

# Leadership in Curriculum Reform for Cinematic Studies Within Broader National Education Priorities

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## **Abstract**

Curriculum reform in cinematic studies is increasingly shaped by national education priorities such as employability, digital literacy, cultural heritage preservation, and innovation-driven economic growth. This article examines the role of academic leadership in navigating these priorities while maintaining the artistic and critical integrity of film education. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study first surveyed 312 curriculum leaders and program directors from 18 countries (2020–2024) to quantify leadership practices, reform drivers, and perceived barriers. Follow-up qualitative interviews with 42 purposively selected leaders and analysis of 68 national policy documents then explained the quantitative patterns. Key findings reveal that transformational leadership styles correlate strongly with successful reform ( $r = .68$ ), yet leaders face persistent tensions between vocational alignment and critical pedagogy. Effective strategies include distributed leadership models, stakeholder co-design processes, data-driven decision-making, and strategic alignment with national policy agendas. The study proposes a leadership framework for cinematic studies reform that integrates national priorities without compromising disciplinary distinctiveness. Results indicate that programs led by leaders who actively bridge policy imperatives and academic values achieve higher graduate employability (average 14% above national benchmarks) and stronger institutional reputation. Institutional leaders and policymakers must treat curriculum reform as a strategic leadership challenge rather than a technical exercise. Without sophisticated leadership, cinematic studies risk marginalization within national education systems or loss of critical identity. This mixed-methods investigation provides evidence-based guidance for film school deans, department chairs, and education policymakers seeking to align cinematic studies with broader national goals while preserving its unique contribution to cultural and creative industries.

**Keywords** Curriculum Reform, Cinematic Studies, Academic Leadership, National Education Priorities, Mixed-Methods

## **Introduction**

Curriculum reform in cinematic studies represents a critical intersection of artistic education, cultural policy, and national development priorities. In recent decades, governments worldwide have intensified efforts to align higher education programs with strategic national goals such as economic competitiveness, digital transformation, cultural heritage preservation, social cohesion, and creative industry growth (de Wit, 2019; Knight, 2012). Cinematic studies programs, encompassing film production, theory, history, criticism, and emerging digital media practices, occupy a distinctive position within this landscape. On one hand, the discipline contributes directly to the creative industries, which account for significant shares of GDP and employment in many nations (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). On the other hand, it serves as a vital site for critical inquiry into representation, ideology, power, and cultural identity (Giroux, 2001; Wasko, 2003). Leadership in curriculum reform therefore requires academic leaders to navigate complex tensions between vocational alignment and the discipline's traditional emphasis on critical theory, artistic experimentation, and cultural critique.

National education priorities have evolved rapidly in response to technological change and economic pressures. In the European Union, the European Skills Agenda and Digital Education Action Plan emphasize employability, digital competencies, and innovation (European Commission, 2023). In the United States, workforce development initiatives have influenced funding and accreditation standards, pushing cinematic studies programs toward industry-relevant skills such as data analytics for streaming platforms, sustainable production practices, and inclusive storytelling (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). In emerging economies, cinematic studies is often positioned as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy and soft power projection (Nye, 2004; Cull, 2019). These priorities exert direct pressure on cinematic studies programs to incorporate industry-relevant skills while maintaining their role as sites of critical cultural analysis. The result is a reform landscape characterized by both opportunity and tension. Leaders must balance demands for measurable employability outcomes with the need to preserve space for critical pedagogy and artistic experimentation (Stocchetti, 2022; Friedman & Whitford, 2018; Romero Walker, 2022).

Academic leadership plays a pivotal role in mediating these tensions. Transformational leadership, characterized by vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, has been linked to successful curriculum innovation across higher education contexts (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Distributed and adaptive leadership models appear particularly relevant in cinematic studies, where reform requires collaboration among faculty from diverse sub-disciplines, industry partners, students, and external policymakers (Bolden, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009). Empirical research on leadership in creative disciplines suggests that leaders who actively bridge policy imperatives and academic values achieve higher levels of faculty buy-in and more coherent curriculum outcomes (Saha, 2018; McMahan, 2022). However, studies specifically focused on

cinematic studies leadership remain limited. Most existing research addresses either general media education or broader creative industries curricula without isolating cinematic studies as a distinct disciplinary field (Romero Walker, 2022; Friedman & Whitford, 2018). This gap is significant because cinematic studies possesses unique characteristics—its combination of technical production skills, theoretical critique, and cultural analysis—that require tailored leadership approaches.

This article addresses that gap through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase surveyed 312 curriculum leaders and program directors in cinematic studies departments across 18 countries to quantify leadership practices, reform drivers, perceived barriers, and perceived outcomes. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 42 purposively selected leaders and analysis of 68 national policy documents to explain the quantitative patterns and illuminate contextual nuances. The study is guided by three research questions and corresponding objectives focused on barriers, effective leadership strategies, and multi-level impacts. By examining leadership within the broader context of national education priorities, the research contributes both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for film school deans, department chairs, and education policymakers.

The stakes are high. Successful curriculum reform can position cinematic studies as a vital contributor to national creative economies, cultural vitality, and social cohesion. Failure risks marginalization within national education systems, loss of disciplinary identity, or reduction to narrow vocational training that fails to prepare graduates for the complex realities of contemporary media industries. In an era of rapid technological change, shifting cultural policies, and increasing emphasis on measurable outcomes, effective leadership in curriculum reform is essential for the continued relevance and vitality of cinematic studies. The quantitative survey data indicate that transformational leadership scores are significantly correlated with successful reform outcomes ( $r = .68, p < .001$ ). Qualitative interviews reveal that leaders who engage in distributed decision-making and stakeholder co-design achieve higher levels of faculty buy-in and curriculum coherence. These findings suggest that leadership practices that bridge policy and pedagogy are particularly effective in cinematic studies contexts.

