

Enhancing Service Quality and Job Satisfaction: A Framework for Transformational Leadership in Higher Education Context

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Abstract: Leaders practicing transformational leadership tend to have more committed and satisfied employees as they motivate employees to do more, and support their personal development. However, little is known about the relationships among transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and service quality in the higher education context. The purpose of this paper was to propose a conceptual framework on the mediating effect of job satisfaction on the relationship between transformational leadership and service quality based on past research, particularly in the higher education context. The proposed conceptual framework was developed based on a literature review on transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and service quality. Findings suggested that transformational leadership positively influences service quality via the mediating effect of job satisfaction in the higher education context. By proposing that transformational leadership affects service quality via job satisfaction, this study's proposed framework lays a strong foundation for the expansion of the transformational leadership knowledge base as well as for future theory development and debate.

Keywords: Conceptual framework, Higher education, Job satisfaction, Service quality, Transformational leadership

1. Introduction

As the landscape of higher education (HE) changes extensively, encompassing multifaceted dimensions, higher educational institutions (HEIs) have to continuously balance and fulfil the needs of various stakeholders from the *glonacal* – global, national, and local – market (Chan, 2018). In other words, HEIs, as local organisations, must respond to national policies efficiently, and utilise governmental support effectively so that they can compete at the global level (Xu et al., 2023). It is essential to keep in mind that the objective of the educational endeavour is to actively engage in expert-driven efforts to serve students and communities, consistently striving to improve and enhance approaches to achieve this goal through continuous learning (Raaper & Brown, 2020).

One strategy to accomplish the aforementioned objective is by imparting contemporary knowledge and skills to students, enabling them to remain competitive in the ever-evolving employment market (Ahmad et al., 2021). Nevertheless, evaluating the quality of HEIs constitutes a multidimensional endeavour, necessitating consideration of non-academic factors such as student service administration (Abdullah, 2005), extracurricular activities (Latif et al., 2019), and facility standards (Teeroovengadam et al., 2016). Meanwhile, during certain times, such as the COVID-19

pandemic, the student support service on HEI campuses becomes even more crucial (Raaper & Brown, 2020). To address these shifts and challenges, the HEI leaders are responsible in considering what services to provide, and how to ensure service quality. This requires effective leadership practices.

One of such effective forms of leadership is transformational leadership, one of the leading theories among educational leadership studies (Adams, 2023; Northouse, 2016; Sathiyaseelan, 2023). It has been proven as an effective leadership style for enhanced service quality in HEIs (Wijaya et al., 2019; Che Omar et al., 2019; Papanthymou & Darra, 2017). However, its influence on service quality tends to be indirect (Angriani et al., 2020; Su et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2021).

This study examined job satisfaction as a mediator for the following two reasons. First, transformational leadership stands out as a promising approach for leaders to achieve high levels of employee job satisfaction as it prioritises individual attention, and relationship cultivation, thereby fulfilling employees' individual and relational needs (Jameel & Ahmad, 2019; Northouse, 2016). Second, job satisfaction is an influential factor of service quality in the HE context since it is closely related to employees' job performance and turnover rate (Arokiasamy & Huam, 2019; Al Kuwaiti et al., 2020). The job satisfaction of especially high-level employees increases job performance, and decreases turnover rate because their needs are met in their jobs, including physiological status, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation (Staempfli & Lamarque, 2020).

However, there is a lack of studies examining the dynamic relationships among transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and service quality in the HE context. To bridge this gap, this article aimed to propose a conceptual framework that examines the mediating effect of job satisfaction on the relationship between transformational leadership and service quality based on reviewed theories and empirical studies. Thus, this article draws attention to the interaction between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and service quality in the HE context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transformational Leadership

The concept of transformational leadership was initially introduced by Burns (1978) as a process in which "leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation" (p. 1). Consequently, factors such as trust, integrity, and honesty are important in its practice (Burns, 1978). Bass (1985) extended transformational leadership by comparing its psychological mechanism with transactional leadership. Under the influence of transformational leaders, followers are willing to do more than what they are expected to because the leaders redefine the meaning of working, for the followers and for themselves, which goes beyond the fulfilment of an individual's self-interest to personal achievements, and group interest (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Northouse, 2016).

