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The Moderating Role of Academic Position in the Relationship between Leadership Skills and the Workplace Engagement of Academic Staff: Evidence from Ethiopian Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the moderating role of academic position on leadership skills and workplace engagement among Ethiopian public universities. The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Data were collected from four public universities and 488 academic staff members. In addition, 18 academic leaders and staff members were purposefully sampled for qualitative interviewing. The multigroup analysis showed that leadership skills were statistically and positively associated with both groups: teachers without leadership positions ($\beta = 0.491$, $p < .001$) and teachers with leadership positions ($\beta = 0.427$, $p < .001$). There was a significant difference in the OLS→OWE path ($\Delta\chi^2$ (1) = 3.921, $p = .048$), indicating that the relationship between leadership skills and workplace engagement is significantly moderated by academic position. Leadership development initiatives should be deepened in public universities on the basis of human, conceptual, and technical skills, among other factors, while the differences in academic position should be considered.

Keywords: academic staff, academic position, leadership skills, moderation role, workplace engagement

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INTRODUCTION

In the last 20 years, higher education has undergone major changes worldwide. The world has evolved into an environment of rapid technological development, globalization, international competition, financial limitations, rising demands from key stakeholders, and growth in knowledge-based economies, all of which have changed the way universities operate (Zhang & Cao, 2024). Universities are no longer

expected to simply deliver education but are expected to produce knowledge as a product of their research, inspire innovation, engage in various aspects of community development, and actively participate in the economic development of their nation. In contrast to manufacturing organizations, where production is dependent mainly on technology and machines, universities are dependent mainly on the knowledge, creativity, innovation, and professional commitment of academic staff. This has created a pressing need to keep academic staff engaged in the workplace, which is among the greatest challenges facing higher education systems worldwide. In this context, one of the most important leadership abilities is identified as a dimension of employee engagement, which plays a vital role in terms of productivity, morale, and employee job satisfaction (ChaaCha, 2024; Ghani et al., 2023).

Employee engagement is the involvement of organizational members in the work they do, which includes cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement levels (Kahn, 1990). This helps create greater job satisfaction, good working relationships at work, and employee loyalty (Jo & Shin, 2025). However, disengagement leads to lower productivity, turnover, and institutional and organizational performance (Boccoli et al., 2022).

The most important factor in the workplace is leadership. Thus, the skill perspective of leadership, as suggested by [illegible], involves looking at the leader and concentrating on developing specific abilities, such as technical skills (knowledge and expertise of a particular type), human skills (interpersonal ability), and conceptual skills (strategic thinking) (Northouse, 2021). For higher education institutions, such as public universities, this model is especially applicable when leaders of academic institutions have to address complex academic situations and facilitate positive attitudes among workers in studying activities (Kasalak et al., 2022).

In this regard, the skill approach of leadership offers leadership as "skill acquisition" based on specific skills, including technical (specialized knowledge), human (interpersonal abilities), and conceptual skills (strategic thinking). This framework is applicable, especially in higher education, such as public universities, where academicians need to operate within intricate academic environments while promoting positive work attitudes among academics (Northouse, 2018, 2021).

On the one hand, universities are struggling with institutional problems; on the other hand, they are rapidly expanding throughout Africa. Over the past two decades, Africa has seen large-scale expansion in public universities to increase access to higher education and provide trained human resources for national development (Jowi, 2024). While this expansion has created academic opportunities, it has also brought with it a number of organizational challenges (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024). All these factors have been combined to determine the engagement of lecturers in most universities in Africa.

In Ethiopia, in particular, where higher education had one of the fastest rates of growth in Africa, this situation poses a special difficulty (Adane et al., 2024; Tareke et al., 2024). During the past two decades, Ethiopia has increased from a handful of public universities to more than 50 universities. This expansion has led to a considerable increase in opportunities for pursuing higher education but has also resulted in significant managerial and organizational problems (Tareke et al., 2024). Many universities continue to face a lack of qualified academic staff, limited institutional resources, reduced research productivity, high employee turnover, poor workplace morale, and low workplace engagement (Abebe & Assemie, 2023; Kidane et al., 2025).

