Sharia Economic and Management Business Journal (SEMBJ)

| Volume 8, Issue 1, 2027 | Page 92-110 |
https://doi.org/10.62159/sembj.v8i1.2600
ISSN-Online: 2774-2679
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https://siducat.org/index.php/sembj

A Conceptual Model of No-Box Leadership in Private University Governance: A Soft Systems Methodology Approach

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
No-Box Leadership; Soft Systems Methodology; Private University Governance; W-I-C-S; Organizational Change;

ABSTRACT

Background: Private universities face interconnected challenges involving institutional sustainability, educational access, organizational accountability, and adaptation to technological change. Leadership approaches must balance flexibility with ethical responsibility and effective governance.
Research Gap: Existing leadership and governance studies address adaptability, innovation, and values, but provide limited context-specific integration of these dimensions within the complex organizational systems of Indonesian private universities.
Novelty: This study proposes No-Box Leadership as an integrated, systems-oriented framework combining Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, and Spirituality (W-I-C-S), rather than treating these orientations as independent leadership styles.
Method: A qualitative exploratory study employed the seven stages of Soft Systems Methodology at Universitas Pamulang, South Tangerang, Indonesia. Data from focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and institutional documents informed stakeholder analysis, a Rich Picture, root definitions, CATWOE analysis, and conceptual model development.
Results: The findings identify leadership practices involving alternative institutional financing, inclusive educational access, values-based governance, and opportunities for staff innovation. The proposed W-I-C-S framework links leadership orientations to communication, coordination, participation, accountable decision-making, and contextually feasible organizational change.
Conclusion: No-Box Leadership offers a context-specific conceptual basis for understanding private university governance. The framework requires further implementation and empirical evaluation across institutional settings before claims of effectiveness or wider transferability can be established.

Received: 8/31/2026 **Revised:** 11/1/2026 **Accepted:** 11/4/2026 **Published:** 11/15/2026

How to cite this article:
Yusuf, N.Q., Notosudjono, D., & Hamzah. (2027). A Conceptual Model of No-Box Leadership in Private University Governance: A Soft Systems Methodology Approach. *Sharia Economic and Management Business Journal (SEMBJ)*, 8(1), 92-110. https://doi.org/10.62159/sembj.v8i1.2600

INTRODUCTION

Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) play a substantial role in Indonesia's higher education system by expanding access to tertiary education and contributing to national human capital development. In South Tangerang City, a rapidly developing urban area within the Greater Jakarta metropolitan region, the presence of numerous private higher education institutions creates both opportunities and challenges for institutional governance. Although this environment offers considerable demographic, economic, and technological potential, institutional growth does not necessarily translate into consistent quality, effective governance, or organizational adaptability. Private universities must increasingly address challenges related to quality assurance, transparency, innovation, human resource capacity, and information technology infrastructure. These challenges have become more pressing amid digital transformation, the growing application of artificial intelligence, and changing expectations regarding higher education in the Society 5.0 era. Consequently, effective university governance requires leadership capable of responding to environmental change while maintaining institutional accountability, academic integrity, and long-term sustainability.

Previous studies have identified several structural and managerial challenges affecting private higher education in Indonesia. Rosser (2022) discussed governance weaknesses and the influence of business interests on the quality and priorities of higher education institutions. Yodianti and Nugraheni (2023) highlighted limitations in human resources and information system infrastructure that can constrain internal financial auditing, transparency, and accountability. In response to such challenges, Desfiandi et al. (2021) proposed a holistic governance approach emphasizing stakeholder participation, human resource empowerment, and the integration of supporting services. Similarly, Nugroho and Lutfiyah (2024) emphasized the relevance of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles for strengthening institutional sustainability, while Pratama et al. (2024) highlighted barriers to digital transformation associated with technological infrastructure and human resource competencies. Taken together, these studies indicate that improving private university governance requires more than administrative compliance or technological investment. It also requires leadership capable of connecting institutional values, organizational arrangements, decision-making processes, and innovation. However, the extent to which an integrated leadership framework can address these interconnected challenges in the specific context of Indonesian private higher education requires further investigation.

Conventional hierarchical and bureaucratic arrangements can provide important foundations for accountability and coordination, but they may also constrain organizational responsiveness when decision-making becomes overly centralized or procedures are applied without sufficient consideration of changing circumstances. The challenge is therefore not to eliminate organizational structures or formal controls, but to develop leadership practices that enable flexibility and innovation without compromising governance and accountability. In private higher education institutions, this balance is particularly important because strategic decisions often involve multiple stakeholders, including foundation boards, university executives, academic staff, administrative personnel, students, and external partners. Leadership must therefore accommodate diverse interests, navigate institutional constraints, and translate strategic intentions into workable organizational changes. This situation calls for a leadership perspective that goes beyond conventional assumptions about authority and routine decision-making while remaining grounded in ethical responsibility and institutional purpose.

No-Box Leadership offers a potential conceptual perspective for addressing this challenge. Rather than simply encouraging leaders to think outside established boundaries, the concept emphasizes the ability to reconsider conventional assumptions, explore alternative solutions, and respond creatively to complex organizational situations. Its theoretical positioning can be strengthened through the integration of four interrelated dimensions: Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, and Spirituality (W-I-C-S). Wisdom concerns the consideration of long-term consequences, competing interests, and the common good; Intelligence concerns analytical reasoning, contextual understanding, and evidence-informed decisions; Creativity concerns the development of innovative alternatives beyond established routines; and Spirituality concerns moral responsibility, integrity, meaning, and value-oriented leadership. These dimensions are intended to complement one another in guiding leadership decisions. Nevertheless, their relevance to university governance should not be assumed solely on conceptual grounds; their meaning and relationships must be examined in the organizational context in which the leadership model is developed.

Theoretical Positioning and Novelty of No-Box Leadership

Although several leadership theories have emphasized adaptability, innovation, ethical responsibility, and organizational transformation, the integration of these capabilities within a context-specific framework for private university governance remains an important area for conceptual development. Adaptive leadership emphasizes the capacity to mobilize organizational members in responding to complex challenges and changing environments (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009). Ambidextrous leadership focuses on balancing exploratory and exploitative behaviors to facilitate organizational innovation (Rosing et al., 2011), while spiritual leadership emphasizes the role of values, meaning, and ethical responsibility in influencing organizational commitment and leadership effectiveness (Fry, 2003).

No-Box Leadership extends these perspectives by proposing an integrated framework comprising Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, and Spirituality (W-I-C-S). Rather than representing four separate leadership styles, W-I-C-S constitutes a complementary set of leadership orientations that connect strategic judgment, analytical capability, innovative thinking, and moral responsibility. The distinctive contribution of this framework lies in its attempt to integrate these four dimensions into a coherent leadership perspective that addresses the interconnected challenges of private university governance.

