






Presenting the Organizational Legitimacy Model in Iraqi Public Universities

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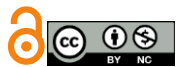
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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to develop and validate a comprehensive model of organizational legitimacy in Iraqi public universities.

Methodology: The research employed a quantitative-descriptive design. The statistical population consisted of 6,000 employees from Iraqi public universities, from which a sample of 361 participants was selected through stratified random sampling using Cochran's formula. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire containing 80 items across 14 dimensions, including independence, innovation, organizational culture, participation, commitment, adaptability, leadership style, organizational support, reward systems, result orientation, mission clarity, organizational behavior, identity, and organizational structure. Validity was established through content and construct validity procedures, while reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86. Data analysis was performed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with LISREL software, and model fit was assessed using multiple fit indices.

Findings: All dimensions demonstrated statistically significant path coefficients, generally exceeding 0.5, with many approaching or surpassing 0.8, indicating strong contributions to organizational legitimacy. The highest factor loadings were observed for independence, innovation, and organizational culture. All t-values exceeded 1.96, confirming statistical significance. Model fit indices indicated strong alignment with the observed data.

Conclusion: The validated model confirms that organizational legitimacy in Iraqi public universities is a multidimensional construct influenced by both internal capabilities and external stakeholder perceptions. Strengthening independence, fostering innovation, cultivating organizational culture, promoting participation, and ensuring transparent governance are key strategies for enhancing legitimacy. The model offers a practical framework for policymakers and university leaders to guide institutional development and strategic planning in higher education.

Keywords: Higher education, university, organizations, organizational legitimacy

1 Introduction

Organizational legitimacy is a foundational concept in the survival, growth, and influence of institutions, encompassing both formal organizations and informal social entities. It refers to the perception that an organization's actions are desirable, proper, and appropriate within the socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions that govern the environment in which it operates (Adams, 2022). This perception directly shapes an organization's ability to acquire resources, maintain stakeholder support, and achieve strategic objectives, making legitimacy an indispensable element for long-term viability (Bitektine et al., 2020). In the context of higher education institutions, particularly public universities, legitimacy serves as a crucial mechanism for aligning institutional objectives with societal expectations, enabling these organizations to navigate political, economic, and cultural challenges while fulfilling their academic missions (Díez-Martín et al., 2021).

The literature on organizational legitimacy emphasizes its multidimensional nature, involving pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions that interact to shape stakeholders' judgments (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Pragmatic legitimacy arises from the self-interest of stakeholders who evaluate organizational actions based on tangible benefits, moral legitimacy is derived from ethical appropriateness, and cognitive legitimacy reflects the perception that an organization's existence is natural and taken for granted (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). The interplay of these dimensions is particularly evident in the higher education sector, where universities are not only judged on their ability to produce knowledge and skilled graduates but also on their adherence to governance standards, responsiveness to societal needs, and alignment with broader cultural and developmental priorities (Herrera, 2016). In this regard, organizational legitimacy becomes a strategic resource that must be actively managed and reinforced (Massey, 2001).

Public universities in Iraq operate in a complex environment characterized by post-conflict reconstruction, political instability, and socio-economic reform efforts (Haddad, 2018). The legitimacy of these institutions depends on their ability to demonstrate independence in governance, foster innovation, build a strong organizational culture, and engage in meaningful collaboration with stakeholders (Razagh Moradi, 2022). Similar to global trends, Iraqi universities must position themselves as credible, competent, and ethically guided organizations, capable of

meeting both academic and societal expectations (Khandan Del et al., 2022). This involves establishing a dynamic relationship between internal capabilities—such as leadership style, reward systems, and organizational adaptability—and external perceptions shaped by governmental authorities, the public, and the international academic community (Haghi Shima et al., 2021).

Scholars have increasingly explored how legitimacy is acquired, maintained, and, in some cases, repaired following challenges or crises (Hampel & Tracey, 2017). Hampel and Tracey's (2017) historical study on Cook's travel agency in Victorian Britain demonstrates how organizations can shift from a position of stigma to legitimacy through strategic rebranding and alignment with societal norms. Similarly, voluntary and nonprofit organizations strengthen their legitimacy by demonstrating alignment with community values and engaging in cross-sector partnerships (Fu & Wang, 2024; Gnes & Vermeulen, 2018). For public universities, legitimacy-building strategies may include transparency in operations, responsiveness to student and faculty concerns, investment in research excellence, and alignment with national development strategies (Rahnavard et al., 2023).

