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The Nexus Between Autocratic Leadership Style and Employee Performance in a South African University

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Abstract:

This study examines the relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee performance in the context of a South African university. Autocratic leadership, which is characterized by centralized decision-making, strict supervision, and limited employee participation, remains common in many hierarchical environments, including higher education institutions. The research focuses on how autocratic leadership practices influence the productivity, job satisfaction, and commitment of university employees, particularly in administrative and academic support units. A quantitative research approach was utilized, with data collected through structured questionnaires administered to a convenient sample of n=400 employees at the university. The Pearson Product Moment correlation was used to analyze the relationship between autocratic leadership behaviors and key indicators of employee performance. The findings aim to determine whether autocratic leadership has a positive impact on performance by promoting discipline and task completion or a negative impact by lowering morale and limiting employee empowerment. This study offers insights for university management on finding a balance between authoritative leadership practices and participative strategies to enhance employee performance and organizational effectiveness. Ultimately, the research aims to inform leadership development and human resource practices within universities to create more productive and supportive work environments.

Keywords:

Leadership, Performance Management, Sustainability, University, South Africa

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Introduction

Leadership is a crucial factor in determining the effectiveness of organizations, especially within higher education institutions where knowledge production, academic autonomy, and administrative efficiency need to coexist (Apet & Adea, 2025). Among various leadership styles, autocratic leadership also known as authoritarian leadership has garnered considerable attention from scholars due to its direct and often contentious impact on employee behavior and performance. This leadership style is characterized by centralized decision-making, strict control, and limited participation from subordinates, with leaders exercising authority unilaterally and expecting compliance from employees (Olabiyi et al., 2024).

In organizational settings, leadership style significantly influences employee performance outcomes, including productivity, engagement, job satisfaction, and innovation. Recent research indicates that leadership behaviors affect not only task execution but also employees' psychological and emotional states, which, in turn, impact overall organizational performance (Haricharan, 2023). Consequently, the relationship between leadership style and employee performance has become a key area of focus in human resource management and organizational psychology.

While the autocratic leadership style is traditionally linked to efficiency, discipline, and rapid decision-making, it presents a paradox in modern organizations. On one hand, it can enhance short-term productivity in structured environments that require clear direction and control. On the other hand, it may stifle employee creativity, reduce engagement, and weaken organizational commitment (Walter, 2024). Empirical studies further indicate that autocratic leadership can negatively affect employee engagement, a critical predictor of performance (Molemane, Edoun & Faku, 2023).

In the context of South African universities, the discussion of leadership becomes even more relevant due to the ongoing transformation within the sector, its institutional complexity, and socio-political dynamics (Mukwawaya, 2025). Higher education institutions in South Africa function within a landscape marked by demands for decolonization, equity, and improved governance. These pressures have intensified scrutiny of leadership practices and their implications for staff performance and institutional sustainability. Recent studies reveal that authoritarian leadership behaviors are prevalent in some South African universities, often manifested through micromanagement, limited consultation, and the suppression of academic voices (Olabiyi et al., 2024).

The autocratic leadership style is often associated with toxic leadership cultures, which can undermine trust, collaboration, and morale among academic and administrative staff. The consequences of these dynamics are significant, as employee performance in universities is measured not only by administrative efficiency but also by teaching quality, research output, and community engagement.

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Consequently, leadership approaches that limit participation and innovation can have far-reaching implications for institutional effectiveness.

Furthermore, comparative studies in similar higher education contexts indicate that autocratic leadership frequently arises in environments characterized by uncertainty, resource constraints, or weak institutional frameworks (Apet & Adea, 2025). While such conditions may justify directive leadership to some degree, an overreliance on autocratic practices can hinder long-term organizational development and employee empowerment. Existing literature highlights that encouraging employees to perform at their best is crucial for organizations aiming to provide quality services and maintain competitiveness. Therefore, organizations need strong leaders and high-performing employees to achieve their strategic objectives. The recruitment and retention of top talent directly impact overall organizational success. Hassnain (2023) noted that focusing on human resource management enhances the integration of various leadership styles and employee management at a strategic level, ultimately improving overall employee performance.

The importance of effective leadership in achieving success has attracted scholarly interest over the years, leading to the conceptualization of different leadership styles (Dastane, 2020). University employees are tasked with delivering services that benefit society and enhance overall well-being for all residents. Thus, it is crucial for individuals in management positions within the university space to possess leadership qualities that enable their subordinates to exceed expectations and provide quality services. In light of this, the current research aims to:

- Examine the relationship between employee performance and autocratic leadership style in the university sector.