The introduction unfolds in four parts. First, we map the historical and policy context of cinematic studies within national education priorities, drawing on archival and policy evidence. Second, we examine the contemporary pressures and opportunities facing cinematic studies programs, highlighting the role of leadership in navigating these dynamics. Third, we review the theoretical foundations of leadership and curriculum reform that inform the mixed-methods investigation. Fourth, we outline the structure of the study and its contribution to both scholarly debate and institutional practice. The global cinematic studies landscape operates as a contested site where economic imperatives, cultural policies, and disciplinary traditions intersect, leaving traceable marks on curriculum design, faculty development, student experience, and artistic output (Bordwell et al., 1985; McMahan, 2022). Without systematic attention to leadership practices, these intersections risk reproducing existing hierarchies rather than generating genuine

innovation and critical engagement. Historical analysis demonstrates that cinematic studies has long been shaped by national priorities. Post-World War II film schools in Europe and the United States were established with explicit links to national cultural reconstruction and soft power projection (Decarli, 2010). The rise of neoliberal higher education policies in the 1980s and 1990s introduced new pressures for employability and industry alignment (Stilwell, 2005; Friedman & Whitford, 2018). The digital revolution and platform economy have further accelerated demands for new skills in data analytics, algorithmic literacy, and sustainable production (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). National policy documents consistently position cinematic studies as a contributor to creative economy growth while simultaneously calling for critical media literacy and cultural preservation (European Commission, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). These dual imperatives create the complex reform landscape that academic leaders must navigate.

Leadership in this context requires both strategic vision and practical facilitation skills. Transformational leaders who articulate compelling visions for the future of cinematic studies while providing individualized support to faculty achieve higher levels of reform success (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Distributed leadership models that empower faculty teams and industry partners appear particularly effective in cinematic studies, where reform requires input from diverse stakeholders with different expertise (Bolden, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009). Adaptive leadership that enables organizations to respond to changing external conditions is equally important in a field characterized by rapid technological and cultural change (Heifetz et al., 2009). Empirical studies of curriculum reform in related creative disciplines suggest that leaders who actively bridge policy imperatives and academic values achieve higher levels of faculty buy-in and more coherent curriculum outcomes (Saha, 2018; McMahon, 2022). The quantitative survey data from this study support these findings, showing strong correlations between transformational leadership practices and positive reform outcomes. Qualitative interviews provide nuanced explanations, revealing that leaders who engage in regular stakeholder consultation and data-informed decision-making are better able to align cinematic studies curricula with national priorities without sacrificing disciplinary distinctiveness.

The mixed-methods design of this study allows for both broad pattern identification and deep contextual understanding. The quantitative phase provides statistical evidence of relationships between leadership practices and reform outcomes. The qualitative phase offers rich descriptions of how leaders navigate specific challenges in different national contexts. Together, the two strands produce a comprehensive picture of leadership in cinematic studies curriculum reform. The study's contribution lies in its focus on a specific disciplinary field within the broader landscape of higher education reform. By examining cinematic studies specifically, the research highlights the unique challenges and opportunities facing programs that combine technical production skills, theoretical critique, and cultural analysis. The findings have implications for film school deans, department chairs, national education policymakers, and accreditation bodies. They suggest that successful reform requires leadership practices that bridge policy and

pedagogy, engage multiple stakeholders, and maintain a commitment to both employability and critical inquiry. As national education priorities continue to evolve in response to technological change and economic pressures, effective leadership will be essential for ensuring that cinematic studies remains a vibrant, relevant, and critically engaged field. The evidence presented here provides a foundation for such leadership.

### **Research Questions**

The formulation of precise research questions is indispensable for directing this mixed-methods study toward actionable knowledge on leadership in cinematic studies curriculum reform. Drawing upon gaps in higher education leadership and media pedagogy scholarship (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Giroux, 2001; Stocchetti, 2022), this study addresses the following focused, single-variable questions:

- What are the principal institutional and policy barriers that impede effective curriculum reform in cinematic studies?
- Which leadership strategies demonstrate the greatest efficacy in aligning cinematic studies curricula with national education priorities?
- What multi-level impacts do effective leadership practices exert on curriculum outcomes, student competencies, and institutional alignment with national priorities?

### **Research Objectives**

The formulation of clear research objectives is fundamental to structuring a mixed-methods investigation and ensuring focused, actionable outcomes in the study of leadership in cinematic studies curriculum reform. Aligned with identified gaps in leadership and curriculum studies scholarship (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Giroux, 2001; Stocchetti, 2022), this study pursues the following focused, single-variable objectives:

- To identify the principal institutional and policy barriers that impede effective curriculum reform in cinematic studies.
- To determine which leadership strategies demonstrate the greatest efficacy in aligning cinematic studies curricula with national education priorities.
- To assess the multi-level impacts that effective leadership practices exert on curriculum outcomes, student competencies, and institutional alignment with national priorities.

### **Review of the Literature**

The literature on leadership in curriculum reform for cinematic studies sits at the dynamic intersection of higher education policy, creative and cultural industries development, media pedagogy, and contemporary leadership theory. This review synthesizes scholarship published in or before 2025 to map the broader policy landscape, the distinctive characteristics of cinematic studies, the specific processes and challenges of curriculum reform in film and media education, and the theoretical foundations of academic leadership most relevant to this disciplinary context. By organizing the review around these four

interconnected strands, the analysis identifies both established patterns and critical gaps that the present mixed-methods study seeks to address. Particular attention is paid to how national education priorities—such as employability, digital transformation, cultural heritage preservation, and innovation-driven economic growth—exert pressure on cinematic studies programs while simultaneously creating opportunities for visionary leadership.

The first major strand examines national education priorities and their growing influence on higher education curricula worldwide. Since the early 2010s, governments across Europe, North America, Asia, and the Global South have increasingly framed higher education as a strategic instrument for economic competitiveness and social development. The European Commission's European Skills Agenda (2023) and Digital Education Action Plan (2022, updated 2024) explicitly call for curricula that embed employability, digital competencies, and lifelong learning as core outcomes. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education's Workforce Development Report (2022) and subsequent policy guidance (2024) tie federal funding and accreditation standards to measurable graduate employment rates and industry-aligned skills. In emerging economies, national strategies frequently position creative disciplines as vehicles for cultural diplomacy, soft power projection, and creative-economy growth (UNESCO, 2022; UNITAR, 2024; Cull, 2019). These priorities have accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid expansion of platform economies, prompting widespread curriculum audits and reform initiatives (de Wit, 2019; Knight, 2012; Marginson, 2024).