The relevance of this integration is particularly significant in private higher education institutions, where leaders must simultaneously address financial sustainability, educational accessibility, academic quality, technological adaptation, and stakeholder expectations. Wisdom provides direction for balancing competing institutional interests; intelligence supports evidence-informed decisions; creativity enables the exploration of alternative organizational arrangements; and spirituality ensures that institutional decisions remain grounded in ethical principles and humanistic values. Consequently, No-Box Leadership conceptualizes organizational flexibility not as the absence of formal structures, but as the capacity to reconsider established practices while maintaining accountability, institutional integrity, and organizational purpose.

Accordingly, the novelty of No-Box Leadership in this study is positioned at the intersection of leadership capabilities and systems-oriented university governance. The framework moves beyond viewing leadership effectiveness solely through individual characteristics or managerial behaviors by considering how leadership orientations interact with organizational structures, stakeholder relationships, and institutional processes. This perspective provides a contextually grounded conceptual contribution to the literature on leadership, organizational change, and private higher education governance.

The practical relevance of this perspective is illustrated by leadership practices described in the context of Universitas Pamulang, which serves as the primary case in the broader dissertation research. These practices include the use of foundation business units to support institutional financing, efforts to expand access to affordable education, an emphasis on spiritual and humanistic values, and the provision of opportunities for academic and administrative personnel to contribute innovative ideas. Such practices offer an empirical starting point for examining how nonconventional leadership approaches may be connected to organizational arrangements, institutional values, and managerial processes. At the same time, these examples should not be interpreted as sufficient evidence that the leadership model is universally effective. Instead, they raise important questions about the conditions under which such practices emerge, how different stakeholders understand them, and how they might be organized into a coherent and contextually relevant conceptual model.

Against this background, this study develops a conceptual model of No-Box Leadership in private university governance using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). SSM is appropriate for exploring complex organizational situations involving multiple stakeholders, differing interpretations of problems, and competing perceptions of desirable change. Through the systematic exploration of the problematic situation, stakeholder perspectives, relevant system definitions, and conceptual activities, the study seeks to examine how the W-I-C-S dimensions can be interpreted in relation to governance challenges in private higher education. The study contributes by articulating a contextually grounded conceptual framework that connects leadership characteristics with organizational governance and the identification of feasible, culturally appropriate improvements. Rather than claiming universal validity or causal effectiveness, the proposed model provides a structured basis for understanding No-Box Leadership in

its institutional context and for informing subsequent empirical evaluation and practical application in private higher education institutions.

METHOD

Research Design and Analytical Approach

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory approach using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to develop a conceptual model of No-Box Leadership in private higher education governance. SSM was selected because governance challenges in private higher education institutions (PHEIs) involve complex interactions among organizational structures, leadership practices, institutional values, stakeholder interests, and decision-making processes. These challenges cannot be adequately understood solely through technical or administrative analysis; they also require consideration of the different perspectives through which organizational members interpret problematic situations.

The study focused on Universitas Pamulang in South Tangerang City, Indonesia, as the primary case for examining the contextual characteristics of No-Box Leadership in private higher education governance. The analysis aimed to explore existing governance practices, identify problematic situations and relevant stakeholders, examine the relationships among leadership, organizational arrangements, and institutional values, and formulate an initial conceptual model incorporating the Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, and Spirituality (W-I-C-S) dimensions of No-Box Leadership.

Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews, and document analysis. These methods were used to explore stakeholder perspectives, obtain contextual explanations of leadership and governance practices, and examine relevant institutional information. The use of multiple data sources supported a broader understanding of the problematic situation and provided a basis for comparing different perspectives during the SSM process.

The participants were selected from institutional leaders and managerial personnel directly involved in strategic decision-making, quality management, and academic policy implementation. The intended participant categories included rectors, vice-rectors, deans, heads of study programs, and other relevant managerial officials. Their involvement was intended to capture different organizational perspectives on leadership practices, governance arrangements, institutional constraints, and opportunities for change.

Application of Soft Systems Methodology

Soft Systems Methodology, developed by Checkland (1972), provides a systems-thinking framework for investigating complex situations involving human activity, multiple stakeholder perspectives, and differing interpretations of organizational problems. Rather than assuming that a problematic situation has a single objective definition, SSM facilitates a structured exploration of how the situation is perceived, how relevant activities can be conceptualized, and what changes may be both desirable and feasible.

In this study, SSM was used to examine No-Box Leadership in the context of private higher education governance. The analytical process followed the seven-stage SSM framework: (1) identifying the problematic situation; (2) expressing the problematic situation; (3) formulating root definitions of relevant systems; (4) developing conceptual models; (5) comparing the conceptual models with the real-world situation; (6) identifying desirable and feasible changes; and (7) formulating actions to improve the problematic situation.

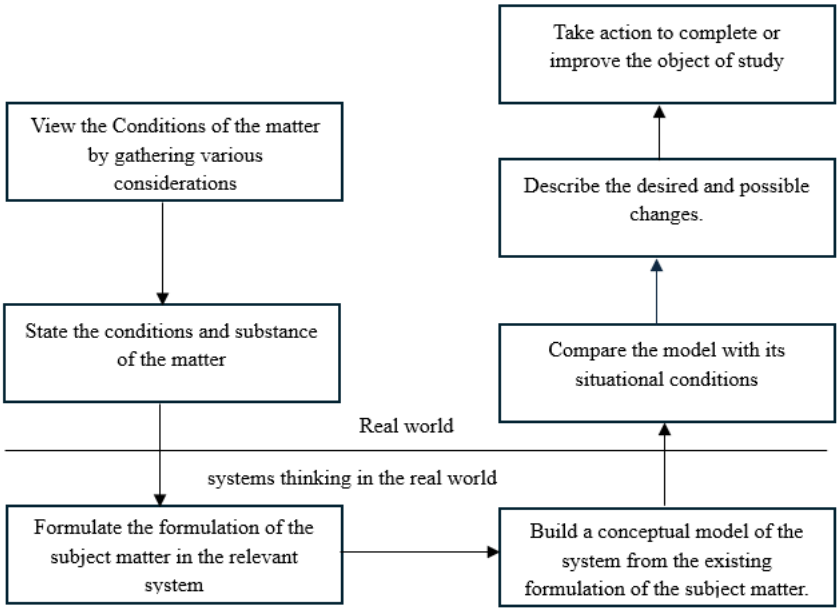


Figure 1. SSM Basic Framework

The seven stages were applied as an interconnected analytical process rather than as isolated procedures. Information obtained from FGDs, in-depth interviews, and institutional documents informed the exploration of the problematic situation and the development of the conceptual model. The resulting model was then considered in relation to the existing organizational context to identify potential improvements in leadership and governance.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection and analysis were organized around the seven stages of SSM.

