

Exploring the Impact of Autocratic Leadership Style on Student Performance: Evidence from Higher Education Lecturers in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of autocratic leadership style on student performance in Cambodian public universities. In a context where hierarchical governance structures and centralized control are prominent, understanding the effects of leadership styles is critical for institutional development and academic success. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed, targeting 305 full-time and part-time lecturers across selected institutions. A structured questionnaire measured autocratic leadership behaviors and perceived student performance outcomes, including skill development, cognitive engagement, and retention. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) confirmed the construct validity of the measurement instruments, while Cronbach's alpha values ($\alpha = 0.841$ for leadership and $\alpha = 0.973$ for student performance) indicated strong internal reliability. A simple linear regression analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between autocratic leadership and student performance ($B = 0.530$, $p < 0.001$), with an R^2 of 0.141, suggesting that autocratic leadership accounts for 14.1% of the variance in student outcomes. These findings suggest that within Cambodia's bureaucratically driven educational environment, autocratic leadership may foster structure and compliance conducive to academic discipline. However, the study also recognizes the limitations of this leadership style in promoting creativity, collaboration, and long-term institutional innovation. The research contributes to the limited empirical literature on leadership in developing countries and offers practical implications for higher education governance in Cambodia. It recommends further investigation into alternative leadership styles and expanded methodological approaches, including qualitative and longitudinal analyses, to fully understand leadership's multifaceted impact on student success.

Keywords: Autocratic Leadership, Student Performance, Cambodian Public Universities, Exploratory Factor Analysis, Quantitative Survey

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are crucial platforms for intellectual and socioeconomic advancement. In Cambodia, the structure of higher education includes both public and private institutions, each with distinct governance models and operational challenges. A major factor influencing institutional effectiveness is leadership style, which determines how universities manage resources, staff, and ultimately impact student learning outcomes. Autocratic leadership has come under scrutiny for its potential effects on academic performance, especially in environments where centralized control and hierarchical systems are deeply rooted. Autocratic leadership is often defined by a top-down approach in which decision-making is centralized, authority is concentrated, and input from subordinates is limited. In the context of Cambodian HEIs where limited funding, rigid institutional frameworks, and traditional cultural norms prevail such leadership approaches may be both common and consequential. Leaders operating under autocratic models may achieve short-term compliance and operational efficiency; however, they may also suppress innovation, reduce faculty motivation, and impair student engagement—factors essential for academic success.

This issue is particularly urgent in Cambodia's public universities, where state funding remains minimal, representing only a fraction of the national education budget. Most institutions rely heavily on tuition fees and fundraising to sustain their operations. As noted in earlier research, large Phnom Penh-based public HEIs often cover only 10–20% of their annual expenses through government allocations, with the remainder sourced independently [1]. Such financial constraints reinforce the need for effective leadership, yet they may inadvertently entrench autocratic styles as a mechanism for control and resource management [2]. Additionally, the pressures of globalization and growing public demand for accountability have prompted significant managerial shifts across higher education institutions (HEIs). Many have adopted leadership models influenced by corporate governance, emphasizing performance, efficiency, and control [3]. In the Cambodian context, this trend often manifests as authoritative leadership in both public and private universities. However, while private institutions may benefit from greater operational flexibility, public universities are frequently entangled in bureaucratic processes, which can amplify the negative impact of autocratic leadership on teaching quality and student learning outcomes.