Organizational legitimacy in the academic context is also deeply intertwined with ethical leadership and social responsibility. Ethical leadership fosters trust, reinforces moral legitimacy, and mitigates perceptions of organizational hypocrisy (Kazemi & Heydari, 2021). Social responsibility initiatives—ranging from environmental sustainability efforts to community engagement programs—signal alignment with societal priorities and enhance both moral and cognitive legitimacy (Rahdarpour et al., 2023; Razmkhah & Sajadi Khah, 2024). In addition, studies have highlighted the role of organizational communications in legitimacy-building, particularly in environments where public perception can be volatile (Rahnavard et al., 2023). Effective communication strategies ensure that stakeholders are informed, engaged, and supportive, thereby reinforcing legitimacy in the face of scrutiny or change (Massey, 2001).

In recent years, legitimacy research has expanded to include the role of innovation, sustainability, and digital transformation. Innovation strategies and the adoption of green information systems contribute to organizational legitimacy by signaling adaptability and responsibility in addressing environmental and societal challenges (Salehi et al., 2024). The integration of green human resource management practices further reinforces this legitimacy by embedding sustainability principles into organizational

culture and employee behavior (Mazidi Sharafbadi, 2025). As higher education institutions increasingly adopt digital technologies, legitimacy becomes tied to the ability to leverage these tools to improve teaching, research, and administration (Zheng et al., 2023). In parallel, legitimacy frameworks in the circular economy context underscore the necessity of aligning technological adoption with broader social and environmental goals (Wang, 2023).

The conceptual underpinnings of legitimacy are not static; they evolve with societal values and institutional pressures (Bitektine et al., 2020). Institutions must, therefore, engage in legitimacy work—intentional actions designed to gain, maintain, or repair legitimacy (Diez-Martín et al., 2021). This includes building reputational capital, managing stakeholder relationships, and aligning organizational identity with accepted norms and expectations (Soltani et al., 2020). For public universities in Iraq, legitimacy work may involve balancing the dual imperatives of academic freedom and state oversight, ensuring equitable access to education, and maintaining transparency in governance (Razagh Moradi, 2022).

Moreover, legitimacy is often contested and subject to competing interpretations. Political and institutional actors may impose differing criteria for legitimacy, creating tension between compliance with regulatory frameworks and responsiveness to local needs (Adams, 2022; Herrera, 2016). In post-conflict societies, these tensions are amplified by the need to rebuild trust in public institutions and address historical grievances (Haddad, 2018). Higher education institutions in Iraq must thus navigate a legitimacy landscape that is shaped by both domestic imperatives and international expectations, particularly in relation to academic quality, governance integrity, and research impact (Nazampour, 2025).

The role of legitimacy in sustaining organizational performance has been well-documented across various sectors (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). In higher education, legitimacy not only influences funding and policy support but also affects the institution's ability to attract and retain talent, secure international collaborations, and enhance student satisfaction (Wang, 2023). This makes legitimacy a central element in strategic planning and organizational development (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Furthermore, legitimacy enhances resilience by enabling institutions to withstand external shocks and adapt to changing environments (Bitektine et al., 2020).

Empirical research also highlights that legitimacy is closely linked to organizational identity, which reflects how

members perceive their organization and its role in the larger social system (Soltani et al., 2020). A strong, positive organizational identity can reinforce legitimacy by aligning internal values with external expectations. In turn, this alignment supports employee engagement, institutional reputation, and long-term sustainability (Fu & Wang, 2024; Hampel & Tracey, 2017).

Given the strategic importance of legitimacy for public universities, this study seeks to develop a comprehensive model of organizational legitimacy tailored to the context of Iraqi higher education. The model incorporates key dimensions identified in prior research, including independence, innovation, organizational culture, participation, organizational support, commitment, leadership style, reward systems, adaptability, mission clarity, and result orientation (Haghi Shima et al., 2021; Khandan Del et al., 2022). It also integrates factors related to social responsibility, ethical leadership, and sustainable management practices (Mazidi Sharafbadi, 2025; Rahdarpour et al., 2023). By grounding the model in both international scholarship and local realities, the study aims to offer a framework that can guide policy-making, institutional development, and strategic communication in Iraqi public universities (Nazampour, 2025; Razmkhah & Sajadi Khah, 2024).

