



Students' Perceptions of University Instructors' Leadership Styles in Ethiopia's Amhara Region: Prevalence, Dominance, and the Case for an Integrated Approach

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Abstract

Ethiopian higher education has grown rapidly, significantly expanding access while posing serious challenges to learning, such as congested classrooms and demanding teaching assignments. This study examined how third-year students at four public universities in the Amhara Region perceived the leadership styles of their instructors. In 2024, data were gathered from 321 students using a modified version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X). Transformational leadership ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.59$) and transactional leadership ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.52$) are both evident, according to the findings, with transactional behaviors being rated slightly higher (paired-samples $t = -4.97$, $p < .001$). Instructors usually integrate the two approaches, which indicates a significant positive correlation ($r = .68$, $p < .001$). The results advocate for faculty development initiatives that strengthen transformational components of the current transactional framework and support an integrated leadership model appropriate for environments with limited resources. This study contributes to the expanding body of research on contextualized educational leadership in developing countries and offers the first comprehensive evidence from student perceptions on classroom leadership styles in Ethiopia's Amhara Region.

1 Introduction

Higher education in Ethiopia has expanded at one of the fastest rates in sub-Saharan Africa (Asgedom, 2019). Before the early 1990s, the country had only two public colleges; today, there are more than fifty, enrolling over 800,000 undergraduate students. Government initiatives aimed at building competent human capital for national development have driven this remarkable growth (Semela, 2011). However, infrastructure and human resource development have not kept pace, creating serious challenges for educational quality.

Institutions are inadequately equipped, research centers lack essential instruments, and classrooms originally designed for 40–50 students now often

accommodate 120–150. Most instructors teach four or five courses per semester while also supervising graduate papers and engaging in community service (Fekadie *et al.*, 2023). Under such conditions, it is nearly impossible for many instructors to adopt innovative teaching methods, and even traditional lectures become difficult to deliver effectively. Teaching objectives are further complicated by Ethiopian higher education institutions' struggles to align research methods with local community needs, which extend beyond infrastructure limitations (Habtu & Melesse, 2024).

Bass and colleagues' full-range leadership model provides a useful framework for distinguishing transformational leadership (inspiration, intellec-

tual stimulation, individualized consideration) from transactional leadership (clear expectations, rewards, corrective actions) (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Despite growing interest in leadership within Ethiopian organizations (Yohannes & Walsonga, 2023), few empirical studies have examined leadership at the classroom level. Most research has focused on senior administrators. For example, a recent study on organizational change and leadership in Ethiopian institutions found that leadership behaviors strongly influence change management processes (Jinga *et al.*, 2024). Yet classroom-level leadership dynamics were not explored.

To address this gap, the current study collected perspectives from third-year students in the Amhara Region, one of Ethiopia's largest higher education zones, focusing on two key questions:

1. How common are transformational and transactional leadership behaviors, and which style is more dominant?
2. Do instructors typically employ both approaches in combination or as alternatives?

Bass's Full-Range Leadership Theory (FRLT), which conceptualizes leadership along a continuum from laissez-faire to transformational leadership, with transactional leadership occupying the middle range, serves as the theoretical foundation for this study (Bass, 1985). Previous research in Ethiopian contexts has demonstrated strong links between transformational and transactional leadership styles and student engagement, using FRLT to analyze motivation (Teshome & Alemu, 2024). Building on this foundation, the present study investigates the prevalence, dominance, and integration of these leadership approaches in classroom settings.

1.1 Literature Review

1.2 Transformational Leadership in Higher Education

Transformational leadership is grounded in four interrelated components: idealized influence (acting as a role model), inspirational motivation (articulating an inspiring vision), intellectual stimulation (encouraging critical thinking), and individualized consideration (attending to each student's needs) (Bass & Riggio, 2006). International meta-analyses

consistently show that instructors who demonstrate these behaviors foster higher student engagement, satisfaction, and academic performance (Balwant, 2016).

