

Leading Beyond Leadership Stereotypes: Adaptive and Inclusive Leadership Among Women Leaders in Malaysian Research Universities

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Abstract

Despite the increasing participation of women in the academic workforce, they remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions within higher education. Existing research has largely focused on gender inequality, barriers to career advancement, and women's representation in leadership, while comparatively little attention has been given to how women leaders are perceived by their subordinates. This study explores how academic and administrative personnel perceive the leadership practices of women leaders in Malaysian research universities and examines how these practices contribute to organisational effectiveness. Guided by Leadership Styles Theory and the Capability Approach, the study adopted an interpretive qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 academic and administrative personnel who had direct experience working under women leaders in senior academic and administrative positions. The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The findings revealed that women leaders adopted multiple leadership styles rather than relying on a single dominant approach. Transformational and democratic leadership emerged as the most prominent styles, characterised by mentoring, collaboration, empowerment, participation, and open communication. Transactional, autocratic-directive, and laissez-faire leadership behaviours were employed selectively in response to organisational accountability, crisis management, and professional autonomy. Overall, the findings demonstrate that women leaders practise adaptive and inclusive leadership by balancing relational and strategic leadership behaviours to foster employee development, trust, engagement, and organisational commitment. The study extends current understanding of women's leadership by showing that leadership effectiveness is context-dependent rather than inherently gendered and by highlighting the importance of subordinate perspectives in explaining adaptive leadership within Malaysian research universities.

Keywords: Women leadership; Higher education; Transformational leadership; Democratic leadership; Adaptive leadership; Malaysian research universities

1. Introduction

Leadership is a key factor in the effectiveness, resilience and sustainability of higher education institutions. The landscape of contemporary universities is continually changing and shifting as the world becomes technologically advanced, global competition grows, expectations of accountability are higher, and the expectations of stakeholders are changing. In this context, leadership is seen as one of the most essential elements in achieving academic excellence, innovation and growth and sustainability of institutions (Northouse, 2021). The higher education context is developing and there is increased awareness of leadership styles that focus on teamwork, flexibility and staff engagement. The organizational structure of most universities is hierarchical, which may fail to meet the needs of the current complex university. Rather, higher education institutions need leaders who can motivate and inspire a diverse set of stakeholders, as well as provide a culture that is conducive to cross-functional collaboration and professional development, continuous learning, and innovation.

In recent years, there has been significant advancement of women in higher education with respect to education attainment as well as academic careers. These progressions have not been enough to close the gender gap for women in higher education leadership roles around the world. Women make a significant proportion of the academic workforce but there are fewer of them in executive and administrative positions like Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Dean, and other high-level management positions, than men. This persistent disparity has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Prior studies have identified some structural and cultural factors that have hindered women's progress in leadership positions, such as gender stereotypes, institutional bias, leadership development opportunities for women, and balancing work and family responsibilities (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell, 2018). Together, these barriers help perpetuate traditional ideas about who runs the show, and they help keep the gender gap in leadership roles in higher education institutions intact.

Much of the literature has been on barriers, career advancement and gender inequality, and existing research has helped to understand the challenges faced by women leaders. Less focus has been paid to the understanding of women's leadership in organisational context and how women's leadership is perceived by subordinates. In addition, much of the literature on leadership has been created in Western settings, and there is a lack of understanding of women's leadership experiences in non-Western higher education settings. Women leaders are often linked to transformational and democratic leadership styles, which focus on communication, collaboration, empowerment and employee development (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). These leadership styles are especially relevant in the context of universities, where knowledge sharing, collegiality and stakeholder engagement are crucial to success. But effectiveness of leadership is not something that can be boiled down to gender-based assumptions. Organisational requirements, institutional environments and situational factors affect leadership behaviours. It is thus crucial to explore how women leaders respond to and cope with these complexities in higher education institutions.

Malaysia offers a rich background to explore women's leadership in higher education. Malaysian research universities are situated in multicultural settings and are facing growing demands for global competitiveness, research excellence and institutional performance. Despite the success of women in academic careers, there is limited empirical research that has explored how women leaders exercise leadership in Malaysian research universities. Much of the previous research has been on representation and barriers to advancement, leaving a lack of understanding of the leadership styles that women leaders use and the impact of these styles on workplace experiences.

The Capability Approach, as developed by Sen (1999, 2014) and further developed by Kabeer (2001), informs this study. The Capability Approach highlights the need to provide opportunities for individuals to build their capabilities and to have meaningful agency. In the context of higher education, leadership can thus be seen as a process as well as a means of reaching organisational objectives, and as a process that allows for participation, empowerment and professional development. In this context, the current study examines the leadership styles of women leaders in Malaysian research universities from the academic and administrative staff's perspectives. In particular, the study focuses on the description and interpretation of the leadership styles of women leaders and their impact on the effectiveness of the organisation. The study highlights the importance of subordinate experiences and adds to the literature on women's leadership and adaptive and inclusive leadership in higher education institutions.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study used a qualitative interpretive approach to understand the perception of women leaders' leadership styles among their subordinates in Malaysian research universities. Qualitative design was deemed suitable as the study aimed to gain insight into the lived experiences and interpretations of leadership practices by the participants in their organizational contexts. Leadership is a social phenomenon that is socially constructed through the interaction between leaders and followers. Thus, an interpretive approach was used to gain a deeper understanding of the experience and meaning of leadership behaviours as they are lived by academic and administrative staff.

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The study was carried out in selected research universities in Malaysia. The institutions were selected as they are the top public universities in Malaysia and are in highly competitive environments with research excellence and academic performance and international engagement.

