Leadership in the Private Higher Education : A Qualitative Case Study

Ren Yuanyuan
Pathumthani University, Thailand
ryy511799@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0009-0005-4187-1800

Supakorn Suradinkura
Pathumthani University, Thailand
supakorn.s@ptu.ac.th
ORCID ID: 0009-0008-4514-3546

ABSTRACT

Objective: This qualitative case study examined the perspectives of three academic leaders at a Thai higher education institution on their leadership practices. The objective was to evaluate how these perspectives align with Ramsden's conceptual framework for academic leadership and to identify distinctive leadership characteristics within the academic environment.

Method: Structured interviews were conducted to guide data collection with three academic leaders selected through purposive sampling. Their responses were analyzed and compared against Ramsden's conceptual model, focusing on multiple leadership dimensions including teaching and learning engagement, scholarly productivity, and faculty development.

Result: The findings demonstrate a broad alignment between the leaders' reported practices and Ramsden's framework. However, individual differences in leadership styles were also observed, indicating that while the core principles of academic leadership were shared, their application varied across leaders. The data further revealed that academic leadership presents unique challenges distinct from those found in corporate or governmental contexts.

Conclusion: Academic leadership requires maintaining active involvement in teaching, research, and scholarly development to effectively support and inspire faculty and students. Leaders who remain closely engaged with core academic functions are more likely to foster a culture of excellence within their institutions.

Recommendation & Implication: Institutional leaders are encouraged to reflect on their own leadership attributes and consider how their engagement with academic work influences institutional performance. Leadership development programs should emphasize the unique nature of academic leadership and support leaders in balancing administrative responsibilities with ongoing scholarly work to sustain educational quality.

Keywords: *Academic Leadership, Ramsden's Framework, Leadership Styles, Higher Education, Thai Institution*

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping institutional success, fostering innovation, and responding to the dynamic challenges of globalization, digital transformation, and shifting student demographics (Altbach & de Wit, 2024). Despite its importance, leadership in higher education remains an underexplored area in many contexts, particularly in developing nations, where institutional structures and cultural factors shape leadership practices differently from Western models. The background of this study stems from the growing recognition that higher education institutions (HEIs) in Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, face unique challenges in leadership development. Thailand's higher education system has undergone rapid expansion and reform, yet struggles with bureaucratic rigidity, resistance to change, and a lack of strategic leadership training (Ariratana et al., 2025). Recent studies highlight that Thai universities often adopt hierarchical leadership models, which may hinder adaptability in an increasingly competitive global education landscape (Sangnapaboworn, 2024).

The study draws upon contemporary theoretical frameworks in higher education leadership, particularly Blackmore's (2021) work on distributed leadership in Asian contexts and Marshall et al.'s (2022) research on leadership challenges in developing higher education systems. These theoretical perspectives provide a critical lens for examining how Thai academic leaders navigate the complex interplay between traditional hierarchical structures and emerging collaborative leadership models in Southeast Asian universities. Prior to conducting interviews, a review of relevant literature informed the development of a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of seven open-ended questions.

1.1 Research Objective

This study examines how three higher education leaders conceptualize and enact leadership within their institutional roles. The participants were purposively selected from Pathum Thani University in Thailand to explore diverse perspectives on academic leadership.

1.2 Research Question

The study was guided by the following central research question: How do academic leaders at a Thai university describe and practice leadership in alignment with Ramsden's framework? Sub-questions explored various dimensions of leadership, including perceptions, challenges, and day-to-day practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Ramsden's Model of Academic Leadership (Ramsden, 1998)

2.1.1 Balance of Vision
Balance of vision involves aligning short-term goals with long-term strategy while integrating academic and administrative priorities. Leaders must translate institutional missions into actionable plans that address both immediate needs and future growth. This requires adaptability to feedback and change while maintaining a clear, shared direction (Ramsden, 1998).