According to Avolio and Bass (2004), transformational leadership is conceptualised by five dimensions. Idealised influence (attributes) reflects whether leaders actively assume risks together with their followers, and consistently demonstrate behaviours aligned with fundamental ethics, principles, and values. Idealised influence (behaviours) reflects the leaders' behaviours that foster a shared understanding of the organisation's mission and values, while actively putting these values into action. Inspirational motivation refers to leaders' behaviours of motivating followers, and conveying a clear purpose and challenge to them. Intellectual stimulation is their ability to stimulate their followers to question assumptions, reconstruct problems, and develop new approaches to solve old issues. Finally, individualised consideration is the leaders' attention to the needs, growth, achievements, and individual differences of their followers.

Accumulated evidence has indicated a positive correlation between transformational leadership and work attitudes and behaviour at both the individual and organisational levels (Adams et al., 2023; Karacabey et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2020). Evidence proving that transformational leadership is valuable in the HE context has also been found (Mahzan & Mohd. Nordin, 2021; Othman & Hamid, 2023). First, transformational leaders turn goals and challenges into actions by offering and sharing their visions with their followers (Adams et al., 2020; Juhro & Aulia, 2018). Andersen et al. (2018) studied the relationship between transformational leadership and motivation, and discovered that both sharing and maintaining visions contribute to promoting employees' motivation. Juhro and Aulia (2018) discovered

a new value to vision sharing, which was transforming challenges to visions and actions. Thus, the three acts of sharing, maintaining, and effectively communicating visions emerge as indispensable for transformational leaders in garnering unwavering commitment from their followers.

Second, in the present, ever-changing work landscape, employees consistently desire a certain level of autonomy within their workplace (Nguyen, 2020). Transformational leaders create autonomy for themselves, and their team members by encouraging all participants to be involved in a free and flexible decision-making process (Sathiyaseelan, 2023). In the study of Siddique and Nawaz (2019), a mutual and positive relationship was found between transformational leadership and participative decision making in the HE context. Meanwhile, transformational leaders appreciate their employees' creativity. Owusu-Agyeman (2021) found that decision making was one of the factors in promoting HE administrative staff's participation in the process, during which their innovative behaviours were positively related to all dimensions of transformational leadership. In the field of education, innovation is critical for improvement and sustainable development as it collectively drives positive change in schools and beyond (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Third, the implementation of the transformational leadership theory enables HEIs to better manage the changes encountered. According to Juhro and Aulia (2018), the current world is full of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA world), which requires leadership to be ready and capable of transferring challenges to a clear vision and response. They compared the characteristics of transformational leadership and transactional leadership, and discovered that it is the transformational leaders who were more agile and adaptive than transitional leaders since they were more willing to learn and deal with problems from different perspectives (Juhro & Aulia, 2018). Meanwhile, Sathiyaseelan (2023) made the same conclusion that, because transformational leaders hold a holistic and global perspective when managing changes, they are able to respond to changes effectively and promptly (Sathiyaseelan, 2023).

Based on the above-mentioned illustrations, it can be stated that the advantages of practicing transformational leadership are interconnected. Coupled with the emphasis on individual attention and relationship cultivation, transformational leadership tends to be a dynamic process that motivates followers to be willing to perform better (Adams, 2018). Hence, through the adoption of transformational leadership, organisations, and their members—both leaders and employees—engage in a virtuous cycle. This cycle involves generating and sharing visions, addressing challenges, fostering motivation, enhancing job performance, and experiencing satisfaction (Akdere & Egan, 2020). Collectively, these elements contribute to enhancing organisational effectiveness, thereby facilitating the attainment of common goals (Dwivedi et al., 2020).

2.2 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is an essential factor in influencing employees' overall experience of their jobs, and attitudes toward them. It refers to "the favourable or unfavourable feelings that individuals have toward their work or work environment, resulting from an evaluation of their job or job experiences" (Dutta & Sahney, 2016, p. 945). Employees who are satisfied with their jobs tend to perform better than dissatisfied employees (Arokiasamy & Huam, 2019). In contrast, dissatisfied employees appear to encounter more work stress, have higher turnover intentions that lead to actual turnover, and even suffer from mental health issues (Qiu et al., 2021).

