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Strategic and Critical Thinking in Multi-Level Leadership: A Systematic Review of Practices and Effectiveness in Ugandan Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

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Institutions (HEIs).

This systematic review examines how strategic and critical thinking across executive, line, middle, and lower-level leadership affects institutional effectiveness in higher education, with emphasis on Ugandan Universities. Drawing on international and regional literature on managerial competencies, adaptive and strategic leadership, middle management, and institutional innovation, it identifies the core thinking skills, leadership practices, and structural conditions that shape performance, adaptability, innovation, and equity. Methods: A PRISMA-guided review of peer-reviewed studies from major databases was conducted using keywords related to strategic/critical thinking, leadership, higher education, Uganda, and institutional effectiveness. Eligible studies provided empirical or robust conceptual analysis of leadership roles, thinking, decision-making, and institutional outcomes. Results: Conceptual and strategic thinking, evidence-informed decisions, and critical problem framing consistently enhance organisational performance, resilience, and innovation, yet remain weakly embedded in Ugandan public universities. Adaptive leadership is limited, decision-making systems are fragile, and middle/line managers are constrained by inadequate preparation, bureaucracy, and scarce resources. Conclusion and recommendations: Multi-level effectiveness requires integrating strategic and critical thinking across all leadership tiers and aligning structures, culture, and data systems to support these capabilities. The review proposes a multi-level analytical framework and calls for structured leadership development, institutionalisation of adaptive and evidence-based leadership, and governance reforms to reduce bureaucracy, strengthen decision-making, and foster inclusive, critically reflective cultures in Ugandan Higher Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) operate in environments of rapid change, resource constraints, and competing demands for quality, equity, and relevance. Leadership at various organisational levels is vital for managing these pressures and maintaining institutional effectiveness (Connie et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Jameson et al., 2022). Strategic and critical thinking, covering conceptual thinking, evidence-based decision-making, and critical framing of problems, has become a key set of skills supporting effective leadership in HEIs worldwide (Connie et al., 2025; Poekert et al., 2020; Jameson et al., 2022).

In Uganda, public universities are reported to face ongoing challenges and low effectiveness, predominantly due to leadership and governance weaknesses (Kasule, 2025). Excessive bureaucratic layers, resistance to change, and gaps in decision-making frameworks hinder adaptive responses to complexity (Kasule, 2025). Contextually, line-level leadership refers to managers who directly supervise frontline staff and oversee day-to-day operations in specific units, such as heads of department and section leaders. Middle managers at the middle-level leadership, on the other hand, refer to managers who sit between top executives and line/frontline managers, responsible for translating institutional strategy into operational plans and coordinating across units, such as deans, school

directors and faculty managers. Lower-level managers at the lower levels of leadership, on the other hand, refer to supervisory or junior managerial roles close to frontline staff, often handling routine supervision, task allocation, and immediate problem-solving, such as team leaders and unit coordinators. In this review, 'line,' 'middle,' and 'lower-level' leadership refer respectively to direct operational managers, intermediary strategic-implementation managers, and frontline supervisory roles.

However, the systematic integration of strategic and critical thinking across executive, line, middle, and lower levels of leadership has not been thoroughly mapped within the Ugandan higher education context.

This review, therefore, investigates: (1) How are strategic and critical thinking defined within multi-level leadership in higher education? (2) Which leadership practices at various levels are linked to institutional effectiveness? (3) What gaps and opportunities exist for enhancing these capabilities in Ugandan universities?

METHODS

The review employs a systematic literature review approach following PRISMA 2020 principles, as used in related work on managerial competencies, crisis leadership, digital leadership, adaptive leadership, and strategic leadership effectiveness

(Connie et al., 2025; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Kasule, 2025; Välimäki et al., 2024; Jameson et al., 2022; Endo et al., 2024).

Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and African Journals Online using combinations of terms such as “strategic thinking”, “critical thinking”, “adaptive leadership”, “middle leadership”, “line managers”, “department heads”, “higher education”, “Uganda”, and “institutional effectiveness”. The search (2006–2025) yielded 1,243 records. After removal of 317 duplicates, 926 unique records remained for title and abstract screening. Of these, 742 were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria (e.g., non-HE context, non-leadership focus, opinion pieces), leaving 184 articles for full-text assessment. A further 139 were excluded at the full-text stage (e.g., insufficient focus on thinking/decision-making, no clear institutional outcomes, methodological weaknesses), resulting in 45 studies included in the final synthesis. Details of the study selection process are summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure X).

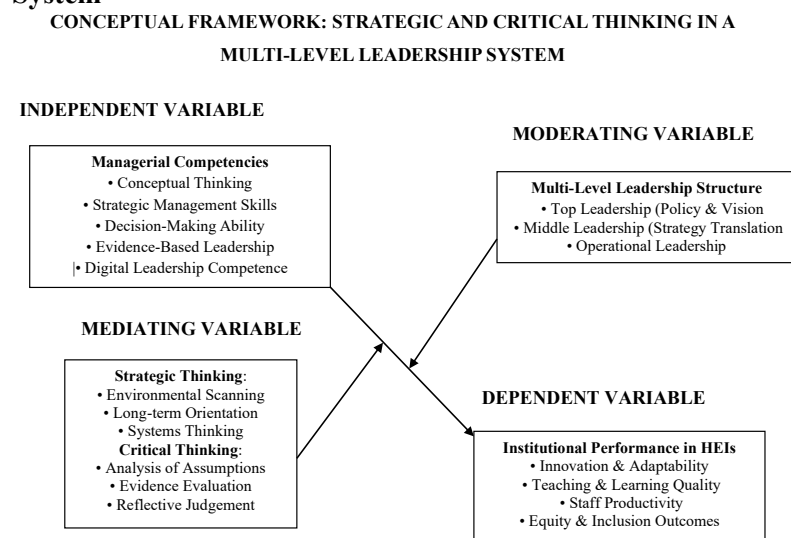
Inclusion criteria aligned with previous systematic reviews: peer-reviewed empirical or high-quality

conceptual studies; focus on higher education (or clearly generalisable to HE); explicit focus on leadership or managerial roles; and publication within a recent, reform-intensive period (2006–2025) (Connie et al., 2025; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Jameson et al., 2022; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022). Exclusion criteria ruled out non-empirical opinion pieces and literature lacking a clear link to leadership or institutional outcomes (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Jameson et al., 2022; Endo et al., 2024).

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction focused on study context, leadership level (executive, line, middle, low-level), conceptualisation of strategic and critical thinking, leadership practices, and reported institutional outcomes. Following methods used in previous reviews, thematic synthesis and textual narrative synthesis were employed to group findings into competency domains, leadership practices, and structural or cultural enablers or barriers (Connie et al., 2025; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Jameson et al., 2022; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Strategic and Critical Thinking in a Multi-Level Leadership System



Thinking in a Multi-Level Leadership System.

This conceptual framework demonstrates that managerial competencies affect institutional performance through the mediating role of strategic and critical thinking skills. The strength and direction of this relationship are moderated by multi-level leadership structures within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), where leadership functions at top, middle, and operational levels to ensure effective strategy formulation, translation, and execution as a team.

Managerial Competencies and Thinking Skills

A comprehensive review of managerial skills in higher education identifies conceptual thinking, effective decision-making, and strategic management as fundamental for institutional performance and adaptability (Connie et al., 2025). Conceptual thinking is closely connected to strategic thinking: the ability to diagnose complex environments, synthesise information, and anticipate long-term consequences.

Institutional innovation research further highlights that multi-level management must combine strategic sense-making with learning from crises and experimentation to develop “smart institutions” capable of thriving amid exponential change (AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022). This requires both strategic (forward-looking, integrative) and critical (questioning assumptions, assessing evidence) thinking at different leadership levels.