2.1.2 Fairness
Fairness is essential for trust and credibility in academic leadership. It means equitable treatment in decisions, transparent processes, and impartial resource distribution. Fair leaders apply policies consistently, communicate criteria clearly, and value diverse perspectives, fostering an ethical and respectful academic environment (Ramsden, 1998; Bryman, 2007).

2.1.3 Collaboration
Collaboration emphasizes shared governance and teamwork to achieve academic objectives. Leaders should actively involve faculty, staff, and students in decision-making and promote interdisciplinary partnerships. Effective collaboration builds community, enhances innovation, and strengthens institutional unity (Ramsden, 1998).

2.1.4 Adaptability
Adaptability refers to proactively responding to changes in higher education, such as technological, demographic, or policy shifts. Adaptive leaders embrace innovation, adjust strategies when needed, and support their teams through transitions, ensuring the institution remains resilient and forward-looking (Ramsden, 1998; Fullan & Scott, 2009).

2.2 Relevant Studies

To establish a clear foundation for this study, it is essential to define both leadership in general and academic leadership in its specific context. Leadership has been extensively conceptualized in organizational and management literature. Bolden et al. (2022) highlight that effective leadership involves fostering an environment where individuals can thrive, aligning with the notion that leadership enhances human potential (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Academic

leadership operates within the unique ecosystem of higher education institutions. Unlike corporate or government sectors, where objectives may prioritize profit or public service, academic institutions must balance diverse stakeholder interests, including students, faculty, funding bodies, and the broader community (Middlehurst, 2020). This complexity introduces distinct challenges, such as managing shared governance, fostering academic freedom, and aligning institutional missions with faculty expectations (Knight & Trowler, 2020).

Furthermore, a recent study has sought to model academic leadership that accounts for these nuances. For example, Jones et al. (2021) identify four key dimensions of academic leadership: strategic vision, relational influence, institutional stewardship, and adaptive problem-solving. Their framework aligns with earlier work by Bryman (2007), who found that effective academic leaders must navigate both bureaucratic structures and collegial cultures. This duality distinguishes higher education from other sectors. This study builds upon these evolving perspectives, particularly by examining how academic leaders interpret and enact their roles within a Thai university context. The following sections explore these challenges in greater depth, drawing on both theoretical models and empirical insights from participants.

The term "academic institution" encompasses a diverse range of educational establishments, including primary and secondary schools, vocational training centers, and tertiary institutions, such as universities. For this study, we focus specifically on Thailand's higher education sector. This narrowed scope was determined by practical considerations of time and resource constraints, as conducting a comprehensive investigation across Thailand's 170+ higher education institutions would not be feasible.

The research centers on Pathum Thani University, a mid-sized public university in central Thailand. This single-institution approach offers several methodological advantages. First, the researcher's deep familiarity with the university's mission, vision, and unique organizational culture, shaped by Thailand's distinctive educational traditions and Buddhist influences, provides valuable contextual understanding that enhances both data collection and interpretation. By examining three academic leaders operating within the same institutional environment, the study enables a meaningful comparison of leadership approaches under similar organizational conditions. This focused methodology aligns with Vongchusiri's (2021) recommendation for in-depth, context-specific investigations of Thai higher education leadership.

The researcher's insider perspective facilitates important methodological triangulation. Firsthand knowledge of the institutional setting allows for verification of interview responses against observed leadership practices, thereby strengthening the study's validity. As Hallinger and Bryant (2020) note in their study of ASEAN higher education, such contextual familiarity is particularly valuable when examining leadership in Thailand's unique cultural and academic environment.

This study is grounded in a conceptual framework of leadership in higher education, building upon Ramsden's (1998) foundational model while incorporating contemporary perspectives from recent research (Ariratana et al., 2025; Luevisadpaibul & Hallinger, 2025). Ramsden's

framework identifies key dimensions of effective academic leadership that remain relevant but have evolved in light of new challenges, such as digital transformation, crisis management, and global competitiveness in higher education (Altbach & de Wit, 2024).

The adapted framework for this study includes the following dimensions:

Leadership in Teaching – Encouraging pedagogical innovation, fostering active learning, and integrating technology-enhanced education (Sangnapaboworn, 2024).