Further to this, the alternative and null hypotheses of this study are as follows:

- H_1: There is a relationship between Autocratic Leadership Style and Employee Performance in a South African University
- H_0: There is no relationship between Autocratic Leadership Style and Employee Performance in a South African University

Literature Review

Leadership in South African higher education has become an essential area of study due to ongoing pressures for transformation, institutional inequalities, and demands for global competitiveness (Mukwawaya, 2026). Universities operate within a complex socio-political context shaped by post-apartheid transformation, funding constraints, and calls for decolonization (Mukwawaya, 2025). Literature emphasizes that leadership is a key driver of institutional effectiveness, transformation, and sustainability (Apet & Adea, 2025).

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Effective and efficient leadership is vital for organizational success and enhanced employee performance. This improvement in employee performance relies on leaders' ability to boost motivation, ensuring that employees remain engaged and can positively contribute to the organization's goals and objectives (Batista-Taran, Shuck, Gutierrez, & Baralt, 2009). Over the years, various scholars have defined leadership in different ways: as a behavior or act, a process rather than a singular event, the personality traits of a leader and their impact, the ability to influence and persuade, a tool for achieving goals and objectives, and the capacity to induce compliance from followers. Malik and Azmat (2019) align with this definition, adding that leadership should involve forming personal bonds with followers to inspire them to perform well, rather than compelling them to meet specific targets.

Apet and Adea (2025) argued that definitions of leadership are as varied as the scholars who attempt to define it. He maintained that leadership is not a static concept; rather, it is a dynamic process aimed at influencing and motivating followers to achieve organizational objectives. Leadership should not be limited to one individual; instead, it should be viewed as a combination of interactions between leaders and followers. This interaction allows both the leader and the followers to influence each other in various situations and at different times to meet and exceed their goals (Cullen-Lester & Yammarino, 2016).

Leadership Theories and Styles in Higher Education

Recent research emphasizes the significance of transformational, transactional, and agile leadership styles in enhancing institutional performance. Transformational leadership, in particular, is linked to innovation, staff motivation, and organizational change. A study by Samodien, du Plessis, and Van Vuuren (2024) found that a combination of transformational and agile leadership positively influences institutional performance in South African universities, especially in adapting to rapid environmental changes such as digital transformation.

In a similar vein, Venter, du Plessis, and Stander (2024) argue that effective leadership in South African higher education necessitates adaptability, emotional intelligence, and ethical governance to navigate the complexities of institutions. These findings align with global leadership theory but highlight the need for leadership approaches that are sensitive to the specific socio-economic realities of South Africa.

Gender and Leadership in Higher Education

Gender transformation in leadership remains a significant concern. While progress has been made, women continue to be underrepresented in senior academic and executive positions. A systematic review by Pillay (2025) identifies key themes in research on women's leadership, including:

- Institutional barriers and gender bias
- Power dynamics and decision-making inequalities
- Intersectionality (race, gender, class)

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The study reveals that despite the existence of progressive policies, gaps in implementation and cultural resistance continue to hinder gender equity in leadership roles. More recent evidence suggests that advances in gender representation have been slow, with ongoing disparities in senior leadership positions across institutions (Moodly & Fouten, 2026).

Autocratic Leadership Style

The autocratic leadership style is focused on tasks and prioritizes the completion of assignments. Some autocratic leaders possess charisma and confidence and often do not seek external validation (Olayisade & Awolusi, 2021). These leaders tend to require less flexibility and creativity from their followers, expecting them to adhere strictly to their instructions while retaining decision-making authority for themselves. As a result of this leadership style, employee motivation, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction may decrease, as leaders show little trust in their followers. This lack of trust can lead to conflicts and a decline in organizational performance (Al Khajeh, 2018).

Olayisade and Awolusi (2021) argued that the autocratic leadership style is most effective when the leader is a subject matter expert leading individuals with limited knowledge. Similarly, Al Khajeh (2018) noted that this style works best when tasks must be completed under tight deadlines.

Leadership and Institutional Performance

Leadership is closely tied to institutional performance, encompassing teaching quality, research output, and student success. Research indicates that:

- Transformational leadership enhances engagement among academic staff.
- Agile leadership promotes responsiveness to change.
- Transactional leadership ensures operational efficiency.