A total of 12 participants comprising academic and administrative staff who had direct experience working under women leaders holding senior academic or administrative positions were involved in this study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the individuals who could give rich and meaningful information about leadership practices. The participants were chosen for their

capacity to reflect on leadership experiences and their knowledge of the leadership styles of women leaders in their institutions.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant	Position Category	Gender	Faculty Cluster
P1	Academic Staff	Female	Non-Science
P2	Academic Staff	Male	Science
P3	Administrative Staff	Female	Administration
P4	Academic Staff	Male	Science
P5	Administrative Staff	Female	Administration
P6	Academic Staff	Female	Non-Science
P7	Academic Staff	Male	Science
P8	Administrative Staff	Male	Administration
P9	Academic Staff	Male	Science
P10	Academic Staff	Female	Non-Science
P11	Administrative Staff	Male	Administration
P12	Academic Staff	Female	Science

Note: Participant identities and institutional affiliations have been anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

2.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, allowing flexibility to interview in-depth, and ensuring a consistency across all interviews. The study had general aims, and the needed leadership literature was used to develop the interview protocol, to ensure congruence with the research questions. The interview questions focused on topics 1–5 of the research questions as they pertained to participants' leadership style, communication, decision-making, support for professional development and workplace experiences. Interviews were conducted online and ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. Before participation, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave informed consent. Ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to during the research process.

2.4. Data Analysis

The interviews were all transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted using the six stages of analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, development of themes, review of themes, definition of themes and report writing. Data management was supported by NVivo software, which was used to systematically code the data. The software helped to organise the interview transcripts, identify patterns and create thematic relationships between the participants' stories. Five themes emerged from the analysis concerning women leaders' leadership styles: transformational leadership, democratic leadership, transactional leadership, autocratic-directive leadership and laissez-faire leadership. These themes were the result of participants' shared experiences and perceptions of leadership in Malaysian research universities.

2.5. Trustworthiness

Multiple steps were taken to improve the credibility of the results. Member checking was used to check the accuracy of interpretations and to ensure that participants' views were represented appropriately. Triangulation was accomplished by involving participants with varying professional backgrounds and institutional roles. Reflective note taking and ongoing analysis of potential biases were used to ensure researcher reflexivity throughout the study. Data collection was carried out until the saturation of the data was reached. Saturation was achieved when no new themes or meaningful insights were found in the subsequent interviews. These procedures increased the credibility, dependability and trustworthiness of the study findings.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

This study was carried out in compliance with the ethical principles of research on human subjects. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, research procedures, and their rights as participants before giving informed consent, which was voluntary. Participants were told that they could drop out of the study at any time without penalty. All identifying information was de-identified from the interview transcripts and pseudonyms were used in the data analysis and reporting to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Interview recordings and research data were kept securely and only accessible to the research team. These procedures ensured the protection of participants' rights, privacy, and well-being throughout the research process.

3. Findings

3.1. Leadership Styles of Women Leaders in Malaysian Research Universities

The findings indicated that women leaders in Malaysian research universities have different leadership styles that are flexible, adaptable and responsive to the demands of the organisation. Women leaders were consistently identified as those who manage interpersonal relationships and institutional responsibilities and create positive workplace environments. Women leaders were

seen as using a combination of leadership styles based on the context of the organisation, the needs of the subordinates and the situation. The analysis resulted in five major leadership styles: transformational leadership, democratic leadership, transactional leadership, autocratic-directive leadership and laissez-faire leadership. Of these, the most dominant were transformational and democratic leadership. Women leaders were often linked to behaviours that fostered collaboration, empowerment, professional development and employee engagement. Women leaders were also seen as being able to assert themselves, hold people to account and make decisions on their own when the situation in the organisation demanded it.

Table 2: Overview of Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-theme
Transformational Leadership	Inspiring and motivating staff
	Empowering professional development
	Encouraging innovation and creativity
Democratic Leadership	Consultation and participation
	Collaborative decision making
	Open communication and accessibility
Transactional Leadership	Performance expectations
	Accountability and monitoring
Autocratic-Directive Leadership	Decisive leadership during crises
	Strategic intervention and problem solving
Laissez-Faire Leadership	Delegation and autonomy
	Trust in professional competence

3.2. Transformational Leadership

The most common leadership style reported by participants was transformational leadership. Women leaders were often described as inspirational figures who motivated employees to meet the organisation's objectives and helped them grow personally and professionally. Participants consistently said that women leaders were very good at inspiring employees, encouraging innovation, and establishing a vision for success. Transformational leadership was the most prevalent leadership style linked to positive workplace experiences and perceptions of leadership effectiveness. The participants saw women leaders as those who could build confidence and enthusiasm among employees and focus on organisational success.

A few participants commented on women's transformational style of leadership, especially regarding their capability as leaders to inspire employees to do more than their job required. Women leaders were seen by participants as providing employees with work environments in which participants are involved, motivated, and feel a sense of belonging. Women leaders fostered an institutional culture by sustaining a culture of maintaining a high level of positive reinforcement,

encouragement and recognition across a diverse range of individual contributions which led to employees feeling supported and driven to support institutional objectives. They further were acknowledged for their effort at knowing and stimulating people to use their own talents. This individualized training helped employees feel more confident, had a positive impact on their motivation and performance and allowed staff members to show more initiative and take on more responsibility.

Another key trait of transformational leadership was the empowerment of employees. Women leaders were consistently reported on for being trusted by participants, by giving opportunities to contribute to decisions made, problem-solving, and ongoing efforts for improvement in the organisation. Women leaders instead adopted a delegation approach leading to the active involvement of employees in the organisational processes rather than a close supervisory approach. With this kind of participative approach, employees felt that they were a part of the initiative, they felt that their ideas were taken into consideration and that they were valued. This made them feel a sense of accountability, ownership and commitment. This capacity of empowering people was considered one of the most important abilities that facilitate personal development and organisational growth.

