PEDAGOGIK JURNAL PENDIDIKAN
P-ISSN : 2528-5793
E-ISSN : 2354-7960

EXAMINING THE LEADERSHIP AND PERFORMANCE RELATIONSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SEQUENTIAL MEDIATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

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Received: Juny 2025	**Accepted:** March 2026	**Published:** May 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33650.pjp.v13i1.11822		

Abstract : *This study investigates the relationship between transformational leadership (TL) and organizational performance (OP) in Indonesian higher education, focusing on the mediating roles of quality assurance (QA) and organizational commitment (OC). Transformational leadership helps strengthen the university's quality system, which increases staff commitment and ultimately can improve university performance. Data collected from 427 academic and administrative staff at accredited public and private universities in Indonesia were analyzed using PLS-SEM. The findings show that transformational leadership does not directly affect organizational performance ($\beta = 0.082$, $p = 0.225$), but it does significantly influence quality assurance ($\beta = 0.672$, $p < 0.001$). Quality assurance also positively affects organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.658$, $p < 0.001$), which, in turn, improves organizational performance ($\beta = 0.551$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the sequential mediation pathway TL → QA → OC → OP was significant ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that transformational leadership enhances performance indirectly through QA institutionalization and staff commitment.*

Keywords : *Transformational Leadership; Quality Assurance; Organizational Commitment.*

Abstrak : *Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menelaah hubungan antara kepemimpinan transformasional (TL) dan kinerja organisasi (OP) di pendidikan tinggi Indonesia, dengan fokus pada peran mediasi penjaminan mutu (QA) dan komitmen organisasi (OC). Kepemimpinan transformasional membantu memperkuat sistem mutu universitas, sistem mutu meningkatkan komitmen staf, dan pada akhirnya dapat meningkatkan kinerja universitas. Data dikumpulkan dari 427 staf akademik dan administrasi di universitas negeri dan swasta terakreditasi di Indonesia dan dianalisis menggunakan PLS-SEM. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan transformasional tidak secara langsung memengaruhi kinerja organisasi ($\beta = 0{,}082$, $p = 0{,}225$), tetapi secara signifikan memengaruhi penjaminan mutu ($\beta = 0{,}672$, $p < 0{,}001$). Penjaminan mutu juga secara positif memengaruhi komitmen organisasi ($\beta = 0{,}658$, $p < 0{,}001$), yang selanjutnya meningkatkan kinerja organisasi ($\beta = 0{,}551$, $p < 0{,}001$). Selanjutnya, jalur mediasi sekuensial TL → QA → OC → OP signifikan ($\beta = 0{,}244$, $p < 0{,}001$), menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan transformasional meningkatkan kinerja secara tidak langsung melalui institusionalisasi QA dan komitmen staf.*

Kata Kunci : *Kepemimpinan Transformasional; Penjaminan Mutu; Komitmen Organisasi.*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Indonesia and globally are facing increasing pressure to remain competitive, adaptive, and accountable amid rapid globalization, digital transformation, and intensified quality demands (Samha, 2024; Zamroni et al., 2025). In Indonesia, universities operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology and are required to implement accreditation standards regulated by the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education (BAN-PT) (sulaiman A, 2021). Although these mechanisms are intended to ensure institutional quality, many Indonesian HEIs continue to experience persistent challenges related to academic excellence, organizational effectiveness, and institutional reputation (Aini et al., 2025). These conditions indicate that institutional performance is not determined solely by external regulations, but also by the internal capacity of universities to transform governance, leadership, and quality management into sustainable organizational capabilities.

Among the internal factors influencing institutional sustainability, transformational leadership (TL) has received substantial scholarly attention due to its ability to stimulate innovation, organizational change, and employee motivation in complex environments (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In higher education settings, transformational leaders such as rectors, deans, and department heads are expected not only to articulate strategic visions but also to shape organizational cultures that encourage collaboration, continuous improvement, and shared commitment (Opoku-Nkoom & Ackah-Jnr, 2023; Zahari et al., 2024). Previous studies have consistently demonstrated positive associations between TL and organizational outcomes, including innovation, employee engagement, and organizational performance (Duffy et al., 2020). However, existing studies predominantly conceptualize this relationship as direct and linear, implicitly assuming that leadership alone is sufficient to improve institutional performance. Such assumptions overlook the organizational processes through which leadership values are translated into sustainable institutional practices, particularly in developing-country higher education systems characterized by bureaucratic structures and uneven quality cultures.