Similarly, instances of broad disengagement have been reported among Ethiopian higher education institutions. A survey by Gallup (2023) revealed that in the Middle East and Africa (MEA) area, only 15% of employees were active in their jobs. In Ethiopia, Asmamaw and Semela (2023) reported that only 33% of employees were fully engaged, 53% were partially engaged, and 14% were completely disengaged. In addition, a report from the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2023) revealed that a noteworthy decrease in the engagement of academic staff in the workplace led to reduced turnover and low morale among academic staff.

While many studies have investigated leadership and employee engagement, most studies focus on specific leadership skills, but they are limited to transformational leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, ethical leadership and transactional leadership (Maheshwari & Kha, 2023; Santosa et al., 2025; Thanh & Quang, 2022). Similarly, no empirical research has considered the effects of the conceptual, human, and technical styles of leadership on all three aspects of workplace engagement, as proposed by Kahn (1990) conceptualization of conceptual, emotional, and physical engagement.

While a volume of literature on workplace engagement has emerged, several important gaps still exist. First, the empirical literature on leadership skills in workplace engagement, especially in higher education in Africa, is limited (Hillberg Jarl, 2024). Second, methodological approaches have largely used descriptive (models) methods, and sequential mixed-design models have been used for explanatory purposes. Third, the theoretical use of Kahn (1990) engagement frameworks to understand the leadership skills that improve engagement is not prevalent in the Ethiopian context.

Therefore, this study aimed to bridge these challenges by examining how academic position moderates the link between leadership skills and the workplace engagement of academic staff in Ethiopian public universities.

This study addressed the following research questions:

- To what extent do conceptual leadership skills influence the workplace engagement of academic staff?
- To what extent do human leadership skills influence the workplace engagement of academic staff?
- To what extent do technical conceptual leadership skills affect the workplace engagement of academic staff?
- Does academic position significantly moderate the relationship between leadership skills and workplace engagement among academic staff?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation of Workplace Engagement

Staff engagement is defined as the interaction of a complex set of individual psychological behaviors and organizational practices that can jointly increase employee performance satisfaction (Bakker, 2022). During role performance, engagement is the use of members' selves in a way that harnesses, as defined by Kahn (1990), cognitive, emotional and physical.

Cognitive workplace engagement refers to how much people think about their purpose, role, and job in the company; emotional involvement is related to how social they feel toward peers and superiors; and physical involvement refers to how much they engage in extra-role behaviors (Hameduddin & Lee, 2019).

Alternative conceptualizations involve, inter-alia, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which measures engagement as consisting of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Merino-Soto et al., 2022). Rich et al. (2010), however, reported that the Job Engagement Scale (JES), which is based on the Kahn (1990) framework, has high validity and reliability and is effective in complex organizations. This study is based on the framework of Kahn (1990) and the measurement tool JES, as these dimensions provide a complete picture of staff engagement in the academic environment (Kossyva et al., 2023).

Leadership Skills Approach

The skills approach to leadership is centered on the leader, concentrating on learning and enhancing the skills and abilities that a leader must have (Northouse, 2018; Sánchez et al., 2020). Thus,

(Northouse, 2018, 2021) classified leadership skills into three domains: technical (specialized knowledge and proficiency in specific methods or techniques), human (interpersonal abilities to work effectively with people), and conceptual (strategic thinking and ability to work with complex ideas).

It is considered a key characteristic of the skills approach in that they are fundamentally cognitive, meaning that they involve a person's capacity to devise and implement solutions to complex social problems (Sacavém et al., 2025). The leadership of higher education institutions is especially applicable to this model, as leaders must contend with a wide range of stakeholder interests, oversee resource management, ensure quality in academic programs, and promote faculty commitment (Hojeij, 2024; Rony et al., 2023; Ukeje et al., 2026).

Leadership Skills and Engagement

Previous studies have indicated that leadership ability is positively associated with employee work engagement (Abun et al., 2020). At the organizational level, a key to ensuring staff engagement is their connection and motivation toward staff with autonomy, competency, and relatedness, which is underlined by the role of effective leadership (Mazzetti et al., 2023; Rahmadani et al., 2020).

Empirical studies have shown that conceptual, technical, and human relation skills are key leadership skills for supporting the engagement of academic staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Albrecht et al., 2023). Atiku et al. (2024) reported that transformational and authentic leadership behaviors effectively influence cognitive, physical, and emotional engagement in higher education contexts. Transformational and authentic leadership behaviors have been found to be particularly effective at influencing cognitive, physical, and emotional engagement in higher education contexts (Atiku et al., 2024; Gemeda & Lee, 2020; Wang et al., 2024).

