From Technology Adoption to Digital Transformation How Institutional Trust and Digital Readiness Shape HRIS Success in Higher Education

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Abstract. Digital transformation in higher education requires more than simple technology implementation; it depends on institutional capability and user confidence in system governance. This research study extends the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) by integrating Institutional Trust (IT) and Digital Readiness (DR) to explain how Human Resource Information System (HRIS) enable digital transformation in universities. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was utilized to analyze survey data from 162 academic and administrative personnel at deemed universities in Chennai, India. The results demonstrate that Performance Expectancy ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$) and Social Influence ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) significantly enhance Institutional Trust, whereas Facilitating Conditions ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) strengthen Digital Readiness. Both IT ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) and DR ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$) positively influence HRIS as a Digital Enabler, which in turn strongly predicts Digital Transformation ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.64$; $Q^2 = 0.46$). The non-significance of Effort Expectancy ($\beta = 0.14$, n.s.) indicates that institutional factors exceed considerations of ease of use. Overall, the study positions HRIS as a socio-technical mechanism that converts institutional trust and digital readiness into meaningful digital transformation in higher education sector.

Keywords: Human Resource Information System (HRIS), Institutional Trust, Digital Readiness, UTAUT, Digital Transformation.

1. Introduction

Digital transformation in higher education has accelerated globally, yet universities continue to face challenges in translating technology adoption into meaningful institutional change. While Human Resource Information System (HRIS) is increasingly introduced as a strategic digital infrastructure intended to support analytics-driven HR processes, workforce planning, and data governance, its implementation outcomes remain inconsistent across higher education systems. This inconsistency raises a core unresolved tension the adoption of HRIS does not necessarily guarantee its strategic use as a transformation mechanism.

Prior research on HRIS adoption has relied heavily on behavioral models such as TAM and UTAUT, which emphasize user perceptions including performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Although these frameworks explain initial acceptance, they provide limited insight into whether accepted systems evolve into institutional capabilities that contribute to digital transformation. This theoretical misalignment creates a gap between understanding adoption and explaining strategic transformation outcomes.

Emerging theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that institutional mechanisms, particularly institutional trust and digital readiness, play a decisive role in determining whether HRIS is used merely as an administrative tool or as a strategic enabler of organizational transformation. Trust in system governance and confidence in ethical data management affect willingness to rely on HRIS outputs, especially in contexts handling sensitive employee information. Similarly, digital readiness, reflected in infrastructure, leadership support, and digital skills, determines whether institutions can operationalize HRIS at scale. Nonetheless, these institutional variables are inadequately theorized in current UTAUT extensions, especially in the context of higher education.

The relevance of this gap is especially pronounced in the Indian higher-education sector. Although India hosts over 1,000 universities, fewer than 35% reportedly use HRIS beyond basic payroll and record-keeping functions (AISHE, 2023). Deemed universities in Chennai constitute a particularly appropriate empirical context because, under the Indian regulatory framework, these institutions are granted autonomous status by the University Grants Commission (UGC), enabling them to design curricula, manage governance processes, and implement digital systems independently. This autonomy has positioned many deemed universities as digitally progressive institutions, providing a compelling environment for examining HRIS-enabled transformation. At the same time, these institutions operate within structurally constrained systems characterized by bureaucratic governance, layered hierarchies, and variable levels of digital readiness which makes them a suitable setting to investigate how behavioral and institutional determinants jointly influence the progression from HRIS adoption to strategic transformation.

To address the identified theoretical and contextual gaps, this study extends UTAUT by integrating institutional trust and digital readiness as higher-order institutional enablers. By conceptualizing HRIS not as a technology artifact but as a digital enabler, the study develops a socio-technical framework explaining how individual behavioral drivers interact with institutional capabilities to produce digital transformation in higher education institutions.

2. Literature Review

Although research on Human Resource Information System (HRIS) in higher education has grown substantially, theoretical perspectives explaining how HRIS supports digital transformation remain fragmented. Much of the existing literature continues to emphasize technology adoption rather than examining how HRIS evolves into a strategic institutional capability that restructures workflows, enhances decision-making, and drives organizational transformation. This narrow focus limits understanding of how individual-level beliefs interact with institutional mechanisms to produce higher-

order transformation outcomes.

