Servant Leadership in Malaysian Higher Education: A Post-2020 Empirical Review of Faculty Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Servant leadership has gained prominence as an ethically grounded and people-centred leadership style in higher education. This paper reviews empirical studies published between 2020 and 2023 to examine how servant leadership has been conceptualised and applied in Malaysian higher education institutions. The review focuses on updated theoretical models, validated measurement approaches, and the effects of servant leadership on key faculty outcomes in the post-pandemic context. A structured search of Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar was conducted using keywords related to servant leadership, higher education, Malaysia, and faculty outcomes. Inclusion criteria restricted the review to peer-reviewed, empirical studies within higher education, while conceptual papers and non-academic contexts were excluded. Following screening and eligibility checks, eight empirical studies were included in the synthesis. Findings demonstrate that servant leadership fosters faculty work engagement, affective commitment, job performance, innovation, and overall well-being. These outcomes are primarily explained through mediating mechanisms such as trust, leader–member exchange, job satisfaction, psychological climate, and career satisfaction. A multilevel validation of the Servant Leadership Scale (SL-28) refined the model for Malaysian academia, while longitudinal research confirmed the resilience and stability of servant leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The review concludes that servant leadership is both culturally congruent and practically effective in Malaysia's high power-distance environment, where values of humility, service, and community are central. Implications are discussed for leadership development, institutional practice, and future research, including comparative ASEAN studies, integration with other leadership models, and examination of student outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Servant leadership was developed by Greenleaf (1970), is characterised by an altruistic focus on serving others, putting followers' needs first and nurturing their growth as the primary avenue to influence and lead. In contrast to authoritarian or purely performance-oriented leadership styles, servant leadership emphasises ethical behaviour, community building, and caring support for subordinates. These qualities make servant leadership particularly appealing in academic institutions, where collaboration, intrinsic motivation, and the development of others (students, staff, and the broader community) are central to the mission. Indeed, scholars have argued that given the complex challenges academic leaders face, servant leadership plays a significant role in governance and administration in academic institutions (Dul et al., 2024).

In Malaysia, leadership in higher education is the national initiative. The Malaysian Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT) was established in 2008 to strengthen university leadership and inculcate *soul-driven* leadership practices aligned with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025. Amid ongoing challenges such as managing staff, finances, and performance pressures in public universities, servant leadership with its ethical, people-centred approach is an appropriate leadership choice for academic institutions (Dul et al., 2024). This study aims to deeply examine how servant leadership has been empirically applied and studied in Malaysian higher education since 2020, a period that has seen both a surge in research interest and unprecedented external shocks (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic) impacting the sector. Despite initiatives such as AKEPT and the Malaysia Education Blueprint, leadership research in Malaysian HEIs has not sufficiently examined servant leadership's alignment with faculty well-being and institutional outcomes in the post-pandemic context. This review addresses this gap by synthesizing empirical studies (2020–2023) on servant leadership in Malaysian higher education.

Key objectives of this review include: (1) evaluating updated models and measures of servant leadership in academia, including the validation of the Servant Leadership 28 scale (SL-28) and any refinements; (2) assessing quantitative findings on the impact of servant leadership on faculty outcomes such as work engagement, job performance, affective organisational commitment, and innovative behavior; (3) identifying mediation and moderation mechanisms (such as trust in leadership, leader–member exchange, and organisational climate) that explain or condition these effects; (4) highlighting multilevel and longitudinal studies that provide robust evidence over time and across organisational levels; and (5) interpreting these findings in light of Malaysian cultural and institutional contexts. In doing so, we integrate results from recent studies across Malaysia and comparable settings (e.g. other Asian higher education contexts) to provide a comprehensive, up-to-date understanding of servant leadership's role in Malaysian higher education.

Review Methodology

This paper adopted a structured review approach to identify, select, and synthesise empirical studies on servant leadership in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) published between 2020 and 2023. Although not a full systematic literature review (SLR), the process applied transparent steps to ensure credibility, replicability, and alignment with established review practices in educational and leadership research.

Search Strategy

The search was conducted across three major academic databases: **Scopus**, **Web of Science (WoS)**, and **Google Scholar**. These databases were chosen to capture both high-impact international publications and regionally indexed journals where Malaysian scholarship is often published. The search terms used in combination included:

- *"servant leadership"*
- *"higher education"*
- *"Malaysia"*
- *"faculty outcomes"*, *"academic staff"*, *"university leadership"*

Boolean operators and truncations were applied (e.g., "servant leadership" AND "higher education" AND "Malaysia") to maximise retrieval. The search was limited to publications between **January 2020 and December 2023** to reflect the post-pandemic context and the surge of empirical leadership studies during this period.