Academic Position as a Moderator of Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement

Although leadership skills positively influence workplace engagement, employees may experience this influence differently depending on their organizational characteristics. One important factor in higher education institutions is academic position, which reflects employees' formal rank and leadership responsibilities within the university (Hillberg Jarl, 2024; Riza et al., 2025)

In Ethiopian public universities, academic positions such as those of lecturers, department heads, deans, directors, vice presidents, and presidents differ in terms of authority, decision-making involvement, leadership exposure, and institutional responsibility. Employees in higher positions often participate more in strategic planning, governance, and organizational decision-making, whereas junior staff are more focused on teaching and research activities. These differences may shape how employees perceive leadership practices and how leadership skills influence their engagement (Wen & Harms, 2025).

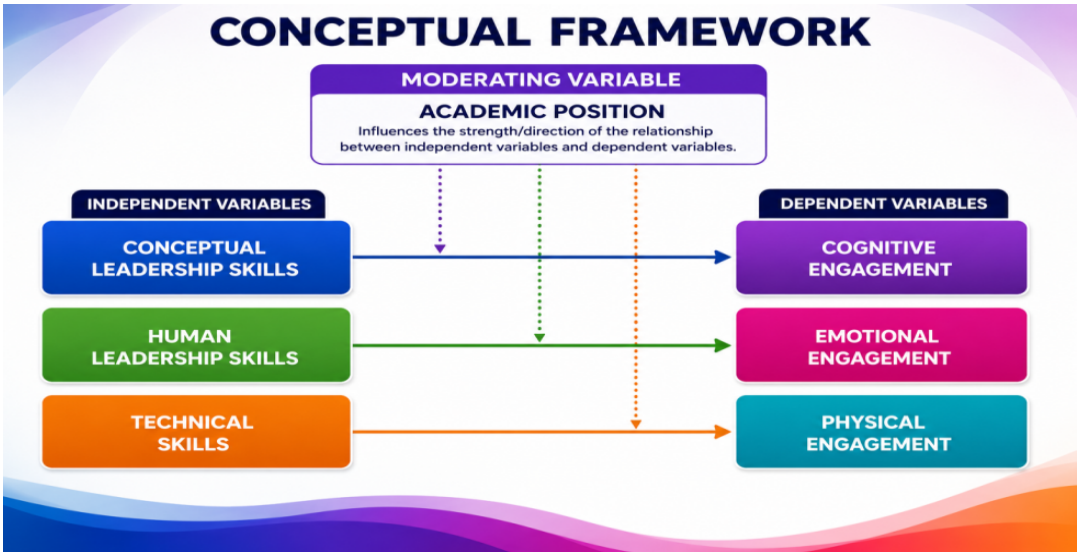
Conceptual Framework

On the basis of the skills approach developed by (Northouse, 2018, 2021) and Kahn (1990)'s engagement theory, the job demands–resources model, social exchange theory, and the empirical literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework in which leadership skills constitute the independent variables, workplace engagement represents the dependent variable, and academic position serves as a moderating variable (Figure 1). The framework assumes that conceptual, human, and technical leadership skills directly influence cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement in the workplace. Furthermore, academic position is hypothesized to moderate these relationships because academic staff with different organizational positions may perceive and respond differently to the leadership behaviors of their supervisors. Accordingly, conceptual, human, and technical skills are expected to positively

influence all three dimensions of workplace engagement, whereas academic position moderates the strength of these relationships.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Note. Adapted from (Northouse, 2018, 2021) and Kahn (1990).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Philosophy

This study employed a pragmatic approach in research philosophy, which was based on the ideals for using methodology that is suitable for solving the problem of the study and not only one of the two approaches in research, namely, positivist and interpretivist. Pragmatism acknowledges the complexity of organizational processes (such as leadership and engagement at work), which is why there must be objective measures of the process and contextual interpretation (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). Finally, quantitative and qualitative approaches were used together to offer a complete perspective on the moderating role of academic position in the relationship between leadership competencies and workplace engagement among academic staff.

Research Approach and Design

This study used a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design. The first phase collected quantitative data and analyzed them to identify the moderating effect of academic position on leadership skills and workplace engagement. The second phase involved qualitative elements, namely, interviews with selected academic leaders and staff to elaborate, clarify, and enrich the results of the quantitative elements.