Evidence from Ethiopia remains limited and highly context-dependent. Some studies suggest that transformational practices positively influence worker innovation and organizational commitment (Mamo *et al.*, 2025). However, the full expression of individualized consideration is particularly difficult in Ethiopian public universities, where large class sizes and standardized national curricula constrain personalized approaches (Kidane, 2019). Moreover, research indicates that transformational leadership can sometimes negatively affect organizational change management in Ethiopian universities (Jinga *et al.*, 2024). These findings highlight the importance of context in shaping the effectiveness of transformational leadership within higher education.

1.3 Transactional Leadership in Structured Systems

Transactional leadership functions through contingent reward (providing grades, praise, or recognition) and management by exception (intervening when problems arise). It relies on contingent compensation, where incentives are offered for meeting established standards (Bass, 1985). This approach is particularly effective in generating order, clarity, and accountability within large, highly regulated systems, though it is sometimes criticized as overly mechanical or rote.

Ethiopian state universities are widely regarded as highly bureaucratic, characterized by institutional pressure to achieve high throughput, standardized credit hour systems, and nationally mandated curricula (Asgedom, 2019). Within this context, transactional practices are seen as both common and functionally necessary. Local scholars argue that such practices are essential for meeting ministerial targets and managing classrooms on a daily basis (Kidane, 2019; Jinga *et al.*, 2024). Broader research on organizational transformation in Ethiopian public universities further supports this view, showing that effective management is positively correlated with structured leadership behaviors (Jinga *et al.*,

2024).

Thus, the prevalence of transactional leadership in Ethiopian higher education may not reflect a philosophical preference for this style, but rather a practical response to structural constraints imposed by large class sizes, bureaucratic systems, and standardized curricula.

1.4 Integrated Leadership in Resource-Constrained Environments

Transformational and transactional styles were never intended as mutually exclusive alternatives within the original full-range leadership philosophy. Bass (1997) argued that the most effective leaders establish a strong transactional foundation, providing structure, clarity, and fairness, before augmenting it with transformational behaviors, a phenomenon known as the augmentation effect. Recent research across Africa supports this integrated approach. For example, successful university deans in Ethiopia and school principals in Kenya combine personal inspiration with explicit norms, rather than relying solely on one leadership style (Yohannes & Wasonga, 2023).

In congested, under-resourced classrooms, a purely transformational method may be impractical, while a strictly transactional approach risks producing only low-level compliance (Fekadie *et al.*, 2023). Within Ethiopian public universities, the integrated model therefore appears particularly relevant. Evidence from Amhara Region universities shows that transformational and transactional leadership styles are significantly correlated ($r = .678$), with instructors frequently employing blended approaches to motivate students (Teshome & Alemu, 2024). This suggests that integration emerges organically, shaped by the demands of resource-constrained environments.

1.5 Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing interest in educational leadership in Ethiopia, several important research gaps remain (Yohannes & Wasonga, 2023). First, most existing studies emphasize institutional leadership, focusing on senior administrators rather than classroom-level instructor leadership. Second, limited attention has been given to how transformational and transac-

tional leadership styles are integrated in practice. Third, few investigations have explored leadership from the student perspective, particularly within the Amhara Regional State (Teshome & Alemu, 2024).

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining students' perceptions of instructor leadership styles and how these approaches are integrated within the classroom context.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional correlational design to assess the prevalence of leadership styles and examine their relationships at a single point in time across multiple institutions. In educational leadership research, this design is frequently used when experimental manipulation is either inappropriate or impractical (Balwant, 2016). The approach enabled the use of inferential statistics to generalize findings to the broader population of third-year students in the Amhara Region. Moreover, cross-sectional data provided timely insights that can inform faculty development policies and interventions.

2.2 Research Context and Population

The target population consisted of all third-year undergraduate students enrolled in public universities in the Amhara Region during the 2023–2024 academic year. Third-year students were selected because they provide a consistent and comparable perspective on instructor leadership styles, having completed at least four semesters and been exposed to a wide range of instructors (Balwant, 2016). This approach aligns with regional research on student motivation and instructor leadership (Teshome & Alemu, 2024).

To capture institutional diversity, four universities were purposively chosen: Wollo University, Debre Tabor University, Debark University, and the long-established University of Gondar. This selection ensured that variations in teaching methods, resource availability, and institutional culture factors likely to influence leadership styles were represented in the sample.

