

Bridging Leadership and Performance: Staff Commitment as a Mediating Factor Between Transformational-Transactional Leadership and Academic Outcomes in Private Higher Education Institutes

Cyril Gunarathna^{1*}, Aruna S. Gamage²

¹Department of Postgraduate Studies, Lincoln University College, Malaysia.

²Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Gangodawila, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of transformational and transactional leadership styles on the performance of internal academic staff in Sri Lankan private higher education institutions, with a special reference to the mediating impact of staff commitment. Following a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from 223 internal academic staff from two reputed institutions. It was revealed that both leadership styles have a substantial impact on staff performance, with transformational leadership having a higher impact. Staff commitment was also an important mediator that heightened the indirect leadership effects on performance. The model exhibited high explanatory ($R^2 = 0.71$) and predictive ($Q^2 = 0.50$) power. Reflective constructs of leadership, commitment, and performance were highly reliable and valid. Findings align with social exchange and motivation theories in that leadership begets commitment, which enhances academic performance. This research contributes to the literature on leadership in the context of a developing country and offers practical implications for leadership development in the competitive higher education sector in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Academic Staff Performance, Staff Commitment, Private Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the effects of perceived leadership styles on academic staff performance in

private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. Higher education institutions and their academic personnel play a critical role in national development, particularly in developing countries like Sri Lanka. As per the 2018 Global Competitiveness Report findings, Sri Lanka's skills ranking system falls into several areas. Out of 140 countries, vocational training quality was ranked 60th. The population's digital skills score 85 out of 140 countries, and the ease of getting qualified workers rates 57 out of 140. Additionally, out of 140 countries, the graduation rank's skill set was 44. The best rankings in this report range from one to seven (1 – 7). The fact that the performance in the current vocational education system falls short of the competence levels that employers require was further implied by this ranking level [1]. However, there is a research gap regarding how leadership styles, specifically transformational and transactional leadership, impact the performance of academic staff in Sri Lanka's private education sector. While leadership styles have been studied in other contexts, recent comprehensive research focusing on Sri Lankan private institutions is lacking [2], [3].

Leadership in academic institutions is crucial, especially in developing nations, as it directly influences the performance and effectiveness of academic staff. In Sri Lanka, higher education institutions significantly contribute to national economic growth, making effective leadership essential for institutional success [4].

*Corresponding author. E-mail address: gunarathne@nibm.lk (Cyril Gunarathna)

Leadership not only impacts staff motivation and commitment but also fosters innovation, creates a positive work environment, and enhances the quality of education provided [5]. The significance of studying leadership lies in its ability to inspire faculty to apply their skills toward institutional goals, thereby improving educational outcomes [6]. Furthermore, understanding leadership's impact on academic staff performance can help guide leadership development programs and institutional policies in Sri Lanka's higher education sector [7].

This research aims to fill the gap in the literature by examining the influence of transformational and transactional leadership styles on academic staff performance at private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. The study will explore how academic staff perceive these leadership styles and how such perceptions affect their performance, including teaching effectiveness, research productivity, and contribution to institutional goals [8]. The findings are expected to provide insights into effective leadership strategies that could improve staff performance and inform policy development, helping Sri Lanka's private higher education sector enhance its overall quality and competitiveness [9].

The conceptual framework of this study is based on six major variables. Transformational and transactional leadership styles are considered independent variables. The academic staff's job performance is treated as the dependent variable, while staff commitment, job autonomy, and workplace climate serve as mediating variables [10].

The primary study question investigates the level of performance of academic staff in private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the potential impact of superiors' leadership styles on this problem. The issues affecting Sri Lanka's education sector, such as a growing skills gap and low productivity of internal academic staff, are larger than this issue.

The reason is Private Higher Education Institutes almost always drive to get more profit in the competitive market with other academic performance indicators like no of graduates, on time delivery and quality of graduates. Three primary goals are sought after by the research: first, to ascertain how commitment, job autonomy, and workplace climate affect academic staff performance with Leadership styles.