The explanatory sequential design was found to be suitable because engagement is formed not only by organizational factors that can be measured but also by individual experiences, the culture of institutions, and leadership skills that must be qualitatively interpreted (Hasanzadeh & Haghkhah, 2026).

Target Population and Sample

The target population of this study included academic staff from four public universities in the Amhara region of Ethiopia. These include Bahir Dar University (first generation), Debre Markos University (second generation), Debre Tabor University (third generation), and Injibara University (fourth generation). The total academic staff population across these universities was 5,370 (MoE, 2023).

Accordingly, the sample size was calculated as $no=\frac{1.96^2}{0.05^2}(0.5)(0.5) = \frac{3.8416}{0.0025}0.25 = 384.16 \approx 384$. The preliminary sample size was calculated with a confidence level of 95% (Z = 1.96), a maximum variability of p = 0.5 and q = 0.5, and a maximum margin of error of 5%. $n_0 = 384$.

The Cochran (1977) formula was preferred for determining size because of its effectiveness with large populations, flexibility in handling different proportions, and adjustability for desired precision levels. In this sense, the target population (four universities) was approximated to include 5,370 academic staff. Accordingly, the sample size was adjusted using the Cochran (1977) finite population correction formula, and the sample units were calculated based on a target population of 5,370 academic staff members. Thus, it was calculated as follows:

$$n=\frac{no}{1+\frac{n0-1}{N}} = \frac{384}{1+\frac{384-1}{5,370}} = 358.59 \approx 359$$

The recommended design effect was 1.5 for the multistage sampling design. Therefore, the approximate number of samples to be collected was 359 x 1.5=539. The target sample size was 539 respondents. However, 488 completed questionnaires were returned and included in the final analysis, yielding a response rate of 90.5%.

For the qualitative data, 18 academic staff members (six from each university) were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews, ensuring representation across gender, academic rank, and position.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The questionnaire was content-validated by experts in educational leadership, organizational behavior and research methodology before the primary survey was conducted.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test construct validity with AMOS software. The standardized factor loadings exceeded the criterion of 0.5, indicating that the observed indicators were suitable for representing the latent constructs (Ishiyaku et al., 2017).

Internal consistency reliability was determined by inspecting Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR). All the constructs showed satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha coefficient > 0.70), which was calculated for both items. All the constructs had a Cronbach's alpha value higher than 0.7, which indicates satisfactory internal consistency. The composite reliability was more than 0.70, and average variance extracted scores above 0.50 indicated good convergent validity.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 26 and IBM SPSS AMOS Version 23. Data screening included the examination of missing values, outliers, normality, multicollinearity, and common method bias. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the study participants.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to assess the adequacy of the measurement model. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was subsequently employed to examine the direct effects of conceptual, human, and technical leadership skills on cognitive, emotional, and physical workplace engagement.

The moderating effect of academic position was examined using multigroup structural equation modeling by comparing constrained and unconstrained models across academic position categories. Statistical significance was set at the 5% significance level.

The qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The interview transcripts were coded, categorized into themes, and integrated with the quantitative findings to provide contextual explanations for the observed statistical relationships.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

A total of 488 respondents participated in this study. Most of the respondents were men (69.7%) because of the gender imbalance in Ethiopia's higher education sector. The vast majority of the respondents were married (84.4%), and this may be regarded as a work-life balance. Most (65.2%) were Masters, and 31.8% had Ph.D. qualifications, demonstrating a well-qualified workforce in education. Professionally, there was low representation of lecturers and assistant professors, as opposed to high rates of assistant lecturers and professors; most were at the junior end, with 46.1% being lecturers and 38.5% assistant professors. Most were in the middle tier of experience (6–10 years, 68.9% mostly mid-career), some were in leadership positions, and most were teachers (likely dual role demands), which affected engagement.

Effects of Leadership Skills on Workplace Engagement

Before the results of the structural model, the model fitness indices were calculated to assess the model fitness to the observed data and determine whether the proposed SEM was a proper fit for the observed data. The results of the model fit assessment are presented below.

