



## Research article

# Leadership at the helm: Essential skills and knowledge for effective management in Islamic Economics and Finance schools

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## ARTICLE INFO

*JEL classification:*A20  
I21  
I23*Keywords:*IEF school leadership  
Principal skills and knowledge  
School collegiality  
Shared leadership  
Higher education leadership

## ABSTRACT

A skilled principal is an invaluable asset in the evolving landscape of higher education institutions, where challenges continually arise and the global economy demands adaptability. This study explored the essential skills and knowledge necessary for principal roles in Islamic Economics and Finance (IEF) schools. A qualitative multiple-case study approach was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 34 academics from four IEF schools at public universities in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. The study revealed six essential skill and knowledge areas that IEF school principals must possess to thrive: advocacy for IEF education, developing and communicating a clear strategic vision, efficiently managing resources and workloads, fostering a collegial environment, providing effective instructional leadership, and building and sustaining strong partnerships. Improving the skills and knowledge of IEF principals can lead to better school management and education. The findings of this study hold significant importance in the advancement of leadership programs designed for IEF school principals and provide valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders regarding the indispensable knowledge and skills that principals of IEF schools must possess.

## 1. Introduction

The role of a school principal<sup>1</sup> in higher education institutions (HEIs) is one of the most demanding, necessitating a unique blend of skills and knowledge for effective school management, academic staff supervision, problem-solving, and demonstrating scholarship in teaching and research [1–3]. Principals are increasingly expected to articulate the school's vision [4,5], enact educational leadership across disciplines [4,6–8], cultivate a positive school climate [2,4,9], and allocate resources to stimulate scholarship and research [10–13]. Further investigation into the multifaceted role of the principal remains crucial, as leadership is the second most influential factor in school success and student performance following classroom instruction [8,14].

In the evolving landscape of HEIs, the presence of a skilled principal is of immense value as they are equipped to address continually emerging challenges and meet the demands of the global economy [15]. The investigation into the skills and knowledge of principals in the field of Islamic Economics and Finance (IEF) holds particular significance because of two key factors. First, IEF education and its academicians are playing an increasingly important role in crafting educational programs that yield graduates capable of meeting the growing demands of the Islamic financial industry [16–22]. IEF school principals' shoulder multiple challenges, including ensuring the

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<sup>1</sup> The term "principal" is understood as a noun meaning "chief," "top executive," "head of all others," or "one who controls the process. For the purpose of this paper, we used the term Principals equivalent to Deans in the HIE schools.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e36696>

Received 7 August 2023; Received in revised form 6 August 2024; Accepted 20 August 2024

Available online 22 August 2024

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academic rigor and global competitiveness of IEF programs, aligning curricula with industry requirements, fostering research endeavors, integrating Islamic principles into coursework, and upholding Shari'ah as the bedrock of IEF education [18]. Therefore, their skills and knowledge are indispensable for IEF schools to effectively navigate complex academic landscapes. Second, similar to most principal positions in HEIs, tenure tends to be short due to a policy known as "rotation," where faculty members assume the principal's role for a fixed term [23]. This practice, while promoting diverse perspectives, can also result in the appointment of academics with limited experience in academic leadership or management [24].

Hull [25] conceptualized effective academic leadership in schools through principals possessing specific attributes. These include a minimum of three years of leadership experience, both general and school-specific, engagement in collaborative leadership roles, and a supportive and autonomous relationship with superintendents. Notably, despite assuming greater managerial responsibilities than other faculty members, principals hold no inherent power advantage. This paradox is further complicated by practices like the honorary awarding of principalships to long-serving faculty members [26,27]. Consequently, understanding effective school leadership can be multifaceted and subject to internal discord within an institution [28]. This underscores the urgency of investigating the perspectives of both academic members and leaders on the crucial skills and knowledge required for effective school principals, particularly within the burgeoning field of Islamic banking and finance. To date, empirical research on IEF school principal skills and knowledge remains limited, offering fertile grounds for further inquiry [20].

To the best of our knowledge, no prior study has explored the perceptions of academic members and school leaders regarding the essential skills and knowledge that principals should possess in this unique educational context. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the perspectives of academic members and school leaders on the skills and knowledge needed for effective principals within IEF schools. In particular, the study seeks to identify, based on participant perceptions, the essential skills and knowledge required by IEF school principals to fulfill their duties effectively. This study focuses on the perspectives of academic staff members, including leaders, from four established IEF schools: two in Saudi Arabia and two in Malaysia. Notably, these universities are among the oldest IEF degree-granting institutions in their respective regions and are consistently ranked among the top five universities nationally, according to the 2021 Times Higher Education Ranking.

## 2. Background

Higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia that offer IEF degrees face significant challenges in delivering high-quality education and producing competent graduates who can adapt to the complex and dynamic environment and fast-growing Islamic banking and finance industry. While both countries are recognized as leaders in IEF education alongside Indonesia, their strengths lie in the knowledge indicator according to the Islamic Finance and Development Report (IFDR) 2021 [29]. This indicator assesses the quality of higher education and research, considered fundamental to a knowledge-based industry. Robust IEF education and research contribute to the depth and efficiency of the Islamic financial sector, fostering economic progress through a competent workforce. Notably, both Malaysia and Saudi Arabia possess well-developed Islamic finance markets, which have in turn fueled the growth of IEF higher education and research within these countries.