In doing so, this research contributes to the broader theoretical discourse on legitimacy by examining its application in a politically sensitive, resource-constrained, and rapidly evolving higher education environment.

2 Methods and Materials

This study falls within the category of quantitative–descriptive research. Quantitative research is a systematic and structured method for collecting and analyzing numerical data, applied with the aim of measuring, comparing, and explaining phenomena.

The statistical population of this research consisted of all employees of Iraqi public universities (6,000 individuals), from which a sample size of 361 was determined using stratified random sampling and Cochran's formula. The research instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire designed based on prior literature as well as several in-depth interviews. The questionnaire consisted of 80 items, including items on independence (6 items), legitimacy (6 items), identity (4 items), commitment (6 items), leadership style (6 items), organizational structure (4 items), reward system (6 items), organizational behavior (7

items), mission (5 items), innovation (6 items), result orientation (6 items), adaptability (6 items), participation (6 items), and organizational support (6 items). It was measured using a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).

Content validity was used to determine the validity of the research instrument. Accordingly, the questionnaire was carefully presented to a group of employees and experts. The feedback and suggestions of these experts were collected and applied to improve and refine the questionnaire in order to better achieve content validity. In addition to content validity, construct validity was also employed as one of the key criteria for evaluating the questionnaire's accuracy. A sample of 30 individuals from the statistical population was used, and the resulting data were analyzed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was calculated at 0.86. Data

analysis was carried out using structural equation modeling (SEM) with LISREL software.

3 Findings and Results

In the research sample, individuals under 30 years of age numbered 46 (12.74%); those aged 30–40 years numbered 72 (19.94%); individuals aged 40–50 years numbered 98 (27.15%); and those over 50 years of age numbered 145 (40.16%). There were 111 women (30.75%) and 250 men (69.25%). Additionally, 115 individuals (31.86%) held a bachelor's degree, 156 individuals (43.21%) held a master's degree, and 90 individuals (24.93%) held a doctoral degree.

To assess the normality of the data related to the research variables, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk statistical tests were used. The results are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

Examination of the Normality of Research Variables Using the Shapiro–Wilk and Kolmogorov–Smirnov Tests

Dimensions	Shapiro–Wilk Sig.	Shapiro–Wilk df	Shapiro–Wilk Statistic	Kolmogorov–Smirnov Sig.	Kolmogorov–Smirnov df	Kolmogorov–Smirnov Statistic
Organizational behavior	0.741	361	0.967	0.135	361	0.198
Innovation	0.641	361	0.907	0.131	361	0.187
Adaptability	0.888	361	0.984	0.127	361	0.169
Independence	0.698	361	0.954	0.199	361	0.222
Organizational culture	0.587	361	0.856	0.198	361	0.211
Participation	0.558	361	0.887	0.187	361	0.131
Commitment	0.684	361	0.921	0.169	361	0.127
Result orientation	0.598	361	0.900	0.198	361	0.211
Leadership style	0.784	361	0.971	0.187	361	0.131
Organizational support	0.690	361	0.951	0.169	361	0.127
Reward system	0.799	361	0.986	0.169	361	0.127
Mission	0.579	361	0.873	0.187	361	0.131
Identity	0.944	361	0.954	0.148	361	0.199
Organizational structure	0.682	361	0.904	0.155	361	0.200

The results in [Table 1](#) indicate that the significance level (p-value) for all variables is greater than 0.05, suggesting

that the data related to these dimensions follow a normal distribution.