Model fit indices: The overall fit of the model can be assessed, which indicates that the proposed model provides a good to excellent fit with the observed data. The chi-square value was significant (χ^2 = 818.886, $p < .001$); however, the chi-square tends to be very sensitive to sample size, and multiple fit indices were used. The chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (CMIN/DF = 1.407) was very close to the chi-square ratio minimum of 1.6, indicating an excellent fit.

The discrepancies between the absolute fit indices are evidence of model adequacy. The values of the goodness-of-fit index and Akizuchi goodness-of-fit index (0.917 and 0.905, respectively) are greater than the accepted value of 0.90, indicating that the model fits the observed covariance structure fairly well. Furthermore, the low RMR value (0.024) indicates that the difference between the observed and estimated relationships is very small.

The incremental fit indices also agree with the appropriateness of the model. The NFI was near the recommended 0.90 level of 0.882 but was slightly below. The IFI (0.963), TLI (0.959), and CFI (0.962) values for the proposed model were equal to or greater than 0.95, indicating excellent comparative fit with the independent model.

The RMSEA value was 0.029; therefore, the degree of approximation according to the data was excellent, and the intervals of the 90% confidence interval (0.024–0.033) were still in the range proposed as good. The PCLOSE value (1.000) indicates that it is a close-fitting model. The parsimony indices (PNFI = 0.815 and PCFI = 0.889) show that the model fits well with the number of parameters.

Finally, the comparison and stability analysis of the models indicate the reliability of the proposed model. The relatively low values of AIC (986.886) and ECVI (2.026) confirm that the model has good efficiency compared with the other models, and the value of the Hoelter critical N is 381, which means that it is very stable for samples.

Academic Position as a Moderating Role between Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement

Measurement Invariance Testing

Strong evidence for the multigroup moderation analysis was provided by the full measurement invariance (MI) testing procedure that employs multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MG-CFA). Invariance was evaluated according to the ΔCFI criterion, with a value of < 0.01 being regarded as invariance (Chen, 2007). The fit of the configural model was acceptable (CFI: 0.935; RMSEA: 0.027), suggesting that there is a common factor structure across the two groups of academic positions. The model that executed the metric (weak) invariance of factor loadings (CFI = 0.930) showed a negligible difference in fit between the original and constrained models (ΔCFI = 0.005). This finding indicates that the latent constructs are mapped onto the same measurement scale among groups; thus, the comparison of the structural paths (moderation effects) is appropriate. Moreover, it constrained item intercepts to test the scalar (strong) invariance of the model. This model fit was acceptable (CFI = 0.925), with a ΔCFI of 0.005 above the metric model, for which scalar invariance is supported. These findings further support the methodological rigor of the analysis and provide evidence that valid latent mean comparisons can be conducted. Strict invariance was not supported (ΔCFI = 0.038).

Multigroup Analysis

A review of the results of the structural path analysis revealed that there were similarities and differences between teachers without leadership positions and teachers with leadership positions (Table 1). The effects of teachers' conceptual skills on leadership skills on cognitive engagement (β = 0.205, p = .033) were significant, whereas they were not significant for emotional (β = 0.116, p = .219) or physical (β = 0.140, p = .150) engagement. Similarly, human skills significantly predicted cognitive engagement (β = 0.238, p = .026), emotional engagement (β = 0.343, p = .002), and physical engagement (β = 0.355, p = .004). For physical engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement, none of the technical skills variables were significant (β = .088, p = .406; β = .044, p = .673; β = .044, p = .673, respectively). For the teacher without leadership position group, conceptual skills significantly positively predicted emotional engagement (β = 0.273, p < .001) and cognitive engagement (β = 0.273, p < .001); however, conceptual skills did not significantly affect physical engagement (β = 0.079, p = .201). Human skills also had significant positive effects on cognitive engagement (β = 0.196, p = .004), emotional engagement (β = 0.432, p < .001), and physical engagement (β = 0.307, p < .001). In addition, physical engagement was significantly predicted by technical skills (β = 0.212, p = .002), whereas the effect of technical skills on emotional and cognitive engagement was not statistically significant (both p > .05).