There is also a significant variation in institutional culture between public and private HEIs. Public institutions often emphasize academic rigor and research, while private institutions prioritize market-oriented skills and professional training. Despite these distinctions, the use of autocratic leadership appears across both sectors. Previous literature suggests that in many educational systems with limited participatory governance, leadership tends to rely on command-and-control methods that discourage shared decision-making and collaboration [4]. This lack of inclusivity may directly influence the quality of instruction and indirectly affect student performance by limiting innovation in pedagogy. The existing body of research on leadership in education has largely focused on democratic, transformational, and participatory leadership styles, highlighting their positive effects on student outcomes and institutional development. In contrast, there is a clear gap in empirical studies that critically examine autocratic leadership—particularly in developing countries like Cambodia where institutional hierarchies and cultural respect for authority are firmly embedded. This gap in the literature underscores the need for contextual research that examines the relationship between leadership style and student performance within localized systems of higher education.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the specific impact of autocratic leadership on student performance, drawing on lecturer perspectives across Cambodian public and private universities. By comparing how autocratic leadership is experienced and enacted in both types of institutions, the research aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of its implications for academic success. The study also considers the socio-cultural context in which leadership operates, acknowledging that perceptions of authority and hierarchy vary across societies and play a critical role in how leadership is interpreted and enacted. The primary objective of this research is to investigate the impact of autocratic leadership style on student academic performance within Cambodian higher education institutions. By examining the perceptions and experiences of higher education lecturers, the research seeks to identify whether autocratic leadership hinders or enhances educational quality. Furthermore, the study endeavors to explore any significant differences between institutional types regarding leadership practices, with the goal of offering policy recommendations for leadership development and improved governance in Cambodia's higher education sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Autocratic leadership, defined by a centralized authority structure where decision-making power is concentrated in a single leader and subordinate input is minimal or absent, remains a prevalent leadership style in various institutional contexts [5]. Rooted historically in postcolonial governance systems, particularly in many African states, autocratic leadership emerged as a legacy of colonial rule, favoring rigid hierarchies and limiting the autonomy of subordinate actors. These centralized structures often prioritize obedience, control, and top-down command, frequently at the expense of employee agency and creativity. [5] argue that such leadership systems inhibit participatory engagement, a dynamic equally observable in academic institutions where administrative power tends to be hierarchically distributed. In academic settings such as university departments and libraries, the autocratic leadership style has been shown to have detrimental effects on organizational climate and staff well-being. [6] highlights that the lack of participative decision-making in such environments often results in low morale, suppressed innovation, and diminished job satisfaction among

academic and administrative personnel. Without the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to institutional decisions, employees are likely to disengage from their work, ultimately impacting institutional productivity and student-related outcomes. Moreover, this leadership style may discourage creative problem-solving and collaborative practices essential in academic institutions, especially those undergoing reform or expansion.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that autocratic leadership can be effective in specific contexts. [7] suggest that in situations demanding urgent decision-making such as institutional crises, policy enforcement, or structural reform centralized leadership may offer efficiency and control that participative model might lack. This form of leadership can be especially useful where there is a lack of managerial capacity or where rapid implementation of policies is required. However, reliance on autocratic methods in the long term can suppress institutional adaptability, professional development, and academic freedom.

In contrast, democratic and participative leadership styles are increasingly advocated for in academic literature as models that promote inclusivity, transparency, and institutional effectiveness. [8], [9] have demonstrated that democratic leadership correlates positively with higher levels of employee performance, job satisfaction, and commitment to organizational goals. These approaches tend to foster collaborative academic cultures that value innovation, shared governance, and continuous professional growth critical components in knowledge-based institutions. Democratic leadership also aligns with contemporary educational paradigms emphasizing student-centered learning, faculty engagement, and institutional accountability.

In the Cambodian higher education context where governance structures are in a transitional phase understanding the impact of leadership styles, particularly autocratic leadership, on student performance is of critical importance. Many Cambodian universities, especially public ones, still exhibit centralized administrative patterns reflective of broader state governance. Investigating the effects of autocratic leadership on student academic outcomes can offer evidence-based insights for leadership development programs, institutional reforms, and quality assurance frameworks. As Cambodian higher education continues to expand and diversify, leadership models that balance decisiveness with participation will be essential for achieving sustainable institutional growth and improved academic performance.

Autocratic leadership, often characterized by centralized control and minimal participatory input, remains a persistent management style across diverse institutional contexts. In this model, leaders make decisions unilaterally, issue directives without consultation, and maintain strict oversight over subordinates. Although its prevalence has declined in favor of more participative approaches, autocratic leadership continues to appeal to certain leaders due to its simplicity, clarity of command, and perceived efficiency [10]. This leadership style is especially dominant in hierarchical cultures where authority is closely linked to institutional power. Autocratic leaders often assume that subordinates are unmotivated, reluctant to take responsibility, and need continuous oversight to perform effectively.