Participants expressed the importance of the strong drive of women leaders with regard to mentoring and employee development. In addition to fulfilling organisational goals, women leaders were also seen to put in a significant amount of their effort in coaching, giving constructive feedback and offering professional development opportunities. Mentoring, leadership coaching, skills development programs were seen as invaluable help for employees. Some reported that they were encouraged to attend to professional training programmes, acquire leadership responsibilities and seek promotion. These developmental practices gave the employees confidence and increased their competencies as well as their commitment to the institute.

One key characteristic of transformational leadership highlighted by the participants was the ability of women leaders to communicate the organisation's vision effectively. Women leaders were represented as being continually able to articulate institutional goals and make their colleagues understand how their jobs fit into the wider goals of their institutions. They gave staff a sense of direction and purpose to promote better understanding of the importance of their role and reflect employees' attention on institutional issues. They reported that this cohesion led to increased institutional commitment, cooperation and responsibility for institutional objectives. In addition, the significance given to the role of women leaders for stimulating innovation and creativity through encouragement of new ideas, facilitation of continuous improvement and by embracing positive organizational change with confidence, by employees.

Participants described how women leaders facilitated staff to think creatively, come up with solutions and contribute to the improvement of the organisation. Women leaders were seen as supportive and open to new ideas, which encouraged employees to share their opinions and try new things. Participants noted that women leaders tended to foster creativity, not limit it. This

attitude to new ideas allowed staff to make a greater contribution to organisational development and to develop a culture of ongoing learning and improvement.

The participants perceived transformational leadership as a major factor in employee motivation, organisational commitment, job satisfaction and institutional effectiveness. Women leaders were seen as having a strong capacity to inspire, empower, mentor and support staff as one of the key elements to their leadership success. Transformational leadership was always linked to positive experiences at work and positive relationships with leaders. The results indicate that transformational leadership is a core element of women's leadership in Malaysian research universities and is a steppingstone to employee engagement, employee development and organisational excellence.

3.3. Democratic Leadership

One of the most prevalent leadership styles among women leaders in Malaysian research universities was democratic leadership. Women leaders were always described as inclusive decision makers who valued participation, consultation and collaboration. Employees said they felt valued and appreciated as their opinions were often considered when the organisation discussed and decided on things. Participants noted that women leaders actively involved staff in the process of discussing challenges in the department, formulating policies and implementing organisational initiatives. Women leaders did not just use their position, but they also wanted to give opportunities to their employees to give their ideas and opinions. This participative process resulted in greater ownership and responsibility of the staff.

Women leaders often highlighted the need for consultation when making key decisions. They were not likely to make decisions on their own but would consult with other team members and promote open discussion before deciding. Staff valued being part of discussions that had an impact on their work as it allowed them to share experiences, make suggestions and participate in problem solving. Participants felt that the participation of employees in decision-making processes would enhance the quality of the decisions made, as it would bring in different perspectives and insights from people who are directly involved in the operations of the organisation. Another key trait of democratic leadership was open communication. Women leaders were always found to be approachable, accessible and listening to staff concerns. Communication channels were kept open and supportive, with employees reporting that they felt comfortable discussing work-related issues, sharing ideas and seeking guidance. Women leaders were seen as being in regular contact with staff and establishing an atmosphere where people could voice their opinions without fear of criticism or repercussions. This openness helped to foster a culture of transparency and understanding within the workplace.

All participants stated that Democratic leadership had a positive effect on their working relationship, through open communication, respect and trust between leaders and workers. Women leadership was seen to proactively engage staff in organisational discussions and decision making which led to a sense of valuing their opinions and recognising their contributions. Many

participants reported that involvement in decision making helped to build their self-esteem, boost their interest and greater their sense of belonging to the department and institutional goals. This collaborative leadership model also decreased the hierarchical distance and made relations amongst leaders and employees collaborative and more trusting.

Democratic leadership was also seen as an important factor in building teamwork and collaboration. Participants said that women leaders fostered the collective decision-making, problem solving, sharing of knowledge within the staff. Staff were encouraged to work together, help each other and offer their skills and knowledge to help meet organisational aims. These partnerships created an even greater sense of community, better inter-departmental connections and better teamwork. The participants noted that this inclusive leadership practice helped create a positive organizational climate through a greater sense of belonging among employees to their peers and the school.

Furthermore, democratic leadership was perceived to be good for increasing employee engagement and motivation. Women leaders fostered a feeling of ownership, responsibility among staff through opportunities for meaningful expressions, ideas and having a say in decisions of the organisation. The participants commented that this greater participation led to greater commitment to the organisation's goals, greater accountability for results of the work done and readiness to make contributions outside of scope of their regular duties. Staff were more likely to support institutional initiatives as they felt a sense of ownership of the outcomes. Employees were also more proactive in finding solutions and contributing to the improvement of the organisation, as they were given the chance to be involved in decision making processes.

The evidence indicates that democratic leadership was a key factor in fostering inclusiveness, employee engagement and organisational effectiveness in Malaysian research universities. This leadership style was always linked to transparency, trust, communication and collective problem solving. Democratic leadership is collaborative and participative, which helped women leaders to foster positive relationships at the workplace and to motivate employees to actively participate in the organisation's success. These findings suggest that democratic leadership is a key aspect of the adaptive and inclusive leadership model that women leaders in higher education institutions embody.