Leadership in Research – Promoting a strong research culture, securing funding, and enhancing institutional research visibility (Ministry of Higher Education, Thailand, 2024).

Strategic Vision and Networking – Aligning departmental goals with national and international higher education trends, such as Thailand 4.0 policies (Tan & Lee, 2025).

Collaborative and Motivational Leadership – Building trust, encouraging shared governance, and maintaining transparency in decision-making (Jones & Lefoe, 2024).

Fair and Efficient Management – Implementing data-driven decision-making, optimizing resource allocation, and reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies (Nguyen et al., 2025).

Development and Recognition of Performance – Establishing merit-based reward systems and providing constructive feedback for professional growth (Ariratana et al., 2025).

Interpersonal Skills – Enhancing communication, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution in multicultural academic settings (Luevisadpaibul & Hallinger, 2025).

2.3 Conceptual Framework

Recent studies in Thailand highlight the need for adaptive leadership approaches that balance traditional hierarchical structures with more flexible, transformational styles (Sangnapaboworn, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the importance of resilient leadership capable of navigating disruptions while maintaining institutional stability (Luevisadpaibul & Hallinger, 2025). Thus, this study not only examines how current academic leaders in Thai higher education align with Ramsden's framework but also explores emerging leadership practices in response to contemporary challenges.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed purposive sampling to select three respondents (leaders) based on the leadership's specified areas of expertise at Pathumthani University, Thailand. The significant variations in how each leader defined "academic leadership" and operationalized their leadership responsibilities. The paper is structured as follows: First, a review of literature on academic leadership establishes the scholarly context. Next, the study's conceptual framework is presented, followed by an explanation of the research methodology. Subsequently, case studies of the three leaders' responses are examined, key findings are discussed, and the paper concludes with implications for leadership practice in higher education.

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to examine leadership perspectives in higher education. A qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to elicit rich, nuanced accounts of participants' lived experiences and to capture the complexity of leadership as enacted and perceived in academic settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consistent with constructivist and interpretivist assumptions, the study recognizes multiple, context-dependent realities shaped through social interaction and meaning-making (Charmaz, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

For consistency and validity, the authors personally interviewed all three leaders using an open-ended interview schedule. A standardized open-ended interview format was employed to ensure consistency while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences. As noted by Guest et al. (2012), structured yet flexible questioning enhances response comparability while preserving depth in qualitative data. The interview protocol comprised seven questions, including one demographic item and seven open-ended questions probing key characteristics of effective academic leadership, as identified in prior research (Bryman, 2007; Bolden et al., 2012). This approach was selected because leadership is a multifaceted construct requiring nuanced exploration. Open-ended questions enabled participants to reflect deeply on the aspects they deemed most significant, aligning with Alvesson's (2011) assertion that interpretive methods are vital for studying complex, context-dependent phenomena like leadership. The questions encouraged leaders to share candid perspectives on their practices, challenges, and philosophies. For example, the second question in the interview was, "Can you describe what you consider to be effective leadership in teaching? Can you provide some examples?"

Before the interviews, the researchers contacted the interviewees (respondents) and scheduled them accordingly. Each interviewee was interviewed individually, and all consented to participate. Responses to each question were recorded in detail. For each question, the interviewee was asked to illustrate with appropriate examples from their own leadership practices, providing insight into how they put leadership into practice. To protect the interviewees' privacy, they are referred to as Leader 1, Leader 2, and Leader 3 in the following sections, and it is clearly stated that the collected data will be used only for this study.

