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# Core competencies for school leaders: insights from educational experts

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This study explores the essential competencies required for effective school leadership in Oman through a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews. Guided by a validated theoretical framework of core competencies for school principals, the research involved 50 experts from the Ministry of Education with specializations in educational supervision and administration. Data collection instruments were reviewed by specialists and pilot-tested to ensure clarity and relevance. The findings revealed a layered understanding of leadership competencies, where experts distinguished between general competencies expected of all school principals, specialized competencies commonly observed among high-performing leaders, and a refined set of critical competencies identified as essential for achieving effective and sustainable school leadership. Among these, ten key domains were emphasized, including instructional leadership, strategic planning, and communication skills. The study highlights noticeable gaps in current leadership practices and emphasizes the urgent need for structured, targeted professional development programs. These findings contribute to both local and international discourse on educational leadership and provide actionable insights for enhancing leadership preparation, school administration, and policy-making in the education sector.

## KEYWORDS

school principals, school leadership, core competencies, leadership, schools

## Introduction

Amidst the rapid changes in today's education sector, core competencies emerge as vital elements in shaping an effective educational experience. Technological innovations like online platforms and AI enhance learners' access to comprehensive resources and personalized learning experiences. The shift toward practical and life skills, rather than rote memorization, reflects a global trend toward balanced, holistic education. This ongoing transformation demands curriculum updates aligned with fast-evolving tech and industry standards, ensuring equal educational opportunities. In this context, core competencies are key benchmarks for measuring learners' ability to adapt to professional and life challenges, serving as the foundation for developing modern educational strategies that align with the dynamic labor market and society.

A search on Scopus found that 83% of research on core competencies emerged after 2010, highlighting its relatively recent rise in global interest. According to [Prahalad and Hamel \(2006\)](#), core competencies represent an institution's collective learning, enabling skill integration across technologies and markets, benefiting clients and posing a challenge for competitors to imitate. Recent studies, such as [RezaeiZadeh et al. \(2017\)](#), identify critical competencies like creative thinking, motivation, interpersonal skills,

and leadership, essential for educational contexts. Johnson et al. (2017) emphasize that unique competencies arise from interconnected skills and technologies rather than standalone capabilities. Al Jabri et al. (2021) defines core competencies in professional ethics, legal issues, evidence-based practices, and teamwork. Despite reliable assessment tools, few focus on improvements in quality, safety, communication, or IT. Choi (2023) refers to core competencies as diverse learning outcomes, noting gender-based patterns and gradual improvement over time.

In Oman, Vision 2040 places core competencies at the forefront of strategic objectives, evident in its focus on education, research, and national capabilities. The vision aims to develop a comprehensive, sustainable educational system that enhances quality across school and higher education curricula, preparing graduates for local and global markets with competitive skills. Core competencies foster a knowledge-based economy, ensuring job security in the private sector and strengthening public-private sector collaboration. Promoting awareness of individuals' roles in economic development, along with a supportive educational and vocational training system, enhances productivity and economic efficiency. Core competencies are thus essential for role distribution based on skills, bolstering national competitiveness, and supporting a system that nurtures talented, creative, and entrepreneurial minds (Ministry of Economy, 2020).

## Problem statement

School leadership is considered the cornerstone for developing the educational process, improving the quality of learning outcomes, and enhancing institutional performance within schools. Over recent decades, the concept of leadership has evolved from a focus on administrative functions to a more comprehensive view that includes the competencies possessed by leaders operating in rapidly changing environments with increasing challenges particularly amid digital transformation and growing demands for quality and accountability.

Global literature shows increasing interest in leadership competency models, such as the model by Marzano et al. (2005), which categorizes competencies into areas like transformational, instructional, digital, and emotional leadership. Other models include ISTE's framework that emphasizes digital leadership and innovation (Okunola and Naicker, 2025), and the OECD model (2021), which links school leadership to holistic learning. These models suggest that an effective leader is one who possesses a blend of skills that enable them to lead change, support teachers, employ technology, and build a sustainable learning environment.

Developing and enhancing core competencies among school leaders is critical to achieving sustainable progress and global competitiveness in education. Despite the efforts made to develop education in Oman, and the goal of Vision 2040 to build national competencies, studies such as Al-Hashimi et al. (2020) point to challenges in developing core competencies and ways to improve them. Despite this growing body of international research, the educational environment in the Sultanate of Oman has yet to receive in-depth investigation regarding core leadership competencies in its local educational context. Apart from one

study (Abunaser and Rubkhi, 2025) that focused on "creative schools" without directly addressing core competencies in public schools, and another study (Salah El-Din et al., 2025) that explored the role of essential competencies in enhancing school performance in Oman, there remains a lack of research integrating an analysis of Omani leadership practices with global models. This gap highlights the absence of a clear national framework for leadership competencies that could guide policymakers and leadership development programs a gap this study seeks to address by drawing on the insights of educational experts and analyzing them in light of international models. The study also seeks to explore current frameworks and practices for developing these competencies and assess their alignment with international standards, offering actionable insights for policymakers.

