

Transformational Teaching Matters: Lecturer Leadership Styles and Student Satisfaction in Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Student satisfaction is a key indicator of teaching quality and institutional performance in higher education. As lecturers function as leaders within the classroom, their leadership behaviours significantly influence students' learning experiences and perceptions of academic quality. This study examines the influence of transformational, transactional, and task-oriented leadership styles on student satisfaction among undergraduates at Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP). Guided by Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) and transformational leadership principles, this research employed a quantitative cross-sectional design. A structured questionnaire adapted from established scales was distributed to 370 students. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.774 to 0.853, indicating acceptable to excellent reliability. Results show that transformational leadership is the strongest predictor of student satisfaction, followed by transactional leadership with a moderate effect, while task-oriented leadership exhibits weak effects. The findings highlight the need for universities to strengthen transformational teaching practices to enhance student satisfaction. Practical implications and recommendations for leadership development among lecturers are provided.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Task-Oriented Leadership, Student Satisfaction, Higher Education, Malaysia, Leadership Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Background

Lecturers serve not only as instructors but also as leaders who shape students' academic experiences, motivation, and satisfaction (Mazer & Hess, 2017). Student satisfaction is linked to learning effectiveness and institutional success, making lecturer leadership behaviour a critical area of inquiry (Pekrun et al., 2017). Transformational leadership, in particular, has been consistently associated with improved student engagement and satisfaction (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Eom, 2009).

Despite this, lecturers in many universities including Malaysian public institutions often prioritise administrative duties over leadership behaviours that enhance student experience (Manning, 2017). This imbalance may negatively affect teaching quality (Kumpulainen et al., 2018). Therefore, examining which leadership styles most effectively influence student satisfaction is essential.

Problem Statement

The problem of lecturer leadership arises from increasing concerns that many academics lack the leadership capabilities required to foster an engaging and supportive learning environment. Although lecturers play a central

role in shaping students' learning experiences, deficiencies in communication, student support, innovation, and collegial collaboration continue to impede instructional effectiveness and student development. This issue is further complicated by evidence showing that high-quality leadership behaviours such as transformational or justice-focused leadership are resource-intensive and psychologically taxing. Prior studies (e.g., Johnson et al., 2014; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) highlight that leaders often face emotional exhaustion, time constraints, and cognitive strain when attempting to enact leadership behaviours that demand persuasion, motivation, and emotional regulation.

Moreover, certain leadership styles may be ill-suited for academic and quality assurance contexts. Transformational leaders may respond slowly to crises, exacerbating staff frustrations (Soumya et al., 2025), while high power-distance cultures can inhibit collaboration, stakeholder involvement, and shared decision-making—factors essential for effective quality assurance processes (Huang et al., 2005; Kim & Oh, 2016; Lee & Lee, 2024; Karakuş & Akçakanat, 2024). Divergent expectations among key stakeholders (e.g., deans, lecturers, government agencies, parents, students) further complicate the attainment of common quality standards (Beerrens & Udam, 2017).

Task-oriented leadership styles also present drawbacks. Strict rule adherence may suppress creativity, reduce morale, and increase turnover (Bass, 1990). In dynamic and highly competitive sectors, such restrictive environments limit the risk-taking necessary for responsiveness and innovation (MindTools, 2009). Collectively, these issues underscore a critical gap: higher education institutions lack a leadership framework that balances effectiveness with the emotional, cognitive, and contextual demands placed on lecturers. This unresolved tension necessitates further research into leadership models that enhance lecturer performance, sustain well-being, and support quality assurance expectations.

Research Objectives

This research aims to:

1. To examine the relationship between transformational leadership and student satisfaction.
2. To analyse the relationship between transactional leadership and student satisfaction.
3. To determine the relationship between task-oriented leadership and student satisfaction.

Research Questions

1. Does transformational leadership influence student satisfaction?
2. Does transactional leadership influence student satisfaction?
3. Does task-oriented leadership influence student satisfaction?

Significance of the Study

This study enhances the understanding of leadership in educational contexts and supports the development of leadership-driven teaching approaches (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Practically, it provides evidence-based recommendations for improving lecturer development programmes and fostering student-centred learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction reflects perceived fulfilment of academic expectations (Astin, 1993). It is positively associated with academic performance, motivation, and overall well-being (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Lecturer behaviour, particularly leadership style, directly affects student satisfaction (Lovett, 2018; Yu & Deng, 2022).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership inspires followers to exceed expectations and embrace change (Bass, 1997; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Its core dimensions include idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1993).

Classroom studies consistently show that transformational leadership enhances student participation, satisfaction, and perceived learning (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Noland, 2005). Intellectual stimulation and inspiring motivation are strongly linked to improved student performance and communication satisfaction (Pounder, 2008; Eom, 2009).