Evidence-Based and Critical Approaches to Leadership

Evidence-based leadership in nursing demonstrates that leaders who systematically collect organisational data, evaluate research, and incorporate stakeholder perspectives enhance staff performance and organisational outcomes (Välimäki et al., 2024). Similar principles apply in education, where leadership that encourages dialogue, inquiry, and critical analysis of social

justice issues boosts professional learning and equity outcomes (Poekert et al., 2020).

Digital leadership reviews highlight that much existing research adopts functional perspectives and often lacks theoretically grounded, critical engagement with how digitalisation reshapes power, pedagogy, and institutional strategy (Jameson et al., 2022). This emphasises the need for more critical thinking in leadership research and practice itself.

Middle Leadership and the “Translation” of Strategy

Middle leadership is difficult to define, highly contextual, and plays a crucial role in connecting strategy to classroom practice (Lipscombe et al., 2021). Middle leaders influence teacher practice, team development, school reform, and professional learning, yet they often lack adequate preparation for the complexity of their roles (Lipscombe et al., 2021). Their work involves interpreting strategic priorities, critically assessing local conditions, and facilitating collaborative problem-solving, key aspects of strategic and critical thinking in practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategic and Critical Thinking at the Executive Level

Evidence from adaptive leadership in Ugandan public universities shows that top leadership has largely not adopted adaptive, learning-focused approaches, which contributes to ongoing institutional ineffectiveness (Kasule, 2025). Executive leaders face complexity, uncertainty, and resource limitations, yet often operate within rigid bureaucracies and traditional decision-making patterns (Kasule, 2025).

Systematic reviews of strategic leadership in government institutions emphasise that strategic leadership is vital for organisational performance and innovation but is often hindered by inadequate training, limited adaptation to dynamic environments, and inconsistent evaluation of

leadership effectiveness (Endo et al., 2024). For universities, these findings imply that vice-chancellors, rectors, and senior management require enhanced capabilities in:

- **Conceptual and strategic thinking:** scanning environments, aligning resources with long-term goals, and prioritising innovation (Connie et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022; Endo et al., 2024).
- **Critical decision-making:** employing evidence, questioning traditional structures, and assessing trade-offs in policy and resource distribution (Kasule, 2025; Välimäki et al., 2024; Endo et al., 2024).
- **Adaptive leadership:** redefining problems, engaging stakeholders, and adopting experimentation to tackle recurrent challenges (Kasule, 2025; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).

In Uganda, research indicates gaps in decision-making systems at leading institutions, with inadequate integration of critical analysis and stakeholder engagement, which limits institutional responsiveness (Kasule, 2025).

Line Managers as Translators of Strategy and Monitors of Performance

Line managers, such as deans, school heads, and faculty administrators, often act as intermediaries between executive directives and academic staff. Although specific Ugandan evidence is limited at this level, examples from school and higher education leadership indicate that these roles:

- Coordinate the implementation of strategic plans, policies, and quality assurance mechanisms (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Jameson et al., 2022).
- Monitor performance indicators and establish feedback loops for senior management (Connie et al., 2025; Välimäki et al., 2024; Endo et al., 2024).

- Mediate tensions between centralised control and professional autonomy, demanding balanced, critical judgment.

Systematic reviews of crisis leadership and digital leadership reveal that mid-tier leaders who demonstrate proactive strategic planning, stakeholder communication, and reflective learning are better equipped to sustain organisational continuity during disruptions such as COVID-19 and digital transformation (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Jameson et al., 2022).

These functions require line managers in Ugandan universities to employ strategic thinking—aligning faculty-level plans with the broader institutional strategy—and critical thinking—evaluating policy feasibility, interrogating performance data, and addressing contextual inequities. However, leadership development for this group is rarely as structured as it is for top executives, which contributes to inconsistent practice (Connie et al., 2025; Lipscombe et al., 2021).