2.3 Sampling Procedure

A proportionate stratified random sampling technique, as indicated in Table 1, was employed using official enrollment lists, resulting in a final sample of 321 students (58.9% male, 41.1% female). This strategy ensured proportional representation

from each university as well as across academic disciplines. By reflecting the diversity of institutions and fields of study, the sampling approach enhanced the representativeness of the sample and strengthened the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of third-year students in the Amhara Region.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics by University

| University | Number of Students | Percentage | Gender Distribution |
|------------------------|--------------------|------------|--------------------------|
| University of Gondar | 98 | 30.5% | 58.2% male, 41.8% female |
| Wollo University | 85 | 26.5% | 59.3% male, 40.7% female |
| Debre Tabor University | 74 | 23.1% | 58.1% male, 41.9% female |
| Debark University | 64 | 19.9% | 60.2% male, 39.8% female |
| Total | 321 | 100% | 58.9% male, 41.1% female |

2.4 Instrument, Validity, and Reliability

The study employed an adapted version of the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ 5X), one of the most widely validated instruments for assessing transformational and transactional leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). To ensure cultural relevance, five Ethiopian specialists in educational leadership reviewed the items and rephrased them to address “my instructor.” This adaptation process confirmed that the scale appropriately reflected leadership characteristics within the Ethiopian higher education context.

Exploratory factor analysis revealed a clear two-factor structure ($KMO = .912$, Bartlett's test $p < .001$), accounting for 58.4% of the variance. Reliability testing showed Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .904 for transformational leadership and .721 for transactional leadership, indicating strong and acceptable internal consistency. These reliability indices align with previous studies conducted in the region using similar instruments (Teshome & Alemu, 2024).

2.5 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Data were collected between April and May 2024 by trained research assistants, who distributed paper-based questionnaires during regular class sessions with departmental approval. This ap-

proach ensured a complete response rate and minimized bias associated with non-response. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Gondar Research and Ethics Committee (reference: O/V/P/RCS/05/1234/2024). Informed consent was secured from all participants, participation was entirely voluntary, and anonymity was strictly maintained throughout the study.

2.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were entered and analyzed using IBM SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed for both leadership styles. The dataset met parametric assumptions: Shapiro–Wilk tests indicated normality, skewness and kurtosis values fell within ± 2 , and Q–Q plots showed no significant deviations.

To assess prevalence, one-sample t-tests were conducted using 3.0 (the scale midpoint) as the test value. To examine dominance, a paired-samples t-test compared the two mean scores. The Pearson product-moment correlation was used to evaluate the relationship between transformational and transactional leadership styles. Effect sizes (Cohen's d and r) were calculated to determine practical significance, and an alpha level of .001 was applied to control for family-wise error.

3 Results

3.1 Prevalence of Leadership Styles

One-sample t-tests showed that both leadership styles scored significantly higher than the neutral midpoint of 3.0, confirming their dominance in classroom settings (see Table 2). The mean score

for transformational leadership was 3.60, while transactional leadership averaged 3.73, indicating that students regularly encounter both types of behaviors. Effect sizes were large (Cohen's $d > 0.80$ for each), indicating both statistical and practical significance. These results strongly suggest that neither leadership style is absent from Ethiopian university education.

Table 2: One-Sample t-tests (test value = 3.0, N = 321)

| Style | M | SD | t | df | p | Cohen's d |
|------------------|------|------|-------|-----|--------|-----------|
| Transformational | 3.6 | 0.59 | 18.21 | 320 | < .001 | 1.02 |
| Transactional | 3.73 | 0.52 | 25.29 | 320 | < .001 | 1.4 |

3.2 Dominance and Relationship between Styles

A paired-samples t-test indicated that transactional leadership was modestly but significantly more dominant than transformational leadership (see Table 3). The mean difference of -0.14 was small but statistically significant, with a 95% confidence interval that did not include zero.

Furthermore, a strong positive association was observed between the two styles, as reflected in the Pearson correlation coefficient of .68 ($p < .001$). This high correlation suggests that instructors who score highly on one leadership style also tend to score highly on the other, providing evidence of integration in practice rather than exclusive reliance on a single approach.