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is based on exchanges between leader and follower, such as rewards for performance (Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2013). Contingent reward and management-by-exception form the core of this style (Bass, 1990; Trottier et al., 2008).

Although less inspirational than transformational leadership, empirical studies show that transactional leadership contributes to clarity, structure, and predictable learning environments (Aydin et al., 2013). Contingent reward can reduce teacher burnout and improve motivation (Eyal & Roth, 2010).

Task-Oriented Leadership

Task-oriented leaders emphasise goals, structure, and task completion (Fiedler, 1964; Forsyth & Donelson, 2010). While beneficial in structured work environments (Anzalone, 2017), this style may suppress creativity and harm interpersonal relationships (Wroblewski, 2019). Studies in higher education show weak or negative links between task orientation and policy implementation or innovation (Brown, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) asserts that learning arises from interactions between environmental, behavioural, and internal factors. Lecturer leadership serves as an environmental influence shaping student expectations, motivation, and performance (Caprara et al., 2006).

Hypotheses

H1: Transformational leadership has a significant positive influence on student satisfaction.

H2: Transactional leadership has a significant positive influence on student satisfaction.

H3: Task-oriented leadership has a significant influence on student satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used, appropriate for examining relationships between measurable variables (Disman et al., 2017).

Sampling

The UniMAP student population (~13,000) required a minimum of 370 samples based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table. Purposive sampling targeted undergraduate students.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire comprised:

- Demographics
- Transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990)
- Transactional leadership
- Task-oriented leadership (Sage Publications, 2014)
- Student satisfaction (Douglas et al., 2006)

5-point Likert scales were used (Taherdoost, 2016).

Reliability

Reliability results (Cronbach's α):

- Transformational: .798
- Transactional: .814
- Task-oriented: .774
- Student satisfaction: .853

All values exceed the recommended threshold (Hair et al., 2010). As illustrate in the above below, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients displayed Cronbach's Alpha. The value of α for preparation for Transformational Leadership is 0.798 while Transactional Leadership α is 0.814. Cronbach's alpha for Task-Oriented Leadership is 0.774 and Student's Satisfaction is 0.853. These value of α for Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Task-Oriented Leadership and Student's Satisfaction shows a good level of association as each of α value is higher than 0.6.

Data Analysis

SPSS Version 27 was used to conduct descriptive statistics, reliability testing (Sekaran, 2003), correlation analysis, and multiple regression (Leech et al., 2015).

RESULTS

Correlation Analysis

Transformational leadership displayed the strongest positive correlation with student satisfaction, consistent with earlier research (Gill et al., 2010). Transactional leadership showed moderate correlations. Task-oriented leadership showed weak or non-significant correlations.

Regression Analysis

Regression results confirm:

- Transformational leadership → strong positive effect ($p < .001$)
- Transactional leadership → moderate effect ($p < .05$)
- Task-oriented leadership → weak / inconsistent effect

The model accounted for a meaningful proportion of variance in student satisfaction (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

DISCUSSION

Transformational Leadership

The strong influence of transformational leadership supports findings by Pounder (2008), Bolkan and Goodboy (2009), and Eom (2009). Students respond positively to inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and personalised attention.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership contributed moderately, aligning with studies showing that contingent reward enhances clarity and reduces burnout (Eyal & Roth, 2010; Kahai et al., 1997).

Task-Oriented Leadership

Weak effects of task-oriented leadership support findings that excessive structure limits creativity and emotional connection (Brown, 2003; Wroblewski, 2019).

Implications

Theoretical

The study reinforces Social Cognitive Theory, showing that lecturer behaviour shapes student satisfaction (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996). Reinforces transformational leadership as the most effective leadership style in higher education.

Practical

Universities should build leadership-based teaching development programmes that emphasise transformational behaviours (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study highlight several promising avenues for future research. First, replicating the proposed relationships across diverse cultural and geographical settings may yield deeper and more generalisable insights. Future work should also consider examining leadership styles from the perspective of contemporary students, whose expectations and learning behaviours continue to evolve. Additionally, incorporating broader outcome variables - such as student effort, commitment, and academic achievement would enrich understanding of how lecturer leadership influences student development.

To further unpack the complexity of these relationships, future studies could explore additional mediating factors, including personality traits, self-efficacy, and teamwork dynamics. Expanding the sample to include a wider range of universities with accreditation standards comparable to Universiti Malaya would also enhance the robustness and external validity of the findings. Finally, distributing the survey across a more diverse and representative student population is recommended to improve sample size and strengthen the generalisability of the results.

CONCLUSION

Transformational leadership is the most effective leadership style for improving student satisfaction at UniMAP. Transactional leadership offers moderate support, while task-oriented leadership contributes minimally. Universities should prioritise leadership development to enhance teaching quality and student experience.

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