Inclusion Criteria

To ensure focus and quality, the following **inclusion criteria** were applied:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles.
2. Empirical studies employing quantitative or mixed-method approaches.
3. Research conducted in higher education contexts, specifically involving academic staff or university leadership.
4. Studies explicitly examining servant leadership as a primary variable.

Exclusion criteria were:

1. Conceptual or purely theoretical papers without empirical data.
2. Studies focusing on non-academic settings (e.g., corporate, healthcare, or school leadership).
3. Publications prior to 2020.
4. Non-peer-reviewed sources such as conference proceedings, dissertations, or grey literature.

Screening and Selection Process

The initial search generated **38 records** across the three databases. After removing duplicates, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance. At this stage, conceptual articles and those outside higher education were excluded. The remaining full texts were assessed against the inclusion/exclusion criteria. This process resulted in a final sample of **8 empirical studies**, which are presented in Table 2 of this paper.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

For each study, the following data were extracted:

- Author(s) and year of publication.
- Context (country, type of HEI).

- Sample size and population (e.g., lecturers, departments).
- Research design (cross-sectional, longitudinal, multilevel, structural equation modelling).
- Key servant leadership dimensions measured (e.g., SL-28 scale, refined models).
- Outcomes examined (engagement, commitment, job satisfaction, innovation, performance, life satisfaction).
- Mediating or moderating mechanisms tested.

The synthesis followed an **integrative approach**: findings were grouped according to major faculty outcomes (engagement, commitment, performance, innovation, well-being) and analysed for convergence, divergence, and methodological rigour. Mediators and moderators were summarised in a dedicated table to reduce redundancy and highlight key mechanisms.

Author Positionality

As scholars and practitioners within Malaysian higher education, we acknowledge our interpretive stance in conducting this review. While efforts were made to ensure objectivity through explicit inclusion criteria and multi-database searching, our positionality provides contextual insight into the cultural and institutional realities of Malaysian academia. This positionality shapes the interpretation of findings, particularly regarding the cultural compatibility of servant leadership in a high power-distance society.

Limitations of the Review Method

While structured, this review is not exhaustive. It does not claim to include all global studies on servant leadership in higher education, but rather focuses on Malaysia and comparable Asian contexts. The restriction to post-2020 studies was deliberate to capture contemporary, post-pandemic evidence, but it may exclude earlier foundational works. Future research could employ a full systematic review protocol (e.g., PRISMA) or bibliometric analysis to expand coverage and assess trends over a longer timeframe.

Servant Leadership in Higher Education: Concept and Measurement

Conceptual Foundations: Servant leadership is rooted in the leader's *choice to serve first*, placing the well-being and development of followers above self-interest. This philosophy resonates strongly in educational environments, where leaders (e.g. department heads, deans) are the mentors for the faculty, foster a collegial climate, and contribute to the broader community. In addition, academic servant leaders strive to cultivate a "sense of community" on campus by reducing conflicts and modelling ethical, caring behaviour. Research indicates that such leaders can boost followers' loyalty and engagement, resulting in advantageous outcomes for organisations. By prioritising service over authority, servant leadership provides an alternative to traditional top-down leadership, aligning with calls for more participative and ethical governance in universities.

SL-28 Scale and Updated Models: A widely used instrument to measure servant leadership is the SL-28, a 28-item scale developed by Liden et al. (2008) that captures seven key dimensions of servant leadership. The SL-28 has been validated in various contexts and is noted for its strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.82$) in prior studies.

These dimensions are:

Table 1: The dimensions of servant leadership

Conceptual Skills	leader's competence in solving work problems and understanding the organisation
Empowering	enabling and encouraging subordinates to develop and excel
Helping Subordinates Grow and Succeed	mentoring and supporting others' career development
Putting Subordinates First	prioritising followers' needs above the leader's own
Behaving Ethically	demonstrating integrity and honesty
Emotional Healing	showing sensitivity and empathy to others' setbacks
Creating Value for the Community	encouraging the organisation and its members to contribute to society

