

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perception gap: Academic leadership styles in Maldivian higher education institutes

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ABSTRACT

Leadership stems from recognition and acceptance, surpassing the mere reliance on their title. Research indicates varying perceptions of relationship values between leaders and followers. A leader's crucial awareness of these differences prevents harm to the institution through disagreements that expose poor style and self-knowledge. This study examines the perception difference of deans' leadership styles in Maldives higher education institutes using self-rating and their lecturers' perceptions using followers rating. In this study, a sequential explanatory mixed-method design was used. The first phase collected data via surveys from deans and lecturers ($N = 190$) from nine different HEI, with SPSS used for analysis. The second phase included qualitative interviews with deans and lecturers ($N = 21$), which were evaluated using template analysis. The independent sample t-test was used to assess the difference in averages between two independent groups, leaders and lecturers. According to the data, there was a slight statistically significant difference between deans' self-assessments of their own current leadership styles and lecturers' ratings of their leaders' existing leadership styles. On the other side, it was discovered that both leaders and lecturers like the same leadership approaches. The findings of this research study suggest institutes to focus on developing academic deans' leadership styles based on followers' perception. Leadership measurement should consider both leaders' and subordinates' perceptions to avoid flawed conclusions. Also, this study calls for academic deans to reflect on their leadership, acknowledge limitations, and engage in developmental activities for growth.

Keywords: deans; higher education; leadership development; perception difference

1. Introduction

Effective academic leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping educational institutions and fostering an environment conducive to research and innovation. Most leading research defines academic leadership as the leadership of senior administrative staff who have held management positions such as Chancellor, Vice Chancellor^[1,2], and in some research, it is the leadership of faculty heads such as deans of faculty or schools^[3]. Each of these conceptualizations provides a distinct and possibly diverse "social identity," which influences who they look up to for leadership and the extent to which others desire to 'follow' them. Academic leadership is defined in this research as the leadership of academic faculty heads, such as deans and deputy deans, who have a formal position and professional autonomy in leading and directing academics (lecturers) in the

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classroom. Hence, academic leadership is defined as “the act of empowering members of the faculty and staff by working with them collegially to achieve common goals, build a community of scholars, and sustain a high level of morale”^[4].

The deans have an instrumental role in HEIs. Zacher and Bal^[5] described deans as the backbone for academic leadership. Deans’ responsibilities include daily involvement with professors, adjuncts, staff, and students, as well as representing administrative business and customers^[6,7]. In playing these roles, the deans have a huge responsibility. For example, deans lead the leaders within the departments of the HEIs, set academic guidelines and policies, work on the development of the faculty, and attend to academic appointments and other administrative duties^[7,8]. Hence, due to the weight of these responsibilities, upon taking the deanship, majority of deans relinquish their professorships, teaching positions, and research activity^[9,10].

From the leader’s perspective, the adoption of an appropriate leadership style is essential for effectively guiding and inspiring faculty members, researchers, and other stakeholders within the academic community. By gaining insights into the effectiveness and perceived importance of different leadership styles, aspiring academic leaders can acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to adapt their leadership approaches to satisfy the evolving requirements of their institutions and followers. Hence, this research seeks to shed light on the academic leadership styles from the perspectives of Maldivian HEI leaders and followers. By examining these perspectives, we aim to enhance our understanding of the impact of leadership on academic environments and offer insights to inform the development of effective leadership practices. Ultimately, this research will contribute to fostering a supportive and inspiring academic culture that promotes research excellence and innovation.

2. Literature review

The success of every organization depends on their leaders. This review investigates leadership styles, philosophies, and perceptions of leadership in higher education (HE), with a focus on deans’ leadership in particular.

2.1. Academic leadership

Leadership roles can differ according to the mission of the organization. Leadership is defined as a component of change and leadership skills formed by education, experiences, interaction and by inspiring people^[11]. There is a distinctive difference between a manager and a leader. Popovici^[11] described a leader as someone who people naturally follow by their own choice, unlike a manager who must be obeyed. Similarly, this distinction is also made by the scholars Kotter^[12] and Covey^[13] stating that managers are responsible for the day-to-day operations of a business, while leaders provide direction.

Specific focus on personal qualities is required from the leaders for the future. Gedro et al.^[14] state that academic leaders must have an academic excellence spirit as well as leadership, communication, and interpersonal abilities. Additionally, according to Patton^[7], managers of HE requires excellent technical and managerial skills in addition to highly developed emotional and social skills. Further, Astin and Astin^[15] identified self-awareness, self-knowledge, interpersonal skills and integrity as the characteristics most likely to characterize effective leadership. While leadership roles differ according to the leader’s position in the organizations, it is important to understand how academic leadership is defined.

