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Leadership Preferences and Academic Performance: A Visit to a Malaysian University

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ABSTRACT

The development of knowledge economy has reinforced the significance of education in Malaysia, particularly for advancing the nation's growth. The success of the education sector depends largely on the element of leadership, a key management role that focuses on building public relations, fostering interpersonal relationships, and creating strategies to boost performance and overall organizational success. Within the context of higher education, effective leadership can shape institutional direction and significantly impact students' performance, substantially driving their capacity to adapt to changes, promote innovation, and uphold higher academic standards. This study aims to develop a model examining how leadership preferences (transformational leadership, task-oriented leadership, and people-oriented leadership) directly influence students' academic performance in Malaysia's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The study developed three hypotheses, which were quantitatively tested using Structural Equation Modelling via Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM). Data were collected from 200 university students via purposive sampling, and a five-point Likert scale was used to administer the survey questionnaires. All measures were adapted from well-validated sources and possessed good internal consistency. The findings indicate that transformational and task-oriented leadership styles have a positive and significant relationship with students' academic performance. On the contrary, people-oriented leadership does not significantly affect students' academic performance. The findings suggest that universities should adopt a blend of transformational and task-oriented leadership styles to enhance student participation and performance. Integrating the benefits of both leadership styles in the education sector can nurture academic success and provide students with the necessary skills for their future.

The growing emphasis on Malaysia's transition to a knowledge-based economy has intensified the focus on improving the quality and performance of higher education institutions (HEIs). Since these institutions are struggling to produce students ready to take on Industry 4.0 and beyond, leadership has become a defining factor that affects not only organizational performance but also student growth and academic performance (Al-Aamri et al., 2024; Maqbool et al., 2024; Zhong, 2024). It is also in this environment that leadership in higher education has expanded beyond traditional administrative management roles to encompass leadership that influences institutional culture, student engagement, and educational innovation (Yongjun et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2020). In the context of Malaysia, student leadership development is particularly important and is embedded within national initiatives, such as Malaysia Higher Education 4.0 (MyHE4.0). In this framework, graduates are expected to be highly technically qualified and also capable of leading change and solving real-world challenges.

While leadership has been widely examined in organizational and educational literature (Bass, 1985; Abu Nasra & Arar, 2020; Berhanu, 2023; Liden et al., 2025), most studies tend to focus on leadership outcomes among employees or faculty members (Vesudevan et al., 2024). Research exploring how different leadership orientations affect students, particularly within Malaysian HEIs, is relatively limited (Arham et al., 2024). Even among the few existing studies that explore the relationship between leadership and academic performance, results remain inconsistent. Some report positive associations (Alwali & Alwali, 2022; Luo et al., 2018), while others indicate weak or even negative effects (Cranston et al., 2015; Khajeh, 2018; Wolor et al., 2022; Zhong, 2024). These mixed findings suggest that contextual factors, including cultural values, institutional practices, and students' readiness for leadership engagement, may shape the impact of leadership on student outcomes.

Students in Malaysian universities are typically in the early stages of developing their personality and character traits, making them particularly susceptible to the influence of leadership in shaping their communication patterns, collaboration skills, and learning behaviors (Yongjun et al., 2021). Depending on their preference and experiences, they can exercise and demonstrate their behavioral styles of leadership. Contextually, universities aim to produce graduates with strong interpersonal and leadership qualities, although the approaches adopted to cultivate these capabilities vary significantly. The preferences in leadership, particularly towards transformational, task- and people-oriented styles, can affect the way students set their academic goals and structure their work performance and cooperation with others (Oppi et al., 2023; Windasari et al., 2025; Zorina et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there is a lack of proper empirical evidence that promotes the kind of leadership most favorable for encouraging academic performance, as applied in the Malaysian setup.