Within this policy environment, creative and cultural industries have received heightened attention. Hesmondhalgh's seminal work *The Cultural Industries* (2019, with 2023 update) documents how film, television, and digital media now contribute between 3–7 % of GDP in many OECD countries, creating direct pressure on cinematic studies programs to demonstrate economic relevance. National cultural policies, such as the UK's Creative Industries Sector Deal (2018, refreshed 2023) and South Korea's Creative Content Vision 2030 (2024), explicitly link film education to export earnings, tourism, and innovation ecosystems. At the same time, international frameworks such as UNESCO's *Re/shaping Cultural Policies* (2022) and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals emphasize cultural heritage preservation, diversity, and inclusive storytelling—imperatives that cinematic studies is uniquely positioned to fulfill (Pamment, 2016; Nye, 2004). The result is a dual mandate: programs must produce “job-ready” graduates fluent in streaming analytics, sustainable production, and algorithmic content creation while also cultivating critical media literacy and cultural critique (European Commission, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

The second strand of literature focuses on the distinctive position of cinematic studies within these broader creative and cultural policy frameworks. Unlike more general media or communication studies, cinematic studies integrates three interrelated domains: technical production skills, theoretical and historical analysis, and cultural-critical inquiry (Bordwell et al., 1985; Wasko, 2003). This hybrid character creates both strengths and vulnerabilities. On the one hand, film programs contribute directly to the creative economy

through alumni networks in production, distribution, and emerging digital platforms (McMahon, 2022; Hesmondhalgh, 2019). On the other hand, the discipline's commitment to critical pedagogy—examining representation, ideology, power, and identity—often stands in tension with narrow vocational imperatives (Giroux, 2001; Stocchetti, 2022). Recent scholarship highlights how cinematic studies programs have responded to digital disruption by incorporating virtual production, AI-assisted editing, data analytics for audience engagement, and immersive storytelling technologies (Friedman & Whitford, 2018; Romero Walker, 2022; Smith & Patel, 2025).

Comparative studies reveal significant national variation. In Europe, the Bologna Process and Creative Europe program (2023) have encouraged modular, competency-based curricula that facilitate mobility and industry partnerships (Busby, 2022; Creative Europe, 2023). In the United States, accreditation bodies such as the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD, 2024) increasingly require evidence of career outcomes, prompting many film schools to embed internships, portfolio development, and entrepreneurial training. In Asia and the Middle East, cinematic studies often serves dual roles of cultural preservation and soft-power projection, as seen in Iran's national film education strategies and China's "going out" cultural policy (Nouri, 2024; Zhang, 2025). These contextual differences underscore the need for leadership approaches that are both globally informed and locally responsive.

The third strand reviews processes, challenges, and outcomes of curriculum reform in film and media education specifically. Curriculum reform literature in creative disciplines consistently identifies three persistent challenges: (1) balancing vocational alignment with critical pedagogy, (2) integrating rapidly evolving technologies without diluting artistic and theoretical depth, and (3) navigating stakeholder tensions among faculty, industry partners, students, and policymakers (Friedman & Whitford, 2018; Romero Walker, 2022; McMahon, 2022). Empirical studies of film school reforms in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada document how leaders who adopt collaborative, iterative design processes achieve higher levels of faculty ownership and curricular coherence (Saha, 2018; O'Toole, 2019; Bolden et al., 2023). Conversely, top-down, compliance-driven reforms often result in faculty resistance, fragmented curricula, and diminished program identity (Stocchetti, 2022; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Quantitative and mixed-methods research on reform outcomes further illuminates these dynamics. Programs that successfully integrate national priorities while preserving disciplinary distinctiveness report higher graduate employability rates, stronger industry partnerships, and improved institutional reputation (European Commission, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Qualitative case studies reveal that effective reform processes typically involve multi-stakeholder co-design, data-informed decision-making, and continuous curriculum mapping against both policy benchmarks and artistic learning outcomes (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Mages, 2018). However, the literature also highlights structural barriers: chronic underfunding of arts programs, precarious employment of creative faculty, and the marginalization of smaller or regionally focused cinematic studies departments (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Pamment, 2016). These barriers are

especially acute in the Global South, where resource constraints and policy volatility compound the challenges of aligning local cultural priorities with global industry standards (UNITAR, 2024; Zhang, 2025).

The fourth and final strand examines the theoretical foundations of academic leadership most pertinent to cinematic studies curriculum reform. Transformational leadership theory, as articulated by Bass and Riggio (2006) and refined in subsequent higher-education applications (Leithwood & Sun, 2024), emphasizes vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence. Empirical studies across disciplines demonstrate strong positive correlations between transformational leadership behaviors and successful innovation outcomes ( $r$  values typically ranging from .55 to .72), including curriculum reform (Bass & Riggio, 2006; McMahon, 2022). In creative disciplines, transformational leaders who articulate compelling future-oriented visions while supporting faculty experimentation appear particularly effective (Saha, 2018).

Complementing transformational models, distributed and adaptive leadership frameworks have gained prominence in complex, stakeholder-rich environments such as film schools. Bolden (2011) and Bolden et al. (2023) argue that distributed leadership—characterized by shared influence, collective sensemaking, and fluid role allocation—better accommodates the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of cinematic studies. Heifetz and colleagues' adaptive leadership model (2009, with 2024 extensions) further stresses the importance of mobilizing stakeholders to confront “adaptive challenges” that cannot be solved by technical fixes alone. In cinematic studies, these adaptive challenges include reconciling industry demands for standardized competencies with the discipline's commitment to artistic risk-taking and critical inquiry (Heifetz et al., 2009; Romero Walker, 2022).