## Research questions

1. What are the key core competencies that school principals must possess, as identified by educational experts?
2. How do educational leadership specialists prioritize these competencies based on their perceived significance for effective school leadership?
3. To what extent do educational experts assess the relative importance of each identified core competency for school principals' success?

## Objectives

1. Identify the core competencies required for effective school leadership.
2. Analyze how these competencies are ranked in terms of importance by educational and leadership experts.
3. Explore challenges faced by educational leaders in developing and implementing these competencies.

## Significance

This study is both theoretically and practically significant, contributing to the scientific understanding of school leadership competencies in the educational context. It defines the core skills needed for effective leadership and enriches literature by examining how these competencies align with educational goals. Practically, it provides insights for educational leaders and policymakers, helping design training programs that develop these essential skills, thereby improving overall school performance and educational environments.

## Theoretical framework

Defining core competencies often involves concepts related to teamwork, resources, capabilities, and competencies. However, this approach can blur the lines between core competencies and other strategic concepts. Therefore, research must aim to clarify

models of core competencies by exploring links between core competencies, capabilities, and resources. Improvements to these definitions should consider three criteria: significant contribution to service or product benefits, competitive uniqueness, and broad accessibility to users. Based on this, competencies are divided into functional and integrative competencies, where the former supports daily activities, and the latter integrates and develops new competencies. In a technological context, core competencies drive innovation, categorizing them into three types: first-degree competencies (customer and technological competencies), integrative competencies (ability to combine first-degree competencies), and thirdly, the ability to build new first-degree competencies. Core competencies should thus include adaptability, transferability, and the ability to manage organizational change (Ljungquist, 2008).

In the educational context, Hwang and Kwon (2019) emphasize that competencies reflect an individual's ability to adapt to societal changes. They describe how conceptual, competency-based education helps students develop essential skills for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, as opposed to innate abilities. Based on this definition, certain core competencies can be adopted in school education, and, following European Union recommendations (2006), several EU countries integrated eight core competencies into their educational laws: linguistic communication, mathematical competence, knowledge and interaction with the natural world, data processing and digital competence, social and civic skills, cultural and artistic competence, learning to learn, and autonomy and personal initiative (Lleixà et al., 2016).

Previous studies have examined various dimensions of core competencies across different contexts. For example, Ertim and Al-Faroukh (2017) highlighted teamwork, employee empowerment, and communication as key dimensions. Other studies, including Khalaf et al. (2022), Ismail (2020), and Taha et al. (2022), focused on organizational learning, human capital, strategic flexibility, and technological management. Zamiri and Esmaeili (2024) explored aspects like resource development, knowledge acquisition, group learning, and service diversification, while Khalaila (2019) identified knowledge, skills, capabilities, and facilitation as core competency dimensions.

Focusing on core competencies is vital for promoting innovation in education, as they are linked to teachers' performance and adaptability to environmental changes. Zhu et al. (2013) emphasize that educational, learning, social, and technological competencies are critical in innovative education, positively impacting teacher performance and supportive relationships with colleagues. RezaeiZadeh et al. (2017) argue that developing competencies such as productive thinking, motivation, interpersonal skills, and leadership fosters entrepreneurship, highlighting the need to focus on core capabilities essential for success in education and work. Huber (2004) underscores the importance of core competencies for school leadership, given their increased responsibilities and the need for leadership theories aligned with educational values in democratic societies.

Developing core competencies requires multi-level efforts through diverse strategies. In nursing education, Markey and

Okantey (2019) stress the importance of value-based learning integrated into curricula, combined with innovative teaching methods. Aas (2017) suggests that developing professional leadership involves critical inquiry into leadership roles and practices, enhancing self-awareness and motivation for transformative leadership. Margarita Meza Rios et al. (2018) argue that university training can develop essential school leadership competencies, emphasizing the practical experience and community engagement needed for effective educational leadership.