Leadership in an academic institution is referred to as academic leadership. For the organization’s overall development and performance, the position of academic deans is crucial^[7]. Academic leadership is characterized by Beerkens and Van der Hoek^[16] as guiding academic employees in the fundamental disciplines of teaching, research, and service. According to Wood^[17], academic deans’ primary duty is to oversee an

academic division. The changes in higher education have raised interest in middle management, such as deans and department chairs^[16,18–23]. Academic deans' duties and responsibilities are likewise evolving. Scott et al.^[2] noted that the deans now have the tasks that were formerly associated with senior leadership in higher education, citing the instance of Australia. The deanship in Europe has evolved into a difficult, senior, and strategic post^[24], and the dean's job now encompasses strategy creation, contact with stakeholders, and performance management^[2]. In the position of deanship, their roles and responsibilities vary. According to Wood^[17], the deans are able to manage information, gather and distribute resources, and address faculty and staff performance within the university hierarchy. In addition to serving as deans, they also serve as middle managers^[25], university representatives, college presidents, consensus builders, facilitators, and mediators^[26], among many other functions. Deans must also work to advance the interests of both the college and the institution as a whole^[7]. Hence the dean's role is multifaceted. According to Arntzen^[10], the deans' roles and responsibilities can be divided into four categories: their professional role and strategic responsibility; their administrative role and financial responsibility; their role in personnel; and their role in fostering collaboration between internal and external organizational components. Hence, it is evident that deans have multiple roles and responsibilities that come with their appointment to deanship and to manage such responsibility and excellent leadership is necessary.

2.2. Leadership styles

People's perception of the roles and responsibilities of deans are changing with time. Popular leadership styles in higher education are found to be transformational leadership^[10], laissez-faire leadership^[27] and distributed or servant leadership^[10]. The transformational leadership theory developed by Burns^[28] appeals to a shared vision of organizational goals and motivates the followers of the leader with the use of intellectual stimulation, inspiration and attention to followers' needs^[29–31]. Studies have found that dean's preferred transformational leadership^[32,33], which is also more morally uplifting than other types of leadership^[34,35]. Transformational leaders are able to forge good relationships and bring changes that positively affect the organization. Transformational leaders are able to develop relationships with their subordinates^[7], become good models for their followers, take good care of their followers and encourage them to think outside the box^[36]. As a result, the performance of the organization increases^[37]. However, it was found in a study examining the different leadership styles of leaders of higher education, both profit and non-profit, their beliefs about the behavior or influence of transformational leaders varied^[38].

Transformational leadership inspires and motivates by setting a compelling vision, whereas transactional leadership emphasizes structured exchanges for achieving goals. Transactional leadership style is more focused on supervision and entails rewards and punishments. Odumeru and Ifeyani^[39], described transactional leadership where the leader motivates his followers through reward and punishments, and does not focus on changing the future, but keeping things the same. By using this leadership approach, leaders use an exchange model where rewards are given for good work and punishment is given until the problem is corrected^[39]. Transactional leadership focuses on performance of specific tasks^[40] and motivates subordinates through contractual arrangements^[41]. Further, it is found that transactional leader's expectation of the followers is not high^[9].

Transactional leadership employs structured rewards and punishments to achieve objectives within defined boundaries, while autocratic leadership emphasizes control and decision-making authority. Autocratic leaders, also known as the classical style of leadership^[41] use power and exert authority to make decisions^[42]. This type of leadership is also known as coercive leadership. Autocratic leaders make decisions without consultation or input from the group. Hence, autocratic leadership is known for individual control over all decisions and less or none from the staff^[43].

Transactional and autocratic leadership styles centralize decision-making and authority, while transformational leadership inspires change, and distributed leadership disperses influence across a team for collaborative decision-making and innovation. Distributed leadership is where the leaders work collaboratively and together with formal and informal leaders^[44]. This type of leadership requires careful attention to common commitments, beliefs and values^[45]. Malloy^[46] described distributed leadership as sharing and distribution of leadership practices. However, distributed leadership does not mean sharing tasks or assigning tasks^[47]. The difference between shared and distributed leadership according to Schlechty^[45] is the sharing of authority with the other relevant heads. Hence, communication, interaction and collaboration are emphasized in this type of leadership. The leaders and teams discuss^[48] and work and learn collectively as a team^[49].