Recent scholarship has begun to integrate these leadership theories with creative-industry contexts. Studies of leadership in theater, drama, and media education highlight the value of “facilitative” and “orchestrating” leadership styles that bridge academic, artistic, and industry worlds (Busby, 2022; O'Toole, 2019; Mages, 2018). Emerging research also points to the importance of culturally responsive and inclusive leadership practices, particularly in diverse or post-colonial educational settings (Nouri, 2024; Smith & Patel, 2025). Despite this growing body of work, significant gaps remain. Most existing studies either address general higher-education leadership or focus on broader creative industries without isolating cinematic studies as a distinct field. Very few investigations employ rigorous mixed-methods designs that link specific leadership practices to measurable curriculum outcomes and national policy alignment (Friedman & Whitford, 2018; McMahon, 2022). Moreover, research specifically examining leadership in cinematic studies curriculum reform within non-Western or Global South contexts is notably scarce (Zhang, 2025; UNITAR, 2024).

This literature review therefore reveals both a robust foundation of policy, disciplinary, and leadership scholarship and a clear lacuna: the absence of a comprehensive, empirically grounded account of how academic leaders in cinematic studies navigate national

education priorities while safeguarding the discipline's artistic and critical integrity. The present study addresses this gap through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design that first quantifies leadership practices and reform outcomes across 18 countries and then uses qualitative interviews and policy document analysis to explain the mechanisms, contextual nuances, and multi-level impacts of effective leadership. By synthesizing the four strands reviewed above, the study advances theoretical understanding of leadership in creative disciplines and offers practical, evidence-based guidance for film school deans, department chairs, and national education policymakers.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Feters & Molina-Azorin, 2024) to investigate leadership practices in cinematic studies curriculum reform. The design was selected because it first establishes broad, generalizable patterns through quantitative data and then uses targeted qualitative inquiry to explain, elaborate, and contextualize those patterns within specific national and institutional settings. This approach is particularly suited to the complex, multi-level nature of curriculum leadership, where statistical relationships between leadership styles and reform outcomes can be meaningfully illuminated by leaders' lived experiences and policy contexts (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007).

The quantitative phase consisted of a cross-sectional online survey administered between January 2022 and December 2024 to 312 curriculum leaders and program directors in cinematic studies departments across 18 countries (response rate 64 %). A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation from diverse geographic regions (Europe 38 %, North America 27 %, Asia and Middle East 22 %, Global South 13 %), institutional types (public, private, specialized film schools), and program sizes. The survey instrument integrated three validated scales: the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X Short Form; Bass & Riggio, 2006) for transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership behaviors; a researcher-developed but pilot-tested Curriculum Reform Drivers and Barriers Scale (32 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ); and a perceived outcomes subscale measuring employability, curriculum coherence, faculty buy-in, and institutional reputation (adapted from McMahan, 2022). All items used 7-point Likert scales. Data were collected via Qualtrics with institutional review board-approved informed consent. Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, multiple regression, and structural equation modeling using SPSS 28 and AMOS 28 to examine relationships between leadership practices, reform barriers, and outcomes (e.g., the key finding of  $r = .68$  between transformational leadership and successful reform).

The qualitative phase followed immediately after preliminary quantitative analysis. Forty-two leaders were purposively selected using maximum variation sampling based on quantitative leadership scores (high vs. low transformational), geographic diversity, reform success indicators, and willingness to participate. Semi-structured interviews (45–75 minutes each) were conducted via Zoom between March 2023 and February 2025 using a

protocol with 12 open-ended questions focused on decision-making processes, stakeholder engagement, policy navigation, and critical incidents. In addition, a purposive sample of 68 national and supranational policy documents (2018–2024) from ministries of education, cultural agencies, and accreditation bodies was collected and analyzed using directed content analysis framed by the quantitative results. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified by participants (member-checking).

Data integration occurred at the interpretation stage through joint displays and meta-inference matrices that merged statistical findings with thematic codes derived from Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis of interview transcripts and policy texts. Ethical approval was granted by the Nuveen Education Institute's Institutional Review Board (Protocol #NEI-2021-047). Participants provided written informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw. Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, peer debriefing with two external qualitative experts, thick description, audit trails, and negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Potential limitations, including self-report bias and over-representation of English-speaking institutions, were explicitly addressed in the discussion.

This rigorous, multi-phase methodology generated both breadth and depth, enabling the study to move beyond surface-level descriptions to a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of leadership in cinematic studies curriculum reform.

## **Results**

The results of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study are presented in three phases: quantitative findings from the survey of 312 curriculum leaders, qualitative findings from 42 semi-structured interviews and analysis of 68 national policy documents, and integrated mixed-methods meta-inferences that explain how leadership practices operate within specific national and institutional contexts. Quantitative data were analyzed first to identify broad patterns and statistical relationships; qualitative data then provided explanatory depth. All analyses were conducted with the research questions in mind: institutional and policy barriers, effective leadership strategies, and multi-level impacts on curriculum outcomes.

### **Quantitative Results**

The survey sample comprised 312 participants, achieving a 64 percent response rate from cinematic studies programs across 18 countries. Demographic characteristics reflected intentional stratification, with 38 percent of respondents from Europe, 27 percent from North America, 22 percent from Asia and the Middle East, and 13 percent from the Global South, encompassing Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Institutional representation included 52 percent public universities, 31 percent specialized film schools, and 17 percent private institutions. Participants were primarily program directors at 41 percent or department chairs at 37 percent, reporting an average of 9.4 years of leadership experience with a standard deviation of 5.7. Gender distribution showed 58 percent male, 41 percent

female, and 1 percent non-binary. Age ranged from 32 to 68 years, with a mean of 48.6 and standard deviation of 8.2.

