit, participants were organized into diverse working groups to examine key themes, including academic reputation. Guiding questions invited reflection on their goals as deans, current and prospective initiatives, challenges encountered, required resources, and the potential role of artificial intelligence (AI) in advancing these objectives.

In reporting back, the deans began by conceptualizing academic reputation as the extent to which their institutions, faculties, and programs are recognized—both internally and externally—for excellence in teaching, research, and societal contribution. This recognition was understood to be reflected in institutional and programmatic accreditations, as well as in national and international rankings and ratings. A strong academic reputation, they argued, signals educational quality and meaningful societal impact.

With respect to strategic goals, the deans emphasized the importance of aligning faculty-level reputation with the broader institutional vision, mission, and strategy. They highlighted the need to selectively pursue accreditations, rankings, and ratings that are consistent with institutional values and priorities. In addition, they underscored the value of conducting comprehensive internal assessments to identify strengths and weaknesses, alongside systematic analyses of external opportunities and challenges through benchmarking against national, regional, and global peers.

The initiatives discussed were organized into four principal domains: research excellence and funding, faculty development, mindset and culture-building, and student education. Within research and funding, priorities included strengthening international collaborations, fostering industry partnerships, and enhancing research capacity. In relation to faculty development and mindset, participants stressed the importance of cultivating shared values and strategic priorities, as well as designing initiatives that enable faculty and students to advance professionally while contributing positively and sustainably to society. Regarding students and education, deans highlighted the development of contemporary, industry-relevant curricula aimed at enhancing graduate employability and engagement.

The principal challenges identified across groups related to constraints in funding, time, and human resources. Deans also noted the difficulty of securing faculty engagement in reputation-building efforts, emphasizing the need to balance reward and recognition systems with both intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation.

Finally, participants considered how AI tools might support these efforts. Potential applications included strategic planning, analysis of accreditation and ranking frameworks, curriculum design and updating, monitoring student academic performance, and strengthening engagement with current students and alumni.

## **5.5 Internationalization**

Internationalization is closely associated with institutional reputation and global competitiveness. It's influence spans research quality, teaching excellence, and graduate employability. In this context, internationalization is also perceived as a lever for improving institutional rankings and strengthening global brand positioning.

The deans felt that in their role, they needed to ensure that the students have global exposure as they are future global citizens. The provision of a global education is central to the internationalization agenda. This includes curriculum design that incorporates international practices and case studies, faculty engagement in delivering globally relevant content, and the cultivation of students' awareness as global citizens. Internationalization therefore extends beyond mobility initiatives and is integrated into pedagogical philosophy and program design. Strategic international partnerships further reinforce global positioning. Collaborations with established international institutions, including partnerships with universities in the United States such as Arizona State University, the United Kingdom, and Australia, contribute to institutional capacity building and global visibility.

Some of the deans debated at length on the need to train faculty as preceptors of Internationalization in the program, School and Institution. Faculty capability is central to effective internationalization. Training faculty to serve as institutional advocates and facilitators of internationalization strengthens the program and it's experience.

Emerging intersections between internationalization and artificial intelligence (AI) introduce additional complexity. AI is increasingly relevant in enhancing global collaboration, improving research

productivity, and addressing ethical considerations in cross-border engagement. Hence the need for faculty to be equipped with AI literacy. This was the general consensus among the deans.

Financial and logistical constraints shape the implementation of internationalization initiatives. Virtual modalities—including global signature courses and virtual internships—expand access while mitigating cost barriers and such examples were prioritized over those requiring funding. These approaches diversify the mechanisms through which global engagement is delivered and support scalability.

Internationalization also intersects with institutional language strategies, particularly in relation to English-medium instruction. Such strategies facilitate international student recruitment and contribute to broader diversity and reputation objectives.

Despite its strategic importance, internationalization is constrained by structural and contextual barriers. Recruitment of international students presents challenges in certain national contexts, and effective implementation requires enabling mechanisms, including the support infrastructure for international students and integration of AI tools such as language-support technologies. Given its multidimensional impact on growth, reputation, academic quality, and institutional competitiveness, deans emphasized that internationalization should be positioned as a strategic growth driver for their Schools.

In summary, the deans recommended that institutional prioritization, coupled with leadership commitment, is therefore essential to achieving sustained global engagement for the advancement of internationalization.

## **5.6 Academic portfolio**

Deans occupy a central role in portfolio governance, serving as custodians of the academic programs, their products, within their respective schools. Their responsibility encompasses program strategy formulation, market positioning, risk diversification and long-term portfolio sustainability. They debated that effective portfolio management requires a systematic engagement with industry, availability of industry data, in depth understanding of market trends and availability of market research. It was agreed that a well-managed academic portfolio distributed the risk across local and international markets while creating pathways for innovation and growth.