This study addresses this gap by empirically examining the impact of transformational, task-oriented, and people-oriented leadership styles on student academic performance in a Malaysian university setting. Drawing on validated instruments and tested through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), this research contributes to the literature in threefold. First, it contextualizes leadership research within Malaysian HEIs, a setting often underrepresented in global studies. Second, it focuses on the student perspective, offering insight into how students interpret and respond to different leadership orientations in their

academic environment. Third, it integrates three leadership constructs within a single framework to evaluate their individual and combined effects on academic achievement.

By addressing these areas, the study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it enhances understanding of the leadership-performance link in educational settings by focusing on student-perceived leadership styles. Practically, it provides university administrators and policymakers with evidence to support the development of leadership training programs that align with students' developmental needs and institutional goals. In due course, this study aims to address the following research question: To what extent do transformational, task-oriented, and people-oriented leadership styles impact student academic performance in Malaysian higher education institutions?

Literature Review

Underpinning Theories

This study is grounded in two theoretical perspectives, namely the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The FRLT, developed by Bass and Avolio (1994), identifies transformational and transactional leadership as key behavioral dimensions that influence follower motivation, engagement, and performance. These dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how leaders interact with subordinates through both inspirational and directive approaches. In this study, the FRLT framework is adapted to include transformational, task-oriented as a structured and goal-driven proxy of transactional leadership (Abbas & Ali, 2021; Borgmann et al., 2016), and people-oriented as a relational and behavioral extension of leadership styles (Abbas & Ali, 2021). This adaptation reflects the dynamic leadership roles within higher education institutions (HEIs), where both performance and interpersonal factors are vital.

The second theory to complement FRLT in this study is that of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT posits that individual motivation and performance are driven by the fulfillment of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan et al., 2021). Transformational leadership aligns with SDT, as it fosters a sense of autonomy and mental enrichment, generating a drive that leads to goal-oriented practices (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2020; Mirza et al., 2023). Competence needs, such as the need to feel in command and inclined towards the use of structure and clarity, are met under task-oriented leadership, whereas people-oriented leadership fulfills the needs associated with relatedness through interpersonal interactions and emotional support (Austin et al., 2012; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2020; Mirza et al., 2023). FRLT and SDT offer two theoretical perspectives that help explain how leadership preferences affect academic performance. The hypothesis presented in this study is that leadership practices that meet psychological needs can lead to improved academic performance in university students.

Transformational Leadership and Academic Performance

Transformational leadership is a concept that describes a leader's ability to inspire, motivate, and encourage followers to transcend individualistic pursuits and serve the greater good (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). The positive influence of its value has been substantiated empirically across various organizational contexts (Abbas & Ali, 2021). For example, Luo et al. (2018) and Buil et al. (2018) found that transformational leadership enhances students' goal commitment,

creativity, and proactive learning behavior. Findings by Schmitz et al. (2023) revealed that school educators also respond positively to transformational leadership in terms of utilizing technology and innovations. Specifically, Maqbool et al. (2024) presented evidence on the significance of leadership in maintaining academic performance levels in Malaysian high schools, and Al-Aamri et al. (2024) discussed the role of transformational leadership in motivating staff and its impact on institutional outcomes.

In light of this finding, some researchers have raised concerns about the generalizability of transformational leadership. Gartzia and Baniandr s (2016) believed that its application would be limited in high power distance or collectivist cultures. Zhong (2024) further noted that the impact of transformational leadership on academic performance may vary significantly depending on contextual factors, such as institutional autonomy and student self-regulation. Notably, most existing studies focus on the leadership of teachers or administrators, overlooking how students themselves experience or respond to leadership orientations within academic institutions.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on the perceived influence of transformational leadership styles on academic performance from the students' perspective within Malaysian HEIs. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *Transformational leadership has a positive effect on academic performance.*

Task-Oriented Leadership and Academic Performance

Task-oriented leadership emphasizes structure, planning, and goal setting to enhance organizational efficiency (Wang & Guan, 2018; Wanyoko & Muchanje, 2021). It involves leaders who prioritize task completion over interpersonal relationships, often with direct supervision and limited input from subordinates. In the education sector, this style has shown mixed results. Alvi and Rana (2019) found that task-oriented leadership in Pakistani universities improved student achievement by setting clear expectations and performance benchmarks. Even and BenDavid-Hadar (2021) observed similar outcomes in schools for students with conduct disorders, where structured leadership increased engagement.