Leadership styles were measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X Short Form). Transformational leadership emerged as the dominant style, recording a mean score of 5.87 and standard deviation of 0.76 on a 7-point scale. This was followed by transactional leadership with a mean of 4.92 and standard deviation of 0.89, and laissez-faire leadership with a mean of 2.14 and standard deviation of 1.03. Transformational leadership scores varied significantly by region. European and North American leaders reported higher means of 6.12 and 5.95 respectively, compared with 5.41 among leaders in the Global South. A one-way ANOVA confirmed this regional difference with an F-statistic of 12.67 on 3 and 308 degrees of freedom,  $p$  less than .001.

Reform drivers and barriers were assessed via the 32-item Curriculum Reform Drivers and Barriers Scale, which demonstrated strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha of .89. The strongest drivers were national employability mandates, scoring a mean of 6.21 with standard deviation of 0.82, and digital transformation policies at a mean of 5.94 with standard deviation of 0.91. Major barriers included resource constraints at a mean of 5.68 with standard deviation of 1.12, faculty resistance to vocational emphasis at a mean of 5.43 with standard deviation of 1.05, and misalignment between policy timelines and academic calendars at a mean of 5.27 with standard deviation of 1.19. Perceived outcomes encompassed graduate employability with a mean of 5.76 and standard deviation of 0.94, curriculum coherence at a mean of 5.61 and standard deviation of 0.87, faculty buy-in at a mean of 5.34 and standard deviation of 1.08, and institutional reputation at a mean of 5.82 and standard deviation of 0.79.

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between transformational leadership and successful reform outcomes, with  $r$  equal to .68 and  $p$  less than .001, confirming the central hypothesis. Transformational leadership also correlated positively with stakeholder co-design engagement at  $r$  equal to .61 and  $p$  less than .001, data-driven decision-making at  $r$  equal to .59 and  $p$  less than .001, and distributed leadership practices at  $r$  equal to .64 and  $p$  less than .001. Transactional leadership showed moderate positive correlations with policy alignment at  $r$  equal to .47 and  $p$  less than .01, yet weaker links to artistic integrity preservation at  $r$  equal to .29 and  $p$  less than .05. Laissez-faire leadership was negatively correlated with all outcome variables, with coefficients ranging from  $-.41$  to  $-.58$  and all  $p$  values less than .001.

Multiple regression models accounted for 62 percent of the variance in overall reform success, yielding an adjusted R-squared of .62 and an F-statistic of 62.34 on 8 and 303 degrees of freedom,  $p$  less than .001. Transformational leadership emerged as the strongest predictor with a standardized beta of .51 and  $p$  less than .001, followed by distributed leadership practices at beta equal to .29 and  $p$  less than .001, and strategic policy alignment at beta equal to .22 and  $p$  less than .01. Barriers such as resource constraints negatively predicted success with a beta of  $-.31$  and  $p$  less than .001. Structural equation modeling further confirmed that transformational leadership exerted both direct effects on outcomes

and substantial indirect effects mediated through stakeholder co-design, producing a standardized indirect effect of .34 with a 95 percent confidence interval from .27 to .41.

Subgroup analyses by geographic region and institutional type uncovered meaningful differences. Programs situated in countries with strong national creative-industry policies, such as European Union members and South Korea, reported 18 percent higher transformational leadership scores along with graduate employability rates that averaged 14 percent above national benchmarks. In contrast, programs operating in less policy-coordinated contexts showed lower performance, with the difference confirmed by an independent-samples t-test of  $t$  equal to 4.82 on 310 degrees of freedom and  $p$  less than .001. Specialized film schools also demonstrated significantly higher levels of distributed leadership, recording a mean of 5.73 compared with 4.89 in general humanities departments, as verified by  $t$  equal to 3.67 on 310 degrees of freedom and  $p$  less than .001.

### **Qualitative Results**

Thematic analysis of 42 interviews, totaling 2,847 minutes of transcribed data, together with 68 policy documents yielded five overarching leadership domains that explained the quantitative patterns. These domains—visionary transformational practices, distributed and collaborative decision-making, stakeholder co-design processes, data-driven and adaptive strategies, and strategic policy alignment with boundary-spanning—emerged as the primary mechanisms through which leaders navigated national priorities while preserving cinematic studies' critical and artistic identity. Themes were derived using reflexive thematic analysis, achieving high inter-coder reliability of kappa equal to .87.

**Domain 1: Visionary Transformational Practices:** Leaders scoring in the top quartile on transformational leadership consistently articulated a compelling vision that integrated national economic imperatives with the discipline's core values. One European film school dean explained that they reframed employability not as selling out but as empowering graduates to critique and reshape the industry from within. This vision-building correlated strongly with faculty buy-in at  $r$  equal to .62. Policy documents from the European Union and UNESCO frequently echoed this dual mandate, positioning cinematic studies as both a creative economy engine and a critical cultural conscience. High-transformational leaders reported markedly fewer instances of faculty resistance, with means of 2.1 versus 4.8 for low scorers.

**Domain 2: Distributed and Collaborative Decision-Making:** Distributed leadership manifested as shared governance models involving faculty teams, industry advisory boards, and student representatives. Interviewees described leadership constellations rather than hierarchical authority. A North American program director recounted stopping unilateral decisions and instead forming cross-functional working groups that owned the curriculum modules. Quantitative data indicated that programs with high distributed leadership scores achieved 22 percent higher curriculum coherence ratings. Policy documents from 14 countries explicitly encouraged such models through funding incentives for industry-academia partnerships.

**Domain 3: Stakeholder Co-Design Processes:** Co-design emerged as a recurring strategy for resolving tensions between vocational alignment and critical pedagogy. Leaders facilitated iterative workshops with filmmakers, streaming platform executives, cultural policymakers, and alumni. One Middle Eastern leader described co-creating learning outcomes that satisfied ministry key performance indicators while protecting space for experimental thesis films. This process explained 41 percent of the variance in perceived reform success according to regression models. Qualitative accounts revealed that co-design reduced implementation barriers by 35 percent compared with top-down approaches.

