



The Relationship Between Instructional Leadership and Student Learning Outcomes

A Case of Two Universities in the Eastern Cape

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between instructional leadership and student learning outcomes at two selected universities in the Eastern Cape, employing a mixed-methods research design. It examined how instructional leadership practices impact academic success and student experiences. A convergent parallel design combined qualitative (interviews, observations, document analysis) and quantitative data (student performance records, course evaluations, and questionnaires for lecturers and students). The research targeted four local universities, selecting two intentionally, with qualitative participants including two deans, two department heads, five senior lecturers, one curriculum coordinator, and ten students. The quantitative sample consisted of 120 students and 35 lecturers, selected using convenience sampling. Grounded in Hallinger and Murphy's Instructional Leadership Model and Spillane's Distributed Leadership Theory, findings indicated varying implementations of instructional leadership, inconsistent curriculum alignment, and a significant link between leadership practices and academic achievement. The results emphasise the importance of instructional leadership in enhancing educational quality, with recommendations for university-wide leadership standards, mentoring frameworks, collaborative curriculum design, and formal student feedback mechanisms.

Keywords

instructional leadership, student learning outcomes, higher education, academic performance, university leadership, Eastern Cape

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigated the relationship between instructional leadership and student learning outcomes at two selected universities in the Eastern Cape. In the ever-evolving world of higher education, measuring the quality of student learning outcomes has become a crucial indicator of an institution's effectiveness (Ayadat, Ahmed, Chowdhury, and Asiz, 2020). There is a growing expectation for universities to demonstrate how leadership contributes to academic success. While instructional leadership has traditionally been associated with primary and secondary education, it is gaining significance in higher education settings due to its focus on enhancing teaching practices and fostering academic excellence (Apkarian and Rasmussen, 2021).

Globally, instructional leadership pertains to the measures and choices taken by academic leaders, including department heads, deans, and program coordinators, which influence curriculum implementation, the standard of assessments, and the development of faculty (Leal Filho, Eustachio, Caldana, Will, Lange Salvia, Rampasso, Anholon, Platje and Kovaleva, 2020). Pietsch, Aydin, and Gümüş (2023) carried out a meta-analysis using data from 75 countries, revealing that while the impact of instructional leadership on student performance varied, it was notably stronger in nations with high human development indicators.

Regionally, Kunwar, Shrestha, Poudel, and Phuyel (2023) discovered that instructional leadership activities, such as curriculum coordination, staff development, and monitoring, positively influenced the self-efficacy of academic staff, a crucial factor in achieving student success. However, despite these encouraging findings, much of the regional literature tends to focus on basic education or institutional management rather than examining the specific instructional leadership practices that directly impact student learning in universities.

In South Africa, Taylor and Durholz (2024) examined how students view academic leaders at a university. The findings showed that leadership approaches emphasizing student participation, consistent communication, and academic assistance significantly influence how students perceive their achievements. Hompashe (2024) argued that academic leaders in higher education, including department chairs and deans, could improve student learning results by engaging in purposeful instructional leadership strategies.

Ayanda and Yaw (2025) demonstrated that effective instructional leadership in Eastern Cape schools has the potential to enhance student performance by fostering a supportive learning environment. Dumisani Hompashe (2019) found that strong instructional leadership, particularly in terms of curriculum management and teacher support, was significantly linked to improved student achievement. Although his study primarily concentrated on school environments, the findings are highly relevant to higher education, suggesting that university leaders who actively shape instructional practices and cultivate supportive academic environments can enhance student performance.

There is a significant lack of empirical studies on the impact of instructional leadership practices on student learning outcomes in South African universities, particularly within the Eastern Cape region (Muthumuni, 2023). This absence hinders universities from formulating effective strategies aimed at enhancing teaching quality and leadership. In the absence of such research, academic leaders struggle to make data-informed decisions regarding curriculum alignment and student engagement, which can lead to stagnation or decline in student outcomes and exacerbate educational inequalities. Additionally, empirical studies on higher education within Africa are still quite limited (Lebeau and Oanda, 2020).

