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Nurturing academic leadership: A quest for the ideal academic leadership style for Maldives higher education

Aishath Waheeda¹

Asokan Vasudevan²⁺
Sam Toong Hai³
Rajani Balakrishnan⁴

¹*Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei.*
²³⁴*INTI International University, Malaysia.*
¹*Email:* aishath.waheeda@ium.edu.mv
²*Email:* asokan.vasudevan@newinti.edu.my
³*Email:* toonghai.sam@newinti.edu.my
⁴*Email:* rajani.balakrishnan@newinti.edu.my

(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

Higher education leadership is an understudied area, especially at the departmental or faculty level. The current study explored preferred academic leadership styles as perceived by academic deans and their lecturers in Maldivian Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). A sequential explanatory mixed method design informed by post-positivist techniques was used in this study. In the first phase, the survey method was used to directly reach many respondents, administer the instruments and to collect the required data. from deans (N=20) and lecturers (N=170) from nine different HEIs. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 23 was used to analyze the data using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics such as means, percentages, standard deviations, independent sample t-test and Pearson correlation coefficients. In the second phase, a qualitative approach was used to explain, validate and to triangulate the quantitative findings. This phase used semi-structured interviews for purposively selected deans (N=5) and lecturers (N=16) from seven different HEIs. The interview transcripts were thematically analyzed and coded using the template analysis method. The most preferred academic leadership styles in Maldivian HEIs were found to be transformational, distributed, and transactional leadership styles, respectively. To enhance academic leadership in HEIs in the Maldives, this study recommends academic leaders to use transformative and distributive leadership behaviors, which would also help HEIs in the skill development of academic deans.

Contribution/Originality: The research paper on Maldives' higher education leadership demonstrates originality by being the first comprehensive study in the region to analyze the evolving role of academic leaders. It introduces new conceptual frameworks and explores the preferred leadership style in this context, contributing significantly to the field of educational leadership research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in higher education occurs in administration, teaching and research. As such, given the multi-faceted nature of academic work, academic leadership has been defined differently, referring to these domains. In some studies, academic leadership is referred to as leadership of faculty members (Asaari, Dwivedi, Lawton, & Desa, 2016), while some research defines academic leadership as the leadership of the research-oriented staff (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). Most of the leading research refers to academic leadership as the leadership of the senior administrative staffs who have been in the management positions like the leadership of chancellor or vice chancellor

(Birnbaum, 1992; Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) and in some research, it is the leadership of faculty heads, like deans of faculty or schools (Karadag, 2017; Patton, 2021). Each of these conceptualizations offers a different and potentially divergent social identity that will influence whom they look up to for leadership and the degree to which others will want to 'follow' them.

Being an effective academic leader is a complicated matter. Given the complexities encountered in the Maldivian HEIs (Higher Education Institutes) due to the infancy of its institutes, small institutional size, young academic deans, rapid developments and challenges faced by the academic faculties (Waheeda, 2019), it is essential to ensure that academic deans practice a favorable leadership style, which would cater for the development of HEIs. Although academic leaders are significant for the operation of the HEIs, it has been understudied in higher education leadership. The literature surrounding higher education leadership further indicates that most studies tend to be centered on the role of the University President or Rector, Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor at the topmost management level (Smith & Hughey, 2006; Spendlove, 2007). There is a dearth of studies examining leadership specifically at other levels of management, such as at the departmental or faculty level (Bryman, 2007; Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017; Patton, 2021). Bryman (2007) reviewed the literature to uncover effective leadership styles in HE (Higher Education) at the departmental level and found little empirical research concerning the topic.

Notably, there is a lack of research which explores the ideal academic leadership styles from both academics and their leaders' perspectives in a single context. In the context of Maldives, there is no such research. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to explore the ideal leadership styles of academic leaders seen as most favored from the perspective of lecturers and their deans in Maldivian HEIs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been no universal consensus over the discussion about what constitutes effective leadership. The definition of leadership is widespread as the number of researchers who have tried to study it (Stogdill, 1974; Yukl, 1994). The definitions of leadership have changed along with the growth in leadership theories. It is evident that varied definitions by various researchers reflect their theoretical orientation and approach. As such, researchers typically define leadership according to their individual perspectives and the facets of the phenomenon that interest them the most (Yukl, 1989). Likewise, the definition of leadership is also related to the intention linked with the effort to define it (Bass, 1999). Hence, leadership can be seen as a group process involving the results of interaction, differentiated roles and initiation of structure, a characteristic of personality, an art of inducing compliance, an exercise of influence, a particular type of action or behaviour, a form of persuasion, a power relationship, and an instrument to achieve goals (Franco & Matos, 2015).