As the most populous Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) houses the region's largest population of higher education students. Vision 2030, unveiled in 2016, has spurred significant changes across the nation's economy and society, including the higher education sector. Remarkably, Islamic banking and finance stands as an integral component of the Kingdom's economic and financial system, playing a crucial role in the transformative roadmap to diversify away from oil dependence. This commitment is further underscored by the Saudi Central Bank's "Excellence and Leadership" Report on Islamic finance in Saudi Arabia [30], which outlines ambitious plans to advance the industry within the Kingdom. Aligning with the broader Financial Sector Development Program (FSDP) designed to bolster the financial sector and support Vision 2030's aspirations for a prosperous economic future, the 2021 FSDP Program Charter identifies three key pillars of Islamic finance strategy: governance, global positioning, and higher education development, encompassing research and innovation. Sub-initiatives within this strategy highlight the creation of robust academic programs and courses in Islamic finance alongside the strengthening of academic and research institutions with the potential to contribute significantly to the industry's growth. Consequently, universities and colleges are expected to actively participate and contribute to the implementation of the Kingdom's long-term strategy. This heightened expectation translates into increased responsibility for IEF school principals, as policymakers and stakeholders look to them to lead the development of educational and research activities that keep pace with the rapidly expanding Islamic finance industry. To fulfill this crucial role effectively, IEF school principals require a specific set of skills and a deep understanding of their roles and leadership practices within the unique context of IEF schools.

Parallel to Saudi Arabia, Malaysia's Islamic Financial Services Industry (IFSI) has witnessed remarkable growth since the 1990s across the Islamic banking, takaful, and capital markets. This rapid expansion sector has consequently generated a critical demand for qualified human capital, prompting collaborative efforts between academics and industry professionals [31]. Consequently, concerted efforts have emerged to address this gap, involving both academics and industry professionals. In 2010, the Malaysian government introduced its Economic Transformation Plan (ETP) with the ambitious objective of positioning Malaysia as a global leader in Islamic finance education. This strategic initiative placed significant emphasis on the role of school principals in bolstering the sustainable development of human capital within the IFSI. Specifically, Malaysian IEF school principals are entrusted with the critical responsibilities of enhancing graduate employability, ensuring faculty quality, and shaping the curriculum to meet industry demands [32].

### 3. Literature

Numerous factors contribute to the success of schools, among which an effective principal is one of the most recognized [33]. Typically, the term "principal" is understood as a noun meaning "chief," "top executive," "head of all others," or "one who controls the process." The use of the term "principal" in the context of educational leadership can be traced back to the 1800s, initially used as an adjective preceding the term "teacher" [34]. As schools evolved beyond single-room structures, the "principal teacher" emerged as the first among equals, who assumed certain administrative responsibilities while maintaining a primary focus on instruction, akin to their fellow teachers [35]. During this period, there were no distinct leadership characteristics or formal distinctions between the duties of principals and teachers [36].

Consequently, early attempts to define teachers as principals primarily centered on the curricula, teaching, and descriptions of notable school principals [37]. However, the 1900s witnessed the emergence of more explicit leadership theories and models. Over the past two decades, empirical research has shed light on the skills and knowledge required by principals to influence school success [38]. Before delving into the specifics of leadership traits and practices shaping the essential skills and knowledge expected of a principal in academia, we briefly discuss principal leadership in the context of higher education.

Since the mid-twentieth century, when universities began to evolve into large and complex organizations, higher education became a fertile field for research and professional training [39]. However, until the early twentieth century, research on the role of principals in HEIs was limited [10]. As a result, higher education was underrepresented in the leadership research literature, indicating the need for a more thorough examination of how context impacts leadership practice [40]. Moreover, transformations in higher education have prompted a reevaluation of leadership research methodologies and theories [41]. Thus, over the last decade, the literature on leadership in higher education has seen a significant evolution and enhancement [42]. A key issue addressed in this body of literature pertains to the extent to which the behaviors, roles, skills, and competencies of leaders in higher education influence the success of their institutions [10,43–46].

Notably, the 1970s saw a substantial increase in studies focused on schools and leadership roles within them, particularly in the United States. This rise was driven by heightened interest in enhancing school effectiveness and identifying the necessary skills and knowledge for school principals [47], and the period also witnessed the emergence of an effective school movement spearheaded by Ronald Edmonds. Edmonds [48] outlined five key aspects of leadership: instructional leadership, teaching, and instruction; a school climate conducive to teaching and learning; high expectations for student performance set by teachers; and measurement of student performance.

Exploration of leaders' skills and knowledge predates, even in the 1970s. For instance, Katz [49] proposed a three-skill approach, suggesting that leaders must possess three skills to excel in their managerial duties, regardless of the context. These are technical, human relations, and conceptual skills. Northouse [50] defined technical skills as "knowledge or proficiency in a certain type of task or activity". Human relations skills refer to a leader's knowledge and ability to collaborate effectively with subordinates, peers, and superiors to achieve their school goals. Conceptual skills are the ability to generate novel ideas and concepts, create an organization's vision, and strategize accordingly. These skills are correlated with a leader's capacity to influence individual and group performance in pursuing an organization's goals and objectives.