From an educational perspective, the core competencies of school leaders are a pivotal element in enhancing institutional performance and achieving quality education; In recent years, there have been fundamental shifts in the role of the school leader from merely a managerial position to a digital instructional leader capable of driving change, motivating teachers, utilizing technology, and navigating crises with resilience; This evolving reality necessitates identifying the required competencies based on the latest studies and international models. Among the most prominent of these competencies is digital leadership, which has become essential in light of the shift toward digital learning and blended education. Lin (2024) emphasizes that digital strategic thinking, digital vision, digital transformation, and digital talent development are the core dimensions of digital leadership. Digital leadership plays a positive role in organizational change and innovation, team effectiveness, employee creativity, and innovative behavior. Other studies also highlight the importance of school leaders' digital competencies, particularly in areas such as technological adaptability and ethical governance (Zhu et al., 2022).

In addition, the past decade has witnessed growing interest in emotional and social competencies. Numerous studies, such as Macaday-Quioco (2024), have underscored the significance of emotional intelligence especially self-regulation and empathy in enabling leaders to create safe and supportive school environments. These skills reinforce collaborative leadership practices, which are rooted in engaging teachers and staff in decision-making and building professional support networks that foster collective commitment. A comprehensive review by Khan et al. (2023) indicates that the integration of these competencies digital, transformational, instructional, and emotional forms the optimal framework for building effective school leadership capable of bringing about meaningful transformation in educational systems, particularly in contexts marked by challenge and change.

In Oman, the Ministry of Education employs a structured selection process for school principals and their assistants, ensuring the chosen candidates possess effective educational management skills. Criteria include experience, qualifications, understanding of regulations, communication skills, planning competencies, and technological literacy. The Specialized Institute for Vocational Training for Teachers also plays a role in developing school leadership skills, with programs like the "School Leadership Program" aiming to enhance leadership strategies and improve educational outcomes (Specialized Institute for Vocational Training of Teachers, 2023) aligning with Oman Vision 2040 (Oman Vision, 2020)

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, as it seeks to explore and interpret the insights of educational experts regarding the core competencies required for effective school leadership. Qualitative methodology is particularly suitable for this type of research because it allows for an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena and the subjective perspectives of participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Through semi-structured interviews, the study aimed to uncover rich and detailed descriptions of the essential leadership competencies as perceived by experienced professionals in the field of education.

### Study population and sample

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on a sample of 50 experts from the Ministry of Education, selected based on their extensive experience in school administration and educational policies. These individuals represent the central authority responsible for developing and implementing leadership strategies in public schools. Regarding the sample size, 50 participants is considered appropriate to achieve data saturation in qualitative studies targeting educational experts. As noted by previous research (Guest et al., 2006), this number is sufficient to collect rich and diverse data covering various aspects of the topic. The sample size was also chosen considering practical factors related to time and organizational feasibility, as well as to ensure a diversity of expert opinions across different specializations and functional levels. Nevertheless, the researchers acknowledge the importance of including the perspectives of direct field practitioners—such as school principals, vice principals, and teachers—in future studies to expand the data base and enrich the applied understanding of school leadership issues. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study sample.

For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality and ensuring anonymity, each participant in the qualitative phase of the study was assigned a numerical code ranging from (M1) to (M50). These codes were used throughout the analysis and presentation of findings. For example, the code (M45) refers to participant number 45. This coding system enabled the researcher to systematically refer to the data while protecting the identity of individual participants

### Study tool

A semi-structured interview approach was adopted to allow flexible yet focused discussions on predefined topics related to school leadership competencies, their importance, and how they are ranked (Appendix 1). The interview guide was validated by nine educational research experts from Omani universities who reviewed and ensured that the questions covered the study's objectives. Content validity was further confirmed by linking questions to previous literature on leadership competencies in

schools. Pilot interviews with a small group (3–5 experts) were conducted to refine question clarity. Reliability was ensured through test-retest reliability, where interviews with the same participants were repeated after 3 weeks to check for consistency in responses. The research assistant conducting the interviews received prior training on how to ask questions objectively to avoid bias. An interview guide with consistent questions and order was used to ensure uniformity across all interviews, helping to gather reliable data.

Interviews were audio-recorded (with participant consent) and each participant was assigned a code (e.g., “P10” for Participant 10). Transcriptions were carefully reviewed by additional researchers for accuracy, ensuring no significant detail was overlooked. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min, providing ample time for in-depth discussion without exhausting the participants. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and concepts. Figure 1 summarizes the study procedures.