2.1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded on the full range of leadership proposed by Bass and Avolio (2004), autocratic leadership by Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) and distributed leadership theory by Gronn (2000). According to Fiore (2009), no single theory can provide leaders with specific ways to lead or inspire people; however, influential leaders realize that a theory can help provide insight into what individuals find inspiring to achieve the institute's vision. A range of leadership theories is adopted to help the researcher understand the prevalent and ideal leadership styles adopted by academic leaders in Maldivian HEIs. It provides to identify and explore the attributes of transformational, transactional, laissez-fare, autocratic and distributed leadership idealized by academics and academic deans to be practiced in academic leadership. As the notion of the range of leadership theory suggests, this theory is an ideal lens through which a whole or broad range of leadership behaviors can be examined by breaking down the concept of leadership into five broad categories and various subcategories well. These five leadership styles and their subcategories form the analytical framework for this research.
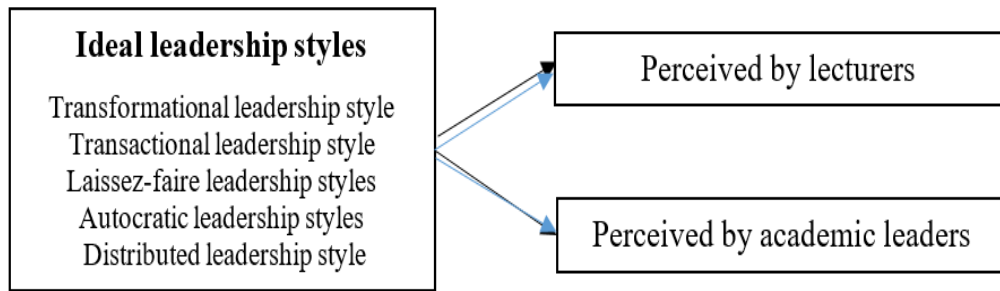
Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

As depicted in Figure 1, perceptions of academic leaders and lecturers are explored using five common leadership styles, namely, transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, autocratic, and distributed leadership style. The succeeding sections further support the framework using evidence from the current literature. The *'ideal leadership style'* is explored using a questionnaire and interview template designed by researchers based on the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The questionnaire was filled out by the leaders and by the academics.

2.2. Leadership Theories

Transformational leadership is the most effective leadership style in terms of the highest level of activity and leader effectiveness. One of the main differences between transformational and other traditional leadership is that in this leadership style, the leader leads to develop the followers to lead. They empower their followers by catering to individual needs and development, enhancing subordinates' leadership potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Instead of addressing follower compliance, the transformational leader goes beyond their expectations by instilling better values, beliefs and attitudes (Bass, 1985). They inspire subordinates to commit to the shared goals and visions of the organization, challenge them to be innovative problem solvers and improve their capability through mentoring, coaching and giving support, thereby, raising leadership to the next level (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Additionally, Gedro, Allain, De-Souza, Dodson, and Mawn (2020), in their study, imply that the best leadership styles involve a blend of goal setting, organizing, and assessing, as well as cooperation, communication, supporting and nurturing, which are elements of transformational leadership style.

Transactional or managerial leadership is based on transactions between the leader and his subordinates. In this leadership, the leader and follower influence one another by exchanging something to derive something of value (Yukl, 1989). In such transactions, there are obvious exchanges (e.g., subsidies for campaign contributions, jobs for votes) and less apparent exchanges, such as exchanges of respect, commitment, and trust (Burns, 1978).

An autocratic leadership style is an extreme form of transactional leadership where the leader displays complete power over the subordinates by directing and manipulating staff to complete the delegated tasks. They are socially distant from subordinates, are power-oriented and arbitrarily control their staffs (Fey, Adaeva, & Vitkovskaia, 2001).

Laissez-faire leaders refrain from getting involved when issues arise or taking a stand on issues and getting involved in decision-making. They fail to follow up, delay actions and are often absent when needed. They do not exercise their authority and avoid taking responsibility and are deemed active only to the level that they prefer to refrain from taking action (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003). These leaders do not develop themselves nor assist in developing their subordinates. Such leaders offer little in terms of support or direction and are essentially considered as non-leader (Kirkbride, 2006).