However, recent research in Malaysian higher education suggests that this seven-factor model may require refinement in academic settings. Table 1 summarises a multilevel validation study by Ghasemy et al. (2022) alongside other key studies since 2020. They collected data from 1,864 lecturers across 120 departments in Malaysian universities. They conducted a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test whether the SL-28's seven dimensions operate at both individual (lecturer) and group (department) levels. Their findings indicated that *servant leadership in academia is best represented by a single-level, second-order model with five factors*, rather than the hypothesised initially hierarchical seven-factor model. In this Malaysian sample, two dimensions: Emotional Healing and Putting Subordinates First did not emerge as distinct factors, suggesting these attributes might be less differentiated or emphasised by academics. The remaining five dimensions (Conceptual Skills, Empowering, Helping Subordinates Grow, Behaving Ethically, and Creating Value for the Community) adequately captured the servant leadership construct among faculty. This result provides an updated model (5-factor SL) tailored to the academic context and underscores the importance of validating leadership scales within specific cultural and institutional settings. In Malaysian academia, acts of empathy or self-sacrifice may be interpreted as part of other dimensions (e.g. ethical behaviour or general support) rather than standalone factors, a point that future scale developers should note.

Multilevel Considerations: Ghasemy et al. (2022) also anticipated a multilevel structure (i.e., servant leadership behaviours would manifest at the individual lecturer level and as an aggregate department-level leadership climate). Contrary to expectation, their data did not support a distinct department-level servant leadership factor. In this context, the best-fitting model treated servant leadership is a primarily individual-level construct . It suggests that servant leadership may experience more as a personal leadership style of individual academics rather than a uniform departmental culture in Malaysian universities (perhaps due to variability in leadership behaviours even within the same department). It also highlights the need for caution when applying multilevel analytic approaches in higher education research: while many organisations exhibit clear nested leadership structures, academic departments might be more loosely coupled in leadership perceptions. Thus, further research could explore under what conditions a shared servant leadership climate emerges (for example, perhaps in smaller academic units or where a strong institutional ethos of service exists).

Table 2: Recent Empirical Studies on Servant Leadership in Higher Education (2020–2023)

Rank	Context & Methodology	Key Findings
Ghasemy et al. (2022a) *"Academics to Serve the Communities"*	Malaysia – $N = 1,864$ lecturers (120 clusters); multilevel CFA (EQS).	Validated a refined servant leadership model for academia. The original SL-28 seven-factor model did not fully hold; a single-level second-order model with 5 factors fit best. *Emotional Healing* and *Putting Subordinates First* were not supported as distinct factors. No significance between-department variance in servant leadership was found (servant leadership operates mainly at the individual level in this sample).
Ghasemy & Frömbling (2022b) *"Servant Leadership & Affective Commitment during Covid-19"*	Malaysia – $N = 220$ academics; three-wave longitudinal survey (Apr–Aug 2020); latent growth curve modelling.	Servant leadership behaviour remained stable during the COVID-19 lockdown and positively influenced affective commitment and job performance over time. *Affective commitment* partially mediated the effect of servant leadership on job performance. Additionally, older academics exhibited higher initial servant leadership, and senior academic rank was associated with higher initial commitment levels. This rigorous longitudinal evidence demonstrates causal directions: servant leadership *drives* commitment and performance, even amid crisis conditions.
Aboramadan et al. (2020) *"Servant Leadership and Academics' Outcomes"*	Palestinian HEIs – $N = 212$ academics (survey); cross-sectional SEM (AMOS).	Servant leadership was positively related to faculty affective commitment (direct effect) and to work engagement (indirectly). Notably, *job satisfaction* fully mediated the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement and partially mediated that between servant leadership and affective commitment. In turn, higher engagement and commitment translated into improved academic job performance. This study underscores job satisfaction as a critical mechanism linking servant leadership to enthusiastic, committed, and high-performing faculty.
Latif et al. (2021) *"Servant Leadership, Career, and Life Satisfaction"*	Spain, China, Pakistan – $N = 508$ academics (multi-country survey); cross-sectional PLS-SEM.	Across diverse cultural contexts, servant leadership significantly increased academics' career and overall life satisfaction, both in the combined sample and within each country. *Career satisfaction* acted as a mediator: servant leadership improved career satisfaction, boosting life satisfaction. These findings indicate that servant leadership's benefits extend beyond the workplace into general well-being and hold in Western and Asian settings.
Zainab et al. (2022) *"Servant Leadership & Work*	Pakistan – $N = 276$ faculty; cross-sectional survey; PLS-SEM.	Provided evidence that servant leadership is a key leadership style for universities:

Engagement: Mediating Climate"		higher servant leadership was associated with higher faculty work engagement, and this link was significantly mediated by the psychological climate perceived by faculty. In other words, servant leaders foster a positive psychological climate (trust, fairness, support), which energises and engages academic staff.
Dami et al. (2022) *"Servant Leadership and Job Satisfaction: Trust & LMX"*	Indonesia (Christian HEIs) – $N =$ 160 lecturers; cross-sectional survey; PLS-SEM.	Servant leadership significantly affected the quality of trust in leader-member exchange (LMX). In turn, trust and LMX increased lecturers' job satisfaction, each as a complementary mediator of servant leadership's effect on job satisfaction. This suggests that servant leaders build strong, trusting relationships that explain why their followers are more satisfied at work. The authors conclude that trust and high-quality LMX are key channels through which servant leadership enhances academic well-being.
Maalouf (2023) *"Servant Leadership & Innovation in HEIs"*	Middle East (Kuwait) – $N = 208$ university staff; cross-sectional survey; regression & ANOVA.	Servant leadership behaviours were found to play a key role in promoting innovation in higher education institutions. Leaders who acted as role models in service and exhibited high ethical standards had a positive relationship with stakeholders' (e.g. students') satisfaction. Encouragingly, focusing on servant leadership practices can help cultivate an innovative organisational culture in universities. This study is among the first empirical evidence linking servant leadership to institutional innovation outcomes in higher education.

Notes: *SL = servant leadership; SEM = structural equation modelling; PLS = partial least squares; LMX = leader–member exchange.*

Impact of Servant Leadership on Academic Outcomes

Research since 2020 consistently demonstrates that servant leadership positively influences important outcomes for academic staff and institutions. In Malaysian universities and comparable contexts, servant leadership is believed to improve work engagement, job performance, organisational commitment, innovative behaviour, and overall well-being of faculty. These findings are particularly salient as universities strive to enhance faculty motivation, productivity, and adaptability in a rapidly changing higher education landscape.

Work engagement refers to a positive, fulfilling state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption in one's work. Servant leadership has shown a strong association with higher engagement among academic staff. Servant leaders likely inspire engagement by creating supportive climates and showing concern for lecturers' needs. For example, a study in Pakistan's

universities found that servant leadership boosted faculty members' engagement *through* fostering a favourable psychological climate (i.e. a sense of trust, safety, and support in the workplace). When lecturers perceive their leaders as serving and trusting them, they invest more energy and enthusiasm in their work. Similarly, in a multi-country study, servant leadership was indirectly tied to work engagement via job satisfaction. As a result, academics led by servant leaders felt more satisfied in their jobs, which thoroughly explained their higher engagement levels. These mediated relationships highlight that servant leadership may not always impact engagement *directly*; instead, its effect is channelled through creating favourable job attitudes (satisfaction) and environments (climate) conducive to engagement. Nonetheless, the evidence converges that servant-led academic units tend to have more engaged faculty, a key factor linked to better teaching, research, and student outcomes.

Affective Organisational Commitment

Affective commitment describes an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and desire to stay in their organisation. It is a critical outcome in academia, as committed faculty are likelier to go above and beyond in their roles and less likely to leave the institution. In multiple studies, servant leadership is associated with academic affective commitment. Leaders who prioritise staff development and well-being engender stronger loyalty and attachment. Aboramadan et al. (2020) found a positive relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment among university academics.

Additionally, indirect servant leadership was part of this effect, which heightened faculty job satisfaction and fueled greater commitment (partial mediation). It indicates that servant leadership builds commitment through the leader's direct influence (e.g., making academics feel valued) and improving faculty members' satisfaction. Importantly, the longitudinal Malaysian study by Ghasemy and Frömbling (2022) reinforces the causal link: *servant leadership behaviour was shown to drive increases in affective commitment over time*. Even during the stress of the COVID-19 lockdown, academics who exhibited servant leadership tendencies (for example, professors supporting their colleagues and students) maintained and slightly strengthened the commitment of those around them. Thus, servant leadership stands out as a mean to bolster faculty commitment, vital for institutional stability and the nurturing of campus communities.

Job Performance

Institutions measured the ultimate effectiveness of leadership by its impact on followers' performance. In the context of higher education, faculty performance can encompass teaching quality, research productivity, administrative service, and community engagement. Empirical evidence suggests that servant leadership contributes to higher academic job performance, frequently through indirect pathways. Aboramadan et al. (2020) reported that academics under servant leaders performed better in their jobs, an effect mediated by their increased engagement and commitment. Engaged and committed lecturers, fostered by servant leadership, are more proactive, effective, and persistent, thus achieving superior performance evaluations and outcomes.