Middle Managers as Institutional Change Agents

Middle leaders—department chairs, programme coordinators, and heads of academic units—emerge as vital agents of change within educational systems. A systematic review of school middle leadership finds that middle leaders:

- Hold diverse and context-specific responsibilities, including curriculum leadership, staff development, and internal accountability (Lipscombe et al., 2021).
- Directly and indirectly influence teacher practices, team functioning, school reform, and professional learning (Lipscombe et al., 2021).
- Often lack professional development appropriate for the complexity of their role (Lipscombe et al., 2021).

Leadership for professional learning focused on equity further shows that leaders who critically

consider social justice issues, facilitate dialogue and inquiry, and foster inclusive, shared leadership promote more equitable outcomes (Poekert et al., 2020). These practices are fundamentally strategic (aligning professional learning with long-term equity goals) and critical (questioning taken-for-granted practices and structures).

For Ugandan universities, where institutional culture and decision-making systems have been identified as barriers to effectiveness (Kasule, 2025), strengthening middle managers' strategic and critical thinking could be crucial to:

- Transforming institutional strategies into innovations at the discipline and programme levels.
- Challenging unproductive cultural norms and bureaucratic routines.
- Supporting academic staff through evidence-based professional development and collaborative problem-solving (Connie et al., 2025; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Poekert et al., 2020; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).

Low-Level Managers and Supervisory Leadership for Quality

Low-level or supervisory managers (e.g., unit supervisors, course coordinators, and administrative supervisors) are less frequently discussed in higher education research. However, insights can be drawn from studies of evidence-based leadership and professional learning.

- Supervisory leaders influence daily work conditions, feedback, and the micro-level implementation of quality standards (Välimäki et al., 2024; Poekert et al., 2020).
- Their utilisation of organisational data, local evidence, and stakeholder input can enhance staff performance and service quality (Välimäki et al., 2024).

- Having critical enquiry skills enables them to identify practice gaps, question inefficient routines, and suggest local innovations in line with broader strategy (Välimäki et al., 2024; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).

In contexts like Uganda, where resource constraints and bureaucratic procedures are significant challenges, low-level managers' ability to exercise critical thinking in micro-decisions (e.g., timetabling, resource allocation, student support) can cumulatively affect institutional effectiveness, but this potential remains under-theorised and under-supported (Kasule, 2025; Välimäki et al., 2024; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).

Cross-Cutting Themes: Institutional Conditions and Research Gaps

Competency Clusters

Across the literature, five recurring competency clusters underpin effective multi-level leadership.

- Conceptual and strategic thinking and decision-making (Connie et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022; Endo et al., 2024).
- Facilitation de la communication et du dialogue (Connie et al., 2025; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2021 ; Poekert et al., 2020).
- Littératie des données et utilisation des preuves "Data literacy and use of evidence" (Connie et al., 2025; Välimäki et al., 2024; Jameson et al., 2022).
- Cultural and equity-focused critical framing (Kasule, 2025; Poekert et al., 2020; Jameson et al., 2022).
- Adaptive and innovative orientation amidst crisis and change (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Kasule, 2025; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).

These clusters directly correspond to strategic and critical thinking, which are essential to institutional

competitiveness and responsiveness (Connie et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022; Endo et al., 2024).

Structural and Cultural Barriers

Persistent barriers include:

- Excessive bureaucratic structures and strict hierarchies, especially in Ugandan public universities (Kasule, 2025).
- Weak decision-making systems and limited cross-level communication (Kasule, 2025; Jameson et al., 2022; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).
- Inadequate professional development, particularly for middle and line leaders (Connie et al., 2025; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Poekert et al., 2020).
- Underdeveloped theoretical and critical perspectives in leadership research, particularly regarding digital and institutional innovation (Jameson et al., 2022; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).