Distributed leadership promotes shared responsibility and collaboration, involving team members in decision-making, while laissez-faire leadership offers autonomy and minimal guidance, giving individuals significant independence in their roles. This type of leadership is known as a passive leadership style and based on avoidance^[30], where the leader does not see it important to address the needs of the team members^[50]. Such leaders are less concerned with people and the organization, have damaging effects on the productivity and leave the organization voluntarily or are terminated^[51]. Further, Laissez-faire leaders participate less in organization work and delay responding to critical issues that need their attention^[52,53]. According to Avolio^[54], on the leadership behavior continuum, the laissez-faire leadership is at the lowest. In the Maldivian health care setting, a study by Mohamed and Saeed^[55] revealed that doctors of all ages, genders, and educational levels preferred transformational and democratic leadership styles over autocratic, laissez-faire, and transactional leadership styles, and that transformational leadership had the highest positive impact on the doctors' job satisfaction measures.

2.3. Perception of leadership styles of academic deans

The success of leadership for any organization is dependent on the behavior exhibited by the leader. Many theorists have revealed two fundamental categories of behavior; the first category is of the behavior and interpersonal skills, and the second category is about the achievements^[56]. In addition, what is found to be influencing the followers are the leader's charisma or experience in addition to many other factors, and not the position and authority of the leader^[57].

Otara^[58] stated that perception is how people come to believe the leader's effectiveness. One of the main duties of the deans is to define their leadership roles^[59] and it is found that leaders perceive that their abilities contribute to development of the climate and effectiveness of the educational environment^[60]. Regardless of their position in the hierarchy, the first and foremost they are academic leaders^[61] and it is crucial for deans to possess the necessary skills for a leadership position^[9].

In a study that explores the relationship between academic leaders' effectiveness and different leadership styles, Al-Husseini and Elbeltagi^[62] found that faculty members perceived the leadership style of the dean are a blend of three leadership styles, which were transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire. In comparison, Firestone^[63] in a study examining the leadership of higher education deans, vice presidents and faculty found these leaders demonstrated leadership behaviors of transformational leadership. Hence, it can be said the most common leadership style perceived is the transformational leadership.

In conclusion, review of literature identified significant gaps that this study attended. To summarise, the review found that there is a significant gap in literature pertaining to leadership style studies in HE at faculty level and that a vast majority of these studies only reported leadership style from the subordinates' perspective with a limited number of studies reporting from leaders' perspective. There are only a handful of studies that explored leadership style in HE from both leaders as well as subordinate's perspective. In addition, literature

relating to academic leaders' leadership style revealed that the vast majority of the studies used quantitative methods and few qualitative studies were conducted. There is a significant lack of literature that explored this phenomenon using a mixed method approach that could provide a better insight of the issue at hand.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

Explanatory sequential design, a mixed method technique, was employed in this investigation. It is a two-phase approach wherein qualitative data is gathered and assessed based on the quantitative results after the quantitative data has been acquired and analyzed^[64]. The quantitative statistics from the survey were explained using the qualitative information from the interviews.

3.2. Data collection

To directly contact a large number of respondents, deliver the instruments, and gather the necessary data in the first phase, a survey was employed. Survey information was gathered from deans ($N = 20$) and lecturers ($N = 170$) from nine different HEI using a total population sampling. The survey's questionnaire was divided into two sections, Section A for gathering different demographic data on the respondents, and Section B for closed-ended questions about leadership styles on a five-point Likert scale. A senior member of a HEI reviewed the survey form to increase its validity. Academics and academic leaders from Maldivian HEI answered the questionnaire. Utilizing Cronbach's alpha measurements, the reliability test was carried out to confirm the measurement of the Likert scale items. The scale's total Cronbach alpha was 0.77.

A qualitative approach was used in the second phase to triangulate, validate, and explain the quantitative results. Semi-structured interviews with deans ($N = 5$) and lecturers ($N = 16$) from seven different HEI were employed in this phase.

3.3. Data analysis

Version 23 of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the survey's data. Means, percentages, standard deviations, and independent sample t-tests were used in descriptive and inferential statistics. The interview transcripts were thematically analyzed and coded using a template analysis (TA) method as this method is a technique that enables the researcher to identify generic themes originating within the data and at the same time, allows problem solving and theory building.

