

The Role of Work Engagement and Leader Distance in Transformational Leadership on Student Performance

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of transformational leadership on student performance, with work engagement as a mediating variable and leader distance as a moderating variable. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 101 accounting students actively involved in student organizations at Swadaya Gunung Jati University and analyzed using SEM-PLS with SmartPLS 4. The result indicate that transformational leadership positively influences work engagement and student performance. Work engagement partially mediates this relationship, while leader distance moderates the indirect effect. These findings highlight the importance of leadership style, engagement, and relational proximity in enhancing student performance in higher education.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pengaruh kepemimpinan transformasional terhadap kinerja mahasiswa dengan work engagement sebagai variabel mediasi dan leader distance sebagai variabel moderasi. Pendekatan kuantitatif digunakan dengan melibatkan 101 mahasiswa akuntansi yang aktif dalam organisasi kemahasiswaan di Universitas Swadaya Gunung Jati. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner dan dianalisis menggunakan metode SEM-PLS dengan SmartPLS 4. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan transformasional berpengaruh positif terhadap work engagement dan kinerja mahasiswa. Work engagement memediasi sebagian hubungan tersebut, sementara leader distance memoderasi pengaruh tidak langsungnya. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya gaya kepemimpinan, keterlibatan, dan kedekatan relasional dalam meningkatkan kinerja mahasiswa.



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INTRODUCTION

Student performance is a key indicator of organizational success, especially in the context of higher education, student performance reflects not only academic achievement but also discipline, responsibility, and active participation in academic and organizational activities. One form of leadership that is widely applied in management research is transformational leadership, building members' vision, motivation, and intellectual stimulation constitutes the main goal of transformational leadership (Balwant 2019; Rafferty and Griffin 2004). According to previous research, transformative leadership is positively correlated with individual performance, motivation, and engagement in both business and educational environments (Ayu et al. 2023; Bakker et al. 2023).

However, leadership influences performance indirectly through certain mechanisms, one of which is work engagement. The degree of a person's physical, emotional, and cognitive participation in doing their duties is indicated by their work engagement (Bakker et al. 2023;

Jiatong et al. 2022). Highly engaged students demonstrate greater enthusiasm, focused, and responsible, which allows them to achieve better. Helalat et al. (2025) states that transformational leadership demonstrates a significant and favorable association with employees' level of work engagement. Bakker et al. (2023) also indicates that Transformational leadership is positively associated with sustained improvements in work engagement and follower performance. On the other hand, leader distance is defined as the physical, social, and the extent of the degree of interpersonal distance between leaders and followers (Antonakis and Atwater 2002; Bell et al. 2023). Balwant (2019) found that leader distance affects work engagement in student teams, while. Xuan et al. (2025) showed that power distance serves as a moderating mechanism in the link between leadership and performance.

Despite the substantial volume of existing research on transformational leadership, work engagement, and performance, the majority of previous studies have focused on professional or corporate organizational environments. Research in the context of student organizations is still limited. In addition, most studies only examine leader distance as a direct predictor Balwant (2019) or as a separate moderator Xuan et al. (2025), without integrating it into a mediation model. Thus, there is a research gap regarding how leader distance acts as a contextual condition that influences the mediation mechanism of work engagement in relation to the influence of transformational leadership on student outcomes. The originality of this study lies in the integration of the variables regarding work engagement and leader distance within a single model framework in the context of higher education.

H1: Transformational leadership is positively influences to work engagement.

H2: Transformational leadership is positively correlated to student performance.

H3: Work engagement is positively related to student performance.

H4: Leader distance is positively associated with work engagement.

H5 : Work engagement mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and student performance.

H6 : Leader distance moderates through the mediation of work engagement on student performance.

To analyze the direct, indirect, mediating, and moderating relationships between variable, the SEM-PLS approach was applied in the quantitative methodology. Data were collected using as questionnaire as a research instrument for accounting student active in organizations at Gunung Jati University and analyzed using SmartPLS4.