2.1 HRIS in higher education

Foundational HRIS studies framed the system primarily as an administrative mechanism for record management and payroll processing (Walker, 1982; DeSanctis, 1986). While these works remain historically important, they do not capture the contemporary transformation of HRIS into a socio-technical digital infrastructure. Recent scholarship highlights that modern HRIS systems support analytics, automation, strategic workforce planning, and evidence-based HR governance (Marler & Fisher, 2013; Fekadu & Walia, 2022; Papaevangelou et al., 2023).

Despite these advancements, empirical findings from developing higher education systems reveal that HRIS use remains largely operational and underutilized. Capability gaps limited digital literacy, infrastructural constraints, and institutional resistance continue to hinder strategic adoption (Bamel et al., 2014; Al Mursalin, 2015). This contrast between technological potential and practical limitations raises an unresolved question why some universities progress toward HRIS-enabled transformation while others remain limited to basic administrative use.

2.2 Institutional trust as a governance enabler

As HRIS increasingly manages sensitive employee and institutional data, institutional trust has emerged as a crucial determinant of sustained system engagement. Trust shapes perceptions of ethical data handling, institutional competence, fairness, and transparency particularly in hierarchical academic environments vulnerable to privacy concerns and resistance to digital systems (Lippert & Swiercz, 2005; Pavlou, 2003). Although prior studies suggest that trust enhances system reliance and long-term usage (Pal et al., 2020), it remains under-theorized within HRIS and e-HRM literature. Few models explicitly integrate trust as a governance mechanism that influences strategic use rather than initial acceptance.

2.3 Extending UTAUT beyond behavioral acceptance

UTAUT remains the dominant theoretical lens for explaining HRIS adoption, emphasizing performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). While these constructs effectively predict initial acceptance, **their** explanatory power weakens in institutional environments where digital transformation depends on governance credibility, infrastructure maturity, and coordinated capability-building rather than individual behavioral beliefs alone (Fekadu & Walia, 2022; Papaevangelou et al., 2023; Toh et al., 2023).

More critically, UTAUT does not account for how adopted technologies become integrated into organizational processes, embedded in institutional routines, or leveraged to enable data-driven decision-making factors central to digital transformation in universities. As HRIS increasingly manages sensitive data and shapes workflow structures, its transformative potential relies on institutional mechanisms such as trust, readiness, and system legitimacy rather than on behavioral intention alone.

Accordingly, while UTAUT provides a robust foundation for predicting user acceptance, it falls short in explaining how accepted systems evolve into institutionally embedded digital capabilities a prerequisite for realizing meaningful digital transformation in higher education.

2.4 Research gap

Across these literature streams, a clear theoretical gap emerges, existing research explains individual acceptance but does not explain how institutional trust and digital readiness jointly enable the transition from basic HRIS usage to strategic digital transformation. This gap is particularly salient in higher education systems in emerging economies, where governance norms, organizational culture, and digital maturity heavily shape technology outcomes.

To address this, the present study extends UTAUT by integrating Institutional Trust and Digital

Readiness as higher-order institutional enablers and conceptualizes HRIS as a Digital Enabler mediating the pathway toward digital transformation. This approach aligns HRIS with socio-technical, institutional, and capability-based perspectives and offers a more comprehensive explanation of how universities convert technology adoption into meaningful transformation.

3. Hypotheses Development

Grounded in the updated literature synthesis, the proposed framework views HRIS adoption as a multilevel process in which individual beliefs interact with institutional mechanisms to shape strategic digital outcomes in higher education. Although UTAUT provides a robust foundation for understanding behavioral intentions (Venkatesh et al., 2003), recent research emphasizes that adoption alone does not guarantee transformation particularly in university contexts where governance legitimacy, digital capability, and organizational norms strongly influence system usage and strategic alignment (Fekadu, 2022; Toh et al., 2023). Accordingly, the hypotheses progress from behavioral drivers to institutional enablers and, ultimately, to digital transformation.

Performance Expectancy → Institutional Trust
Employees who believe that HRIS improves efficiency, accuracy, and decision-making are more likely to trust both the system and the institution governing it. Prior research shows that perceived usefulness strengthens confidence in system reliability and legitimacy (Aggelidis & Chatzoglou, 2009; Fekadu, 2022).

H1 Performance Expectancy positively influences Institutional Trust.