Sharing and distribution of leadership practices is known as distributed leadership (Malloy, 2012). According to Spillane (2006), leaders and subordinates play a vital role in this leadership style. Advocates of distributed leadership claim that this style of leadership is necessary in the educational context due to the complex structure of the organization, which cannot be led by a single heroic person. Similarly, higher education institutions are often

called complex institutions due to the consideration of various stakeholders, including students, parents, counsel bodies, the local community, academics, and governors in higher education leadership (Patton, 2021). Especially Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) describe distributed leadership by referring to the educational context, and literature has shown that most distributed leadership studies has focused on educational leadership and is getting common in higher education leadership (Bolden, 2011).

2.3. Effective Academic Leadership

Some claim that academic leaders have more challenges than business leaders because of the presence of various stakeholders in HEIs compared to a business organization such as students and faculty members, which may require different policies to deal with them (Siddique, Aslam, Khan, & Fatima, 2011; Waheeda, 2019). On the other hand, Yasin, Batool, and Ajmal (2015) found that there are more similarities than differences in effective leadership characteristics of corporate leaders and academic leaders and suggest a more global outlook towards academic leadership. However, higher education researchers continue to claim that higher education leadership is complicated due to the complex and unique entities which impact the institution's productivity due to the dynamic social, economic, and political context in which they operate (Patton, 2021; Smith & Hughey, 2006; Waheeda, 2019).

Given the complex nature of higher education institutions, the lack of research in higher education leadership, and the need for academic leadership development in higher education, particularly at the faculty/ department level, it is significant to study the ideal leadership styles among academic leaders. Bryman (2007) highlighted that a more subtle form of leadership is required by professionals like HE employees compared to employees in non-professional fields. He explains that task-oriented leadership styles associated with close supervision may be less relevant for academics due to their academic professionalism and intrinsic motivation. He also cautioned that internally driven employees like academics need considerable care since ineffective leadership could damage their commitment. Explaining the practical leadership approach in HE, Bryman (2007) pointed out that leadership that undermines collegiality, autonomy and participative decision-making is most likely ineffective.

Smith and Hughey (2006) highlight that effective leadership in HE has much to do with balance. Using the Ecosystem Model, Smith and Hughey (2006) describe that academic leaders, as factors in the campus environment, will be ineffective if they experience a poor person-environment fit in their professional lives. Similarly, studies conducted using the Bolman and Deal (1984) four-frame model of leadership frame show that most academic leaders use the human resource frame and suggest the development of their leadership skills about political and symbolic frame orientations (Sypawka, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative that leaders in HEIs be aware of the unique features that characterize most campus environments in an attempt to match leadership style with the unique context in which they operate.

Turning the focus to studies that explored leadership styles exclusively at the faculty level in HEIs, it is worth mentioning that the majority of the studies reviewed investigated leadership from followers' perspective, i.e. how followers perceived the leadership style of their leaders (see (Adjei, 2014; Bateh & Heyliger, 2014)) and few investigated leadership style as perceived by themselves (for e.g. (Al-Omari, 2012)). In addition, studies that used the perspective of both the follower and the leader were very rare (e.g. (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Thu, Pillay, & Mergler, 2017; Waheeda, 2022)).

When looking at the types of leadership styles investigated, it was found that a range of theoretical orientations was used to explore leadership styles in HE, such as situational leadership, spiritual leadership, servant leadership, authentic leadership, Blake and Mouton's managerial grid and the transformational-transactional theory. However, notably, the majority of the recent studies reviewed used the Full Range Leadership Model to explore the leadership style of leaders at the departmental level (for e.g. (Adjei, 2014; Bateh & Heyliger, 2014; Bodla & Nawaz, 2010; Jamali, Bhutto, Khaskhely, & Sethar, 2022; Waheeda, 2022; Zeleke, 2013)) possibly because this model covers

a range of leadership behaviours from the ideal types of leadership (transformational) to least effective type (Laissez -faire leadership style).

Existing literature indicates that the transformational leadership style is the most effective, followed by the transactional leadership style (Gozukara, 2016; Jamali et al., 2022; Kuslina & Widjaja, 2018; Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017; Wahab, Rahmat, Yusof, & Mohamed, 2016; Waheeda & Shaheeda, 2017). At this point, it is essential to highlight that the majority of higher education leadership was studied using Bass and Avolio's Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which consist of three main leadership style, namely transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles (Bucic, Robinson, & Ramburuth, 2010; Wahab et al., 2016; Webb, 2008). Hence, these studies are limited only to these leadership styles. Transformational leadership was investigated in Malaysian universities (Asmawi, Zakaria, & Chin Wei, 2013), Indonesian universities (Kuslina & Widjaja, 2018), North America (Webb, 2008), and in Pakistan (Abbas, Iqbal, Waheed, & Riaz, 2012). In contrast to this are few leadership studies that employed other leadership theories. For instance, Alonderiene and Majauskaite (2016) studied the leadership style of Lithuanian public and private universities using a range of leadership including coach leadership style, human relations specialist leadership style, controlling autocrat leadership style, transformational visionary leadership style, transactional exchange leadership style and servant leadership style. Hence, the theoretical orientation of this study focused on a range of leadership theories identified in higher education leadership.

