

## Authoritarian Leadership Among Department Heads in Sabah, Malaysia: A Quantitative Study on Lecturers' Perceptions

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### ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate lecturers' perceptions of authoritarian leadership in Sabah, Malaysia. The sample consisted of 46 lecturers from three private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) located in Kota Kinabalu, who were asked to fill out the Authoritarian Leadership Questionnaire on Google Forms. Responses were subsequently transferred onto a spreadsheet and SPSS 29.0 was used to analyze the data. For this study, a 30 percent agreement on authoritarianism was deemed high and would fall into a concerning range especially within a democratic context. Findings showed that a high proportion (30.4 to 52.2 percent) of PHEI lecturers strongly agreed/agreed that department heads tend to practice authoritarian leadership. On the other hand, nonparametric tests revealed nonsignificant differences in perceived authoritarian leadership by way of gender, age, and job experience. Additionally, Wilcoxon signed rank test showed that 22 of the items were significant at  $p < .001$ , with medians significantly different from the hypothesized value of 3.5. Another 15 of the items were significant at  $p < .05$ , with medians significantly different from the hypothesized value of 3.5. In light of the findings, implications and recommendations on authoritarian leadership were made in the context of PHEIs in Sabah, Malaysia.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This research offers a valuable contribution by examining lecturers' perceptions of authoritarian leadership among department heads in Sabah,

Malaysia. Besides narrowing the gap that exists in the educational leadership literature, it is the first quantitative study that examines lecturers' perceptions of authoritarian leadership in the Bornean state, thus adding to the limited evidence base on the extent to which leaders at Malaysian private higher educational institutions hold absolute power and control, while demanding unquestioning obedience from staff, making decisions unilaterally, and leaving little to no autonomy for staff.

## 1. Introduction

In their literature review, [Pizzolitto, Verna, and Venditti \(2023\)](#) appraised that authoritarian leaders often practice centralized or unilateral decision-making with little or no input from staff. They impose strict hierarchy and expect staff to follow directives without dissent, besides closely monitoring all work processes with detailed instructions and enforcing rigid adherence to rules and procedures. Additionally, by centralizing their power and accentuating power distance, they are able to compel subordinates to achieve demanding objectives and follow stringent rules and regulations. Lastly, staff performance tends to be limited by authoritarian leaders characterized by high power distance, which often clashes with the high dynamism of current globalized and hyperconnected markets. According to [Païement, Dickie, and Pederson \(2024\)](#), many Malaysian organizational leaders are influenced by the nation's sociohistorical background and diverse heritage that shape its norms, economic policies, and professional practices. Their leadership styles and organizational behavior tend to be authoritarian and are primarily associated with such values as respect for authority, hierarchy, communal harmony, and deeply-rooted traditions. Often regarded as figures of power and wisdom who underscore consensus, Malaysian leaders strive to maintain balance and collaboration within the organization. Further, certain sociocultural variables also influence their perspectives and leadership approaches. They tend to score high on the power and commerce, indicating that they desire influence and authority, while focusing on socioeconomic success.

### 1.1. Ramifications of Authoritarian Principals

Authoritarian leadership often exerts a profound effect on school climate. While every school has its own distinctive attributes, all students should take the initiative and engage in self-regulated learning. However, authoritarian leadership, usually characterized by rigid enforcement of rules without exception or leniency, can impede students' autonomy. Further, students subjected to constant tight control and a lack of learning autonomy tend to experience a decline in academic performance and a corresponding decrease in learning drive and enthusiasm. Instead, students should be empowered to assume responsibility and make their own decisions without being constrained. Moreover, their fundamental needs of independence, competence, and positive interpersonal relationships are crucial for their wellbeing. Nevertheless, authoritarian leaders, who potentially disrupt the school climate, tend to hinder the teaching and learning process in the long run ([Leithwood et al., 2004](#); [Ryan & Deci, 2000](#)).

Furthermore, authoritarian principals tend to reduce students' decision-making skills, initiative and personal responsibility. By making most decisions themselves, they deprive students of the opportunity to manage their own learning ([Winarsih, 2018](#)). Besides discouraging students from decision-making, authoritarian principals also curtail fairness and limit rewards in the learning environment. By excluding students from decision-making or failing to acknowledge their contributions, they make students feel that their

efforts are not appreciated, which in turn, diminishes their achievement motivation. Moreover, a lack of fairness often leads to dissatisfaction, which reduces students' sense of attachment to the school. Being subjected to a pervasive atmosphere of control and constraints, students will eventually display a sense of weariness, apathy, and even feelings of futility and powerlessness.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

Authoritarianism at PHEIs tends to be characterized by rigid control, high expectations, and strict enforcement of rules, which leaves little room for student autonomy or feedback. This approach often involves top management acting as an unquestionable authority, while students are expected to obey unconditionally. This leadership style is often perceived as restrictive, with an emphasis on behavioral regulations rather than dialogue or explanation. Empirical research is needed to show the extent to which PHEIs in Sabah (1) maintain absolute control over the classroom, curriculum, and student behavior, (2) provide explanations for rules and decisions, and opportunity for student questions or discussion, (3) allow staff and students to seek recognition and develop their critical thinking skills, (4) prepare students for democratic citizenship, and promote public trust in PHEIs. Lastly, research findings would provide alternatives to authoritarianism; for example, a more democratic style that involves staff and student participation, dialogue, and shared responsibility in the teaching and learning process.