Furthermore, Ghasemy and Frömbling's (2022) longitudinal analysis provided a robust confirmation: *academics' servant leadership behaviours had a significant positive influence on*

their job performance over four months, as rated through performance indicators, partly through the mechanism of affective commitment. Practically, an academic who consistently practices servant leadership (mentoring junior colleagues, listening to team concerns, acting ethically) nurtures a more committed team and creates conditions that enhance the group's productivity, such as facilitating collaboration or reducing turnover distractions. Over time, these effects accumulate into measurable performance gains. The research thus positions servant leadership as conducive to both the "people" and "task" dimensions of academic work: it drives relational capital (trust, morale) that ultimately translates into better fulfilment of academic responsibilities.

Innovative Behaviour and Institutional Innovation

A newer avenue of servant leadership research in higher education examines its relationship with innovation, both individual innovative work behaviour (IWB) of faculty and the broader innovation culture of institutions. Innovation in academia can mean adopting new pedagogies, engaging in creative research, or developing novel programs and services. Servant leadership's emphasis on empowerment and community building intuitively should support innovation, as leaders empower faculty to experiment and collaborate. Recent findings support this connection. For example, according to Dul et al. (2024), studies focusing on Malaysian higher education argued that servant leadership is among the styles that can foster innovative work behaviour in academicians by providing psychological safety and role-modelling supportive behaviours. Empirical data from Maalouf's (2023) study showed that servant leadership behaviours promote innovation in universities, with leaders' ethical and servant-oriented practices correlating with higher innovation outcomes at the institutional level. Specifically, when university leaders acted as humble stewards, for example, soliciting input ("asking for career goals") and focusing on serving stakeholder needs, their institutions saw improvements in innovative capacities and student satisfaction. Servant leaders create an environment where faculty feel valued and motivated to explore new ideas, knowing their leader "has their back" and values community advancement over personal power.

Additionally, by engaging with the community (one of the servant leadership dimensions), these leaders bring in external perspectives and opportunities for innovation in teaching and research. Although research on servant leadership and innovation in Malaysian universities is still emerging, the early evidence suggests a positive synergy: servant leadership can catalyse creativity and change in higher education, complementing other innovation drivers such as transformational leadership. It has significant implications for Malaysian universities aiming to improve their standing in metrics like the Global Innovation Index. Building a servant-leadership culture might be a viable strategy to encourage faculty-led innovations and interdisciplinary initiatives.

Well-Being and Satisfaction Outcomes

Beyond work-specific outcomes, servant leadership positively influences more general indicators of faculty well-being. For instance, Latif et al. (2021) demonstrated that servant leadership enhanced academics' overall life satisfaction, mainly by increasing their career satisfaction. In that cross-country study, academic staff who perceived higher servant leadership from their superiors felt better about their career progression and work-life, translating into greater life satisfaction. It underscores the humanistic payoff of servant leadership: by caring for

employees as whole persons and supporting their professional growth, servant leaders contribute to followers' happiness and quality of life. Similarly, in the Indonesian context, Dami et al. (2022) found that servant leadership led to higher job satisfaction among lecturers, through the mediating effects of trust and strong leader-member relationships. Trust in leadership, often viewed as a facet of psychological well-being at work, tends to flourish under servant leaders, thereby boosting satisfaction and reducing the stress or uncertainty that faculty might feel under less supportive leadership. Taken together, these studies painted a consistent picture: servant leadership in academia yields more satisfied, fulfilled, and optimistic faculty, which is likely to have secondary benefits such as reduced turnover intentions and a more positive campus climate.

Mediators and Moderators: The Role of Trust, Climate, and Culture

One hallmark of servant leadership research is exploring how and when this leadership style produces its effects. Rather than viewing servant leadership as a magic bullet, recent studies have delved into mediating mechanisms, the intermediate variables influencing outcomes, and moderating factors that might strengthen or weaken its impact. Several mediators have been identified in the context of Malaysian and regional higher education, with trust being especially prominent, and emerging evidence speaks to how servant leadership functions across different cultural settings.