To summarize, a literature review surrounding HE leadership showed that academic leadership at departmental or middle management levels is understudied, revealing a significant gap in the literature. The empirical literature on academic leaders' leadership style showed that most academic leaders were inclined to use more human or person-oriented leadership styles over task-oriented ones, such as the transformational one in the HE context. Some characteristics, like creating vision and mission based on science and research data; understanding the importance of building an academic community, empowering teachers, and demonstrating strong communication skills; and creating environments where students thrive was some important areas of the studies. It was also found that a vast majority of these studies identified dominant leadership styles among academic leaders from the perception of their subordinates, and few explored from the perspective of leaders themselves. In addition, very few studies explored leadership style using both the leader and their subordinates. Moreover, reviewed literature also revealed that a vast majority of leadership style studies in HE was of quantitative in nature, with very few studies using qualitative or mixed method design. Hence, this study uses a sequential explanatory design to explore the ideal leadership styles as perceived by both lecturers and their deans from a range of common higher education leadership styles.

3. METHODOLOGY

This sequential explanatory study identified the ideal academic leadership styles perceived by academic leaders and academics in the Republic of Maldives. In the first phase, the survey method was used to directly reach many respondents, administer the instruments and collect the required data. A total sampling used to collect survey data comprised deans (N=20) and lecturers (N=170) from nine HEIs in the Republic of Maldives. SPSS version 23 was used to analyze the data using descriptive statistics such as means, percentages and standard deviations. The survey questionnaire in this study consisted of two sections. Section one collected various demographic information of respondents including age, gender, institution category, experience in the current job, and the highest level of qualification. In section two, the leadership styles scale was adapted from Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 2004), Leadership Style Questionnaire and Distributed Leadership Inventory (Hulpia, Devos, & Van Keer, 2009). The adapted Likert scale in Section B of the survey questionnaire used in this study consisted of 30 items which were rated on a five-point scale: "Not at all", "Once in a while", "Sometimes", "Fairly Often", and "Frequently, if not always".

To enhance the validity of the survey questionnaire, it was checked by two experts in higher education leadership. The questionnaire was pilot tested using a total 0f 90 academics and academic leaders in one of the higher education institutes. In addition, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was carried out to analyze the subscales to strengthen the questionnaire. The 30 items of the leadership style scale were subjected to principal components analysis (PCA) using SPSS Version 12. Before performing PCA, data suitability for factor analysis was assessed. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients of .3 and above. A Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was used to test for linear relationships among the leadership variables in the factor solution. As shown in Table 1, the Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin value was .692, exceeding the recommended value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1970), which indicated that the leadership variables were linearly related. Barlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical significance t (p < 0.001), supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix.

Table 1. KMO and Barlett's test.

KMO and Bartlett's test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		0.692
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi-square	995.634
	Df	435
	Sig.	000

The Rotated Component Matrix depicted the loadings of each variable on five selected factors. The highest loading variables on each component were used to identify the nature of the underlying latent variable represented by each component. The reliability test was performed to verify the measurement of items in the Likert scale using Cronbach's alpha measurements. The overall Cronbach alpha of the scale was 0.77. In the second phase, a qualitative approach was used to explain, validate and to triangulate the quantitative findings. In this phase, a self-constructed semi-structured interview template was used for purposively selected deans (N=5) and lecturers (N=16) from seven different HEIs. The interview transcripts were thematically analyzed and coded using the template analysis method. Member checking and intercoder agreement were applied to ensure validity during the qualitative phase.

4. FINDINGS

To explore the ideal leadership styles of academic leaders in Maldivian HEIs, participants were separated by participant type (leader or lecturer). Then, mean scores were calculated for each leadership style dimension in the ideal leadership style scale. The mean score (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) in Table 2 show that most of the leaders prefer distributed leadership style (M=3.90, SD=.623), whereas laissez-faire leadership style (M=1.95, SD=.603) is the least favored. The mean score of transformational leadership (M=3.82, SD=.535) and transactional leadership style (M=3.63, SD=.572) were ranked as the 2nd and 3rd most ideal leadership style as perceived by leaders. The mean score of the autocratic leadership style is M=2.99, and the standard deviation was .940.