Table 3: Paired-Samples t-test and Correlation

| Variable | M | SD | Mean Diff. [95% CI] | t (320) | p | r |
|------------------|------|------|----------------------|---------|--------|--------|
| Transformational | 3.6 | 0.59 | -0.14 [-0.19, -0.08] | -4.97 | < .001 | .68*** |
| Transactional | 3.73 | 0.52 | | | | |

P < .001 Source: Field Survey (2024)

3.3 Additional Analyses: Demographic Variations

Although the primary research questions focused on overall prevalence and dominance, supplementary analyses explored potential variations by gender and institutional type. Results showed no significant differences in students' perceptions of leadership styles between male and female respondents. This finding is consistent with an Ethiopian study on ped-

agogical leadership, which reported that gender had no significant effect on perceptions of leadership practices.

However, slight differences emerged across institutions. Longer-established universities scored marginally higher on measures of innovative leadership, suggesting that institutional maturity and resource availability may contribute to more diverse leadership practices (Table 4).

Table 4: Leadership Style Means by University

| University | Transformational Mean | Transactional Mean | Integration Correlation (r) |
|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| University of Gondar | 3.65 | 3.71 | 0.72 |
| Wollo University | 3.58 | 3.75 | 0.66 |
| Debre Tabor University | 3.59 | 3.72 | 0.65 |
| Debark University | 3.55 | 3.76 | 0.63 |

4 Discussions

The strong presence of transactional leadership is fully consistent with the structural conditions Ethiopian instructors face (Asgedom, 2019). In classrooms of 100–150 students, under rigorous national curricula and institutional pressure to cover subject matter and achieve acceptable pass rates, clear requirements and transparent assessments are practically indispensable. Students frequently cite confusing grading as their primary complaint; transactional techniques directly address this issue, explaining the higher mean score. This finding aligns with broader studies of Ethiopian higher education, which show that transactional leadership practices can enhance organizational change management (Jinga *et al.*, 2024).

At the same time, the transformational mean of 3.60 is comfortably above the neutral threshold and offers a more favorable picture than many outside observers might expect. Despite large class sizes, many educators continue to connect theory to Ethiopian realities (agriculture, health, governance), stimulate debate, share personal anecdotes, and demonstrate genuine interest in individual students (Fekadie *et al.*, 2023). These practices highlight instructors' adaptability and commitment in challenging circumstances.

Perhaps the most policy-relevant finding is the correlation of 0.68 between transformational and transactional leadership. Instructors are not easily categorized as either “strict rule enforcers” or “inspiring mentors”; rather, those who excel at providing structure also tend to motivate effectively. This pattern directly supports Bass’s augmentation hypothesis (Bass, 1997) and is consistent with recent African research showing that integrated leadership is the most effective approach in resource-constrained environments (Yohannes & Wasonga, 2023; Jinga *et*

al., 2024). The strong association between the two styles suggests that competent Ethiopian instructors have developed a hybrid strategy that responds to local demands while maintaining instructional effectiveness.

5 Conclusion

This study examined the prevalence, dominance, and integration of transformational and transactional leadership styles among instructors in Ethiopian public universities, focusing on third-year students in the Amhara Region. The findings demonstrate that both leadership styles are significantly present in classroom practice, with transactional leadership emerging as modestly more dominant. This outcome reflects the structural realities of Ethiopian higher education, including large class sizes, standardized curricula, and institutional pressure to achieve throughput.

At the same time, transformational practices remain evident, as many instructors continue to contextualize theory, encourage debate, and show genuine concern for students despite resource constraints. The coexistence of these approaches highlights the adaptability and resilience of Ethiopian educators. Most importantly, the strong positive correlation between the two styles underscores the emergence of a hybrid leadership model. Instructors who excel at providing structure also tend to inspire and motivate, supporting Bass’s augmentation hypothesis and aligning with African research on integrated leadership in resource-constrained environments.

This study contributes to the literature by shifting attention from institutional leadership to classroom-level dynamics and by incorporating student perspectives, which have been largely overlooked. It provides evidence that integrated leadership is not only possible but necessary in Ethiopian univer-

sities, where structural limitations demand both clarity and inspiration.