Trust in Leadership and Leader–Member Exchange

Trust is foundational in any leader-follower relationship, but it is particularly central to servant leadership, which relies on credibility and genuine concern. When leaders consistently act in their followers' best interests, followers reciprocate with trust. This trust then enables various positive outcomes. Dami et al. (2022) explicitly tested trust in the leader as a mediator and confirmed that servant leadership increases trust, boosting lecturers' job satisfaction. Alongside trust, they examined leader–member exchange (LMX) and the quality of the working relationship between leader and follower. They found a similar effect: servant leadership fosters high-quality LMX, leading to greater satisfaction. The mediating roles of trust and LMX were "complementary," meaning servant leadership simultaneously builds a trustful environment and strong individual relationships, which translate into more satisfied and possibly more productive faculty. These findings align with social exchange theory: servant leaders create a climate of goodwill and fairness, encouraging faculty to respond with positive attitudes and extra-role behaviours. Trust may also mediate other outcomes; prior research (pre-2020) had shown that trust mediates the effect of servant leadership on organisational commitment, a relationship likely applicable in the Malaysian context. In essence, trust is a key conduit for servant leadership's influence.

Job Satisfaction and Psychological Climate

Several studies highlight that servant leadership indirectly improves followers' job attitudes and perceptions of their work environment. Job satisfaction emerged as an essential mediator in Aboramadan et al.'s (2020) study: servant leadership led to higher job satisfaction among academics, which thoroughly explained the increase in their work engagement and *partially* explained greater commitment. It suggests that servant leaders engage faculty primarily by

making their jobs more satisfying, possibly through recognising accomplishments, reducing unnecessary stress, and aligning work with personal values. A satisfied lecturer is naturally more engaged and loyal. Similarly, psychological climate, a composite of employees' perceptions of support, recognition, and fairness in their immediate work environment, has been shown to mediate servant leadership effects. In the Pakistani faculty study, psychological climate significantly mediated between servant leadership and engagement, indicating that servant leaders shape an encouraging environment (e.g. open communication, shared purpose) that energises employees. These mediators are interrelated with trust: a favourable climate and satisfaction often stem from trust in leadership and feeling valued. Thus, servant leadership first wins the hearts of faculty by creating trust and satisfaction, which drives the desired outcomes. From a practical standpoint, university leaders aiming to improve faculty engagement might focus on servant leadership behaviours, knowing that the payoff comes through improved morale and climate.

Other Mediators - Career Satisfaction and Self-Efficacy

Latif et al. (2021) introduced career satisfaction as a mediator between servant leadership and life satisfaction. Academics under servant leaders felt more content with their career progression and choices, translating to higher satisfaction with life overall. In an academic career, which often has intrinsic rewards beyond just a paycheck, having a leader who mentors and supports one's job can dramatically affect personal fulfilment. Another mediator studied (outside Malaysia but relevant) is innovation self-efficacy, which is the confidence to engage in innovative activities. Servant leadership might bolster a teacher's or researcher's belief in their creative capabilities by providing encouragement and removing fear of failure, thereby indirectly increasing actual innovative behaviour. Though not yet extensively studied in Malaysian Higher Education (henceforth HE), we can extrapolate that servant leaders likely enhance faculty self-efficacy (for teaching, research, etc.), which could mediate outcomes like teaching effectiveness or research performance. In sum, the literature is converging on a mediated model of servant leadership: it influences internal states of followers (trust, satisfaction, efficacy, commitment), which then influence behaviours and performance.

Moderating Factors

Fewer studies have tackled moderators in the servant leadership–outcome relationship in higher education, but cultural context is one implicit moderator worth discussing, especially as we consider Malaysia's artistic milieu. A longstanding question is whether servant leadership "fits" in high power-distance cultures (where hierarchies are accepted and leaders are expected to be authoritative). Malaysia, like many Asian societies, traditionally scores higher on power distance and has paternalistic leadership norms. Some critics have suggested that servant leadership might face resistance or be less effective in such contexts. However, recent evidence suggests otherwise: servant leadership's core principles can transcend cultural differences. A meta-analysis by Lee et al. (2020) found that servant leadership is effective even in high power-distance cultures, though the *expression* of servant leadership may differ slightly. Consistent with this, Dami et al. (2022) reported that power distance and paternalism were not obstacles to servant leadership in Indonesian Christian universities. Their results showed that servant leadership produced positive outcomes despite (or perhaps because of) cultural expectations. However, faculty still responded favourably to leaders who served them, even if the norm was more hierarchical. One interpretation is that in high power-distance settings, followers *appreciate*

servant leadership even more because it is atypical for a servant leader in a culture of authority to stand out as exceptionally respectful and empowering, thus winning trust.