Table 2. Total mean scores of ideal leadership styles as perceived by leaders themselves (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 mean scores (M) in Table 3 show that most of the lecturers prefer the transformational leadership style (M=3.93, SD=.707), whereas laissez-faire leadership style (M=2.27, SD=.812) is the least favored. Distributed

leadership style (*M*=3.83, *SD*=.793), transactional leadership style (*M*=3.55, *SD*=752) and autocratic leadership (*M*=3.52, *SD*=.865) were ranked as the 2ⁿᵈ, 3ʳᵈ and 4ᵗʰ most ideal leadership style respectively.

The descriptive analysis yielded how leaders and lecturers perceived the ideal leadership style. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, leaders perceived that the ideal leadership style expected from academic deans is distributed leadership. In contrast, lecturers preferred the transformational leadership style the most. Both leaders and lecturers rated the rest of the ideal leadership style in a similar preference ranging from transactional to autocratic and the least preferred laissez-faire leadership style.

Table 3. Total mean scores of ideal leadership styles of academic leaders 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

An interview template collected data from five academic leaders and 16 academics from seven HEIs. The academics and academic leaders who participated in this study's qualitative portion were asked to describe their ideal academic leaders. They were further probed in decision-making, participation in faculty works, relationship with staff, how they provide a vision for faculty, and the strategies used to motivate faculty members. The researchers reviewed a separate, clean set of interview transcripts, and statements that reflected one of the five leadership styles were coded using *Atlas.ti* software. These data are represented as quotes from academics and academic leaders under each of the priori codes or leadership styles; transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, autocratic and distributed leadership style. The analysis of these data provides the ideal academic leadership styles expected from academic leaders or faculty deans of Maldivian HEIs. A quantified version of deans' responses is shown in Table 4, followed by lecturers' responses in Table 5.

Table 4. Ideal academic leadership styles as perceived by deans.

Themes	Distributed leadership style (13)				Transformational leadership style (17)				Transactional leadership style (5)			Autocratic leadership style (5)		
Deans	Collaborative	Delegative	Empowering	Monitoring	Individual consideration	Entertain new ideas	Intellectual stimulation	Visionary	Focus on policies, procedures, and rule	Directive	Extrinsic motivation	Highly structured rules and procedures	Command and control	Centralization
1	1	1	2	1	3	2		2		1	1	1	1	
2	1				1				1			1	1	
3			1					3	1					
4	3		2		1	1		3			1	1		
5	1				1									
Total	6	1	5	1	6	3	0	8	2	1	2	3	2	0

Table 4 shows academic leaders/deans' responses (n=5) with regard to the ideal academic leadership styles. There were 4 identifiable themes and 12 sub-themes. The responses include (1) Transformational leadership style (individual consideration, entertaining new ideas, intellectual stimulation, and visionary) (n=17); (2) Distributed leadership style (collaborative, delegating, empowering, and monitoring) (n=13); (3) Transactional leadership style

(focus on established policies, procedures, routines and rule, directive, and extrinsic motivation) (n=5); and (4) Autocratic leadership style (highly structured / rigid rules and procedures, command and control, and centralization) (n=5).

Table 5. Ideal leadership styles of deans as perceived by lecturers.

Themes / Lecturers	Distributed leadership style (20)				Transformational leadership style (41)					Transactional leadership style (11)		
	Collaborative	Delegative	Empowering	Monitoring	Individual consideration	Entertain new ideas	Intellectual stimulation	Inspirational motivation	Visionary	Focus on policies, procedures, and rule	Directive	Extrinsic motivation
1	1	1	1			1			1			1
2									5	1		
3					2				1			1
4	1								1	1		1
5	1											
6	1		1	1	1					1		
7					1				1			
8	1		1		1				2		1	
9	1						1		1			1
10	1		2				1	1	1			
11	1				1	1			1			
12						1	1	2	1			
13			1		1	1			1			1
14				1	1	1			1			
15	1											
16			1	1	2				3	2		
Total	9	1	7	3	10	5	3	3	20	5	1	5

Table 5 shows academics/lecturers' responses (n=16) about the ideal academic leadership styles. There were 4 identifiable themes and 14 sub-themes. The responses include (1) Transformational leadership style (individual consideration, entertaining new ideas, intellectual stimulation, and visionary) (n=41); (2) Distributed leadership style (collaborative, delegating, empowering, and monitoring) (n=20); and (3) Transactional leadership style (focus on established policies, procedures, routines and rule, directive, and extrinsic motivation) (n=11).