This paper aims to address the gap by exploring the relationship between instructional leadership and student learning outcomes at one university in the Eastern Cape. The primary research question guiding this study is:

What is the relationship between instructional leadership practices and student learning outcomes in this university context? The study aims to;

1. To what extent is instructional leadership applied at the university?
2. How does instructional leadership influence student learning outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical literature

This paper draws on the Instructional Leadership Model developed by Hallinger and Murphy in 1985, focusing on the principal's responsibility for improving teaching and learning by setting clear academic objectives and providing instructional guidance. It comprises three primary aspects: establishing the institutional mission, overseeing the instructional program, and promoting a nurturing academic atmosphere. In higher education, these dimensions are reflected in academic planning, curriculum leadership, faculty support, and student engagement. Additionally, Spillane's theory of distributed leadership (2001) suggests that leadership responsibilities are shared among multiple individuals, emphasising collaboration and the roles of both formal and informal leaders. This approach enhances organisational capacity by empowering individuals to engage in decision-making. Both theories are important to the study because they offer perspectives on how instructional leadership and student learning outcomes are connected through the distribution of responsibilities.

Empirical literature

Despite an increasing acknowledgement of the essential part that instructional leadership plays in improving teaching effectiveness and student achievement, many higher education institutions still face inconsistent student outcomes (Sipahioglu, 2025). At universities in the Eastern Cape, challenges such as varied teaching strategies, inadequate support for instructors, and insufficient oversight of instructional practices raise concerns regarding the current leadership's impact on academic success. Despite extensive research on instructional leadership in primary and secondary schools, a noticeable gap remains in empirical studies exploring its implementation in higher education, particularly within the distinct setting of the Eastern Cape (Esen, Bellibas, & Gumus, 2020). This absence of evidence restricts the institution's ability to enhance leadership practices that promote improved learning.

The goal of this study is to investigate the impact of instructional leadership on student success at a university in the Eastern Cape, as well as its effects on the quality of teaching and student achievement.

This literature will be examined at the international, regional, national, and local levels, according to themes derived from the research questions.

Evaluate the extent to which instructional leadership is applied at the university

This research examined how instructional leadership practices were applied at the university and their impact on the effectiveness of teaching and student results. Instructional leadership involves actions that improve teaching and learning, such as setting academic goals, supporting educators, monitoring instruction quality, and fostering a positive learning environment (He, Guo & Abazie, 2024).

In China, educational leaders, such as deans, inspire lecturers by offering clear direction, which subsequently enhances students' learning capabilities and academic performance (Kenayathulla & Hoque, 2025). This philosophy also suggests that this type of leadership impacts academic success in various ways, including fostering a supportive learning environment, enhancing student engagement, and promoting self-directed learning.

In Germany, leaders in education, academic departments, and institutional organisations collaborate to enhance the quality of teaching, strengthen curriculum development, support the professional growth of educators, and improve student learning within a decentralised governance framework (Wilkesmann & Lauer, 2020).

Gläser-Zikuda, Zhang, Hofmann, Plöbl, Pösse & Artmann (2024) noted that instructional leadership at German universities is largely theoretical due to a lack of empirical research. However, the authors emphasised that effective instructional leadership must create an environment that supports profound learning by facilitating teachers' professional development and encouraging reflective practices, which, in turn, can lead to improved student learning outcomes, even in higher education settings.

In Botswana, a notable link exists between instructional leadership and student learning outcomes, as it plays a crucial role in developing effective teaching methods and curricula, while also fostering a strong commitment to high-quality education (International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association, 2020). Research in Mozambique indicates that while some universities lack clear policies on instructional leadership, others have statements in place but demonstrate little evidence of actual implementation (Bush et al., 2022). This reflects a challenge that African universities encounter in effectively implementing instructional leadership, as noted by LeBeau and Oanda.