Theoretical Implications

The findings have significant implications for leadership theory, particularly the use of Western-developed frameworks in African educational settings. They confirm the cross-cultural validity of Bass's Full-Range Theory while emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive interpretations. The integration of leadership styles observed here suggests that binary conceptualizations of "transactional versus transformational" are insufficient to capture the complexities of instructor behavior in resource-constrained contexts.

Furthermore, the results challenge simplistic assumptions about the universal superiority of transformational leadership (Balwant, 2016). While transformational leadership remains crucial, its integration with transactional components appears critical for effectiveness in Ethiopian higher education. This supports contingent leadership perspectives that emphasize tailoring techniques to situational restrictions and opportunities (Kidane, 2019).

Contextual Challenges and Instructor Adaptation

The findings must be interpreted within the difficult realities of Ethiopian higher education (Asgedom, 2019). Overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and heavy teaching loads naturally encourage transactional practices. Yet, as noted by Fekadie *et al.* (2023), effective leadership in such circumstances requires strategic adaptation, balancing systemic constraints with opportunities for transformative influence. Instructors in this study appear to have developed this adaptive capacity, demonstrating that effective teaching leadership requires integration rather than strict adherence to a single style.

Limitations

Several limitations are acknowledged:

- The study was limited to four universities in the Amhara Region, which may not represent all Ethiopian institutions.

- The correlational design captured perceptions at one point in time, leaving questions about how practices evolve.
- Reliance on student self-reports introduces potential bias.
- Although the MLQ 5X was adapted for cultural relevance, some nuances of Ethiopian classroom leadership may remain underexplored.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for enhancing instructional leadership in Ethiopian higher education:

- Institutions should develop and implement comprehensive faculty development programs focusing on both transformational and transactional leadership skills. Such programs should educate instructors on how to integrate these styles effectively to foster a more enriching learning environment.
- Regular workshops that provide actionable strategies for personalized attention in large classrooms can enhance instructors' transformational leadership capabilities. This can also include peer mentoring, where experienced instructors share practices that merge both leadership styles.
- Establishing formal channels for student feedback regarding instructional practices can help instructors continually refine their leadership behaviors and tailor their approaches to better meet student needs.
- University administrations should explore strategies to reduce class sizes where feasible or enhance support services (like teaching assistants) to allow for more personalized instruction.
- Institutions must prioritize resources that support innovative teaching methods, such as technology integration and better classroom facilities, which can enable instructors to effectively apply transformational leadership practices.

- Institutions should utilize structured performance evaluations that specifically assess both transformational and transactional leadership behaviors among instructors. This can help identify areas for improvement and promote effective teaching practices.

Future Research Directions

- Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how leadership styles evolve over time within Ethiopian universities. Such studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term impacts of integrated leadership approaches on student outcomes and instructional effectiveness.
- Conduct comparative studies across different regions of Ethiopia or other sub-Saharan African countries to identify commonalities and differences in instructional leadership styles. Such comparative research can enhance understanding of context-specific leadership dynamics in varying educational settings.
- Integrating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide richer contextual insights into how students perceive and experience different leadership styles. This could also reveal nuances that quantitative methods may overlook, particularly regarding the subjective experiences of students.
- Research could explore how leadership styles manifest across different academic disciplines. Understanding whether certain fields lend themselves more readily to transformational or transactional approaches could help tailor faculty development initiatives to educate effectively.
- Investigating the direct effects of different leadership styles on student engagement, satisfaction, retention, and performance can offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers focused on enhancing the quality of higher education in resource-constrained settings.

In conclusion, addressing the complexities of leadership in Ethiopian higher education requires intentional strategies that blend transformational and transactional leadership. By implementing these recommendations and pursuing the suggested avenues for future research, stakeholders can contribute to the advancement of effective instructional leadership practices in Ethiopia's Amhara Region and beyond.

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Conflict of Interest

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The corresponding author will provide data upon reasonable request.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Sisay Fekadie Molla: Writing – original draft, review & editing; Software; Methodology; Formal analysis; Data curation.

Professor Tesfaye Ketsela Woldyesus: Writing – review & editing; Formal analysis; Conceptualization

Markos Tezera Taye (Associate Professor): Writing review & editing; Visualization; Investigation; Formal analysis.

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