3.4. Transactional Leadership

Transformational and democratic leadership styles were the most common leadership styles mentioned, but transactional leadership was also observed in the descriptions of women leaders. Participants acknowledged that women leaders had clear expectations of employee performance and organisational responsibilities. They were generally seen as helpful, friendly and cooperative, but also as people who were very focused on responsibility, output and results. Participants recognized that good leadership in research universities was not just inspirational and participative but also had to be able to get things done.

Participants described how women leaders routinely tracked progress on organisation goals and made sure tasks were done to standards and on schedule. Staff were expected to perform their duties, adhere to deadlines and actively participate in the goals of the department and institution. Generally, expectations of performance were clearly communicated, and staff were aware of their role, responsibilities and expected outcomes. The participants responded with favourable appreciation for this clarity as it brought enough reduction in confusion and helped them concentrate their activities in the main concerns of the organization. This was seen as an important tool for women leaders in setting clear expectations as a critical factor in organisational efficiencies and effectiveness.

The other aspect of transactional leadership that was mentioned among the participants was the use of recognition and rewards to motivate for the optimal level of productivity and employee motivation. Women leaders appeared to be congratulating colleagues on their achievements and recognising people's efforts to ensure the organisation is successful. Appreciation was frequently stated via verbal recognition, public recognition, and opportunities for further training and more responsibilities. This recognition helped to reinforce positive work behaviours and to keep employees engaged in meeting organisational goals. Participants felt that when leaders recognised them, it boosted their morale and made them feel valued in the organisation. Participants also noted that women leaders were very committed to upholding professional standards and holding staff members accountable. Women leaders were not afraid to confront performance problems, but rather than avoid or delay challenging conversations. Participants reported that constructive feedback was frequently given to help employees enhance their performance and meet organisational expectations. Importantly, these discussions were generally done in a professional and respectful way, enabling leaders to discuss issues and maintain positive work relationships. This balanced approach was well received as it included accountability with support and professional development.

Some of the participants noted that transactional leadership was especially noticeable regarding institutional performance indicators and organisational targets. Research universities function in a competitive environment where leaders are expected to keep track of research productivity, publication output, student outcomes, financial performance and administrative efficiency. Participants identified that women leaders tended to use transactional leadership behaviours to ensure that institutional needs were met and that the resources of the organisation were used effectively. These practices were seen as essential to sustain the performance of the organisation and to attain the strategic goals in the ever-changing higher education context.

The interviews revealed evidence that transactional leadership was also a significant managerial mechanism that complemented transformational and democratic leadership. Women leaders did not only rely on motivation and collaboration, but also on supportive leadership with clear expectations, performance monitoring and accountability. The participants felt that this mix had a positive impact on the effectiveness of the organisation as it enabled them to support employee development and relationships in the workplace whilst keeping the focus on achieving the

institutional goals. The results thus suggest that transactional leadership was a significant part of the overall adaptive leadership style of women leaders in Malaysian research universities.

3.5. Autocratic-Directive Leadership

Participants also reported situations in which women leaders adopted autocratic-directive leadership styles. This type of leadership was less common than transformational and democratic leadership, but participants reported that it was more evident in times of uncertainty, crisis management, organisational restructuring and when quick decision making was needed. Overall, women leaders were seen as collaborative and inclusive in their leadership style. But participants noted that there were some situations that needed to be more directive to ensure continuity of the organisation and effective problem solving.

Some of the participants described how women leaders could make decisions on their own when there was a need for immediate action. Leaders took on more responsibility for decision-making processes and gave clear instructions to staff in situations where delays might have a negative impact on the organisation's operations. Participants reported that this was especially the case when there were institutional change, administrative difficulties and situations with tight deadlines. In such situations, broad consultation was often impractical, and leadership was required to make decisions and ensure timely responses and organisational stability. The general opinion of the participants was that autocratic-directive leadership was a viable and suitable approach to certain organisational requirements. Many participants saw directive leadership as a sign of leadership competence and confidence, rather than authoritarian or controlling. Women leaders were seen as ready to accept responsibility for tough decisions and to take charge when there was uncertainty. Staff valued the clarity of direction in difficult situations as it helped to minimise confusion and allowed staff to focus on effective implementation of solutions.

Participants had mixed opinions about the effectiveness of laissez faire leadership. Many participants noted that this leadership style offered flexibility, autonomy, and independence; yet some found it to be a lack of guidance and support, leading to uncertainty and a dampening of feedback, mentoring, and professional development opportunities. The results of this research indicate that giving more autonomy to staff with prior experience and expertise might be beneficial when it comes to their leadership abilities, but it isn't right for every worker and is only effective when set up appropriately in the context of the organisation. Staff reported that good communication and leadership had a positive impact on organisational efficiency and helped to complete important tasks. It was also noted that women leaders did not use directive leadership as a normal management approach. Rather, it was applied in a targeted and purposeful way where consultation and collaborative decision making was not possible because of time pressures or pressing organisational needs. Women leaders were generally characterized as collaborative and participative in their day-to-day interactions. This temporary use of directive leadership in certain situations was thus considered to reflect leadership adaptability and not a leadership orientation. This selective use of authority helped to build perceptions of fairness and confidence in employees' leaders.

The results also indicate that women leaders could balance the authority with sensitivity to employee needs. Despite the use of directive leadership styles, participants indicated that women leaders were respectful and professional with staff. The directive actions were not seen as punitive or oppressive by employees, as leaders still showed concern for employee well-being and organisational relationships. This combination of decisiveness and interpersonal sensitivity seemed to increase the acceptance of directive decisions and decrease employee resistance.