However, excessive control and limited collaboration can lead to student disengagement, particularly in less disciplined learning environments (Wang & Guan, 2018). Additionally, Okumbe (2001) criticized task-oriented leaders for lacking empathy and confidence in others' capabilities. In the Malaysian context, the impact of such leadership remains underexplored, particularly on student outcomes.

By examining task-oriented leadership from the students' perspective, this study investigates whether structure-driven leadership influences academic success in Malaysian HEIs. Therefore, the second hypothesis is proposed:

H2: *Task-oriented leadership has a positive effect on academic performance.*

People-Oriented Leadership and Academic Performance

People-oriented leadership emphasizes building strong interpersonal relationships, fostering trust, and promoting collaboration (Gartzia & Baniandr s, 2016). This leadership style promotes open communication, emotional support, and team cohesion. Avolio et al. (2009) and Yukl (2012) emphasized its effectiveness in enhancing job satisfaction and perceived leader

effectiveness. In academic settings, Zorina et al. (2018) and Liquiu (2022) found that people-oriented leadership fosters commitment and loyalty, which can potentially contribute to improved performance.

Nonetheless, Judge et al. (2004) reported that people-oriented leadership can sometimes be less effective than task-oriented leadership in driving performance outcomes. Gartzia and Baniandr s (2016) further found that people-oriented leaders in student environments may unintentionally reduce performance by prioritizing relationships over results. A study conducted in Ethiopia found that this leadership style has a negative impact on student academic performance (Botha & Aleme, 2023). Whereas, in some Malaysian universities, where students may prioritize self-directed achievement over peer-oriented collaboration (Ayish & Deveci, 2019), this leadership style might be less impactful.

Given the inconclusive evidence and lack of research within the Malaysian student context, this study explores whether people-oriented leadership improves academic outcomes. Thus, the third hypothesis is formulated:

H3: *People-oriented leadership has a positive effect on academic performance.*

Student Academic Performance

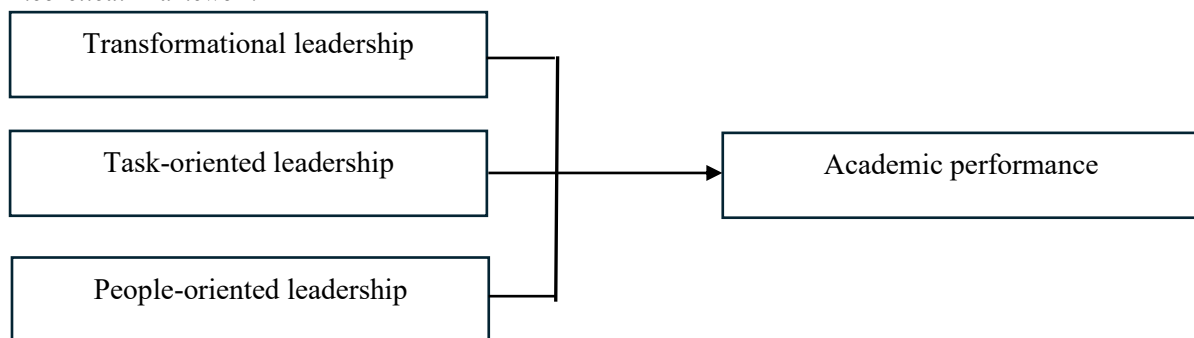
Academic performance is a crucial benchmark for a student's advancement to the next level of education. It reflects a student's ability to meet institutional learning objectives and is a key metric for educational success. This research work will contribute to the existing body of literature and research on the impact of leadership on academic performance (Al-Aamri et al., 2024; Basyir et al., 2020; Bodenhausen & Curtis, 2016) in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This study makes a novel contribution to the study of higher education concerning the drivers of academic performance from the perspective of leadership. The combination of the three leadership styles into a proposed theoretical framework makes both theoretical and practical contributions regarding how universities can improve by aligning leadership development activities with academic achievements.

Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 presents the study's theoretical framework, entailing the three first-order constructs (transformational, task-oriented, and people-oriented leadership styles) and their relational pathway toward academic performance.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Method

Design and Sample

This study employed a quantitative approach by implementing a self-administered questionnaire to collect data from 200 university students in Malacca, Malaysia. The data collection was conducted between September and November 2024. The researchers employed purposive sampling techniques to distribute questionnaires, available in both English and Malay, to the students. The inclusion criteria required that participants be: (1) currently enrolled students at the Universiti Teknologi Mara, Melaka, (2) actively involved in academic and/or extracurricular activities that may expose them to different leadership styles, and (3) have completed at least one full semester of study to ensure they had sufficient academic experience for meaningful responses. Students who were in their first semester or on academic leave were excluded from the sample, as they may not have had adequate exposure to institutional leadership or academic performance metrics. The purposive selection was facilitated through the efforts of course coordinators and faculty members, who helped identify suitable classes and student groups.

The survey was translated into Malay using the back translation approach. The questionnaire consists of three sections: Section A pertains to the demographic profile of the students (e.g., age, gender, semester, faculty, position, etc.). Section B contains the independent variable questions, whilst Section C comprises the dependent variable questions. The measurement items of this study were adopted from previous research. To rate the measurement items, the researchers used a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Table 1 illustrates the respondents' demographic profile. Two hundred responses were obtained from August to November 2024 and ultimately accepted for further consideration. Out of the 200 university students who participated in this study, 153 are female, and 47 are male, with 52.5% aged between 18 and 20 years old. In addition, 124 students are from the Faculty of Business and Management, 34 from the Faculty of Arts and Design, 18 from the Faculty of Accountancy, nine from the Faculty of Hotel Management & Tourism, seven from the Academy of Language Studies, four from the Faculty of Communication & Media Studies, two from the Faculty of Computer & Mathematical Sciences, and one each from the Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies and Plantation & Agrotechnology. Most of the respondents were in their second semester (40%), followed by the fourth semester (29%), fifth semester (25.5%), sixth semester (3%), and third semester (2.5%).

Table 1
Respondents' Profile

Demographic Variable	Categories	N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	47	23.5
	Female	153	76.5
Age	18-20 years old	105	52.5
	21-23 years old	78	39.0
	24-27 years old	17	8.5
Faculty	Business & Management	124	62.0
	Arts & Design	34	17.0
	Accountancy	18	9.0
	Hotel Management & Tourism	9	4.5
	Academy of Language Studies	7	3.5
	Communication & Media Studies	4	2.0
		2	1.0

	Computer & Mathematical Sciences		
	Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies	1	0.5
	Plantation & Agrotechnology	1	0.5
Semester	2 nd	80	40.0
	3 rd	5	2.5
	4 th	58	29.0
	5 th	51	25.5
	6 th	6	3.0

Measurement Items

Transformational leadership was measured using a 5-item scale derived from Li and Shi (2005) and Chen et. al. (2012) (e.g., "I focus on giving individual consideration to each project team member"). Previous research has proven that Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the five items is .80, indicating their internal consistency. The task-oriented and people-oriented leadership scales were measured using the Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaires adapted from Blake and Mouton (1970) (e.g., "I encourage my team to participate when it comes to decision-making time"; "nothing is more important than accomplishing a goal or task"). The task-oriented leadership and people-oriented questions consist of nine items, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient demonstrates that all the subscales exhibit excellent reliability and internal consistency. Finally, academic performance was measured using five items taken from Stadler et al. (2021) (e.g., "I set my own goals for learning without the help of the instructor"). The Cronbach's alpha for all the measurement items indicates that the scale's consistency exceeded .8.