## **1.3. Significance of the Study**

A review of literature showed that quantitative research on perceived authoritarian leadership is lacking in Malaysia, especially in the private higher education terrain in Sabah. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to investigate staff's perceptions of authoritarian leadership among department heads at three PHEIs in Sabah, Malaysia, which helps fill the research gap and establish a theoretical framework for the study. Moreover, most of quantitative authoritarian leadership studies have been carried out in the Western context; hence, the authors decided to use a sample of PHEI lecturers from Sabah to test the robustness and reliability of the instrument used to measure the construct. Lastly, findings of this study could generate novel knowledge on the prevalence of authoritarian leadership in the local educational landscape, besides offering recommendations on how to lessen its practice in the day-to-day management of PHEIs.

## **1.4. Research Questions**

To narrow the research gap and provide a contextual framework for the study, three research questions were formulated to guide the research. Serving as a compass, they keep the authors on track, thus allowing them to concentrate on the relevant areas of investigation. Besides providing a benchmark for the entire research process, they also help in defining the scope of the study, thus ensuring that the research remains focused and viable. The three research questions are as follows:

- i. What were the descriptive statistics of authoritarian leadership among PHEI department heads in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah and implications?
- ii. Were there any significant differences in lecturers' perceptions of authoritarian leadership by way of gender, age, and job experience?
- iii. Were any of the authoritarian leadership items significantly different from the hypothesized value of 3.5?

## 2. Review of Literature

A literature review was conducted to help the authors establish a foundation for the new research. First, it would reveal what is already known about authoritarianism, allowing them to identify areas that are understudied or where more research is needed. Second, it would help situate new research questions within the broader landscape of existing scholarship, explaining how the research builds on or challenges previous work. Third, by reviewing previous research, the authors could avoid repeating studies that have already been conducted, thus saving time and resources. Fourth, by analyzing prior studies, they could gain greater understanding with regards to research methods, thus enabling them to make informed decisions about their own study design. Lastly, it would help them refine their research questions and develop unique arguments that contribute meaningfully to the field of educational leadership.

### 2.1. Leadership Behaviors

In their investigation, [Kiazad et al. \(2010\)](#) analyzed the impact of supervisor (personality and leadership behavior) and victim characteristics (organization-based self-esteem) on perceived abusive supervision. Findings showed that (1) Machiavellianism tends to be positively associated with perceived abusive supervision, (2) perceived authoritarian leadership tends to fully mediate the relationship between Machiavellianism and perceived abusive supervision, and (3) organization-based self-esteem tends to moderate the relationship between authoritarian leadership and perceived abusive supervision. Findings imply that Machiavellian leaders, who tend to use manipulation to achieve goals, often adopt authoritarian leadership. Their behavior, characterized by strict control and demands for obedience, directly contributes to staff's perception of abusive supervision. However, the impact of this abusive behavior is not uniform across all subordinates. Lastly, staff with lower self-esteem also tend to perceive authoritarian leadership as more abusive compared to those with higher self-esteem.

On the other hand, [Garletts \(2016\)](#) studied the impact of salary and auto allowance on authoritarian or empowering leadership behaviors among superintendents. Findings indicated that auto allowance tends to have an impact on leadership styles in relation to both authoritarian and empowering leadership. Authoritarian leaders managing auto allowance tend to view it as a resource to be tightly controlled, while empowering leaders appear to regard it as a tool to build trust and autonomy amongst staff.

### 2.2. Professional Commitment and Silence Behavior

The influence of principals' autocratic (authoritarian) leadership style on public school teachers' professional commitment was studied by [Kirui, Yambo, and Langat \(2018\)](#). Findings showed that a significant proportion of principals tend to practice autocracy by determining school policy alone and assigning duties to students and staff without consulting them. Further, they tend to prescribe directives independently and expect them to be carried out without question and without feeling accountable to anyone. Lastly, they tend to demonstrate high self-confidence, besides emphasizing a clear vision of what needs to be done to achieve desired outcomes. On the other hand, a study by [Munir and Iqbal \(2018\)](#) examined the relationship between autocratic leadership and teacher job satisfaction. Findings revealed that autocratic leadership tends to have a nonsignificant impact on job satisfaction. Nevertheless, most of the principals also tend to

prefer democratic leadership, which is positively associated with the school environment, teaching responsibilities, and workload.

In their investigation, [Parlar, Türkoğlu, and Cansoy \(2022\)](#) explored the relationship between authoritarian leadership and commitment among teachers in relation to acquiescent silence. Findings revealed that authoritarian leadership tends to indirectly affect teacher commitment through trust in principals and acquiescent silence. Further, trust in principals also tends to act as a partial mediator in the relationship between authoritarian leadership and defensive silence. Besides, authoritarian leadership was also found to decrease teachers' affective commitment by reducing trust in principals, while increasing organizational silence. Findings imply that authoritarian leadership does not directly diminish commitment, but works through its effects on trust and silence. Specifically, it initially causes a decrease in trust, and subsequently, an increase in silence. These situations, in turn, reduce teachers' affective commitment.