The understanding of the essential domains and practices required for a principal's role in driving school improvement has been developed and refined over a dozen years in the scholarly literature. A deeper understanding of principals' skills and knowledge has led to the identification of numerous factors that define the performance of high-performing principals in higher education. For instance, effective principals establish a school-wide vision dedicated to high standards and student success [5,51]. Following this, the principal must articulate this vision, garnering the support of all and motivating academic staff to work towards it. Guided by this vision, effective principals prioritize the quality of instruction within their institutions. They advocate using research-based strategies to enhance teaching and learning and encourage discussions about diverse learning approaches among teams and teachers to identify the most effective instructional practices [7,8,51].

In these practices, a common theme across the literature is the importance of creating a positive school climate, which is considered the core responsibility of high-performing principals [2,4,9]. This suggests that principals' effectiveness at the leadership level is strongly influenced by the extent to which the working environment is pleasant and promotes a positive, supportive, and collegial culture among academic staff [52]. Moreover, Reynolds [53] identified five characteristics of high-performance principals that drive school success: (1) a clear mission and vision supported by all key stakeholders; (2) instructional leadership that emphasizes curriculum development and effective teaching and learning; (3) strong ties with the school community and other partners; (4) monitoring of staff performance and provision of support as needed; and (5) a focus on supporting and facilitating students' academic performance.

In addition to these five characteristics, Arnold et al. [54] outlined the five most crucial tasks associated with being an effective principal: (1) fostering a collegial working climate and discipline; (2) facilitating proper communication and relationship development; (3) providing instructional leadership and guiding curriculum development; (4) ensuring the principal's availability and visibility; and (5) setting a vision and strategic plan. This body of research provides a strong foundation for principal leadership in managing high-performing schools. It applies across all types and stages of school and can be further divided into knowledge, skills, and professional behaviors.

Bryman [10] identified several behaviors exhibited by competent principals in the context of HEIs, including providing performance feedback to academic staff, setting direction, engaging with academic staff, having a clear sense of strategic vision, fostering a collegial school climate, treating staff fairly, demonstrating honesty and integrity, and involving academic staff in critical decision making. Similarly, Mendels [55] outlined five behaviors that characterize an effective principal: 1) shaping a vision for a high-performing school; 2) fostering a welcoming climate that supports fruitful interactions; 3) developing leadership skills in teachers

and others so that they play a meaningful role in realizing the school's vision; 4) contributing significantly to improving instruction; and 5) managing people, data, and resources to improve schools. Despite the different perspectives on the practices of skillful principals in managing high-performing schools, the competence of principal leadership in managing these tasks and practices within the school context has emerged as a common theme. Although there are extensive discussions about the range of ways in which principals can influence school performance and student achievement, further investigation is still required to define effective principal practices [56,57].

While there is a substantial amount of research on what defines an effective principal in managing high-performing schools, there appears to be a gap in the field of Islamic Economics and Finance Education (IEF), especially regarding the skills and knowledge of principals in IEF schools [17,18,22]. However, Haneef [58] highlighted the current state of IEF schools by quoting a study conducted by the International Council of Islamic Finance Educators (ICIFE), which indicated a severe underrepresentation of skilled principals in IEF higher education. Traditionally, principals in Islamic economics and finance schools have been tasked with equipping students with the competencies and knowledge necessary to support, develop, and lead the Islamic finance industry, which is a critical component of the research necessary for the industry's sustainability and growth. Although these responsibilities may limit principals' capabilities within academia, the existing literature in the IEF field emphasizes the importance of school principals interacting with the industry to integrate the best expertise for the growth of Islamic financial services. Hence, the IEF school principals' crucial skill is to establish and foster partnerships with industry experts to create a more significant synergy between industry and academia [17,18,22,59].

Despite ongoing discussions about the rapid growth of Islamic banking and finance, it is undeniable that the capacity of IEF schools still requires significant improvement to bridge the gap between academia and the Islamic finance industry. To bridge this gap, IEF schools in higher education need skilled principals capable of addressing the severe mismatch between academia and the Islamic banking industry.

Hence, an effective principal in IEF schools is expected to establish beneficial collaborations with experts in the Islamic banking industry and promote awareness and understanding of Islamic finance among the public and business firms that traditionally deal with conventional banking systems [16,21,60]. Despite the growing body of literature on Islamic economics and finance education, many questions remain to be answered. What are the characteristics of effective principals in IEF schools? What knowledge and skills are required for school principals' development? What methodologies are required, and what challenges do they present? Why has the status quo addressed these challenges? [18].

Given that leadership studies in higher education are still in their early stages [61] and considering the scarcity of leadership studies in Islamic Economics schools [18], the recent increase in studies on principal leadership is promising for the future of leadership research in the context of IEF schools and higher education. These studies should lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the development, scope, and empirical validity of leadership theories unique to HEIs, with a focus on Islamic economics and finance. This is a crucial step towards bridging the gap between academic theory and the practical requirements of the Islamic banking industry, ensuring the sustainability and growth of this important sector.