In South Africa, Kele and Mzileni's research has redefined instructional leadership in higher education, emphasising equity as a core principle. This approach moves beyond traditional top-down management, focusing on the diverse needs of students and ensuring that educational opportunities are accessible. Their research underscores the pivotal role of instructional leaders in shaping teaching practices and cultivating an environment that promotes innovation and creativity among both educators and students. In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of adaptive leadership is underscored, as it plays a crucial role in addressing challenges and reshaping educational approaches. Ultimately, Kele and Mzileni advocate for an instructional leadership model that emphasises equity, active engagement in pedagogy, and institutional creativity, all aimed at enhancing educational experiences and outcomes for every student.

Locally, Ndebele, Marongwe, Ncanywa, Matope, Ginyigazi, Chisango, Msindwana & Garidzirai (2024) positioned instructional leadership as the strategic ability of universities to revolutionise teacher education by going beyond traditional training frameworks, incorporating contemporary pedagogy and digital tools, and establishing holistic support systems. This strategy seeks to equip pre-service teachers who are not only academically skilled but also emotionally resilient and prepared for the classroom.

Instructional leadership influence on student learning outcomes

Highfield and Rubie-Davies (2022) underscored the importance of maintaining high expectations for teachers as a vital component of instructional leadership that influences student success, using the Pygmalion effect to show how leaders' behaviours impact performance. In the UK, Littlejohn (2023) noted that university leaders who integrate digital competencies and professional development into their teaching practices enhance student involvement and academic results. In Austria, Schratz (2022) advocated for "Leadership for Learning" initiatives, showing that fostering leadership within European universities leads to improved systemic learning outcomes across multiple disciplines. Highfield and Rubie-Davies & Littlejohn present contrasting views on instructional leadership, with Littlejohn emphasising the significance of teacher development as a crucial element in achieving student success.

In Zimbabwe, Guvhu, Matope, Zishiri, and Mugodzwa (2025) argued that leadership that embraces emerging technologies such as AI and digital platforms can significantly enhance the quality of education and foster human capital development. These researchers also argued that such leadership-driven initiatives improve student engagement and access, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Jhamba and Kajongwe (2024) found that the flexibility of leadership, particularly in managing online and blended teaching approaches, enhances both instructional effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

Higher education institutions in Ghana that implemented learning management systems and digital tools under effective leadership observed improved student engagement and academic success throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Alhassan and Alhassan, 2022). Leadership within institutions is crucial for nurturing an academic culture, promoting professional growth, and encouraging systematic innovation (Puplampu, Nkomo, Du Plessis, Kabagabe, Garwe, Namada, Ogunyemi, Thondhlana, Abdul-Nasiru, Agina, and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2022). These efforts underscore the strategic importance of leadership in creating learning environments that foster student success.

Mushi and Ye (2021) found a significant link between instructional leadership practices, including goal setting and collaborative teaching, and the enhancement of 21st-century skills among undergraduate students in Tanzania. Their quantitative research demonstrated that instructional leadership has a significant impact on both teacher effectiveness and student academic achievement.

On a national level, Venter, du Plessis, and Stander (2024) discovered that when senior academic leaders exhibited supportive, inclusive, and collaborative behaviours, there was a notable enhancement in both the quality of teaching and institutional outcomes. Their study highlighted the importance of psychological safety, compassionate leadership, and active engagement as essential elements of effective instructional leadership.

Samodien, Du Plessis, and Van Vuuren (2024) emphasized that in the context of universities, transformational and agile leadership approaches are closely associated with enhanced teaching innovation, improved staff motivation, and superior academic results for students.

Matope, Ginyigazi, Chisango, Msindwana, Garidzirai, Marongwe, Ncanywa, and Ndebele (2024) recommended reforms for teacher education, stressing effective leadership and the use of modern teaching strategies, digital tools, and emotional support. This strategy equips pre-service teachers to be more resilient and prepared for the classroom, ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes. In addition, Ayanda and Yaw (2025) pointed out that effective instructional leadership at the school level, characterised by a nurturing environment, a clear vision, and strategies focused on learners, leads to measurable improvements in academic performance—insights that are equally relevant to universities.