This study aims to obtain empirical evidence regarding the contribution of transformational leadership to improving student performance, both through work engagement, and to examine the role of leader distance as a contextual factor that moderates this relationship as well as directly. The result of this research are anticipated to contribute to the literature on leadership in the context of higher education and provide practical implications for developing leadership patterns that are closer, more participatory, and supportive of student engagement.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study examines the association between transformational leadership and work engagement, leader distance, and student performance using an associative research design with quantitative methods. The research subjects were accounting students at Swadaya Gunung

Jati University who were active in student organizations. Transformational leadership refers to a leadership style approach that encourages individuals and inspires them through the articulation of a clear vision, intellectual stimulation, and individual attention (Balwant 2019). Work engagement is defined as the degree to which students are affectively and physically involved and capable in their activities, in organizational activities, while leader distance is understood as the perceived relational distance between leaders and members.

The measurement instruments were adapted from previous studies. Transformational leadership was measured using 10 items, Work engagement was measured using 6 items, Leader distance was measured using 9 items, and Student performance was measured using 6 items

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with a five-point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Example items include: “I clearly understand the direction and goals of the faculty in supporting student academic activities” for transformational leadership, “I am working hard to complete my academic obligations” for work engagement, “I saw the leader physically present at important activities or meetings” for leader distance, “ I am actively striving to improve both my academic and non-academic skills” for performance student.

The data sources were collected from primary data directly through respondents. In the standard questionnaire used for data collection, each variable. Data were collected through the study population comprised accounting students in their seventh semester, A total of 101 respondents were obtained through proportionate stratified random sampling, ensuring that each student organization was represented proportionally. SEM-PLS was employed to analyze the data. The testing step involved evaluating the measurement model, including validity and reliability tests, while the structural model was analyzed to determine direct and indirect effects, including mediation and moderation effects between variable.

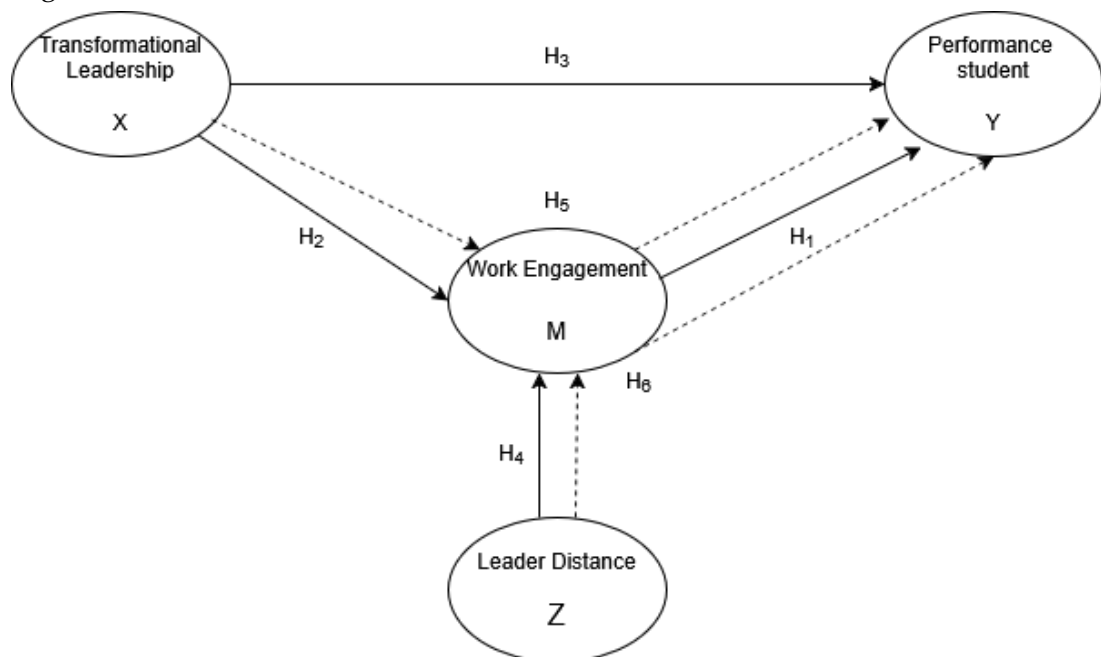


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source : Data processing results, 2026

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Description

The respondents in this study included education level, age, gender, and organizational status. This study involved 101 respondents who were accounting students at Swadaya Gunung Jati University, with female respondents dominating the sample. This shows that female students are more actively involved in organizational activities in accounting study programs. In terms of age, the respondents were dominated by students aged 20-23 years. This distribution reflects the typical age range of undergraduate students who are in their active academic and organizational phase.