The study's concentration on internal full-time academic personnel and exclusion of visiting academics are significant drawbacks that may restrict the study's generalizability. To obtain data for the study, private higher education institutions' geographic distribution variations that concentrate on certain areas are chosen. Furthermore, the entire range of private higher education available in the nation might be represented if only profit-oriented institutions are included. Future studies could take into account several strategies to alleviate these limitations, including: involving non-profit private institutions to compare leadership effects across various organizational structures; implementing a longitudinal design to assess leadership impacts over time and capture potential changes; expanding the sample to include visiting academics and part-time staff; and adopting a multi-institutional approach by incorporating other private higher education institutions to extend the geographical coverage to more provinces and districts. These adjustments would provide a more comprehensive and representative view of leadership impacts in Sri Lanka's private higher education sector [11].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership research was vital for improving organizational effectiveness, especially as work structures change and human resources become more crucial. It helps identify new leadership approaches, evaluate existing ones, and refine traditional techniques. Leadership must adapt to different situations, as no single style fits all contexts [12]. Research explores leaders' traits, actions, and methods, analyzing current behaviors to predict future leadership needs. Various theories, including trait, behavioral, contingency, and style approaches, were examined. The text emphasizes transformational and transactional leadership theories, noting their role in leadership frameworks. While global research was abundant, Sri Lanka lacks studies on leadership's impact on employee performance, highlighting the need for further investigation [13].

A. Transformational Leadership style

James Macgregor Burns, a presidential biographer and leadership expert, is credited with first introducing the idea of transformative leadership. Transformative leadership is when leaders and followers make each other advance to a higher degree of morality and motivation [14].

Transformational leaders can motivate followers to shift expectations, attitudes, and motives to work toward shared objectives through the power of their vision and personality. Later, scholar Bernard M. Bass developed what was now known as Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory by building upon Burns' initial concepts. According to Bass, the influence a leader had on their followers can be used to define transformative leadership. Bass argued that followers of transformational leaders were more likely to trust, respect, and admire them [15].

B. Transactional leadership style

Transactional leadership was a structured leadership style that focuses on clear expectations and a system of rewards and punishments to achieve specific objectives. It assumes that employee motivation stems from well-defined roles, supervision, and performance-based incentives.

Transactional leadership prioritizes maintaining the status quo, focusing on short-term goals and immediate results rather than fostering innovation or long-term growth. While effective in certain situations, it lacks the inspirational and visionary qualities of transformational leadership [16]. Transactional leaders emphasize individual performance, offering rewards for meeting goals, but typically did not inspire followers to go beyond their defined roles. This leadership style provided a foundational framework for managing organizational performance and operations, often serving as a basis for more complex leadership approaches [17].

C. Transformational leadership and Academic staff performance

Research shows that leadership styles have varying effects on employee attitudes and organizational outcomes. Transformational leadership typically enhances self-efficacy, motivation, creativity, and performance, especially during organizational change [18]. H1: Transformational leadership has a significant influence on the perceived performance of staff.

D. Transactional leadership and staff performance

Transactional leadership, focused on rewards and punishments, can improve job satisfaction and organizational identity but may encourage complacency. While some research indicates transactional leadership boosts performance more, others favor transformational

leadership [17]. H2: Transactional leadership has a significant influence on the perceived performance of staff.

E. Transformational leadership styles and staff commitment

Leadership style was shaped by a leader's characteristics, behaviors, and interactions with subordinates [19]. Transformational leadership was directly linked to employee commitment, with transformational leadership often having a greater impact [9], [20]. Research in Malaysia's manufacturing sector showed transformational leadership styles positively influence organizational commitment. H3: Transformational leadership has a significant influence on the perceived commitment of staff.