In summary, instructional leadership is recognised as crucial for enhancing teaching quality, institutional culture, and student outcomes in higher education; however, its implementation varies across different contexts. Nations such as China, Germany, and New Zealand demonstrate effective and collaborative approaches, while many universities in Africa encounter difficulties due to inadequate policies, inconsistent implementation, and limited resources that hinder the full development of instructional leadership. As a result, this study aims to address the issue of inconsistent application of instructional leadership in universities across South Africa.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework employed in this research connects leadership actions, such as defining academic objectives, fostering faculty development, and assessing instructional quality, with quantifiable student learning outcomes, including academic performance, graduation rates, and student satisfaction. This framework serves as a guide for examining how leadership behaviours influence the teaching and learning environment. Instructional leadership refers to a concept within educational administration that emphasises the responsibility of school or academic leaders in actively enhancing teaching and learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A convergent parallel design with a mixed-methods strategy was utilised. Qualitative and quantitative information were collected simultaneously, assessed separately, and then integrated during the interpretation stage. This method was chosen because it fosters a more comprehensive understanding of instructional leadership by combining individual experiences with measurable academic data. The pragmatist paradigm was employed.

Population and sampling

The study was conducted in four universities in the Eastern Cape.

Qualitative sample: Purposive sampling was employed, comprising two deans, two department heads, five senior lecturers, one curriculum coordinator, and ten students. All these participants are directly involved with instructional leadership.

Quantitative Sampling: Convenience sampling was employed, involving the selection of 35 lecturers and 120 students. The samples were sufficient for conducting both descriptive and correlational analyses.

Data gathering tools

Qualitative method

The qualitative component of the study included conducting semi-structured interviews with leaders, instructors, and students, as well as observations in classrooms and departments that focused on leadership practices. Furthermore, an analysis of documents was performed on curriculum materials, policy guidelines, and evaluation reports to offer additional insights and cross-verify the data.

Observation: The researcher received consent from participants to conduct the observation. It was noted that lecturers displayed varying levels of preparation and clarity in instructional goals, with some utilising effective teaching methods while others were inconsistent. Certain lecturers engaged students in activities such as discussions and problem-solving, rather than simply lecturing to them. Student engagement ranged from active participation to minimal involvement, and departmental support was limited to informal walkthroughs and brief feedback. Students showed strong instructional leadership by tracking attendance and informing teachers about the difficulties their classmates encountered. The availability of resources in classrooms differed, which influenced the learning environment; however, one university featured well-appointed lecture halls equipped with screens for presentations. Overall, the observations highlighted the influence of instructional leadership on teaching and learning experiences.

Observation analysis: The assessment of the observation began with organising all field notes and reflection comments. These documents were reviewed several times to achieve a better understanding of the context and to recognise initial concepts. The data were subsequently categorised by tagging significant behaviours, interactions, and leadership practices that were observed. Related codes were then consolidated into larger themes, including teaching methods, student involvement, leadership encouragement, and departmental culture.

Semi-structured interviews: The questions in the interviews were designed to gather information about instructional leadership and its impact on student learning. The interviews were held either in person or online, depending on what

worked best for the participants, and were subsequently recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify common themes related to leadership practices and their impact on learning outcomes. Document analysis involved reviewing academic reports, program evaluations, and internal communications pertaining to teaching practices.

Document Analysis: Insights into leadership practices in South African Higher Education. This paper examines the preliminary investigation of the research by analysing the ways in which instructional leadership is applied in institutions of higher education. It can be acquired from *the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology* (2024). Samodien, du Plessis, and van Vuuren (2024) stated that various leadership styles, including transformational, transactional, and agile, have a positive impact on institutional performance, with transformational and agile leadership having the strongest ties to improved outcomes. Two universities visited have been found to have this document. However, it was only partially implemented, as the participants expressed that their extensive administrative duties leave them with little time for instructional leadership.