Research and Practice Gaps for Uganda

Specific gaps affecting Ugandan HEIs include:

- Lack of empirical research breaking down leadership practices by level (executive, line, middle, lower) and systematically connecting them to institutional effectiveness.
- Limited integration of adaptive leadership, digital leadership, and equity-focused professional learning into leadership development programmes (Kasule, 2025; Poekert et al., 2020; Jameson et al., 2022; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).
- Limited assessment of how strategic and critical thinking skills are developed, evaluated, and recognised in Ugandan universities.

Proposed Multi-Level Framework

Synthesising the reviewed literature, a conceptual framework for Ugandan HEIs could:

- Position strategic and critical thinking as a central competency across all leadership levels.
- Specify role-specific practices:
 - Executives: system-level vision, structural reform, resource strategy, and evidence-informed governance (Connie et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022; Endo et al., 2024).
 - Line managers: coordination of faculty and school plans, overseeing performance, and interpreting policy within the context (Connie et al., 2025; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2021).
 - Middle managers: leadership in curriculum and programme, professional learning, and change agency at the departmental level (Lipscombe et al., 2021; Poekert et al., 2020).
 - Low-level managers: overseeing supervisory quality, resolving local issues, and maintaining feedback loops (Välimäki et al., 2024; Poekert et al., 2020).
- Embed enabling conditions: streamlined, learning-focused structures; robust data systems; inclusive cultures; and targeted leadership development (Connie et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Välimäki et al., 2024; Poekert et al., 2020; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022).

This framework can direct empirical research in Ugandan universities and support capacity-building and governance reforms.

Summary and Implications

Strategic and critical thinking are essential for effective multi-level leadership in higher education, helping institutions manage complexity, foster innovation, and promote equity. International

evidence indicates that conceptual thinking, evidence-based decision-making, adaptive leadership, and critical analysis of problems enhance institutional performance. However, these skills are inconsistently developed and poorly supported, especially in Ugandan public universities.

Enhancing institutional effectiveness in Ugandan higher education requires intentional investment in leadership development across executive, line, middle, and lower-level roles; reforming decision-making and bureaucratic structures; and a research agenda that empirically links strategic and critical thinking practices to measurable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review reveals that strategic and critical thinking are essential skills for multi-level leadership and institutional effectiveness in higher education. However, they are weakly integrated and unevenly supported across roles in Ugandan universities. Adaptive leadership is largely absent in public universities, contributing to persistent, unresolved challenges and low effectiveness (Kasule, 2025). Middle-level academics and department chairs hold crucial roles in maintaining academic standards, developing programmes, and ensuring accountability, yet they often struggle due to limited capacity-building and mentoring. Evidence from broader management and institutional-innovation literature shows that institutions that promote strategic planning, conceptual thinking, and evidence-based decision-making at multiple levels tend to perform better, adapt more effectively, and foster innovation. However, entrenched bureaucracies, poor working conditions, resistance to change, and underdeveloped leadership competence and development schemes constrain the emergence of such practices in Ugandan higher education. Overall, institutional effectiveness depends not only on individual leaders' skills but also on supportive structures, governance, and a culture that values critical enquiry and learning.

Recommendations

Regarding University Leadership and Governance in Uganda

- Institutionalise adaptive and strategic leadership.
 - Integrate adaptive leadership principles into leadership standards, performance appraisals, and operational guidelines to enhance responsiveness to complexity and crises (Rojon et al., 2021; Kasule, 2025).
 - Use strategic planning not just as a compliance tool but as a dynamic process that connects institutional vision, resources, and measurable outcomes (Rojon et al., 2021; Habeeb & Eyupoglu, 2024).
- Design a comprehensive, multi-tiered leadership development.
 - Develop tiered programmes for executive, line, middle, and lower-level managers centred on conceptual and strategic thinking, evidence utilisation, and critical reflection (Jameson et al., 2022; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022; Geerts et al., 2019; Kasule, 2022).
 - Prioritise middle managers (deans, heads of department) through mentoring, coaching, and practice-based learning to address their documented competence gaps (Mwangu, 2022; Kasule, 2022).
- Enhance evidence-based decision-making
 - Develop robust data systems and enhance leaders' capacity to utilise organisational, research, and stakeholder evidence in decision-making (Jameson et al., 2022; AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022; Välimäki et al., 2024; Geerts et al., 2019).
 - Encourage reflective, critical evaluation of digitalisation and strategic initiatives rather than merely functional adoption (Jameson et al., 2022; Anand et al., 2023; Kasule, 2025).