Stage 1: Identifying the Problematic Situation

The first stage focused on identifying governance and leadership situations perceived as problematic within the case institution. The analysis considered issues associated with decision-making, communication, organizational coordination, institutional values, innovation, and the responsiveness of managerial processes. Information from FGDs and in-depth interviews was used to understand how institutional leaders and managerial personnel perceived these issues. Relevant documents provided additional contextual information about institutional arrangements and governance practices.

Stage 2: Expressing the Problematic Situation

The second stage involved organizing the information obtained from the data sources into a comprehensive representation of the problematic situation. The analysis considered three interrelated dimensions: the social dimension, including individuals and groups involved in or affected by governance practices; the cultural dimension, including institutional norms, values, assumptions, and patterns of interaction; and the political dimension, including authority, influence, decision-making rights, and relationships among organizational actors.

These dimensions informed the development of a *Rich Picture* to represent the relationships among stakeholders, organizational processes, institutional constraints, and competing perspectives. The Rich Picture was intended to provide a holistic view of the situation rather than to reduce the governance problem to a single organizational variable.

Stage 3: Formulating Root Definitions and CATWOE Analysis

The third stage involved formulating root definitions of relevant human activity systems. Root definitions described the purposeful transformation that a relevant system would undertake to address the identified governance problems. The formulation was informed by stakeholder perspectives and the institutional context. CATWOE was used as an analytical framework to clarify the principal elements of the relevant system:

C — Customers: The individuals or groups who benefit from, or may be adversely affected by, the transformation, including relevant members of the university community.

A — Actors: The individuals or groups responsible for carrying out the activities required to achieve the transformation.

T — Transformation: The process through which an identified problematic situation is transformed into a more desirable governance condition.

W — Weltanschauung (Worldview): The underlying beliefs and perspectives that explain why the proposed transformation is meaningful and desirable.

O — Owners: The individuals or institutional bodies with the authority to initiate, modify, or discontinue the relevant system.

E — Environmental Constraints: External or contextual conditions that influence the system but cannot be readily controlled by its participants.

The CATWOE analysis provided a structured basis for examining how leadership practices, organizational authority, stakeholder interests, and institutional values could be incorporated into the proposed No-Box Leadership model.

Stage 4: Developing the Conceptual Model

In the fourth stage, the root definitions were translated into conceptual models consisting of logically related activities required to achieve the intended transformation. The models were expressed through purposeful activities rather than descriptions of organizational positions alone. Particular attention was given to the relationships among leadership capabilities, stakeholder participation, decision-making, organizational coordination, and institutional learning.

The W-I-C-S dimensions—Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, and Spirituality—provided the conceptual basis for examining the leadership characteristics relevant to the identified governance situation. Wisdom concerns the consideration of long-term consequences and the common good; Intelligence concerns analytical reasoning and informed decision-making; Creativity concerns the development of alternative solutions and innovation; and Spirituality concerns ethical responsibility, integrity, and value-oriented leadership.

Monitoring and control were also considered within the conceptual model. Monitoring concerns whether the activities contribute to their intended objectives, while evaluation considers their effectiveness, efficiency, and consistency with institutional values and governance requirements. The resulting conceptual model was intended to illustrate how leadership characteristics could be connected to purposeful organizational activities.

Stage 5: Comparing the Conceptual Model with the Real-World Situation

The fifth stage involved comparing the activities represented in the conceptual model with the practices and conditions identified in the case institution. The comparison was intended to identify similarities, discrepancies, and areas requiring further consideration. Relevant questions included whether the proposed activities were already present in the institution, how they were carried out, what constraints affected their implementation, and what evidence would be needed to assess their contribution to governance improvement.

The comparison provided a basis for distinguishing between existing practices and proposed improvements. It also enabled consideration of whether the activities associated with No-Box Leadership were compatible with institutional arrangements, stakeholder expectations, and the practical requirements of university governance.

Stage 6: Identifying Desirable and Feasible Changes

The sixth stage focused on identifying changes that could improve the problematic situation. Desirability was considered in relation to the conceptual model and its potential contribution to more responsive, participatory, innovative, and value-oriented governance. Feasibility was considered in relation to the institution's organizational arrangements, authority structures, resources, institutional culture, and stakeholder perspectives.

The analysis emphasized changes that could be considered both systematically desirable and culturally feasible. Potential improvements were examined in terms of their relevance to leadership practices, communication, decision-making, organizational coordination, and the integration of institutional values into governance processes. This stage provided the basis for formulating practical implications of the proposed conceptual model.

Stage 7: Formulating Actions to Improve the Problematic Situation

The final stage concerned the formulation of potential actions based on the changes identified in the preceding stage. These actions were intended to provide a direction for improving leadership and governance practices in the case institution. Because the principal objective of this study was to develop a conceptual model, the identification of proposed actions should be distinguished from the implementation and evaluation of those actions. Accordingly, the model provides a structured basis for future organizational application and empirical assessment rather than, by itself, demonstrating the effectiveness of implemented interventions.

Synthesis of Findings and Conceptual Model Development

The findings from the data collection and SSM analysis were synthesized to formulate the initial conceptual model of No-Box Leadership in private higher education governance. The synthesis considered the problematic situation, stakeholder perspectives, root definitions, CATWOE elements, conceptual activities, and the comparison between the proposed model and the organizational context.

The W-I-C-S dimensions were used to organize the leadership characteristics relevant to the identified governance situation. The resulting model sought to explain how wisdom, intelligence, creativity, and spirituality could inform leadership decisions and organizational activities while accounting for institutional constraints and stakeholder interests. The model was therefore developed as a contextually grounded conceptual proposition intended to inform further research and potential governance improvements in private higher education institutions.

RESULTS

Characteristics of No-Box Leadership at Universitas Pamulang

The findings indicate that No-Box Leadership at Universitas Pamulang is reflected in leadership practices that challenge rigid administrative routines while remaining oriented toward institutional goals, accountability, and social responsibility. Rather than being understood merely as the ability to think outside conventional boundaries, No-Box Leadership is characterized by the willingness to reconsider established practices, respond adaptively to organizational challenges, and create opportunities for innovation without abandoning institutional values.

The accounts provided by university leaders suggest that these practices developed organically during the institution’s growth rather than through the formal adoption of a predefined leadership model. The Rector described the development of foundation business units as an alternative funding strategy, with the proceeds reinvested in campus facilities and educational service quality. This practice illustrates an effort to address resource constraints through an approach that differs from reliance on student tuition alone. It also demonstrates that organizational flexibility can operate alongside financial accountability and institutional objectives.

Inclusive access to education emerged as another characteristic of No-Box Leadership. According to the Vice Rector I, institutional policies seek to provide educational opportunities to broader segments of society, including marginalized groups, without imposing excessive financial burdens on students. This approach reflects the integration of strategic considerations with a commitment to social benefit. Meanwhile, the Vice Rector II emphasized the spiritual and moral foundations of institutional

governance, describing leadership as a responsibility guided by values, service, and accountability before God.