4. Findings

4.1. Demographics

4.1.1. Survey questionnaire participants

Participants came from a total of nine different HEI in Maldives. $N = 66$, or 34.7%, of the participants belonged to Institute A, which was followed by $N = 36$, or 18.9%, and $N = 27$, or 14.2%, of the participants from institute B and C respectively. Institutes D, E, G, H, and Institute I are represented by the remaining 25% of participants. The majority of the participants in this research had between 0 and 3 years of employment there. A total of 77 individuals (40.5%) reported having no more than three years of experience working at the HEI. 62 participants (32.6%) said that they had been employed for more than 5 years. 45 participants (23.7%) said they have experience ranging from 3–5 years. In terms of educational background, the majority of participants ($N = 127$, 66.8%) had master's degrees. $N = 170$, or 89% of the participants were lecturers, while $N = 20$, or 10.5%, were deans. In terms of gender, there were 97 female participants (51.1%), compared to 84 male participants (44.2%). The participants' ages varied from 20 to 59 years. $N = 96$, or 50.5%, of the

participants were in the 30–39-year-old age range. Only five participants (2.6%) were in the 50–59-year age range, while 57 individuals (30.0%) were in the 40–49-year age range, 27 participants (14.2%) were in the 20–29-year range.

4.1.2. Interview participants

There were variations among the interviewees for this study in terms of age, gender, educational attainment, work experience, and institute size. 20% of the deans were men ($N = 1$), while the majority of deans ($N = 4$, 80%) were women in the 40- to 49-year-old age range. Deans were selected from the largest 3 HEI in the Maldives. As a result, Institute A ($N = 1$, 20%), Institute B ($N = 2$, 40%), and Institute C ($N = 2$, 40%) took part in the qualitative interviews. Three lecturers (18.75%) each from Institute B and Institute C participated in the survey of teachers. Two participants from each of the remaining institutes participated. In this study, 2 deans (or 40%) had been deans for 6–7 years, and 2 deans (or 40%) had been a dean for less than one year. Only 1 dean (20%) had 3–5 years of experience in higher education. Regarding the deans' qualifications, the majority of them ($N = 3$, 60%) were PhD-level professionals.

Regarding the lecturers, there were 8 male participants (50%) and 8 female participants (50%) in total. The lecturers' ages ranged from 20 to 59 years, with the majority of them having worked for less than five years; specifically, 6 lecturers (37.5%) said they had worked in HEIs for 0–2 years and 6 lecturers (37.5%) said they had worked in HEIs for 3–5 years. The lecturers' ages ranged from 30 to 59 years old ($N = 8$, 50%). Two lecturers (12.5%) said they have 6–7 years of experience, while two lecturers (12.5%) claimed to have been employed for more than 7 years. The majority of lecturers ($n = 15$, 93.8%) have masters-level qualifications.

4.2. Existing leadership style

Participants were divided into lecturers and leaders in order to assess the current leadership styles of academic leaders in Maldivian HEI. Then, mean scores for each dimension of the preexisting leadership style scale were calculated. Fewer leaders ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.769$) were identified as laissez-faire leaders, whereas the majority of leaders ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.574$) believed they had a distributed leadership style. The second and third most common types of leadership, respectively, were classified as transformational leadership ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.567$) and transactional leadership ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.424$). The standard deviation for autocratic leadership was 0.675, while the mean score was $M = 2.10$. The mean ratings of the current leadership style as perceived by leaders are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Existing leadership styles as perceived by deans ($n = 20$).

Rank	Existing Leadership Styles	Mean	SD
1	Distributed leadership	4.15	0.574
2	Transformational leadership	4.08	0.567
3	Transactional leadership	3.95	0.424
4	Autocratic leadership	2.70	0.675
5	Laissez-faire leadership	2.02	0.769

Similar to faculty leaders, lecturers said that the most prevalent type of current leadership was distributed leadership. In contrast to faculty leaders' perceptions of laissez-faire leadership, autocratic leadership was seen by lecturers as being the least frequent type of leadership. **Table 2** displays the mean score for lecturers' perceptions on the current leadership style of academic leaders.

Table 2. Existing leadership styles as perceived by lecturers (n = 170).

Rank	Existing Leadership Styles	Mean	SD
1	Distributed leadership	3.72	0.896
2	Transformational leadership	3.46	0.957
3	Transactional leadership	3.39	0.810
4	Laissez-faire leadership	2.80	0.714
5	Autocratic leadership	2.76	0.803

The average score (M) indicates that the majority of lecturers (M = 3.72, SD = 0.896) believed their leaders to have a distributed leadership style, while the minority (M = 2.76, SD = 0.803) believed their leaders to have an autocratic style. According to lecturers, the transactional leadership style (M = 3.39, SD = 0.810) and the transformational leadership style (M = 3.46, SD = 0.957) had the two second- and third-highest mean scores. Laissez-faire leadership had a mean score of M = 2.80 and a standard deviation of 0.714, respectively.