A critical limitation of previous research lies in its insufficient attention to the institutional mechanisms that connect leadership practices to organizational outcomes. While several studies have examined organizational commitment (OC) as a mediator between TL and performance, these studies largely focus on the psychological influence of leaders on employees' emotional attachment and loyalty (Khoiroh & Baharun, 2025; Mundiri et al., 2025). Consequently, the discussion remains centered on interpersonal influence rather than on how leadership becomes embedded within organizational systems

that shape everyday institutional behavior (Zahari et al., 2024). This creates an important theoretical gap because sustainable organizational performance in higher education is unlikely to emerge solely from charismatic leadership; instead, it requires institutionalized structures capable of transforming leadership vision into collective organizational practices.

In this context, Quality Assurance (QA) represents a strategically important yet underexplored organizational mechanism. Unlike previous studies that treat QA primarily as an administrative or compliance-based requirement, this study positions QA as a transformational organizational capability that mediates the influence of leadership on institutional performance. In Indonesian HEIs, QA is implemented through the Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI), which is formally designed to foster continuous improvement. Nevertheless, empirical realities show that QA implementation often remains procedural, document-oriented, and detached from employee engagement and organizational culture (Jaiyeoba & Hazahari, 2024). This study argues that transformational leadership has the potential to redefine QA from a bureaucratic accreditation instrument into a participatory quality culture that strengthens trust, empowerment, and institutional commitment among academic and administrative staff. This perspective offers a novel conceptual shift by viewing QA not merely as a technical control system, but as a socially embedded organizational process shaped by leadership practices.

Building on the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Social Exchange Theory (SET), this study develops an integrated sequential mediation framework linking TL, QA, OC, and organizational performance (OP). RBV explains how leadership and QA can function as strategic organizational resources that create sustainable competitive advantage, while SET explains how employees reciprocate supportive leadership and empowering institutional systems through stronger commitment and performance-oriented behavior. Unlike prior studies that examine these constructs separately or through simple mediation models, this research introduces a sequential mechanism in which transformational leadership institutionalizes quality assurance practices, which subsequently foster organizational commitment and ultimately improve organizational performance. The novelty of this study therefore lies not only in the integration of TL, QA, and OC into a unified empirical model, but also in its reconceptualization of QA as a transformational bridge between leadership and performance within the context of Indonesian higher education.

Despite the increasing scholarly attention devoted to leadership, quality management, and employee commitment in higher education, empirical studies integrating these dimensions into a comprehensive sequential mediation model remain absent, particularly in Indonesian universities. Addressing this gap is theoretically and practically

important because it enables a deeper understanding of how leadership-driven quality systems can cultivate institutional commitment and sustainable organizational performance in highly regulated educational environments. Therefore, this study aims to empirically examine the sequential mediating roles of QA and OC in the relationship between TL and OP among academic and administrative staff in accredited public and private universities in Indonesia. Specifically, this study tests the following hypotheses: 1) TL has a significant direct effect on OP, 2) TL has a significant positive effect on QA, 3) QA has a significant positive effect on OC, 4) OC has a significant positive effect on OP, 5) QA significantly mediates the relationship between TL and OC, 6) OC significantly mediates the relationship between QA and OP; and 7) QA and OC sequentially mediate the pathway TL → QA → OC → OP.

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional design with an explanatory approach to test the sequential mediation model TL → QA → OC → OP within Indonesian higher education institutions (HEIs). Data collected from March to June 2024, a timeframe selected to capture stable institutional conditions following the completion of the 2023/2024 academic semester cycle and prior to major administrative transitions. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4, which is particularly suitable for complex, predictive models involving multiple mediators and data that may not meet strict normality assumptions (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2022a)

The target population of this study consists of academic and administrative staff employed at public and private universities holding an A/Excellent accreditation rating from BAN-PT (Indonesia's National Accreditation Board for Higher Education). Examples of institutions included in the sampling frame are Universitas Gadjah Mada, Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Brawijaya, Universitas Padjadjaran, and several private institutions such as Universitas Islam Indonesia and Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, selected to ensure geographic and institutional diversity across Java and other major islands. The researcher constructed the research sample from the official BAN-PT website and university directories.