Effort Expectancy → Institutional Trust

Effort Expectancy reflects perceived ease of use, which reduces uncertainty and perceived complexity. When HRIS is intuitive and easy to navigate, user confidence increases, reinforcing perceptions of institutional competence (Tarhini et al., 2015; Mun & Hwang, 2003).

H2 Effort Expectancy positively influences Institutional Trust.

Social Influence → Institutional Trust

In higher education, adoption norms are shaped by hierarchical structures and academic culture. Empirical evidence shows that leadership endorsement and peer approval enhance trust in digital systems and institutional intent (Dery et al., 2013; Lippert & Swiercz, 2005).

H3 Social Influence positively influences Institutional Trust.

Facilitating Conditions → Digital Readiness

Institutional infrastructure, technical support, and resource availability form the foundation of digital capability. Facilitating Conditions have been shown to enhance organizational preparedness for digital integration (Kumar & Parumasur, 2013; Papaevangelou, 2023).

H4 Facilitating Conditions positively influence Digital Readiness.

Institutional Trust → HRIS as a Digital Enabler

Trust in data governance, system security, and institutional integrity increases system reliance and encourages deeper use beyond administrative tasks. Research indicates that trust is a precursor to embedded digital capability (Pavlou, 2003; Lippert & Swiercz, 2005).

H5 Institutional Trust positively influences HRIS as a Digital Enabler.

Digital Readiness → HRIS as a Digital Enabler

Institutions with mature digital infrastructure, leadership support, and digital skills are more capable of leveraging HRIS strategically rather than operationally (Tarhini et al., 2015; Kumar & Parumasur, 2013).

H6 Digital Readiness positively influences HRIS as a Digital Enabler.

HRIS as a Digital Enabler → Digital Transformation

Once HRIS is embedded into processes, analytics, and HR workflows, it contributes to organizational intelligence and modernization. Studies highlight HRIS as a socio-technical driver of digital transformation (Marler & Fisher, 2013; Maamari & Osta, 2021).

H7 HRIS as a Digital Enabler positively influences Digital Transformation.

Mediating Mechanisms

Aligned with socio-technical and institutional theory, digital transformation emerges from organizational pathways rather than individual beliefs alone (Marler & Fisher, 2013; Maamari & Osta, 2021). Institutional Trust acts as a legitimizing mechanism that transforms individual perceptions into deeper reliance, while HRIS-DE converts organizational readiness and governance confidence into measurable digital outcomes (Fekadu, 2022; Papaevangelou, 2023).

Institutional Trust mediates PE → HRIS-DE

Performance Expectancy enhances perceptions that HRIS improves efficiency. But usefulness alone does not lead to strategic use; employees must trust institutional governance and data integrity (Pavlou, 2003; Lippert & Swiercz, 2005).

Thus, trust channels perceived usefulness into genuine reliance.

H8 Institutional Trust mediates the relationship between Performance Expectancy and HRIS as a Digital Enabler.

Institutional Trust mediates SI → HRIS-DE

Social Influence motivates initial adoption through leadership and peer endorsement (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Dery et al., 2013).

However, employees will not rely on HRIS outputs unless they trust the institution operating the system (Pal et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018).

Thus, trust legitimizes social cues and converts them into strategic engagement.

H9 Institutional Trust mediates the relationship between Social Influence and HRIS as a Digital Enabler.

HRIS-DE mediates IT → Digital Transformation

While trust increases willingness to use HRIS, transformation occurs only when HRIS becomes embedded in workflows, analytics, and decision processes. HRIS-DE operationalizes trust into institutional capability.

H10 HRIS as a Digital Enabler mediates the relationship between Institutional Trust and Digital Transformation.

HRIS-DE mediates DR → Digital Transformation

Digital Readiness provides infrastructure, skills, and leadership support, but readiness alone does not ensure transformation. HRIS-DE acts as the socio-technical mechanism through which readiness becomes integrated digital practice (Fekadu, 2022; Al-Mursalin, 2015).