Deans view themselves as strategic enablers, as the bridge between various stakeholders. This was further discussed in the context of portfolio effectiveness, which they felt was undermined when programs were developed in isolation. Integrated collaboration across academic, and marketing functions was deemed necessary to ensure coherence between program design, market messaging and student recruitment strategies. Much debate revolved around stakeholder inclusion throughout the process of new program development, highlighting the importance of communication and the identification of key messages that describe the value proposition of each program.

An emphasis on student experience was also seen as critical. According to the deans, the value of a degree is shaped not only by curriculum design but also by the broader educational journey and support

ecosystem, which must be embedded within the program design and delivery, as part of the process of portfolio development and innovation.

Cultivating a culture of innovation within academic units was identified as a critical need. Such a culture must align with the institutional mission and vision, and must involve the development of strategic partnerships, internal and external as key mechanisms for accelerating innovation and diversifying the portfolio to address the real needs of society.

Portfolio differentiation extends beyond curriculum and content, international faculty representation, diverse student cohorts, globally benchmarked curricula, joint academic projects, mobility programs, virtual learning modalities, study tours, internships and research opportunities contribute to the overall value proposition of academic products.

AI was positioned as an enabling tool for portfolio analytics and strategic foresight. Much debate took place around AI applications that could support environmental scanning, trend analysis, market research analysis, and forecasting future employment opportunities. These capabilities were viewed in the context of their ability to enhance gap identification, product differentiation and value creation. AI was also identified as a necessary component of any innovative curriculum, and high-quality contemporary learning experience.

In summary, deans agreed that sustainable portfolio growth and diversification require empowered academic teams capable of structured ideation and continuous renewal. Institutional mechanisms that support collaborative innovation, data-informed strategy, and forward-looking design would contribute to the long-term resilience and competitiveness of their Schools.

## **6. Comparison with Latin American dean ´s perception**

When comparing the reflections of deans from Asia and the Middle East in the present study with those of Latin American deans in the parallel study (Benito et al, 2026), strong convergences emerge regarding the multidimensional and hybrid nature of contemporary deanship. In both contexts, deans perceive themselves as operating at the intersection of academic leadership and managerial responsibility, balancing quality assurance, faculty development, research strategy, financial sustainability, and stakeholder expectations. Student success appears as the most rewarding aspect of the role across regions, reinforcing the centrality of educational impact as a shared professional motivation. Likewise, both groups emphasize the need for autonomy, access to reliable data, financial resources, and institutional backing from senior leadership. The professionalization of the role—moving from traditional academic authority toward strategic academic management—is clearly acknowledged in both studies, as is the tension between academic values and financial viability.

However, notable differences can also be identified. The Latin American study places comparatively stronger emphasis on institutional recognition, participation in strategic decision-making, and the symbolic visibility of the dean as an “articulator of institutional transformation. The present study intentionally introduces AI at the centre of the discussions, while in the Latin American study, AI arose spontaneously and appears primarily as an emerging transversal tool within innovation, far from the transformative force completely reshaping the work of the Dean that this study suggests.

Overall, while both studies confirm the increasing complexity and strategic scope of deanship, the present research highlights a more explicit framing of the dean as a technologically fluent change agent within the AI-enabled university, whereas the Latin American perspective underscores leadership identity, institutional culture, and recognition within governance structures.

## **7. What do deans need to work effectively?**

During this segment of the group discussion, deans identified budgetary constraints and limited resources as their most pressing challenges. Although they expressed strong willingness to lead new initiatives, they emphasized that their capacity to do so is fundamentally shaped by available funding. As one dean noted, “the spirit is willing, but the wallet is empty,” underscoring the tension between institutional ambition and financial realities.

Participants further argued that effective and collaborative leadership requires greater empowerment and autonomy. They indicated that increased decision-making authority would enable them to articulate and implement a clear strategic vision for their schools while remaining aligned with broader institutional missions. Such autonomy, they suggested, would enhance organizational agility and allow for the prioritization of high-impact initiatives rather than diffuse efforts across competing demands.

The need for stronger institutional support also emerged as a recurring theme. Deans highlighted the importance of backing from rectors or provosts in advancing strategic initiatives and navigating institutional challenges. In addition, many reported limited expertise in finance and data analytics, expressing a need for enhanced support in these domains. Access to reliable and actionable data—for market analysis, monitoring student progression, evaluating faculty workloads, and assessing budget utilization—was viewed as essential for informed decision-making.

Securing and retaining qualified faculty, both local and international, was identified as another critical concern. Deans emphasized the need for institutional assistance throughout the recruitment process, including candidate searches, competitive compensation benchmarking, and, where relevant, visa and work permit procedures. They also underscored the importance of human resource support for faculty retention, talent development, mentorship of high-performing staff, and conflict resolution.

Student retention was similarly highlighted as a priority area. Participants suggested that fostering an integrated ecosystem to support student development—both within and beyond the classroom—is central to improving retention outcomes.