### Study findings: research question 1

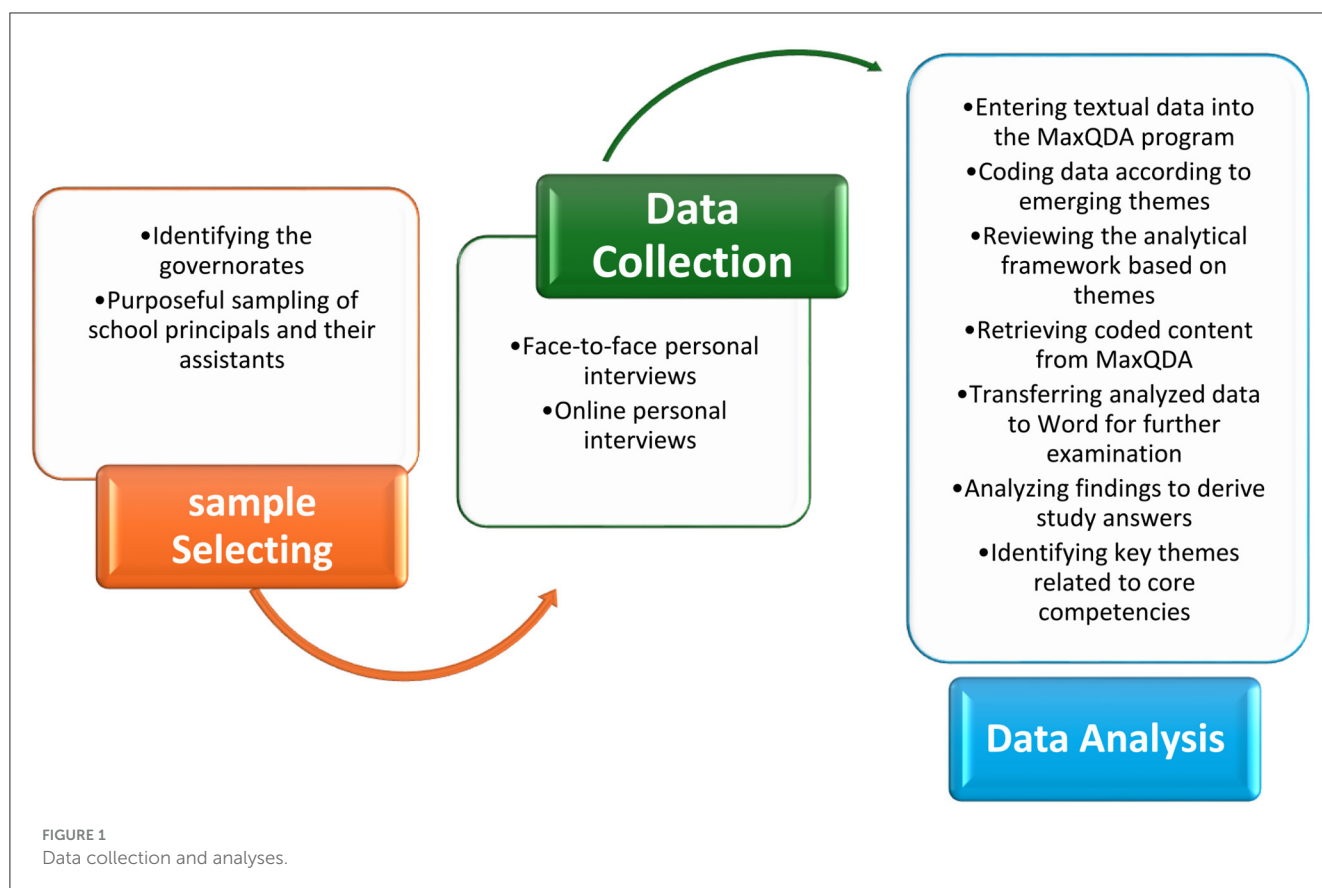
What are the key core competencies that school principals must possess, as identified by educational experts? Data analysis revealed three main groups of competencies (Table 2), those that all school principals should possess, the essential competencies found in effective principals, and those identified by experts as critical for effective role fulfillment.

Table 2 categorizes competencies within leadership, planning, communication, motivation, and more, highlighting personal and professional attributes.

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of the study sample.

Category	Attribute	Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	15	30.00%
	Male	35	70.00%
Educational level	Bachelor's	21	42.00%
	Master's	19	38.00%
	Doctorate	10	20.00%
Position	Supervisory team member	4	8.00%
	Administrative supervisor	17	34.00%
	Educational supervisor	29	58.00%
Experience	Less than 5 years	8	16.00%
	5 - 10 years	4	8.00%
	More than 10 years	38	76.00%
Total		50	100%

The demographic diversity provided a comprehensive understanding of essential competencies for school leadership.