H11 HRIS as a Digital Enabler mediates the relationship between Digital Readiness and Digital Transformation.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework illustrating the hypothesized relationships between behavioral drivers, institutional enablers, and HRIS as a Digital Enabler leading to digital transformation higher education.
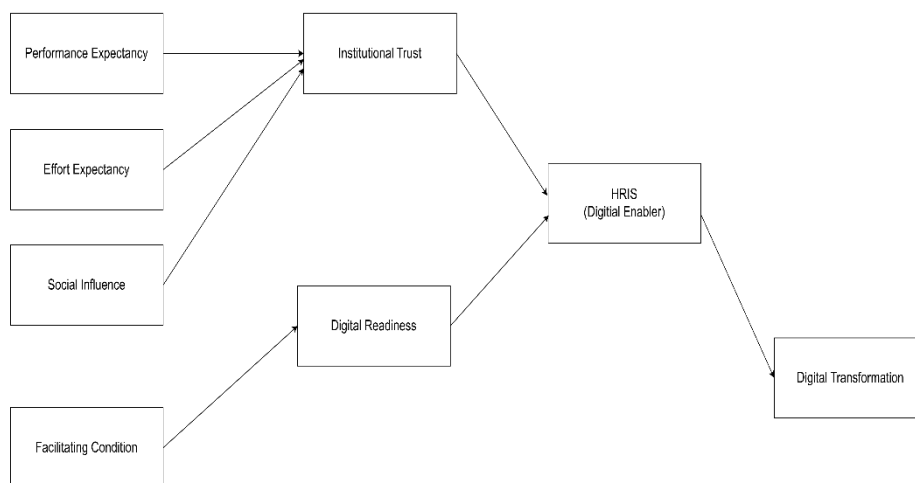

Fig.1:Trust Readiness enablement framework.

4. Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the proposed Trust Readiness Enablement Framework explaining HRIS-enabled digital transformation in higher education. The design is well-suited for theory testing and identifying associative relationships; however, because

data were collected at a single point in time, it does not allow for causal inference. This limitation is acknowledged and further addressed in the limitations section.

4.1 Population, context, and sampling strategy

The study targeted academic and administrative staff in deemed universities located in Chennai, India. Deemed universities are higher education institutions granted autonomous status by the University Grants Commission (UGC), allowing them to independently manage academic, administrative, and governance functions. This clarification is added to ensure international readers understand this institutional category within the Indian system. Chennai provides a suitable empirical context because it hosts one of India's most digitally mature higher education ecosystems, with active HRIS deployment, established governance mandates, and observable variation in institutional trust and digital capability conditions essential for testing the proposed model. This contextual focus is intentional and not intended to represent all Indian universities. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure participation from individuals directly interacting with or influencing HRIS processes (e.g., HR personnel, payroll teams, academic administrators, IT support, data governance staff). This approach aligns with methodological guidance recommending informed rather than random respondents for technology governance research. A total of 310 survey invitations were distributed, yielding 248 accesses and 189 completed responses (response rate = 52.3%). After data screening for incompleteness, straight lining, and inconsistent responses, 162 valid cases were retained. To assess non-response bias, early–late responder t-tests and Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted. No significant differences emerged (all $p > 0.10$), indicating minimal non-response bias.

4.2 Instrument development and transparency

The survey instrument employed previously validated reflective multi-item scales to measure the core constructs of the proposed model. These constructs included Performance Expectancy, Effort Expectancy, Social Influence, Facilitating Conditions, Institutional Trust, Digital Readiness, HRIS as a Digital Enabler, and Digital Transformation. All items were adapted from established measurement sources to ensure conceptual clarity, reliability, and alignment with HRIS and technology-adoption literature. A five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was used throughout the instrument. To further enhance transparency and replicability, a detailed measurement appendix containing all item wordings and original scale citations has been included as part of the study documentation.

4.3 Ethical approval and data protection

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Human Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, in accordance with institutional and national guidelines for research involving human participants. Respondents were informed of the study purpose and provided digital consent before participation.

4.4 Common method bias and data quality controls

Because all measurements were self-reported and collected at a single time point, several procedural and statistical controls were implemented to mitigate potential common method variance (CMV). Procedurally, item sequences were randomized, scale wording was kept neutral, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test indicated that no single factor dominated the variance (first factor = 38.4%, below the 50% threshold), full collinearity VIF values were all below 3.3, and the marker variable technique confirmed the absence of inflated correlations. Collectively, these procedures suggest that CMV is unlikely to threaten the validity of the study's results.