From the five leadership styles, laissez-faire leadership was not generated as an ideal academic leadership style as perceived by leaders and lecturers. In addition, an autocratic leadership style was not generated for lecturers, even though deans preferred this style in an academic leader. Hence, this section presents the findings (perception of both lecturers and deans- Table 4 and Table 5), organized by the ideal leadership style expected from academic leaders to the least favored leadership style as perceived by lecturers and leaders themselves; that is:

1. Transformational leadership style

(1) visionary, (2) individual consideration, (3) inspirational motivation, and (4) entertaining new ideas.

2. Distributed leadership style

(1) collaborative, (2) delegation, (3) empowering, and (4) monitoring.

3. Transactional leadership style

(1) focus on established policies, procedures, routines and rules, (2) directive, and (3) extrinsic motivation.

4. Autocratic leadership style

(1) highly structured / rigid rules and procedures, (2) command and control, and (3) centralization.

4.1. Transformational Leadership Style

Transformational leadership was the ideal leadership style preferred by lecturers and deans. The four categories that generated this theme included (1) Visionary, (2) Individual consideration, (3) Inspirational motivation, and (4) Entertain new ideas. Most participants expected their leaders to be visionary and capable of bringing new changes to the faculty or student learning experiences. Likewise, academic deans emphasized the importance of a leader being strategic and visionary and having a mission to lead an institution. Being visionary comes with being proactive. Lecturers expected an ideal leader to be proactive and visionary in planning and implementing the development of the faculty. Describing the current leader, a few lecturers expressed discontent as their leaders were not proactive. While describing an ideal academic leader, the lecturers described the initiation taken by their dean for the faculty development, which is not very common among the faculty deans in the Maldivian HEIs. Similarly, academic leaders believed an ideal academic leader should be proactive and visionary.

Lecturers believed that an ideal leader should consider the individual's needs and feelings. Since this characteristic is shared among the deans, lecturers expressed their gratitude and preference in working with such deans. Excellent human-related skills were considered an essential aspect of an ideal leader. An ideal leader should not only consider the needs of the lecturers but also should be cordial enough to listen and cater for the needs of the students as well. Some lecturers presumed that the dean has to be considerate to the lecturers and provide flexibility as they make sacrifices for the faculty, like working odd/ long hours. Similarly, deans stressed that an ideal leader should be approachable to the lecturers for them to share their concerns and come to a conclusion that best suits the lecturers and the institution. According to the lecturers, an ideal academic leader should be driven by inspiration instead of working on daily routine tasks. An ideal leader should be an inspiration for the students as well as the lecturers. Moreover, the ideal leader should be open-minded and aware of how things work in other institutions and also someone who entertains new ideas from others. Likewise, deans also approve that an ideal leader should give room for creativity and appreciate the ideas brought by the staff.

4.2. Distributed Leadership Style

The second most preferred leadership style, as perceived by lecturers and deans, was distributed leadership style. Categories that formulated this theme comprised (1) Collaborative, (2) Empowerment, (3) Delegative and (4) Monitoring. An ideal academic leader was deemed collaborative when it comes to decision-making and having a good human relationship with the staff. A collaborative leader should be knowledgeable in vast disciplines and able to work collaboratively with different groups of people. At the same time, the academic leader should have the confidence to discuss matters with others and make accountable decisions. Likewise, deans perceived an ideal academic leader as an approachable person who maintains a good relationship with the staff, eventually motivating them to achieve the faculty goals. n addition, leaders who empower their subordinates were idealized by their staff. For instance, one dean stressed keeping the staff empowered by giving them the autonomy and freedom to bring out their creativity and innovation. Lecturers implied that they prefer the works to be delegated reasonably among all lecturers so that the dean can invest their time and energy on the planning and development of the faculty. It was also revealed that the lecturers prefer their work to be monitored by their leaders. Some lecturers expressed their disappointment when lecturers are left without monitoring their work by the deans.

4.3. Transactional Leadership Style

Two major categories contributed to the transactional leadership style, that is: (1) Focus on established policies, procedures, routines and rules, and (2) Extrinsic motivation. Even though Directive was a theme identified under transactional leadership practiced currently, this theme was not identified as a characteristic of an ideal academic leader. Both leaders and lecturers prefer deans to adhere to the established policies, procedures, rules and routines but do not prefer their leaders to be directive or instruct them on what to do. Similarly, academic leaders

also believe that ideal leaders should be systematic in their thinking and aware of the institutions' policies and procedures, thereby following them whenever required. Few lecturers prefer their leaders to keep them extrinsically motivated to appreciate and encourage the highly committed high achievers.