Table 1

Standardized Structural Regression Estimates between Academic Position Groups

Structural Path	Teachers with Leadership Position β	p value	Teacher Leaders Only β	p value
Cognitive ← Conceptual	0.205	.033*	0.273	***
Emotional ← Conceptual	0.116	.219	0.273	***
Physical ← Conceptual	0.140	.150	0.079	.201
Cognitive ← Human	0.238	.026*	0.196	.004**
Emotional ← Human	0.343	.002**	0.432	***
Physical ← Human	0.355	.004**	0.307	***
Physical ← Technical	0.088	.406	0.212	.002**
Emotional ← Technical	0.044	.673	0.043	.503
Cognitive ← Technical	0.044	.673	0.109	.121

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient; p = p-value. “Teachers with Leadership Position” refers to teachers holding leadership positions, while “Teacher Leaders Only” refers to teachers in teacher leadership roles.

Moderating Role of Academic Position

Multigroup structural equation modeling was used to explore the moderating role of academic position. Overall leadership skills were positively and significantly correlated with overall workplace engagement for teachers in leadership positions ($\beta = 0.491$, $p < .001$), as evidenced in Table 2. Again, the statistical relationships between the OLS and OWE variables were statistically significant and positive ($\beta = 0.427$, $p < 0.001$) for teachers holding leadership positions, and leadership skills were also found to be positively associated with workplace engagement among teachers in leadership positions.

A formal test of equality between groups was carried out by fixing the OLS→ OWE path to be equal on both groups of subjects (equal to a random intercept) for the academic-position groups. The unconstrained model and the structural-weights model gave an edge difference of (χ^2 (1) = 3.921, p = .048), which was statistically significant. Given that the p value is less than the conventional 0.05 limit, the equality constraint was rejected, and it was concluded that the strength of the relationship between OLS and OWE varies with academic rank. Among the variance in workplace engagement, leadership skills statistically explained a greater proportion of the variance in both Group 1 (teachers without leadership positions, $\beta = 0.491$) and Group 2 (teachers with leadership positions, $\beta = 0.427$).

Table 2

Formal Group Difference Test

Academic position		B	SE	β	CR	p	Moderation test
Without leadership position	OLS → OWE	0.493	0.048	0.491	10.271	***	
With leadership position	OLS → OWE	0.356	0.053	0.427	6.717	***	
Between-group equality test	OLS → OWE constrained equal						$\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.921$, p = .048

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized regression coefficient; CR = critical ratio; p = p-value.

Discussion of Findings

Conceptual Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement among Academic Staff

The first research question focused on how "conceptual" leadership skills are related to academic staff in their workplaces. The results suggest that conceptual leadership positively and significantly influences cognitive engagement on the job and has a statistically significant effect on emotional engagement but not on the physical component of workplace engagement.

Specifically, cognitive and emotional engagement were strongly predicted by conceptual leadership skills ($\beta = 0.222$, $p < .001$; $\beta = 0.199$, $p < .001$).

Previous research on leadership has focused on leadership and cognition, which explains the positive connection between conceptual skills and cognitive engagement that is observed, and these abilities involve the ability to make meaning promote strategic understanding and encourage intellectual involvement among employees (Iso-Ahola, 2024; Maricuțoiu et al., 2017; Mazzetti et al., 2023; Northouse, 2021; Serrano et al., 2026). Academic staff members are knowledge workers whose involvement is strongly linked to having a sense of direction and feeling that they are contributing to the institution and making a difference in the work.

Academic leaders who clearly establish a vision and understand the strategy are more likely to make staff feel that they are part of the institution, committed, and emotionally connected to institutional

objectives. This discovery is consistent with Kahn (1990) engagement theory, in which he stated that an employee becomes psychologically engaged by their perception of work as meaningful, safe, and personally rewarding. (KI-3) stated, *"When department heads tell them the 'big picture', relate what they do to the institutional needs, and support them in thinking ahead about what might be challenging, it makes them more focused and dedicated to making a meaningful contribution"* (KI-3, personal communication, August 2025). In general, leadership support was sometimes reactive in nature rather than proactive, meaning that leaders have strategic awareness but would require effective mechanisms for it to be provided and for it to then bring about behavioral engagement throughout the organization (Al-Omari, 2026).

Human Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement among Academic Staff

The second research question concerned the impact of human skills on workplace engagement within an academic work environment. According to this study, human leadership skills consistently had the greatest impact across all areas of workplace engagement across all the considered leadership dimensions.