Respondents were eligible for inclusion if they had at least 1 year of tenure, were currently active, and were involved in academic or administrative processes subject to the Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI). Those on full-time study leave, on leave for three months or more, or who submitted incomplete or invalid responses, such as those exhibiting extreme straight-lining, were excluded from the analysis.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness across two dimensions: institution type (public vs. private) and respondent role (academic vs. administrative staff). Sampling proportions were determined to reflect the actual population distributions across strata. Regarding sample size, the PLS-SEM rule of thumb requires a minimum of 10–20 cases per indicator of the most complex construct; with approximately 30 indicators in this model, a minimum of 300 respondents was deemed necessary. The indicators were further validated using G*Power (linear multiple regression; $f^2 = 0.10$; $\alpha = 0.05$; power = 0.95; approximately 6–8 predictors), which indicated that 260–320 respondents would be statistically sufficient. A final target of 450 respondents was set to account for potential non-response, ensure data quality, and enable multi-group analysis (MGA) across institutional strata.

Following the translation–back translation procedure, an expert panel consisting of five to seven specialists in higher education management, internal quality assurance (SPMI), and SEM methodology reviewed all items for content validity, clarity, and contextual relevance. Items achieving an Item-level Content Validity Index (I-CVI) and Scale-level Content Validity Index (S-CVI) of 0.80 or above were retained. A pilot test was subsequently conducted with 50 to 80 respondents drawn from non-sample institutions to assess initial reliability, item distribution, and average completion time.

Data were collected through a secure, anonymous online survey administered via Google Forms and distributed through faculty coordinators and internal quality assurance unit heads at each participating institution. Two scheduled reminders were sent at weeks two and four of the data collection window to improve response rates. The estimated survey completion time was 10 to 12 minutes. As a non-monetary incentive, a summary of research findings was offered to all participating institutions upon study completion. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Informed consent was provided on the first page of the survey, clearly stating the study's purpose, confidentiality guarantees, and the respondents' right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All data were stored in encrypted form, analyzed only in aggregate, and no personal identifiers were retained.

Prior to structural model estimation, the dataset was screened to remove duplicate entries, failed attention check responses, and extreme response patterns. Missing data were handled according to the proportion of missingness per item: values below 5% were addressed through mean replacement, those between 5% and 20% through multiple imputation using five imputations, and cases or items exceeding 20% missingness were removed. Outliers were identified using Mahalanobis distance on indicator sets and

confirmed through Cook's D leverage in regression-based procedures. Common Method Bias (CMB) was addressed through both procedural and statistical remedies. Procedurally, anonymity was assured, item order was randomized, and mixed positive–negative wording was applied. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test, full collinearity VIF assessment following Kock's (2015) criterion (VIF < 3.3), and an Unmeasured Latent Method Construct (ULMC) approach were employed. Non-response bias was evaluated by comparing early and late respondents on key constructs using independent samples t-tests and Mann-Whitney U tests.

The data analysis proceeded in two stages following the two-step approach recommended by (Hair et al., 2022a). In the first stage, the measurement model (outer model) was evaluated for convergent validity through factor loadings (above 0.70), AVE (above 0.50), and Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha (above 0.70). Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (√AVE exceeding inter-construct correlations) and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with a conservative threshold of below 0.85 and bootstrapped confidence intervals excluding 1.0 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981a; Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2022b). In the second stage, the structural model (inner model) was evaluated for multicollinearity (inner VIF below 3–5), coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2 via blindfolding with omission distance d = 7), effect sizes (f^2), and model fit via SRMR (below 0.08). Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples using bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) 95% confidence intervals was applied for all path coefficient and mediation significance tests (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The significance of sequential indirect effects, TL → QA → OC, QA → OC → OP, and TL → QA → OC → OP was assessed alongside Variance Accounted For (VAF) to determine the extent of mediation. Additionally, multi-group analysis (MGA) using MICOM invariance testing and Henseler's permutation-based MGA was conducted to compare path coefficients across public versus private institutions and academic versus administrative staff subgroups.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

A total of 427 valid respondents were collected from a target of 450 invitations, yielding a response rate of 94.8%. As presented in Table 1, the majority of respondents (54.8%) were from public universities, while 45.2% were from private institutions. In terms of staff role, 62.3% were academic staff (lecturers) and 37.7% were administrative staff. The average working period was 8.4 years, indicating that most respondents had sufficient institutional experience to provide meaningful assessments of leadership, quality assurance, and commitment practices in their respective universities.