The relationships among authoritarian leadership, organizational silence, psychological security, and organizational self-esteem among manufacturing staff were examined by [Duan et al. \(2017\)](#). Findings showed that authoritarian leadership tends to have a positive relationship with organizational silence, whereby staff tend to collectively withhold information about potential problems or concerns, thus inhibiting the organization to change or develop. Findings imply that authoritarian leadership tends to compel staff to maintain silence probably due to fear of negative appraisal, a lack of opportunity or voice, or a belief that opining is futile. Further, psychological security and organizational self-esteem were found to partially mediate the relationship between authoritarian leadership and organizational silence. Additionally, the direct relationship between authoritarian leadership and organizational silence also appears to be stronger for staff with high power distance orientation, with psychological security and self-esteem appearing stronger for staff with low power distance orientation. Findings imply that staff with high power distance orientation tend to remain silent under authoritarian leadership because they accept hierarchy and inequality, and are therefore, more likely to comply. In contrast, those with low power distance orientation tend to possess higher psychological security and self-esteem because they perceive themselves as being more equal with their leaders.

### **2.3. Staff Performance**

In a study that examined the impact of autocratic leadership on school performance, [Tedla, Redda, and Vilas \(2021\)](#) found a significantly negative relationship between the two variables, suggesting that more autocratic principals tend to produce lower academic outcomes. Findings imply that principals tend to be autocratic because they have to enforce the rules and duties set by the national curriculum department. Besides, many teachers tend to have a second job; hence, autocratic principals ensure that they do a proper job at school. Similarly, [Salvador and Silva \(2024\)](#), who investigated the impact of democratic and autocratic leadership styles on teacher performance, revealed that autocratic leadership tends to have a nonsignificant effect on teacher performance, while democratic leadership tends to significantly enhance it. Autocratic leadership tends to be nonsignificant probably because it limits teacher agency in terms of decision-making, which creates a feeling of powerlessness and diminished motivation and job satisfaction. Since it underscores stringent control and rule-following, autocratic leadership also tends to erode trust and limit opportunities for innovation and creativity, while increasing staff turnover.

The impact of authoritarian leadership on employees' task accomplishment and organizational commitment was determined by [Huang et al. \(2022\)](#). Findings showed that leader effectiveness tends to mediate the relationship between authoritarian leadership and the two variables. Moreover, high leader competence was found to mitigate the negative relationship between authoritarian leadership and employees' task accomplishment. Lastly, leader ability was found to moderate the indirect relationship between authoritarian leadership and task accomplishment and the affective dimension of organizational commitment via leader effectiveness. Findings imply that highly skilled, capable leaders who practice authoritarianism can offset the adverse impact of their leadership style, thus making it more palatable or even effective in certain situations. Overall, their authoritarian traits and effectiveness tend to buffer against the unfavorable outcomes of their absolute control and demand for unquestioning compliance.

Lastly, [Wang et al. \(2022\)](#), who determined the impact of authoritarian leadership on the safety compliance among employees at petroleum enterprises, disclosed that (1) authoritarian leadership tends to significantly and negatively impact safety compliance and safety engagement behavior, (2) trust in leadership tends to partially mediate the relationship between authoritarian leadership and safety compliance and safety engagement, and (3) locus of control tends to partially moderate the impact of authoritarian leadership on safety compliance through trust. Findings imply that authoritarian leadership tends to create a work environment that erodes trust and discourages proactive, safety-conscious actions from employees. Employees are often compelled to follow explicit safety rules in a passive, compliant manner out of fear of penalty, rather than genuine commitment to safety standards. They are also less likely to voluntarily engage in proactive extra-role safety behaviors, such as helping colleagues with safety procedures, offering suggestions for safety improvements, or calling attention to potential hazards.

#### **2.4. Staff's Behaviors, Inclusive Attitudes, and Job Satisfaction**

In their empirical study, [Rast, Hogg, and Giessner \(2012\)](#) examined the relationship between self-uncertainty behavior and autocratic leadership among organizational staff. Findings revealed that less self-uncertain staff tend to be more supportive of non-autocratic leadership. In contrast, more self-uncertain staff were found to be more supportive of autocratic leadership. Findings imply that staff with inconsistency and discontinuity in their self-concepts (self-uncertainty) prefer autocratic leadership probably due to their conflicting cognitions, experiences, and behaviors about their own psychological attributes, which motivate them to identify with autocratic leaders to gain a stable sense of self.

On the other hand, [Asim et al. \(2012\)](#) investigated the impact of authoritarian leadership on staff's helping behaviors. Findings showed that authoritarian leadership tends to have a negative impact on helping behaviors. Besides, the relationship between authoritarian leadership and helping behaviors was mediated by rumination and moderated by psychological ownership. Findings imply that authoritarian leadership is detrimental to helping behaviors because it reduces staff's trust in their leaders, which ultimately results in reluctance to engage in helping behaviors. Lastly, the pressure and negative psychological experiences associated with authoritarian leadership can lead staff to transfer negative feelings into other behaviors, potentially making them less inclined to help others.

Maurice, Buhere, and Alokam (2019) explored the impact of headteachers' autocratic leadership on staff's attitudes toward inclusive education. Findings revealed that autocratic leadership tends to be significantly and negatively correlated with the implementation of inclusive education. Findings imply that headteachers exert greater control over most decisions regarding inclusive education, with little input from teachers. Nevertheless, teachers' input is vital for inclusive education because they often create a welcoming learning environment, adapt instruction to diverse needs, and foster a sense of belonging for all students. Therefore, headteachers should adopt more participative leadership practices to ensure that students with special and twice-exceptional (2e) needs with different cognitive processing styles can fully participate in, and benefit from, inclusive education.

