

Ethical Leadership and the Enactment of Justice in Higher Education Governance: Evidence from Private Faith-Based Universities

Fitriyani¹, Ahmad Syukri², Lukman Hakim³

¹STAI Bumi Silamapari Lubuklinggau, Indonesia

^{2,3}UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia



DOI : <https://doi.org/10.61796/jheaa.v3i4.1761>



Sections Info

Article history:

Submitted: January 11, 2026

Final Revised: February 23, 2026

Accepted: March 16, 2026

Published: April 22, 2026

Keywords:

Ethical leadership

Organizational justice

Higher education governance

Procedural justice

Faith-based universities

ABSTRACT

Objective: Drawing on ethical leadership and organizational justice theory, this study examines how justice is enacted through leadership practices in private Islamic higher education institutions in South Sumatra, Indonesia. **Method:** Adopting a qualitative multiple-case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with institutional leaders and lecturers, supported by document analysis. **Results:** The findings reveal that perceptions of fairness are shaped less by distributive outcomes than by procedural justice embedded in governance practices. Ethical leadership emerges as a key mechanism enabling justice through transparency, consistency, and moral justification in decision-making processes, even under conditions of financial and structural constraint. Conversely, misalignment between ethical rhetoric and enacted practices generates ethical dissonance and undermines leadership legitimacy. **Novelty:** Justice in higher education governance is increasingly recognized as a critical ethical concern, particularly in relation to leadership practices that shape budget management, workload distribution, and reward systems. This study contributes to ethical leadership theory by repositioning ethical leadership as a governance capability rather than an individual moral trait, and extends organizational justice research by highlighting the primacy of procedural justice in resource-constrained academic environments. By offering contextually grounded insights from faith-based higher education institutions in the Global South, the study addresses a significant gap in the predominantly Western-centric literature on leadership and justice in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of justice in higher education governance have gained increasing scholarly attention, particularly in relation to ethical leadership, academic integrity, and faculty well-being. Within universities, perceptions of fairness in budget allocation, workload distribution, and reward systems are not merely administrative concerns but fundamental ethical issues that shape trust, motivation, and job satisfaction among academic staff. Prior studies consistently show that perceived organizational justice is closely associated with positive work outcomes, including commitment, engagement, and performance, especially in knowledge-intensive organizations such as universities [1], [2].

Ethical leadership has emerged as a central framework for understanding how justice is enacted within organizations. Ethical leaders are characterized by integrity, fairness, transparency, and moral accountability, and they actively promote ethical standards through decision-making processes, role modeling, and interpersonal interactions [3]. Drawing on social learning theory, ethical leadership functions not only as a set of personal virtues but also as a governance mechanism through which norms of

fairness are communicated and institutionalized [4]. Empirical research demonstrates that ethical leadership is strongly related to employees' perceptions of distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice [5], [6].

In higher education institutions, justice-related issues are particularly salient due to the collegial structure of academic work and the professional autonomy of lecturers. Decisions concerning teaching load allocation, research funding, performance evaluation, and reward distribution are closely tied to academic identity and career trajectories. When these decisions are perceived as inconsistent, opaque, or biased, they can erode trust in institutional leadership and undermine academic morale. Conversely, transparent and fair governance practices contribute to stronger faculty engagement, higher job satisfaction, and greater institutional loyalty [7], [8].

Despite the growing body of literature on ethical leadership and organizational justice, empirical evidence from private, faith-based higher education institutions remains limited, particularly in non-Western contexts. Existing studies are predominantly situated in corporate organizations or public universities in Western countries, leaving a significant contextual gap. This gap is especially critical in private Islamic higher education institutions, where ethical governance is normatively grounded in religious values such as justice ('adl), trust (amanah), and moral responsibility, yet operationalized within contemporary managerial and financial constraints.

In Indonesia, private Islamic higher education institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Swasta, PTKIS) play a strategic role in expanding access to higher education and promoting value-based academic cultures. At the same time, these institutions often operate under conditions of limited financial resources, high dependence on tuition fees, and relatively weak governance infrastructures. Such structural conditions frequently intensify ethical tensions in budget management, workload distribution, and reward allocation for lecturers. Empirical indications suggest that lecturers in PTKIS experience persistent concerns regarding inequitable teaching loads, uneven access to research funding, and unclear criteria for rewards and incentives, compounded by limited transparency in budgeting and decision-making processes.

