



Research Article

Leadership Styles, Sustainable Academic Staff Performance *and* the Role of Staff Commitment and Job Autonomy: Evidence from the Private Higher Education Sector of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sustaining academic staff performance is a strategic priority for private higher education institutions facing increasing competition and changing quality expectations. This study examines the influence of perceived transformational and perceived transactional leadership on sustainable academic staff performance, with staff commitment and job autonomy considered as mediating mechanisms in Sri Lanka's private higher education sector. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among full-time academic staff in two selected private higher education institutions. Questionnaires were distributed to 525 eligible staff members, and 223 valid responses were obtained. Data was analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings show that both leadership styles positively influence sustainable academic staff performance, while staff commitment and job autonomy are positively associated with performance. The structural model explains 71% of the variance in sustainable academic staff performance. The study highlights leadership, commitment, and professional autonomy as organizational conditions for sustainable academic performance and effectiveness.

Introduction

Sustaining high academic staff performance has become a strategic priority for higher education institutions operating in increasingly competitive, technology-driven, and quality-oriented environments (Wickramasinghe, 2018; Núñez-Acosta & Sánchez-García, 2024; Samodien et al., 2024). Academic staff are central to institutional success through their contributions to teaching, research, innovation, student development, and community engagement. Consequently, institutions seeking long-term sustainability must adopt leadership practices that not only enhance current performance but also foster continuous professional development, employee engagement, and organizational resilience (Núñez-Acosta & Sánchez-García, 2024; Motyka, 2018; Pradhan & Jena, 2017).

Sri Lanka's higher education sector has undergone significant transformation during the past decade, driven by the rapid expansion of private higher education institutions (PHEIs). These institutions have broadened educational access while facing growing competition, increasing expectations for graduate employability, internationalization, digital transformation, and quality assurance (Wickramasinghe, 2018). Within this context, sustaining academic staff performance has become essential for maintaining institutional competitiveness and achieving long-term organizational sustainability (Núñez-Acosta & Sánchez-García, 2024; Samodien et al., 2024).

Leadership is widely recognized as a critical organizational factor influencing employee attitudes, motivation, commitment, and performance (Baig et al., 2021; Raveendran & Gamage, 2018). In higher education, leadership shapes academic staff behaviour by

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establishing a supportive environment that encourages innovation, collaboration, and professional growth (Samodien et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023). Among contemporary leadership approaches, perceived transformational leadership motivates employees through inspirational vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, whereas perceived transactional leadership promotes performance through clearly defined expectations, monitoring, and contingent rewards (Buil & Matute, 2019; Supriadi et al., 2020; Viana Feranita et al., 2020). Previous studies consistently report positive relationships between these leadership styles and employee performance across organizational settings (Fakhri et al., 2020; Jaqua & Jaqua, 2021). However, evidence explaining how these leadership behaviors contribute to sustainable academic staff performance remains comparatively limited, particularly within Sri Lanka's private higher education sector (Baig et al., 2021; Fernando et al., 2024; Samodien et al., 2024).

Existing leadership research reveals several important gaps. First, most empirical studies have been conducted in business organizations, public institutions, or public universities, leaving private higher education institutions comparatively underexplored (Maama, 2024; Núñez-Acosta & Sánchez-García, 2024; Vargas, 2024). Second, previous research has primarily examined the direct influence of leadership on employee performance while providing limited explanation of the organizational mechanisms through which leadership enhances sustainable performance (Ambad et al., 2021; Baig et al., 2021). Although staff commitment and job autonomy have individually received scholarly attention, they have rarely been examined simultaneously as complementary mediating mechanisms within a unified theoretical framework (Aziz et al., 2021; Dias et al., 2022; Mworio et al., 2021). Finally, much of the available evidence originates from countries with institutional and cultural contexts that differ substantially from Sri Lanka, limiting the generalizability of existing findings (Fernando et al., 2024; Wickramasinghe, 2018).

To address these gaps, this study investigates the influence of perceived transformational and perceived transactional leadership on sustainable academic staff performance among full-time academic staff employed in Sri Lanka's private higher education institutions. Specifically, the study examines whether staff commitment and job autonomy mediate the relationships between leadership styles and sustainable academic staff performance. The study integrates Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain the relational and motivational mechanisms through which leadership contributes to sustainable academic performance.

This research contributes to leadership and higher education literature in three important ways. First, it develops an integrated theoretical framework linking perceived transformational leadership, perceived transactional leadership, staff commitment, job autonomy, and sustainable academic staff performance. Second, it provides contemporary empirical evidence from Sri Lanka's private higher education sector, an institutional context that remains underrepresented in leadership research. Finally, the findings offer practical guidance for institutional leaders and policymakers by demonstrating how effective leadership, stronger staff commitment, and greater professional autonomy can enhance teaching quality, research productivity, employee engagement, and long-term institutional sustainability.

This literature review synthesizes the theoretical and empirical foundations underlying the relationships among leadership, staff commitment, job autonomy, and sustainable academic staff

performance. It first outlines the theoretical perspectives guiding the study and then reviews the evidence supporting the proposed relationships and research gap.