## Core competencies possessed and lacking among effective school principals

### Core competencies among effective principals and gaps

The results indicated that participants identified two types of competencies within various administrative areas: those that are currently present and those that are lacking, based on their field experiences. Table 3 summarizes these findings.

Insights from Table 3 the table helps in identifying gaps in the core competencies of school principals, providing a foundation for improvement in these areas. Analysis highlights a strong focus on educational leadership and managing day-to-day operations. However, there is a noticeable shortfall in strategic planning and crisis management, which are crucial for long-term vision and effective handling of unforeseen challenges. Despite the strength in communication and human relations, gaps exist in team building and delegation. Basic skills in planning, motivation, and problem-solving are available, but there remain weaknesses in crisis response and quick, fair decision-making. Personal attributes like flexibility are present but lack emotional control and exemplary leadership. Finally, basic administrative skills are present, yet there is a need for enhanced use of educational technology and efficient crisis management.

Through Table 3, the gaps in core competencies for school principals are outlined, distributed according to experts' perspectives in the field. It reveals that while there are well-established competencies, such as educational leadership,

curriculum management, and effective communication with the local community, which enhance effective school leadership and contribute to an outstanding educational environment, there are other areas requiring enhancement. Strategic planning and crisis management, deemed essential for addressing contemporary challenges in the educational sector, are notably absent. This absence highlights the need for training programs focused on developing strategic and leadership skills.

In terms of communication and relationships, while some basic skills are present, there is a lack of relationship-building and equality in interactions, which could negatively impact the school environment. This necessitates improving personal skills to build stronger relationships between leaders and staff. As for motivation and team building, as well as decision-making and problem-solving, there is a need to foster leadership by example and positive crisis response. Overall, the table underscores the importance of focusing on developing unavailable skills and enhancing core competencies to ensure effective school leadership that can address future challenges and succeed in the educational process.

### Core competencies identified by study participants as essential for effective school leadership

To identify the core competencies essential for effective school leadership, an in-depth analysis was conducted on interviews with a group of experienced educational experts in school administration. The analysis focused on categorizing the frequently mentioned



attributes and skills, emphasizing the consensus among participants to determine the fundamental competencies that directly influence a school principal's effectiveness. These competencies were grouped into six comprehensive dimensions: personal traits, leadership abilities, communication skills, organizational skills, ethical values, and adaptability and flexibility. This classification was derived from a systematic thematic analysis of the interview data, where each category encompasses a set of related attributes and skills. The results identified six key competencies essential for school principals to effectively fulfill their roles. These competencies are reflected in various attributes and skills, as shown in [Table 4](#).

[Table 4](#) displays the different categories of attributes that a school principal should possess to be effective in their role. These competencies are divided among leadership, communication, organizational, and ethical skills, in addition to adaptability and flexibility traits. The analysis highlights the diverse set of competencies necessary for school leaders, reflecting their comprehensive role. These include personal traits such as decisiveness and humility, which build trust and respect, as well as leadership abilities like planning and motivation, which help direct the school toward its goals. Effective communication skills facilitate strong relationship-building, while organizational skills ensure efficient resource management. Ethical values such as integrity and fairness foster a culture of trust and respect, while flexibility

and adaptability are crucial for managing ongoing challenges. Altogether, these skills enable principals to lead schools effectively and cultivate a positive educational environment.

Question 2: How do educational leadership specialists prioritize these competencies based on their perceived significance for effective school leadership?

Based on the second phase of the field data analysis. In this phase, the 50 educational leadership experts participating in the study were asked to rank the core leadership competencies according to their perceived importance for enhancing effective school leadership. Each expert was provided with a list of competencies derived from the initial interview phase and was asked to rank them using a six-point scale: (most important, very important, important, moderately important, less important, least important). This ranking process provided quantitative evaluations that complemented the qualitative findings and revealed general trends among the experts regarding the prioritization of each competency within the school context. The data were analyzed using a frequency-based approach, where the number of responses for each competency across the six scale points was tallied. The results were then organized into a [Table 5](#) which illustrating how expert judgments were distributed for each competency. This allowed for a comparative analysis of the competencies in terms of their perceived priority, and enabled the construction of a hierarchical framework that identifies the most critical competencies for inclusion in educational leadership preparation programs. This classification also served as the basis for discussing the results and formulating related recommendations for school leadership development. This methodology aligns with best practices in qualitative-quantitative integration, particularly in leadership research where expert input is essential for deriving competency models ([Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018](#)).