It was found that women leaders can adjust their leadership styles to the situations. They are willing to take charge when needed, showing flexibility in leadership, strategic thinking and decision-making skills. Women leaders were able to switch between leadership styles as per the need of the organisation rather than sticking to collaborative styles. Selective use of autocratic-directive leadership is therefore a key element of adaptive leadership that allows women leaders to keep the organisation effective and to respond appropriately to complex and rapidly changing situations.

3.6. Laissez-Faire Leadership

Laissez-faire leadership was the least dominant leadership style found in this study. Participants reported contexts where women leaders delegated tasks and gave employees a lot of autonomy in their work. This leadership style was most frequently seen in experienced academic and administrative personnel who had the requisite skills, self-assurance and professional maturity to carry out their duties without assistance. Women leaders did not closely track the day-to-day activities but gave employees discretion in how they managed tasks and how objectives could be met. The participants considered this as a sign of trust and confidence in the professionalism of the employees.

Some of the participants indicated that women leaders like to give general instructions and let staff members have flexibility in how they complete tasks and manage responsibilities. This allowed employees to apply their skills and make decisions on their own and take responsibility for their work. Participants described how the autonomy given to women leaders led to increased responsibility and accountability as employees felt trusted to do their work with less supervision. Academic staff, in particular, valued the autonomy to conduct research, teaching and administration in the way they saw fit and in their professional judgment.

Participants also noted the benefits of autonomy on creativity and innovation. Women leaders were seen as fostering an environment where staff were comfortable to try new ideas and suggest alternative ways of tackling organisational issues. Leaders reduced unnecessary control and allowed staff to be innovative and to solve problems themselves. Some of the participants commented that this flexibility was especially useful in the university environment where innovation, independent thinking and knowledge creation are highly valued. Working independently gave staff the chance to build their confidence and to make a valuable contribution to institutional goals. However, there were mixed opinions about the effectiveness of laissez-faire leadership. While many appreciated the flexibility and independence provided, others indicated

that excessive autonomy could create uncertainty and reduce opportunities for guidance and support. Some participants described how sometimes there was a lack of clarity about expectations, priorities and organisational direction due to limited involvement of leaders. Less experienced staff were more likely to indicate a preference for more frequent communication, supervision and feedback to ensure responsibilities were understood and organisational expectations were met.

The results indicated that the use of laissez-faire leadership was most effective when used selectively and in situations where employees were highly experienced and self-motivated. Autonomy was generally seen as positive when it was supported by the right amount of support and communication. Laissez-faire leadership did not seem to be a form of leadership in itself, but rather a supplement to other leadership styles, allowing employees to have opportunities for independence and growth. The results show that women leaders understood the need to balance autonomy with guidance, which meant that employees were given enough autonomy to do their work but also were aligned with the organisation's goals and expectations.

4. Discussion

Overall, the results indicate that women leaders in Malaysian research universities do not use one leadership style. Rather, they take a flexible and adaptive leadership style, combining transformational, democratic, transactional, autocratic-directive and laissez-faire styles as needed by the organisation and its employees.

Transformational and democratic leadership were always the most cited leadership styles. These leadership styles helped to motivate employees, foster teamwork, and promote growth and engagement within the organisation. Meanwhile, transactional, autocratic-directive and laissez-faire leadership styles offered other means of holding people accountable, crisis management and autonomy. The results also indicate that leadership effectiveness of women leaders is closely related to their relational and managerial responsibilities. Women leaders were not found to fit into the stereotypical gender-based leadership roles, but rather they were very flexible in adapting their leadership behaviours to the various situations in the organisation. This adaptive leadership approach helped them to be able to respond to the challenges in the institution and to have positive relationships in the workplace and to contribute to the success of the organisation.

The results of this study are significant in understanding the perception of women leaders in Malaysian research universities and the leadership styles they employ in enhancing the effectiveness of their universities. The study found that women leaders do not use only one style of leadership but a blend of transformational, democratic, transactional, autocratic-directive and laissez-faire leadership styles. Of these, transformational and democratic leadership styles were the most prevalent and common among participants. The results indicate that women leaders in higher education can balance relational and task-oriented leadership behaviours and adjust their leadership styles to fit the context of the organisation. The results also suggest that leadership effectiveness is not only dependent on leadership style, but also on the leader's capacity to react to the evolving institutional needs and employee expectations. These insights are especially

applicable to research universities that face a range of competing institutional pressures and must deliver strategic leadership to achieve excellence in teaching, research, innovation and community service, while simultaneously upholding strong institutional norms. The results thus add to the literature that highlights flexibility, inclusiveness and adaptability as important aspects of effective leadership in today's higher education institutions.

The high level of transformational leadership among women leaders is in line with the previous leadership research that states that transformational leaders motivate followers through vision, motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised support (Burns, 1978; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Women leaders were often characterized as those who inspire employees, foster innovation, and promote professional growth. These behaviours are indicative of the core tenets of transformational leadership, which involves helping followers transcend their own self-interest and motivating them to work toward shared objectives for the organization. In research universities, these leadership behaviours are especially important, given that academic institutions are increasingly functioning in a highly competitive and rapidly changing environment. It is expected that universities will increase their research output, boost their international profile, rise in international rankings and meet the changing needs of society and technology. In these situations, leaders who can inspire confidence, foster innovation, and encourage ongoing learning are crucial for institutional sustainability. The results thus align with the notion that transformational leadership is one of the most effective leadership styles in knowledge-intensive organizations where intellectual capital and employee engagement are key factors in organizational success (Northouse, 2021).

