

## ACADEMIC LEADERS' LEADERSHIP STYLES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES

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**Abstract:** Leadership is one of the most researched areas in every walk of life. Over the last decades, there has been a dramatic increase in scholarly research on the topic of leadership. However, until date, there has been limited research on leadership within the higher education sector in the Maldives, which is a small state developing country. The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership styles among academic leaders in Maldivian Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The instrument used in this qualitative study was a semi-structured interview guide. Thirteen academics from three HEIs were selected purposively for in-depth interviews in this study. The interview responses were transcribed and analysed for themes. The respondents found that the most prevalent leadership styles used in Maldivian HEIs were, affiliative, task-oriented, laissez-faire, democratic and visionary leadership style. Affiliative and task-oriented leadership styles were perceived to be the most prevalent leadership styles. It was also perceived that task-oriented leadership was the most negative leadership style and laissez-faire leadership was surprisingly favoured due to its advantages in enhancing confidence and helping academics to empower themselves. To enhance academic leadership in HEIs in the Maldives, it is recommended for academic leaders to use leadership behaviors which are affiliative and considerate of the academics.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Higher Education, Leadership Style, Academic Leaders.

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### Introduction

Leadership has been widely recognized as an essential element in determining the success of any organization (Bass, 1990; Smith and Hughey, 2006), especially during turbulent times when organizations are experiencing stress when undergoing change due to evolving circumstances. Hence, it has been the subject of seminal research since ancient times, and yet, it is "one of the least understood phenomena" (Burns, 1978, p.2). A review of the literature indicates that the definitions of leadership have evolved along with the developments in leadership theory, and the definitions by different researchers reflect their theoretical orientation and approach. The focus of leadership theories has changed from a leader-centered

perspective to a more holistic view of leadership which involves exploration of leadership from all angles, incorporating the leader, the follower, the context, the levels, and their dynamic interactions in their models and studies (Avolio, Walumba, and Weber, 2009). Yukl (2010) describes leadership as a process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives.

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to explore the leadership styles among academic leaders in Maldivian Higher Education Institutions (HEI) as perceived by their academics.

### ***Higher Education in the Maldives***

The Maldives has the typical demographic and geographic landscape of a small state. The uneven distribution of population among the scattered islands poses many challenges for development, including the high unit cost of providing social and economic services and infrastructure (Permanent Mission of the Republic of Maldives to the United Nations Office at Geneva, 2006).

As the Maldives attempts to transform itself into a knowledge society and diversify its economy, higher education becomes a key sector to achieving this objective. Also, the population growth adds impetus to the rising demand for higher education. The number of students progressing to higher education has increased significantly (Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2007) and the scope and reach of higher education institutions have increased rapidly (Maldives: Country report, 2009). The major higher education institutions are comprised of two government-supported institutions: the Maldives National University (MNU) established in 2011, and the Islamic University of the Maldives (IUM) established in 2015. Seven private colleges are also in operation.

Although off-shore foreign providers are not currently operating in the Maldives, Maldivian students are exposed to these providers operating in neighbouring countries such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia where an increasing number of Maldivian students are pursuing higher education studies (Maldives: Country report, 2009). It is worth noting that some local higher education providers have mutually beneficial agreements to offer programs of foreign institutions, namely from the universities in Malaysia and United Kingdom.

Seven private institutes have been upgraded to colleges since 2007. It is not only the status of the institutions that has been changed, but also the student numbers and the variety of the academic programs offered. Until recently, many private providers were involved in only delivering short courses in computer literacy and English language for adults and preparing youth and adults for professional examinations (Maldives: Country report, 2009). However, private providers now offer long-term courses in many disciplines such as education, health sciences, computing, business, hospitality management and tourism studies, marine studies and water sports. As for the level of the programs, masters-level programs were first offered at MNU in 2011 and Ph.D. level programs in 2015. Today there are 12 HEIs that offers a minimum bachelor's degree program in more than one discipline.

The rapid expansion of higher education provision in the Maldives is demanding more from the staffs especially from the academic faculties. Working as a lecturer and course coordinator in the Maldivian HE sector for the past four years, it is noted that the workloads and pressures for the academic deans and deputy deans are rapidly increasing with the increase of students, new

local and offshore international programs and also due to introductory focus on research. The irresistible demands and workload at today's academic faculties, along with the difficulties they bring, portrays a need for effective academic leadership among faculty leaders.