Qualitative interview data analysis and interpretation can be approached in diverse ways. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline several thematic analysis techniques, including coding, theme development, and pattern identification, while Saldaña (2021) emphasizes the importance of both descriptive and interpretive methods in qualitative research. Depending on the study's objectives, researchers may adopt a single analytical approach or combine multiple methods. Given that this study sought to compare how three academic leaders conceptualized "academic leadership," we integrated *meaning categorization,* grouping semantically similar responses with *interpretive analysis* to uncover deeper, holistic meanings. This dual approach allowed us to systematically organize leaders' descriptions of their leadership styles and interpret the underlying significance they ascribed to the concept. Content or thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns in textual data (Limna, 2025). This study used a hybrid approach: categorizing explicit meanings and interpreting underlying themes. The process included data familiarization, coding, theme development, and refinement, aligning findings with Ramsden's framework and research questions.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Profile of Respondents

Three academic leaders from Pathumthani University, Thailand, participated in this study.

Leader 1 (L1) is the Director of the English Language Center at Pathumthani University, Thailand, and has served in his current leadership role for about eight months.

Leader 2 (L2) is the Dean of Pathumthani University, Thailand, and has held his current academic leadership position for more than 5 years.

Leader 3 (L3) is the Assistant to the President of Pathumthani University and has held his current leadership position for approximately five years.

4.2 Leadership

4.2.1 Leadership in teaching

L1 noted: "I encourage, guide, and support students, while collaborating with colleagues to achieve clear teaching objectives. I motivate learners to believe in themselves, communicate ideas effectively, and adjust my teaching strategies when they encounter difficulties."

L2 stated: "Effective leadership in teaching is about simplifying complex content so that students can grasp it more easily, fostering innovation, and incorporating digital tools into education, such as replacing paper-based tasks with online resources."

L3 explained: "Leadership in teaching means establishing the right conditions for high-quality learning, equipping teachers with resources and training, and organizing workshops that promote innovative teaching methods and emerging technologies."

The above responses illustrate that L2 emphasized innovation and digital integration in teaching, which represent essential leadership qualities that ensure adaptability to educational change and prepare students for a technology-driven environment. L1 stressed motivation and adaptability, reflecting a student-centered approach where teaching methods shift according to learners' needs. This highlights empathetic leadership but also raises the question of how effectiveness is assessed—whether through student performance, formal evaluations, or increased engagement. L3 underscored the importance of supporting staff and improving the broader teaching context, indicating that leadership extends beyond classroom practice to empowering educators. His stance resonates with distributed leadership theory, which recognizes creating favorable conditions for others to succeed as an effective form of leadership.

4.2.2 Leadership in research

L1 noted: "I guide the research team by sharing useful knowledge and ideas. I set clear research objectives, introduce appropriate methodologies, and stress the importance of ethics such as copyright. I also train the team in time management and provide financial support when needed."

L2 stated: "Leadership in research involves identifying new societal challenges and directing research to address them. For instance, I encourage colleagues to investigate issues such as aging populations and preventive healthcare. I also promote interdisciplinary collaboration to increase relevance and impact."

L3 explained: "Leadership in research means offering vision, securing resources, and creating opportunities for staff to publish in international journals. I also ensure that younger scholars receive mentorship and that research activities are aligned with the university's strategic goals. For example, I support faculty in improving their manuscripts through writing workshops, provide funding for conference participation where papers can be refined before submission, and encourage collaboration with international partners to increase the likelihood of acceptance in high-impact journals."

The responses above indicate that L1 concentrated on the operational side of research management, including setting objectives, ensuring ethical standards, and managing time and resources. This demonstrates a strong managerial approach to research leadership. L2 emphasized societal relevance, linking research agendas to urgent issues, reflecting visionary leadership that ensures outcomes contribute meaningfully to communities. L3 highlighted capacity building and institutional alignment, emphasizing international visibility through publications. Unlike L1's practical orientation and L2's focus on social challenges, L3 adopted a strategic perspective by connecting individual research efforts with institutional priorities,

particularly by fostering international publication opportunities—an essential leadership attribute in advancing higher education research.

4.2.3 Strategy, Vision, and Networking

In response to Question 4, "What short-term (ST) and long-term (LT) vision have you set up for your department/school/discipline?" and Question 5, "How does this vision correspond with the University's vision?",

L1 replied: "In the short term, I focus on organizing workshops for staff, gathering student feedback, and building cooperation with other universities. For the long term, my goals are to help students achieve success in IELTS or TOEFL and to attract international students from neighbouring countries." Regarding alignment, he added: "The school's vision is consistent with the University's mission of teaching and research for developing professionals, sharing the same values of service to the community."