The Vice Rector IV highlighted managerial flexibility as another manifestation of No-Box Leadership. Lecturers and educational staff are encouraged to develop ideas and contribute to organizational improvement, while decision-making is expected to become more responsive to technological developments and workplace demands. Taken together, these accounts suggest that No-Box Leadership at Universitas Pamulang encompasses four interrelated dimensions: wisdom, intelligence, creativity, and spirituality (W-I-C-S).

Wisdom concerns the capacity to consider long-term consequences, balance competing interests, and orient decisions toward the common good. In the case examined, this dimension is reflected in efforts to balance institutional development with affordable and inclusive education. Intelligence involves analyzing organizational problems, considering relevant information, and making reasoned decisions. The development of alternative funding arrangements and responses to changing educational demands illustrates the practical relevance of this dimension. Creativity is reflected in the willingness to reconsider conventional practices, explore alternative funding strategies, and encourage innovation among academic and administrative personnel. Spirituality provides an ethical and moral foundation for leadership, emphasizing service, integrity, human dignity, and responsibility.

These dimensions should not be interpreted as four independent leadership styles. Rather, they represent complementary orientations that can inform leadership decisions. Creativity without wisdom may produce innovation without sufficient consideration of long-term consequences, while intelligence without spirituality may prioritize technical efficiency without adequately considering human and ethical implications. Wisdom helps integrate analytical judgment, innovation, and moral responsibility.

The findings therefore conceptualize No-Box Leadership as a context-sensitive leadership practice that combines organizational flexibility with accountability and values-based decision-making. The evidence from Universitas Pamulang provides an illustrative case of how these dimensions may be expressed in the governance of a private higher education institution. However, the findings should not be generalized automatically to all private universities without further investigation.

Implementation of No-Box Leadership

The implementation of No-Box Leadership at Universitas Pamulang can be examined through three interconnected aspects: institutional strategy, managerial practices, and organizational culture.

At the strategic level, the development of foundation business units represents an alternative approach to financing institutional growth. The reinvestment of business proceeds in campus facilities and educational services illustrates how leadership can respond to resource constraints by exploring options beyond conventional funding arrangements. This example is relevant to the creativity dimension, while the need to maintain accountability and align investment with institutional priorities reflects wisdom and intelligence.

At the managerial level, the informants described an approach that encourages more flexible decision-making and greater responsiveness to organizational and external demands. The freedom provided to lecturers and educational staff to contribute ideas may create opportunities for problem-solving and innovation. Nevertheless, flexibility does not imply the absence of procedures or controls. In higher education governance, the removal of unnecessary administrative barriers needs to be accompanied by clear responsibilities, transparent decision-making, and appropriate accountability mechanisms.

At the cultural level, the accounts emphasize humanistic relationships, participation, and the spiritual meaning of organizational service. The emphasis on inclusive education connects institutional decision-making with broader social responsibilities, while the moral orientation described by the Vice Rector II situates leadership within a framework of values and service. These findings suggest that the implementation of No-Box Leadership involves not only changes in formal managerial practices but also the values that guide organizational behavior.

The three aspects are interrelated. Strategic flexibility creates opportunities for institutional development, managerial practices influence how those opportunities are translated into action, and organizational culture shapes how members understand and respond to change. Accordingly, No-Box

Leadership is best examined as a governance approach embedded in organizational systems and processes rather than solely as a set of personal characteristics possessed by individual leaders.

The findings also indicate several issues that require attention. Greater decision-making flexibility may be constrained by established bureaucratic procedures, limited resources, coordination difficulties between organizational units, and differences in readiness for change. These challenges imply that leadership flexibility alone may be insufficient. Its practical contribution depends on whether organizational structures, communication practices, and decision-making processes support cross-unit collaboration and responsible innovation.

Consequently, the case suggests that the implementation of No-Box Leadership requires alignment between leadership values and organizational arrangements. Empowerment needs to be accompanied by role clarity, while innovation needs to be supported by communication, coordination, and evaluation. This interpretation provides a basis for the subsequent systems analysis using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM).

Rich Picture: Mapping the Problematic Situation

At the external level, private higher education institutions operate amid economic pressures, changing stakeholder expectations, technological developments, social demands, and government regulations. These conditions create an ongoing need to maintain educational relevance, organizational sustainability, and institutional quality. The figure also identifies accreditation and quality standards as important considerations in institutional governance.

Within the organization, the Rector and Vice Rectors occupy strategic leadership and coordination roles, while lecturers and educational staff contribute to academic and administrative operations. Students are central recipients of educational services, and external partners and industry contribute perspectives on graduate competencies and the relevance of educational provision. These actors are connected through decision-making, service delivery, communication, and institutional development.

The Rich Picture also highlights internal challenges, including bureaucratic complexity, resource constraints, performance demands, and difficulties associated with adapting organizational culture. These challenges may interact with one another. For example, complicated procedures can delay decisions, while limited coordination between units can make it more difficult to implement innovations. At the same time, institutions must maintain appropriate accountability and quality standards. The problem is therefore not simply the existence of organizational rules, but the difficulty of balancing necessary controls with the flexibility required to respond to changing conditions.

Within this situation, No-Box Leadership is positioned as a potential organizing approach rather than a single intervention that automatically resolves every organizational problem. The W-I-C-S dimensions provide a way to interpret how leadership may respond to the identified challenges. Intelligence supports the analysis of organizational conditions and available information; creativity encourages alternative solutions and cross-unit collaboration; spirituality provides an ethical orientation for decisions affecting people and communities; and wisdom helps balance these considerations in pursuit of institutional sustainability.

The practices described by the informants offer concrete illustrations of this relationship. Alternative funding through foundation business units represents an attempt to respond to resource constraints. Inclusive education reflects the consideration of social benefit in institutional strategy. Encouraging lecturers and educational staff to innovate illustrates the importance of empowerment and flexibility. These practices are consistent with the proposed W-I-C-S dimensions, although the Rich Picture itself should be understood as a systems representation of the situation rather than empirical proof that the model has produced particular outcomes.