The need for effective leadership is emphasized in order to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning happening at HEI in the Maldives is not diluted by the growing challenges. This calls for leaders in HEIs in the Maldives who can bring about the changes needed to maintain quality and performance in a dynamic environment. To understand leadership in these institutes, it is crucial to identify what types of leadership styles are used by them. According to Gmelch (2000, p.1) 'in order to be a leader in higher education, one must be a 'dove' of peace intervening among warring factions that are causing destructive turbulence in the college, a dragon driving away both internal and external forces that threaten the college, and a diplomat guiding, inspiring, and encouraging people who live and work in the college environment.' This suggests that to be an effective leader one must have various skills in order to fulfil their roles. Yukl and Mahsud (2010) also consider the ability to be versatile and adapt one's leadership style to the demands of the situation. Hence, it is significant to explore the leadership styles of academic leaders in HEIs. Since there is limited research on the academic leadership among Maldivian HEIs this research aims to explore the leadership styles among academic leaders in Maldivian HEIs, which will greatly contribute to the lack of research studies and in planning of professional development of the academic leaders.

### ***Leadership in Higher Education***

Leaders at HEIs need to be responsive to the changing social, economic and educational needs. Since the environment in which these institutes exist are constantly changing at a rapid rate it calls for leadership that is ready to adapt to and leverage opportunities to excel from such trend. In addition, it emphasizes the need for research in the area of leadership in Higher Education (HE). However, a review of research suggests that leadership research in HE has not attracted a great deal of attention and that there is a dearth of studies examining specifically the factors behind leadership effectiveness, particularly at departmental level (Bryman, 2007; Bryman and Lilley, 2009; Bolden, Jones, Davis and Gentle, 2015).

In a review of literature concerned with answering "what styles of or approaches to leadership are associated with effective leadership in higher education?" at the departmental level, Bryman (2007) found that there is surprisingly little empirical research addressing the research question. Bryman's (2007, p.6) review resulted in 13 identified aspects of leader behaviour associated with effectiveness at the departmental level, they include:

- having a clear sense of direction or strategic vision;
- preparing department arrangements to facilitate the set direction;
- being considerate; treating academic staff fairly and with integrity;
- being trustworthy and having personal integrity;
- allowing the opportunity to participate in a key decision or encouraging open communication;
- communicating well about the direction the department is going;
- acting as a role model and having credibility;
- creating a positive/collegial work atmosphere;
- advancing the department's cause with respect to constituencies internal and external to the university and being proactive in doing so;
- providing feedback on performance;

- providing resources for an adjusting workload to stimulate scholarship and research;
- making an academic appointment that enhances department's reputation.

In addition, research highlights that professionals such as University employees needs a different or more subtle form of leadership than non-professionals (Bryman, 2007; Eacott, 2011 and Lumby, 2012), suggesting that leadership in the traditional sense associated with leadership theory and research such as providing close supervision of tasks may be of limited relevance as academics' professionalism and their internal motivation mitigate the need for leadership of this kind (Bryman, 2007). In addition, Bolden *et al.*, (2015) regard leadership as a group process rather than as a set of individual traits, competencies or behaviours and advocates the significance of shared leadership in higher education institutions.

Most of the recent leadership style research conducted in HE sector explored the transformational-transactional leadership style. Literature suggests that most effective and successful leaders use transformational leadership most of the time followed by some transactional leadership with a minimal use of laissez-faire leadership (Bateh and Heyliger, 2014; Bucic, Robinson and Ramburuth, 2010; Jones and Rudd, 2008; Pihie, Sadeghi and Elias, 2011). This is in agreement with Bass, Avolio, Jung and Berson (2012) and Yukl and Mahsud (2010) who found similar results outside educational setting. Bashir and Khalil (2017) studied leadership styles of University Head of Department's using Goleman's leadership styles and suggested that these leadership styles are well practiced by the instructional leaders.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on Denial Goleman's Primal Leadership theory. According to Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2004) there are 4 fundamentals of emotional intelligence, or "the building blocks of leadership that prime resonance" which is self-awareness, self-mastery or self-management of emotion, empathy or social awareness, and relationship management

Goleman *et al.*, (2004) describe six styles of leaders that are influenced by the emotions intelligence of the subordinates. As in situational leadership theories, primal leadership also believes that leadership style is most effective if customised to the relevant situation. "Four of these styles—visionary, coaching, affiliative, and democratic—create the kind of resonance that boosts performance, while two others—pacesetting and commanding—although useful in some very specific situations, should be applied with caution" (Goleman *et al.*, 2004, P18). Hence, these six leadership styles which might be evident in any sort of situation helped the researcher to better understand the academic leaders leadership styles in Maldivian HEIs.