## 4. Method

This study explored the skills and knowledge required by principals in IEF schools at HEIs from the perspective of academic professionals, including deans, department heads, and teachers. Using a qualitative research approach, this study conducted multiple case studies in four selected universities to enable in-depth longitudinal analyses of the principals' essential skills and knowledge in effectively managing IEF schools from the perspectives of deans, department heads, and teachers [62]. This in-depth case study effectively investigated participants' perceptions and experiences and stimulated descriptions of their concerns about current leadership practices in the school and the principal's responsibility for these concerns [63]. It also analyzes the context and practices, shedding light on the principal's skills and knowledge to effectively manage IEF schools. To do so, we interviewed department heads, teachers, and school deans to understand their perceptions of the skills and knowledge required of an effective school principal in Islamic economics and finance higher education settings. Semi-structured interviews provided rich and detailed accounts of human experiences and concerns about current school leadership practices and the principal's role in addressing them. This exploratory study employs open-ended questions to provide evolving narratives, new ideas, and meanings that enable researchers to understand an occurrence from respondents' perspectives. Exploratory research is often employed to generate initial personal opinions about an event.

### 4.1. Study group and sampling

This study used purposive sampling to select 34 academic staff members from four public Islamic economics and finance (IEF) schools at two Saudi universities (A and B) and two Malaysian universities (C and D). Two key factors guided the university selection process. First, the chosen institutions possessed esteemed reputations for their IEF programs, recognized as early contributors to the field, and delivered high-quality IEF curricula. Second, their academic excellence was consistently acknowledged, as reflected in their top five rankings within their respective countries based on rigorous assessments of academic stature and research output. This selection aimed to ensure a comprehensive and diverse exploration of the perspectives and practices of IEF schools in both countries. Deans, heads of departments, and teaching staff were interviewed to obtain the views of both the leaders and practitioners of IEF schools. The participants included all four deans, all HODs, and a subset of teachers who consented to participate from each school. The sample included 12 department heads, 18 teachers, and four school deans, with an employment span of 15–33 years and ages ranging

from 35 to 58 years. The sample size distribution was carefully maintained across the four schools to ensure balance and representation. However, an exception was made at School A in Saudi Arabia, where the researchers conducted interviews with four additional teachers. This decision was motivated by the profound experience, expertise, and reputation of these teachers in the realm of IEF academia, as endorsed by the esteemed Dean of School A. The distribution of participants across schools and categories is presented in (Table 1). This table summarizes the number of participants in each country and school across different educational roles.

#### 4.2. Data collection tool

This study used semi-structured interviews recorded through audio, video, and field notes to collect qualitative data on the perceptions of 34 academic staff members from four (IEF) schools, including deans, department heads, and teachers, as shown in (Table 2). This method was chosen because of its ability to explore participants' perspectives and experiences, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the skills and knowledge required for effective IEF school leadership [64,65]. Open-ended interview questions were developed as one method to fulfill the aim of the study, facilitate conversational exchanges, and allow follow-up queries based on participants' responses [66]. Therefore, the interviews were dialogic, with follow-up questions from previous responses when possible. The interviews resembled discussions or monologues rather than a sequence of questions and answers. The aim was to gain rich insights into participants' perceptions and understand the ideal conditions for effective school principals' success in IEF schools. Example interview questions included.

- What knowledge and skills are essential for effective school principals to manage IEF schools successfully? Provide Examples.
- What should be done to enhance school leadership practices at the individual, unit, or institutional levels?
- Can you provide additional information that would be helpful in the preparation of effective school principals in Islamic economics and finance schools?

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews, using either face-to-face or zoom as the chosen medium for data collection. This approach provides a broad range of perspectives on the skills and knowledge required for effective IEF school principals in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. Zoom and similar technologies provide a suitable platform for qualitative data collection through interviews, offering advantages, such as flexibility, accessibility, and data quality [67]. The researchers assessed participants' satisfaction with Zoom as a data collection tool prior to each interview and obtained their consent to record the interviews. By using Zoom as audio/visual software, the researchers ensured that the digital interviews were comparable to face-to-face interviews in terms of effectiveness and quality. The use of a camera in audio/visual software interviews also enabled researchers to observe the visual cues of the participants, while the participants enjoyed a higher level of comfort and convenience in a flexible setting [68,69].

#### 4.3. Data collection procedure

The participants were emailed about the study's objectives and procedures, and interview schedules were arranged. Each interview lasted between 60 and 70 min and was conducted after obtaining signed informed consent from the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The transcripts were then reviewed for accuracy and completeness before being returned to the participants for validation and necessary revisions.

#### 4.4. Ethical considerations

Because the research involved human subjects, we sought ethical considerations for conducting research at schools from the vice presidents of graduate studies and scientific research at both universities (*approval reference number: UPM/FPP/TDPS/GS54849*). Ethical considerations included protection from harm, voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and permission to record interviews. Participants were reassured that their identities would remain confidential, and that the data would be used only for research purposes. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their identities, and the information they provided was used only for research purposes.

**Table 1**  
(Participant selection in four schools).

Country	School	Participants Selection in Four Schools		
		School Dean	Department Heads	Teachers
Saudi Arabia	School A	1	4	8
	School B	1	3	4
Malaysia	School C	1	3	3
	School D	1	2	3

**Table 2**

Presents a comprehensive list of study participants derived from four distinct universities.