Consequently, feedback is often punitive rather than developmental, and communication flows are predominantly top-down [11]. In such environments, employees may experience fear-driven compliance rather than genuine motivation, which can lead to long-term issues including staff turnover, reduced creativity, and resistance to institutional change. In the context of higher education, particularly in developing countries like Cambodia, autocratic leadership is still frequently observed due to deeply entrenched bureaucratic norms and centralized governance systems. While this style may ensure task completion and discipline, it poses significant risks to academic freedom, collaboration, and innovation core values essential to educational quality. Excessive reliance on authority within academic settings, such as university libraries or classrooms, may suppress open dialogue, discourage feedback, and hinder professional development. Moreover, the authoritarian tendency to prioritize outcomes over human capital can create a disconnect between leadership expectations and staff engagement. As [11] autocratic leaders are often perceived as dominant, insensitive, and unreceptive to feedback, which can contribute to a culture of dissatisfaction, low morale, and reduced motivation among subordinates. Although autocratic leadership may serve specific short-term organizational goals, especially in crisis or low-resource contexts, its long-term impact on institutional development and student outcomes requires critical examination. This study investigates the influence of autocratic leadership practices on student performance in Cambodian universities, offering evidence-based insights for enhancing leadership effectiveness in higher education institutions.

Hypotheses and Research Framework

H1: Autocratic leadership style has a positive and statistically significant effect on student performance in Cambodian higher education institutions.

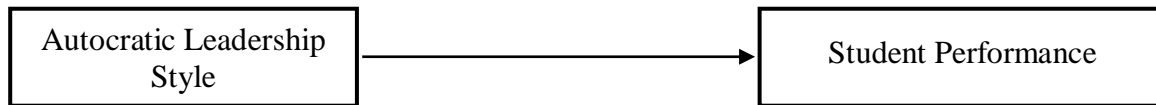


Figure 1: Research Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between autocratic leadership style and students performance in Cambodian public higher education institutions. The quantitative approach was selected for its ability to test hypotheses and quantify relationships among variables using statistical methods [12]. The cross-sectional nature enabled data collection at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of current perceptions and performance outcomes [13].

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised full-time and part-time lecturers from selected public universities across Cambodia. To ensure proportional representation across various faculties, academic departments, and institutional sizes, a stratified random sampling approach was adopted [14]. A total of 460 structured paper-based questionnaires were distributed. Of these, 326 were returned, resulting in a response rate of 70.9%. Following the exclusion of 21 incomplete responses, a final sample of 305 valid questionnaires was retained for analysis, yielding a usable response rate of 66.3%. This sample size aligns with the recommended thresholds for both regression analysis and factor analysis, which suggest a ratio of at least 5 to 10 respondents per observed variable [15].

Instrumentation

A structured survey instrument was utilized to measure the key constructs in this study, employing a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was organized into three main sections. The first section collected demographic information, including gender, age, academic rank, and years of teaching experience. The second section measured the Autocratic Leadership Style, with items adapted from validated instruments to reflect relevant behaviors within the technological and institutional context of Cambodian higher education. The third section focused on Student Performance, assessed through four core dimensions related to skill performance, retention, interest, and cognitive ability), derived from established theoretical frameworks and empirical studies. A pilot study tested the instrument's reliability, showing strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha above 0.70 for all constructs. The results indicated that Cronbach's alpha coefficients for most constructs ranged from 0.730 to 0.908, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, which demonstrates acceptable reliability [16].

Validity and Reliability

To examine the construct validity of the measurement instruments, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation. This procedure was applied to both the Autocratic Leadership Style and Student Performance constructs. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity confirmed that the dataset was suitable for factor analysis. In accordance with established guidelines, only items with factor loadings of 0.50 or higher were retained [17]. To evaluate internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for each scale. Both constructs recorded alpha values exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable to high reliability [16].

Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. The process commenced with the computation of descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations, to present an overview of the participants' demographic characteristics and to evaluate the distribution patterns of responses for each survey item. Following this, validated measurement constructs were used to compute composite scores by averaging the retained items under each dimension. To test the primary hypothesis regarding the effect of autocratic leadership style on students performance, a simple linear regression analysis was performed. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level, and model fitness was assessed through R-squared and standardized coefficients. This analytical approach allowed for empirical testing of the hypothesized relationship while controlling for measurement integrity.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Respondents' Profile

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 305 full-time and part-time lecturers who participated in the study. The majority of respondents were male (90.8%) and married (84.6%), indicating a predominant representation of male academics within the sample. The largest age group was between 41 and 50 years (36.1%), followed by those aged 31–40 years (29.5%) and 51–60 years (22.3%), suggesting a mature and experienced academic cohort. In terms of academic qualifications, the vast majority held Master's degrees (89.8%), while 10.2% possessed doctoral degrees, reflecting a highly educated sample appropriate for assessing leadership and educational outcomes. Regarding teaching experience, respondents ranged from those with five years or less (15.7%) to those with 16–20 years of experience (29.2%), further enhancing the credibility of the study by drawing on insights from experienced professionals.

Table 1: The demographic characteristics of the respondents

Factors	Classification	Repetition	Proportion
Gender	Female	28	9.2
	Male	277	90.8
Marital Status	Single	36	11.8
	Married	258	84.6
	Other	11	3.6
Age	>30yrs	33	10.8
	31-40yrs	55	18.0
	41-50yrs	110	36.1
	51-60yrs	82	26.9
	> 61yrs	25	8.2
Academic Qualification	MSc.	274	89.8
	PhD	31	10.2
Working Experience	>5yrs	48	15.7
	6 – 10yrs	55	18.0
	11 – 15yrs	71	23.3
	16 – 20yrs	89	29.2
	> 20yrs	42	13.8
N		305	

Factor Analysis (EFA) for Autocratic Leadership Style

Table 2: Component Matrix for Autocratic Leadership Style (ALS)

Item Code	Component 1	Component 2
ALS1	0.834	0.017
ALS2	0.853	-0.045
ALS3	0.830	-0.106
ALS4	0.900	-0.122
ALS5	0.898	-0.134
ALS6	0.112	0.641
ALS7	0.179	0.740
ALS8	0.153	0.724
ALS9	0.134	0.699
ALS10	0.824	-0.081

Table 3: KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

Measurement	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	0.792
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	3,080.993
Df	45
Significance (p-value)	0.000

Table 2, items ALS1 through ALS5 and ALS10 loaded strongly on Component 1 (loadings ranging from 0.824 to 0.900), suggesting this factor represents core elements of autocratic leadership behaviors, such as directive decision-making and control. Conversely, items ALS6 to ALS9 showed high loadings on Component 2 (ranging from 0.641 to 0.740), which may reflect a distinct dimension related to enforcement or disciplinary actions within autocratic leadership.

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of the Autocratic Leadership Style (ALS) scale revealed a two-factor structure, as indicated by the extraction of two components with eigenvalues greater than one. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.792 demonstrates a good level of sampling adequacy, confirming that the dataset is appropriate for factor analysis. Moreover, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2(45) = 3,080.993$, $p < 0.001$), indicating sufficient correlations among the items for factor extraction as shown in Table 3.

This two-factor solution supports the multidimensional nature of the autocratic leadership construct in this context. Retaining items with factor loadings above 0.50 ensures the measurement scale's validity and robustness for further analyses, such as reliability testing and regression modeling.

Factor Analysis (EFA) for Student Performance

Table 4: Component Matrix for Student Performance (SP)

Item Code	Component 1	Component 2
SP1	0.484	0.737
SP2	0.903	-0.145

SP3	0.917	-0.122
SP4	0.932	-0.137
SP5	0.934	-0.131
SP6	0.928	-0.145
SP7	0.917	-0.118
SP8	0.624	0.619
SP9	0.608	0.701
SP10	0.832	-0.008
SP11	0.904	-0.106
SP12	0.916	-0.134
SP13	0.655	0.466
SP14	0.905	-0.115
SP15	0.915	-0.139
SP16	0.905	-0.137
SP17	0.916	-0.172