## Analysis

[Table 5](#) indicates that educational leadership was ranked as the most important, with 15 votes, underscoring its central role in enhancing the quality of education. General leadership followed with 10 votes, highlighting the necessity of guiding and motivating school teams toward goals. Strategic planning had a balanced distribution, with 10 votes for “most important” and 15 for “very important,” emphasizing its role in organizing work and achieving long-term objectives. Problem-solving was less prioritized but still crucial for addressing daily challenges. Communication received 4 votes for “most important” and 11 for “very important,” signifying its importance in building relationships, even if not always at the forefront. Lastly, relationship building was relatively lower in priority but remains vital for fostering a supportive school environment (see [Figure 2](#)).

Question 3: To what extent do educational experts assess the relative importance of each identified core competency for school principals' success?

The experts were asked to rank the proposed core competencies on a scale from 1 to 10, with each expert ordering them based on their perceived importance.

[Table 6](#) reflects the experts' evaluations of the core competencies necessary for school principals, ranking them

TABLE 2 Core competencies that school principals should possess.

Domain	Competencies
Leadership	Educational leadership, transformational leadership, instructional leadership, governance, teamwork, legal compliance, assertiveness, effective communication
Communication and human relations	Communication skills, engaging with teachers, various communication forms, relationship-building, emotional and social intelligence
Planning and change management	Strategic planning, change management, adaptability, organizational skills
Motivation and team management	Individual motivation, team building, collaborative work, staff encouragement
Problem-solving	Problem-solving, decision-making, negotiation
Administrative skills	Human resource management, time management, task allocation, crisis management
Professional and academic competence	High academic and professional qualifications, instructional skills, practical expertise
Values and behavior	Justice, humility, patience, empathy, adaptability, firmness
Emotional and social intelligence	Emotional intelligence, social awareness, relationship management
Innovation and creativity	Innovation, adaptability, critical and creative thinking
Initiative and responsibility	Initiative, accountability, flexibility
Future vision	Alignment with Vision 2040, future-oriented skills, clear goals

TABLE 3 Core competencies possessed and lacking among effective principals.

Domain	Competencies available	Competencies lacking
Educational and administrative leadership	Educational leadership, instructional leadership, curriculum management, team leadership, managing unexpected situations, mastery of administrative procedures	Strategic planning, crisis management, leading by example, strategic thinking
Communication and relationships	Communication skills, human relations, gaining community support, interaction with students and teaching staff, understanding staff	Building relationships, effective communication, equality and fairness, task delegation
Planning and change management	Change management, adaptability, planning, directing, flexibility in work	Strategic planning, creative thinking, crisis management
Motivation and team building	Motivating individuals, team building, encouraging innovation, activating teamwork, team spirit, effective leadership	Effective team motivation, teamwork, developing effective internal relationships
Decision-making and problem-solving	Ability to make appropriate decisions, problem-solving, effective leadership in unexpected situations	Ability to make fair and equitable decisions, crisis response, prompt decision-making
Personal and behavioral competencies	Emotional intelligence, humility, flexibility, strong personality, discipline, commitment, ability to organize and delegate roles	Emotional control, leading by example, self-initiative
Technical and administrative skills	Human resource management, knowledge of laws and legal administration, effective management, strategic planning (in certain cases)	Educational technology, effective measurement to achieve operational goals, crisis management, incomplete equity
Professional authority	Professional authority aligned with leadership roles, understanding staff and their needs, managing team and leader relationships	Lack of personal role modeling among some leaders, inability to manage psychological aspects in crises
Core leadership attributes	Leadership, flexibility, social intelligence, relationship-building, motivation, effective communication, discipline	Lack of strategic vision, failure to utilize exceptional skills, neglect of training for school talents

TABLE 4 Core competencies identified as essential for school principals.

Personal traits	Leadership abilities	Communication skills	Organizational skills	Ethical values	Adaptability and flexibility
Leadership	Leadership skills	Good communication	Planning	Integrity and honesty	Flexibility
Decisiveness	Motivation	Listening	Work organization	Justice	Adaptation to change
Patience	Decision-making	Human relations	Task delegation	Humility	Creativity in solutions
Endurance	Relationship building	Constructive communication	Monitoring	Cooperation	Flexible thinking
Humility	Strategic planning	Communication with teachers	Role distribution	Honesty	Teamwork
Wisdom	Responsibility	Politeness in speech	Time management	Truthfulness	Stress management
Self-control	Problem-solving	Effective discussion	Independence	Fairness and equity	Flexible leadership

on a scale of 1 to 10. The distribution reveals several key insights: communication had varied opinions, with some experts placing it lower (especially 10 votes in the ninth rank), while others gave it higher priority, indicating diverse perspectives on its importance. Leadership consistently scored high, especially in the top two ranks, showing a strong consensus on its critical role in effective school management. Problem-solving was frequently in higher ranks, highlighting its essential role in daily challenges. Strategic planning mostly appeared in middle to upper ranks (3 to 5), suggesting it is significant but not always a top priority. Educational leadership consistently received high rankings (especially in ranks 1 and 2), underlining its importance in achieving educational goals. Finally, relationship building was mostly in mid-level rankings (4 to 7), indicating it is important, though not necessarily a top priority compared to other competencies.