The results indicated that human leadership skills significantly predicted cognitive ($\beta = 0.195$, $p < .001$), emotional ($\beta = 0.374$, $p < .001$), and physical ($\beta = 0.295$, $p < .001$) engagement. Human leadership skills had the greatest impact on emotional engagement ($\beta = 0.374$), and human leadership skills were the most influential on the basis of the relationship between each component and the involvement of academic staff.

The results add weight to the literature that suggests that relational leadership behaviors are used to constitute employee engagement. The job demands–resources (JD–R) model shows that supportive leadership is a crucial job resource to increase employee motivation and lower barriers to them in the workplace and to strengthen their motivational involvement in the job (Afrahi et al., 2022; Alam & Mohanty, 2024; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

The qualitative results overwhelmingly confirm the quantitative findings. A total of 78% of the respondents reported that they believed that psychological safety is a key element in their ability to engage in intellectual work and innovation. KI-7 commented, *"Trust and enthusiasm within the team are established through regular care for people; if this is not done, then the emotional bond is lost rapidly with the leaders"* (personal communication, August 2025). This revelation shows how the human way of behaviors motivates academic staff to be confident in expressing ideas, communicate to be involved in research activities without fear, and share concerns and contribute creatively.

The leadership role mainly covers human leadership abilities, which is consistent with past studies showing that emotionally intelligent and supportive leadership is strongly related to employees' engagement, organizational commitment, and innovative behavior (Abbas et al., 2026; Mazzetti et al., 2023; Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022). Interpersonal leadership skills might be more important than technical expertise in higher education settings, where professionals are given great latitude to exercise their professional judgment and develop their own professional skills.

Therefore, these findings are strongly supported. The highest leadership dimension affecting academic staff engagement in the workplace is human leadership skills.

Technical Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement among Academic Staff

The third research question explored the impact of technical leadership skills on workplace engagement among academic professionals. The results show that the influence of technical leadership skills is less general and comprehensive than that of human and conceptual leadership skills.

The results showed that the degree of technical leadership skills had a significant effect on physical engagement ($\beta = 0.178$, $p = 0.002$). However, neither cognitive ($\beta = 0.110$, $p = 0.060$) nor

emotional (β = 0.052, p = 0.345) engagement was significantly predicted by technical leadership skills. Technical leadership skills have a highly noticeable effect on physical involvement in relation to academic staff, which means that leaders with good technical skills can help increase academic staff involvement by fostering effective working conditions and minimizing operational issues. ChaaCha (2024) support this finding since the understanding of institutional procedures by leaders, the provision of appropriate resources, and the efficient solving of practical problems enables academic staff to carry out their teaching, research, and service roles successfully.

As noted by (KI-8), *"Technical skills are rarely apparent unless they are missing, causing delays and conflicts, and requiring additional work on the staff's part to make up for them"* (personal communication, August 2025. This interpretation is well supported by the qualitative results. Eighty-five percent of the participants noted the technical expertise of leaders as a key factor in creating a climate conducive to and supportive of ongoing physical participation. This discovery highlights the principal ways in which technical leadership can impact academic staff by enabling the environment required for the successful completion of academic staff duties.

The Moderating Role of Academic Position on Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement

The fourth research question focused on whether academic staff who participated in a change in academic position, compared with their pre-position equivalents, had different levels of engagement in their workplace and whether this variable moderated the relationship between leadership skills and workplace engagement.

The results showed that overall leadership skills were positively and significantly correlated with overall workplace engagement for teachers in leadership roles (β = 0.491, p < .001). This means that in this group, more leadership skills led to higher means of workplace engagement. Again, the statistical relationships between the OLS and OWE variables were statistically significant and positive (β = 0.427, p < 0.001) for teachers holding leadership positions, and leadership skills were also found to be positively associated with workplace engagement among teachers in leadership positions.

The unconstrained model and the structural-weights model gave an edge difference of (χ^2 (1) = 3.921, p = .048), which was statistically significant. Given that the p value is less than the conventional 0.05 limit, the equality constraint was rejected; thus, it is concluded that the intensity of the relationship between OLS and OWE varies with academic rank. Among the variance in workplace engagement, leadership skills statistically explained a greater proportion of the variance in both Group 1 (teachers without leadership positions, B = 0.491) and Group 2 (teachers with leadership positions, B = 0.427). Thus, the results offer statistical support for the moderating effect of academic position in relation to the correlation between organizational leadership skills and workplace engagement. The quantitative result is supported by the interview participant (KI-7) explained,

> If you are our leaders, a lot of the job is already done for you; it is shaped by policy and committee and is still the same as it was under any other leader. However, for teachers who do not have administrative tasks, having a supportive and able leader is immensely important, as they feel informed, inspired, and integrated. (KI-2, personal communication, August 2025)

The differences indicate that there are more varied experiences and applications of leadership resources in higher education institutions than there would be if there were no organizational differences. Academic staff's perceptions of leadership behaviors often vary depending on their responsibilities, opportunities, and expectations of involvement.