4.5 Analytical strategy

Data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4.0, following the recommended two-stage PLS-SEM procedure. The measurement model assessment evaluated indicator reliability (loadings above 0.70), composite reliability (exceeding 0.80), convergent validity through AVE values greater than 0.50, and discriminant validity using both the Fornell- Larcker criterion and HTMT values below 0.85. The structural model was then assessed using bootstrapped path coefficients based on 5,000 resamples, effect size estimates (f^2), predictive relevance via Stone Geisser's Q^2 statistics (all values above zero), and overall model fit using the SRMR threshold of less than 0.08. Mediation effects were examined through bootstrapped indirect paths in accordance with established PLS-SEM mediation testing guidelines.

5. Results

5.1 Respondent profile

A total of 162 valid responses were analyzed. Participants represented diverse demographic and organizational levels as presented in Table 1, including academic and administrative staff actively exposed to HRIS processes. While the purposive sampling strategy does not aim for statistical generalizability, it ensures relevance to HRIS-using roles, supporting the contextual validity of the analysis.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	90	56%
	Female	72	44%
Age	20–30 years	51	32%
	31–40 years	29	18%
	41–50 years	34	21%
	51–60 years	48	29%
Education Level	Undergraduate	4	3%
	Graduate	76	47%
	Postgraduate	58	36%
	Other Qualification	24	14%
Marital Status	Unmarried	73	45%
	Married	89	55%
Organizational Hierarchy	Top-level Executives	25	15%
	Middle-level Employees	85	53%
	Lower-level Employees	52	32%
Experience in Organization	0–5 years	58	36%
	6–10 years	27	17%
	11–15 years	42	26%
	Above 15 years	35	21%
Monthly Income (INR)	Below 25,000	36	22%
	25,000–50,000	51	32%
	50,000–75,000	64	40%
	75,000–100,000	10	6%

Note Currency values in INR are accompanied by USD equivalents at the rate of 1 USD = 89 INR.

5.2 Common method bias assessment

Multiple diagnostic procedures were applied to assess potential common method bias. Harman's single-factor test indicated that no single factor dominated the variance (38.4% < 50% threshold). Full collinearity VIF scores (1.89-3.12) were below the recommended cut-off (3.3), and a marker-variable test showed no inflation in correlations. These results, supported by procedural controls such as anonymity, randomized item order, and neutral wording, indicate that CMB is unlikely to threaten validity.

5.3 Measurement model evaluation

The reflective measurement model satisfied all reliability and validity thresholds as revealed in Table 2. Composite Reliability values ranged from 0.93 to 0.96, and AVE values ranged from 0.84 to 0.92, confirming strong internal consistency and convergent validity. Although AVE values appear high, additional diagnostics, cross-loadings, Fornell-Larcker criteria, and HTMT (< 0.85) confirmed discriminant validity and rule out item redundancy or overfitting.

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity summary constructs

Construct	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Performance Expectancy (PE)	0.89	0.95	0.93
Effort Expectancy (EE)	0.88	0.94	0.92
Social Influence (SI)	0.87	0.95	0.93
Facilitating Conditions (FC)	0.91	0.96	0.94
Institutional Trust (IT)	0.84	0.93	0.91
Digital Readiness (DR)	0.90	0.95	0.93
HRIS as Digital Enabler (HRIS-DE)	0.92	0.96	0.95
Digital Transformation (DT)	0.89	0.95	0.93

5.4 Structural model and hypothesis testing

The structural model as shown in Table 3 demonstrates strong explanatory power, accounting for 64% of the variance in HRIS as a Digital Enabler and 61% in Digital Transformation, representing substantial predictive relevance.

Table 3. Structural path results with confidence intervals

Path	β	t-value	95% BC CI	Supported
PE → IT	0.29	3.32	[.12, .44]	Yes
EE → IT	0.14	1.28	[-.04, .31]	No
SI → IT	0.35	4.27	[.18, .51]	Yes
FC → DR	0.41	5.11	[.24, .54]	Yes
IT → HRIS-DE	0.38	4.45	[.20, .54]	Yes
DR → HRIS-DE	0.33	3.92	[.15, .50]	Yes
HRIS-DE → DT	0.61	8.21	[.46, .74]	Yes

5.5 Effect Sizes and Predictive Validity

Effect size analysis (f^2) indicated that the predictors exerted meaningful contributions to their respective endogenous constructs, with values ranging from small to large. The strongest effect was observed for the path from HRIS as a Digital Enabler to Digital Transformation ($f^2 = 0.59$), demonstrating that HRIS operates as a substantive transformation mechanism rather than a routine administrative system. This reinforces the central role of HRIS-DE in translating institutional trust and readiness into broader digital outcomes.