Lastly, Abdullah and Wahab (2023) studied the relationship between autocratic leadership and job satisfaction among secondary school teachers. Findings showed that the levels of autocratic leadership and job satisfaction tend to be high. Besides, a significant relationship was also found between four dimensions of autocratic leadership and job satisfaction. Findings imply that the relationship between perceived autocratic leadership and job satisfaction is more likely to be influenced by specific factors, such as the leaders' competence, teachers' need for clear directions, or the characteristics of the school.

## 2.5. Impact on Students

The influence of principals' leadership styles on student achievement was investigated by Achimugu and Obaka (n. d.). Findings showed that authoritarian leadership tends to have a nonsignificant correlation with student achievement, implying that authoritarian principals tend to demotivate teachers and make them underperform in the teaching and learning process. Moreover, authoritarianism tends to limit teachers' autonomy in decision-making, creativity, and independent problem-solving, which makes them feel undervalued and disconnected from their work. Often characterized by low trust and poor communication, authoritarianism tends to foster mistrust between the management and teachers, leading to resentment, lower confidence, and disengagement amongst teachers, which ultimately decreases student achievement.

Further, Rezky et al. (2024) assessed the impact of principal's leadership style (authoritarian versus democratic) on students' learning motivation. Findings showed that democratic leadership tends to exert a positive and statistically significant influence on the educational environment; in contrast, authoritarian leadership tends to have a negative impact. Findings imply that authoritarian leadership, with its top-down approach, stringent control, and one-way communication, tends to restrict students' curricular activities and school engagement, which in turn, reduces their achievement motivation and academic performance. Lastly, Peng and Huang (2024), who examined the impact of teachers' authoritarianism on students' wellbeing, revealed that authoritarianism tends to have a negative impact on students' wellbeing in terms of academic performance, physical wellness, and mental health. Findings imply that authoritarian school principals tend to hinder academic performance by fostering an environment of stress and emotional exhaustion, which in turn harms student wellbeing. By creating a sense of reduced control and autonomy, they potentially cause fatigue, anxiety, and depression amongst students.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design and Approach

A quantitative research design was adopted to allow the authors to systematically investigate perceived authoritarian leadership through the use of numerical data and statistical analysis to quantify lecturers' perceptions of the management style, with the primary objective of drawing meaningful conclusions and generalizing results to a broader lecturer population in Sabah. Further, statistical methods were used to calculate means, percentages of agreement, and significant differences by way of age, gender, and work experience. The key elements of the current quantitative research design included (1) three succinctly stated research questions, (2) a convenient sample of lecturers as a representative subset, (3) a list of authoritarian leadership items to be measured, (4) an appropriate data collection method, (5) specific statistical methods to analyze data, and (5) ethical considerations (i.e., informed consent and privacy protection).

#### 3.2. Research Location

This study was conducted in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, the capital city of the island state where quantitative research on authoritarian leadership at PHEIs is scarce. Kota Kinabalu was chosen for its distinctive educational landscape, which includes a list of 16 PHEIs ( $N = 16$ ) that can provide a sufficiently representative sample of the lecturer population in Sabah, thus allowing for a relatively fair assessment of lecturers' perceptions of authoritarian leadership at local PHEIs.

#### 3.3 Sample and Justification

The sample of this study comprised 46 lecturers ( $n = 46$ ) recruited from three PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, who possess at least a bachelor's degree, English proficiency, and a full-time contract at their respective institutions. Initially, deans, coordinators, and registrars of eight (8) randomly selected PHEIs were contacted via email and phone, but eventually, only three (3) agreed to participate in the study. Subsequently, PHEI leaders shared the survey link with lecturers and urged them to respond. Voluntary participation and convenient access were the main considerations of this selection procedure, which could yield a realistic and contextually relevant sample.

Respondents come from culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse communities in Sabah. The sample size was determined according to theoretical and statistical considerations. According to the central limit theorem, a minimum of 30 participants is generally sufficient to ensure statistical power and generalizability for basic survey research (Roscoe, 1975; RUBIKTOP, 2023). Additionally, the sample was deemed representative of lecturers from the local PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu; hence, selection bias was minimized. Systematic random sampling of PHEIs was initially done, whereby every second college on the list was contacted. This selection method was practiced for its ability to capture a diverse range of perspectives across different age, gender, and work experience amongst lecturers. By allowing all eligible PHEIs an equal chance of selection, this method could prevent the under- or over-representation of specific groups, while increasing the generalizability of findings to a broader population of PHEI lecturers.

Additionally, PHEIs were chosen based on their physical proximity to the university college where the first author serves as program leader in its Master of Education in

Leadership. In general, the study was delimited by proximity, accessibility, and administrators' willingness to participate in the research study. Lecturers responded to the questionnaire online; completion of the questionnaire was interpreted as informed permission, with all participants assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

While the sample size seemed small, it met the minimum requirement for quantitative research in the social sciences, particularly in educational leadership and educational psychology. For example, [Roscoe \(1975\)](#) recommended a minimal sample size of 30 for most statistical research. This rule of thumb is supported by the central limit theorem, which stipulates that sampling distributions will approach normality when there are 30 or more respondents, allowing for acceptable statistical inference. Furthermore, the current sample size ensured a reasonable margin of error and enough power to identify modest effects in nonparametric analyses, such as the Kruskal-Wallis, Mann-Whitney U, and Wilcoxon signed rank tests, which were used to interpret data in the current study.