Based on their latest education, all respondents were undergraduate students (S1), as this study specifically targeted accounting students at the undergraduate level. This shows that the respondents' educational backgrounds were homogeneous and relevant to the research context. Regarding organizational status, all respondents were active members of student organizations and other campus organizations. This confirms that the respondents have direct experience with leadership practices, work engagement, and leader-member interactions, making them appropriate subjects for testing transformational leadership, work engagement, leader distance, and student performance. Overall, the characteristics of the respondents indicate that the sample represents active undergraduate students who are directly involved in the organizational leadership process, thus supporting the relevance and validity of the research findings.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

| Characteristic | Item | Sum | Percentage (%) |
|----------------|-------|-----|----------------|
| Biner | Woman | 78 | 77,2 |
| | Man | 23 | 22,8 |
| Age | < 20 | 5 | 5 |
| | 20-25 | 96 | 95 |
| | 26-30 | 0 | - |
| | > 30 | 0 | - |

Source : Data processing results, 2026

Validity and Reliability

Validity Test

This study has four variables, namely transformational leadership, work engagement, leader distance, and students' academic performance, which consist of several measurement indicators for each construct. The discriminant validity test proves the extent to which one variable is truly different from another, as reflected in the low correlation between indicators in different constructs. Discriminant validity testing conducted through cross-loading analysis, where each indicator needed to show a loading value >0.70 on the related variable and consistently greater than the loading on other variable (Bakker et al. 2023). Referring to the data processing results, all indicators must produce factor loading above 0.70, indicating that the indicators can be used for further analytical procedures.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity Test

| Variabel | Work Engagement (M) | Transformational Leadership (X) | Performance Student (Y) | Leader Distance (Z) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Work Engagement (M) | 0,789 | | | |
| Transformational Leadership (X) | 0,571 | 0,777 | | |
| Performance Student (Y) | 0,638 | 0,558 | 0,791 | |
| Leader Distance (Z) | 0,558 | 0,795 | 0,482 | 0,790 |

Source : SmartPLS4 data processing results, 2026

In the discriminant validity test, each indicator was shown to have the largest loading contribution to the variable being measured compared to other variables, so that all indicators were considered to meet the criteria discriminant validity.

Table 3. Convergent Validity Test

| Variabel | Indicator | Outer Loading | Result |
|---------------------------------|-----------|---------------|--------|
| Transformational Leadership (X) | TL1 | 0,787 | Valid |
| | TL2 | 0,757 | Valid |
| | TL3 | 0,794 | Valid |
| | TL4 | 0,744 | Valid |
| | TL7 | 0,780 | Valid |
| | TL9 | 0,789 | Valid |
| | TL10 | 0,788 | Valid |
| Work Engagement (M) | WE2 | 0,785 | Valid |
| | WE4 | 0,819 | Valid |
| | WE5 | 0,765 | Valid |
| | WE6 | 0,788 | Valid |
| Leader Distance (Z) | LD2 | 0,715 | Valid |
| | LD4 | 0,762 | Valid |
| | LD5 | 0,797 | Valid |
| | LD6 | 0,811 | Valid |
| | LD7 | 0,833 | Valid |
| | LD8 | 0,832 | Valid |
| | LD9 | 0,772 | Valid |
| | LD9 | 0,772 | Valid |
| Performance Student (Y) | SP1 | 0,784 | Valid |
| | SP5 | 0,770 | Valid |
| | SP6 | 0,818 | Valid |

Source : SmartPLS4 data processing results, 2026

These results prove that all indicators in the variables of leader distance, work engagement, transformational leadership, and student performance demonstrated cross-loading values greater than 0.7. therefore, the indicators are considered valid and can be used to measure the research constructs. Overall, there are 21 indicators that meet the cross-loading validity requirements with values above 0.7. Furthermore, the AVE value for each variable is >0.5. This indicates that each construct is able to describe the variance of its indicators effectively. Therefore, the measurement model is considered to have satisfied discriminant validity requirements and can be regarded as valid for subsequent examination.