- Revise structures and organisational culture.
- Simplify bureaucratic processes, specify decision rights, and enhance communication channels to reduce rigidity and strengthen cross-level collaboration (Rojon et al., 2021; Kasule, 2025; Villena, 2025).
- Encourage cultures that value critical enquiry, peer dialogue, and inclusive participation in decision-making, including gender and equity considerations (Välimäki et al., 2024; Hilal et al., 2024).
- ***For Policymakers and External Stakeholders***
- Align quality assurance and funding frameworks with expectations for adaptable, strategically thoughtful leadership and support for leadership development across all levels (Rojon et al., 2021; Anand et al., 2023; Villena, 2025; Habeeb & Eyupoglu, 2024).
- Support collaborative African and regional leadership institutes and research networks that focus on strategic and critical thinking in HE leadership (Kasule, 2025; Fia et al., 2022; Hilal et al., 2024).
- Longitudinal designs to examine how strategic and critical thinking skills develop and influence outcomes over time.
- Operationalising and measuring strategic and critical thinking
- Development and validation of contextually appropriate instruments to assess leaders' strategic, critical, and evidence-based thinking, building on research in managerial competencies and higher-order thinking (Jameson et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2023; Loyens et al., 2023; Neely et al., 2020).
- Intervention and evaluation research
- Rigorous evaluations, including experimental or quasi-experimental designs, of leadership development interventions for Ugandan HE managers, based on outcome-focused programmes in healthcare and school management (AlMalki & Durugbo, 2022; Anand et al., 2023; Villena, 2025; Geerts et al., 2019).
- Studies isolating the marginal effects of key design features such as coaching, multisource feedback, digital tools, and accountability mechanisms (Anand et al., 2023; Villena, 2025; Geerts et al., 2019).
- Multi-level and comparative research
- Comparative analyses of Ugandan universities with institutions in other African or LMIC contexts aim to understand how various governance models and strategic planning traditions influence leadership thinking and effectiveness (Villena, 2025; Fia et al., 2022; Habeeb & Eyupoglu, 2024; Kasule, 2022).
- Research on cross-level dynamics: how executive vision and national policy interact with middle and low-level leadership practices to influence teaching, research, and third-mission outcomes (Jameson et al., 2022;

AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Following best practices for systematic reviews, implications for future research should be closely linked to identified gaps and unresolved issues (Hermanto & Srimulyani, 2022; Sauer & Seuring, 2023). Priority areas include:

- Context-specific empirical research in Ugandan higher education institutions
- Multi-site quantitative and mixed-methods studies analyse how executive, line, middle, and low-level leadership practices in Ugandan universities relate to institutional effectiveness indicators (quality, equity, innovation, financial sustainability) (Rojon et al., 2021; Kasule, 2025; Villena, 2025; Habeeb & Eyupoglu, 2024).

Kasule, 2025; Fia et al., 2022; Habeeb & Eyupoglu, 2024).

- Critical and equity-focused perspectives
 - Research integrating critical management, gender, and postcolonial perspectives to explore how power, culture, and social norms enable or constrain strategic and critical thinking among leaders in Ugandan HE (Välimäki et al., 2024; Hilal et al., 2024; Spicer & Alvesson, 2024).

Overall, future research should move beyond mere description towards theory-informed, methodologically rigorous studies that examine how strategic and critical thinking at various leadership levels can be intentionally developed to improve institutional effectiveness in Ugandan higher education.

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