These findings lend weight to the idea of the JD–R model, according to which contextual factors can impact how personal resources lead to positive work outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; ChaaCha, 2024; Kahn, 1990).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that leadership skills are significant predictors of workplace engagement among academic staff. However, the influence of leadership skills is multidimensional and depends on the specific type of leadership capability and the organizational context in which it is practiced. The findings demonstrate that leadership effectiveness in higher education is not determined by a single leadership attribute but by the combined contributions of human, conceptual, and technical leadership capabilities.

Human leadership skills have emerged as the strongest predictors of workplace engagement, particularly in terms of emotional engagement. These findings indicate that academic staff engagement is strongly influenced by interpersonal relationships, psychological safety, trust, communication, and supportive leadership behaviors. Leaders who demonstrate empathy, fairness, respect, and effective interpersonal skills are more likely to create a positive academic environment in which staff members feel valued, motivated, and emotionally connected to their institutions.

Conceptual leadership skills also significantly enhance cognitive and emotional engagement by providing direction, meaning, strategic understanding, and a shared institutional vision. These findings highlight the importance of leaders' ability to communicate broader organizational goals and help academic staff understand how their individual roles contribute to institutional success. However, conceptual leadership capabilities alone are insufficient to generate behavioral engagement without adequate operational support and effective implementation mechanisms.

Technical leadership skills contribute mainly to physical engagement by reducing operational barriers, improving work processes, and facilitating effective academic performance. Although technical competence is necessary to support academic activities, the findings indicate that it has a limited direct influence on cognitive and emotional engagement. Therefore, technical leadership should be integrated with human and conceptual leadership approaches to achieve comprehensive engagement.

Overall, this study demonstrates that effective leadership in higher education requires a balanced combination of interpersonal, strategic, and operational capabilities. Therefore, universities seeking to improve academic staff engagement should focus on developing leaders who can build supportive relationships, provide strategic direction, and remove the practical barriers that limit staff performance. The findings emphasize that leadership development should be context sensitive and aligned with the realities of academic work environments.

Recommendations

Improving Human Leadership Development

Universities need to prioritize programs for human leadership development, which reinforces human leadership skills among academic leaders. Leadership development efforts should focus more on relational competence and the tendency to foster supportive academic environments, especially when human leadership has the greatest influence on workplace engagement, specifically emotional engagement.

Provide Continuous Professional Development in Strategic and Conceptual Leadership Capacity

Academic leaders should be nurtured with continuous professional development on concepts of leadership, such as strategic planning, vision for institutions, change management, systems thinking, and organizational analysis.

Increased Technical Leadership Support

Universities should develop leaders in terms of the technical aspects of digital academic systems, research management, administrative processes, the coordination of resources, and problem solving in situations related to system operation.

Practice Position-Specific Leadership Approaches

Academic positions play a key role in moderating the link between leadership and workplace engagement; therefore, universities need to design their leadership approaches differently on the basis of the needs of various groups of academics, such as department heads, senior and junior academics, and teaching staff.

Encourage Psychological Safety

Universities should do more to foster a culture of psychological safety in the academic setting, as revealed by the qualitative findings. Academic leaders should ensure that academic members are not restricted from airing ideas, talking about problems openly, contributing ideas for decision making, and coming up with innovations without facing criticism or negative outcomes.

Future Research Directions

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how leadership practices influence employee engagement over time, providing insights into the sustainability of leadership effects. Additionally, assessing the long-term impact of leadership development programs through rigorous evaluations would help determine their effectiveness in enhancing engagement. Action research models may also be employed, allowing interventions to be implemented, evaluated, and refined before being scaled across organizations. Furthermore, investigating the role of digital transformation in shaping the relationship between leadership and engagement could reveal how technology-driven changes affect employee motivation and commitment.

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