A statistically significant difference ($t(37.84) = 2.054, p = 0.047$) between the existing leadership styles as perceived by leaders (M = 0.38, SD = 0.287) and lecturers (M = 3.22, SD = 0.546) was found using t-test. The magnitude of the difference in the means was minimal (eta squared = 0.02). By dividing the mean of the paired differences by the standard deviation of the paired differences for both leaders and lecturers, the effect size (Cohen’s d) was calculated (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Independent samples T-Test comparing existing leadership style.

		Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower		Upper
ExScale	Equal variances assumed	6.785	0.010	1.267	188	0.207	0.15750	0.12435	-0.08780	0.40280
	Equal variances not assumed			2.054	37.844	0.047	0.15750	0.07670	0.00222	0.31278

According to the results of the interviews, the distributed leadership style was thought to be the most commonly used by academic deans. As elaborated by the following lecturers,

...prevalent leadership skills that are possessed in Maldivian HE is distributive leadership style and transactional leadership style. We have strict guidelines, strict rules to follow, and strict policies and aspirations that we always try to meet (Lecturer 9).

Although lecturers think that transactional leadership style is more frequently used than transformational leadership style, deans think that transformational leadership style is more frequently used. As perceived by the following participants,

... transformational leadership... it is not a quality commonly seen ...the visionary part I haven’t noticed. I think transactional leadership is more common than transformational leaders (Lecturer 1).

I think a mix of the first two (distributed and transformational) would be dominating (Dean 3).

Despite the fact that transformational leadership is rarely applied, the majority of participants emphasized

the dearth of transformational leaders among their academic deans. Participants notably pointed out that academic leaders lack the ability to be visionary and the traits necessary to bring about changes in the faculty. It appears that, despite the faculty leaders' lack of transformational leadership and involvement in the strategic development of the faculty, senior management, such as the president, chairperson, rector, and vice rector, are heavily involved in the faculty's development. This outweighs the faculty head's lack of leadership. Lecturers perceive the prevalence of laissez-faire leadership among academic deans, while no deans perceive themselves as laissez-faire leaders.

...she is very knowledgeable, but she lacks leadership skills, she doesn't distribute work evenly and she doesn't consider assigning the tasks in a way that all staffs feel important and feel that their voice, their expertise are considered (Lecturer 9).

Academic leaders and lecturers agree that autocratic leadership is used occasionally. Deans of faculties concur with the study's quantitative findings.

They don't give flexibility... they direct us, so we don't have the chance to come out of the shell, we work in the nutshell. So, it's such that we can't bring about what we really want. So that's the control point as I say (Lecturer 13).

I think that maybe some aspects of autocracy like giving orders and expecting others to follow is common (Dean 3).

Deans and lecturers agree that academic leaders in the Maldives frequently use distributed leadership.

4.3. Ideal leadership style

In order to study the ideal leadership styles of academic leaders in Maldivian HEI, participants were separated into leader and lecturer groups. The ideal leadership style scale's mean scores for each facet of leadership style were then calculated. The average rating for the ideal leadership as understood by the leaders, is shown in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Ideal leadership styles as perceived by deans ($n = 20$).

Rank	Ideal Leadership Styles	Mean	SD
1	Distributed leadership	3.90	0.623
2	Transformational leadership	3.82	0.535
3	Transactional leadership	3.63	0.572
4	Autocratic leadership	2.99	0.940
5	Laissez-faire leadership	1.95	0.603

The majority of the leaders choose distributed leadership style, according to the average score (M) (M = 3.90, SD = 0.623), while the least favoured style is laissez-faire (M = 1.95, SD = 0.603). According to the leaders, the second and third most desired leadership styles were transactional leadership style (M = 3.63, SD = 0.572) and transformational leadership style (M = 3.82, SD = 0.535), respectively. The standard deviation for an authoritarian leadership style was 0.940, while the mean score was M = 2.99. These findings indicated that academic leaders favor distributed, transformative, and transactional leadership styles. Academic leaders themselves tend to dislike autocratic and laissez-faire leadership styles the least. **Table 5** displays the mean score that lecturer assigned to the ideal leadership style.

Table 5. Ideal leadership styles as perceived by lecturers ($n = 170$).