F. Transactional leadership styles and staff commitment

Transactional leadership had a stronger effect and Studies in Ghana and Oman similarly found that transformational leadership enhances employee commitment, while laissez-faire leadership weakens it. Transactional leaders inspire change and cooperation, resulting in greater staff commitment and lower turnover [21], [22]. H4: Transactional leadership has a significant influence on perceived commitment of staff.

G. Commitment and academic staff performance

Research shows a positive correlation between organizational commitment and employee performance. Normative commitment has a strong link with job performance [19]. Both affective and normative commitments significantly impact performance, with affective commitment boosting network performance. However, continued commitment negatively correlates with network performance, indicating complexity in this relationship. Organizational commitment and corporate culture also significantly influence performance.

H9: The Commitment has a significant influence on Staff's Performance.

METHODOLOGY

This methodology establishes a theoretical foundation by discussing several leadership styles. It describes the investigation of leadership styles and their potential connection to outcome factors in the performance of academic staff in higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. In the current study, a quantitative survey

method is utilized to get the answers to the research questions and test the suggested model. Data collection from more populations can be done effectively and affordably using the quantitative survey method [23].

This study uses a post-positivist paradigm, which emphasizes systematic measurement, statistical analysis, and hypothesis testing—all of which are consistent with quantitative techniques. Although it is challenging to establish absolute truth, this philosophical framework recognizes that rigorous scientific approaches can provide factual data that helps us understand reality.

This section presents the conceptual framework, operationalization of variables, population, tools used for data collection, data collection process, data validity, and data analysis method [10].

A. Research design

A research design describes the strategies and procedures used to conduct a study. The current investigation is based on a cross-sectional survey methodology. The survey method is suitable for gathering data from a larger population and increases the researcher's control over the research process. The main tool used in the survey method is a questionnaire.

The current study is useful for understanding attitude, perception, and behavioral components because it is exploratory and explanatory [24]. Also, the study used quantitative research methodology, which involved grading participant replies to quantify the data. The current study is based on an analysis at the personal level.

The researcher administered the pre-made questionnaires directly to the respondents to obtain the necessary data [25].

B. The Conceptual framework

An effective and useful method for investigating or interpreting anticipated correlations between variables is a conceptual framework. The framework may be based on the practitioner's knowledge or on what the researcher thought was pertinent and significant to solving the challenges raised by the research. The quantitative study's conceptual framework makes the connection between effective leadership practice and both transformational and transactional leadership styles [10].

The conceptual framework that underpins this study is based on five key variables, including

- Transactional leadership style
- Transformational leadership style as independent variables
- Job performance of staff as a dependent variable
- Staff commitment
- Job autonomy as mediators between leadership
- Job performance relationships.

To further understand how these variables affect the relationship between the independent variables (transformational and transactional leadership styles) and dependent variables, the mediating influence of staff commitment is tested (academic staff job performance). When lowering or amplifying the impact of one dependent variable on another, mediator effects are very important practically [26].

The conceptual framework of the current study assumes that both transactional and transformational leadership qualities can support academic staff Commitment and Job autonomy. It also presupposes that strong leadership practices influence academic staff's performance through commitment and job autonomy.

C. The Operationalization

The practical application of the study's areas and variables is shown in Table 1.

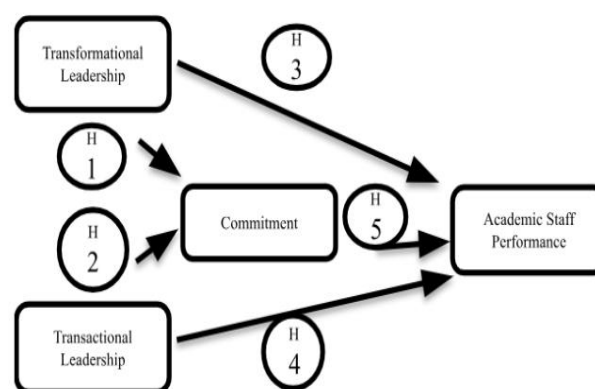


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework

D. Procedure and Instruments

Questionnaires and the survey approach utilized in this study are used to gather data from research participants. The proposed constructs for measuring the model variables. Prior to use, the instruments were pretested.