Samodien et al. (2024) demonstrate that hybrid leadership approaches are most effective in South African universities, particularly in achieving a balance between stability and innovation. Additionally, leadership is crucial in addressing student-related challenges such as access, funding, and protest movements, which have historically influenced the sector.

Methods and Data

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive quantitative research design to investigate the relationship between autocratic leadership style and performance within a South African University. A quantitative approach was deemed appropriate because it allows researchers to collect numerical data and statistically analyze the relationships between variables, such as autocratic leadership style and performance (Pai

et al., 2026). The application of quantitative methods also enhances the objectivity, reliability, and generalizability of the research findings.

Research Approach

This study utilized a survey research approach to collect data from participants working within a higher education institution (HEI). The survey method is commonly employed in human resource management (HRM) research because, as noted by Alam et al. (2026), it allows researchers to gather standardized information from a relatively large group of respondents in a systematic and structured manner. Additionally, this approach facilitates quantitative analysis of the data (Chan et al., 2026), enabling the identification of patterns and relationships between autocratic leadership style and performance within the HEI.

Population of the Study

The target population for this study consisted of academic and administrative employees working within higher education institution (HEI). These individuals were chosen for the study because they are either directly involved in staffing processes or are affected different leadership styles within their working environments.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A convenient sampling technique was utilized to select participants from the target population. A sample size of n=400 was considered for the study. Due to practical constraints such as limited time and accessibility, the study employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience sampling. This approach involved choosing respondents who were readily available and willing to participate (Alhassan et al., 2026). The sample consisted of academic and administrative staff members from the higher education institution (HEI) being studied. These participant groups were considered appropriate because they possess relevant knowledge and experience regarding the different leadership styles experienced in different departments within the university context, making the sample purposive as well (Magida et al., 2024). The selected sample size was determined to be adequate for generating meaningful data for statistical analysis and supporting the study's objectives.

Reliability of Measurement Instrument

In order to ensure the reliability of the measurement instrument, a Cronbach ‘s Alpha was performed and a result of 0,70 was achieved which confirmed the internal consistency of the measurement instrument.

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Data Collection Methods

Primary data for this study were collected using a structured questionnaire, which is a widely used method in human resource management research due to its effectiveness in generating standardized and comparable data across a relatively large group of respondents (Alam et al., 2026). The questionnaire aimed to capture employees' perceptions of autocratic leadership style and performance management within higher education institutions (HEIs), focusing on key dimensions such as workforce planning, recruitment, selection, placement, and talent attraction and retention.

Closed-ended questions were employed to enhance response consistency and facilitate quantitative analysis. Additionally, a Likert scale was used to measure the degree of agreement with specific statements. This methodology allowed for the systematic quantification of attitudes and perceptions, thereby improving the reliability and objectivity of the collected data. The structured format of the questionnaire ensured that all respondents were presented with the same set of questions, enabling meaningful comparison of responses and supporting the statistical analysis of the relationships between staffing practices and talent management outcomes.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using various statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, summarized the participants' responses. These statistics provided insight into the characteristics of the respondents and offered an overview of autocratic leadership style and performance within higher education institutions (HEIs). Additionally, inferential statistical techniques were employed to examine the relationship between autocratic leadership style and performance.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously upheld throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research before completing the questionnaire. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and all information collected was used exclusively for academic purposes.

Results

The results of the study are presented below:

Variable		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Gender	Male	156	39%

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	Female	244	61%
Age	30 years and below	49	12.3%
	31-40 years	143	35.7%
	41-50 years	103	25.8%
	51years and above	105	26.3%
Race	Black African	317	79.3%
	Coloured	8	2.0%
	Indian	9	2.3%
	White	66	16.5%
Marital Status	Divorced	25	6.3%
	Married	204	51%
	Re-Married	13	3.3%
	Single	158	40%
Work strata	Academic	204	51%
	Support	47	11.8%
	Administration	149	37.3%

Table 1: Demographical Details of Respondents

The workforce of the HEI, which is located adjacent to a Black residential area, is predominantly Black and female. This reflects post-apartheid transformation cheerful progress in which a dominant race is also dominant in the HEI employ. However, the small proportion (12.3%) of younger employees (<30 years) indicates an aging workforce and limited entry-level recruitment. The highest proportion in age is 35.7% of those between 31–40 years, signifying a mature workforce. The tiny proportion of Coloured employees (2%) is a concern when recalling this group as being among the previously disadvantaged populations.