Predictive validity was further assessed through blindfolding procedures, which produced positive Q^2 values for all endogenous constructs. As shown in Table 4, these values confirm that the structural model possesses strong predictive relevance, indicating that it can meaningfully estimate out-of-sample performance and offering additional support for the robustness of the proposed Trust Readiness Enablement Framework.

Table 4. Predictive relevance (Q^2) results

Construct	Q^2 Value	Predictive Relevance
Institutional Trust (IT)	0.32	Medium Predictive Relevance
Digital Readiness (DR)	0.27	Medium
HRIS as Digital Enabler (HRIS-DE)	0.41	High Predictive Relevance
Digital Transformation (DT)	0.46	High Predictive Relevance

5.6 Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapped mediation results confirmed the presence of significant indirect effects across the proposed pathways. Institutional Trust mediated the relationships between Performance Expectancy and HRIS-DE (β = 0.11; CI [.03, .21]) and between Social Influence and HRIS-DE (β = 0.13; CI [.06, .24]), indicating that employees' perceptions of system usefulness and social endorsement translate into deeper HRIS engagement only when institutional governance is trusted. Additionally, HRIS as a Digital Enabler mediated the effects of Institutional Trust on Digital Transformation (β = 0.23; CI [.12, .35]) and Digital Readiness on Digital Transformation (β = 0.20; CI [.10, .31]). These results suggest that trust and readiness alone are insufficient to produce transformation; they must be operationalized through HRIS as a functional digital capability. Overall, the mediation effects reinforce a multi-layered socio-technical mechanism in which institutional enablers activate and amplify the influence of behavioral drivers on digital transformation outcomes.

5.7 Interpretation of the Non-Significant Finding (H₂)

The non-significant relationship between Effort Expectancy and Institutional Trust suggests that in digitally structured environments, perceptions of ease-of-use are less central to trust formation. Instead, trust derives from institutional legitimacy, perceived system value, and governance confidence. This aligns with post-adoption and institutional theory literature, which argues that usability concerns diminish as systems become normalized and embedded in workflow structures.