4.4. Autocratic Leadership Style

Even though three categories formulated autocratic leadership in the existing leadership styles of deans, which is (1) Highly structured/rigid rules/procedures, (2) Command and control and (3) Centralization of decision making, these are not preferred to be practiced by an ideal academic leader as perceived by lecturers. However, leaders believe that as ideal academic leaders, they must practice some level of authority.

To conclude, interviews of deans and lecturers validated the quantitative finding with one insignificant exception. Qualitative findings revealed that both deans and lecturers perceived transformational leadership styles as ideal, followed by distributed and transactional leadership styles. From the interviews, it was found that laissez-faire leadership styles were not preferred by deans or academics. Likewise, autocratic leadership was not identified as an ideal leadership style as preferred by the lecturers. However, deans believed that an ideal leader should have some autocratic leadership style. This difference between the quantitative and qualitative findings is probably due to the inclusion of laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership items in the quantitative survey instrument, which the participants could not have avoided, and hence scored the least.

5. DISCUSSION

Taking into consideration the insignificant difference between the ideal leadership style between the perceptions of deans and lecturers and looking into the analysis of the in-depth data from the interviews, it was concluded that the ideal leadership style preferred by both deans and lecturers is the same, which revealed that transformational leadership is the ideal leadership style followed by distributed, transactional and the least as an autocratic leadership style. This finding is consistent with many studies, which revealed that transformational leadership is well-suited for universities (Bamford-Wade & Moss, 2010; Gedro et al., 2020; Gonaim, 2017; Jamali et al., 2022; Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017; Scott et al., 2008). The ideal transformational leadership attributes generated from the current study revealed that both deans and lecturers expect academic leaders to be visionary, followed by being considerate to individuals. Entertain new ideas, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation were also expected from the study participants. This finding aligns with other higher education leadership studies' idealized leadership style characteristics, skills, competencies, and principles (Bryman, 2007; Gedro et al., 2020; Karadag, 2017; Ololube, Ingiabuna, & Dudafa, 2021). Hence, it is concluded that the ideal academic leader is a leader who is visionary and has excellent human relations skills to build and influence the community to achieve its visions. This finding is consistent with the empirical studies, which have found the effectiveness of transformational leadership on the various aspects of organization effectiveness, namely, job satisfaction, organization commitment, employee motivation, knowledge sharing, organization performance, policy development, and change management (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Hasanefendic, Birkholz, Horta, & van der Sijde, 2017; Jamali et al., 2022; Nasir, Nordin, Seman, & Rahmat, 2014; Sharma, Amir, Veeriah, & Kannan, 2016; Shaw & Newton, 2014; Siddique et al., 2011; Yang & Islam, 2012). Additionally, the effectiveness of transformational leadership is evident in the business world and in school settings.

The second most ideal leadership style, according to the deans and lecturers of the current study, is the distributed leadership style. Both deans and lecturers agreed on the importance of the distributed leadership attributes found in the study. Distributed leadership style attributes idealized from the current study include collaboration, empowerment, delegation, and monitoring of the leadership responsibilities delegated to others. Hence, collaboration was the most desired leadership attribute, followed by empowerment. Delegative and monitoring were also idealized by both deans and lecturers. Similarly, Thornton, Walton, Wilson, and Jones

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(2018), in their study to explore the middle leadership roles in New Zealand universities, observed the need for distributed leadership to manage people, their workload and enhance their research careers. Furthermore, Gonaim (2017) and Patton (2021) advocated the need of distributed leadership in HE, indicating that the skills of delegation make academic leaders more effective leaders due to the multiple responsibilities for which academic leaders are responsible. She further stressed the significance of collaborative behaviour, emphasizing delegation as a way of building trust and collegiality in the academic department rather than an escape from complicated tasks and responsibilities. The quantitative results revealed that the third most idealized leadership style perceived by deans and lecturers was transactional leadership. This finding was validated and further explained through the qualitative phase of the study. From qualitative interviews, two significant attributes were idealized, namely, deans' focus on established policies, procedures, routines and rules; and providing extrinsic motivation to their subordinates. According to Bass and Avolio (2004) leaders often exhibit a combination of transformational and transactional leadership styles, which have a corresponding effect and can increase leadership effectiveness. This is consistent with the current study's findings which found that lecturers and deans preferred deans adopting transactional leadership styles, mainly when they focus on established policies, procedures, routines and rules and lead through extrinsic motivation. On the other hand, both deans and lecturers did not favor academic leaders being directive on their subordinates or which was like being directive inclined more towards the autocratic leadership style. Therefore, the current study's findings support the study of Kiplangat (2017), which revealed that lecturers disliked being led by strict direction from their leaders and the study of Jamali et al. (2022) which found that deans' transactional leadership has a negative impact on faculty performance.