Locke (1969, p. 316) defined job satisfaction and dissatisfaction as "a function of the perceived relationship between what one wants from one's job, and what one perceives it as offering or entailing." He also argues that job satisfaction is driven by job attitudes. There are three major factors affecting job attitudes: "discrepancies between what the job offers and what the person expects", "the degree to which jobs fulfil individual needs", or "the degree to which individual values (desires or wants) are fulfilled" (Spector, 1985, p. 695).

Meanwhile, Locke (1969) also emphasised the concept of values, and distinguished it with the concept of needs. According to him, every individual has needs; however, individuals place different values, or levels of importance, on different factors. This is also one reason why Locke criticised some theorists, such as Herzberg (1966), stating that they only included the concept of needs without considering individual differences (Malik & Naeem, 2013). Hence, as Locke (1969) concluded himself, "[w]hether or not a man's values correspond to needs, it is the value which regulates his actions and

determines his emotional responses” (p. 321), amounting to the key difference between his job satisfaction theory and others.

Spector (2022) conceptualised job satisfaction by nine dimensions. The equity of pay is considered as one key factor of job satisfaction (Tremblay et al., 2013) as employees’ satisfaction with their rate of pay affects their attitude toward and participation in their jobs (Al-Ali et al., 2019). Promotion refers to the given opportunity that transfers an employee from one post to another with more responsibilities (Zhang et al., 2020). Supervision is the employees’ attitude toward their immediate supervisor (Spector, 2022). Fringe benefits can be defined as the compensation given from employers to employees, which could be monetary and non-monetary (Yoon & Khan, 2020; Spector, 2022) whereas contingent rewards denote appreciation, recognition, and rewards for an employee’s good work (Spector, 2022).

Another dimension is operating procedures, referring to the policies/rules, and required procedures (Spector, 2022). Co-workers refer to the people whom the employees work with (Spector, 2022). Nature of work is an employee’s day-to-day duties, and the environment in which they are performed (Pfister et al., 2020). Lastly, communication refers to both formal and informal communication that can increase the level of commitment, and enhance positive relationships among organisational personnel (Batugal & Tindowen, 2019).

In the HE context, job satisfaction tends to be studied in two groups of employees: academic and administrative staff. Al Kuwaiti et al. (2020) evaluated job satisfaction among health and science faculty members at a HEI in Saudi Arabia. They found that the faculty members had a medium level of satisfaction in their salary, but had high levels in other dimensions (Al Kuwaiti et al., 2020). However, salary still predicted overall job satisfaction the most, indicating that such job dissatisfiers are also significant in evaluating employees’ job satisfaction (Al Kuwaiti et al., 2020).

Berrío-Ríos et al. (2021) investigated the predictors of job satisfaction among administrative staff at a HEI in Columbia. As a result, seniority, sex, type of relationship, and age were the sociodemographic factors that influenced job satisfaction among administrative staff. For example, the female administrative staff tended to express higher satisfaction levels compared to their male counterparts regarding their relationships with leaders and colleagues (Berrío-Ríos et al., 2021). Factors related to the job and the organisation, such as tasks, management styles of leaders, behaviours of colleagues, and collaborative approaches between both leaders and colleagues presented high-level job satisfaction among administrative staff (Berrío-Ríos et al., 2021).

2.3 Service Quality

Service quality of HEIs refers to the extent of providing students with an excellent campus learning experience, involving academic and extracurricular activities, administrative support, and facilities (Latif et al., 2019). By this definition, the services provided by HEIs appear to have two distinguished characteristics compared to other service organisations. First, measuring a HEI’s service quality is a multidimensional task. HEIs provide services by various means, and the fulfilment of one aspect of students’ demands cannot represent their overall service quality (Latif et al., 2019). Second, it is highly debatable that students are the customers of these HEIs. Although students are increasingly considered so, a product-based quality measurement is inappropriate because they are participants in the process of service delivery, and their learning efforts also determine the quality of the service outcome (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020).