#	Category	Age	Academic experience	Designation
1	Dean 1	57	15	Professor
2	Dean 2	58	36	Professor
3	Dean 3	52	23	Associate Professor
4	Dean 4	50	19	Professor
5	HOD 1	42	12	Associate Professor
6	HOD 2	48	22	Associate Professor
7	HOD 3	49	19	Associate Professor
8	HOD 4	50	22	Associate Professor
9	HOD 5	47	7	Assistant Professor
10	HOD 6	38	6	Assistant Professor
11	HOD 7	59	32	Professor
12	HOD 8	59	38	Professor
13	HOD 9	48	21	Associate Professor
14	HOD 10	51	24	Associate Professor
15	HOD 11	39	8	Associate Professor
16	HOD 12	52	17	Associate Professor
17	Teacher 1	46	9	Assistant Professor
18	Teacher 2	59	41	Associate Professor
19	Teacher 3	47	19	Associate Professor
20	Teacher 4	59	32	Professor
21	Teacher 5	51	18	Associate Professor
22	Teacher 6	42	11	Assistant Professor
23	Teacher 7	59	33	Professor
24	Teacher 8	46	13	Assistant Professor
25	Teacher 9	58	35	Professor
26	Teacher 10	38	14	Assistant Professor
27	Teacher 11	52	22	Associate Professor
28	Teacher 12	58	29	Professor
29	Teacher 13	56	25	Associate Professor
30	Teacher 14	58	26	Professor
31	Teacher 15	59	25	Professor
32	Teacher 16	58	27	Associate Professor
33	Teacher 17	42	17	Associate Professor
34	Teacher 18	59	28	Associate Professor

#### 4.5. Data analysis methodology

The interview data were analyzed using a three-step thematic analysis approach to extract meaningful insights from the raw data by identifying and interpreting complex patterns and relationships, which is the objective of this study. First, all data were organized by type, including interview transcripts, field notes, and other documents. Second, the interview data were transcribed, and the initial themes were identified through a comparative analysis. Verbatim transcription of the field notes and audio recordings was used for the analysis. Third, NVivo.12™, a recognized qualitative data analysis software, was used to code the data and identify themes. This tool is particularly effective for organizing large amounts of data, making patterns more visible and easier to analyze [70]. In this step, the data were reviewed multiple times to identify overlooked meanings. Similar codes were then merged using the NVivo.12™ software to simplify the data. The research purpose and questions were guided and focused on analysis. The researchers-maintained reflexivity throughout the process to ascertain the authenticity of themes in the data [71]. Finally, a cross-referenced check was performed to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the study. The preliminary data and final findings were shared with participants. The preliminary data included interview transcripts, which were validated by the participants for accuracy and fidelity. The final findings were presented to the participants who provided their input and feedback. This step aimed to reduce any potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the data or narratives, and to ensure the validity of the interpretations attributed to them.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. The importance of understanding and advocating for IEF education

The study's findings revealed a predominant theme emphasizing the critical need for school principals to have extensive and proficient expertise in Islamic Economics and Finance (IEF) to succeed. The participants overwhelmingly concurred that a profound and comprehensive understanding of the IEF field's complexities is an essential attribute for IEF school principals. Additionally, they underscored the significance of effective school principals exhibiting competence and acumen in fostering innovation and excellence in IEF education in the school setting. As Teacher\_4 noted, "I believe the IEF school principals must have a great understanding of Sharia and how it relates to Islamic economics and finance." Dean\_1 and Dean\_4 echoed this perspective, asserting that a principal needing a more specialized background could lead to performance issues and tension within the school. However, the participants stressed that this

knowledge must be coupled with a deep commitment to the school's mission and objectives. As noted by several teachers and HODs, "IEF school principals should have faith in the institution's causes. That is what distinguishes us from many institutions." HOD\_3 further emphasized the importance of this alignment, suggesting that a principal's actions could undermine the school's objectives if they did not fully believe in Islamic economics and finance principles.

Consistency with Islamic law and Islamization of knowledge were also highlighted as crucial elements. Teacher\_10 explained, "The school principals must understand the college's mission of promoting Islamic Economics and Finance and be emotionally attached to it." Dean\_1 reiterated this point, emphasizing the need for a leader whose views align with the school's mission. Teacher\_13 and HOD\_1 emphasized the importance of principals being knowledgeable enough to provide credible information sources to other academic staff. Similarly, Teacher\_16 added, 'A background in IEF is essential for school principals as they represent the school in meetings and seminars and act as a reference to many academic professionals.' Teacher\_2 highlighted, "Principals needing more IEF knowledge can limit the school's potential despite their leadership style."

In summary, the participants agreed that effective IEF school principals should be advocates for IEF education. They should possess extensive knowledge of Islamic Economics and Finance, support the school's academic pursuits, and firmly believe that IEF is a viable alternative to conventional financial systems.

### 5.2. A clear sense of direction/strategic vision

Participants overwhelmingly recognized the visionary principal's vital role in shaping IEF schools' success. Teacher\_11 stated, "The school principal should be a visionary person with a perceptive eye that predicts the future." The participants overwhelmingly concurred that a principal must possess essential foresight and strategic acumen to chart the future path of the IEF school and shape its long-term vision. However, many participants also noted the need for more apparent trajectories and a strategic vision in their IEF schools, which they viewed as a critical oversight. Teacher\_14 lamented the lack of clarity, asking, "Are we a factory or training ground that will feed the IEF industry with labor? Is it an educational institute that provides knowledgeable thinkers?" Teacher\_9 further highlighted the reliance on individual leadership traits rather than a shared vision.