Table 4. Value of Average Variance Extracted

| Variabel | Average Variance Extracted (AVE) |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Transformational Leadership (X) | 0,604 |
| Work Engagement (M) | 0,623 |
| Leader Distance (Z) | 0,623 |
| Performance Student (Y) | 0,626 |

Source : SmartPLS4 data processing results, 2026

Reliability Test

Reliability testing was conducted in order to evaluate the quality of the questionnaire in providing consistent measurement results for the variable studied. A variable is considered reliable when its Cronbach's alpha. value obtained is >0.7 , as is the case with composite reliability exceeding 0.7. Tabel 5 shows he reliability test.

Table 5. Reliability Test

| Variabel | Cronbach's Alpha | Rho_A | Composite Reliability | Result |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-------|-----------------------|----------|
| Transformational Leadership (X) | 0,891 | 0,893 | 0,914 | Reliabel |
| Work Engagement (M) | 0,799 | 0,807 | 0,869 | Reliabel |
| Leader Distance (Z) | 0,900 | 0,911 | 0,920 | Reliabel |
| Performance Student (Y) | 0,701 | 0,702 | 0,834 | Reliabel |

Source : SmartPLS4 data processing results, 2026

All composite reliability values in the reliability test in table 5 are greater than 0.7, proving that each variable in this study is reliable and satisfies all testing requirements. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported above are as follows: all exceeding 0.7, suggesting that the variables demonstrate adequate reliability.

Structural Model (Inner Model)

The inner model was evaluated in order to examine the associations among the explanatory and dependent variables. This was accomplished by path coefficient testing, coefficient of determination (R^2) value and the associations among variable (Yahaya et al., 2019).

Table 6. R-square Adjusted

| Variabel | R-Square Adjusted | Interpratation |
|-------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Work Engagement (M) | 0,342 | Moderate |
| Performance Student (Y) | 0,451 | Moderate |

Source : SmartPLS4 data processing results, 2026

According to the table, it may be concluded that the adjusted r-square for the work engagement variable is 0.342. This value proves that the variables of transformational leadership and leader distance can explain 34.2% of the variance in work engagement, while the remaining 65.8% is affected by other factors outside the variables examined in this study.

The r-squared adjusted value for student achievement is 0.451. This finding indicates that transformational leadership, work engagement, and and leader distance together can account 45.1% of the variation in student performance, whereas the remaining 54.9% is attributed to factors not included in the research model.

The findings demonstrate that the research model possesses a moderate level of explanatory power, implying that leadership and relational factors play important role, but are not the only determinants in improving work engagement and student performance.