Therefore, defining HE services is a complex and subjective task (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020). As it is challenging to even elucidate the entirety of HE services students can receive, student perceptions and expectations of these services are thus hard to measure. In that case, service quality is only the service performance instead of the gap between customer expectations and service perception. Thus, the attitude theory is appropriate in measuring service quality in the HE context.

The attitude theory was developed by Bolton and Drew (1991), which was based on the assumption that service quality is similar to attitudes. Based on the attitude theory, Cronin and Taylor (1992) argued that “perceived service quality is best conceptualised as an attitude” and “current performance adequately captures consumers’ perceptions of the service quality offered by a specific service provider” (p. 58), which formed their assumption that service quality is only the perception of

performance ($SQ = P$). Thus, since the attitude theory argues that service quality is the customers' attitude, service performance is the only factor to consider when measuring service quality.

2.4 Transformational Leadership and Job Satisfaction

The impact of various leadership approaches on job satisfaction has been studied in the HE context, such as servant leadership (Dahleez & Aboramadan, 2022), transactional leadership (Mgaiwa, 2023), and transformational leadership (Jameel & Ahmad, 2019). Employees' job satisfaction levels can determine their performance and productivity in terms of factors such as work effectiveness, efficiency, and turnover rate. As transformational leadership has potential in achieving high employee job satisfaction, it has attracted great attention, and is of value to leaders and organisations (Al Kuwaiti et al., 2020).

Jameel and Ahmad (2019) studied the effect of transformational leadership on academic staff's job satisfaction at a university in Iraq. They found that transformational leadership positively and significantly affected the staff's job satisfaction, with the most influential factor being individualised consideration (Jameel & Ahmad, 2019). In a similar study, Eroje et al. (2019) discovered a weak but positive correlation between transformational leadership and job satisfaction among academic staff from the medicine, dentistry, and science faculties. In contrast to the finding of Jameel and Ahmad (2019), intellectual stimulation was the most influential factor on the academic staff's job satisfaction (Eroje et al., 2019). More recently, Samad et al. (2022) found a significant and positive correlation between transformational leadership and job satisfaction among academics and professional staff at an Australian regional university.

Scholars like Li and Karanxha (2024) argue that transformational leadership shows promise in enhancing job satisfaction due to its emphasis on individual attention and relationship building (Jameel & Ahmad, 2019; Northouse, 2016). This focus on fulfilling personal and relational needs can positively impact job satisfaction levels (Purnomo & Novalia, 2019). Likewise, although past studies have focused on academics, it is believed that similar findings are to be observed among administrative employees as well. Thus, with the support from empirical studies, this study hypothesised the effect of transformational leadership on job satisfaction as follows:

H1: Administrative supervisors' transformational leadership is positively related to administrative staff's job satisfaction.

2.5 Transformational Leadership and Service Quality

Empirical studies have demonstrated that practicing transformational leadership has been effective in enhancing the quality of services in the HE context (Wijaya et al., 2019; Che Omar et al., 2019; Papanthymou & Darra, 2017). Wijaya et al. (2019) categorised employees of HEIs into faculty members, and supporting staff, and compared the effect of leadership style on the latter's service quality. Among transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership, transformational leadership was the strongest influential indicator of service quality (Wijaya et al., 2019). Manurung (2020), and Angriani et al. (2020) found that transformative leadership had a positive and significant influence on lecturer performance, and teaching quality, leading to an overall enhancement in service quality.

In other words, transformational leadership places a strong emphasis on achieving the objectives of an organisation, while also promoting collaboration among team members, and cultivating organisational commitment (Wang et al., 2022). For that purpose, transformational leaders put efforts into developing, transferring, and sharing their visions of the organisation to subordinates (Juhro & Aulia, 2018; Andersen et al., 2018; Tran & Hoang, 2024) as this holds the potential to impact both individual and collective job performance (Wang et al., 2022; Tran & Hoang, 2024), thereby influencing the overall attainment of organisational goals (Dwivedi et al., 2020; Akdere & Egan, 2020). Thus, with support from empirical studies, this study hypothesised the effect of transformational leadership on service quality as follows:

H2: Administrative supervisors' transformational leadership is positively related to administrative staff's service quality.