Academic staff constitute nearly half the workforce, which is a positive aspect as the core business of the university is academic work. However, within this academic group, only a small fraction occupy senior academic ranks (Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, or Professor). Furthermore, a correlation analysis was performed and presented below:

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Autocratic Leadership Style and Employee Performance

Participants were asked to indicate how much they related to various statements about autocratic leadership styles in order to understand its impact on employee performance. Table 2 below displays the responses to each statement.

No	Autocratic Leadership Style Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	The head believes employees should be closely supervised.	3.34	1.204
2	The head does not listen to suggestions from employees.	2.14	1.305
3	The head want employees to follow his/her way of working all the time.	2.56	1.269
4	The head believes employees are lazy.	2.25	1.234
5	Employees cannot express their opinions freely.	2.19	1.232
6	Work outputs are prioritized over employee well-being.	2.32	1.129
7	The head does not share all the information.	2.30	1.198
	Average	**2.442**	**0.986**

Table 2: Autocratic Leadership Items

Most respondents disagreed with the statements regarding autocratic leadership, resulting in an average mean of 2.442 (SD = 0.986). There were mixed reactions regarding whether regional heads believe employees should be closely supervised, with a mean of 3.34 (SD = 1.204). Additionally, responses varied on whether regional heads expect employees to always adhere to their specific way of working, which had a mean of 2.56 (SD = 1.269). These findings indicate that some regional heads monitor their subordinates closely, while others take a more hands-off approach. Furthermore, some regional heads expect their subordinates to follow their established methods, whereas others allow employees to carry out their duties independently.

It's important to note that some employees at the university have been with the department longer than certain departmental heads, giving them more experience and knowledge regarding their work. In contrast, other employees may have less experience and depend more on the guidance of their heads. These findings align with Olayisade and Awolusi (2021), who suggested that an autocratic leadership

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style can be effective when the leader is an expert in their field, guiding followers who may have limited knowledge.

Employee Performance

The mean, or average, scores are used to determine the typical number of responses each participant provided for the statements in the questionnaire. The standard deviation indicates how much the responses vary in relation to the mean. Each participant was required to indicate how much they agreed with the various statements about employee performance. Table 3 below presents the responses to each statement.

No	Employee Performance items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I receive feedback on my performance from my head	3.62	1.049
2	I have enough resources to perform my duties well	2.93	1.284
3	My performance is restricted by the lack of resources	3.18	1.229
4	There is sufficient training and development opportunities	3.00	1.225
5	I am satisfied with the performance management system in the department	2.95	1.235
6	I take part in performance appraisals	3.89	0.843
7	I am given freedom to make decisions about my work and career	3.86	1.045
8	There are clear roles and responsibility in the institution	4.05	0.941
9	I receive coaching and mentorship in the execution of my duties	3.52	1.119
10	There are clear goals and expectations from my head	3.99	0.950
11	There is a positive culture that boosts employee morale	3.29	1.172
12	The organisational structure enables me to execute my duties well	3.25	1.140
13	I receive adequate support and guidance from the head	3.96	1.047
14	I receive rewards and recognition when perform my duties well	3.16	1.143

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15	I motivate my colleagues to improve our performance	4.22	0.692
16	I offer support to fellow colleagues in need	4.47	0.689
	Average	**3.583**	**0.644**

Table 3: Employee Performance Items

Most respondents agreed with various statements regarding employee performance, as indicated by an average mean value of 3.583 (SD = 0.644). Specifically, respondents strongly agreed that they offer support to colleagues in need (M = 4.47, SD = 0.689) and that they motivate their peers to enhance their performance (M = 4.22, SD = 0.692). Additionally, a majority of participants agreed that clear roles and responsibilities exist within their regions and academic institutions (M = 4.05, SD = 0.941). These results underscore the significance of teamwork and defined roles in improving employee performance. These findings align with the views of Levi (2014), who suggested that teamwork fosters positive employee relations and boosts performance.

However, the respondents expressed mixed feelings about whether they had sufficient resources to perform their duties effectively (M = 2.93, SD = 1.284), their satisfaction with the performance management system in the department (M = 2.95, SD = 1.235), and the availability of training and development opportunities within the health maintenance branch (M = 3.00, SD = 1.225). These varied responses can be attributed to the fact that each region and academic institution manages its own resource requests and training needs. Some regions or institutions submit their requests promptly, while others experience delays. Requests submitted late are expedited only if budgetary constraints allow.

The differing opinions regarding the performance management system may stem from the experiences of employees. Those who recently received higher scores in performance appraisals tend to be satisfied with the system, while those who scored lower are likely to express dissatisfaction.