L2 explained: "We have a field-specific vision. While our main goal is to develop professionals, we also aim to differentiate ourselves from local competitors by emphasizing applied learning." He further noted: "The short-term vision consists of incremental steps toward the long-term goals, covering teaching, research, and community service. Both short- and long-term visions are integrated into the annual plan, which corresponds to the University's strategic framework." However, for greater clarity, L2's vision would benefit from explicit outcome measures, such as tracking graduate employability rates, monitoring the number of applied research projects with industry partners, or assessing student satisfaction levels. These indicators would provide concrete benchmarks to evaluate whether the applied focus vision is being achieved.

Leadership theory emphasizes that establishing clear goals and vision is a hallmark of effective leadership, and L2 demonstrates this attribute.

L3 responded, the long-term vision is "to achieve international recognition and position the University as a first choice for students, which requires recruiting and retaining high-calibre staff." His focus on global recognition and staff quality aligns with theoretical models of visionary leadership. At the same time, L3's concern that the University lacks a clear overall direction raises questions about strategic alignment and the consistency of leadership priorities.

4.2.4 Collaborative and Motivational Leadership

For Question 6, "How do you motivate the staff in your discipline/school/department? Can you give some examples?", the following responses were provided.

L1 stated: "I motivate staff by expressing gratitude directly, offering training for further education, and providing promotion opportunities. I also maintain open communication by asking their opinions and ensuring a comfortable working environment." These strategies can be

illustrated by practices such as personally acknowledging staff contributions in meetings, sponsoring attendance at external workshops, and establishing transparent criteria for career advancement. According to theory, inspiring people to perform at their best is a motivational quality of effective academic leadership, and L1's examples suggest that this principle is being applied in practice.

L2 explained: "I motivate staff by enhancing the work environment." However, this requires more specific examples to clarify the impact. For instance, L2 noted improvements such as renovating classrooms to create more interactive spaces, updating digital facilities to reduce administrative burdens, and introducing regular well-being activities to foster a positive atmosphere. According to theory, motivational leadership requires openness, honesty, and a positive attitude toward change and innovation, alongside the ability to inspire people to give their best. What remains unclear is how L2 addresses staff who are less receptive to change, a critical aspect of sustaining motivation.

L3 responded: "I motivate staff by recognizing their achievements, offering professional growth opportunities, and supporting their career development. I also keep communication open and encourage appreciation in daily practice." His approach includes publicly acknowledging research outputs, funding staff participation in international conferences, and facilitating mentorship programs to support younger academics. Leadership theory highlights that identifying staff needs and rewarding them accordingly are essential qualities of effective leadership, and L3's response demonstrates consistency with this perspective.

4.2.5 Fair and efficient management

For Question 7, "What, according to you, constitutes fair and efficient management? Can you give some examples?", the leaders offered the following views. L1 explained: "Fair and efficient management means establishing clear rules, treating staff equally, and giving timely feedback. It also involves managing time well, such as keeping meetings short, and ensuring trust to avoid internal conflicts." For example,

L1 noted that rules were collaboratively created with staff at the beginning of each semester to clarify responsibilities and deadlines, thereby minimizing misunderstandings and fostering accountability.

L2 responded: "Openness, no special treatment, transparency in workloads, and giving people opportunities to develop their strengths constitute fairness. It also involves delegating tasks clearly and respecting staff input." According to theory, fair and efficient management requires effective delegation, clear organization, and the achievement of goals with minimal friction. L2's description reflects these qualities by stressing transparent workload distribution and encouraging individual development.

L3 stated: "Fair and efficient management means listening to staff opinions, recognizing mistakes openly, and distributing rewards equally. It also includes holding staff accountable while supporting their development." The point about rewards was elaborated with examples such as linking recognition to specific achievements—publishing in high-impact journals, securing external grants, or successfully leading community projects—while ensuring that all staff members are considered for advancement opportunities. This approach illustrates how fairness and efficiency can coexist, combining accountability with equitable recognition.