Figure 1

Estimation of Standardized Coefficients in the Structural Model

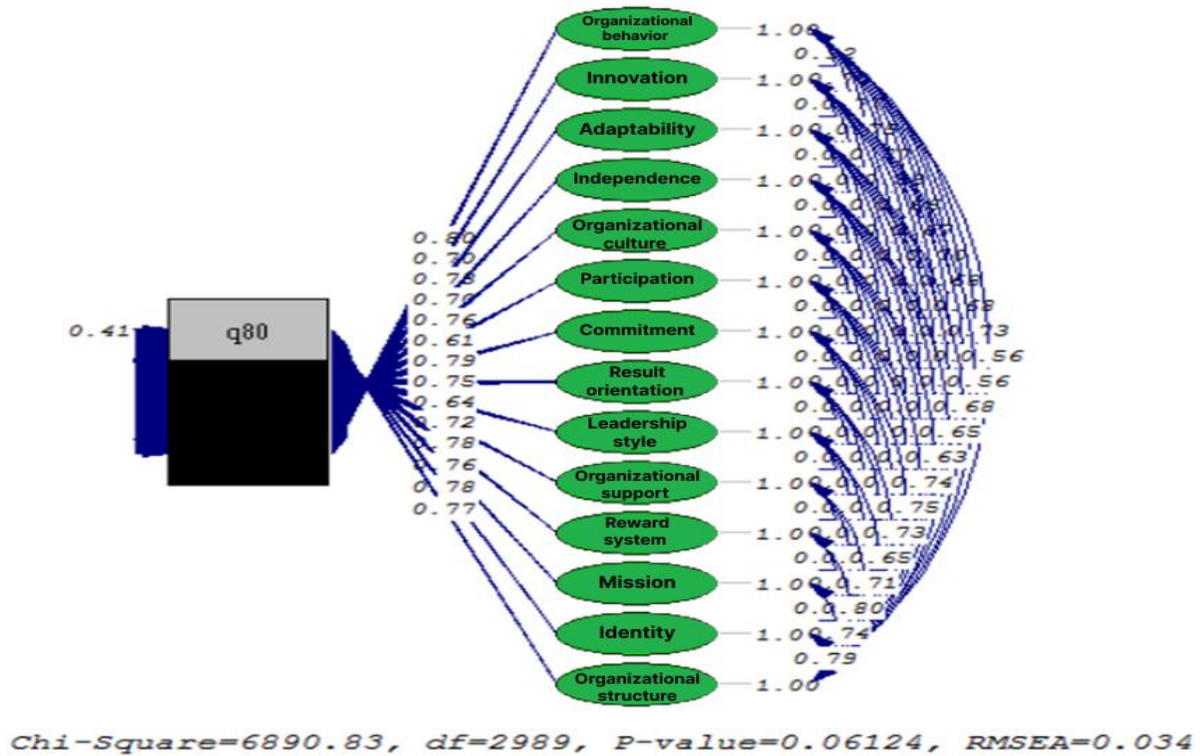
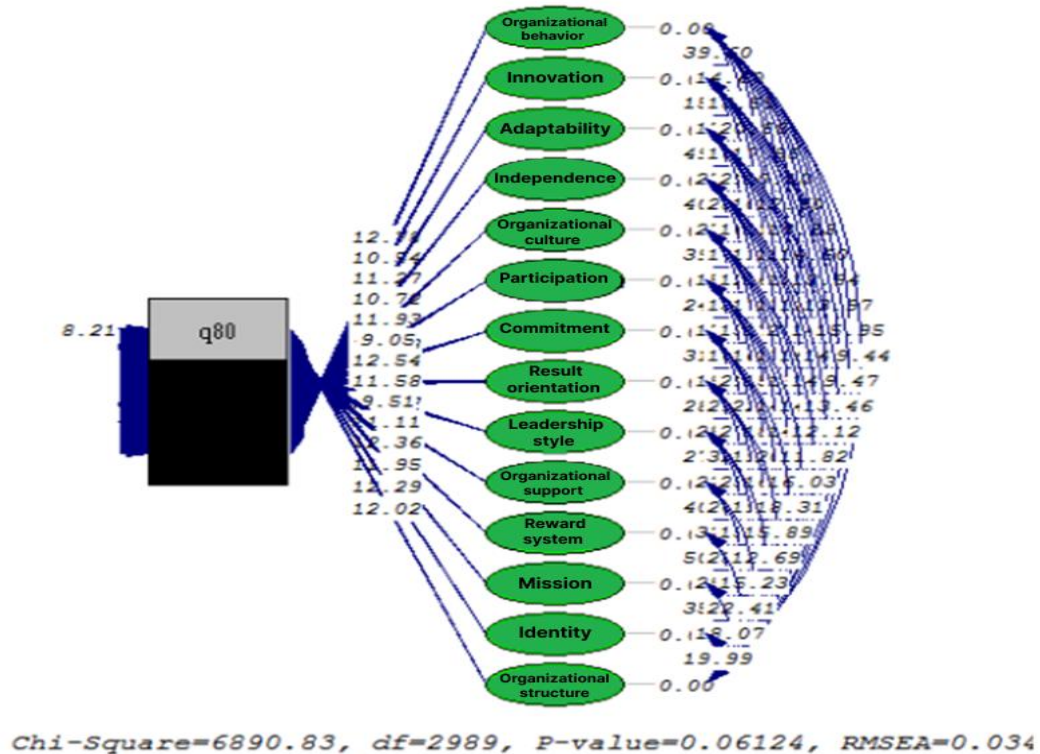