Rank	Ideal Leadership Styles	Mean	SD
1	Transformational leadership	3.93	0.707
2	Distributed leadership	3.83	0.793
3	Transactional leadership	3.55	0.752
4	Autocratic leadership	3.52	0.865
5	Laissez-faire leadership	2.27	0.812

Lecturers identified a variety of leadership styles, from transformational to distributed to transactional. The least preferred leadership styles among lecturers are authoritarian and laissez-faire, just like academic leaders' perception (Table 4). The mean ratings (M) showed that transformational leadership is most frequently selected by lecturers ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.707$), whereas laissez-faire leadership is least frequently preferred ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.812$). Distributed leadership ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.793$), transactional leadership ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.752$), and authoritarian leadership ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.865$) were shown to be the second, third, and fourth most desirable leadership types, respectively.

There was no statistically significant difference ($t(188) = -1.428$, $p = 0.16$) between the ideal leadership styles as perceived by lecturers ($M = 0.42$, $SD = 0.496$) and leaders ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.496$) in the findings of the independent sample t -test. However, the size of the mean difference was minimal (eta squared = -0.02). For both leaders and lecturers, the effect size (Cohen's d) was calculated by dividing the mean of the paired differences by the standard deviation of the paired differences (see Table 6).

Table 6. Independent samples t -test comparing ideal leadership style.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
IdScale	Equal variances assumed	0.090	0.764	-1.428	188	0.155	0.16732	0.11718	-0.39847	0.06384
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.428	23.701	0.166	-0.16732	0.11714	-0.40924	0.07461

Quantitative research revealed that transformational leadership, distributed leadership, transactional leadership, authoritarian leadership, and laissez-faire leadership are the most desired leadership styles preferred from academic leaders. All 16 academics and five academic leaders who participated in the interviews agreed on this. The majority of them emphasized how much they valued transformative leaders who could make remarkable improvements to the faculty. According to the participants who followed,

A leader is a leader when she has a vision. You can't steer up when you don't have a destination. Must be visionary and after that only other things come (Lecturer 15).

Deans of academic institutions expressed their support for the academic community's expectations of their transformative leadership. According to the academic dean below,

...Even the lecturers want something different. Transformational means you bring a change... (Dean 2).

Similar to this, deans and lecturers like distributed leadership due to the freedom offered to the employees in carrying out their accountable duties.

If the institution is to grow and flourish and if it's working towards a certain goal, the leaders need to possess distributive or transformational leadership. Otherwise, the institution will not flourish in the competitive environment... (Lecturer 9).

At this level we want empowerment... accountable as well, and when something goes well, we will feel accomplished and also, we want someone to look after what we do and give feedback (Dean 5).

Some of the participants made clear that they opposed autocratic leadership techniques. Some participants did, however, exhibit a preference for autocratic leadership techniques.

Because autocracy is severe, people dislike it. Autocratic leaders, however, may be necessary in some contexts or circumstances, but not in academia (Lecturer 6).

Few academics held the opinion that there is no optimal ideal leadership style; rather, they thought that the finest leadership practices would be determined by the circumstances. As the following lecturer elaborated,

The thing is we cannot simply say that we want transactional... transformation. Because it all depends on the situation. Based on the situation you bring changes to your leadership styles that work best (Lecturer 5).

5. Discussion

According to the findings of this study, transformational and transactional leadership styles predominate, whereas autocratic and laissez-faire leadership practices are uncommon in Maldives Higher Education Institutions. However, academic deans have different perspectives on the predominance of transformational and transactional leadership. Deans feel that transformational leadership is more prevalent than transactional leadership, but academics believe that transactional leadership is more prevalent among academic leaders than transformational leadership (**Figure 1**).

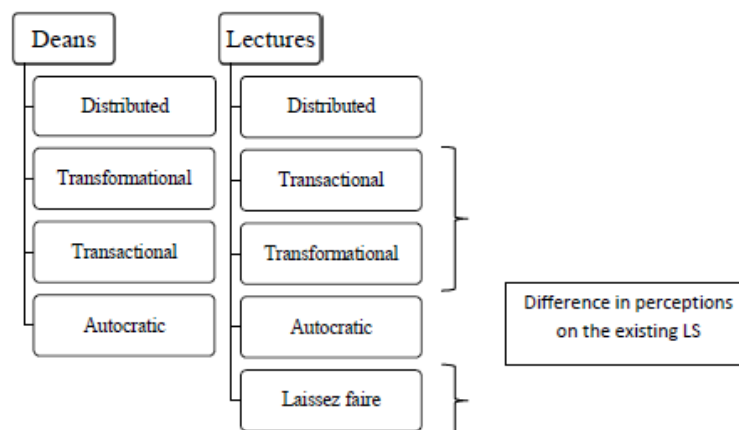


Figure 1. Difference between deans' and lecturers' perception on deans existing leadership style.