5.8 Figure 2 Description

Figure 2 presents the final structural model with standardized path coefficients (β) and explained variances (R^2). As shown, the model demonstrates strong predictive relevance, explaining 64% of the variance in HRIS as a Digital Enabler and 61% in Digital Transformation. By integrating behavioral drivers (PE, EE, SI, FC) with institutional enablers (Institutional Trust and Digital Readiness), the model illustrates how these complementary forces jointly shape HRIS-driven outcomes. The mediating role of HRIS as a Digital Enabler is visually highlighted, showing how trust and readiness are translated into strategic digital practices. Overall, the visualization provides a clear and coherent depiction of the proposed Trust-Readiness-Enablement Framework, demonstrating its operational pathways within the higher education context.
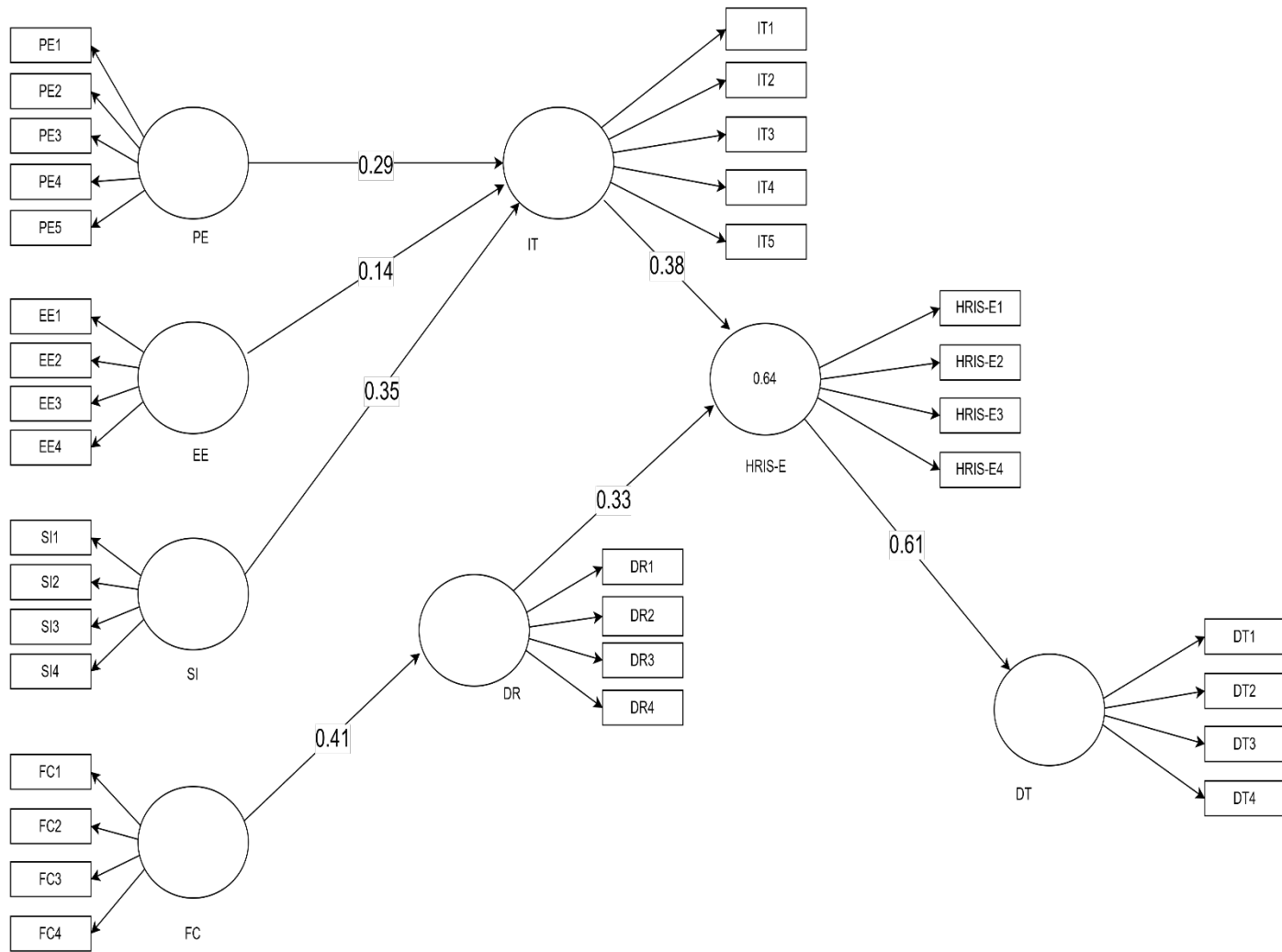
Fig.2: Structural model results of the Trust-Readiness-Enablement Framework.

Note PE (Performance Expectancy), EE (Effort Expectancy), SI (Social Influence), FC (Facilitating Conditions), IT (Institutional Trust), DR (Digital Readiness), HRIS -E (Human Resource Information System Enabler), DT (Digital Transformation)

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that HRIS adoption in higher education extends beyond individual acceptance and functions as an institutionally embedded digital capability. Rather than reiterating statistical outcomes, the results reveal the central role of two institutional mechanisms Institutional Trust and Digital Readiness in shaping the extent to which HRIS contributes to meaningful digital transformation.

The significant effects of Performance Expectancy and Social Influence on Institutional Trust indicate that both perceived usefulness and normative reinforcement enhance confidence in HRIS governance. This interpretation expands UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003) by showing that behavioral drivers contribute not only to initial acceptance but also to the legitimacy of institutional technology use. This aligns with institutional theory, which emphasizes credibility, ethical stewardship, and consistent governance as core foundations of trust (Pavlou, 2003; Lippert & Swiercz, 2005). Trust therefore acts as a bridge linking individual perceptions to institution-wide reliance on HRIS, an aspect largely overlooked in previous HRIS research (Marler & Fisher, 2013).