Women leaders were also highlighted as developmental agents in the form of mentoring, coaching and empowerment. This is consistent with the results of previous studies that indicate that women leaders often focus on building the potential and ability of their subordinates (Ng & Rumaya, 2022; Rose Taylor, 2020). Participants did not just see women leaders as interested in organisational results, but also in staff members' personal and professional development. These developmental leadership behaviours help organisations to be effective by improving employee competence, confidence and commitment. Leadership behaviours that foster learning and growth are especially significant in higher education contexts, where academic and administrative personnel are expected to be lifelong learners. The results thus indicate that transformational leadership is not only a factor that influences the performance of the organisation but also a factor that influences human capital development which is one of the main goals of universities as learning organisations.

The results also showed that another key aspect of women leaders' leadership is democratic leadership. Women leaders were consistently reported as approachable, consultative and open to including staff in decision-making processes. The results are consistent with earlier studies that indicated that women leaders are more likely to use participative and collaborative leadership styles which prioritise communication, consultation, and problem solving as a group (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell et al., 2021). Democratic leadership seems especially applicable in the context of higher education institutions, where universities are traditionally collegial, intellectual exchange is valued, shared governance is practiced, and professional autonomy is cherished. In a university

setting, unlike many corporate settings, decisions can be made through a process of consensus building and stakeholder engagement to achieve institutional goals. Participative, collaborative and inclusive styles of leadership therefore are likely to be more effective in creating that PSS in academics, as well as in increasing employee commitment and cooperation and shared responsibility within the academic communities.

The results further indicate that democratic leadership has significant impact on employee engagement and organisational trust. The meaningful engagement of staff in decision making and the taking into account of their views and concerns resulted in them feeling respected, valued and recognised as an important part of the institution. These experiences helped to improve relationships within the workplace, provided employees with a sense of ownership and responsibility and helped strengthen their willingness to commit to working towards the achievement of organisational objectives. The result agrees with earlier studies which showed positive relationships between participative leadership and employee satisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors. (Heffernan et al., 2021; Lumby, 2019). The present findings corroborate these observations and show that democratic leadership enhances communication and fosters a cooperative organisational culture. This is especially true in research universities where the success of the enterprise often relies on interdisciplinary cooperation, teamwork, and joint intellectual effort.

Transformational and democratic leadership styles dominated participants' descriptions, the findings also revealed the presence of transactional leadership behaviours. Participants noted that women leaders set standards of performance, kept track of results, and held staff accountable. This is an important discovery as it dispels the notion that women leaders are only focused on interpersonal relationships and emotional support. Rather, the results suggest that women leaders are just as effective in running the organisation and maintaining institutional standards. One of the main criticisms of transactional leadership is that it is about the exchange between leaders and followers, and not about intrinsic motivation. However, in higher education institutions, some organisational functions do need to have performance expectations, monitoring systems and accountability mechanisms. Research universities exist in a very regulated world, where success is defined by research productivity, publication metrics, student success, accreditation standards, and institutional rankings. Therefore, leadership styles that encourage accountability continue to be a key element of good organisational management.

The results indicate that transactional leadership is not a dominant leadership style among women leaders, but rather a complementary leadership style. Overall, participants had a positive attitude towards performance monitoring and accountability if it was accompanied by supportive and collaborative leadership. This suggests that there may be a need for a balance between developmental support and organisational control in effective leadership. Women leaders seem to be able to balance these two, using transformational and democratic leadership styles and transactional ones as needed. Mixing various leadership styles positively influences the effectiveness and performance of an organisation, because it will mix the clear expectations of good performance with support to growth giving both the individuals and the institution a chance

for growth and good performance. These results provide evidence for the non-uniqueness of leadership in modern organisations, which should not be viewed as the use of one leadership style. In contrast, effective leadership is made up of complementary leadership behaviours that need to be tailored to organizational requirements and situational demands (Arikan, 2020; Thanh & Quang, 2022).

The other salient finding which came out of the investigation was regarding the directive leadership of female leaders. Women they reported having participated in found women leaders more directive when crises organisational occurred, when decisions needed to be taken quickly, or uncertainty was present. Of great importance was that these acts were not seen as negative. Instead, those elements were interpreted as being representative of decisiveness, competence and effective strategic leadership. The discovery stands in contrast to the belief that directive leadership is an incompatible leadership style for women. Researchers have historically pointed to women as more collaborative, supportive and nurturing and more authoritarian and decisive in their leadership styles (Powell, 2018). The present findings, on the other hand, show that women leaders can make independent decisions and establish decisive authority where and when the importance of a timely decision is demanded within an organisation. This is more sophisticated conception of effective leadership than generally acknowledged in the gendered norms of leadership, and more in tune with the need for the adaptability of leadership.

A directive leadership style is also displayed when needed by female university leaders, which aspect also reflects the existing governance situation in today's research university. Very often, higher education institutions find themselves facing complex issues that demand immediate and swift leadership decisions, such as to initiate policy reforms, conduct simultaneous institutional crises management, address financial issues, navigate technological shifts, and simultaneously contemplate attending to external regulatory demands. In these cases, extended consultation might not always be possible. Participants affirmed that women leaders are ready to take responsibility, make tough decisions and offer clear leadership to help ensure institutional stability and continuity. The results indicate that effective leadership is not just about cooperation and participation but also about having the ability to take decisive actions and stay resilient within the organisation in times of uncertainty and change. The results thus corroborate current leadership theories that focus on being responsive to the situation, not on specific leadership behaviours. Laissez-faire leadership was the least dominant leadership style found in this study.