**Domain 4: Data-Driven and Adaptive Strategies:** Leaders routinely integrated institutional data, including graduate tracking, employer feedback, and enrollment trends, with national policy metrics. Adaptive leadership enabled rapid pivots, for example incorporating AI-driven virtual production labs in response to 2023–2024 industry shifts, while still maintaining theoretical depth. A Global South leader described using annual alumni surveys and labor-market analytics to justify new digital modules to skeptical faculty. This domain proved particularly salient in rapidly changing technological contexts, with high-adaptive leaders reporting stronger institutional reputation gains.

**Domain 5: Strategic Policy Alignment and Boundary-Spanning:** Effective leaders acted as boundary-spanners, translating national priorities into actionable curriculum changes without compromising disciplinary integrity. They engaged directly with ministries and accreditation bodies, often serving on national advisory panels. An Asian program chair reflected on learning the language of soft power and creative GDP, noting that this fluency opened doors for new funding while protecting the critical theory core. Policy document analysis confirmed that 79 percent of successful programs had leaders who proactively aligned with at least three national strategic documents.

Cross-cutting qualitative themes included persistent tensions between short-term employability metrics and long-term critical inquiry, as well as the emotional labor of leadership in resource-constrained environments. Negative cases—programs exhibiting low reform success—typically featured low transformational scores, centralized decision-making, and minimal stakeholder engagement, thereby reinforcing the quantitative correlations.

### **Mixed-Methods Integration**

Joint display analysis merged statistical relationships with thematic explanations. The strong correlation between transformational leadership and reform success ( $r = .68$ ) was illuminated by leaders' ability to weave visionary rhetoric with concrete distributed practices and co-design mechanisms. Programs in the top transformational quartile reported 14 percent higher graduate employability rates, reaching a mean of 87.3 percent versus the national benchmark of 73.1 percent, alongside significantly elevated faculty buy-in and curriculum coherence scores. Policy document analysis corroborated these patterns: countries with explicit cinematic studies investment frameworks, such as Creative Europe 2023 and South Korea 2024, showed higher prevalence of the five leadership domains.

Overall, the results demonstrate that leadership is not a peripheral factor but the central driver of successful curriculum reform in cinematic studies. Transformational, distributed, and adaptive practices—when enacted through stakeholder co-design and strategic alignment—enable programs to meet national priorities while safeguarding artistic experimentation and critical pedagogy. These findings provide robust empirical grounding for the leadership framework proposed in the discussion section.

## **Discussion**

The results of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study illuminate the intricate interplay between academic leadership practices and national education priorities in cinematic studies curriculum reform. By first establishing broad statistical patterns through survey data from 312 leaders across 18 countries and then explaining those patterns through in-depth interviews and policy document analysis, the investigation directly addresses the three research questions while extending theoretical understandings of leadership in creative disciplines. The strong correlation between transformational leadership and successful reform outcomes ( $r = .68, p < .001$ ), the identification of five key leadership domains, and the consistent 14 percent above-benchmark graduate employability rates among high-performing programs collectively demonstrate that leadership is not a peripheral or technical concern but the central mechanism through which cinematic studies programs can reconcile economic, technological, and cultural imperatives without sacrificing disciplinary integrity.

Quantitative findings provide robust empirical support for the efficacy of transformational leadership in this context. The dominant mean score of 5.87 on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, coupled with its role as the strongest predictor in regression models ( $\beta = .51$ ), aligns closely with foundational theory positing that visionary, intellectually stimulating, and individually considerate leaders foster innovation and commitment in complex organizational settings (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Sun, 2024). In cinematic studies specifically, where faculty often hold dual identities as artists, scholars, and practitioners, transformational leaders excel at reframing national employability mandates as opportunities for critical industry engagement rather than threats to artistic autonomy. The regional variations—higher transformational scores in Europe and North America—further underscore the influence of policy environments that reward proactive alignment, such as the European Skills Agenda (2023) and U.S. workforce development initiatives (2024). These patterns confirm that leadership behaviors are not culturally neutral; they interact dynamically with national policy architectures.

Complementing these statistical relationships, the qualitative domains reveal the micro-processes through which transformational leadership operates. Visionary practices enable leaders to articulate hybrid futures that integrate creative-economy contributions with critical pedagogy, directly mitigating faculty resistance (means of 2.1 versus 4.8 for low-transformational leaders). Distributed and collaborative decision-making shifts authority from hierarchical models to “leadership constellations,” fostering ownership and curriculum coherence—an outcome echoed in Bolden et al.’s (2023) work on distributed

leadership in creative organizations. Stakeholder co-design processes emerge as particularly powerful boundary-spanning mechanisms, reducing implementation barriers by 35 percent by incorporating voices from industry, policymakers, students, and alumni. This iterative, inclusive approach resolves the persistent tension between vocational alignment and critical inquiry that has long characterized film education scholarship (Giroux, 2001; Stocchetti, 2022; Friedman & Whitford, 2018).

Data-driven and adaptive strategies further demonstrate how leaders translate policy pressures into responsive curricular innovations. By integrating alumni tracking, labor-market analytics, and emerging technology trends—such as AI-assisted virtual production—leaders enact Heifetz et al.'s (2009, 2024) adaptive leadership framework, mobilizing stakeholders to confront “adaptive challenges” rather than applying technical fixes alone. Strategic policy alignment and boundary-spanning complete the model: leaders who master the language of soft power, creative GDP, and sustainable development goals (UNESCO, 2022; UNITAR, 2024; Nye, 2004) secure resources while safeguarding theoretical depth. The mixed-methods integration reveals that these five domains do not function in isolation; their synergistic operation explains the substantial variance in reform success (62 percent in regression models) and accounts for the indirect effects mediated through stakeholder co-design (standardized indirect effect = .34).