Literature Review

This section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature underpinning the relationships among leadership styles, staff commitment, job autonomy, and sustainable academic staff performance. It first establishes the theoretical foundation and then examines the relevant empirical relationships and develops the hypotheses guiding the study.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which jointly explain the relational and motivational mechanisms linking leadership to sustainable academic staff performance.

SET posits that organizational relationships are based on reciprocal exchanges of trust, support, and mutual obligation (Blau, 1964). Employees who perceive leaders as supportive, fair, and committed to their development are more likely to reciprocate through stronger organizational commitment, discretionary effort, and improved performance. Accordingly, SET explains how perceived transformational and perceived transactional leadership foster staff commitment and enhance performance (Ambad et al., 2021; Aziz et al., 2021; Baig et al., 2021).

SDT complements this perspective by emphasizing that sustainable performance depends on satisfying employees' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In higher education, academic staff require professional autonomy to exercise independent judgement in teaching, research, curriculum development, and scholarly engagement. Leadership practices that empower employees and encourage participation strengthen intrinsic motivation and long-term performance (Dias et al., 2022; Mworio et al., 2021).

Together, SET explains the development of reciprocal organizational relationships, whereas SDT explains how leadership promotes intrinsic motivation through autonomy. Their integration provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding how leadership enhances sustainable academic staff performance.

Leadership and Sustainable Academic Staff Performance

Leadership is widely recognized as a key determinant of employee performance, particularly in knowledge-intensive organizations such as higher education institutions (Baig et al., 2021; Raveendran & Gamage, 2018). Perceived transformational leadership motivates employees by articulating a shared vision, encouraging innovation, providing intellectual stimulation, and supporting individual development (Buil & Matute, 2019; Supriadi et al., 2020). Through these behaviors, leaders inspire academic staff to exceed formal expectations and contribute to teaching excellence, research productivity, and institutional development (Ambad et al., 2021; Samodien et al., 2024).

Perceived transactional leadership, in contrast, emphasizes clearly defined expectations, performance monitoring, and contingent rewards (Jaqua & Jaqua, 2021). Although more structured in nature, it contributes to organizational effectiveness by promoting accountability, role clarity, and consistent performance. Within

higher education, these practices support academic quality assurance and operational efficiency (Yang et al., 2023; Vargas, 2024).

Previous empirical studies consistently report positive relationships between both perceived transformational leadership and perceived transactional leadership and employee performance (Baig et al., 2021; Buil & Matute, 2019; Fernando et al., 2024; Samodien et al., 2024). Nevertheless, leadership effectiveness varies across institutional and cultural contexts, highlighting the need for empirical evidence from Sri Lanka's private higher education sector (Núñez-Acosta & Sánchez-García, 2024; Maama, 2024). Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Perceived transformational leadership has a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance.

H2: Perceived transactional leadership has a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance.

Leadership and Staff Commitment

Staff commitment reflects employees' psychological attachment to their organization and their willingness to contribute to institutional success. In higher education, committed academic staff demonstrate greater dedication to teaching, research, curriculum development, and institutional service (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Cassim et al., 2024; Vargas, 2024).

SET suggests that supportive and fair leadership strengthens employees' commitment by creating reciprocal relationships characterized by trust and mutual respect. Perceived transformational leadership enhances commitment through inspiration, empowerment, and professional development, while perceived transactional leadership contributes by establishing clear expectations, procedural fairness, and equitable recognition (Ambad et al., 2021; Aziz et al., 2021).

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate positive relationships between leadership and organizational commitment. However, limited evidence exists within Sri Lanka's private higher education institutions, where commitment is essential for retaining talented academic staff and sustaining institutional competitiveness (Bano & Bashir, 2024; Cassim et al., 2024; Fernando et al., 2024; Kassaw & Golga, 2019). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Perceived transformational leadership has a significant positive influence on staff commitment.

H4: Perceived transactional leadership has a significant positive influence on staff commitment.

Leadership and Job Autonomy

Job autonomy refers to employees' freedom and discretion in organizing and performing work. Within higher education, autonomy enables academic staff to design curricula, conduct research, supervise students, and engage in scholarly activities using their professional expertise.

According to SDT, autonomy is a fundamental psychological need that enhances intrinsic motivation and sustained performance. Transformational leaders strengthen autonomy by encouraging participation, empowerment, and independent decision-making, whereas perceived transactional leadership can also support

autonomy by establishing clear expectations while allowing flexibility in achieving organizational objectives.

Previous studies indicate that leadership positively influences job autonomy, although the strength of this relationship depends on organizational culture and leadership behavior (Dias et al., 2022; Mworio et al., 2021). Empirical evidence from Sri Lanka's private higher education institutions remains limited, warranting further investigation. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: Perceived transformational leadership has a significant positive influence on job autonomy.

H6: Perceived transactional leadership has a significant positive influence on job autonomy.

Staff Commitment, Job Autonomy, and Sustainable Academic Staff Performance

Staff commitment and job autonomy are recognized as critical organizational resources that promote sustainable employee performance. Committed academic staff are more likely to invest sustained effort in teaching, research, student supervision, and institutional development, while autonomous employees demonstrate greater creativity, innovation, and ownership of their professional responsibilities (Aziz et al., 2021; Motyka, 2018; Mworio et al., 2021).