E. The Population and sample

The researcher would have to conduct a census or include every member of the target demographic in his study to gather the entire population as a sample for research. This method makes it possible to collect information from every member of the target population, guaranteeing full representation via an online questionnaire. If conducting a census for this research is feasible, it can offer the following justifications:

F. Full representation

A census assures that every member of the population is counted, removing any bias that might result from sampling methods. The research findings' accuracy and generalizability are improved by this thorough interpretation.

Elimination of sampling error: Since data are gathered from the entire population during a census, there is no sampling error. This improves the accuracy of my research findings and lowers the uncertainty related to predicting population parameters.

G. Extensive analysis

A census enables a thorough examination of demographic subgroups. By considering every person, it may evaluate traits, patterns, and trends at a detailed level, giving us a thorough picture of the population.

Small-scale analyses: Comparing conducting a census with larger populations, it may be more practical if the population is relatively small. In such circumstances, the logistical difficulties and expenses of a census might be more manageable, making it a justifiable strategy [27].

In line with the general aim of this study to test the impact of leadership styles between internal academic staff and their immediate superiors, data were collected from two renowned Sri Lankan private higher education institutions with an island-wide network. The former has 40 branches with approximately 400 internal academic staff, while the latter has 8 branches with a total of 125 internal academic staff. To gain comprehensive coverage, a structured questionnaire was dispatched to every 525 members of the academic staff in the Two institutions. 223 responses were obtained, providing an adequate response rate for quantitative analysis [28].

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH AND FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

This research was conducted among academic staff of higher education institutions in Sri Lanka for two types of perceived leadership styles. Therefore, for future research, it is recommended to include staff of higher education institutions in Public and Private and more leadership styles and dimensions. Mainly this study considered the importance of staff commitment and effect on academic staff performance connected with Transformational and Transactional leadership styles.

MEASURES

The measurement model of reflection in the study focused on six first-order constructs, namely Transformational Leadership (TFL), Transactional Leadership (TSL), Commitment, Job Autonomy, Climate, and Performance. The analysis of construct measures provided strong psychometric properties for all reflective indicators. Specifically, factor loadings of items under the Transformational Leadership construct were, in all instances, well over the 0.70 benchmark, between 0.76 and 0.88, thereby obtaining convergent validity. Reliability was also ensured by Cronbach's Alpha values greater than 0.70 for all the constructs, with TFL recording an extremely high alpha value of 0.91, indicating perfect internal consistency. Composite Reliability (CR) values were also higher than the threshold limit of 0.70, with TFL recording a CR of 0.93, indicating high reliability. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of TFL was 0.65, well over the minimum of 0.50, and this testifies to adequate convergent validity. In sum, results confirm the robustness of the reflective measurement model, confirming the reliability and validity of the first-order constructs used in measuring the impact of leadership styles on the performance of academic staff.

This operationalization framework was developed by the authors for the present study. The constructs, operational definitions, and measurement indicators were synthesized from established literature and validated measurement scales. The framework was specifically developed to align with the objectives and conceptual model of the present study.