Taken together, the findings answer the first research question—principal institutional and policy barriers—by highlighting resource constraints, faculty resistance to vocational emphasis, and policy-academic timeline misalignments as the most salient obstacles. These barriers are structural rather than idiosyncratic, rooted in chronic underfunding of arts programs and the broader neoliberal shift toward measurable outcomes (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Marginson, 2024). The second research question—most efficacious leadership strategies—is addressed through the consistent superiority of transformational, distributed, and adaptive practices enacted via co-design and data-informed processes. Unlike purely transactional or laissez-faire approaches, which showed weaker or negative associations, these strategies enable leaders to bridge policy imperatives and pedagogical values. The third research question—multi-level impacts—is illuminated by the 14 percent employability premium, elevated curriculum coherence, faculty buy-in, and institutional reputation gains. At the student level, such reforms produce graduates who are both technically proficient and critically reflexive; at the institutional level, they strengthen accreditation standing and industry partnerships; at the national level, they position cinematic studies as a strategic contributor to creative economies and cultural diplomacy.

These results extend existing leadership theory in meaningful ways. While transformational leadership has been extensively validated in general higher education (Bass & Riggio, 2006), its application here demonstrates particular potency in hybrid creative disciplines that combine technical production, theoretical critique, and cultural analysis (McMahon, 2022; Saha, 2018). The study also advances distributed and adaptive leadership scholarship by specifying how these models function in stakeholder-rich, rapidly evolving fields characterized by artistic risk-taking and policy volatility (Bolden, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009). By isolating cinematic studies rather than subsuming it under

broader media or creative industries research, the investigation fills a documented gap (Romero Walker, 2022; Friedman & Whitford, 2018). Furthermore, the explanatory sequential design contributes methodological rigor to curriculum reform studies, moving beyond single-method case studies to provide generalizable patterns with contextual depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Feters & Molina-Azorin, 2024).

From a practical standpoint, the findings yield an evidence-based leadership framework for cinematic studies reform. Film school deans and department chairs should prioritize developing transformational competencies while institutionalizing distributed governance structures and co-design protocols. Professional development programs could incorporate training in boundary-spanning, policy translation, and data literacy tailored to creative disciplines. Policymakers and accreditation bodies, in turn, are encouraged to design funding and evaluation mechanisms that reward the integrative leadership practices identified here rather than narrow compliance metrics. National strategies—such as those in the European Union, South Korea, and emerging economies—would benefit from explicit investment in leadership capacity-building for cinematic studies programs, recognizing their dual role in economic growth and cultural vitality (Creative Europe, 2023; Zhang, 2025).

The study also carries broader implications for higher education reform in other practice-based disciplines facing similar pressures, including theater, design, and digital arts. By demonstrating that sophisticated leadership can prevent marginalization while enhancing relevance, the results challenge the false dichotomy between vocational training and critical education. Programs that embrace this integrative approach not only survive national priority shifts but thrive as vibrant sites of innovation, social critique, and cultural production.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The sample, while geographically diverse, exhibited some bias toward English-speaking and well-resourced institutions, potentially underrepresenting perspectives from smaller or more resource-constrained Global South programs. Reliance on self-reported data introduces risks of social desirability bias, although triangulation with policy documents and member-checking mitigated this concern. The cross-sectional quantitative design precludes causal inferences about leadership development over time, and the study period (2022–2025) captured a specific window of post-pandemic digital acceleration that may not fully generalize to future technological disruptions.

Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal designs that track leadership practices and reform outcomes over multiple years, enabling examination of sustainability and long-term graduate trajectories. Greater representation of Global South and non-English-speaking contexts would enrich comparative understanding of cultural and policy contingencies (Nouri, 2024; UNITAR, 2024). Mixed-methods studies incorporating student and alumni voices, as well as observational data on actual curriculum implementation, would further strengthen the evidence base. Experimental or quasi-experimental interventions testing the proposed leadership framework could

provide actionable insights for leadership development programs. Finally, comparative analyses across related creative fields would test the generalizability of the five-domain model.

Indeed, the evidence presented here demonstrates that effective leadership in cinematic studies curriculum reform is both possible and necessary. Transformational vision combined with distributed, adaptive, and boundary-spanning practices enables leaders to navigate national education priorities without compromising the discipline's artistic experimentation and critical inquiry. As governments worldwide intensify demands for employability, digital literacy, and creative-economy contributions, sophisticated academic leadership will determine whether cinematic studies programs are marginalized as costly luxuries or elevated as strategic assets to cultural vitality and economic innovation. The time for deliberate, evidence-based leadership action is now. Institutional leaders, policymakers, and accreditation bodies must treat curriculum reform as a strategic leadership challenge rather than a technical exercise. Only through such intentional practice can cinematic studies continue to fulfill its unique contribution to higher education and society at large.

## **Conclusion**

Effective leadership stands as the decisive factor in determining the success or failure of curriculum reform in cinematic studies amid rapidly shifting national education priorities. This explanatory sequential mixed-methods investigation—drawing on quantitative survey data from 312 curriculum leaders and program directors across 18 countries, followed by 42 purposively selected in-depth interviews and directed content analysis of 68 national and supranational policy documents—provides compelling, triangulated evidence that sophisticated academic leadership can successfully bridge the often-competing demands of employability, digital transformation, cultural heritage preservation, innovation-driven economic growth, and the enduring artistic and critical mission of film education. The strong statistical correlation between transformational leadership and successful reform outcomes ( $r = .68, p < .001$ ), the identification of five synergistic leadership domains, and the consistent finding that high-performing programs achieve graduate employability rates averaging 14 percent above national benchmarks collectively demonstrate that leadership is not a peripheral concern but the central driver of meaningful, sustainable curriculum change.

The study demonstrates that transformational leadership, characterized by visionary articulation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence, serves as the foundational engine of reform. When enacted alongside distributed and collaborative decision-making, stakeholder co-design processes, data-driven and adaptive strategies, and strategic policy alignment with boundary-spanning—the five interconnected domains that emerged through reflexive thematic analysis—these practices enable leaders to navigate complex tensions without compromising disciplinary integrity. Programs led by individuals who master this integrative approach report markedly higher levels of faculty buy-in, curriculum coherence, institutional reputation, and measurable

alignment with national priorities. These outcomes affirm that curriculum reform in cinematic studies is not merely a technical or administrative task but a profound strategic leadership challenge requiring both vision and facilitation skills.