SET explains how supportive organizational relationships foster commitment, whereas SDT argues that autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation and professional effectiveness. Empirical research consistently reports positive relationships between organizational commitment, job autonomy, and employee performance across diverse organizational contexts (Ambad et al., 2021; Baig et al., 2021; Kamaruddin & Mohd Zin, 2024; Motyka, 2018). However, comparatively little research has examined these relationships within Sri Lanka's private higher education sector. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H7: Staff commitment has a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance.

H8: Job autonomy has a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance.

Thus, the literature review leads to eight hypotheses which are shown in the form of a figure and expressed as a collection thereafter.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research on leadership and employee performance, several gaps remain. First, most leadership studies have focused on business organizations, public institutions, or public universities, with limited attention to private higher education institutions. Second, previous research has primarily examined the direct effects of leadership on performance, providing limited understanding of the organizational mechanisms through which leadership influences sustainable academic staff performance. Although staff commitment and job autonomy have individually received scholarly attention, they have rarely been examined simultaneously within an integrated framework. Third, leadership studies have generally relied on a single theoretical perspective. Integrating SET and SDT provides a more comprehensive explanation by capturing both the relational and motivational processes underlying employee performance.

Finally, empirical evidence from Sri Lanka's private higher education sector remains scarce despite increasing competition, digital transformation, and quality assurance requirements (Núñez-Acosta & Sánchez-García, 2024; Maama, 2024).

To address these gaps, this study develops an integrated model examining how perceived transformational and perceived transactional leadership influence sustainable academic staff performance through staff commitment and job autonomy. The study extends leadership theory while providing context-specific evidence from Sri Lanka's private higher education institutions (Fernando et al., 2024; Wickramasinghe, 2018).

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

The conceptual framework was developed through a synthesis of the literature and is grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). These complementary theories explain how leadership contributes to sustainable academic staff performance through both relational and motivational mechanisms.

SET suggests that supportive leadership fosters reciprocal relationships based on trust, fairness, and mutual obligation, encouraging employees to demonstrate stronger organizational commitment and improved performance. SDT argues that leadership enhances sustainable performance by satisfying employees' psychological need for autonomy, thereby strengthening intrinsic motivation and professional engagement.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, the framework conceptualizes perceived transformational leadership and

perceived transactional leadership as the principal antecedents of sustainable academic staff performance. Their effects are proposed to occur both directly and indirectly through staff commitment and job autonomy. Staff commitment reflects employees' psychological attachment to their institution, whereas job autonomy represents the degree of professional discretion and independence experienced in teaching, research, and academic service.

Accordingly, the framework proposes that effective leadership enhances sustainable academic staff performance by simultaneously strengthening employees' commitment and professional autonomy, thereby promoting long-term organizational effectiveness and academic excellence.

The proposed model comprises two independent variables (perceived transformational leadership and perceived transactional leadership), two mediating variables (staff commitment and job autonomy), and one dependent variable (sustainable academic staff performance). The model specifies four direct relationships with sustainable academic staff performance: perceived transformational leadership → sustainable academic staff performance, perceived transactional leadership → sustainable academic staff performance, staff commitment → sustainable academic staff performance, and job autonomy → sustainable academic staff performance. It also proposes four indirect relationships in which staff commitment and job autonomy transmit the effects of the two leadership variables to sustainable academic staff performance. Thus, staff commitment and job autonomy are positioned as mediators rather than independent antecedents of the dependent variable. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

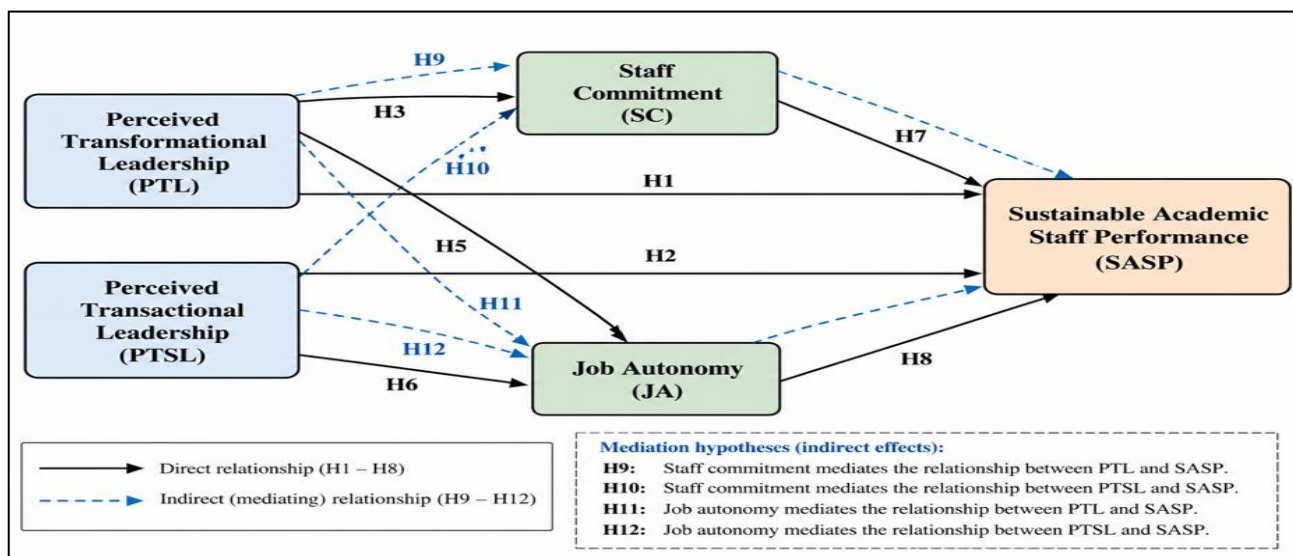


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

Note: Drawing upon the theoretical foundation and empirical evidence presented in the literature review, the following hypotheses were developed:

- H1: Perceived transformational leadership has a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance.
- H2: Perceived transactional leadership has a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance.
- H3: Perceived transformational leadership has a significant positive influence on staff commitment.
- H4: Perceived transactional leadership has a significant positive influence on staff commitment.
- H5: Perceived transformational leadership has a significant positive influence on job autonomy.
- H6: Perceived transactional leadership has a significant positive influence on job autonomy.
- H7: Staff commitment has a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance.
- H8: Job autonomy has a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance.
- H9: Staff commitment mediates the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and sustainable academic staff performance.

H10: Staff commitment mediates the relationship between perceived transactional leadership and sustainable academic staff performance.

H11: Job autonomy mediates the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and sustainable academic staff performance.

H12: Job autonomy mediates the relationship between perceived transactional leadership and sustainable academic staff performance.

These hypotheses provide the empirical basis for evaluating the proposed structural model using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM).

Source: Based on Blau (1964), Deci and Ryan (1985), and the reviewed literature.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among perceived transformational leadership, perceived transactional leadership, staff commitment, job autonomy, and sustainable academic staff performance in Sri Lanka's private higher education institutions (PHEIs). A quantitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to test theoretically derived hypotheses and evaluate relationships among multiple latent constructs using statistical modelling (Majid, 2018).

The study was conducted within a post-positivist paradigm, which assumes that organizational phenomena can be systematically measured and empirically examined. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was selected because it enables the simultaneous estimation of multiple direct and indirect relationships within complex models and is particularly suitable for prediction-oriented research involving latent constructs (Hair et al., 2022).

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised full-time academic staff employed in two selected private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. Full-time academic staff were selected because their roles encompass core academic responsibilities, including teaching, research, student supervision, curriculum-related activities, and contributions to institutional development. Academic staff play a central role in determining the quality of teaching, research, and institutional engagement in higher education (OECD, 2020). In the Sri Lankan higher education context, academic staff responsibilities similarly extend beyond teaching to include research, research supervision, academic coordination, and contributions to university and national development (University Grants Commission, 2015; University of Sri Jayewardenepura, 2016). Therefore, full-time academic staff were considered an appropriate population for examining perceived transformational leadership and perceived transactional leadership, staff commitment, job autonomy, and sustainable academic staff performance.

A survey approach was adopted by administering the questionnaire to all 525 eligible full-time academic staff members in the two selected private higher education institutions. A total of 223 valid questionnaires were returned, representing a 42.5% response rate. To assess the adequacy of the achieved sample size, an a priori statistical power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009). Using a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$; Cohen, 1988), an alpha level of 0.05, and statistical power of 0.80, and four predictors corresponding to the maximum number of predictors of sustainable academic staff performance in the proposed structural model, the analysis indicated a minimum required sample size of 85. The 223 valid responses therefore exceeded the minimum sample size required for the planned

analysis and provided adequate statistical power for testing the proposed relationships.

To assess non-response bias, early and late respondents were compared across the principal study variables. No statistically significant differences were identified, indicating that non-response bias was unlikely to affect the findings.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Data was collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire link was distributed electronically to eligible full-time academic staff in the two selected private higher education institutions. Prior to the main survey, the instrument was pilot tested with a small group of academic staff possessing characteristics similar to those of the target respondents. Minor wording revisions were made to improve clarity while preserving the conceptual meaning of the original measurement scales.

Participation was voluntary. Respondents received information regarding the purpose of the study, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained before data collection commenced. Personally identifiable information was not collected, and all responses were analyzed only in aggregated form for academic research purposes.

Measurement of Variables

Five latent constructs were measured using previously validated instruments adapted to the Sri Lankan higher education context. Perceived transformational leadership and perceived transactional leadership were measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) developed by Bass and Avolio (1995) and further refined by Bass and Riggio (2006), as it provides established dimensions for assessing transformational and transactional leadership behaviours. Staff commitment was measured using the organizational commitment scale developed by Meyer and Allen (1997), which captures affective, continuance, and normative commitment. Job autonomy was measured using instruments developed by Breugh (1985) and Morgeson and Humphrey (2006), covering employees' discretion over work scheduling, decision making, and work methods. Sustainable academic staff performance was measured using a role-based performance scale adapted from Welbourne et al. (1998) and Koopmans et al. (2014), reflecting the multidimensional nature of employee performance. These established instruments were selected because their underlying constructs and dimensions correspond directly with the variables specified in the conceptual framework. The wording of the items was adapted where necessary to reflect the Sri Lankan private higher education context while preserving the meaning of the original measures.