Hypothesis Testing

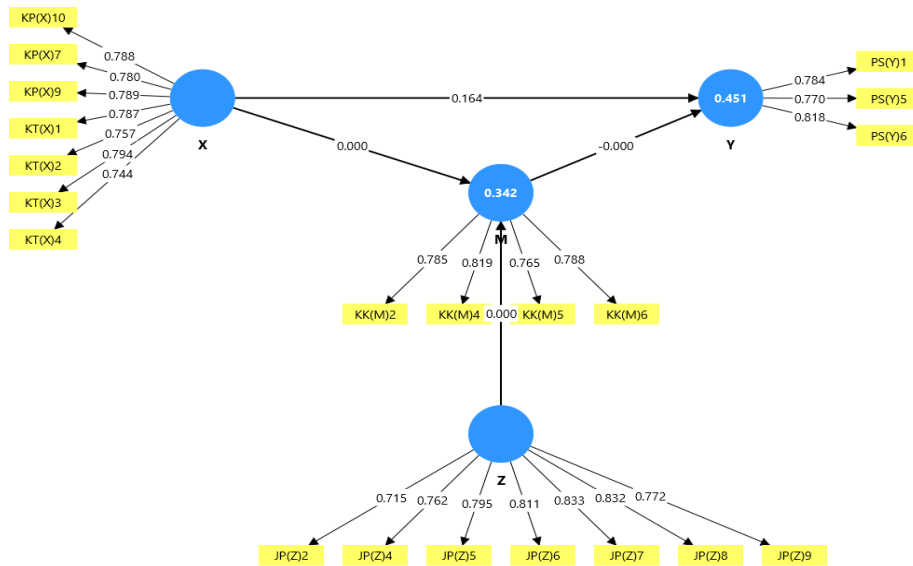


Figure 2. Bootstrapping Test

Source : SmartPLS4 data processing results, 2026

Hypothesis testing is conducted to evaluate the statistical significance of relationship among research variables (Jr et al. 2022). The significance level is assessed using t-statistic and p-values, where a relationship is considered significant if the t-statistic exceeds 1.96 at a 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), as suggested by (Semuel and Wibisono 2019). This method is widely used in PLS-SEM because it does not require the assumption of normal data distribution and is suitable for small to medium sample sizes.

Tabel 7. path coefficient

| Hypothesis | Relationship | Original sample (O) | P-value | T-statistics | Result |
|------------|---|---------------------|---------|--------------|----------|
| H1 | Transformational Leadership (X) → Work Engagement (M) | 0.347 | 0.003 | 2.981 | Suported |
| H2 | Transformational Leadership (X) → Performance Student (Y) | 0.287 | 0.004 | 2.848 | Suported |
| H3 | Work Engagement (M) → Performance Student (Y) | 0.473 | 0,000 | 4.597 | Suported |
| H4 | Leader Distance (Z) → Work Engagement (M) | 0.282 | 0.031 | 2.156 | Suported |
| H5 | Transformational Leadership → Work Engagement → Performance Student (Mediation) | 0.164 | 0.024 | 2.258 | Suported |
| H6 | Moderation Effect | 0.133 | 0.045 | 2.003 | Suported |

Source : SmartPLS4 data processing result, 2026

Transformational leadership and work engagement

The analysis demonstrates that transformational leadership significantly influences work engagement, “with a t-statistic value of 2.981 (> 1.96) and a p-value of 0.003 (< 0.05).” This implies that individuals who experience more positive transformational leadership tend to exhibit higher work engagement.

The results are consistent with the findings of Jiatong et al. (2022), which suggest that transformational leadership has a positive effect on employee engagement. This conclusion is reinforced by Bader et al. (2023), “which explains that transformational leadership” increases work engagement. Thus, both studies reinforce the findings of this investigation show that transformational leadership is an important aspect in increasing work engagement.

Transformational leadership and student performance

The analysis results for the second hypothesis reveal that transformational leadership has a statistically significant and positive effect on student performance, as indicated by a t-statistic of 2.848 (> 1.96) and a p-value of 0.004 (< 0.05). Accordingly, the alternative hypothesis (H3) is accepted, whereas the null hypothesis (H0) is rejected. This finding suggests that the more optimal the application of transformational leadership, the higher the student student performance. Transformational leadership is able to provide clarity of vision, individual attention, and inspirational motivation, which ultimately contributes to improving student performance.

These results are consistent with Jiatong et al. (2022), suggesting that transformational leadership exerts a positive impact on individual performance by fostering higher motivation and stronger commitment. Research by Liu and Huang (2023) confirms the positive and significant influence of students’ perceptions of the transformational leadership of lecturers or educational institution leaders on student learning outcome (academic result). These result reveal that transformational leadership motivates and inspires students, thereby directly improving their academic results.

Work engagement and student performance

The examination of the third hypothesis reveals a positive and statistically significant association between work engagement and student performance based on SmartPLS results. The t-statistic value of 2.258 exceeds 1.96, while the p-value of 0.024 is below 0.05, indicating statistical significance. Consequently, accepting the alternative hypothesis (H1) leads to rejecting the null hypothesis (H0), so it can be concluded that an increase in the level of work engagement in academic activities is associated with an increase in academic performance. Work engagement encourages students to be more focused, take initiative, and have a high commitment to learning tasks, which ultimately contributes directly to improving student performance.