Table 1: Respondent Profile (n = 427)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Institution Type	Public University	234	54.8%
	Private University	193	45.2%
Staff Role	Academic Staff (Lecturer)	266	62.3%
	Administrative Staff	161	37.7%
Average Working Period	8.4 years	—	—

Prior to testing the structural model, the measurement model was evaluated to ensure construct validity and reliability across all four latent variables: Transformational Leadership (TL), Quality Assurance (QA), Organizational Commitment (OC), and Organizational Performance (OP).

Convergent validity was assessed through outer loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), and Cronbach's Alpha. As presented in Table 2, all outer loadings exceeded the threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.782 (QA4) to 0.877 (TL2), confirming that all indicators adequately reflect their respective constructs (Hair et al., 2022a). AVE values for all constructs surpassed the 0.50 threshold: TL (AVE = 0.687), QA (AVE = 0.704), OC (AVE = 0.756), and OP (AVE = 0.721), indicating each construct explains more than half the variance in its indicators. Both Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded 0.90 for all constructs, well above the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming strong internal consistency and reliability. These results are summarized in Table 2.

Table: 2 Convergent Reliability and Validity Test

Construct	Number of Indicators	AVE	CR	Cronbach's α
Transformational Leadership (TL)	12	0.687	0.938	0.924
Quality Assurance (QA)	12	0.704	0.941	0.927
Organizational Commitment (OC)	6	0.756	0.932	0.913
Organizational Performance (OP)	9	0.721	0.935	0.916

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. As shown in Table 3, the square root of AVE for each construct (diagonal values) exceeds all inter-construct correlations in its corresponding row and column, confirming discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker,

1981b). For instance, the √AVE of OC (0.869) exceeds its correlations with TL (0.591), QA (0.655), and OP (0.701).

Table 3: Discriminant Validity - Fornell–Larcker Criterion

Construct	TL	QA	OC	OP
TL	0.829			
QA	0.672	0.840		
OC	0.591	0.655	0.869	
OP	0.544	0.628	0.701	0.850

Note: Bold diagonal = √AVE

Furthermore, Table 4 presents the HTMT ratios, all of which fall well below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015), ranging from 0.509 (TL–OP) to 0.704 (OC–OP), confirming that all constructs are empirically distinct from one another.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity - HTMT Ratio

Construct	OC	OP	QA	TL
OC				
OP	0.704			
QA	0.653	0.611		
TL	0.572	0.509	0.644	

Before testing the hypotheses, the structural model was evaluated for collinearity, predictive accuracy, and model fit. All outer VIF values ranged from 2.251 to 3.722, well below the threshold of 5.0, confirming no multicollinearity issues among the indicators (Hair et al., 2022a). As shown in Table 5, the R^2 values indicate moderate to substantial explanatory power: QA (R^2 = 0.386), OC (R^2 = 0.381), and OP (R^2 = 0.461), suggesting that the model explains a meaningful proportion of variance in all endogenous constructs. Predictive relevance assessed via PLSPredict confirmed acceptable Q^2 values for all constructs: QA (Q^2 = 0.382), OC (Q^2 = 0.265), and OP (Q^2 = 0.227), all above zero, confirming the model's predictive relevance (Shmueli et al., 2019). Model fit was confirmed by an SRMR of 0.053, below the recommended threshold of 0.08.

Table 5: R-Square and Predictive Relevance

Construct	R^2	R^2 Adjusted	Q^2predict	RMSE	MAE
QA	0.386	0.385	0.382	0.788	0.644
OC	0.381	0.380	0.265	0.861	0.723
OP	0.461	0.459	0.227	0.882	0.745

The structural relationships between the latent variables, including the path coefficients and variance explained (R^2), are visually summarized in Figure 1 below:

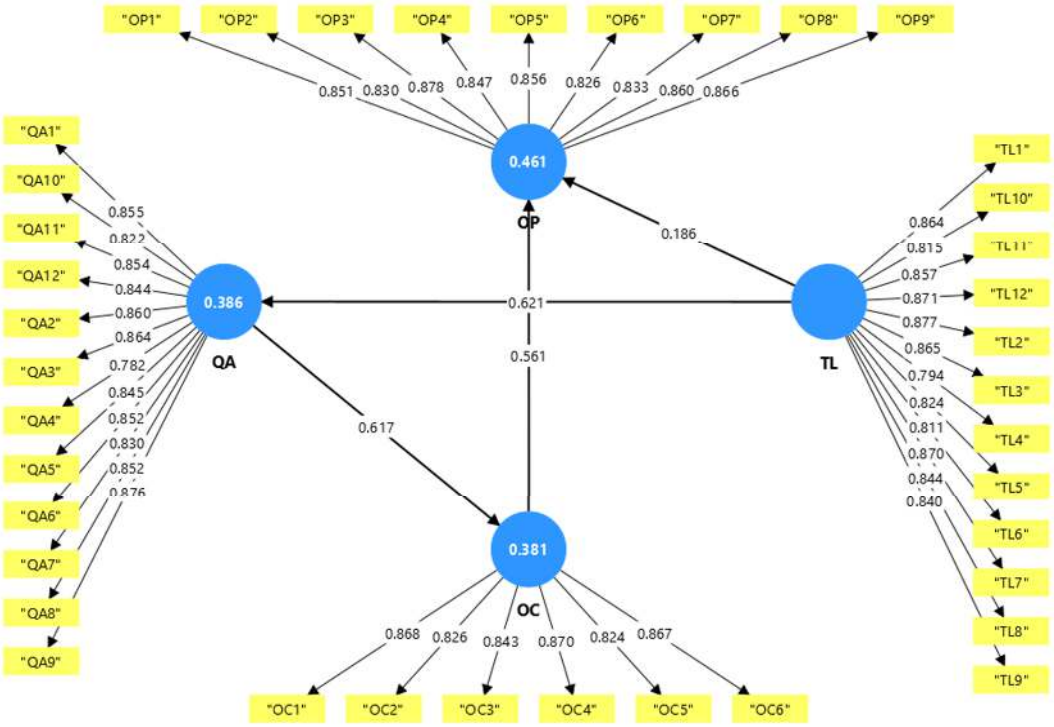


Figure 1: PLS-SEM Structural Model

The direct effects were estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples and BCa 95% confidence intervals. Results are presented in Table 6. H1, which proposed a significant direct effect of TL on OP, was not supported (β = 0.082, t = 1.215, p = 0.225), indicating that transformational leadership does not directly and independently improve organizational performance when mediators are present in the model — suggesting full mediation. H2, proposing a significant positive effect of TL on QA, was strongly supported (β = 0.672, t = 14.285, p < 0.001), confirming that transformational leaders play a central role in driving quality assurance practices in Indonesian universities. H3, proposing a positive effect of QA on OC, was also strongly supported (β = 0.658, t = 13.974, p < 0.001), indicating that effective quality assurance systems significantly enhance staff organizational commitment. Finally, H4, proposing a significant positive effect of OC on OP, was supported (β = 0.551, t = 10.102, p < 0.001), confirming that committed staff contribute meaningfully to institutional performance.

Table 6: Direct Effects - Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	TL → OP	0.082	1.215	0.225	Rejected
H2	TL → QA	0.672	14.285	<0.001	Accepted
H3	QA → OC	0.658	13.974	<0.001	Accepted
H4	OC → OP	0.551	10.102	<0.001	Accepted

The sequential ediation hypotheses were tested using specific indirect effects with bootstrapped BCa 95% confidence intervals. As shown in Table 7, all three indirect pathways were statistically significant with confidence intervals entirely excluding zero. H5, proposing that QA mediates the TL–OC relationship, was supported ($\beta = 0.442$, $t = 12.165$, $p < 0.001$; CI [0.325, 0.441]), demonstrating that transformational leadership fosters organizational commitment primarily through the institutionalization of quality assurance practices. H6, proposing that OC mediates the QA–OP relationship, was also supported ($\beta = 0.362$, $t = 8.713$, $p < 0.001$; CI [0.288, 0.407]), confirming that QA enhances performance by cultivating staff commitment as an intermediate mechanism. Most importantly, H7, proposing the full sequential mediation pathway TL → QA → OC → OP, was supported ($\beta = 0.244$, $t = 7.898$, $p < 0.001$; CI [0.171, 0.261]), confirming that transformational leadership influences organizational performance through the sequential mechanism of quality assurance and organizational commitment. Combined with the non-significant direct effect of TL on OP (H1), these results indicate full mediation, underscoring the critical role of institutional processes and human capital engagement as complementary pathways to sustainable performance.