According to deans, the least idealized leadership style is the autocratic leadership style. Two main themes emerged under the autocratic leadership style: highly structured or rigid rules and procedures; and command and control. From the autocratic leadership attributes, the dean does not favor the practice of centralized structure. On the other hand, lecturers did not idealize any aspect of the autocratic leadership style. Similarly, Mrig and Sanaghan (2017) in their longitudinal study, suggest that to lead successfully or collaboratively, leaders need to practice influence, not to control, as in the autocratic leadership style. They further elaborate that the leaders' natural direction is to trust others and to give up some authority as they value what followers contribute to the organization. Moreover, from the quantitative analysis, it was revealed that the least desired leadership style, according to deans and lecturers, is laissez-faire leadership style. Qualitative interviews validated this finding and revealed that both deans and lecturers do not prefer their academic leaders to be laissez-faire or passive-avoidant leaders. This is supported by literature and empirical findings, which showed that laissez-faire leadership is the most ineffective leadership style (Avolio, 2011; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Lewin et al., 1939). Laissez-faire leadership is unaccepted by the subordinates as it jeopardizes the relationship among staff, and subordinates are left to move at their own pace without illuminating a path for them to move towards a desired objective (Day, Zaccaro, & Halpin, 2004). However, Jamali et al. (2022) found that laissez-faire leadership is found to have positive effect on faculty performance. Therefore, the current study found that the transformational leadership style is the ideal one, which is parallel to the findings of most empirical studies in higher education leadership or any other organization. However, it is essential to note that this is because most studies use Bass and Avolio's MLQ (Bass & Avolio, 2004). Similarly, Bass (2000) stressed that different aspects of leadership share some common elements with transformational leadership, including democratic, empowering and participative leadership.

With the findings from the recent emerging literature on distributed leadership in higher education institutions, it is understood that the effectiveness of distributed leadership style in higher education is not less than that of the transformational leadership style. In addition, with the researcher's experience in the HEIs in Maldives and the knowledge of the feasibility and effectiveness of distributed leadership style, it is believed that distributed leadership would be ideal for the Maldivian HE context. The adoption of distributed leadership styles is ideal

because it is more practical in achieving institutional success due to the high workload of the academic deans and the importance of delegating authority and empowering the lecturers to achieve the institutions' visions.

Even though this research found the need for the deans to be visionary, the researcher believes that ways to implement the organizational vision are far more critical than the deans having their own visions for the faculty. Similarly, Mrig and Sanaghan (2017) elaborate that idea of the leaders being paid to set the vision is a misconception which is accepted by HE stakeholders. They further advocate that the HE need their leaders to be collaborative and facilitative to create alignment, shared understanding, and action, leading to success.

6. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to explore the perception of academic deans and lecturers on the ideal leadership styles of academic deans in Maldivian HEIs. The result indicated that both academic deans and lecturers perceived transformational leadership styles as an ideal leadership style followed by distributed and transactional leadership styles. Laissez-faire and autocratic leadership styles were not identified as ideal leadership styles. Hence, it was confirmed from the current study that both deans and lecturers preferred similar leadership styles to be practiced in Maldivian HEIs. However, the primary issue raised from the findings is the need for 'change-making leaders' who are visionary. Guided by the findings of this study, this research put forward a few recommendations to implement in policy, practice and research. Firstly, this study recommends that deans should concentrate on transformative and distributive leadership approaches, specifically focusing on being visionary and challenging the status quo. Likewise, this study calls for autocratic and laissez-faire leaders to adjust their leadership approach to a more transformative and distributed approach to sustain in the competitive HE sector of the Maldives. Similarly, this study recommends that HE governing boards and management should recognize and appreciate the commitment of deans who demonstrate attributes of transformative and distributive leadership styles and emphasize the recruitment and hiring of deans who prove positive transformational and distributed leadership styles.

Moreover, the current study found the need for more transformational leaders, especially visionary leaders. Hence, further research could explore the existing transformational attributes and leadership developmental activities favoring the Maldivian cultural context. The efficiency of such leadership developmental activities needs to be studied with a link to several perspectives, such as deans' leadership behaviour over time and its impact on institutional effectiveness.

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