## Discussion of results

Core competencies are essential factors to consider during recruitment and selection in various organizations, as they have a profound impact on performance and productivity. Competencies are equally important as qualifications, experience, and skills necessary to carry out job tasks efficiently (M18) pointed out, “*In any effective recruitment strategy, priority must be given to core competencies alongside qualifications and experience*” This reflects the importance of including core competencies in hiring criteria to ensure improved performance and productivity in real-world work environments. These are reliable indicators of a candidate’s ability to adapt, contribute, and maintain high performance within the organization.” (Expert 16) The results showed a significant focus on educational leadership and the management of daily operations. However, there was a clear lack in strategic planning and crisis

TABLE 5 Experts' ranking of core competencies.

No.	Competency	Most important	Very important	Important	Average	Less important	Least important
1	Educational leadership	15	5	8	18	2	2
2	General leadership	10	1	6	16	4	9
3	Strategic planning	10	15	14	5	7	3
4	Problem-solving	8	10	5	6	12	9
5	Communication	4	11	7	3	12	11
6	Relationship building	3	8	10	2	13	12



TABLE 6 Ranking of core competencies for school principals.

Competency	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Communication	1	2	1	2	7	9	5	5	10	8
Leadership	3	1	6	5	9	2	4	10	3	7
Problem-solving	5	7	3	1	6	7	3	4	6	6
Strategic planning	2	3	6	2	7	5	6	7	6	5
Educational leadership	5	7	3	2	4	6	6	6	5	4
Relationship building	6	6	3	5	4	6	5	4	7	4

management, which are critical elements for achieving long-term vision and effectively addressing sudden challenges. Respondent (M5) stated that “the school leader must, first and foremost, be an educational leader, because in his view, leadership is the cornerstone of a school’s success in all its components” this emphasized that a school leader must be an educational leader, noting that leadership is the cornerstone of success”.

Moreover, the importance of effective communication and building human relationships was highlighted, especially the ability of school leaders to engage with the local community and students, to avoid weak internal team relationships. Respondent (M11) stated, “No successful principal fails in communication,” reflecting the critical importance of this skill within a school environment. Additionally, the equitable delegation of tasks emerged as a key element according to experts, emphasizing the importance of effective distribution of responsibilities among team members.

Planning and change management skills were also identified as crucial. Respondent (M6) pointed out, “There is a lack of strategic planning and creative thinking, which limits the ability to respond efficiently to sudden changes,” when discussing the key traits for school principals. The findings also emphasized the need to develop skills in motivation, team building, and cohesive group work, as well as the necessity of having essential problem-solving and decision-making skills. However, there were gaps observed in making fair and swift decisions, particularly during critical times. However, there were gaps observed in making fair and swift decisions, particularly during critical times. Respondent (M15) remarked, “A successful school principal is one who can manage crises, no matter how severe.” Similarly, Respondent (M4) noted, “Hesitation or inconsistency in decision-making can weaken staff



*confidence and disrupt the school's momentum during emergencies.*" This highlights the critical role of decisiveness and clarity under pressure, reinforcing the idea that core leadership competencies must include the ability to respond promptly and justly in challenging situations.

The findings indicate that effective school leaders possess a set of core competencies that enhance their ability to lead and create a positive impact. These competencies include educational leadership and curriculum management, where leaders demonstrate flexibility in managing change and adapting to new developments, thereby achieving daily goals effectively. Other competencies involve the ability to communicate effectively and build positive relationships with students, faculty, and the local community. Respondent (M31) noted, *"There is no school management without a sustainable plan for effective communication"* as well as the ability to motivate individuals and manage human resources efficiently.

The importance of these competencies varies according to expert perspectives, with educational leadership and strategic planning ranked at the top, reflecting their significance in guiding schools toward achieving their long-term vision and goals. Meanwhile, competencies like problem-solving, communication, and relationship-building were ranked lower, possibly because they are integrated within strategic leadership skills. These findings suggest that experts focus on competencies that support educational quality and future planning as the foundation for successful school leadership. Respondent (M42) stated, *"A successful principal plans for the future and ensures quality in every step of planning."* This aligns with the findings of [Al-Saeedat and Al-Rababaa \(2021\)](#).