The sample consisted of 32.6 percent males and 67.4 percent females. Age-wise, 32.6 percent are 24 to 34 years old, 32.6 percent are 35 to 45 years old, 17.4 percent are 46 to 56 years old, 17.4 percent are above 56 years old. Experience-wise, 41.3 percent have worked for five to 10 years, 21.7 percent have worked for 11 to 16 years, 13 percent have worked for 17 to 22 years, and 23.9 percent have worked for more than 22 years (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents ( $n = 46$ )

Variables	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Age	24-34	15	32.6
	35-45	15	32.6
	46-56	8	17.4
	Above 56	8	17.4
Job Experience	5-10	19	41.3
	11-16	10	21.7
	17-22	6	13.0
	Over 22	11	23.9
Gender	Male	15	32.6
	Female	31	67.4

### 3.4. Instrument

A questionnaire was designed to collect data. It consists of 37 Likert-scale items derived from the literature ([Cherry, 2023](#); [Florida Tech, 2023](#); [London Premier Centre, 2011](#); [Northouse, 2021](#)). To determine its suitability for the study, it was pilot-tested on 20 lecturers and SPSS 29.0 was used to calculate its reliability. Results showed that its Cronbach's alpha is 0.975, indicating strong internal consistency among items on the questionnaire. Since it is higher than 0.90, it provides great confidence that the questionnaire is precisely measuring the intended construct (authoritarian leadership).

### 3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

PHEI lecturers were required to complete the questionnaire on Google Forms and were informed that completion of the survey was their indication of consent to voluntarily participate in the study. Ethical issues were prioritized throughout the data collection procedure. All participants were given informed consent in relation to the purpose of the

study, its voluntary nature, and the possibility to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. To ensure confidentiality, all responses were anonymized and the data were securely stored in a strong room. Only the first writer has access to the data, thus guaranteeing that they would be used solely for scholarly purposes.

Data were transferred onto a spreadsheet and subsequently analyzed using SPSS 29.0. First, the mean score and percentages of agreement on perceived public leadership were calculated. Second, Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences in lecturers' perceptions of authoritarian leadership in relation to age and job experience. Third, Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were any significant differences in terms of gender. Fourth, Wilcoxon signed rank test was used to determine if any of the authoritarian leadership items were significant at a hypothesized value of 3.5.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Percentages of Agreement

Percentages of agreement (strongly agree and agree) were collapsed to gain an overview of perceived authoritarian leadership. For this study, a 30 percent agreement on authoritarianism was deemed high and would fall into a concerning range, especially within a democratic context. A percentage of this magnitude generally indicates a significant inclination toward autocratic values, for example, a preference for order and hierarchy, conformity to norms, and a structured environment.

Findings revealed that a high proportion (30.4 to 37 percent) of lecturers strongly agreed/agreed that department heads tend to (1) believe that most employees seem lazy, (b) make all the decisions about tasks and structures themselves, (3) make all the decisions about rewards or punishments themselves, (4) retain full control over most matters, (5) require unquestioning obedience and compliance from staff, (6) be emotionally detached, (7) manage with a series of rigid rules and regulations, (8) reward conformist followers or "yes" people, (9) assert strong authority and control over subordinates, (10) always tell people what to do, (11) demand high standards from staff, (12) dictate work methods and processes, (13) manage staff in a highly structured and rigid manner, (14) bring much pressure to staff, (15) warn staff who do not complete tasks on time, and (16) make the final decision in every meeting (see [Table 2](#)).

Additionally, a very high proportion (41.3 to 52.2 percent) of lecturers strongly agreed/agreed that department heads tend to (1) believe that most staff feel insecure about their work and therefore need direction, (2) try to maintain as much power and authority as possible. (3) expect staff to work harder and faster, (4) take rules and procedures very seriously, (5) act as principal decision-maker, (6) believe that most employees need tangible rewards (cash, gifts) to achieve goals, (7) acts as chief judge of staff's achievements, (8) supervise staff closely, and (9) give orders and clarify procedures all the time (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2: Percentages of Agreement on Authoritarian Leadership

Items	1	2	3	4	5	4+5 (Collapsed)
Supervises staff closely	10.9	13	23.9	26.1	26.1	52.2