Cultural context might moderate the emphasis on specific servant leadership dimensions. The findings from Malaysia show that emotional healing did not emerge as a distinct factor, which could reflect cultural tendencies that do not openly discuss emotional vulnerabilities at work or an expectation that leaders focus on professional (not personal) support. Likewise, putting Subordinates First might be taken for granted or blended with the general backing in a collectivist culture, rather than recognised as a separate behaviour. These nuances suggest that while servant leadership's effectiveness is robust across cultures, how it is enacted or perceived can vary. Leaders in Malaysia may need cultural sensitivity, for example, demonstrating humility and service in a way that fits Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultural norms in their university. Encouragingly, servant leadership aligns well with values in many of these cultures (such as community well-being and humility in leadership, as espoused by Islamic and Confucian principles).

Other potential moderators include individual differences (e.g. faculty personality or generation). Ghasemy and Frömbling (2022) found that the older academics showed more servant-leader behaviour early in the pandemic, which could imply that the younger faculty, perhaps less experienced or in more precarious positions, were initially less inclined to take on servant leadership roles. Over time or with training, this gap might close. Additionally, whether an institution is public or private, research-intensive or teaching-focused, could moderate outcomes; these aspects haven't been directly tested post-2020, but one might expect servant leadership to be especially impactful in environments that grant leaders the flexibility to practice it (e.g. autonomous private colleges vs. rigid public bureaucracies). Overall, the moderating influences in Malaysian HE seem less about negating servant leadership's impact and more about shaping the context in which it flourishes. So far, the evidence suggests *no fundamental cultural barriers* to implementing servant leadership in Malaysia; if anything, it may fulfil a need for more people-centric leadership in a system described as facing a leadership crisis.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings reviewed in this paper underscore that servant leadership is not only a morally appealing approach for higher education leadership but also an *effective* one in driving desirable outcomes for faculty and institutions. These insights are particularly valuable for Malaysian higher education institutions, which operate in a culturally diverse, high power-distance society undergoing rapid change. The studies collectively answer critical questions about servant leadership's viability and impact in this context.

Alignment with Malaysian Context

Servant leadership's focus on service, community, and ethical conduct resonates with several Malaysian cultural and religious values. For instance, the concept of *"kepimpinan melalui teladan"* (leadership by example) in Malay culture dovetails with the servant leader's role-modelling of integrity and humility. Likewise, the importance of community (e.g. the "kampung spirit" of mutual help) is in the servant leadership dimension of creating value for the community.

Creating community value remained a decisive factor in the Malaysian SL-28 validation, highlighting how academic leaders serving societal needs (through outreach, industry partnerships, etc.) are recognised as part of effective leadership in Malaysia's universities. Even with higher power-distance norms, Malaysian academics responded positively to leaders who shared power and put others first, perhaps a refreshing approach against more bureaucratic or top-down traditions. The evidence that power distance did not impede servant leadership's effectiveness is encouraging; it suggests that initiatives by bodies like AKEPT to instil more empathetic, servant-like qualities in university leaders are on the right track. Moreover, servant leadership may help address some chronic challenges in Malaysian HE (as identified by Ghasemy et al., 2018): for example, issues of staff management and morale could be improved by servant leaders who actively listen and support faculty, and issues of innovation and KPI pressure could be mitigated by leaders who empower and protect their staff to experiment and grow. In short, servant leadership provides a culturally adaptable framework that can humanise leadership practices in Malaysian academia without undermining respect for authority; leaders are still leaders. Still, they earn respect through service rather than force.

Practical Implications for Institutions

The robust links between servant leadership and outcomes like engagement, commitment, and performance significantly affect higher education management. University administrators and policy-makers in Malaysia should consider integrating servant leadership principles into leadership development programmes and criteria for academic leadership appointments. For example, training workshops could be designed to enhance skills in active listening, empathy, community-building, and ethical decision-making among department heads and deans. The mediating role of trust and climate means that leaders should be coached on building trusting relationships, potentially via mentorship programs that pair new leaders with servant-minded exemplary leaders. The research also implies that faculty satisfaction and engagement are sensitive to leadership style; thus, university management might implement periodic 360-degree feedback or leadership audits where faculty can anonymously evaluate how their leaders exhibit servant leadership behaviours. It could identify areas for improvement and reinforce accountability for a supportive leadership culture. Additionally, given the proven impact on innovation, institutions aiming to boost academic innovation outputs might do well to select and reward leaders who excel as "servant-innovators" who remove obstacles for their teams and provide resources selflessly.