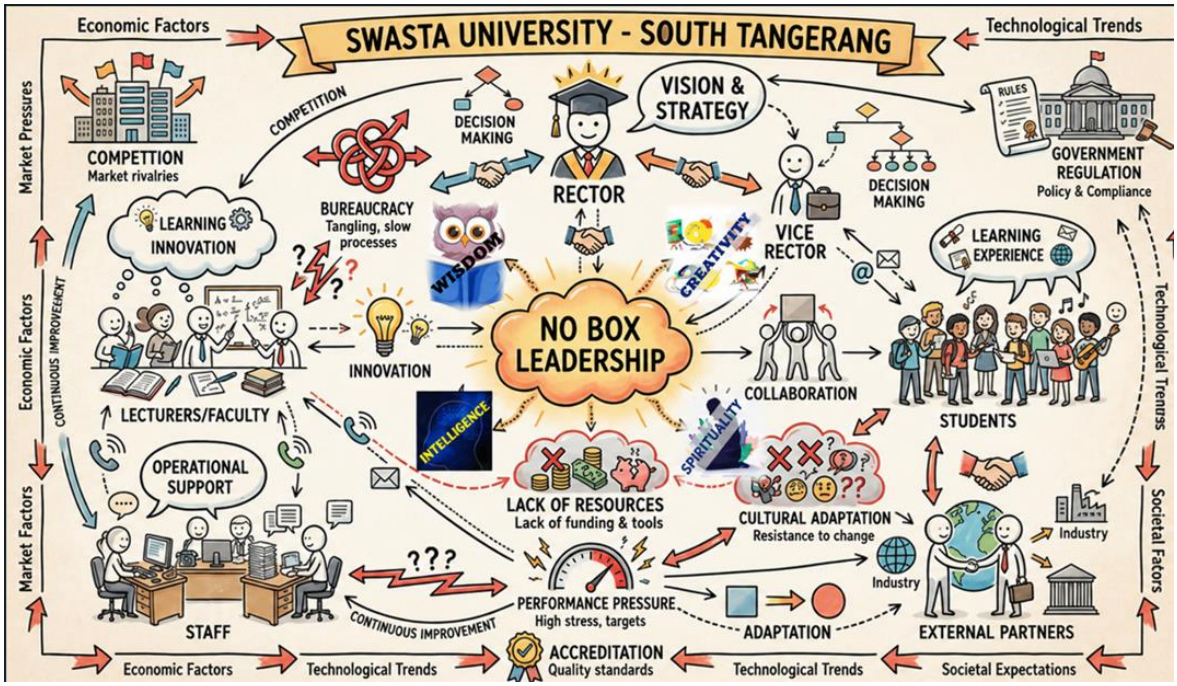


Figure 2. Rich Picture

The Rich Picture thus identifies a central governance issue: how can private higher education institutions respond to external change and internal constraints while maintaining educational quality, accountability, and social responsibility? This question provides the foundation for formulating the relevant system of purposeful activity and developing a conceptual model through the subsequent stages of SSM.

Integrating the Findings into a Conceptual Model of No-Box Leadership

The findings from the informants and the systems representation indicate that No-Box Leadership can be conceptualized through the interaction between leadership orientation and organizational arrangements. The W-I-C-S dimensions describe the principles that inform leadership decisions, while organizational systems and processes provide the context in which these principles can be translated into practice.

In this proposed model, wisdom, intelligence, creativity, and spirituality inform how leaders interpret problems, consider alternatives, and determine appropriate courses of action. Their practical expression depends on the presence of organizational arrangements that support communication, coordination, participation, and accountable decision-making. Leadership flexibility, for example, is more likely to be operationally meaningful when personnel understand their responsibilities and have appropriate opportunities to contribute to institutional improvement.

The model therefore distinguishes between the leadership principles that guide decision-making and the organizational mechanisms through which those principles may be enacted. This distinction is important because encouraging leaders to think beyond conventional boundaries does not, by itself, remove institutional constraints. Organizational procedures, relationships between units, and established working practices may need to be reviewed so that innovation can occur without compromising governance requirements.

From an SSM perspective, the conceptual model is a structured representation of purposeful activities that can be compared with the existing organizational situation. It is not a claim that the proposed arrangements have already been fully implemented or that their effectiveness has been experimentally established. Rather, it provides a basis for discussing feasible changes with relevant stakeholders and identifying practical actions that are consistent with the institution's context and values.

The contribution of this study is therefore the contextual articulation of No-Box Leadership as a values-based and systems-oriented approach to private higher education governance. By integrating W-I-C-S with the organizational challenges identified in the Rich Picture, the study moves beyond

describing leadership as individual flexibility and considers the relationship between leadership principles, institutional arrangements, and organizational practices. The final model should be interpreted alongside the CATWOE analysis and the comparison between the conceptual model and the existing situation, as these SSM outputs are necessary to clarify the system's purpose, stakeholder perspectives, and feasible areas of change.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions to Leadership and Higher Education Governance

The findings of this study contribute to the leadership literature by positioning No-Box Leadership as a systems-oriented and values-based approach to understanding leadership in private higher education governance. While existing leadership perspectives have examined adaptability, innovation, and spirituality as important leadership characteristics, this study brings these elements together through the W-I-C-S framework. The integration provides a broader conceptual understanding of leadership capabilities required to navigate institutional complexity.

First, the study extends the discussion of leadership adaptability by demonstrating that organizational flexibility needs to be accompanied by wisdom and intelligence. Adaptive leadership emphasizes the mobilization of organizational members in responding to complex challenges (Heifetz, 1994). The present study adds a governance-oriented perspective by highlighting the importance of balancing alternative solutions with institutional accountability, long-term consequences, and stakeholder interests. Thus, flexibility is understood not merely as the ability to change existing practices but also as the capacity to determine which changes are appropriate and feasible within the institutional context.

Second, the study contributes to the literature on organizational innovation by connecting creativity with ethical judgment and institutional purpose. Ambidextrous leadership emphasizes the importance of balancing exploratory and exploitative activities to facilitate innovation (Rosing et al., 2011). The findings of this study suggest that creativity in private university governance should not operate independently of organizational accountability. Instead, innovative initiatives need to be evaluated in relation to institutional sustainability, educational quality, resource availability, and stakeholder needs.

Third, the integration of spirituality within W-I-C-S expands the understanding of values-based leadership in higher education. Spiritual leadership highlights the importance of meaning, values, and ethical responsibility in organizational life (Fry, 2003). In the present study, spirituality is considered alongside wisdom, intelligence, and creativity, thereby emphasizing that institutional transformation should remain consistent with human dignity, integrity, and social responsibility. This integration is particularly relevant to private universities, where strategic and financial decisions must remain aligned with educational purposes and institutional values.

Fourth, this study extends the discussion of higher education governance by emphasizing the interaction between leadership capabilities and organizational systems. Previous governance discussions have frequently highlighted institutional structures, accountability mechanisms, financial resources, and regulatory arrangements. The findings suggest that these structural elements should also be examined in relation to leadership capabilities that facilitate communication, cross-unit coordination, participation, and organizational learning. Consequently, effective governance is conceptualized not only as a matter of formal institutional arrangements but also as a process shaped by how leaders interpret problems, engage stakeholders, and translate institutional values into organizational practices.