### **Methodology**

The researcher confirmed the following in identifying the population for the current study. Firstly, the participant should be from one of the HEIs that offers a minimum bachelor's degree program in more than one discipline. It was found that there are 12 HEIs that fit the criteria. From this, three most experienced and highly populated HEIs were selected. Secondly the participants should be an academic (a lecturer or coordinator) in one of the academic faculties. From these three HEIs, it was found that there are approximately 223 full time academics working in the academic faculties. 13 academics from 3 HEIs from the Republic of Maldives were selected purposively for in-depth interviews in this qualitative study. Academic leaders perceived leadership styles were obtained through academics working for the respective academic leaders. Interviews were used in order to observe feelings, thoughts and impressions. Documents included field notes taken during the interview and right after the interview.

### ***Participants***

The main participants were 13 academics from three HEIs of the Republic of Maldives. All the participants are program coordinators and lecturers who have been working in the higher education sectors for a minimum of five years. Interview allowed academics to share their understanding regarding the leadership styles of the academic leaders.

### ***Data Collection***

A semi structured interview questionnaire was prepared to allow further questioning to emerge and to explore further ideas during the process. In addition, the interview protocol helped in the structure which eased the data organising and analysing. Interview atmosphere was comfortable for the participants to open up to the researcher and the timing was convenient for the participant which helped them to give full attention. Moreover, their experience, their ability to express their perception towards academic leaders' leadership style and their ability to reflect and criticise helped greatly to the quality of data. Interview took approximately 40 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### ***Data Analysis***

In this qualitative study content analysis was used to analyse the data obtained through interviews. Content analysis is useful when analysing in-depth interviews (Berg, 2001). According to Merriam (1998), content analysis involves the concurrent acts of identifying substantive points in the raw data, coding them and constructing categories for sorting the coded pieces of information. Codes are names or labels (Patton, 1990) assigned to these meaningful pieces of information. Therefore, codes were identified and assigned to meaningful chunks concurrently.

### ***Findings***

From the interview questions, the responses were categorized under themes and coded. These responses were collapsed and grouped into five main categories and ranked in order of highest to lowest and were summarised as in Table 1. Most prevalent leadership styles practiced among academic leaders in Maldivian higher education institutions were distinguished as affiliative leadership, task-oriented leadership, laissez-faire leadership, democratic leadership and visionary leadership style.

**Table1: Academic Leader's Leadership Style in HEIs**

|   | <b>Leadership style</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>%</b> |
|---|-------------------------|------------------|----------|
| 1 | Affiliative             | 4                | 30.8     |
| 2 | Task oriented           | 3                | 23.1     |
| 3 | Laissez-faire           | 3                | 23.1     |
| 4 | Democratic              | 2                | 15.4     |
| 5 | Visionary               | 1                | 7.7      |

### ***Affiliative Leadership***

The most prevalent leadership styles as expressed by 4 academics (30.8%) were affiliative leadership styles. Excerpts from the interview with P1 clearly showed that she perceives her academic leader as an affiliative leader. From the interview with Participant 1, the academic leader seems to focus on the needs of the staffs.

*“Question's the seniors whenever she thinks it is in less favour of academics or the academia... Some have problem with our dean as she raises our concerns in meeting and fights for the lecturer's needs”.*

Triangulating these quotes to the interviews and researchers field notes, the affiliative leadership comes across in the emotional consideration they receive from their academic leader.

Similarly, experts from other interview participants supported what Participant 1 said about her academic leader being an affiliative leader.

*“She is a listener. Whatever concern we have we know she is willing to hear and provide the best possible solution for us... she is easy to talk to... it doesn't feel like she is the boss... I didn't know her before but working under her in this faculty created a very close relationship. Even she is that friendly and considerate to our part-time lecturers... here in this faculty, we feel more like a family” (P9).*

### **Task-Oriented Leadership**

3 academics (23.1%) perceived their academic leader as a task-oriented leader. From the interview with participant 2 and some other participants, it seems that their academic leaders are less concerned for their staffs, instead, is more involved in planning, directing and controlling the work of the subordinates.