Figure 2

Examination of the Significance of Coefficients in the Structural Model



The results of Figures (1 and 2) indicate that all parameter values related to the dimensions of desirable organizational legitimacy in Iraqi public universities, along with path coefficients, t-values, and their respective statuses, are presented. These values demonstrate the extent to which

each dimension—such as independence, innovation, organizational culture, participation, and organizational support—affects organizational legitimacy. This information is presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Parameter Estimates for the Desirable Organizational Legitimacy Model

Dimension	Item	Coefficient	t-value	Status
Organizational Behavior	Q1	0.77	17.34	Confirmed
	Q2	0.76	17.78	Confirmed
	Q3	0.68	15.23	Confirmed
	Q4	0.75	17.65	Confirmed
	Q5	0.81	19.50	Confirmed
	Q6	0.74	17.31	Confirmed
	Q7	0.80	19.49	Confirmed
Innovation	Q8	0.81	19.82	Confirmed
	Q9	0.76	17.82	Confirmed
	Q10	0.76	18.00	Confirmed
	Q11	0.75	17.60	Confirmed
	Q12	0.75	17.67	Confirmed
Adaptability	Q13	0.72	16.53	Confirmed
	Q14	0.78	18.47	Confirmed
	Q15	0.71	16.17	Confirmed
	Q16	0.77	18.14	Confirmed
	Q17	0.80	19.45	Confirmed
	Q18	0.79	19.10	Confirmed
	Q19	0.82	20.29	Confirmed
Independence	Q20	0.82	20.00	Confirmed
	Q21	0.85	21.28	Confirmed
	Q22	0.78	19.81	Confirmed
	Q23	0.79	18.95	Confirmed
	Q24	0.76	17.98	Confirmed
	Q25	0.81	19.73	Confirmed
Organizational Culture	Q26	0.80	19.33	Confirmed
	Q27	0.84	20.92	Confirmed
	Q28	0.81	19.86	Confirmed
	Q29	0.79	19.05	Confirmed
	Q30	0.76	18.00	Confirmed
	Q31	0.79	18.89	Confirmed
Participation	Q32	0.81	19.63	Confirmed
	Q33	0.78	18.64	Confirmed
	Q34	0.69	15.62	Confirmed
	Q35	0.79	18.81	Confirmed
	Q36	0.69	15.81	Confirmed
	Q37	0.76	18.07	Confirmed
Commitment	Q38	0.69	15.66	Confirmed
	Q39	0.85	21.08	Confirmed
	Q40	0.77	18.15	Confirmed
	Q41	0.60	13.43	Confirmed
	Q42	0.42	9.78	Confirmed
	Q43	0.59	13.16	Confirmed
Result Orientation	Q44	0.59	13.86	Confirmed
	Q45	0.57	13.65	Confirmed
	Q46	0.52	12.12	Confirmed
	Q47	0.56	13.64	Confirmed
	Q48	0.78	18.97	Confirmed
	Q49	0.53	12.47	Confirmed