From an organizational change perspective, No-Box Leadership offers a conceptual basis for understanding how private universities may respond to digital disruption, changing stakeholder expectations, and regulatory pressures. The W-I-C-S dimensions provide complementary orientations for interpreting organizational challenges, exploring alternative solutions, and maintaining institutional legitimacy during transformation. However, the contribution of this study is conceptual and context-specific. Further empirical research is required to examine whether and under what conditions the proposed framework contributes to governance effectiveness, organizational resilience, and stakeholder satisfaction.

Contribution of Soft Systems Methodology to Leadership Model Development

The application of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) provides an important methodological contribution to the development of the No-Box Leadership framework. Unlike conventional approaches that examine organizational problems primarily through predefined variables, indicators, or structural relationships, SSM enables the exploration of complex organizational situations from different stakeholder perspectives. This approach is particularly relevant to private university governance because institutional challenges are shaped not only by formal structures and managerial arrangements but also by differences in organizational values, interests, authority, culture, and interpretations of institutional priorities.

Through the Rich Picture, this study identifies the interconnected relationships among institutional leadership, academic and administrative personnel, students, external partners, regulatory pressures, resource constraints, and organizational adaptation. The analysis illustrates that governance challenges cannot be adequately understood as isolated managerial problems. For instance, bureaucratic complexity may interact with limited coordination across organizational units, while resource constraints may influence institutional decisions concerning educational accessibility, infrastructure development, and organizational innovation. The Rich Picture therefore provides a holistic representation of the problematic situation and its interrelated organizational dimensions.

Furthermore, the CATWOE framework provides a systematic basis for examining the transformation required to improve the identified problematic situation. By considering Customers, Actors, Transformation, Weltanschauung, Owners, and Environmental Constraints, the analysis clarifies the purpose of the relevant system, the actors involved, the underlying worldview, and the institutional conditions influencing organizational change. These elements provide a basis for understanding the different interests and contextual considerations that affect the feasibility of governance improvements.

The participatory orientation of SSM also provides an analytical opportunity to consider different stakeholder perspectives in formulating relevant systems and purposeful activities. In this study, stakeholder perspectives were explored through the available interview and focus group discussion information, complemented by institutional documents and the organizational relationships represented in the Rich Picture. This approach enabled the analysis to consider the broader institutional context without assuming that all stakeholder groups were directly involved as research participants.

The methodological contribution of this study lies in connecting stakeholder-oriented problem exploration with the conceptual development of leadership capabilities. SSM does not merely function as a technique for describing organizational problems; it provides a structured process for translating complex governance situations into relevant system definitions, conceptual activities, and potential organizational improvements. Through this process, the Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, and Spirituality (W-I-C-S) dimensions are positioned within the organizational context in which leadership decisions and governance practices take place.

Accordingly, the proposed No-Box Leadership model represents a contextually informed conceptual outcome of systems thinking rather than a predetermined leadership framework imposed on the institution. By integrating the SSM analytical process with the W-I-C-S dimensions, this study demonstrates how leadership capabilities can be examined in relation to organizational structures, stakeholder interests, institutional values, and feasible changes. This methodological integration provides an alternative perspective for investigating complex governance challenges in private higher education institutions.

Theoretical Propositions for Future Empirical Research

The conceptualization of No-Box Leadership can also be examined through the perspective of Islamic leadership values, particularly the principles of amanah (trustworthiness), 'adl (justice), and maslahah (public interest). These principles provide an ethical foundation for leadership and organizational governance by emphasizing that institutional decisions should be guided not only by managerial effectiveness but also by moral responsibility, fairness, and the welfare of the wider community. The relationship between these principles and the W-I-C-S dimensions offers an additional conceptual perspective for understanding values-based leadership in higher education.

Wisdom has a conceptual connection with hikmah, which emphasizes the ability to apply knowledge, understanding, and sound judgment in making decisions. In university governance, hikmah encourages leaders to consider the long-term consequences of institutional policies, balance competing interests, and orient decisions toward educational objectives and community welfare. This perspective is consistent with maslahah, which emphasizes the importance of promoting collective benefits and avoiding decisions that may undermine the interests of the wider academic community.

Intelligence can be interpreted in relation to the importance of knowledge, competence, and responsible reasoning in Islamic leadership. Leaders are expected to make informed decisions based on relevant information, professional capabilities, and careful consideration of institutional consequences. This dimension is also connected with amanah because the authority to manage institutional resources, academic policies, and organizational responsibilities requires competence, honesty, and accountability.

Creativity reflects the capacity to explore alternative solutions, encourage innovation, and respond constructively to organizational challenges. From the perspective of Islamic values, creativity should be exercised within an ethical framework that respects justice ('adl), institutional responsibility, and stakeholder welfare. Innovation in higher education governance should therefore not be directed exclusively toward organizational growth or financial efficiency but should also contribute to educational accessibility, service quality, and broader social benefits.

Spirituality provides the moral and ethical foundation of the W-I-C-S framework. It is associated with sincerity, integrity, accountability before God, and responsibility toward other human beings. This dimension strengthens the principle of amanah by positioning leadership as a responsibility that must be exercised with honesty, fairness, and commitment to institutional and social welfare. Spirituality also reinforces the understanding that leadership is not merely an administrative position but a responsibility involving ethical conduct and service to the academic community.

The integration of these Islamic values suggests that No-Box Leadership can be understood as a leadership perspective connecting managerial capabilities with ethical and spiritual responsibilities. Wisdom encourages decisions grounded in hikmah and maslahah; intelligence supports knowledge-based and accountable governance; creativity facilitates responsible innovation within the boundaries of justice; and spirituality reinforces amanah, sincerity, and moral responsibility. These relationships demonstrate the potential compatibility between the W-I-C-S framework and Islamic value-based leadership.

Nevertheless, the present study was conducted at Universitas Pamulang and was not specifically designed as an empirical investigation of Islamic leadership. Therefore, the relationship between No-Box Leadership and Islamic values is presented as a conceptual interpretation of the proposed framework rather than a direct empirical finding. This perspective provides opportunities for further investigation, particularly in Islamic higher education institutions seeking to integrate contemporary leadership practices with ethical, spiritual, and socially responsible governance.

Shura and Participatory Governance in Private Higher Education

The Islamic principle of shura (consultation) offers an important perspective for strengthening the participatory dimension of No-Box Leadership. Shura emphasizes consultation, collective deliberation, and the consideration of different perspectives before organizational decisions are made. This principle is relevant to private higher education institutions, where governance decisions involve multiple stakeholders with different responsibilities, interests, and expectations. Through consultation, institutional leadership can develop a broader understanding of organizational problems and consider alternative solutions that reflect the needs of the academic community.

Within the proposed No-Box Leadership framework, shura complements the W-I-C-S dimensions by providing an organizational mechanism through which leadership principles can be translated into participatory decision-making. Wisdom enables leaders to consider different perspectives and their long-term consequences, intelligence supports the evaluation of information and alternative solutions, creativity encourages collective problem-solving and innovation, while spirituality reinforces mutual respect, sincerity, and ethical responsibility during deliberation.