*“He guides a lot. It's not that we necessarily need that much of guidance. But he will keep repeating the same thing over and over.... He will check updates almost every day. Even when passing through our stations to his cabin he will call the name and ask how is this how is that going” (P2).*

*As long as the things get done that's it... works are monitored well... delegates work as discussed in the meeting and will keep reminding... she is a very silent and closed person... so we don't talk much unless its work related” (P4).*

### **Laissez-faire Leadership**

Similarly, 3 academics (23.1%) perceived their academic leader as a laissez-faire leader. Participants expressed that their leaders are laissez-faire leaders and it is not the least favourable or entirely bad leadership style. Participant 12 has the following to say:

*“Sometimes we are sent to senior meetings where the dean has to go... as she isn't aware or is not interested to know what we have done... give us more confidence though” (P12).*

Some other participants had similar experiences with their leaders. And perceived their leader as a non-participative leader.

*“He would delegate the work completely and would not question how it goes. Most probably because he trusts us... I would say he is a non-participative leader... Sometimes he would take us to the meeting where he has to talk and tell us to do the talking as it is us who did the work, as we would be better in communicating it” (P3).*

### **Democratic Leadership**

2 academics (15.4%) perceived their leader as a democratic leader who focuses on leading through collaboration with the staffs.

*“She is much of a team player, everything is decided from meetings. Sometimes part-time lecturers are also invited. We have a close and friendly relationship in our faculty... As academics, we have our differences but with our dean it’s easier to come to an agreement. She is approachable; whether we want to talk personally or in a group she is ready to listen... She would come up with her own ideas to implement and shares it and ask for our input and would consider integrating our thought and suggestions into her ideas... we have frequent meetings and we are encouraged to be open at the meetings” (P8).*

### ***Visionary Leadership***

Least mentioned leadership style among academic leaders was found to be visionary leaders. Only 1 academic (7.7%) perceived her leader to be a visionary leader. Visionary leader articulates where a group is going, but not how it gets there, thereby setting people free to innovate, experiment and take calculated risks.

*“She is a very visionary person... Very academic focused and makes plans to implement new things... Foresee the consequences and address them appropriately” (P6).*

### **Discussion**

Studies in higher education leadership show that transformational leadership and transactional leadership has a positive influence on the organisational effectiveness (Bateh and Heyliger, 2014). Few studies have advocated the positive impact of laissez faire leadership style in HEIs (Bryman, 2007). In addition, some studies have shown the effectiveness of participative leadership components in the HEI (Kiplangat, 2017; Spendlove, 2007). Components of these leadership styles support Brymans (2007) review of higher education leadership which identified 13 aspects of leader behaviour associated with effectiveness at higher education departmental level.

Similar leadership styles were identified in this study. In this study, academic leaders were perceived to have affiliative, task oriented, laissez-faire, democratic and visionary leadership styles. These leadership styles are an indication of effective leadership which is consistent with the findings from Amey, 2006; Goleman, et al., 2004; Bryman 2007; Kouzes and Posner, 2007; Spendlove, 2007 and Bashir and Khalil, 2017. Academic leaders with similar leadership style is able to influence institution effectiveness with strategies that encourage staff involvement (affiliative and democratic leadership), staff empowering (laissez-faire leadership), result oriented (task-oriented leadership style) and inspire to be innovative and risk-taking (visionary leadership). Such academic leaders allow great teamwork, commitment, communication and empowerment which may lead to faculty success.

In this study, the academic leaders were most perceived to use affiliative leadership style. An affiliative leader focuses on the emotional needs of the staffs and is concerned with creating friendly interactions (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2004). Participants expressed the genuine concern of their academic leaders towards their staffs. Leaders need to show sensitivity and concern for employee's feelings and needs, be it personal or professional. Bass and Avolio (1993) identified 'individual consideration: behaviour that pay close attention to follower's individual needs for achievement and growth' as an important component of transformational leadership. Similarly, Bryman (2007, p6) identified 'being considerate;' 'treating academic staff fairly and with integrity;' and 'creating a positive/collegial work atmosphere' as effective leader behaviour in the HE department level. Bashir and Khalil (2017) also found that faculty members

perceive their leaders as affiliative leaders. Similarly, HODs themselves perceive themselves as affiliative leaders and there were no significant differences in their perception of affiliative leadership style.