Results

This research employed the PLS-SEM 3.0 for data analysis and hypothesis testing. PLS-SEM has two basic phases: the measurement model and the structural model assessments. The application of PLS-SEM in this research is to establish the connection between the variables. PLS-SEM was chosen over other techniques because the research model aims to explain and predict the variance in the key target constructs (Chin, 2009; Alwali & Alwali, 2022). It is also suitable for exploratory research, i.e., one that expands upon an existing structural theory. The relationship examined in this study remains at the level of theoretical identification; therefore, it is open to further study.

Measurement Model

The validity and reliability of the measurement items were assessed in the reflective measurement model. Table 2 presents the results of the measurement model assessment. Under the reflective measurement model, convergent validity and discriminant validity were assessed. Convergent validity pertains to the degree to which the measures of a particular construct come together or demonstrate a notable amount of shared variance (Hair et al., 2010). This study assessed convergent validity by following Hair et al.'s (2017) recommendations, using factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Table 2 also shows the outer loadings, AVE, and Composite Reliability (CR) of the reflective constructs. All loadings that exceeded the recommended value of .6, as suggested by Bryne (2016), were retained. Low-loading items labeled TASK1, TASK5, PPL1, PPL5, PPL7, PPL8, and AP5 were deleted. All four constructs met the threshold values for CR and AVE, as all the CRs were greater than .7, and all the AVE

values exceeded .5 after the item deletion process (Hair et al., 2017). Therefore, the constructs can be concluded to demonstrate reliability and convergent validity at this stage.

Table 2

Measurement Model

Construct	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Transformational Leadership	TRANS1	.77	.58	.87
	TRANS2	.87		
	TRANS3	.74		
	TRANS4	.65		
	TRANS5	.75		
Task-Oriented Leadership	TASK2	.65	.53	.89
	TASK3	.70		
	TASK4	.72		
	TASK6	.74		
	TASK7	.79		
	TASK8	.74		
People-Oriented Leadership	PPL2	.78	.62	.89
	PPL3	.82		
	PPL4	.71		
	PPL6	.85		
	PPL9	.76		
Academic Performance	AP1	.85	.66	.88
	AP2	.86		
	AP3	.74		
	AP4	.78		

The subsequent phase involves evaluating the model's discriminant validity, whereby the indicators must exhibit stronger loadings on their respective constructs than on other constructs within the model. In addition, the average variance shared between each construct and its indicators must exceed the variance shared between that construct and other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Following this suggestion, Table 3 indicates that all the constructs exhibited sufficient or satisfactory discriminant validity, where the square root of AVE is greater than the correlations for all the reflective constructs.

Table 3

Discriminant Validity using the Fornell and Larcker Criterion

Construct	Academic Performance	People-Oriented	Task-Oriented	Transformational
Academic Performance	.81			
People-Oriented	.41	.79		
Task-Oriented	.46	.77	.72	
Transformational	.44	.61	.59	.76

Table 4 presents the discriminant analysis approach, which compares the cross-loadings of the constructs. To evaluate discriminant validity through cross-loading, each indicator must exhibit a strong loading on its respective construct while demonstrating a low loading on other constructs. This procedure demonstrates that discriminant validity is achieved in this study as the constructs are distinctly different from each other.

Table 4*Cross-loadings*

Items	Academic Performance	People-Oriented	Task-Oriented	Transformational
AP1	.85	.28	.30	.31
AP2	.86	.38	.41	.38
AP3	.74	.27	.32	.34
AP4	.78	.39	.43	.37
PPL2	.34	.78	.56	.55
PPL3	.31	.82	.54	.53
PPL4	.33	.71	.70	.39
PPL6	.36	.85	.61	.46
PPL9	.28	.76	.63	.48
TASK2	.24	.49	.65	.47
TASK3	.29	.52	.70	.40
TASK4	.31	.48	.72	.49
TASK6	.35	.52	.74	.37
TASK7	.39	.57	.79	.45
TASK8	.34	.63	.74	.39
TASK9	.40	.68	.74	.44
TRANS1	.37	.47	.43	.77
TRANS5	.33	.40	.38	.75
TRASN2	.39	.53	.52	.87
TRASN3	.30	.49	.51	.74
TRASN4	.26	.46	.40	.65