The application of shura may be reflected in structured consultation involving university executives, deans, heads of study programs, lecturers, educational staff, student representatives, and

relevant external partners. Such consultation may be facilitated through regular coordination meetings, cross-functional forums, institutional focus group discussions, and participatory evaluation sessions. These mechanisms can provide opportunities to identify shared governance challenges, improve communication across organizational units, clarify responsibilities, and strengthen stakeholder involvement in institutional development.

The principle of shura also has a conceptual relationship with the participatory orientation of Soft Systems Methodology. Through the exploration of problematic situations, Rich Picture development, and the formulation of relevant systems, SSM provides an analytical process for understanding different interpretations of organizational problems. When considered alongside shura, this process highlights the importance of consultation and collective understanding in identifying desirable and feasible organizational changes. Both perspectives recognize that complex organizational problems require consideration of multiple viewpoints rather than relying exclusively on a single managerial interpretation.

However, participatory governance requires more than providing opportunities for discussion. Consultation should be supported by clear responsibilities, transparent decision-making procedures, appropriate documentation, and mechanisms for translating deliberations into institutional actions. Institutional leaders should therefore establish follow-up procedures to ensure that stakeholder recommendations are evaluated, assigned to responsible organizational units, and reviewed according to agreed institutional priorities.

Accordingly, integrating shura into No-Box Leadership provides a conceptual basis for developing more inclusive, accountable, and participatory governance practices. The combination of W-I-C-S leadership orientations, the consultative principle of shura, and the systems-oriented perspective of SSM offers a broader understanding of how private universities may align leadership values with organizational processes. This integration may also provide a relevant conceptual reference for Islamic higher education institutions seeking to strengthen institutional governance while maintaining their ethical and educational missions.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have several managerial implications for private higher education institutions (PHEIs), particularly in the context of Universitas Pamulang, South Tangerang. Through the application of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), institutional governance can be understood as an interaction between organizational structures, managerial processes, stakeholder relationships, and underlying values. The implications of this study therefore focus on strengthening cross-unit coordination, facilitating organizational change, developing leadership capacity, fostering organizational learning, and supporting institutional sustainability. Furthermore, the proposed No-Box Leadership framework provides a conceptual perspective for connecting leadership capabilities with ethical responsibilities and values-based governance, including principles that are relevant to Islamic institutional contexts.

Institutional leaders should establish structured mechanisms for dialogue and coordination across academic, financial, administrative, and quality assurance units. Regular coordination meetings, facilitated discussions, and focus group discussions can provide opportunities to identify shared problems, clarify responsibilities, and align institutional priorities. Consistent with the SSM perspective, complex organizational problems require attention not only to formal structures and procedures but also to the different perceptions, interests, and expectations of stakeholders. The Islamic principle of shura (consultation) provides an additional perspective for strengthening these participatory practices by encouraging collective deliberation and consideration of different viewpoints in institutional decision-making. Strengthening cross-unit communication and consultation may help institutions develop a shared understanding of governance challenges and identify feasible solutions.

The implementation of organizational change should combine procedural clarity with a people-centered leadership approach. Changes involving standard operating procedures (SOPs), organizational restructuring, or information technology systems should be accompanied by clear communication, staff participation, appropriate training, and feedback mechanisms. Within the No-Box Leadership framework, this approach connects intelligence, through systematic problem analysis, with wisdom and spirituality, through consideration of human needs, ethical responsibilities, and institutional values. In

the context of Islamic values-based governance, these practices may also reflect amanah (trustworthiness) and 'adl (justice), particularly in ensuring that organizational changes are implemented responsibly and fairly. Such practices may help address implementation barriers and support staff readiness to adapt to organizational change.

Leadership development should also incorporate the W-I-C-S dimensions—Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, and Spirituality—as a framework for strengthening managerial competencies. Mentoring, leadership training, and reflective evaluation can help current and prospective leaders, including deans, heads of study programs, and bureau heads, develop these complementary capabilities. Wisdom supports balanced judgment and conflict resolution and may be associated with hikmah, or the ability to apply knowledge and understanding through sound judgment. Intelligence strengthens evidence-informed decision-making and professional competence. Creativity encourages alternative solutions and responsible innovation, while spirituality reinforces integrity, ethical responsibility, sincerity, and service to the academic community. From an Islamic leadership perspective, these dimensions may be connected with amanah, 'adl, and maslahah, thereby encouraging leaders to consider not only institutional effectiveness but also fairness and the welfare of stakeholders. Institutions may consider integrating W-I-C-S capabilities into leadership development, leadership evaluation, and succession planning, provided that the relevant indicators are clearly defined and applied through transparent assessment procedures.

An organizational learning environment is equally important for sustaining institutional adaptability. Continuing professional development, digital competency training, knowledge-sharing activities, and collaborative problem-solving can help lecturers and educational staff respond to evolving academic, administrative, and technological demands. In line with SSM, these initiatives should address the specific problems and stakeholder needs identified within the institution rather than operate as isolated training activities. For institutions guided by Islamic values, organizational learning may also incorporate ethical reflection, professional integrity, and social responsibility as important elements of leadership and employee development. A sustained learning environment may support staff capability development and facilitate improvements in academic and administrative processes, including those associated with the Tri Dharma of Higher Education.

Institutional sustainability also requires leaders to explore strategic options that are appropriate to their organizational context and available resources. The case of Universitas Pamulang illustrates the relevance of alternative funding arrangements and inclusive educational access in institutional development. Other private universities may assess the feasibility of strategic partnerships with industry, shared digital infrastructure, cloud-based services, and hybrid learning arrangements, depending on their institutional needs and resources. Such initiatives should be evaluated in terms of educational quality, financial feasibility, data security, regulatory compliance, and long-term sustainability. From the perspective of Islamic values, institutional sustainability should also consider maslahah, emphasizing the broader benefits of institutional policies for students, employees, and society. This perspective does not diminish the importance of physical infrastructure; rather, it encourages leaders to consider a broader range of options when making strategic decisions.

The proposed No-Box Leadership framework also offers potential implications for Islamic higher education institutions (IHEIs), particularly those seeking to integrate institutional competitiveness, educational quality, and Islamic ethical values. Although the empirical context of this study is Universitas Pamulang, the W-I-C-S framework may provide a conceptual reference for Islamic universities facing similar challenges related to institutional sustainability, digital transformation, human resource development, and stakeholder expectations. Wisdom may guide institutional leaders in aligning strategic decisions with educational objectives and the principle of maslahah. Intelligence may strengthen evidence-informed governance and responsible institutional resource management. Creativity may encourage innovation in academic programs, digital learning, research collaboration, and community engagement, while spirituality may reinforce amanah, integrity, sincerity, and accountability as foundations of institutional culture. Together, these dimensions may support the development of Islamic educational leadership that balances organizational effectiveness with ethical and spiritual responsibilities.