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The measurement instruments and dimensions used for each study variable are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Measurement of study variables

Variable / Construct	Measurement Instrument / Dimensions	Question / Item Numbers	Source
Perceived Transformational Leadership (PTL)	Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ); Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, Individualized Consideration	PTL1–PTL20	Bass & Avolio (1995); Bass & Riggio (2006)
Perceived Transactional Leadership (PTSL)	Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ); Contingent Reward, Active Management-by-Exception, Passive Management-by-Exception	PTSL1–PTSL12	Bass & Avolio (1995); Bass & Riggio (2006)
Staff Commitment (SC)	Organizational Commitment Scale; Affective Commitment, Continuance Commitment, Normative Commitment	SC1–SC18	Meyer & Allen (1997)
Job Autonomy (JA)	Job Autonomy Scale; Work Scheduling Autonomy, Decision-Making Autonomy, Work Methods Autonomy	JA1–JA9	Breaugh (1985); Morgeson & Humphrey (2006)
Sustainable Academic Staff Performance (SASP)	Role-Based Performance Scale; Teaching Performance, Research Performance, Institutional Service	SASP1–SASP18	Welbourne et al. (1998); Koopmans et al. (2014)

Note: All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Data Analysis

Data were screened for missing values, duplicate responses, response consistency, and outliers before analysis. Descriptive statistics were generated using IBM SPSS Statistics, while the hypothesized relationships were analyzed using SmartPLS 4.

Following the two-stage PLS-SEM procedure recommended by Hair et al. (2022), the measurement model was evaluated before assessing the structural model.

Measurement Model Assessment

Indicator reliability was assessed using outer loadings (>0.70). Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), with values above 0.70 indicating satisfactory reliability.

Convergent validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), where values exceeding 0.50 indicated acceptable convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was evaluated using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). The Fornell–Larcker criterion assesses whether the square root of each construct's AVE exceeds its correlations with other constructs, while HTMT provides an additional assessment of construct distinctiveness (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015).

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was evaluated using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Path coefficients (β), t-values, p-values, and confidence intervals were used to test the proposed hypotheses.

Model explanatory power was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2), while predictive relevance was evaluated using the Stone-Geisser Q^2 statistic. Effect sizes (f^2) and multicollinearity were also examined. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values below the recommended threshold indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern.

Mediation Analysis

The mediating roles of staff commitment and job autonomy were examined using the bootstrapping procedure recommended by Hair et al. (2022). The proposed indirect relationships were specified as $PTL \rightarrow SC \rightarrow SASP$, $PTSL \rightarrow SC \rightarrow SASP$, $PTL \rightarrow JA \rightarrow SASP$, and $PTSL \rightarrow JA \rightarrow SASP$. Indirect effects should be evaluated using bootstrap confidence intervals to determine whether the mediating effects are statistically different from zero.

Common Method Bias

Because all variables were measured using a single questionnaire, procedural and statistical remedies were applied to minimize common method bias. Procedural remedies included ensuring respondent anonymity, maintaining confidentiality, and using validated measurement instruments (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Statistically, Harman's single-factor test and full collinearity VIF values were examined. The results indicated that common method bias was unlikely to have materially influenced the findings.

Results

Respondent Profile

The respondents represented diverse demographic characteristics in terms of gender, age, academic qualifications, teaching experience, academic position, and years working under their current supervisor. Most respondents possessed postgraduate qualifications and substantial teaching experience, indicating that the sample consisted of academically qualified and experienced staff capable of evaluating leadership practices and organizational conditions within their institutions.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 223)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	107	48.0
	Female	115	51.6
Age (Years)	Below 25	33	14.8
	26–35	115	51.6
	36–45	55	24.7
	46–60	19	8.5
	61–75	11	4.9
Highest Academic Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	48	21.5
	Postgraduate Diploma	53	23.8
	Master's Degree	115	51.6
	Doctoral Degree (PhD)	6	2.7
Marital Status	Single	114	51.1
	Married	108	48.4
Teaching Experience	1–5 years	86	38.6
	6–10 years	89	39.9
	11–15 years	32	14.3
	16–20 years	11	4.9
	More than 20 years	4	1.8
Current Position	Lecturer/Consultant	164	73.5
	Senior Lecturer	55	24.7
	Other	3	1.3
Years Working Under Current Immediate Superior	0–3 years	93	41.7
	4–6 years	86	38.6
	7–9 years	27	12.1
	10–12 years	11	4.9
	More than 13 years	5	2.2

Note: N = 223

Source: Survey data

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for the study variables.

Overall, respondents reported favorable perceptions across all constructs, with mean scores above the midpoint of the

measurement scale. Perceived transformational leadership recorded the strongest positive association with sustainable academic staff performance, followed by staff commitment and job autonomy. Perceived transactional leadership also demonstrated a positive relationship with academic staff performance, providing preliminary support for the proposed conceptual framework.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation matrix (N = 223)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived Transformational Leadership	3.758	0.556	1.000				
2. Perceived Transactional Leadership	3.670	0.584	.765	1.000			
3. Staff Commitment	3.748	0.497	.258	.241	1.000		
4. Job Autonomy	3.904	0.381	.217	.183	.453	1.000	
5. Sustainable Academic Staff Performance	3.481	0.505	.502	.502	-.013	.050	1.000

Note: $N = 223$. Pearson correlation coefficients are reported below the diagonal. Descriptive statistics are based on composite scores calculated from the respective measurement items. The hypothesized relationships were subsequently evaluated using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM).