The least favourable yet practiced leadership style of academic leaders as perceived by academics is task-oriented leadership style. In task-oriented leadership leader is less concerned for people, instead, the leader's responsibility is to plan, direct and control the work of the subordinates. Bryman (2007) suggests that when academics are closely supervised it is not effective and highlights that academics are professionals who are more responsible for what they do. According to Amey (2006) academic leaders need to dispense command-and-control leadership and enable more transformational learning approaches.

Laissez-fair leadership is one of the three components of full range leadership model by Bass and Avolio (1993). They are passive/avoidant leaders who avoid making decisions, abdicates responsibility and often do not exercise their authority (Bass and Avolio, 1993). Such leaders are withdrawn and uninvolved unless a problem arises. Findings from this study recognized that some academic leaders instil laissez-faire leadership styles. Some academic leaders were perceived to be less involved and often gave the authority to the academics. From the finding of this study, laissez faire leadership is not entirely bad in fact some academics find this leadership style favourable as it enhances their confidence and makes them more empowered. Similarly, research highlights that professionals such as University employees needs a different or more subtle form of leadership than non-professionals (Bryman, 2007; Eacott, 2011 and Lumby, 2012), suggesting that leadership in the traditional sense associated with leadership theory and research such as providing close supervision of tasks may be of limited relevance as academics' professionalism and their internal motivation mitigate the need for leadership of this kind (Bryman, 2007).

Democratic leadership focuses on leading through collaboration with the staffs. Leaders need to communicate a strong and challenging vision and sense of mission to the people. Leaders need to have the ability to communicate, negotiate and involve their people in the decision making (Spendlove, 2007). According to Yang and Islam (2012), leadership directed towards group maintenance and interactive relationships as in democratic leadership style impacts employees job satisfaction. As reported by Amzat and Idris (2012) the democratic decision-making style is one of the influential leader behaviour. Bryman (2007, p6) identifies 'allowing opportunity to participate in key decision or encouraging open communication' and 'communicating well about the direction the department is going' as effective leader behaviour at higher education department level.

The leadership style that was perceived to be least exhibited by Maldivian academic leaders was the visionary leadership style. Visionary leadership has similar characteristics of the 'intellectual stimulation' and inspirational motivation' component in transformational leadership style. According to Goleman et al., (2004), a "visionary leader articulates where a group is going, but not how it gets there --- letting people free to innovate, experiment and take calculated risks (p.6)". According to Bass and Avolio (1993) a leader is considered to be intellectually stimulating when he instils behaviours that encourage followers to be innovative and creative by questioning the assumption, reframing problems and approaching old problems in new ways. Inspirational motivation is when the leader provides meaning and challenge their followers to encourage followers to envision attractive future states of their work units (Bass and Avolio, 1993). Likewise, Bryman (2007, p6) identified 'having a clear sense of direction



or strategic vision' and 'preparing department arrangements to facilitate the set direction' as two of the 13 leader behaviour associated with leadership effectiveness at the department level.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study explored the leadership styles among academic leaders in Maldivian Higher Education Institutions (HEI). This study found that academic leaders practice affiliative, task oriented, laissez faire, democratic and visionary leadership styles in their faculties. Academics were in favour of all five leadership styles except of task-oriented leadership. In the Maldives, the demand for higher education is increasing rapidly as the government pushes for a knowledge-based economy. This study is crucial for the Maldivian context where the higher education is an infant stage and where the private colleges are working to upgrade their status to private universities. In addition, for the developing countries, this study would create a broader sense of direction towards enhancing higher education leadership.

Further work could include qualitative in-depth studies to explore and compare the leadership styles of academic deans in the Maldivian higher education institutions. This would make an interesting study to identify any differences in leadership styles in public and private sectors. In addition, a similar study could be done using more HEI and by using in-depth interviews with academic leaders and academics. This should assist triangulating both academics and their leader's interviews. Findings of this study could be used to develop a survey questionnaire and a quantitative study could be conducted using the 9 HEIs with sufficient sample to see the prevalent academic leadership style in Maldivian HEIs and its relation to other outcome-based objective could be identified.

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