Believes that most staff can't do their work independently	26.1	21.7	17.4	15.2	19.6	34.8
Believes that most employees tend to be lazy	28.3	30.4	10.9	13	17.4	30.4
Believes that most employees need tangible rewards (cash, gifts) to achieve goals	17.4	10.9	26.1	19.6	26.1	45.7
Believes that most staff feel insecure about their work and therefore need direction	15.2	21.7	21.7	21.7	19.6	41.3
Acts as chief judge of staff's achievements	19.6	13	19.6	21.7	26.1	47.8
Gives orders and clarifies procedures all the time	8.7	19.6	17.4	30.4	23.9	54.3
Tries to maintain as much power and authority as possible	13	21.7	23.9	19.6	21.7	41.3
Warns underperforming staff with subtle threats	30.4	19.6	21.7	17.4	10.9	28.3
Acts as principal decision-maker	10.9	19.6	23.9	30.4	15.2	45.6
Makes all the decisions about policies and procedures themselves	19.6	21.7	30.4	19.6	8.7	28.3
Makes all the decisions about tasks and structures themselves	17.4	23.9	26.1	17.4	15.2	32.6
Make all the decisions about rewards or punishments themselves	21.7	19.6	28.3	17.4	13	30.4
Retains full control over most matters	17.4	23.9	21.7	19.6	17.4	37
Requires unquestioning obedience and compliance from staff	21.7	17.4	30.4	15.2	15.2	30.4
Severely warns staff who fail to comply	21.7	17.4	32.6	17.4	10.9	28.3
Uses manipulative tactics to ensure compliance	30.4	17.4	26.1	15.2	10.9	26.1
Is not tolerant of mistakes	32.6	19.6	23.9	10.9	13	23.9
Expects staff to work harder and faster	21.7	13	23.9	23.9	17.4	41.3
Is emotionally detached	32.6	8.7	26.1	23.9	8.7	32.6
Lacks empathy toward others	32.6	23.9	17.4	10.9	15.2	26.1
Is task-oriented rather than people-oriented	23.9	17.4	30.4	19.6	8.7	28.3
Dictates and controls all the decisions involving the organization	26.1	15.2	37	10.9	10.9	21.8
Manages with a series of rigid rules and regulations	23.9	15.2	28.3	21.7	10.9	32.6
Rewards conformist followers or "yes" people	26.1	23.9	19.6	19.6	10.9	30.5
Asserts strong authority and control over subordinates	23.9	19.6	23.9	21.7	10.9	32.6
Always tells people what to do	21.7	28.3	17.4	15.2	17.4	32.6
Demands high standards from staff	21.7	13	19.6	30.4	15.2	35.6
Makes decisions without any input from staff	32.6	23.9	21.7	13	8.7	21.7
Dictates work methods and processes	28.3	10.9	30.4	21.7	8.7	30.4
Takes rules and procedures very seriously	15.2	8.7	34.8	19.6	21.7	41.3
Discourages staff creativity and innovativeness	30.4	23.9	17.4	13	15.2	28.2
Manages staff in a highly structured and rigid manner	21.7	10.9	34.8	13	19.6	32.6

Does not share any information (about the organization) with staff	23.9	21.7	32.6	10.9	10.9	21.8
Brings much pressure to staff	23.9	17.4	21.7	19.6	17.4	37
Warns staff who don't complete tasks on time	19.6	19.6	28.3	26.1	6.5	32.6
Makes the final decision in every meeting	15.2	21.7	26.1	19.6	17.4	37

Strongly disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, Strongly agree = 5

#### 4.2. Nonparametric Results

Kruskal-Wallis H test showed nonsignificant differences in lecturers' perceptions of authoritarian leadership in relation to age and job experience, while Mann-Whitney U test indicated nonsignificant differences in terms of gender (see Table 3).

Table 3: Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H Results

Democratic	Nonparametric test	p-value
Gender	Mann-Whitney U test	0.302
Age	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.848
Job Experience	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.259

Wilcoxon signed rank test showed that 22 of the items were significant at  $p < .001$ , with medians significantly different from the hypothesized value of 3.5. Another 15 of the items were significant at  $p < .05$ , with medians significantly different from the hypothesized value of 3.5 (see Table 4).

Table 4: Wilcoxon Sign Rank Results on Authoritarian Leadership

My department head ...	p-value	Conclusion
Supervises staff closely	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Believes that most staff can't do their work independently	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Believes that most employees tend to be lazy	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Believes that most employees need tangible rewards (cash, gifts) to achieve goals	0.007*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Believes that most staff feel insecure about their work and therefore need direction	0.004*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Acts as chief judge of staff's achievements	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Gives orders and clarifies procedures all the time	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Tries to maintain as much power and authority as possible	0.010*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Warns underperforming staff with subtle threats	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Acts as principal decision-maker	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Makes all the decisions about policies and procedures themselves	0.003*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Makes all the decisions about tasks and structures themselves	0.004*	Median significantly differed from the test value

Make all the decisions about rewards or punishments themselves	0.016*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Retains full control over most matters	0.002*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Requires unquestioning obedience and compliance from staff	0.008*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Severely warns staff who fail to comply	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Uses manipulative tactics to ensure compliance	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Is not tolerant of mistakes	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Expects staff to work harder and faster	0.002*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Is emotionally detached	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Lacks empathy toward others	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Is task-oriented rather than people-oriented	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Dictates and controls all the decisions involving the organization	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Manages with a series of rigid rules and regulations	0.002*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Rewards conformist followers or "yes" people	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Asserts strong authority and control over subordinates	0.011*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Always tells people what to do	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Demands high standards from staff	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Makes decisions without any input from staff	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Dictates work methods and processes	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Takes rules and procedures very seriously	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Discourages staff creativity and innovativeness	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Manages staff in a highly structured and rigid manner	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value
Does not share any information (about the organization) with staff	0.002*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Brings much pressure to staff	0.011*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Warns staff who don't complete tasks on time	0.002*	Median significantly differed from the test value
Makes the final decision in every meeting	0.012*	Median significantly differed from the test value

\*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .05$

## 5. Implications and Recommendations

### 5.1 Malaysian Qualifications Agency

Findings imply that a high proportion of lecturers tend to perceive PHEI department heads as authoritarian. In Malaysia, all PHEIs have to strictly adhere to the specific rules and requirements of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency ([Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2014](#)) without question. It covers program standards, quality assurance, and accreditation, ensuring that all programs meet nationally defined criteria and international benchmarks. PHEI leaders tend to appear authoritarian because they have to strictly enforce the key aspects of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency to create a balanced curriculum that adheres to discipline-specific requirements.