The findings support previous research Sukor et al. (2021) which demonstrates a positive and significant association between work engagement and student performance, reinforcing the evidence that work engagement directly impacts their academic result. Recent research by Meng and Zhang (2023) further strengthens the argument that academic engagement is a significant influencing variable on student performance.

Leader distance and work engagement

The results of data analysis on the fourth hypothesis show that leader distance has a positive and significant effect on work engagement. This is proven through analysis using SmartPLS, which produced a t-statistic value of 2.156 > 1.96 and a p-value of 0.031 < 0.05 . Therefore, H4 is accepted and H0 is rejected, which means that the level of distance between leaders and individuals has an effect on work engagement. Properly managed leader distance

can create clear professional relationships, increase respect, and encourage individuals to remain focused and optimally engaged in academic activities.

Zhang et al., (2025) found in their study when the level of power distance between leaders and followers is consistent, it can increase work engagement through value alignment and more effective communication. In addition, research conducted by Syamsuddin et al., (2026) related to leadership distance shows that the perceived distance between leaders and individual is also related to the level of work engagement, where organizational support and communication quality can influence this relationship.

The mediating role of work engagement

The analysis of the fifth hypothesis demonstrates that work engagement serves in a mediating role within the association between transformational leadership and student performance. This is supported by a t-statistic of 2.258 (> 1.96) and a p-value of 0.024 (< 0.05) obtained from SmartPLS. Accordingly, H5 is supported and H0 is rejected, suggesting that transformational leadership influences student performance both directly as well as indirectly through work engagement. This proves that the effective application of transformational leadership can encourage increased work engagement in academic activities, which ultimately contributes to improved student performance.

The results reported by Jiatong et al. (2022) indicate that employee engagement functions in a mediating role within the association between transformational leadership and job performance. Rezeki et al. (2025) indicate that work engagement plays a significant role in linking transformational leadership to individual performance outcomes, thereby confirming its importance in the leadership–performance relationship.

The moderating role of leader distance

Testing of the sixth hypothesis shows that leader distance has a significant effect as a moderating variable through the mediation of work engagement on student performance, as shown as evidenced by a t-statistic of 2.003 (> 1.96) and a p-value of 0.045 (< 0.05), resulting in the acceptance of H6 and rejection of H, which means that leader distance can strengthen or weaken the effect of transformational leadership on student performance through variations in students' work engagement.

Results align with the study by Kwan et al. (2025) which suggests that power distance orientation, representing leader distance, serves a moderating function in the association between empowering leadership style and work engagement, where a high level of power distance tends to weaken the positive influence of leadership on work engagement. Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2025) The findings indicate that power distance, as a form of leadership distance, functions as a moderating element within the relationship between leadership, engagement, and performance outcomes, whereby value congruence between leaders and followers strengthens the indirect influence of leadership on performance.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate the degree to which transformational leadership significantly and favorably influences student performance, either directly or indirectly via work engagement. These findings indicate that a leadership style that is able to bring positive values and individual attention can optimize student engagement and encourage improved performance in the context of student organizations. Furthermore, the analysis shows that

leader distance plays a role in moderating the influence of transformational on student performance through work engagement. This finding confirms that leadership effectiveness is not solely determined by the leadership style applied, but also by the level of closeness in the relationship between leader and members.

Practically speaking, these findings imply that student organizations need to promote transformational leadership practices that emphasize open communication, emotional support, and member empowerment. Student organization leaders are expected to not only focus on achieving goals, but also on building positive interpersonal relationships so that members feel involved and motivated. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes by integrating the variable of work engagement and leader distance into a single model of leadership research in higher education. This research advances leadership studies by underscoring the critical role of relational context in enhancing the processes by which leadership affects performance. Future research is encouraged to develop this research model using other variables such as intrinsic motivation, organizational culture, or student satisfaction. In addition, future research can apply this framework to different contexts, such as other educational institutions or non-academic organizations, to improve the generalization of findings.

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