Consequently, the participants emphasized the essential requirement for principals to possess a distinct and strategic vision. In addition, principals in IEF schools must demonstrate competence in effectively conveying the school's vision and future directions, while also assuming responsibility for motivating academic staff and overseeing the implementation of the vision. Teachers\_17 and\_13 emphasized the importance of effective communication to garner support for the school's vision. HOD\_10 added that principals should possess openness, a willingness to listen, and a less authoritative approach to facilitate this. In addition to clear communication, principals inspire and encourage academic staff to implement the school vision. As expressed by Teacher\_14, "The school principals must be excellent motivators who can firmly manage the school's strategies, vision, and future directions and inspire without forcing academic staff." The forced approach is not suitable for implementing a school vision in academia. Instead, the ability of school principals to effectively communicate, engage, and motivate the staff of IEF schools and subsequently ensure the implementation of the school's vision emerges as a critical element of effective principal practices. As Teacher\_10 observed, "School principals' effective communication and motivation skills play a vital role in gaining the endorsement of all stakeholders in the IEF school towards the school's vision implementation."

Furthermore, principals must supervise and monitor the implementation of their visions. Teachers\_2 and HOD\_2 underscored the significance of school principals' skills and knowledge in this process.

Participants felt that the lack of a strategic vision and future direction within their IEF schools was primarily due to the principals' lack of skills in effectively communicating the vision, motivating staff, and supervising its implementation. The general consensus among participants in the four schools is that the current leadership practices employed by IEF school principals primarily prioritize routine school administration, neglecting the significance of developing a strategic vision and setting goals for future directions. This oversight undermines the effectiveness of school principals in managing IEF schools.

### 5.3. Mastering academic workload management

School leadership is instrumental in shaping the job satisfaction, workload management, and overall academic achievement of academic staff. School principals must set achievable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for academic staff to foster research and scholarship. However, dissatisfaction with leadership practices and workload was expressed, particularly in Malaysian schools C and D. Teacher\_17 noted, "In my opinion, after becoming a research-oriented institute, I have to work much longer hours. Therefore, I became unhappy with my job". Teacher\_11 added, "Work-life balance is unlikely to occur in a faculty like ours, which prioritizes research." The "impact factor race" at HEI institutes, especially in schools C and D, has become a significant aspect of academic staff careers, with an increased focus on publishing research articles. However, this focus can negatively impact work-life balance and teaching quality. Teacher\_16 stated, 'Our KPIs rely on publications. This load depreciates the quality of the curricula and teaching experience'.

The majority of participants from all four schools perceived their heavy workload and diverse assignments as significant barriers to effectively meeting their KPIs. The participants further expressed that school principals must possess a high level of competence in effectively managing academic workloads and demonstrate innovative approaches to facilitate resource allocation to mitigate the burden placed on academic staff. Teacher\_2 mentioned, 'Inside the faculty or even at the university level; no officials were responsible for curriculum development ... each teacher manages these activities, which takes an inordinate amount of time and effort'. HOD\_8 suggested appointing full-time curriculum specialists to manage curriculum development, thus reducing the workload and improving curriculum quality. The study revealed a tendency among IEF school principals to shy away from fair workload management and distribution due to high research demand, prioritization of article publishing, and discomfort in managing staff barriers. These shortcomings, coupled

with a lack of practical leadership and creativity skills, hinder the efficient management of academic staff time and creativity to utilize the resources of schools and departments that foster proper resource management and reduce academic staff workload. These issues significantly impact job satisfaction, marginalize effective teaching practices, and hinder the improvement of instructional activities in IEF schools.

#### 5.4. *Fostering a welcoming environment for staff collaboration*

School principals are vital for promoting a welcoming, open, and collaborative atmosphere. This environment is fundamental to the success of IEF schools, as all participants agreed that staff collaboration is a key aspect of school development. Teacher\_6 stated, "All members communicate in the frame of brotherhood, ethics, and religion, which builds a great relationship environment inside the school." Similarly, HOD\_2 noted, "The community in our school has a cooperative and fraternal environment. Communication here is easier than in other colleges".

School principals shape the school's culture and environment; as noted by HOD\_5, "The school principalship has a great role in changing the institute's atmosphere." In IEF schools, principals foster a conducive learning environment by promoting brotherhood relationships among staff, thus making the staff feel valued and connected. Encouraging, promoting, and managing diversity is crucial for principals to create a welcoming atmosphere. Participants across all four schools appreciated the spirit of brotherhood, which positively impacted the climate of cooperation regardless of their diverse backgrounds. However, there were concerns about School (B) in Saudi Arabia, where the principal reportedly did not embrace other cultures or promote fairness, thus impacting the school's atmosphere. Teacher\_8 remarked, "With the hiring of our new school principal, the college's environment has not been as positive as it was a few years ago. Subsequently, failure to provide a positive atmosphere can alienate faculty members".