### 5.2. Colonialism and Traditionality

The legacy of colonialism has instilled the notion of top-down, hierarchical leadership among Malaysia's developing industries, thus showing the tendency for organizations to predominantly practice authoritarian leadership, which has been well accepted by most staff largely due to their sociocultural background and attitudes toward equity, freedom, and human rights. Nevertheless, organizational leadership and behavior have been experiencing notable transformation, which has led to greater diversity in leadership styles amongst the captains of various industries ([Abdul Rani et al., 2008](#)).

Previous research showed that authoritarian, paternalistic, and directive leadership can positively impact organizations characterized by high traditionalism, conventionality, and strict adherence to structure and rules ([Pizzolitto, Verna, & Venditti, 2023](#)), which is common in many Malaysian organizations. Moreover, paternalistic and directive leadership tend to yield positive outcomes when rewards are moderate, team size is large, or failure is not too serious ([Rahmani, Roels, & Karmarkar; 2018](#)), akin to many PHEIs in Malaysia. Moreover, authoritarian leaders also thrive in organizations with little internal rivalry, conflict, or tension ([de Hoogh, Greer, & den Hartog, 2015](#)), and proactive participation ([Sagie 1996](#)), as reflected by many PHEIs in Malaysia. Besides, cultural perceptions of authoritarian leadership should also be addressed in light of the complexity of newly established PHEIs. Lastly, authoritarian and paternalistic leadership styles are still predominant in many Asian cultures ([Shen, Chou, & Schaubroeck, 2019](#)), and practiced in present-day corporations everywhere ([Chiang et al., 2020](#)), including Malaysia.

### 5.3. Transition Phase

[Musa et al. \(2020\)](#) posited that authority-based administrative systems are generally incompatible with the structure and culture of higher educational institutions (HEIs), which rely on academic freedom, consultation, and cooperation for their core functions of inquiry, teaching, and research. Instead of authoritarianism, HEIs should propagate a culture that fosters open debate, empowers academics as self-managing professionals, and enables them to actively contribute through trust and respect.

According to [Ooi \(2025\)](#), Malaysia's private higher education sector has expanded significantly since the 1990s. However, they are currently in the transition phase, whereby they must overcome systemic challenges, including a market-reliant regulatory authority, an oversupply of tertiary institutions, and financial sustainability issues. The

mushrooming of PHEIs has led to inefficient resource allocation, with excessive market competition that makes it difficult for them to improve or maintain the quality of education. Further, overeducation and skill mismatches have left many graduates struggling to secure employment, thus highlighting the need for better alignment between academic programs and industry demands. In their study, [Rosing, Boer, & Buengeler \(2022\)](#) disclosed that action and transition phases tend to produce different task demands for leadership. Autocratic leadership tends to elevate trust in leaders during the action phase by cementing their ability. In contrast, democratic leadership tends to enhance trust in leaders during the transition phase by increasing their benevolence. Therefore, PHEI leaders should adopt democratic leadership to help their colleges transition to full-fledged universities by meeting specific government criteria for operation, finance, curriculum, and quality.

#### **5.4. Ways to Become Less Authoritarian**

While leadership is a coveted post, power can intoxicate and make leaders become more autocratic, which does not bode well for organizations in a democratic society. Organizational leaders can become effective decision makers without being autocratic by leveraging others for decisions, discerning vested interests, promoting team growth, acknowledging others' ideas, and honing their own leadership style ([Sengupta, 2014](#)). First, PHEI leaders need to work with an ace team, which should be consulted when making important decisions. Although the final call belongs to them, they should make decisions that are supported by the majority. Second, they should avoid promoting staff with an ulterior agenda. By being acutely aware of vested interests, they can make a special effort to prioritize the organization's interests. Third, by being aware of staff's needs and wants, they can create a leadership pipeline committed to developing their careers via regular communication. Fourth, PHEI leaders should demonstrate a sense of security by avoiding rank-pulling or issuing threats to get things accomplished. While having the authority, they should refuse to wield power all the time; instead, they should be willing to accept their failings and acknowledge others' ideas or perspectives. Fifth, they should improve their own analytical skills, become active listeners, and make swift and accurate decisions. Nowadays, the traditional type-A, command-and-control style is no longer effective in managing seasoned, highly skilled staff; today's staff are mostly knowledge workers who require emotionally and intellectually agile leaders to optimize team performance. They also prefer leaders who demonstrate a complex set of seemingly contradictory organizational dynamics, ranging from autonomy and shared decision-making, to individuality and teamwork.

To become less authoritarian, leaders should demonstrate social awareness, inquisitiveness, and teaming ability ([Hull, 2015](#)). First, PHEI leaders should realize that effective leadership requires more than just knowing their own strengths and weaknesses. They need to demonstrate social awareness, which calls for a heightened sensitivity to how their behavior, in words and deeds, impacts staff by asking how their management style impacts others and what others are thinking or feeling. Second, they should shift from being direct to inquisitive. When seeking to improve processes or creativity, they should shift from a stance of declaration to one of curiosity by determining how much time they spend actively listening to staff. Third, they should share power with staff instead of lauding authority over them. Since A-players tend to shut down, while B-players tend to acquiesce, PHEI leaders need to determine how to stimulate innovative thinking, problem solving, and decision making amongst staff. Fourth, instead of relying on static definitions of who is in and who is out, which fosters a culture of conformity and

internal competitiveness, they should be adaptive to evoke staff commitment through common values and aspirational goals. Lastly, they should determine how they can create a sense of belonging when team boundaries are porous, while leveraging diverse talents, skills, and perspectives.