The strong impact of Facilitating Conditions on Digital Readiness clarifies that infrastructure and support mechanisms serve as structural enablers rather than mere operational aids. This deepens earlier HRIS studies that treated facilitating conditions as basic support factors (Tarhini et al., 2015), showing instead that they underpin broader institutional capability-building especially in resource-constrained higher education environments (Al Mursalin, 2015; Papaevangelou, 2023).

A notable theoretical contribution arises from the non-significant relationship between Effort Expectancy and Institutional Trust. Contrary to classical UTAUT expectations, ease of use appears less influential in contexts where HRIS has become routinized. This finding is consistent with post-adoption IS literature, which suggests that the drivers of trust shift over time from interface usability toward perceptions of governance quality, transparency, and data integrity (Venkatesh, Thong & Xu, 2012; Pal et al., 2020). Thus, the weak effect of Effort Expectancy highlights a boundary condition usability matters less in digitally mature institutions and more in early-stage or low-capability environments.

The strong role of HRIS as a Digital Enabler in predicting Digital Transformation reinforces its function as a socio-technical capability rather than a transactional system. When HRIS becomes embedded in workflows, analytics, and strategic HR governance, it serves as the mechanism through which trust and readiness translate into institutional performance and organizational change (Maamari & Osta, 2021; Fekadu, 2022).

This finding advances existing HRIS and e-HRM frameworks by elucidating the institutional pathways that connect acceptance to transformation an area previously understudied.

This study does not seek to introduce an entirely new theory; rather, it offers a contextual extension of UTAUT by incorporating Institutional Trust and Digital Readiness as higher-order institutional enablers in higher education settings. This refinement aligns with calls for models that account for governance legitimacy, digital capability, and socio-technical alignment in universities across developing regions (Bamel et al., 2014; Quaosar, 2018).

Practically, the findings demonstrate that successful HRIS-enabled transformation depends more on institutional trust and digital readiness than on usability alone. For universities particularly those in developing contexts investments in transparent governance, ethical data management, robust digital infrastructure, staff digital capability, and leadership alignment are likely to generate more sustainable transformation outcomes than technical improvements to the system itself.

7. Conclusion and Implications

This study provides an integrated understanding of how Human Resource Information System (HRIS) drives digital transformation in higher education by showing how behavioral factors interact with institutional trust and digital readiness. By extending UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003) into an institutional context, the study demonstrates that transformative HRIS use depends not only on individual beliefs but on higher-order organizational conditions. Institutional Trust and Digital Readiness determine whether HRIS remains an administrative system or becomes a strategic digital capability, consistent with institutional and socio-technical theories emphasizing governance legitimacy and infrastructural maturity (Pavlou, 2003; Lippert & Swiercz, 2005; Marler & Fisher, 2013).

A key theoretical insight is the non-significant effect of Effort Expectancy on Institutional Trust. Rather than reflecting a weakness, this aligns with post-adoption IS research, where trust becomes driven by ethical data practices and institutional credibility once systems are routinized (Venkatesh, Thong & Xu, 2012). Ease of use may still matter in less mature institutions (Aggelidis & Chatzoglou, 2009; Toh et al., 2023). The strong mediating role of HRIS as a Digital Enabler further highlights its function as the socio-technical mechanism through which trust and readiness translate into transformation.

Practically, the findings show that successful HRIS-enabled transformation requires institutional strategies beyond technology acquisition. Strengthening Institutional Trust involves transparent data-governance policies, clear communication of system safeguards, audit disclosure, and accountability structures (Pal et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). Enhancing Digital Readiness requires investment in infrastructure, integration capability, and continuous digital upskilling (Papaevangelou, 2023), supported by HRIS governance committees and digital HR leadership roles.

These implications are particularly critical for universities in emerging contexts such as India, where governance maturity and resource availability vary widely (Al Mursalin, 2015; Bamel et al., 2014). Treating HRIS as a strategic resource enables institutions to embed analytics into decision-making and strengthen institutional agility.

The study's limitations include its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data, and focus on deemed universities in Chennai, which limits generalizability. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, use objective usage metrics, and test the model across different institutional settings. Additional constructs such as leadership trust, digital ethics, and data fairness may further advance understanding of governance-driven digital transformation.

In conclusion, HRIS should be viewed not just as a technological tool but as a strategic institutional capability. Aligning behavioral drivers with institutional trust and digital readiness enables universities to convert HRIS investments into sustainable digital transformation outcomes.

Acknowledgment

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