IEF school principals are crucial for building conducive learning environments, promoting brotherhood relationships, and ensuring that staff members feel connected and valued. Given the diversity in Saudi schools, school principals need to foster tolerance, appreciate cultural differences, develop excellent communication skills, and treat staff regardless of their cultural backgrounds or nationalities.

#### 5.5. *Strengthening school partnerships and integrating best practices in IEF school activities*

The participants' responses underscored the importance of school principals' skills and ambition to engage with international schools and industry experts. This partnership is crucial for defining instructional and curriculum projects that address practical issues in the IEF industry. The participants believed that school principals should ensure that best practices are incorporated into all school activities, including curriculum development and research. HOD\_4 suggested, "Partnerships with international institutions in the field will help us collaborate on research projects and improve the quality of the IEF curriculum." Most participants asserted that enhancing the school curriculum and research deliverables began by planning effective collaborations and networking with international schools and IEF industry experts.

Participants also highlighted the importance of collaboration between principals in different IEF schools and their peers in local and international schools. Such collaboration can facilitate mutual benefit and data sharing, which would ultimately help grow the Islamic finance industry and disseminate knowledge among academic staff members. Collaboration with experts from Islamic banking and IEF institutions in the private sector was essential for schools to develop practical and innovative IEF curricula. HOD\_12 stated, 'We always seek feedback from industry experts to enrich our curricula.' Teacher\_9 emphasized the need for collaboration with Islamic Banks and private institutions to train students before graduation. However, there needs to be more decision-making on the part of the school principal.

The participants agreed that school principals should be adept at creating, developing, and maintaining collaboration and networking with international schools, private sector entities, and IEF subject matter experts. This collaboration and networking are essential for integrating best practices into IEF curriculum development and research activities.

#### 5.6. *Providing instructional guidance*

The participants voiced concern that principals should emphasize leading instructional activities or guiding school members to improve their curriculum and teaching skills. They argue that principals could be pivotal in designing instructional methodologies, supervising curriculum implementation, and classroom teaching. Teacher\_12 suggested that "school principals must be knowledgeable about the subject area, be a source of information for academic staff, and exhibit instructional leadership qualities." However, the participants also noted that, in their experience, school principals had minimal influence on the curriculum, instruction, and supervision of teaching. The teachers and heads of each scientific department primarily handle these responsibilities. HOD\_5 commented, 'Instructional leadership is one of the core activities for school principals; however, the academic program and all curriculum content are made by the professor of the subject and supervised by the HOD'.

Interestingly, participants from selected Malaysian schools (C and D) reported that school principals encouraged and supported using data from student feedback each semester to enhance instructional activities. Conversely, participants from Saudi schools (A and B) stated that principals should have paid more attention to data utilization, which exacerbated schools' poor instructional practices. The participants highlighted the need for training interventions to address the knowledge gaps in instructional leadership practices among school principals. Dean\_1 explained that "training and development are critical for improving and assisting school principals in upholding their highest standards of instructional leadership." Teacher\_11 echoed this sentiment, suggesting that school principals should



receive tailored instructional leadership training.

In summary, despite the perception that instructional leadership is primarily in the role of school principals, teachers and HODs managed instructional leadership practices entirely in the IEF schools represented in this study. This lack of principal involvement in instructional leadership and the absence of data-driven instructional activities may negatively impact school improvement and student learning. The essential skills required by school principals identified in this study included understanding and advocating for Islamic economics and finance, a clear school vision, providing resources and mastering academic workload management, creating a welcoming atmosphere, improving school partnerships, and providing instructional guidance.

## 6. Discussion

This study aimed to identify the essential leadership skills and knowledge required by IEF school principals, as perceived by academic staff and leaders. Our findings indicate that IEF school principals often lack the necessary skills, knowledge, and leadership experience, which limits their effectiveness in school management. This study posits that effective IEF school principals must articulate a coherent school vision, supervise staff effectively, manage academic staff workloads efficiently, manage resources proficiently, cultivate partnerships, and oversee curricula and instruction. The lack of relevant skills and leadership, coupled with an insufficient understanding of Islamic economics and finance, curriculum Islamization, and the mission and purpose of IEF schools, leads to the mismanagement of school principals, which impedes their efforts to promote IEF school success and foster a welcoming school community. This is particularly true in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, two prominent players in the Islamic finance industry, where there has been a notable emphasis on IEF education, resulting in the establishment of specialized academic institutions and dedicated IEF programs [72]. Yet, their distinct educational landscapes necessitate tailored approaches to developing effective school leadership within each context. While Saudi Arabia's centralized system offers limited formal professional development opportunities for principals under the Ministry of Higher Education [73], Malaysia actively embraces decentralization and empowers school leaders through initiatives like the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) and the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) [74]. This divergence necessitates a closer examination of the leadership challenges facing principals in IEF schools in both countries. Collaborative efforts are crucial among policymakers, educational institutions, and industry stakeholders to ensure the success of IEF schools. This collaboration should focus on developing a robust and relevant IEF education environment, led by effective school principals equipped to prepare students for the dynamic Islamic finance industry.