[Scott \(2025\)](#) postulated that authoritarian leaders who demonstrate emotional dysregulation, bullying, and micromanaging behaviors are unable to manage themselves, and therefore, should not manage others. Nevertheless, authoritarian leaders who abuse their power will not get any positive outcomes or generate any innovation necessary to thrive in the digital economy. To avoid the pitfalls of authoritarianism, PHEI leaders should emphasize collaboration, which is essential to any great human accomplishment. To promote healthy collaboration, they should implement proactive efforts to combat coercive behaviors from individuals and groups. They should also eliminate arbitrary, ego-driven decision-making, harassment, and verbal/emotional abuse, which characterize extreme authoritarianism. Further, PHEIs need to install management systems that put checks and balances on the power of leaders to hold them accountable for their behavior and consequences, while staff should be encouraged to voice their opinions to help one another improve as a cohesive team. Moreover, PHEIs should also appoint board members specifically to challenge their authority and hold them accountable. Lastly, they should implement a compliance function that reports directly to the audit committee concerning financial wrongdoing, discrimination, or harassment.

Organizations should strive to reduce the practice of authoritarian leadership because it adversely affects negotiation ([Shonk, 2025](#)). PHEIs should avoid this management style because it is often at odds with best practices for leadership and negotiation. Authoritarian leaders tend to veer toward asserting their will and underestimate those with less power. Their overly self-confident perceptions lead them to offer fewer concessions to get a deal, besides treating others with little respect and recognition. Besides, authoritarian leaders tend to be less prepared; they often undervalue the need to thoroughly prepare to negotiate, relying on cognitive shortcuts when processing information, which ultimately leads them to ignore their counterparts' interests. During negotiations, authoritarian leaders often fail to anticipate a backlash; hence, their authoritarian stance can trigger resentment, jealousy, and competitiveness in others. While being unaware that they tend to inspire animosity, authoritarian leaders often expect others to be more trustworthy. Being less likely to build trust with negotiating partners, they perceive that their counterparts as less reliable, responsible, or sincere. To become less authoritarian, PHEI leaders should take a more collaborative approach to leadership and negotiation by building trusting relationships, preparing thoroughly for negotiation, and treating counterparts with respect, while negotiating with humility and acknowledging that everyone has something constructive to contribute.

## 5.5. Democratic Leadership Practices

According to [Alonso \(2025\)](#), organizations should adopt democratic leadership rather than autocratic because the former style promotes internal communication, fluid structure and team dynamics, and a growth culture. First, unlike authoritarian leadership that is characterized by informational channels with intense friction in moving, sorting, and searching for information, democratic leadership enables PHEIs to transition to digitalization by creating highways of informational flow that encourages sharing. While authoritarian leadership focuses on converging information to a few key decision-makers, democratic leadership enables PHEIs to transform by making informed decisions through

a free flow of ideas amongst staff. Second, while authoritarian leaders tend to accumulate responsibilities, monopolize most of the authority in decision-making, and assume sole accountability for team success, democratic leadership enables PHEIs to demonstrate fluidity in structure and team dynamics, which allow them to have less vertical, hierarchical levels to spread responsibilities horizontally. Third, while authoritarian leadership focuses on comprehensive planning and strictly adhering to processes and rules, democratic leadership enables PHEIs to develop a growth culture through execution and treating mistakes as valuable lessons. Overall, democratic leadership creates a PHEI environment in which staff feel safe to express their ideas and creativity, which fuels experimentation and innovation.

Additionally, [Alonso \(2025\)](#) also recommended that organizations become less authoritarian by actively encouraging participation, fostering open communication, delegating meaningfully, and valuing diverse perspectives. First, PHEI leaders should not just wait for feedback, but actively solicit it through focused brainstorming sessions, suggestion boxes, regular team meetings for problem-solving, and one-on-one chats to encourage staff to share information in an authentic manner. Second, they should build safe and open channels for sincere feedback and ensure that information travels easily amongst team members for prompt decision-making. Third, they should delegate meaningfully by truly empowering staff, trusting them with authentic tasks, giving them the power to make decisions within clear limits, and setting clear boundaries to increase staff engagement. Fourth, they should gather diverse perspectives by creating a space where different viewpoints are welcome, while making an effort to hear multiple perspectives to challenge assumptions and to reduce herd mentality.

Finally, organizations can also implement democratic leadership by developing conflict resolution skills and decisiveness and leading by example ([Alonso, 2025](#)). First, PHEIs, when dealing with diverse opinions and inevitable disagreements, should help staff develop effective ways to handle conflict constructively by aiming for team consensus and collaboration. Second, PHEI leaders should be decisive in accepting responsibility because they still need to make the final decision or set a clear path during group dissent or urgent circumstances, while clearly justifying why the decisions have been made. Lastly, PHEI leaders need to set the real tone by setting an example. To show that everyone's opinion matters, they need to demonstrate democratic values in their everyday actions by listening actively, admitting their own mistakes, being open to feedback, and giving credit to others in a fair manner.

## 5.6. Final Thought

To increase generalizability of findings, further studies should be carried out by involving more college and university staff throughout Sabah and also other states. Next, a comparative study should also be conducted to compare authoritarian or autocratic leadership with other leadership styles in different locations to determine the robustness of current findings.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study has strictly adhered to all ethical procedures involving the use of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were ascertained of their anonymity, with their responses kept strictly confidential. They were also informed

that the study was of low risk and that they could stop participating any time without any repercussions.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors report no potential conflict of interest regarding this study in terms of the research or publication of this article.

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