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated by assessing indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

All retained indicators exceeded the recommended outer loading threshold of 0.70, confirming satisfactory indicator reliability. Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values were greater than 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. Average Variance

Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50, demonstrating adequate convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was confirmed using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), with the reported results indicating adequate construct distinctiveness. Collectively, these findings confirm that the measurement model possesses satisfactory psychometric properties.

The results of the reliability and validity assessment are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Reliability and validity assessment of the measurement model

Construct	Average Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Perceived Transformational Leadership	0.82	0.91	0.93	0.65
Perceived Transactional Leadership	0.79	0.89	0.91	0.62
Staff Commitment	0.81	0.90	0.92	0.66
Job Autonomy	0.78	0.88	0.90	0.61
Sustainable academic staff Performance	0.83	0.92	0.94	0.68

Note: Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) exceeded the recommended threshold values, supporting the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model. Discriminant validity was established based on the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio (Henseler et al., 2015).

Structural Model Assessment

After confirming the adequacy of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples.

Prior to hypothesis testing, multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, which ranged from 1.90 to 2.30, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern.

The structural model demonstrated significant positive relationships between the study variables. Perceived transformational leadership significantly influenced sustainable academic staff performance ($\beta = 0.35$, $t = 5.21$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Similarly, perceived transactional leadership had a significant positive effect on sustainable academic staff performance ($\beta = 0.25$, $t = 3.78$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. Staff commitment also positively influenced sustainable academic staff

performance ($\beta = 0.30$, $t = 4.91$, $p < .001$), supporting H7, while job autonomy demonstrated a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance ($\beta = 0.28$, $t = 4.35$, $p < .001$), supporting H8.

Perceived transformational leadership exhibited the strongest direct effect among the predictor variables, highlighting its importance in promoting sustainable academic staff performance. The model explained 71% of the variance in sustainable academic staff performance ($R^2 = 0.71$), while staff commitment ($R^2 = 0.52$) and job autonomy ($R^2 = 0.48$) also demonstrated satisfactory explanatory power.

The structural model results and hypothesis testing outcomes are presented in Table 5.

Predictive relevance was confirmed through positive Stone-Geisser Q^2 values for all endogenous constructs, indicating that the model possessed adequate predictive capability.

Table 5: Structural model assessment and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	PTL $\rightarrow$ SASP	0.35	5.21	< .001	Supported
H2	PTSL $\rightarrow$ SASP	0.25	3.78	< .001	Supported
H7	SC $\rightarrow$ SASP	0.30	4.91	< .001	Supported
H8	JA $\rightarrow$ SASP	0.28	4.35	< .001	Supported

Note: PTL = Perceived Transformational Leadership; PTSL = Perceived Transactional Leadership; SC = Staff Commitment; JA = Job Autonomy; SASP = Sustainable Academic Staff Performance.

Mediation Analysis

The mediating roles of staff commitment and job autonomy were examined to determine whether they explained the relationships between leadership styles and sustainable academic staff performance. The results indicated that both leadership styles were positively associated with staff commitment and job autonomy, while both mediating variables significantly influenced sustainable academic staff performance. These findings are consistent with the proposed theoretical framework and suggest that leadership contributes to academic staff performance through relational and motivational mechanisms.

The proposed mediation paths are therefore $PTL \rightarrow SC \rightarrow SASP$, $PTSL \rightarrow SC \rightarrow SASP$, $PTL \rightarrow JA \rightarrow SASP$, and $PTSL \rightarrow JA \rightarrow SASP$. These represent indirect relationships rather than additional direct hypotheses in the present eight-hypothesis structure.

However, as complete bootstrapped indirect-effect statistics and confidence intervals were unavailable, the study reports preliminary evidence consistent with mediation rather than definitive mediation effects. Future studies should include comprehensive indirect-effect analyses to confirm the magnitude and nature of these mediating relationships.

Based on the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence discussed above, staff commitment and job autonomy are proposed as mediating mechanisms through which leadership styles may influence sustainable academic staff performance. Accordingly, the following mediation hypotheses are formulated:

H9: Staff commitment mediates the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and sustainable academic staff performance.

H10: Staff commitment mediates the relationship between perceived transactional leadership and sustainable academic staff performance.

H11: Job autonomy mediates the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and sustainable academic staff performance.

H12: Job autonomy mediates the relationship between perceived transactional leadership and sustainable academic staff performance.

The findings are discussed next.

Summary of Findings

The empirical findings provide substantial support for the proposed conceptual framework. The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, while the structural model exhibited strong explanatory power and predictive relevance.

Both perceived transformational leadership and perceived transactional leadership significantly influenced sustainable academic staff performance, with perceived transformational leadership exerting the stronger effect. Staff commitment and job autonomy also demonstrated significant positive relationships with academic staff performance, supporting their proposed roles as important organizational mechanisms. Although preliminary evidence suggests mediation, further confirmation requires complete bootstrapped indirect-effect analyses.