However, its existence is significant as it points to another aspect of leadership flexibility. Participants reported instances of women leaders delegating and giving employees a lot of autonomy. These behaviours were typically linked to staff competence and confidence in employees to take on responsibilities. In academic settings, autonomy is valued highly as academic staff have specialised expertise and are expected to act independently. Therefore, giving autonomy can improve creativity, innovation and professional ownership. But it was also pointed out that too much autonomy can lead to a lack of clarity and direction, especially for less experienced staff. This discovery implies that a laissez-faire approach to leadership is best suited for specific situations and when employees have enough experience and self-motivation to work on their own.

One of the most important contributions of this study is that it challenges essentialist views of gender and leadership. Traditional leadership theories often described women and men as having different leadership traits. Women were stereotyped as communal, with characteristics like empathy, nurturing, and cooperation, and men were stereotyped as agentic, with characteristics like assertiveness, independence, and control (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell, 2018). While some aspects of these differences are still present in leadership research, the results of this study indicate that binary categorizations of leadership may no longer be sufficient to explain leadership practices in today's higher education institutions. Participants did not view women leaders as being either relational or task oriented. Rather, women leaders showed that they could integrate both types of attributes as per the needs of the organisation and the situation. This aligns with recent research indicating that effective leadership is now a combination of communal and agentic characteristics, rather than one or the other (Ng & Rumaya, 2022; Thien, 2021). Women leaders were seen as being able to show empathy and collaboration, and assert authority, accountability and strategic decision making. This integration enables leaders to foster positive relationships in the workplace while ensuring that the organisation's performance is not affected. The results thus question the gender-based notions of leadership effectiveness and contribute to a more contextual understanding of leadership behaviour.

The overall pattern of findings in this study can be understood in the context of the concept of adaptive leadership. Women leaders were consistently described as people who adapted their leadership styles to the evolving organisational context. Women leaders did not consistently use a single leadership style, but rather alternated between transformational, democratic, transactional, directive, and laissez-faire styles as circumstances changed. This flexibility in behaviour helped them to solve various organizational problems and keep the employees engaged and the organization effective. Adaptive leadership is now acknowledged as a key skill in complex organizational contexts, where leaders must be able to deal with uncertainty, ambiguity, and fast-paced change (Arikan, 2020; Thanh & Quang, 2022). The results indicate that women leaders in Malaysian research universities have this adaptive ability and that this is a key characteristic of their leadership effectiveness.

The results can also be analysed using the Capability Approach, as developed by Sen (1999, 2014) and extended by Kabeer (2001). The Capability Approach focuses on the need to increase opportunities, freedoms and capabilities of individuals to attain the outcomes they value. In this view, leadership should not be judged only by the indicators of the performance of the organisation, but also by the contribution to human development and empowerment. Women leaders were often reported to provide opportunities for participation, learning, professional development and engagement. These practices helped build employees' capacities, boosting their confidence, skills and capacity to participate in organisational processes. Women leaders thus served not only as managers of the organisations but also as facilitators of human development in institutional contexts.

The Capability Approach is especially relevant in the context of higher education institutions, as universities are places of organisational production and human development. Academic institutions are expected to not only meet performance targets, but also to promote learning, capacity building and intellectual growth. The results indicate that women leaders can help achieve these goals by fostering inclusive workplaces that promote employee growth and engagement in organizational activities. These practices are closely related to the developmental objectives of higher education and reinforce the notion that leadership is a developmental process and not a managerial role (Sen, 1999; Gandhi & Sen, 2021).

Overall, the results indicate that women leaders in Malaysian research universities are effective in using multiple leadership styles instead of one leadership style. They are effective because they are able to combine transformational inspiration with democratic participation, accountability with support, authority with inclusiveness, and organisational performance with human development. This adaptable and inclusive leadership model facilitates women leaders not only to handle the various obstacles they face in today's complex HE landscape but also to nurture trust, engagement, empowerment and commitment among their team members. The findings enrich the already expanding literature on women's leadership as they identify elements of leadership that are flexible, context-sensitive and related to capability development as major factors in the effectiveness of women's leadership in higher education institutions.

5. Implications

The implications of this study have had significant relevance for the development and training of leaders, organisational governance, and gender parity in HEIs. As one of the first studies to directly question the norms responsible for reinforcing women's leadership competence according to a gendered perspective, this study is notable. The study goes against the grain of the predominant view that strongly assumes that the effectiveness of leadership is a gender-dependent one. The participants did generally view women leaders as being adept at the ability to combine various leadership behaviors as an organization and as situations demanded. The discovery implies that leadership development programmes should shift their emphasis from the reinforcement of stereotypical masculine or feminine leadership styles, and instead, focus on developing a leader's adaptability skills. Therefore, universities must place an emphasis on leadership development strategies which enhance leaders' flexibility, strategic awareness, teamwork, communication, and contextual decision making in a context of positive leadership that helps them to face ever more complex contexts.

The results reveal the critical role of transformational and democratic leadership behaviours in promoting employees' engagement, trust in the organisation and commitment to the institution. Women leaders were seen as fostering inclusive work settings where staff members participated, continued to develop, feel empowered, and take responsibility. Such leadership behaviors had the positive effects of improving work relations and increasing organizational effectiveness. Thus, the focus for leadership development initiatives in HEIs needs to be more on mentoring, coaching, co-

creation of decisions and enabling employees. These acts can help build a positive organisational culture, while improving employee morale, engagement and productivity.

The paper has serious implications regarding succession planning in universities as well. Women participation in the academic world is growing, but women in high-level management positions in the academy remain underrepresented. Participants' positive perception of women leaders suggests that they have the capacities to make significant contribution to the performance of their institutions and their governance. The universities thus need to have a clear leadership ladder and provide more training programs for women teaching personnel and administrators. Structured mentoring programmes, leadership coaching, leadership sponsorship, and a formal succession pipeline can enhance leadership pipelines and help groom the leadership talents of the next generation of women leaders for succession.