Leadership Style	Q50	0.53	12.60	Confirmed
	Q51	0.54	12.74	Confirmed
	Q52	0.59	13.84	Confirmed
	Q53	0.50	11.57	Confirmed
	Q54	0.55	12.93	Confirmed
	Q55	0.50	11.32	Confirmed
Organizational Support	Q56	0.54	12.70	Confirmed
	Q57	0.56	13.62	Confirmed
	Q58	0.55	13.37	Confirmed
	Q59	0.57	14.20	Confirmed
	Q60	0.57	14.00	Confirmed
	Q61	0.71	17.67	Confirmed
Reward System	Q62	0.60	15.32	Confirmed
	Q63	0.55	13.27	Confirmed
	Q64	0.53	12.59	Confirmed
	Q65	0.57	13.81	Confirmed
	Q66	0.63	15.34	Confirmed
	Q67	0.59	14.64	Confirmed
Mission	Q68	0.57	13.90	Confirmed
	Q69	0.55	13.34	Confirmed
	Q70	0.53	12.60	Confirmed
	Q71	0.55	13.22	Confirmed
	Q72	0.57	13.91	Confirmed
Identity	Q73	0.44	10.43	Confirmed
	Q74	0.60	13.50	Confirmed
	Q75	0.55	13.17	Confirmed
	Q76	0.48	11.07	Confirmed
Organizational Structure	Q77	0.53	12.65	Confirmed
	Q78	0.56	12.75	Confirmed
	Q79	0.63	15.64	Confirmed
	Q80	0.54	12.71	Confirmed

The results of [Table 2](#) present the parameter estimates for the organizational legitimacy model in Iraqi public universities. This table includes the coefficients for each item, the t-values, and the confirmation status of each item. The coefficients indicate the strength of the influence of each item on its respective dimension; the higher the coefficient, the greater the item's effect on the targeted dimension. All coefficients are above 0.5, with many approaching 0.8 (for example, "Organizational Behavior" with a coefficient of 0.81 for item Q5), indicating strong item effects on the corresponding dimensions. The t-values are also reported for

each item; values above 1.96 indicate statistical significance. In this table, all t-values exceed this threshold (such as a t-value of 21.28 for item Q21 under the Independence dimension), confirming all items.

Various indices, such as Chi-square and RMSEA, indicate that the proposed model can fit the available data appropriately, with the outputs presented in the table below. These results will assist in better decision-making regarding organizational strategies and enhancing university legitimacy ([Table 3](#)).

Table 3

Key Fit Indices for Path Models

Index	Value	Acceptable Threshold
Chi-square/df	2.30	Less than 3
RMSEA	0.034	Less than 0.1
CFI	0.98	Greater than 0.9
NFI	0.98	Greater than 0.9
GFI	0.87	Greater than 0.8
AGFI	0.85	Greater than 0.8

The results of [Table 3](#) analyze the key fit indices for the path models. These indices include Chi-square/df, RMSEA, CFI, NFI, GFI, and AGFI, each used to assess the degree of model–data fit. The Chi-square/df ratio is 2.30, below the acceptable limit of 3, indicating good model fit. The RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) value is 0.034, well below the maximum acceptable limit of 0.1, indicating a low estimation error in the model. The CFI (Comparative Fit Index) and NFI (Normed Fit Index) are both 0.98, exceeding the 0.9 threshold, which signifies a high degree of fit between the model and observed data. The GFI (Goodness-of-Fit Index) with a value of 0.87 and the AGFI (Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index) with a value of 0.85 are also above the acceptable limit of 0.8, clearly demonstrating that the proposed model has desirable fit. Overall, all indices are within acceptable ranges, indicating that the model aligns well with the collected data and accurately explains the relationships among variables.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study, which aimed to develop and validate a comprehensive model of organizational legitimacy in Iraqi public universities, indicate that all identified dimensions and indicators significantly contribute to the overall construct of legitimacy. The structural equation modeling results revealed that factors such as organizational behavior, innovation, adaptability, independence, organizational culture, participation, commitment, result orientation, leadership style, organizational support, reward systems, mission clarity, identity, and organizational structure all demonstrated strong and statistically significant path coefficients, with values generally exceeding 0.5 and in many cases approaching or surpassing 0.8. Furthermore, the model fit indices—including CFI and NFI (0.98), GFI (0.87), AGFI (0.85), RMSEA (0.034), and Chi-square/df (2.30)—were all within acceptable thresholds, confirming the robustness of the model in capturing the determinants of legitimacy in the higher education context.