Table 7: Indirect Effects - Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	β	t-value	p-value	CI 2.5%	CI 97.5%	Decision
H5	TL → QA → OC	0.442	12.165	<0.001	0.325	0.441	Accepted
H6	QA → OC → OP	0.362	8.713	<0.001	0.288	0.407	Accepted
H7	TL → QA → OC → OP	0.244	7.898	<0.001	0.171	0.261	Accepted

2. Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust empirical support for the proposed sequential mediation model, demonstrating that transformational leadership enhances

organizational performance in Indonesian higher education institutions primarily through quality assurance and organizational commitment as sequential mediators. These results carry significant theoretical and practical implications, and are discussed below in relation to the research hypotheses established in the introduction.

The Resource-Based View (RBV) posits that sustainable competitive advantage stems from valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable organizational capabilities (Anglani et al., 2023). The strong direct effect of TL on QA ($\beta = 0.672$, $f^2 = 0.629$) aligns with this proposition, demonstrating that transformational leaders through their capacity to inspire shared vision, stimulate intellectual engagement, and model continuous improvement are uniquely positioned to institutionalize quality cultures within their organizations in the Indonesian higher education context, this finding is particularly meaningful: the SPMI framework mandates quality assurance processes across all accredited institutions, yet their effectiveness varies considerably depending on leadership commitment and capacity(Adeoye et al., 2025; Berlanga-Fernández et al., 2025; Görgens-Ekermans & Roux, 2021). Transformational leaders who communicate clear quality standards and empower quality unit staff appear to convert regulatory compliance into genuine organizational capability. This is consistent with Nguyen et al., (2023), who found that managerial systems like QA serve as vital organizational capabilities supporting sustainable advantage, but only when driven by strategic leadership intent.

However, the non-significant direct effect of TL on OP (H1: $\beta = 0.082$, $p = 0.225$) contrasts with studies conducted in more autonomous organizational settings, where transformational leaders demonstrated direct performance effects(Dobija et al., 2023; Zahari et al., 2024). This divergence may reflect the highly bureaucratic and compliance-oriented structure of Indonesian higher education governance, where leadership discretion is constrained by regulatory frameworks and accreditation requirements(Kachkar & Yilmaz, 2023; Moslimany et al., 2024). In such environments, leadership vision alone is insufficient to drive performance improvements without being operationalized through institutional processes such as QA a finding that strengthens the theoretical case for full sequential mediation in regulated institutional contexts.

The significant effect of QA on OC ($\beta = 0.658$, $f^2 = 0.616$) extends the existing literature by demonstrating that quality assurance systems are not merely administrative mechanisms but active drivers of affective commitment among academic and administrative staff. This finding resonates with Social Exchange Theory Ho et al., (2024), when staff perceive that their institution invests in clear, fair, and improvement-oriented quality processes, they reciprocate with stronger emotional attachment and loyalty. Frick et al., (2021), similarly observed that participatory QA systems generate ownership among faculty and staff, strengthening affective commitment. For Indonesian

universities, where QA is frequently perceived as an administrative burden imposed by BAN-PT accreditation requirements rather than a genuine improvement tool Famularsih et al., (2022), this study suggests that when SPMI is implemented as an empowering and transparent process driven by transformational leaders it transitions from a compliance exercise into a strategic human capital investment.

This finding does, however, contrast with the concern raised by Mulla & Krishnan, (2022), that compliance-driven QA systems may alienate rather than engage staff. The positive QA–OC relationship found in this study suggests that the sampled institutions have progressed beyond mere regulatory compliance, reflecting a more mature SPMI implementation culture that actively involves academic and administrative stakeholders in quality improvement processes. Future research should examine the specific design features of QA systems that distinguish compliance-oriented from commitment-generating implementations.

The direct effect of OC on OP ($\beta = 0.551$, $f^2 = 0.413$) confirms that organizational commitment remains a powerful antecedent of institutional performance, consistent with Meyer et al., (2018) and more recent findings by Chang et al., (2019). The large effect size underscores that commitment is not merely a peripheral outcome variable but a central performance driver warranting deliberate managerial attention. In the Indonesian university context, committed lecturers are more likely to engage in research innovation, curriculum development, and mentoring beyond formal role requirements, while committed administrative staff tend to improve student service quality and operational efficiency both of which compound into measurable improvements across academic, operational, and reputational performance dimensions.