The findings are relevant to the policy as they add to the on-going debate on gender equity in leadership of higher education institutions. The results of this study support institutional leadership development policies in three ways: through being empirical evidence of successful women leaders across various leadership models, it offers support for the need for equitable leadership opportunities for women; through showing that women leaders can come from multiple leadership models, it provides support for women to access to leadership development programmes, and, by all women leaders using a model that is promoted publicly, the results of this study support the need for transparent promotion and succession for women. Together, these efforts can bolster the diversity of higher education leaders, boost institutional governance, and bolster the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of higher education institutions. The study shows that women leaders can make a positive impact on the performance of the organisation and create an inclusive and supportive workplace. Policymakers and university administrators should therefore continue to encourage gender-inclusive recruitment, promotion and leadership development policies. Greater representation of women in leadership roles is not only a question of equity but could also improve the effectiveness of organisations by diversifying leadership styles and thinking.

The results also contribute to leadership scholarship by building on existing knowledge of adaptive leadership in higher education contexts. Previous studies on leadership have tended to focus on the individual leadership style. The present study, on the other hand, shows that effectiveness of leadership is closely related to the capacity to combine various leadership styles as per the situation. The results thus suggest a more dynamic and context-sensitive view of leadership that emphasizes the need for behavioral flexibility and responsiveness in complex organizational settings. The main findings of the study emphasise the importance of the Capability Approach as a valuable tool for understanding leadership in the context of higher education institutions and its impact on the effectiveness of the institution and professional development, as well as the role of institutional environments, opportunities and support systems. Women leaders were seen as providing opportunities for professional development, involvement and empowerment of employees. These practices helped to shape the outcomes of the organisation as well as employees' capabilities and professional agency. Leadership development programmes should thus appreciate the need to create an environment that is conducive to the performance of the organisation and human

development. This is especially true in universities where the creation of knowledge, skills and human potential is a key institutional task.

6. Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations to be noted when interpreting the results of this study. Only research universities in Malaysia were studied. These institutions are the highest level of public higher education institutions in Malaysia, and the results may not be a full reflection of leadership experiences in other types of higher education institutions such as comprehensive universities, technical universities, private universities and community colleges. A cross-institutional analysis of women leaders would offer a wider perspective on leadership practices and help identify if there are similar patterns of leadership in other higher education settings.

The academic/ administration experiences used in this study were limited to individuals who had experienced working under a female academic / administration leader. Subordinate perspectives may give insight into leadership effectiveness and experiences at work, but other stakeholder groups' perspectives may create a richer understanding of leadership practices. In future, the engagement of women leaders, senior management teams and external stakeholders is therefore necessary to ensure that there will be a wider range of perspectives on leadership behaviours, decision making and leadership within the organisation.

Participants lived experiences and perceptions were explored in-depth through the qualitative research design. However, the results are based on the context and not applicable to all women leaders in Malaysian higher education institutions. Mixed-methods or quantitative research methods would be appropriate for future research to investigate the prevalence, relationships, and effects of leadership in higher education using a larger, more diverse group of higher education leaders, which would further the generalisability of the results.

Moving forward, there is a need for research to explore the link between adaptive leadership and other anticipated organizational metrics such as employee engagement, job satisfaction, innovation, organisational commitment, and institutional performance. It is also desirable to have some comparative studies that could be carried out between universities from different cultural and national backgrounds, to get good insights into the interplay between gender, leadership and organisational contexts in different higher education systems. It would help in deepening understanding of the role of a good leader and enable the theories of leadership to be used in a wider range of institutional and cultural contexts. Furthermore, longitudinal studies might be useful to gain insight into the development of leadership practices over time in relation to shifting institutional priorities, organisational issues and developments in the higher education sector.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the leadership styles of women leaders in Malaysian research universities from the perspectives of academic and administrative staff. The results showed that women leaders use

a variety of leadership styles such as transformational leadership style, democratic leadership style, transactional leadership style, autocratic-directive leadership style, and laissez-faire leadership style. Transformational and democratic leadership styles were the most prevalent, with a high focus on inspiration, empowerment, collaboration and employee development. Meanwhile, women leaders also showed the ability to use transactional, directive, and laissez-faire leadership styles when the situation in the organisation called for more accountability, decisiveness, or autonomy. This study's results show that women leaders are not the same leader type. Rather, they embrace an adaptive and inclusive leadership style, a combination of different leadership behaviours that respond to the organizational context and contexts where it is required. They exhibit a pragmatic leadership capability that encompasses a balance of relations and strategically oriented leadership styles and practices, as well as working to enhance the performance of the institution, employees, and organization. This leadership versatility will help women leaders to adapt to today's complex contexts in higher education and respond to changing institutional challenges.

The study also questions the assumption of the traditional division specific traits of leadership. The results show that women leaders are able to effectively engage in collaboration, empathetic leadership, accountability, decisiveness and strategic decision making within their leadership practices, moving beyond the popular characterisation of "masculine" and "feminine" leadership. These findings confirm a more sophisticated view of leadership, which highlights adaptability, inclusiveness and responsiveness to context as key aspects of effective leadership.

In conclusion, this research adds to the growing, but limited, literature on women's leadership in higher education leadership and governance research by highlighting that rather than gender, leadership effectiveness can be attributed to a leader's ability to inspire, empower, engage, and lead others in order to reach a shared set of organisational targets. The results have significant implications for leadership development, succession planning and gender mainstreaming in HEIs. They also emphasize the need to develop modality leadership skills in view of the growing complexity and changing requirements in today's higher education environments.

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