The strong influence of these dimensions aligns with the theoretical and empirical literature emphasizing the multidimensional nature of legitimacy. According to ([Diez-Martín et al., 2021](#)), legitimacy is not a singular attribute but a composite of various organizational behaviors, structures, and cultural elements that interact to form a coherent perception among stakeholders. The high coefficients observed for variables such as independence and

organizational culture underscore the importance of institutional autonomy and shared values in shaping legitimacy perceptions, a finding that resonates with the observations of ([Razagh Moradi, 2022](#)) in their study of public universities' need for institutional independence to remain dynamic in a globalized academic space. In environments such as Iraq, where political and social conditions often influence higher education governance, autonomy serves as a safeguard for credibility and academic freedom, reinforcing both moral and cognitive legitimacy ([Adams, 2022](#)).

Innovation emerged as another critical dimension with consistently high factor loadings, which is consistent with ([Salehi et al., 2024](#)) who demonstrated that innovation strategies contribute to green organizational identity and environmental legitimacy, strengthening the institution's image among diverse stakeholders. In higher education, innovation reflects not only research productivity and curriculum development but also the adoption of advanced technologies and adaptive pedagogies, which signal an institution's capacity to meet evolving societal and market needs ([Zheng et al., 2023](#)). This is particularly relevant for Iraqi universities aiming to compete regionally and internationally, as innovation fosters pragmatic legitimacy by demonstrating the ability to generate tangible benefits for students, faculty, and the broader community ([Fu & Wang, 2024](#)).

The significant role of organizational culture and participation in the model reflects the importance of inclusive governance and shared values. ([Khandan Del et al., 2022](#)) emphasized that legitimacy is sustained when organizational practices are perceived as fair, transparent, and participatory. This is further supported by ([Kazemi & Heydari, 2021](#)), who identified ethical leadership as a core driver of legitimacy, enhancing trust and reducing perceptions of organizational hypocrisy. In this study, participation was strongly linked to legitimacy, suggesting that faculty, staff, and student involvement in decision-making processes contributes to moral legitimacy by aligning institutional actions with community values ([Herrera, 2016](#)).

Organizational support and commitment also showed strong and significant effects, aligning with the findings of ([Rahdarpour et al., 2023](#)) and ([Rahnavard et al., 2023](#)), who demonstrated that internal support mechanisms and effective communication channels enhance legitimacy by fostering a positive internal climate and signaling responsiveness to stakeholder needs. The reinforcement of internal trust and

morale not only boosts employee engagement but also projects an image of stability and reliability to external audiences (Wang, 2023). Similarly, the mission clarity dimension—capturing the extent to which the university's purpose is well-defined and communicated—supports previous arguments by (Thomas & Lamm, 2012) that legitimacy is closely tied to organizational sustainability through a well-articulated mission that aligns with societal expectations.

Leadership style and reward systems, while having slightly lower coefficients compared to independence and innovation, still contributed significantly to legitimacy. This reflects the notion advanced by (Haghi Shima et al., 2021) that leadership behaviors, when aligned with institutional values, reinforce organizational identity and legitimacy. Reward systems that recognize merit and align with institutional goals help maintain fairness and motivate high performance, thereby enhancing pragmatic legitimacy (Soltani et al., 2020). In contexts where resource constraints and political pressures may undermine morale, equitable and transparent reward mechanisms become even more critical.

The dimension of adaptability—reflected in the organization's capacity to respond to changing environments—was also strongly linked to legitimacy, corroborating the view of (Bitektine et al., 2020) that adaptive capacity is a critical micro-level determinant of legitimacy, allowing institutions to maintain relevance in dynamic environments. Adaptability in Iraqi public universities involves updating curricula, adopting new teaching methods, and engaging in international collaborations, all of which project an image of an institution that is both resilient and progressive (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017).

Interestingly, identity and organizational structure, while statistically significant, showed more moderate coefficients compared to other variables. This suggests that while these factors are important, their contribution to legitimacy may be mediated by more dynamic elements such as leadership, culture, and participation. Nevertheless, (Massey, 2001) highlights that organizational identity is a cornerstone of legitimacy, as it reflects how internal members see the organization in relation to external expectations. The structural design of the university, as argued by (Gnes & Vermeulen, 2018), supports legitimacy when it facilitates effective governance, accountability, and the achievement of strategic objectives.