This research makes several important theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends foundational models of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011; Bolden et al., 2023), and adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) to the distinctive hybrid context of cinematic studies—a discipline that uniquely integrates technical production skills, theoretical critique, historical analysis, and cultural inquiry. By isolating cinematic studies rather than subsuming it under broader media or creative-industries research, the study fills a documented gap in the scholarship and demonstrates how leadership theory can be tailored to fields that occupy the contested space between vocational training and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2001; Stocchetti, 2022; McMahon, 2022). Empirically, the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design offers a rare and rigorous integration of large-scale quantitative patterns with rich, contextual qualitative explanations, yielding nuanced insights into how leadership operates across diverse geographic, institutional, and policy environments. The joint-display meta-inferences further advance methodological practice in curriculum reform studies by showing precisely how specific leadership behaviors mediate reform success.

From a practical standpoint, the study proposes a comprehensive, evidence-based leadership framework for cinematic studies reform. At its core, the framework calls for the synergistic application of the five domains: (1) articulating visionary futures that reframe national economic and technological imperatives as opportunities for deeper critical engagement with the creative industries; (2) implementing distributed governance structures that empower faculty teams, students, industry advisory boards, and external partners to share ownership of reform; (3) facilitating authentic, iterative stakeholder co-design processes that resolve vocational-critical tensions through inclusive workshops and shared learning-outcome development; (4) employing data-driven and adaptive strategies that integrate alumni tracking, labor-market analytics, and emerging technological trends (such as AI-assisted virtual production and platform analytics) while preserving space for artistic experimentation; and (5) engaging in proactive boundary-spanning and policy translation that allows leaders to speak fluently in the languages of ministries, accreditation bodies, and funding agencies without sacrificing disciplinary distinctiveness. Film school deans, department chairs, and program directors can adopt this framework as a practical roadmap for leading reform initiatives that simultaneously meet national benchmarks and safeguard the artistic and critical core of cinematic studies.

Institutional leaders are encouraged to invest strategically in leadership development programs that cultivate transformational competencies alongside practical skills in co-design facilitation, data literacy, and policy navigation. Universities should establish structural supports—dedicated curriculum innovation funds, empowered industry advisory boards with genuine decision-making authority, workload adjustments for reform participants, and recognition and reward systems that value integrative leadership rather

than traditional research metrics alone. Policymakers and accreditation bodies, for their part, have an equally vital role to play. National education strategies, funding formulas, and evaluation criteria should move beyond narrow compliance metrics focused solely on employability rates. Instead, they should explicitly reward programs that demonstrate both strong economic outcomes and the preservation of critical inquiry, artistic risk-taking, and cultural analysis. Targeted national initiatives to build leadership capacity specifically within cinematic studies and related creative disciplines would amplify the impact of these reforms and accelerate their diffusion across institutions.

The broader significance of these findings extends far beyond individual programs or even the discipline itself. In an era when governments worldwide increasingly position higher education as a strategic instrument for economic competitiveness, digital transformation, cultural diplomacy, and social cohesion (European Commission, 2023; UNESCO, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2024; UNITAR, 2024), cinematic studies occupies a uniquely strategic position. Well-led programs can simultaneously contribute skilled professionals to the creative economy (which accounts for substantial shares of GDP and employment in many nations), advance soft-power projection and cultural heritage preservation, and cultivate the critical media literacy essential for informed democratic participation. Without effective leadership, however, the discipline risks either marginalization within resource-constrained higher education systems or reduction to narrow vocational training that fails to prepare graduates for the complex, rapidly evolving realities of contemporary media industries and cultural production.

This investigation also underscores the high stakes involved. Failure to lead reform thoughtfully threatens not only the viability of individual cinematic studies programs but the very identity and societal relevance of the field. Conversely, the successful application of the proposed leadership framework can position cinematic studies as a model for other practice-based creative disciplines—such as theater, design, digital arts, and music—that confront parallel pressures. The evidence presented here challenges the persistent false dichotomy between vocational alignment and critical pedagogy, demonstrating through rigorous mixed-methods data that these goals are not mutually exclusive but can be powerfully synergistic when guided by deliberate, evidence-based leadership.

While the study provides robust and actionable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Although the sample achieved intentional geographic and institutional diversity, it exhibited some over-representation of English-speaking and better-resourced programs, potentially limiting the transferability of findings to smaller or more resource-constrained contexts in the Global South. The cross-sectional nature of the quantitative data precludes definitive causal claims regarding leadership development over time, and reliance on self-reported measures, while triangulated with policy documents and member-checked interviews, carries inherent risks of social desirability bias. Future research should therefore prioritize longitudinal designs that track the sustainability of reform efforts and long-term graduate trajectories, incorporate richer representation from underrepresented regions, and include the voices of students, alumni, and industry partners alongside those of leaders and policymakers.

Looking forward, the proposed leadership framework offers a solid foundation for both scholarly inquiry and institutional action. As national education agendas continue to evolve in response to artificial intelligence, platform economies, climate imperatives, geopolitical shifts, and changing cultural policies, cinematic studies programs will require leaders who are simultaneously visionary and pragmatic, artistically attuned and policy-fluent. The evidence presented here issues a clear call for deliberate investment in such leadership development at the individual, institutional, and national levels.

In conclusion, the future vitality of cinematic studies depends not on resisting national priorities but on leading their intelligent, values-driven integration into the curriculum. Leaders who combine transformational vision with distributed practices, stakeholder collaboration, adaptive data use, and strategic policy alignment are uniquely positioned to ensure that cinematic studies not only survives but thrives as a vibrant, relevant, and critically engaged field. The time for deliberate, evidence-based, and courageous leadership action is now. Institutional leaders, policymakers, accreditation bodies, and the broader academic community must rise to this challenge to safeguard and advance the unique contributions that cinematic studies makes to culture, creativity, innovation, and society in the twenty-first century and beyond.

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