Structural Model

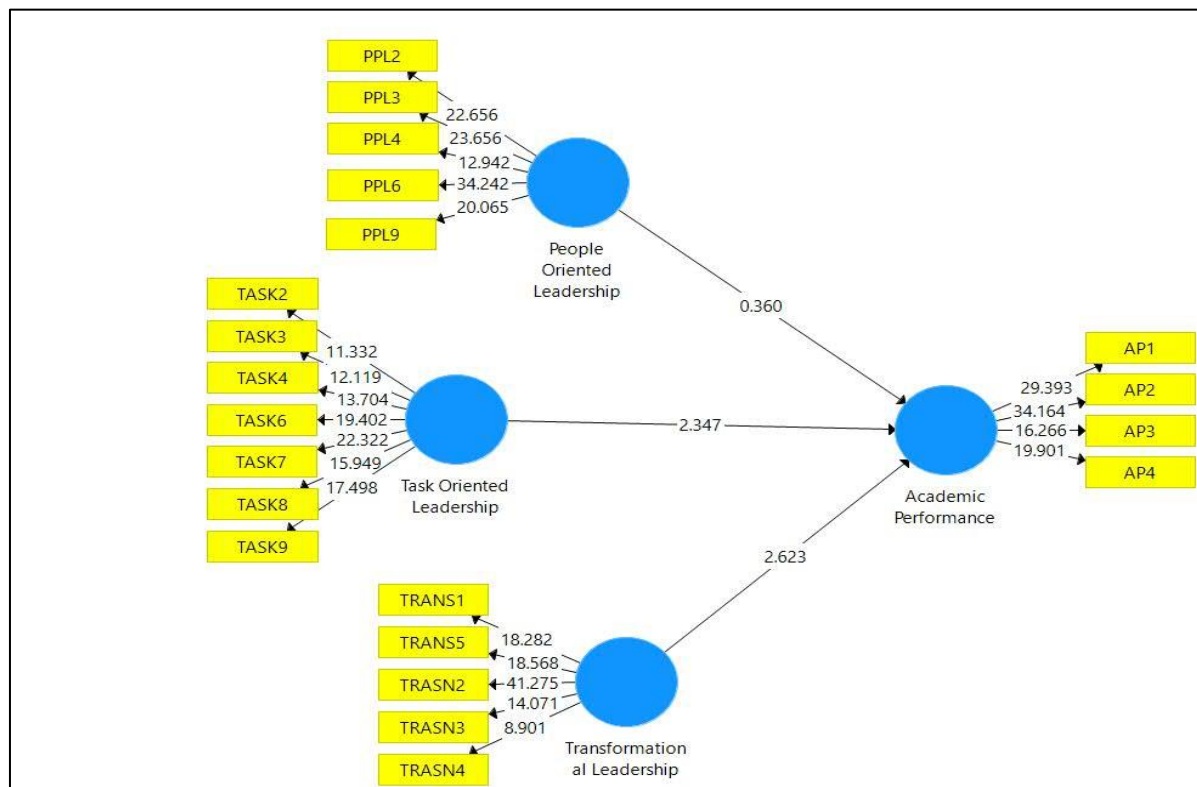
All hypotheses encompassing the direct and indirect effects can be evaluated simultaneously using PLS-SEM. Before assessing the structural model, it is important to confirm the non-presence of any lateral collinearity issue. Based on Kock and Lynn (2012), even when the discriminant validity criteria are met, lateral collinearity issues can occasionally distort findings, potentially hiding the significant causal effect in the model. Table 5 indicates the outcome of the lateral collinearity test, showing that all inner VIF values for people-oriented, task-oriented, and transformational leadership were below the threshold value of 5. Based on Hair et al. (2017), these results indicate no lateral multicollinearity issue in this study, as all the inner VIF values for the independent variables (people-oriented, task-oriented, and transformational leadership) were below 5.