2.6 Job Satisfaction and Service Quality

In the HE context, job satisfaction and service quality are two critical elements in terms of organisational competitiveness. Al Kuwaiti et al. (2020) argued that job satisfaction is a significant factor in service quality since it is closely related to employee job performance, and turnover rate. Al (2020) found a positive relationship between job satisfaction and service quality among academic staff. Similarly, Vaseer (2018) also found a significant effect of job satisfaction on service quality among faculty members. Siahaan et al. (2022) evaluated lecturers' performance by the provision of teaching, researching, and community services, which were significantly affected by job satisfaction. Al-Refaei et al. (2023) also found a significant impact of job satisfaction on service quality among academic staff. It can be seen that the relationship between job satisfaction and service quality tends to be positive.

Employees' job satisfaction or dissatisfaction depends on whether their various needs, such as safety, self-fulfilment, and interpersonal connections, are fulfilled (Staempfli & Lamarche, 2020; Purnomo & Novalia, 2019). Subsequently, when employees experience a sense of satisfaction in their work, they will naturally exert their full potential, and make efforts to successfully accomplish their tasks (Siahaan et al., 2022; Al-Refaei et al., 2023). Conversely, when employees are dissatisfied or unhappy, they are unable to meet service targets, which, in the case of HE, would affect providing quality services to students (Al-Refaei et al., 2023). Thus, with the support from empirical studies, this study hypothesised the effect of job satisfaction on service quality as follows:

H3: Administrative staff's job satisfaction is positively related to service quality.

2.7 Job Satisfaction as a Mediator Between Transformational Leadership and Service Quality

Empirical studies have shown the relationship between transformational leadership and job satisfaction (Samad et al., 2022; Eroje et al., 2019; Jameel & Ahmad, 2019). There is also strong evidence of the impact of job satisfaction on service quality in the HE context (Al Kuwaiti et al., 2020; Al-refaei, 2021; Vaseer, 2018; Siahaan et al., 2022; Al-Refaei et al., 2023). Furthermore, other studies have established a direct relationship between transformational leadership and service quality (Wijaya et al., 2019; Manurung, 2020; Angriani et al., 2020).

In the HE context, both leadership and job satisfaction play crucial roles in shaping the quality of service provided by employees. Angriani et al. (2020) found that lecturers' job satisfaction mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and service quality. Transformational leadership can motivate employees to do more than expected (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Northouse, 2016), which contributes to the enhancement of employee job satisfaction, and service quality (Arokiasamy & Huam, 2019).

For example, Angriani et al. (2020) argued that the success of graduates was closely related to the quality of teaching given by lecturers. In that case, the job satisfaction of HEI employees is an influential factor of the quality of services provided, which, as discussed above, can be enhanced by practicing transformational leadership. Thus, with the support from empirical studies, this study hypothesised the mediating effect of job satisfaction on the relationship between transformational leadership and service quality as follows:

H4: Administrative staff's job satisfaction mediates the relationship between administrative supervisors' transformational leadership and their staff's service quality.