The overall fit of the model and the significance of all dimensions confirm that legitimacy in Iraqi public

universities is best understood as a multifaceted construct requiring balanced attention to structural, cultural, behavioral, and strategic elements. This finding is consistent with (Hampel & Tracey, 2017), who stressed that legitimacy building and maintenance involve a combination of symbolic and substantive actions. Symbolic actions, such as mission statements and branding, communicate alignment with societal values, while substantive actions—like improving teaching quality, research output, and governance—deliver the tangible outcomes that sustain legitimacy over time.

Furthermore, the results underscore the interdependence of legitimacy dimensions. For example, independence facilitates innovation by reducing external constraints, while innovation strengthens organizational identity and enhances mission clarity. Participation fosters organizational support and commitment, which in turn reinforce adaptability and result orientation. This systems perspective aligns with (Diez-Martín et al., 2021), who described legitimacy as a complex network of reinforcing components rather than a linear cause-and-effect relationship.

From a contextual standpoint, these findings have special relevance for Iraqi public universities navigating post-conflict reconstruction and modernization. As (Haddad, 2018) observed in the broader Iraqi institutional landscape, legitimacy is essential for restoring public trust and attracting both domestic and international support. Universities that effectively integrate independence, innovation, and cultural alignment into their strategic management are more likely to enhance their legitimacy, secure resources, and achieve long-term stability. This echoes the argument of (Nazampour, 2025) that legitimacy serves as a mediating factor linking human dignity, organizational practices, and institutional loyalty.

The alignment between the present findings and the broader literature on legitimacy across sectors reinforces the external validity of the proposed model. While the Iraqi context presents unique challenges, the dimensions identified here are consistent with global patterns in legitimacy research, suggesting that the model could potentially be adapted for use in other developing and transitional countries. Nevertheless, as (Herrera, 2016) and (Adams, 2022) caution, legitimacy criteria are shaped by local cultural, political, and institutional contexts, and thus must be interpreted within these boundaries.

Despite the strength of the findings, this study has several limitations. First, the data were collected exclusively from public universities in Iraq, which limits the generalizability

of the results to other higher education contexts, particularly private institutions or universities in different cultural and political settings. Second, the use of self-reported questionnaire data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, where respondents may provide answers they perceive as favorable rather than reflecting their true perceptions. Third, while the structural equation modeling approach provides robust insights into the relationships among variables, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to make causal inferences. Longitudinal studies would be needed to assess how legitimacy evolves over time in response to institutional changes and external pressures. Fourth, the study did not explicitly account for potential moderating variables, such as the size of the university, geographic location, or specific academic disciplines, which could influence perceptions of legitimacy.

Future research should aim to replicate and extend the current study across diverse higher education contexts, including private universities and institutions in other countries facing similar developmental challenges. Comparative studies could explore how contextual differences in governance, funding structures, and cultural norms influence the relative importance of legitimacy dimensions. Additionally, incorporating longitudinal designs would allow researchers to examine the dynamic nature of legitimacy and identify the factors that sustain or erode it over time. Future studies could also explore the role of external stakeholders—such as employers, alumni, and policymakers—in shaping perceptions of legitimacy, thereby providing a more comprehensive view of the legitimacy ecosystem. Furthermore, qualitative research, including case studies and interviews, could complement the quantitative findings by providing deeper insights into the mechanisms through which specific dimensions influence legitimacy in practice.

University leaders and policymakers should prioritize strategies that enhance legitimacy across all identified dimensions, with particular emphasis on strengthening independence, fostering innovation, cultivating a positive organizational culture, and promoting inclusive participation. Transparent governance practices, equitable reward systems, and clear communication of the institutional mission can reinforce stakeholder trust and engagement. Investments in adaptability—through curriculum reform, technology adoption, and international collaboration—will further position universities as forward-looking and responsive institutions. Finally, sustained efforts to integrate ethical leadership, social responsibility, and environmental

sustainability into institutional policies and practices will not only enhance legitimacy but also align higher education institutions with the broader societal goals of Iraq's reconstruction and development.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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