Table 5*Lateral Collinearity Assessment*

Construct	To Academic Performance (VIF)
People-Oriented	2.75
Task-Oriented	2.61
Transformational	1.69

Figure 2 illustrates the structural model. In this study, three direct hypotheses were developed between the constructs. SmartPLS 3.0 was used to test the significant paths between the variables.

Figure 2
Structural Model



Based on the evaluation of the path coefficients in Table 6, two relationships exhibit a t -value > 1.64 out of the three proposed hypotheses, indicating a significance level of .05. Specifically, the predictors of transformational ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$), task-oriented ($\beta = .29$, $p < .01$), and people-oriented ($\beta = .05$, $p > .05$) leadership styles are positively related to student academic performance, which explains 25.6% of the variance in performance. Therefore, H1 and H2 are supported, while H3 is rejected. Next, the effect sizes (f^2) were evaluated using Cohen's (1988) guidelines. The threshold value of .02 indicates a small effect, .15 a medium effect, and .35 a large effect. Table 6 shows that transformational (.04) and task-oriented (.04) leadership styles have small effects in producing the R^2 for performance. However, the results indicate that people-oriented leadership has no significant impact on producing the R^2 for performance.

Table 6
Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	t-value	Decision	R ²	f ²
H1	Transformational → Performance	.24	.13	2.62	Supported		.05
H2	Task-Oriented → Performance	.29	.12	2.35	Supported	.26	.04
H3	People-Oriented → Performance	.05	.13	.36	Rejected		.001

Discussion

This study aims to explore leadership preferences that positively influence university students' academic performance. The specific focus on university students is due to their capacity in shaping future professionals, entrepreneurs, and learners. By identifying their preferred leadership style, universities can establish relevant leadership programs that correspond with their expectations and strengths. In addition, the results, based on a model derived from Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), provide both empirical evidence and theoretical justification.

For the first hypothesis, the findings indicate that transformational leadership has a positive impact on students' academic performance. It can relate to the propositions of FRLT, which states that those who portray the qualities of transformational leaders can create enthusiasm, intellectual arousal, and individual pull, which is relevant to the student learning process. Maqbool et al. (2024) and Al-Aamri et al. (2024) also supported the significance of transformational leadership in promoting educational success in Malaysia. This suggests that students who exhibit high transformational leadership characteristics are more likely to perform well academically, as previous studies have found (Buil et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2018). Perhaps, with idealized influence, transformational student leaders can foster trust and respect among their peers, thereby emphasizing the importance of collective knowledge and shared goals (Khan et al., 2020; Mickson et al., 2021). Students with these attributes can develop a cooperative and team-oriented environment, motivating their peers to work creatively and diligently to achieve outstanding team performance. This, in turn, shapes organizational goals and fosters a positive dedication to achieving better academic results.

Similar findings were reported for the second hypothesis. Task-oriented leadership also positively impacts the students' academic performance. This finding aligns with the FRLT component of transactional or directive leadership, where clear goals and structured environments are essential for enhancing performance. In line with SDT, task-oriented leadership satisfies the need for competence by providing clarity and consistency in expectations, which might influence students to organize their learning effectively and remain focused on academic goals. The evidence also demonstrates that the higher the level of task-oriented leadership, the higher the academic performance. These observations are consistent with Alvi and Rana (2019) and Even and BenDavid-Hadar (2021), who found task-oriented leadership beneficial for academic environments that demand structured guidance. Perhaps, this leadership orientation helps them to clarify work tasks and set higher performance criteria. Task-oriented leaders drive the formation of a strong sense of self-achievement, which motivates students to achieve their goals. They practice unique direction-specific guidance, set particular performance standards, and focus on rules and regulations for subordinates throughout organizational processes (Saide et al., 2019). When students practice this type of leadership, they are inspired to learn while continuously fulfilling their tasks. In turn, they will strengthen their knowledge, skills, and abilities to execute responsibilities effectively and ultimately improve their academic performance.