Overall, the findings indicate that effective leadership contributes to sustainable academic staff performance both directly and through organizational processes that strengthen employee commitment and professional autonomy.

Discussion

This study examined the influence of perceived transformational leadership and perceived transactional leadership on sustainable academic staff performance, while investigating the mediating roles of staff commitment and job autonomy within Sri Lanka's private higher education institutions. The findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework and demonstrate that effective leadership contributes to sustainable academic staff performance through both direct and indirect organizational mechanisms.

Consistent with H1, perceived transformational leadership exhibited a significant positive influence on sustainable academic staff performance and emerged as the strongest predictor in the structural model. This finding suggests that leaders who articulate a compelling vision, encourage innovation, provide intellectual stimulation, and recognize individual contributions create an environment in which academic staff are more motivated to excel in teaching, research, and institutional service. These findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that perceived transformational leadership enhances employee motivation, organizational commitment, and performance across educational and organizational settings (Aziz et al., 2021; Baig et al., 2021; Fernando et al., 2024). Within Sri Lanka's private higher education sector, perceived transformational leadership appears particularly important because institutions operate in highly competitive environments that require continuous innovation, academic excellence, and responsiveness to changing stakeholder expectations. This result is also consistent with evidence that transformational leadership can strengthen academic staff performance through motivation, empowerment, and supportive leadership practices (Ambad et al., 2021; Baig et al., 2021; Samodien et al., 2024).

The findings also support H2, demonstrating that perceived transactional leadership positively influences sustainable academic staff performance. Although its effect was weaker than that of perceived transformational leadership, perceived transactional leadership contributes by establishing clear expectations, maintaining accountability, and recognizing performance through appropriate rewards. These practices reduce ambiguity, promote consistency, and support institutional quality assurance. This result aligns with previous research indicating that transactional leadership remains effective when organizational objectives, performance standards, and operational efficiency require careful monitoring (Supriadi et al., 2020; Kassaw & Golga, 2019). Rather than viewing perceived transformational and perceived transactional leadership as competing approaches, the findings suggest that they complement one another within higher education institutions. This is consistent with prior evidence that perceived transactional leadership can support performance through role clarity, accountability, and performance-oriented practices (Fakhri et al., 2020; Jaqua & Jaqua, 2021; Supriadi et al., 2020).

The positive relationships identified between leadership and staff commitment support H3 and H4, reinforcing the argument that leadership influences employee attitudes beyond immediate performance outcomes. Academic staff who perceive their leaders as supportive, fair, and professionally engaged are more likely to develop stronger psychological attachment to their institutions.

Such commitment encourages employees to contribute beyond formal job requirements through greater collaboration, knowledge sharing, and institutional citizenship behaviors. These findings are consistent with Social Exchange Theory, which proposes that employees reciprocate supportive leadership through positive organizational attitudes and behaviors. This interpretation is supported by empirical evidence linking leadership practices with employee commitment and by studies of academic staff commitment in higher education settings (Ambad et al., 2021; Bano & Bashir, 2024; Cassim et al., 2024).

Similarly, the results support H5 and H6, indicating that both leadership styles contribute positively to job autonomy. Leaders who encourage participation in decision-making, trust professional judgement, and provide appropriate levels of independence create conditions that strengthen intrinsic motivation. Although academic staff generally enjoy greater autonomy than employees in many other sectors, effective leadership remains essential in creating an organizational climate where professional discretion is respected and supported. These findings reinforce the principles of Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy as a fundamental psychological need that enhances motivation, engagement, and sustained performance. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that transformational leadership can contribute to employee autonomy and that job autonomy is associated with employee performance (Dias et al., 2022; Mworio et al., 2021).

The significant positive relationships between staff commitment, job autonomy, and sustainable academic staff performance support H7 and H8. Committed employees are more willing to invest discretionary effort in teaching, research, curriculum development, and student support, while autonomous employees demonstrate greater initiative, creativity, and responsibility in fulfilling their academic roles. Together, these findings suggest that organizational conditions fostering both commitment and autonomy contribute to sustainable improvements in academic staff performance. This finding is consistent with prior research linking employee commitment and job performance and with evidence concerning academic staff commitment in higher education (Aziz et al., 2021; Kamaruddin & Mohd Zin, 2024; Kassaw & Golga, 2019).

Although the mediation analysis provides evidence that staff commitment and job autonomy function as important mechanisms linking leadership to sustainable academic staff performance, the present study focuses primarily on establishing these relationships within the proposed conceptual framework. The findings indicate that leadership contributes not only through direct behavioral influence but also by shaping organizational environments that strengthen employee commitment and professional autonomy. Future studies employing more comprehensive longitudinal or multi-wave research designs could further examine the temporal dynamics and relative strength of these mediating relationships.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that sustainable academic staff performance is influenced by an integrated combination of effective leadership, strong organizational commitment, and professional autonomy. Perceived transformational leadership provides strategic direction and inspiration, while perceived transactional leadership establishes the structure and accountability necessary for consistent performance. Together with higher levels of staff commitment and job autonomy, these leadership practices create organizational conditions that support long-term institutional effectiveness and sustainability within Sri Lanka's private higher education sector.