Table 1: The Operationalization View

Variables	Definition	Indicators	Constructs	Measurement
The Transformational leadership	According to definitions, transformational leadership is a style of leadership in which interactions between interested parties are planned around a common goal in a way that influences, inspires, and improves followers' behavior and ethical ambitions [13].	• Coaching • Moral and ethics • Needs and motivation • Creativity • Standards [4]	The questionnaire for Multifactor leadership [2].	Questionnaire – Part B
The Transactional Leadership	A task is agreed upon and defined between the leader and follower as part of a social exchange process known as transactional leadership, with the understanding that a task that is properly accomplished will lead to a reward and the avoidance of punishment [6].	• Possible expectation • Problems • Standards and agreements [4].	The questionnaire of Multifactor leadership [2].	
Staff Performance	Work results, comprising efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness, are referred to as job performance of Staff [19].	• Job • Innovator • Carrer • Team • Institute [3]	Five-factor performance scale [19].	Questionnaire – Part C
Staff Commitment	The Staff commitment refers to the degree of identification and involvement that individuals have with the mission, values, and goals of their organization [9].	• Affective Commitment • Continuance Commitment • Normative commitment [4].	Academic staff Commitment Questionnaire [7]	Questionnaire – Part D

A. Assessment of Formative Measures (Second-Order Constructs)

Though not detailed in the dataset explicitly, formative constructs like overall leadership effectiveness might have been conceptualized. However, if treated as second-order, proper steps such as evaluating weights, multicollinearity, and outer VIFs are needed.

Table 2: Multicollinearity Check (Vif)

Path	VIF
Transformational -> Commitment	2.1
Transactional -> Commitment	1.9

All VIFs are below 3.3 (e.g. Transformational -> Commitment = 2.1), indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

Structural Model Assessment Coefficients & Significance

All structural path coefficients are statistically significant with $p < 0.05$.

Notably:

Transformational $\rightarrow$ Performance ($\beta = 0.35$, $t = 5.21$)

Transactional $\rightarrow$ Performance ($\beta = 0.25$, $t = 3.78$)

Table 3: Structural Model Assessment

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Significance
Transformational → Performance	0.35	5.21	0	Yes
Transactional → Performance	0.25	3.78	0	Yes
Commitment → Performance	0.30	4.91	0	Yes

Interpretation - All structural paths are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), confirming strong direct effects.

Table 4: R² and Q² Values

Construct	R ²	Q ²
Commitment	0.52	0.35
Performance	0.71	0.50

- $R^2 \geq 0.50$ = strong explanatory power.
- $Q^2 > 0$ confirms **predictive relevance**.

The model explains 71% of the variance in Performance, showing substantial explanatory power.

Table 5: Direct Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Supported?
H1	TFL → Performance	✓ Yes
H2	TSL → Performance	✓ Yes
H3	TFL → Commitment	✓ Yes
H4	TSL → Commitment	✓ Yes
H5	Commitment → Performance	✓ Yes

All eight hypotheses are supported with statistically significant results.

All five hypotheses (H1–H5) are statistically supported. Both leadership styles positively influence performance and are mediated by Commitment and Job Autonomy.

Indirect Effects / Mediation (Hypothesis Testing for Mediation)

The mediation is evident as:

- TFL and TSL influence Commitment which in turn significantly affect Performance.
- Hence, Commitment mediates the effects of leadership on performance.

The mediation paths are statistically supported.

Assessment of Validity and Reliability (Reflective Measures)

To evaluate the measurement model, the validity and reliability of the reflective constructs were assessed using four key indicators: indicator loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Table 6: Validity and Reliability Assessment

Construct	Average Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Transformational Leadership	0.82	0.91	0.93	0.65
Transactional Leadership	0.79	0.89	0.91	0.62
Commitment	0.81	0.90	0.92	0.66
Performance	0.83	0.92	0.94	0.68

Indicator Loadings: All constructs demonstrated strong item loadings, with average values above the recommended threshold of 0.70. This indicates that the observed variables adequately represent their respective latent constructs.

Cronbach's Alpha: All constructs showed Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.70, which confirms internal consistency and reliability of the constructs used in the model.

Composite Reliability (CR): CR values for all constructs were above 0.70, suggesting that the constructs demonstrate high reliability and are free from random measurement error.

Average Variance Extracted (AVE): Each construct had an AVE above the minimum threshold of 0.50. This validates that the constructs exhibit acceptable convergent validity, meaning they explain more than half of the variance of their respective indicators.