For the third hypothesis, the outcomes indicate that people-oriented leadership has no significant effect on student performance. Although people-oriented leadership fulfills SDT's need for relatedness, its influence on academic outcomes appears limited in the current context. The respondents' demographic profiles likely influenced this unexpected outcome, as the

majority were second-semester students who tended to focus on their own learning rather than that of their peers (Ayish & Deveci, 2019). Another possible explanation is that while interpersonal support and relational dynamics are beneficial for emotional well-being, they may not directly drive academic performance unless combined with goal-setting and academic reinforcement. Botha and Aleme (2023) suggested that the effect of this style of leadership on academic performance will depend on the balance between relationship building and well-defined academic objectives, as well as active participation from peers. Otherwise, it is less effective for students. Gartzia and Baniandr s (2016) and Judge et al. (2004) similarly noted that this leadership style may emphasize social harmony over academic rigor, thus limiting its direct academic impact. This observation is further supported by Ayish and Deveci (2019), who found that Malaysian students often prioritize independent learning over group-centered activities.

People-oriented leadership can achieve not only the motivation of teachers, but also improve the climate in the organization. However, its impact on academic performance will depend on the balance between relationship building and well-defined academic objectives, as well as active participation.

Based on the results above, this study presents several scholarly contributions. Theoretically, the findings support the application of FRLT and SDT in higher education, particularly in understanding how different leadership styles fulfill specific motivational needs that drive academic performance. Practically, the results suggest that universities should integrate transformational and task-oriented elements into student leadership development programs while selectively incorporating people-oriented practices in contexts where emotional support and collaboration are vital.

Empirically, this study contributes to leadership and educational literature by validating a student-centered leadership-performance model in the Malaysian HEI context. It reinforces the idea that leadership styles are not uniformly effective; their impact depends on how they align with students' motivational structures and learning environments. Each style has its strengths and limitations, depending on the outcome (e.g., performance vs. emotional well-being), context (Malaysian HEI), and student characteristics.

Practically, universities or administrators in Malaysia can also foster and promote transformational and task-oriented leadership attributes within their institutions. Incorporating these two elements in a university's leadership programs is important for developing more resilient leaders in the future. Thus, this study concludes that no single leadership style works equally well in all situations, with all people, or for all desired outcomes.

Conclusion

Leadership significantly influences academic performance through regulations and standards by inspiring, motivating, and empowering students. Transformational, task-oriented, and people-oriented leadership styles may generate different results in terms of motivation, engagement, and overall learning outcomes. This study discusses university students' preferred leadership style and stresses the importance of developing effective leadership abilities in future leaders throughout their education. To foster these skills, universities should incorporate content on leadership theories, styles, and techniques within their curricula, ensuring that their students excel academically and develop the necessary leadership qualities for their future

careers. Educational leadership is not about managing students; rather, it is about guiding them towards their full potential. The appropriate leadership approach depends on the students' needs and learning environment. Overall, universities must prioritize future preparation over the attainment of high grades, a journey that significantly relies on effective leadership.

Notwithstanding the contributions of the present study, some limitations have also been identified, which could be addressed in future studies. Firstly, this study focuses solely on universities in Malaysia. Future studies may examine similar factors in other countries using a similar approach or compare two countries with somewhat different cultural origins and educational systems. Secondly, this study gathered data using questionnaires. Future research could employ a mixed-methods strategy, utilizing multiple data collection tools or a qualitative approach, depending on the topic. Such an approach may lead to a more in-depth understanding of the topic, along with valuable ethical insights. Additionally, future studies may expand the current research model by adding more independent variables or by incorporating moderating and/or mediating variables.

Declarations

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Not applicable.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics Approval

All participants in this study provided informed consent before participation. The purpose of the research, procedures, potential risks, and benefits were clearly explained, and participants voluntarily agreed to participate. Any personal data collected was handled with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic and research purposes. Consent was obtained in written/oral form following Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) ethical guidelines and relevant institutional requirements and adhered to the ethical standards set by the UiTM Research Ethics Committee (REC/07/2024 (ST/MR/128).

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