The different rankings of competencies can be explained by variables such as the type of school (public/private), educational levels, and even the gender of the principal. Public schools often require a greater focus on organizational aspects and adherence to policies, while private schools need additional skills such as marketing and innovation to stay competitive in the educational market. Respondent (M21) mentioned, *"Private schools are culturally diverse environments that require more varied competencies that cater to stakeholder needs."* Respondent (M32) explained, *"A principal managing a diverse team of males and females needs different competencies than those managing teams of just males or females,"* due to the psychological characteristics of each gender and their approaches to interaction.

Personal and behavioral competencies, such as emotional intelligence and flexibility, are strengths that enhance leaders' ability to handle difficult situations. However, challenges such as a lack of emotional control and the absence of self-initiative still need improvement. There is also a growing need to enhance the use of educational technology and effective crisis management to achieve an integrated leadership model. Respondent (M38) mentioned that *"A principal without technical skills is simply a leader of the past."* Nevertheless, the results exposed deficiencies in areas like strategic planning and crisis management, which could hinder the ability of school leaders to provide long-term guidance and address urgent challenges. There was also a noted weakness in fostering teamwork and leading by example, which necessitates addressing these aspects to strengthen effective school leadership.

These analyses indicate that core competencies for principals are not limited to technical or leadership aspects but also

include personal and behavioral skills that promote sustainability and adaptability, which positively impacts the educational and administrative environment in schools.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study hold significant value by comparing the data with global research on educational leadership and core competencies, helping to identify similarities and differences across contexts. These insights can be leveraged to adopt a global theoretical framework based on international organizational standards, enhancing the applicability of the results across different contexts. Such measures contribute to the development of public education schools in the region by offering practical recommendations to enhance leadership skills among principals, such as strategic planning, problem-solving, and relationship-building, thereby boosting their capacity to lead schools effectively and positively impacting educational quality. Moreover, enhancing communication skills improves cooperation among teachers, students, and parents, creating a supportive school environment. Schools can also benefit from global frameworks, such as the standards of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), to adopt successful international practices, enhancing their ability to address educational challenges in innovative ways. Ultimately, these efforts lead to the creation of a progressive educational environment and improve the overall level of public education in the region.

## Study recommendations: based on the findings of the study

- Develop comprehensive training programs to nurture essential leadership competencies such as educational leadership and strategic planning to enhance the administrative and educational efficiency of principals. This can be achieved through advanced workshops and continuous assessment of participants' progress.
- Strengthen problem-solving and relationship-building skills through workshops that focus on enhancing analytical abilities and effective communication, including strategies for crisis management and building effective teams.
- Provide ongoing support to develop core competencies through sharing experiences and best practices among principals to improve school performance, as well as establishing platforms for professional communication and collaboration to enhance school operations.

## Study suggestions

- The study suggests conducting comparative studies on the effectiveness of these competencies in various educational settings (such as public vs. private schools, or rural vs. urban settings) to understand how institutional culture affects the application of these competencies.

- Analyze the relationship between the level of core leadership competency development and the improvement of students' academic performance, focusing on the development of effective measurement tools to monitor the impact of competency development on students' academic achievements.

## Study limitations

The study's limitations include the relatively small sample size (50 experts), which may not fully represent the broader field of educational experts. Additionally, participant bias and personal professional experiences might influence the data quality. The qualitative nature of the study, particularly the use of semi-structured interviews, limits generalizability and relies on individual interpretations. The study is also context-specific to Oman, which may restrict the applicability of the findings to other regions. Although this study focused on the Omani context and employed a qualitative methodology, which may limit the direct generalizability of its findings to other settings, the results and insights obtained reflect leadership practices and characteristics that can be relevant and meaningful in similar contexts. This is especially true for countries or institutions that share cultural, social, and organizational factors with Oman, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and those with comparable educational structures. Therefore, the findings of this study can be considered a useful framework for developing leadership models in such environments, with due consideration given to contextual differences during application. Moreover, this study provides an important foundation for future research aimed at testing and expanding these models in broader contexts.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Sultan Qaboos University committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board waived the requirement of

written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin because the study is general and not related to privacy, it was sufficient to present the ethical approval issued by the university.

## Author contributions

FA: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Conceptualization. NS: Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Data curation. RA-F: Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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