Correlations Analysis Between Autocratic Leadership Style and Employee Performance

A Pearson correlation test was conducted to determine whether a correlation exists between employee performance and autocratic leadership style. The analysis aimed to assess the strength of this correlation, categorizing it as strong, moderate, or weak, and to evaluate its statistical significance. The results are presented in Table 4 below.

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		Autocratic Leadership Style
Employee Performance	Pearson Correlation	-0.422
	Sg. (1-Tailed)	<0.001

Table 4: Correlation Between Autocratic Leadership Style and Employee Performance

From Table 4 above, the autocratic leadership style negatively correlated with employee performance (correlation coefficient (r) = -0.422), and the correlation is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The research findings indicate that most employees at the university under study believe their regional managers do not exhibit autocratic leadership characteristics. However, there is evidence that more regional heads closely supervise their subordinates. Given that most employees at the university under study have an average work experience of 10 years, this close supervision may not always yield the desired outcomes, as it can be perceived as micromanagement. Additionally, some departmental heads expect employees to execute tasks exactly as instructed.

Literature suggests that autocratic leadership can be effective when quick decisions are required with minimal input from employees (Jafaar, Zambi, and Fathil, 2021). While this approach may work in the short term to accomplish tasks, it can have negative long-term effects by straining the relationships between employees and their supervisors. When employees feel their input is overlooked in the decision-making process, they tend to disengage. This disengagement can result in reluctance to address new problems promptly, which ultimately lowers their performance and hinders the achievement of organizational goals.

The study found that, in general, departmental heads are receptive to suggestions from their subordinates and encourage employees to express their views openly. Although autocratic leadership has been shown to positively predict employee performance, its impact is deemed insignificant. Departmental heads with autocratic traits may motivate some employees at the university under study, but the effect is limited. Newer employees, who have less experience, may benefit more from autocratic leadership traits than those who are more experienced.

Recommendations for Policy Implications

Departmental heads must enhance the technical skills and knowledge of their employees through upskilling and retraining. This can be achieved by utilizing individual development plans and performance appraisals to identify areas for improvement.

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Additionally, regional heads should empower employees by assigning them acting roles and involving them in stakeholder meetings where they can provide feedback in the form of presentations. This exposure will help develop their confidence and improve their communication and decision-making skills. Leaders can then delegate some of their responsibilities and allow employees to work more independently.

Employees should also feel encouraged to share their suggestions on how specific tasks should be executed. When employees contribute ideas, they develop a sense of psychological ownership of the process, which can lead to better results.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee performance within a South African university context is complex and context dependent. Current literature indicates that while autocratic (authoritarian) leadership can provide structure, control, and rapid decision-making, its overall impact on employee performance particularly in knowledge-driven environments like universities is often mixed and can be negative in the long term.

Empirical evidence from South African and broader African contexts suggests that autocratic leadership tends to suppress employee engagement, creativity, and intrinsic motivation, which are critical for performance in academic institutions. For example, recent research in the South African education sector shows that authoritarian leadership behaviors, characterized by unilateral decision-making and limited consultation, contribute to toxic organizational cultures, lowered morale, and feelings of unfairness. Additionally, studies across various South African organizations indicate that autocratic leadership is linked to job dissatisfaction and reduced employee well-being, which indirectly undermines performance outcomes.

From a performance perspective, the relationship is not strictly linear. Some studies acknowledge that autocratic leadership may yield short-term efficiency gains, especially in highly structured or crisis-driven environments where quick decisions are necessary. However, in university settings where innovation, collaboration, and intellectual autonomy are essential, this leadership style often hinders knowledge sharing and diminishes academic productivity. Furthermore, broader empirical findings suggest that autocratic leadership may have no significant or even negative direct effect on employee performance, with mediating variables such as job satisfaction and emotional intelligence playing critical roles.

It is also important to note that the higher education sector in South Africa faces unique challenges, including pressures for transformation, complexities in institutional governance, and diverse workforce expectations. In this context, rigid hierarchical leadership approaches increasingly clash with the sector's need for participative governance and collegial decision-making. Consequently, autocratic

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leadership is often perceived as not only ineffective but also counterproductive to institutional performance and transformation goals.

Therefore, the study concludes that while autocratic leadership may still hold situational relevance, its prevalence in South African universities is unsustainable for fostering high employee performance. A more balanced or hybrid leadership approach incorporating elements of transformational, participative, and emotionally intelligent leadership would be better suited to enhancing employee motivation, engagement, and productivity.

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