The confirmation of the full sequential mediation pathway (H7: TL → QA → OC → OP; $\beta = 0.244$, CI [0.171, 0.261]) represents the most theoretically significant contribution of this study. No prior research has integrated these three constructs into a single empirically tested sequential model within Indonesian HEIs. This finding suggests that transformational leadership exerts its most powerful influence on performance not through direct inspiration alone, but through a structured institutional pathway: leaders who build robust quality assurance systems create conditions that foster staff commitment, which in turn drives organizational performance. This mechanism aligns with Harmathilda et al., (2024) argument that sustainable performance in HEIs requires the alignment of leadership vision, institutional processes, and human capital engagement a combination this study now quantifies empirically for the Indonesian context.

These findings offer several actionable recommendations for university leaders and policymakers in Indonesia. First, institutional investment in transformational leadership development programs particularly for rectors, deans, and program heads

should be prioritized, as leadership quality demonstrably cascades through quality systems and commitment into institutional performance. Training programs should specifically target the four TL dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Second, SPMI implementation should be redesigned to emphasize participatory quality processes rather than compliance-oriented audits, as staff engagement in quality improvement is a key driver of affective commitment. Third, human resource policies that foster organizational commitment including career development pathways, recognition systems, and transparent communication should be aligned with institutional quality strategies to maximize performance outcomes. Fourth, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) should consider incorporating leadership effectiveness assessments alongside QA compliance reviews in the BAN-PT accreditation framework.

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal data would be needed to confirm the directionality of the proposed relationships over time. Second, the use of self-reported Likert-scale measures for all constructs introduces the possibility of common method bias, although procedural and statistical controls were applied. Third, the sampling frame was limited to BAN-PT A/Excellent accredited institutions, which may limit the generalizability of findings to lower-accredited or newly established universities in Indonesia. Fourth, while the model explains 46.1% of variance in OP, a substantial portion remains unexplained, suggesting that additional constructs such as digital leadership, institutional culture, or government policy alignment may further enrich the model. Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal or mixed-method designs, expanding the sampling frame to include diverse accreditation levels, and exploring additional mediating or moderating variables that may boundary-condition the TL–QA–OC–OP relationships in Indonesian and broader Southeast Asian higher education contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study provides robust empirical evidence that transformational leadership (TL) enhances organizational performance (OP) in Indonesian higher education institutions through a sequential mediation pathway involving quality assurance (QA) and organizational commitment (OC). The non-significant direct effect of TL on OP ($\beta = 0.082$, $p = 0.225$), combined with the significant sequential indirect effect ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$; CI [0.171, 0.261]), confirms full mediation, demonstrating that leadership effectiveness in this context is contingent upon its institutionalization through structural and psychological mechanisms.

Specifically, transformational leaders drive performance by first building robust quality assurance systems (TL → QA: $\beta = 0.672$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn cultivate staff affective commitment (QA → OC: $\beta = 0.658$, $p < 0.001$), ultimately translating into superior organizational outcomes (OC → OP: $\beta = 0.551$, $p < 0.001$). Grounded in the Resource-Based View and Social Exchange Theory, these findings position TL and QA as strategic organizational resources, while OC serves as the psychological mechanism through which empowered employees reciprocate institutional support with heightened dedication and performance-oriented behavior.

This study contributes theoretically by integrating RBV and SET into a unified sequential mediation framework the first of its kind to be empirically tested within Indonesian higher education. Practically, the findings underscore the need for university leaders and policymakers to invest in transformational leadership development, redesign SPMI implementation toward participatory quality cultures, and align human resource strategies with institutional quality objectives to achieve sustainable competitive advantage in an increasingly demanding educational landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to all participating universities, academic staff, and administrative personnel across public and private higher education institutions in Indonesia for their invaluable contributions to this research. Special appreciation is extended to the Quality Assurance Units (SPMI) and institutional leaders who facilitated the data collection process. The authors also thank the expert panel members who provided constructive feedback during the instrument validation and content validity assessment stages. Finally, the authors acknowledge the support of all parties who contributed to the completion of this research.

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