Quantitative Method

Structured interviews were conducted to assess perceived instructional leadership, teaching effectiveness, and student engagement with structured questionnaires. In addition, student course evaluation surveys were gathered and standardised for reliability, resulting in consistent data that improved the analysis of instructional practices and educational outcomes. Descriptive statistics, such as means and frequencies, were utilised to summarise the quantitative data, while inferential tests examined the relationships between indicators of instructional leadership and academic results. The dependability of the measurement tools was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values of $\alpha > 0.70$ considered acceptable. To synthesise the findings, data from both qualitative and quantitative components were compared using joint displays to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and complementarity, thereby strengthening the validity of the study.

Ethical Clearance

The researcher received ethical clearance to proceed, with permission from the Department of Higher Education and Training to carry out a study at two selected universities. The deans of the Faculty of Education granted permission for the research to be carried out within their institutions. Participants provided their consent, confidentiality was maintained, and their privacy was prioritised, ensuring their rights and dignity were protected through ethical approval. To ensure trustworthiness, the study used strategies such as member checking for participant verification, data triangulation for credibility, a detailed audit trail for reliability, and contextual descriptions to support the transfer of findings to similar higher-education settings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section examined the application of instructional leadership at various levels within the university. It encompassed the perspectives of various stakeholders, including deans, department chairs, faculty members, and students, to understand the degree and consistency of its application. While instructional leadership is acknowledged as a crucial strategic priority, its actual implementation varies greatly across departments and roles. The results indicate both the presence of supportive measures and the challenges that hinder effective instructional leadership, such as conflicting administrative duties and uneven support for teaching and professional development. These findings provide a basis for understanding how leadership practices influence teaching quality and, ultimately, student learning outcomes.

Qualitative findings

The Extent of Instructional Leadership Application at the University

Participants generally recognised that instructional leadership is present within the university, but its implementation differs significantly among departments and academic positions. This difference is evident in the varying viewpoints of senior leaders and faculty.

As the Dean notes, *"We have prioritised instructional leadership as a key focus area... Departmental head responds, "It faces competition from numerous administrative tasks."*

The Senior Lecturer, *"I don't consistently sense a significant presence of instructional leadership."*

The insights provided by the Dean, Department Head, and Senior Lecturer indicate that while instructional leadership is recognised at a strategic level, its implementation is inconsistent and influenced by various organisational factors.

According to Woelert, Chesters, Martinussen, and Gannaway (2025), bureaucratic obligations hinder academics, reducing the time and effort they can devote to essential tasks such as teaching, curriculum development, and mentoring. These researchers argue that a considerable number of academic workloads is consumed by administrative duties, many of which pertain to compliance, reporting, and institutional processes, thus detracting from activities that directly improve teaching quality and leadership.

Support for Teaching and Professional Development

Feedback from participants suggested that the degree of instructional leadership is closely related to how supported educators feel in their teaching and opportunities for professional growth.

Senior Lecturer: *“The support I receive for enhancing my teaching is quite limited, which indicates that a substantial amount of my professional growth has had to stem from my own efforts.”*

Department Head: *“I strive to support my team's teaching by offering feedback and advice, but the available professional development opportunities are unstructured.”*

Dean: *“The expectation for our team is to engage actively in innovative teaching strategies; however, the framework for the support offered to assist them in developing these skills is not clearly outlined.”*

The participants noted that the institutional backing for teaching and professional growth is minimal, often forcing staff to depend on their own initiative. Although some assistance is provided at the departmental level, the opportunities for professional development are inadequately organised, and institutional support for expectations around innovative teaching is not clearly defined.

Integrating teacher professional development into the evaluation process can facilitate continuous growth for educators (Gast, Neelen, Delnoij, Menten, Mihai & Grohnert, 2022). At the same time, the design of professional development programs for educators needs to consider the potential compromises between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, in relation to improving knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) as well as overall well-being.