Contributions of the study

The theoretical contributions and practical implications are as follows.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three specific contributions to leadership and higher education literature. First, it integrates Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory to explain two distinct mechanisms—staff commitment and job autonomy—through which perceived leadership may be associated with sustainable academic staff performance. Second, it examines perceived transformational and perceived transactional leadership simultaneously, allowing their relative direct relationships with sustainable academic staff performance to be assessed within the same model. Third, it provides context-specific empirical evidence from private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka, extending the existing literature beyond the predominantly public-university and non-Sri Lankan settings represented in prior research.

First, it advances understanding of leadership by integrating Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) into a single framework for explaining sustainable academic staff performance. While previous studies have typically relied on a single theoretical perspective, the present study demonstrates that leadership influences performance through both relational processes, reflected in staff commitment, and motivational processes, reflected in job autonomy. The integration of these complementary theories provides a more comprehensive explanation of how leadership contributes to sustainable employee performance in knowledge-intensive organizations.

Second, the study extends existing leadership research by examining perceived transformational leadership and perceived transactional leadership simultaneously within the context of private higher education institutions. Previous studies have often investigated these leadership styles independently or focused primarily on direct relationships with employee performance. By incorporating staff commitment and job autonomy as complementary organizational mechanisms, the study provides a more holistic understanding of how leadership shapes sustainable academic staff performance.

Third, the research contributes valuable empirical evidence from Sri Lanka's private higher education sector, a context that remains underrepresented in the international leadership literature. Most existing studies have been conducted in public universities or business organizations within developed economies. The present findings therefore extend the geographical and institutional applicability of leadership theory while responding to increasing calls for evidence from developing countries and emerging higher education systems.

Finally, the study contributes to the growing literature on sustainable organizational performance by demonstrating that leadership effectiveness extends beyond immediate performance outcomes. Sustainable academic staff performance is shown to depend on organizational conditions that strengthen employee commitment and professional autonomy, highlighting the importance of leadership in fostering long-term institutional resilience and academic excellence.

Practical Implications

The findings offer several practical implications for institutional leaders, policymakers, and human resource practitioners within private higher education institutions.

First, institutional leaders should prioritize the development of perceived transformational leadership capabilities among academic managers, heads of departments, and programme leaders. Leadership development initiatives should focus on strengthening communication, vision building, coaching, mentoring, and employee empowerment to enhance staff motivation and long-term performance.

Second, while perceived transformational leadership demonstrated the strongest influence on sustainable academic staff performance, perceived transactional leadership also contributed positively by promoting accountability, role clarity, and performance monitoring. Institutions should therefore adopt a balanced leadership approach that combines inspirational leadership with effective performance management practices.

Third, the findings emphasize the importance of strengthening staff commitment. Institutions should implement policies that promote employee recognition, career development, professional learning opportunities, transparent decision-making, and supportive organizational cultures. These practices are likely to enhance employee retention, engagement, and institutional citizenship behaviors.

Fourth, higher education institutions should create organizational environments that encourage professional autonomy. Academic staff should be provided with appropriate discretion in curriculum development, research activities, teaching innovation, and academic decision-making while maintaining institutional quality standards. Greater autonomy is likely to enhance intrinsic motivation, creativity, and sustained performance.

Finally, policymakers and governing bodies should recognize leadership development as a strategic investment in institutional sustainability. Leadership competency frameworks, succession planning, and continuous professional development programmes can strengthen leadership effectiveness and improve organizational performance across the private higher education sector.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations.

First, the research adopted a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among the study variables. Longitudinal research could provide deeper insights into how leadership influences academic staff performance over time.

Second, the study was conducted in only two private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. Although these institutions represent an important segment of the higher education sector, the findings may not be fully generalizable to public universities or institutions operating in different national contexts.

Third, all variables were measured using self-reported questionnaire data, which may introduce common method bias despite the procedural and statistical controls employed. Future studies could incorporate multiple data sources, including supervisor evaluations, peer assessments, and objective performance indicators.

Finally, this study focused on staff commitment and job autonomy as mediating mechanisms. Future research could examine additional organizational and psychological factors, such as organizational culture, psychological empowerment, employee engagement, innovative work behavior, digital leadership, or organizational trust, to further explain how leadership contributes to sustainable academic staff performance.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of perceived transformational and perceived transactional leadership on sustainable academic staff performance among full-time academic staff in Sri Lanka's private higher education institutions. Drawing upon Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the study examined the mediating roles of staff commitment and job autonomy in explaining the relationship between leadership and sustainable academic staff performance.

The findings demonstrate that both perceived transformational and perceived transactional leadership positively influence sustainable academic staff performance, with perceived transformational leadership exerting the stronger effect. Staff commitment and job autonomy also emerged as significant organizational mechanisms associated with higher levels of sustainable academic staff performance, highlighting the importance of supportive leadership and empowering work environments.

Overall, this study provides an integrated framework for understanding sustainable academic staff performance by considering the interrelationships among leadership, staff commitment, and job autonomy, and offers theoretical and practical insights for strengthening academic staff performance and institutional sustainability in private higher education institutions.

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