Finally, deans expressed appreciation for being part of a professional network, recognizing the distinct nature of their role at the intersection of leadership, management, and stakeholder engagement. They proposed regular annual meetings as a mechanism for peer learning, shared problem-solving, and dissemination of best practices. Personal and professional development was also considered essential, with particular emphasis placed on strengthening competencies in artificial intelligence, technological literacy, and financial management



## **8. How can AI help deans?**

Universities face many challenges and increasing pressure to maintain their reputation and growth and this was echoed by the deans in many of the groups. Cascaded downwards, each of them faced increasing pressure to improve and streamline their administrative processes, increase their enrolments, become more efficient and productive as well as enhance their academic outcomes.

The deans discussed the role of AI and how they could leverage on AI in the context of Internationalization, Students, Faculty, Portfolio, Research and Academic Reputation.

This was also discussed in the context of teaching and learning and administrative efficiency. The deans understood and agreed that they needed to embrace and ride the AI evolution. This would mean that there would be new opportunities that they could leverage on to help them drive efficiencies, optimize resource allocation, refine product development, enhance existing portfolios of products, enhance the learning process and achievement of educational outcomes and most importantly, being able to leverage data to make informed and impactful decisions.

They were unanimous in calling out that the dawn of AI would make their roles more demanding and complex whereby they not only needed to lead but blend this leadership with cutting edge technological fluency. Some of them mentioned the need to upskill faculty and support staff in areas influenced by AI, from using tools that were relevant, interpretation of data, using AI ethically to helping them create a thriving ecosystem.

In the sphere of students and learning, the deans mentioned that AI could be utilized to predict which students are at risks of underperforming or dropping out. Early intervention using AI tools would be important for targeted and timely action to prevent attrition. One Dean mentioned that AI could play a role in personalized learning especially for special needs students and those needing extra support in their learning.

In the conversation on portfolio, the topic on AI tutors was raised. This was raised in the context of addressing shortages in faculty with product expansion. In this regard, AI could assist the deans to support faculty with mundane, non-instructional tasks such as attendance tracking, checking grammar, drafting reports, lesson planning and grading. This could drive more efficiencies in the schools.

There was also discussion especially in the context of licensure examinations, on the role of AI to personalize instruction, assessment, and individualize the tutoring. Again, this is geared towards making the schools more efficient and managing budgets.

In the governance area, the deans felt that AI could be of great help to keep them abreast on compliance and risk.

In summary, the Deans recommended that they needed to embed AI in their School strategy, develop relevant policies, prioritize ethics and most importantly upskill their team members.

## **9. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future studies**

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative and exploratory design, while appropriate for capturing rich collective reflections, limits the generalizability of findings. The sample consisted of 27 deans participating in a residential summit within a specific alliance network and primarily representing Asian institutional contexts. Although the diversity of countries enhances cross-cultural insight, the perspectives gathered may reflect particular institutional models, governance structures, or strategic partnerships that are not universally applicable. In addition, data were generated through facilitated group discussions, written reflections, and selected external voices rather than through longitudinal observation or individual in-depth interviews. As such, findings represent self-reported perceptions and shared narratives at a specific moment in time, potentially influenced by group dynamics, professional positioning, or summit context.

Future research could expand this work in several directions. Comparative studies across additional regions would allow for deeper cross-cultural analysis of how deanship evolves under different regulatory, financial, and technological environments. Longitudinal designs could examine how AI integration and digital transformation reshape leadership practices over time, moving beyond perception to measurable institutional outcomes. Quantitative or mixed-method approaches may also help assess relationships between leadership styles, AI adoption, faculty performance, student success, and institutional sustainability. Finally, further investigation into leadership development models, AI literacy frameworks for academic leaders, and governance structures that balance technological innovation with ethical oversight would provide practical guidance for universities navigating the AI-enabled future.

## **10. Conclusions**

This study explored how the role of the university dean is evolving in response to increasing managerial complexity, stakeholder expectations, and the rapid development of artificial intelligence. The findings show that deanship has become a multidimensional leadership role that combines academic oversight, strategic management, financial responsibility, and technological awareness.

Across all areas discussed—faculty, research, student experience, academic reputation, internationalization, and portfolio management—deans described a shift toward more strategic, data-informed decision-making. At the same time, they emphasized that effective leadership depends on autonomy, institutional trust, adequate resources, and access to reliable data. Without these enabling conditions, expectations placed on deans may exceed their capacity to deliver sustainable results.

Artificial intelligence emerged as both an opportunity and a challenge. Deans see AI as a tool to improve efficiency, support personalized learning, strengthen research and portfolio strategy, and enable better governance through data analytics. However, they also recognize the need for ethical guidance, policy development, and continuous upskilling to ensure responsible use. As a result, the contemporary dean must combine traditional academic values with technological fluency and strategic foresight.

Despite growing complexity, the most rewarding aspect of the role remains student success and societal impact. Ultimately, the “Dean 2.0” can be understood as a strategic and human-centred leader who must balance innovation with integrity, financial sustainability with academic quality, and technological advancement with educational purpose

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