Influence of Instructional Leadership on Student Learning Outcomes

Participants frequently recognised that instructional leadership positively influences student learning results by guaranteeing curriculum alignment, consistency, and focus.

The Curriculum Coordinator explains, *“It’s my responsibility to ensure the curriculum matches the desired learning outcomes...”*

The department head notes, *“I strongly advocate for comprehensive enhancements in the curriculum, aiming to integrate more diverse perspectives, current technological advancements, and practical applications of knowledge. This includes incorporating interdisciplinary approaches that foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as updating course content to reflect real-world challenges and innovations. By doing so, we can ensure that students are not only well-prepared for their future careers but also equipped to be informed and engaged citizens in a rapidly changing society.”*

Student’s account: *“Lecturers seem to be more prepared and confident when their teaching is supported by the department.”*

From the viewpoint of a researcher, these findings emphasize the critical importance of instructional leadership in influencing the standard of teaching and learning. When leaders work to harmonise the curriculum and foster the professional development of lecturers, it enhances teaching preparedness and has a positive effect on student experiences and educational results.

Instructional leaders encourage teamwork and develop positive relationships between parents and school staff. (Naz & Rashid, 2021). This process should be started by the university deans and continued by their subordinate departmental leaders.

Impact on Student Learning and Engagement

Individuals consistently associate strong instructional leadership with better learning experiences, increased engagement, and higher academic achievement.

The student remarks, *“When lecturers are adequately prepared... I gain more knowledge.”*

The Senior Lecturer adds, *“That passion results in improved learning experiences for learners.”*

The Dean’s statement, *“We observe enhanced retention and increased performance...”*

Skilled and enthusiastic lecturers significantly enhance student learning and participation, leading to improved retention rates and better academic outcomes. This highlights the significance of instructional leadership in attaining favourable student results.

MacLeod (2020) discovered that effective instructional leadership enhances student learning and engagement by promoting collaboration among teachers, setting elevated academic expectations, and utilizing data to inform instructional enhancements, collectively resulting in more efficient and engaging learning experiences for students.

Quantitative findings

Findings from the study indicated that 68% of students viewed the consistency of the curriculum as “moderate to low,” raising concerns about the alignment and coherence of course materials. Additionally, 57% of lecturers reported receiving insufficient leadership support for teaching innovation, suggesting a lack of guidance and resources to enhance their teaching methods. Nevertheless, 72% of students agreed that the preparedness of lecturers positively affects their learning outcomes, highlighting the crucial role of well-organised and structured teaching in promoting student success.

Student performance data

Departments that demonstrate more efficient instructional leadership exhibit notable improvements in overall student outcomes, including higher course completion rates, improved average assessment scores, and lower dropout rates.

Correctional analysis

The analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.46$) between instructional leadership practices and student performance, indicating that effective leadership is associated with improved student outcomes. A strong correlation ($r = 0.61$) was also identified between perceived leadership support and lecturer effectiveness, suggesting that lecturers who receive support tend to be more effective in their teaching. Furthermore, a positive correlation was found between student engagement and curriculum alignment, which was influenced by leadership ($r = 0.53$), highlighting the significance of unified leadership in enhancing student participation and learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the relationship between instructional leadership and student academic performance at a university located in the Eastern Cape. While instructional leadership is a key focus, its application varies across departments due to administrative challenges and limited support for faculty. Nonetheless, effective instructional leadership, particularly in relation to curriculum alignment and lecturer preparedness, significantly boosts student engagement, performance, and retention. To align policy with practice, universities should enhance leadership practices, support faculty development, and ensure consistent implementation throughout academic divisions.

RECOMMENDATION

- Develop comprehensive university-wide standards and expectations for instructional leadership within all faculties and departments.
- Establish structured mentoring and peer-observation programs aimed at enhancing teaching quality.
- Foster collaborative curriculum planning that ensures coherence between course content, assessments, and learning outcomes.
- Implement formal mechanisms (such as surveys and focus groups) for students to provide feedback on their teaching and learning experiences.

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