Based on the above results, all reflective constructs in the study are considered valid and reliable. This confirms that the measurement model is statistically sound and suitable for further analysis in the structural model phase.

Theoretical Implications

- Confirms Transformational Leadership is more effective than Transactional Leadership in enhancing academic staff performance.
- Supports social exchange and motivation theory: employees reciprocate supportive leadership with higher performance and commitment.
- Expands the body of literature by applying these constructs in the Sri Lankan private education context, a previously under-researched area.

Practical Implications

- Leadership training for Superiors should emphasize transformational behaviors (coaching, motivation, ethics).
- Enhancing and reinforcing organizational commitment improves academic output.

LIMITATIONS

This study examines several limitations. First, it is based on private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka and therefore does not generalize to public institutions or other educational settings. The study also does not include visiting staff members but only internal academic staff, which may be lacking the heterogeneity of other staff interactions. Cross-sectional data limit the ability to make causal inferences regarding the relationships examined. Furthermore, since the information was collected through self-reporting questionnaires, there is a potential for social desirability bias, which could affect the truthfulness of the responses.

Future research can improve the generalizability of this study by including public institutions and part-time teaching staff to allow for the extension of results' generalizability to the whole higher education institution. Future research could also consider other mediating factors such as organizational climate, staff motivation, or job satisfaction to understand more clearly the mechanisms through which leadership styles affect academic staff performance. Longitudinal study designs would enable researchers to capture the long-term effects of leadership without the limitations of cross-sectional data.

Multi-level modeling is also recommended to control for hierarchical structure in departments and institutions as well as for more nuanced context effects.

This study offers robust evidence that both transformational and transactional leadership styles significantly influence academic staff performance directly and indirectly through commitment and job autonomy. Leadership development initiatives tailored to Sri Lanka's private education sector can benefit significantly from these insights, ultimately enhancing educational quality and staff satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate good empirical support for the conceptual model, which investigates transformational and transactional leadership patterns and their influence on Sri Lanka's private higher education institutions' academic staff performance. The measurement model was very valid and reliable for all reflective constructs in that it showed good average factor loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results confirm the efficacy of the instrument for leadership, commitment, autonomy, and performance measurement.

Structural model further reveals that transformational and transactional leadership styles both have statistically significant and positive direct effects on academic staff performance. Transformational leadership has a larger effect, which reveals that it has a key role to play in the creation of innovation, motivation, and quality academic production. In addition to this, these mediating variables of staff commitment and job autonomy were also significantly associated with performance, again suggesting that effective leadership does not operate so much through direct motivation but by enabling employees to work in an organizational environment in which they are empowered and committed.

The strong R^2 value for staff performance (0.71) demonstrates that the model possesses good explanatory power. This lends validity to the theoretical assumption that leadership is among the most powerful determinants of individual behavior as well as organizational performance in the academic environment. Further, the high Q^2 values demonstrate that the model possesses good predictive power, justifying its effectiveness in applied scenarios in institutions.

Theoretically, the findings are in line with social exchange and motivation theories that posit that leadership behavior moderates subordinate responses through direct and indirect avenues such as commitment. In practice, the research necessitates the setup of leadership initiatives with high emphasis on coaching, ethical leadership, more so in competitive learning environments where employees' commitment is directly associated with the success of institutions.

While results are substantial, the study is limited. The sample was restricted to full-time academic faculty in private institutions, and this may limit generalizability. Future research could involve public sector organizations, part-time academics, and examine other mediators such as organizational climate and employee engagement. Longitudinal design would be best to capture change over a period. Lastly, this study corroborates the existence of the impact of effective leadership or better yet, transformational leadership on the academic staff performance directly and indirectly through enhanced commitment. Such types of findings are helpful for higher education institutions in attempts to boost productivity among their workforce, job satisfaction, and overall academic quality.

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