Beyond higher education, the framework may also have potential relevance for Islamic social finance institutions, including zakat and waqf organizations, as well as organizations operating in the

halal industry. In these settings, the W-I-C-S dimensions may provide a conceptual perspective for understanding leadership responsibilities in managing institutional resources, developing innovative services, strengthening accountability, and promoting social welfare. Wisdom and intelligence may support responsible resource allocation and evidence-informed decisions, creativity may encourage innovative social finance programs and service development, while spirituality may reinforce trustworthiness and ethical accountability. Nevertheless, the application of the framework in these sectors requires contextual adaptation and further empirical investigation.

The institutionalization of No-Box Leadership in Islamic educational settings also requires organizational policies and practices that translate Islamic values into everyday governance. Transparent resource management may reinforce amanah, fair human resource policies may reflect 'adl, community-oriented educational programs may promote maslahah, and regular stakeholder consultations may institutionalize shura. These principles can be incorporated into leadership development programs, organizational policies, performance evaluation, and institutional decision-making. Mentoring, ethical decision-making exercises, spiritual reflection, and collaborative problem-solving may further strengthen the W-I-C-S capabilities of current and prospective leaders. Through these mechanisms, Islamic values can become an integral part of organizational culture rather than remaining limited to institutional statements or ceremonial activities.

Overall, these implications position No-Box Leadership as a potentially useful framework for aligning leadership values with organizational systems, institutional processes, and ethical responsibilities. The W-I-C-S dimensions provide a basis for guiding leadership judgment, while SSM offers a structured approach to exploring complex situations, comparing stakeholder perspectives, and identifying changes that are desirable and feasible. In the context of Islamic values-based governance, the principles of amanah, 'adl, maslahah, and shura provide additional ethical orientations for translating leadership capabilities into responsible and participatory institutional practices. Because the study is grounded in a specific institutional context, the proposed actions should be adapted to the governance arrangements, resources, cultural characteristics, and stakeholder needs of each institution. Further application and evaluation in other private higher education settings, including Islamic higher education institutions, would be necessary to assess the transferability and practical effectiveness of the proposed framework.

CONCLUSION

This study examines No-Box Leadership in private higher education governance through the application of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), using Universitas Pamulang in South Tangerang as the institutional context. The findings indicate that institutional governance involves interconnected challenges related to organizational procedures, coordination across work units, adaptation to technological developments, and the alignment of institutional priorities with stakeholder needs. These challenges suggest that improving higher education governance requires more than formal administrative arrangements; it also requires attention to organizational relationships, leadership practices, and the values underlying managerial decisions.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the conceptual integration of Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, and Spirituality (W-I-C-S) as complementary dimensions of No-Box Leadership. This framework extends the discussion of adaptive, innovative, and spiritual leadership by connecting leadership capabilities with the organizational systems and processes that shape private university governance. The proposed model emphasizes that effective institutional transformation requires not only flexible leadership and innovative thinking but also analytical judgment, ethical responsibility, stakeholder participation, and organizational accountability.

From the perspective of organizational change and institutional sustainability, No-Box Leadership provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how private universities can strengthen their capacity to respond to digital disruption, regulatory developments, resource constraints, and changing stakeholder expectations. Its potential contribution to organizational resilience lies in the alignment between leadership orientations and institutional arrangements that support communication, coordination, innovation, and organizational learning. Nevertheless, these relationships remain propositions for future empirical investigation rather than demonstrated causal effects of the present study.

Future research should examine the proposed framework across private universities with different institutional characteristics, organizational cultures, and resource capacities. In particular, empirical studies may investigate the individual and combined contributions of W-I-C-S to governance effectiveness, institutional resilience, stakeholder satisfaction, and long-term educational sustainability. Such investigations would help establish the applicability, operational dimensions, and potential limitations of No-Box Leadership in broader higher education contexts.

From a managerial perspective, private higher education leaders may use the W-I-C-S framework to inform leadership development, strengthen cross-unit dialogue, support staff participation in organizational change, and encourage continuous learning. Proposed changes should be assessed in relation to institutional priorities, available resources, governance requirements, and the needs of the academic community. These measures may provide a basis for aligning leadership practices with institutional development and educational quality objectives.

This study is limited by its focus on a specific institutional context, which constrains the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other private higher education institutions. Further research should examine the application of the proposed framework in institutions of different sizes, organizational cultures, and resource capacities. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the implementation of proposed changes and examine their relationship with governance effectiveness, institutional accreditation, and educational quality over time. Such investigations would help clarify the practical applicability and transferability of No-Box Leadership in private higher education governance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all parties who have contributed to the successful completion of this study. Special appreciation is extended to the leadership and administrative staff of Pamulang University, as a representative private higher education institution in South Tangerang, who willingly participated as respondents in the Focus Group Discussions, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and generously shared their time, experiences, and insights regarding institutional governance and No Box Leadership. The authors also acknowledge the academic support provided by the Management Science Postgraduate School at Pakuan University, Indonesia, as well as the institutional resources that facilitated this research. Furthermore, gratitude is extended to colleagues, reviewers, and editors whose constructive feedback significantly improved the quality of this manuscript. This research would not have been possible without their continuous encouragement and intellectual contribution.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Conceptualization, research design, methodology development, and the formulation of the No Box Leadership conceptual model using the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) framework were carried out by Nanang Qosim Yusuf, Didik Notosudjono, and Hamzah. Data collection, including Focus Group Discussions, in-depth interviews, and document analysis at Pamulang University as a representative of private universities in South Tangerang, was conducted by Nanang Qosim Yusuf and Didik Notosudjono. Formal analysis, including Rich Picture mapping, CATWOE analysis, root definition development, conceptual model building, and comparison with real-world situations, was performed by Nanang Qosim Yusuf, Didik Notosudjono, and Hamzah. Original draft preparation and writing were conducted by Nanang Qosim Yusuf, while review, editing, and revision were performed by Didik Notosudjono and Hamzah. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of this work.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used AI-assisted tools, such as grammar checkers and language enhancement software, solely for the purpose of improving readability and refining the language of the manuscript. No generative AI tools were used for qualitative data analysis, SSM interpretation, conceptual model development, or core scientific writing. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the research findings and the final content of this article.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The study was conducted using the personal resources of the authors and the institutional support provided by the Management Science Postgraduate School at Pakuan University, Indonesia.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The research was conducted independently, and the results are presented objectively and without bias. The authors have no affiliation with or financial interest in Pamulang University or any related organization mentioned in this study that could be perceived as influencing the analysis or conclusions of this research.

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