The Multilevel and Longitudinal Lens

One notable contribution of recent studies is advanced methodological approaches, like multilevel modelling and longitudinal designs, which strengthen the causal claims. The longitudinal findings from Malaysia lend confidence that servant leadership is not merely correlated with happier, better-performing faculty but actively contributes to making them so over time. Even during an exogenous shock (pandemic lockdown), servant leadership behaviours held steady and continued to yield benefits, indicating the resilience of this leadership approach. For university leaders, investing in servant leadership will likely pay dividends even in crises, helping maintain faculty commitment and performance when needed most. The fact that servant leadership remained stable suggests that once ingrained, it is a consistent style less prone to fluctuation under stress, which is a valuable trait. While finding no departmental-level factor in

this case, the multilevel inquiry raises interesting considerations: universities might ask whether servant leadership can be diffused as an organisational culture (not just an individual trait). If so, strategies like servant leadership cascades (senior leaders modelling it to mid-level leaders, and so on) or forming communities of practice for servant leaders across departments could be beneficial. It may also be fruitful to research whether a "critical mass" of servant leaders in an institution creates spillover effects that lift overall organisational performance.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the progress, the current body of research has limitations. Many studies rely on self-reported data from single sources (e.g. faculty rating both their leader's behaviour and their own outcomes), which can raise concerns about common method bias. Some studies have addressed this (for instance, Ghasemy et al. (2022b) separated measurements over time and found little evidence of bias). Still, future research should employ methodological remedies such as multi-source data (e.g. incorporating student feedback as indicators of faculty performance or using peers to rate a leader's servant behaviour) and experimental or longitudinal designs. Another gap is the lack of moderator analyses beyond cultural context. In Malaysian HE, it would be insightful to examine whether factors like faculty gender, age, or contract status (permanent vs. adjunct) alter their receptivity to servant leadership. Additionally, at the organisational level, do specific university characteristics (size, public vs. private, ranking status) affect the effects of servant leadership? Answering these questions could help tailor servant leadership development programs to where they are most needed.

Moreover, while we have ample evidence on faculty outcomes, research could extend to student's outcomes as an ultimate impact. For example, do departments led by servant leaders see improvements in student satisfaction, retention, or learning outcomes? A servant leader who empowers faculty might indirectly create better student learning experiences, a hypothesis worth testing in Malaysia's universities. There is also room to integrate servant leadership with other leadership approaches in education; a conceptual paper in Malaysia juxtaposed servant, democratic, and transformational leadership, and it would be empirically valuable to see how servant leadership uniquely contributes relative to these styles or perhaps complements them (e.g. a leader could be both servant-oriented and transformational). Finally, given the positive evidence thus far, an important future direction is implementing interventions: deliberately training and instilling servant leadership in a sample of academic leaders and tracking changes in outcomes. Such intervention studies would establish practical causality and offer templates for institutional adoption.

CONCLUSION

This review of empirical studies published between 2020 and 2023 affirms servant leadership as a culturally congruent and empirically supported approach to academic leadership in Malaysian higher education. Evidence demonstrates its positive influence on faculty outcomes, including work engagement, affective commitment, job performance, innovation, and overall well-being. These effects are consistently explained by mediating mechanisms such as trust, leader–member exchange, job satisfaction, and psychological climate. Importantly, longitudinal evidence shows that servant leadership remains resilient and effective even during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings hold strong implications for leadership development and institutional practice. Servant leadership aligns with Malaysian cultural values of humility, service, and community, while also resonating with global debates on ethical and people-centred leadership. For universities, embedding servant leadership principles in training and promotion criteria could strengthen faculty satisfaction, engagement, and innovation capacity.

At the same time, this review highlights key gaps for future inquiry. Research should incorporate multi-source data, extend beyond faculty to include student outcomes, and undertake comparative studies across Southeast Asia. Integrating servant leadership with related models of transformational, ethical, and distributed leadership which may also provide richer insights into effective leadership in higher education.

In conclusion, servant leadership offers Malaysian universities a viable framework for achieving institutional excellence without compromising compassion, ethics, and community. By prioritising service over authority, it provides a pathway to resilient, innovative, and inclusive higher education leadership in the post-pandemic era.

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