Table 5: KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

Measurement	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	0.858
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	12,131.402
df	136
Significance (p-value)	0.000

Table 4, two components were extracted. The majority of the items (e.g., SP2–SP7, SP10–SP17) loaded strongly on Component 1 (with loadings mostly > 0.90), representing the core dimension of student academic performance likely, encompassing achievement, engagement, and learning outcomes. Items such as SP1, SP8, SP9, and SP13 demonstrated moderate cross-loadings on both components, suggesting potential sub-dimensions related to student performance.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Principal Component Analysis was conducted on 17 items measuring Students Performance (SP). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.858 indicates a high degree of sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 12,131.402$, $df = 136$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis as shown in Table 5.

These findings indicate that while Student Performance is largely unidimensional in nature, there may be latent substructures worth exploring in future confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). All retained items met the acceptable loading threshold of ≥ 0.50 , supporting the construct validity of the measurement scale.

Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

Table 6: Reliability Analysis Using Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Demographic	6	0.713
Autocratic Leadership style	10	0.841
Students Performance	17	0.973

Table 6, cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the study constructs. The Demographic items yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.713, indicating acceptable reliability for descriptive purposes. The Autocratic Leadership Style scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.841, demonstrating good internal consistency. The Students Performance scale showed a very high alpha of 0.973, indicating excellent reliability. All values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming the measurement instruments' suitability for further analysis [16].

Hypotheses Tested

H1: Autocratic leadership style has a positive and statistically significant effect on student performance in Cambodian higher education institutions.

Table 7: Simple Linear Regression

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t-value	Sig.
Constant	1.756	0.293	6.002	0.000
Autocratic Leadership Style	0.530	0.075	7.041	0.000
R = 0.375				
R Square = 0.141				
Adjust R Square = 0.138				
F = 49.576				

A simple linear regression analysis was employed to assess the influence of autocratic leadership style on students performance among lecturers at Cambodian public universities. The findings, presented in Table 7, indicate that the model was statistically significant, $F(1, 303) = 49.576$, $p < 0.001$, suggesting that the predictor accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in student performance. The R^2 value of 0.141 implies that autocratic leadership explains approximately 14.1% of the variation in student outcomes, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.138 confirming the model's reliability after adjusting for sample size. The unstandardized coefficient ($B = 0.530$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrates a significant and positive effect, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1, which posited that autocratic leadership positively impacts student performance. Furthermore, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) of 1.000 indicates no multicollinearity issues, confirming the stability of the regression estimates [17]. These results are consistent with previous studies that highlight the effectiveness of directive leadership in cultures that value hierarchy and structure [18], [19]. In the Cambodian context, where educational

institutions often operate within hierarchical frameworks, autocratic leadership may foster discipline and role clarity, contributing to enhanced academic achievement.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATION OF STUDY, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study explored the impact of autocratic leadership style on student performance within Cambodian public universities using a quantitative approach. The findings reveal a statistically significant and positive relationship between autocratic leadership and student academic outcomes ($R^2 = 0.141$, $B = 0.530$, $p < 0.001$). The results suggest that in hierarchical academic contexts like Cambodia, autocratic leadership can create structured environments that promote discipline and clarity in instructional delivery, thereby positively influencing student performance. While often critiqued for its restrictive nature, autocratic leadership may offer pragmatic advantages in settings where educational governance is traditionally centralized and bureaucratically driven.

Although the study offers valuable insights, it has several limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality; using longitudinal data would offer a better understanding of how the impact of leadership changes over time. Secondly, the research was conducted solely within public universities, which restricts the applicability of the results to private universities or different educational settings. Lastly, the use of self-reported data from lecturers may introduce biases, including social desirability effects and errors in recall. Future research should employ mixed methods approaches to validate findings through triangulation and gain richer qualitative insights into leadership dynamics. Conducting comparative analyses between public and private institutions is also recommended to better grasp contextual variations. Moreover, investigating other leadership styles such as transformational or servant leadership could offer a more comprehensive understanding of leadership effectiveness in Cambodian higher education. Broadening the geographic coverage and incorporating student perspectives would additionally enhance the literature and support the design of more effective leadership development initiatives.

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