In higher education, the effective leadership of IEF school principals is more crucial than management abilities while emphasizing collaboration with academic staff for continuous improvement [75]. Mintzberg [76] suggests that academic professionals require less direct supervision but rather 'protection and support.' The shared leadership style in IEF schools cultivates a positive collegial environment, enhancing communication and relationships between academic members. In IEF schools, the unique 'Brotherhood' culture necessitates principals to foster a positive working environment rather than command-through power. By encouraging collegiality, principals can enhance job satisfaction, cohesion, organizational commitment, and shared leadership practices [9,77]. However, principals undermining collegiality or disregarding diversity may harm academic commitment. Effective use of this 'brotherhood' distributed network amongst academic staff and department heads can lead to successfully shared leadership practices, facilitating school improvement and student learning [61,78].

Effective communication is a cornerstone skill for IEF school principals, particularly for navigating stakeholders' diverse needs and priorities [4]. Bridging the communication gap between academic staff, universities, and industry partners hinges on the principal's ability to clearly articulate the school's vision and mission. This fosters alignment and collaborative efforts towards shared goals, which are crucial for IEF schools operating in diverse contexts, such as Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. As our study reveals, Saudi Arabian stakeholders prioritize curriculum quality, while their Malaysian counterparts value research excellence. Adept communication skills have become paramount in bridging these gaps and creating a unified vision for the school. Regular meetings, open communication channels, and active listening empower principals to align stakeholders with the school's mission and work toward a common purpose [54].

Beyond collaboration and communication, effective resource management has emerged as a pivotal skill for IEF school principals, directly impacting their ability to achieve educational goals. Our study participants shed light on the complexities they face in managing their workloads and fairly distributing tasks across diverse responsibilities and performance indicators. This uneven distribution, often coupled with heavy workloads, hinders academic staff's ability to fulfill their research and curriculum development duties. This impact is particularly pronounced in research-oriented Malaysian schools, where uneven workloads and heavy demands can lead to staff conflicts and stress [9,77]. Saudi Arabian schools, meanwhile, highlight a need for additional resources, including personnel and training, to effectively develop and update their curricula. Effective school principals go beyond mere resource allocation and leverage internal and external resources through strategic partnerships with industry stakeholders. Building bridges with Islamic banking institutions and other organizations opens doors to vital resources, expertise, and collaborative opportunities, such as research and exchange programs. This is consistent with Dinh et al.'s (2021) call for closing performance gaps in the IEF sector and emphasizes the potential of collaborative leadership in achieving this goal.

Our study underscores the complexity of the IEF school principal's role and its dependence on contextual factors. This is particularly evident in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, where IEF education faces global and local challenges [2]. Principals in these countries face difficulties, including the growing demand for high-quality graduates in the Islamic finance industry; a lack of synergy between universities, Islamic banks, and IEF schools; outdated curricula hampered by bureaucratic processes; and intense competition within the rapidly evolving IEF education sector [17,21,29,31,59,79,80]. While all principals need skills and knowledge, the IEF School principals require specific traits to deal with the rapid growth and challenges in the Islamic finance industry. As such, IEF school

principals should possess key skills such as fostering a positive collegial climate, shaping and supervising school vision, instructional leadership, mastering academic workload management, and managing resource provision. Future research may explore the influence of personality traits and personal competencies on the effectiveness of principals in IEF schools. Additionally, it would be valuable to compare the leadership and managerial activities of the school principals. Such investigations would enhance our understanding of effective principals in the context of IEF schools and contribute to educational practices and policy.

### 6.1. Study implications and limitations

The study's qualitative methodology and small sample size limit its findings, which may not be generalizable to all universities, higher education IEF schools, and Saudi Arabian and Malaysian contexts. The case study approach revealed the skills and knowledge needed for effective IEF school principals; however, the limitations of qualitative research, such as participant reactivity and generalizability issues, should be recognized. The findings may lack breadth and representativeness due to the small sample size and limited number of cases from four schools in two countries. Despite its limitations, this study has significant implications for future research on IEF school leadership development and training. One possible direction is to address the immense challenges Islamic Economics and Finance education institutions face, which demand a concerted effort to equip future principals with essential skills and knowledge. As such, regulators, policymakers, and university administrators must establish a comprehensive framework outlining the core competencies required of IEF school principals. This includes creating principalship guidelines and delivering information necessary for stakeholders to develop professional programs focused on academic leadership development.

## 7. Conclusion

The leadership skills of IEF school principals significantly impact their academic achievement and school goals. This study highlights the importance of principals fostering strong relationships with academic staff and adopting a shared leadership approach to capitalize on the positive climate within Saudi Arabian and Malaysian IEF schools. However, there is a gap in principals' abilities to effectively communicate, delegate, and inspire their teams for professional growth. This deficiency is further exacerbated by the increasing pressure on principals to manage schools, adhere to university quality standards, and meet the growing demands of the IEF industry. To address this gap, enhanced leadership training and development is crucial. The manifestations of this leadership gap can be observed in challenges related to setting a school vision, supervising staff, managing resources, establishing partnerships, and overseeing the curriculum and instruction. Additionally, staff dissatisfaction with workload management, resource allocation, and maintaining a positive and collegial atmosphere further underscores the significance of addressing this leadership gap.

### Data availability statement

The datasets produced and/or analyzed in the present study can be made available by contacting the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Mohamed Abdeltawab Ibrahim:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Arnida Abdullah:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Data curation. **Ismi Arif Ismail:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision. **Soaib Asimiran:** Validation, Supervision.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e36696>.

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