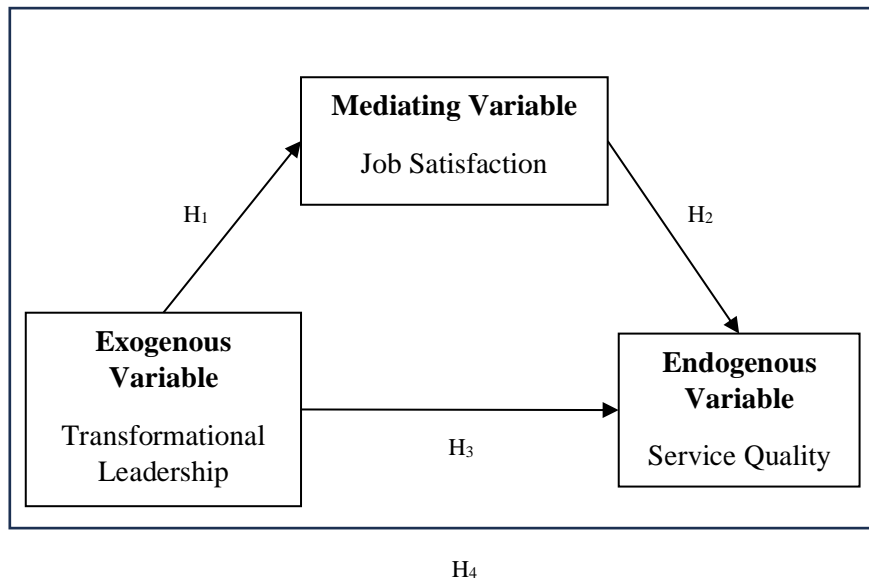


Fig. 1 The proposed conceptual framework of job satisfaction as a mediator between transformational leadership and service quality in the HE context

The proposed model (see Figure 1) highlights the potential of transformational leadership to enhance service quality. It suggests that job satisfaction plays a role in mediating the relationship between transformational leadership and service quality. This comprehensive perspective emphasises the importance of transformational leaders in enhancing employees' service quality by fostering job satisfaction.

3. Discussion

This study proposed a conceptual framework that examined the mediating effect of job satisfaction in the relationship between transformational leadership and service quality in the HE context. Transformational leadership has been proven as an effective approach in terms of enhancing employees' job satisfaction (Jameel & Ahmad, 2019; Eroje et al., 2019; Samad et al., 2022) and service quality (Wijaya et al., 2019; Che Omar et al., 2019; Papanthymou & Darra, 2017) in the HE context. Transformational leaders emphasise individual attention and relationship building, which promotes job satisfaction from the perspective of fulfilling employees' individual and relational needs (Jameel & Ahmad, 2019; Northouse, 2016). With a higher level of job satisfaction, employees tend to do more than what they are expected to because of the new value of work given by these transformational leaders (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Northouse, 2016). Consequently, satisfied employees perform better than unsatisfied ones, which, in turn, improves service quality (Arokiasamy & Huam, 2019).

Overall, this study aligned with the empirical studies on three points. First, transformational leadership positively influences job satisfaction (Jameel & Ahmad, 2019; Eroje et al., 2019; Samad et al., 2022) and service quality (Manurung, 2020; Angriani et al., 2020). Second, job satisfaction positively influences service quality (Al Kuwaiti et al., 2020; Vaseer, 2018; Siahaan et al., 2022; Al-Refaei et al., 2023). Third, transformational leadership also influences service quality through the mediating effect of job satisfaction (Angriani et al., 2020). Thus, the proposed framework incorporated job satisfaction as a mediator of the relationship between transformational leadership and service quality in the HE context.

4. Recommendations for future research

The presented framework can be employed as a concrete foundation for further exploration into the influence of transformational leadership and job satisfaction on service quality within the HE context. It is therefore recommended that, to thoroughly test the proposed framework, multiple factor

analysis, and advanced modelling, such as discriminant analysis, MANOVA, multiple regression, and structural equation modelling, should be employed. The proposed framework can serve as a structural guide for future research, directing inquiries into additional factors such as alternative leadership theories, job performance, organisational citizenship behaviour, as well as higher education and academic resources. Ultimately, the proposed framework is expected to facilitate productive research growth, and make significant contributions to the theoretical advancement and expansion of the knowledge in this field.

5. Significance and conclusion

The presented model in this study, to the authors' knowledge, is one of the first attempts to explore the relationships among transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and service quality in the HE context. Thus, by proposing this framework, this study contributes to the literature by enhancing the understanding of job satisfaction as a potential mediator that explains the relationship between transformational leadership and service quality. Nevertheless, empirical research is required to validate the proposed hypotheses.

6. Co-Author contributions

Chaoyi Zhang: Writing—original draft.

Donnie Adams: Conceptualization, Writing—review and editing.

Ahmad Zabidi Abdul Razak: Supervision, Writing—review and editing, Validation.

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