The conclusions of this study are equivalent to the findings of Lustik's^[32] and Rhodes et al.^[33] that dean's preferred transformational leadership. This may be due to the fact that deans feel that transformational leadership leads to more favorable results. Farahnak et al.^[35] stated that compared to other leadership styles, transformational leadership is more uplifting. Another reason deans believed that they practice transformational leadership could be because of their common understanding of the organization's objectives while supplying intellectual stimulation and taking into account the demands of followers^[14,29]. In contrast, the

reasons for the academics to believe that the deans practiced more of transactional leadership style could be for the reason that deans play the role of supervision of the academic’s work and provide rewards for the work accomplished. As Odumeru and Ifeyani^[39] stated that in transactional leadership, the leader encourages followers’ compliance by using both rewards and penalties. In addition, the beliefs of the academics may be based on the fact that transactional leadership also emphasizes the accomplishment of specific tasks, which focuses on lower levels of demands^[40].

The findings of this study also showed that even though academics believe that their leaders do adopt a laissez-faire leadership style to some level, deans deny the usage of it. The laissez-faire leadership style is more of a passive style of leadership, and this is sometimes referred to as based on avoidance of leadership^[30]. The leaders are seen to be less concerned with people and issues in this type of leadership and leaders make no effort to satisfy the colleagues or subordinates^[51]. This may be a technique used by the deans not to entertain every demand of the academics as by doing so, the dean will have control over the smooth running of the faculty and avoid drama leading to being labeled as being partial. Even though some studies show a positive effect of laissez-faire leadership on faculty performance^[27], majority of the studies have warned that practicing this type of leadership too much may indicate the leader is less concerned with the people and organization which leads to damaging effects on the productivity of the organization^[51].

Quantitative evidence revealed that there is no significant difference between academic leaders’ and other academics’ perceptions of the ideal academic leadership style (**Figure 2**). Qualitative research also confirmed that academic deans’ and academics’ assessments of the optimal leadership style for academic leaders are consistent. Transformational leadership is the most desirable type of leadership that is anticipated by academic leaders, followed by distributed, transactional, autocratic, and lastly, laissez-faire leadership.

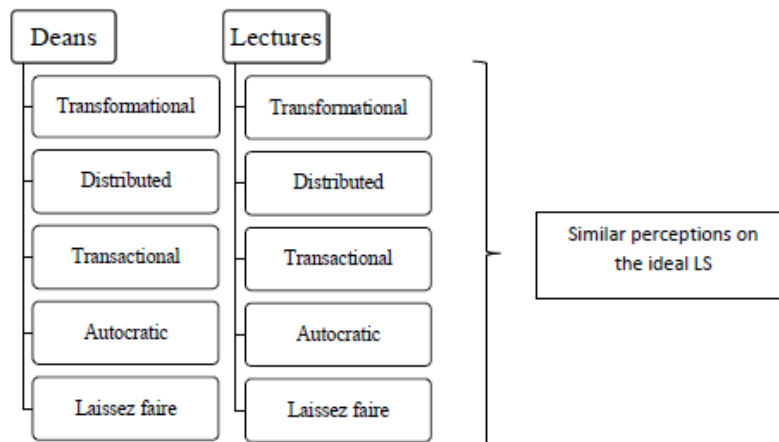


Figure 2. Deans’ and lecturers’ perception on ideal academic leadership style.

According to various research, transformational leadership is the most desirable type of leadership. In fact, similar to the outcomes of this study, the most often used leadership styles in higher education are found to be transformational leadership^[16], laissez-faire leadership style^[27,65], and distributed leadership^[16]. Some of the reasons for transformational leadership to be more ideally perceived may be because transformational leaders are able to build good relationships with their subordinates^[7,55], set good examples for their employees and take care of the subordinates^[36] leading to positive changes. When there is a good relationship built between the dean and the academics, it is much easier to motivate the team as a whole to work towards the shared values of the faculty and the HEI.

The second style of leadership perceived by the participants of this study was found to be distributed leadership. This type of leadership is more collaborative in nature^[44] and is about sharing and distributing

leadership practices. When there are opportunities for team members to contribute to decision making, the feeling of belonging and appreciation is greater. Schlechty^[45] asserts that sharing the authority's choices about subordinates with those who make up these units is more important than equality or sharing the administration function. Hence, communication, interaction and collaboration are emphasized in this type of leadership. When there are channels of communication that are clear, there is more opportunity to share viewpoints, contribute to decision making and hence, strengthen the organization. In this style of leadership, the teams and leaders engage, and everyone works and learns together^[48,49].