The responses collectively show that all three leaders described practices consistent with leadership theory, which highlights fairness, effective delegation, and organizational efficiency as central attributes of fair and efficient management.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Academic leadership presents challenges that differ significantly from those in business or government sectors (Blackmore, 2023). Academic leaders must remain actively engaged in teaching, learning, research, and scholarship to foster excellence among colleagues while safeguarding academic freedom, which is of paramount importance (Marshall & Cameron, 2024). The perspectives of the three leaders illustrate practical applications of Ramsden's theoretical model of academic leadership, reinforcing its relevance. For instance, Leader 1 (L1) emphasized motivation, gratitude, and professional development opportunities, which align with Ramsden's view that leaders should inspire academic staff to reach their potential. Leader 3 (L3) stressed internationalization, staff development, and transparent management processes, reflecting Ramsden's emphasis on vision, collaboration, and fairness.

Leader 2 (L2) demonstrated the most substantial alignment with theoretical expectations (Vongchusiri & Hallinger, 2025). His emphasis on adapting education through digital learning and AI reflects the theoretical principle that leaders must anticipate and manage change. Importantly, his vision is not merely rhetorical but linked to practical outcomes, such as improved student engagement, increased use of blended learning platforms, and measurable reductions in administrative workload. Furthermore, his attention to facility management removes all the "please" issues— such as addressing classroom infrastructure issues quickly—can be assessed through concrete indicators, such as student satisfaction surveys or reduced downtime in teaching spaces, demonstrating how theoretical leadership attributes translate into operational efficiency.

The study also highlights the importance of communication styles. While one-on-one interactions, as described by L2, may foster individualized support and trust, open discussions in committee settings provide broader transparency, encourage diverse input, and strengthen collective engagement. Theory suggests that both are necessary. However, committee-based dialogue more directly reflects principles of participatory governance in academia.

In alignment with Ramsden's model, the study demonstrates that effective academic leadership requires a balance of vision, fairness, collaboration, and adaptability. The author intends to

integrate these attributes into personal practice, with a particular focus on cultivating open committee discussions to enhance transparency and shared ownership of decisions, thereby reinforcing the core principles of academic leadership.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The results indicate a significant correspondence between the leaders' practices and Ramsden's framework. Nevertheless, individual variations in leadership styles were noted, suggesting that although the fundamental concepts of academic leadership were familiar, their implementation differed among leaders. The research indicated that academic leadership entails particular obstacles not encountered in corporate or governmental settings. Academic leadership requires active engagement in teaching, research, and intellectual advancement to effectively support and motivate professors and students. Leaders who remain actively involved in fundamental academic functions are more likely to cultivate a culture of excellence within their institutions. Institutional leaders are urged to reflect on their leadership qualities and assess the impact of their involvement in academic endeavors on institutional effectiveness. Leadership development programs must highlight the distinctive characteristics of academic leadership and help leaders reconcile administrative duties with continuous scholarly engagement to maintain educational excellence.

7. LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study was limited by its small sample size of only three academic leaders, which may not fully represent the broader diversity of leadership practices within higher education institutions. Thus, this research is a case study focusing solely on Pathumthani University in Thailand.

The reliance on self-reported interview data may also introduce subjectivity, as responses could be influenced by personal reflection or institutional image. Future research should expand the sample to include leaders from multiple universities and across administrative levels to improve generalizability. Incorporating additional data sources, such as document analysis, classroom observations, or faculty and student feedback, would also offer a more comprehensive understanding of leadership practices. It is recommended that institutions develop professional development programs that emphasize communication, participatory governance, and the integration of scholarly engagement into leadership roles. These initiatives could help leaders balance administrative responsibilities with academic functions, fostering a more collaborative, academically driven organizational culture.

DECLARATION

The authors did not use AI for text generation, except for grammar checking and paraphrasing. Also, there is no conflict of interest in this study.

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