The third most idealistic leadership style as found from this study is transactional leadership. According to Anderson & Sun^[9], transactional leaders have lower performance expectations for their followers. This leadership style does not demand much from the academics as the leader is more passive in the leadership role. Good work is appreciated through rewards and problems are required to be corrected. Transactional leadership is the practice of a leader encouraging followers' compliance through both incentives and penalties rather than focusing on altering the future^[39]. Hence, in the faculty, the deans may want to keep things running smoothly without requiring any changes and take a passive role and academics may want things to be kept the way they are and hence may prefer the leader to be passive. Regardless, by practicing a transactional leadership style, the deans may want some issues that need to be "corrected" and may alienate the academics from rewards until the issue is remedied. By doing so, the leader is able to motivate the subordinates. By using this leadership approach, leaders employ an exchange model where merit-based incentives are granted, and punishment is given until the problem is corrected^[39] and accentuate the use of contractual agreements to inspire the subordinates^[41].

In this study, autocratic leadership style is found to be less idealistic than transactional leadership. It may be because in autocratic leadership the dean will use more power and authority in the decision making and management of the organization. Autocratic leadership is termed the classical style, where the leader used power to make decisions and exercise authority^[23,42]. By practicing this leadership style, academics will not have a role in participation in decision making. As a result, the dean will be in full control of all strategic implementation. Decisions are made and tasks are assigned by leaders, and there is no input required from the group members. Hence, individual control over all decisions and little to no input from the team are hallmarks of autocratic leadership^[43].

The laissez-faire leadership style is the least idealistic one that was found in this investigation. This finding is similar to the finding of Avolio^[54], which stated that leadership effectiveness depends on the leadership behavior continuum, where the lowest degree of leadership is laissez-faire, while the highest level is ide idealised influence. The laissez-faire leadership style being the least popular could be because of the passive leadership role and by the leader being passive, this affects the productivity of the whole organization. Laissez-faire leaders strive to put off reacting to pressing situations that require their attention and show less involvement in organizational affairs^[52,53]. Further, the leader does not make any attempt to satisfy the colleagues or subordinates.

6. Conclusion

This study found that the most prevalent leadership style in Maldivian HEI is distributed leadership style, and the most desired leadership style is transformational leadership style. There was a small statistically significant difference between the deans' self-rating of their own existing leadership styles and employees' ratings of their leaders' existing leadership styles. On the other hand, there is no significant difference in the ideal leadership styles perceived by lecturers and leaders. It is concluded that academic leaders perceive themselves as effective leaders who employ effective leadership styles, or they want others to perceive them

as effective leaders while concealing the limitations of their own leadership attributes. The study's findings in the context of Maldivian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) imply that fostering distributed leadership as the predominant style and prioritizing the development of transformational leadership qualities are crucial for effective leadership within these institutions. The alignment in the perceived ideal leadership styles between academic leaders and educators is encouraging, emphasizing a shared vision for effective leadership. However, the small but significant difference between deans' self-assessment and employees' perceptions highlights the need for greater self-awareness and authenticity among academic leaders. It suggests that academic leaders may sometimes prioritize the perception of effectiveness over acknowledging their limitations. As a result, there is a clear need for academic deans in the Maldives to engage in self-reflective practices and accept their leadership shortcomings. By doing so, they can cultivate genuine, trustworthy leadership and enhance their abilities through reflection, individual reading, mentoring, networking, research, training, and other developmental activities. This shift towards self-aware and authentic leadership has the potential to improve the quality of higher education and foster a more transparent and effective academic leadership environment in the Maldives.

The study has acknowledged various limitations. These include concerns about response bias, given the early stage of development of Maldivian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and potential limitations in academics' leadership knowledge, as well as hesitancy to share negative leadership aspects and social desirability bias in interviews. To address these biases, the study employed multiple strategies, such as probing for honest responses, using diverse perspectives, piloting the survey instrument, and conducting interviews to cross-validate findings. The study's specific focus on certain leadership theories may limit its scope, although an extensive literature review aimed to mitigate this limitation. Additionally, researcher bias due to insider status was considered, and the study's findings are context-specific and may not be universally applicable, subject to change as the higher education sector evolves with the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, AW; methodology, AW; software, AW; validation, AW; formal analysis, AW; investigation, AW; resources, AW; data curation, AW; writing—original draft preparation, AW and FN; writing—review and editing, AW and FN; visualization, AW; supervision, AW; project administration, AW. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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