These challenges point to justice not merely as a technical governance issue but as a core ethical leadership concern. When institutional leaders fail to ensure fair procedures and equitable outcomes, perceptions of favoritism, moral inconsistency, and ethical dissonance may emerge, particularly in institutions that explicitly claim moral and religious legitimacy. Previous research has shown that such ethical gaps can significantly undermine trust in leadership and reduce job satisfaction among academic staff [9], [10].

Although ethical leadership and organizational justice have been widely examined, several critical gaps remain. First, most studies conceptualize justice at an abstract or perceptual level, offering limited insight into how justice is enacted through concrete governance practices, particularly budget allocation, workload distribution, and reward systems. Second, empirical research remains heavily concentrated in Western corporate and public university settings, leaving private, faith-based higher education institutions in the Global South largely underexplored. Third, little attention has been paid to the

ethical tension between normative value commitments and everyday managerial practices in resource-constrained academic institutions. As a result, there is limited understanding of how ethical leadership translates into distributive and procedural justice in the governance of academic work, or how lecturers interpret fairness when ethical ideals confront organizational realities [11].

Addressing these gaps, this study examines how justice is enacted through ethical leadership in the governance of budget management, workload distribution, and reward systems for lecturers in private Islamic higher education institutions in South Sumatra, Indonesia. By situating justice as an ethical practice embedded in leadership decisions rather than a rhetorical ideal, this study contributes to a more contextually grounded understanding of ethical leadership and organizational justice in higher education.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a multiple-case study approach to examine how justice is enacted through ethical leadership in higher education governance [12], [13]. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study seeks to capture meanings, interpretations, and ethical reasoning underlying leadership practices related to budget management, workload distribution, and reward systems. Case study methodology enables an in-depth exploration of governance processes within their real-life institutional contexts, particularly when the boundaries between ethical values and managerial practices are not clearly delineated [14].

The research is interpretive in nature and grounded in organizational justice and ethical leadership theory. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study aims to generate contextually rich insights into how fairness is constructed and experienced by lecturers within private Islamic higher education institutions.

Case Selection

The cases were selected purposively from private Islamic higher education institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Swasta, PTKIS) located in South Sumatra, Indonesia. Selection criteria included institutional status as a private, faith-based university, organizational maturity, and variation in governance structures. These criteria were applied to ensure that each case provided sufficient exposure to ethical leadership practices related to budgeting, workload allocation, and reward mechanisms.

Focusing on PTKIS allows the study to examine justice practices within institutions that explicitly claim ethical and religious legitimacy, while simultaneously operating under resource constraints typical of private higher education institutions in the Global South. This context offers a theoretically meaningful setting for analyzing the translation of ethical leadership into concrete governance practices.

Data Sources

Data were collected from multiple sources to enhance credibility through triangulation. The primary data source consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders and lecturers. Interview participants included rectors, deans,

heads of study programs, and academic staff who were directly involved in or affected by governance decisions related to budgeting, workload distribution, and rewards. Interviews focused on leadership decision-making processes, criteria for resource allocation, perceptions of fairness, and experiences of justice in everyday academic work.

To complement interview data, institutional documents were analyzed, including strategic plans, budget-related documents, workload assignment guidelines, reward and incentive policies, and codes of ethics. These documents provided insight into formal governance structures and normative expectations, allowing comparison between stated policies and enacted practices. Field notes from institutional observations further supported contextual understanding of leadership interactions and decision-making dynamics.

Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis followed a thematic approach informed by organizational justice and ethical leadership theory. Interview transcripts and documents were coded iteratively using a combination of deductive and inductive strategies. Initial coding categories were derived from theoretical constructs such as distributive justice, procedural justice, transparency, consistency, and moral accountability [1], [3]. These categories were then refined through inductive coding to capture context-specific themes emerging from the data.

Cross-case analysis was conducted to identify patterns and variations in justice practices across institutions. Attention was given to how ethical leadership was articulated, operationalized, and contested in governance processes related to budgeting, workload allocation, and reward systems. Analytical memos were used to document emerging interpretations and to ensure reflexivity throughout the analytic process [15].

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation across data sources, prolonged engagement in the field, and peer debriefing during the analysis phase. Rather than seeking generalizability, the study emphasizes analytical transferability by providing theoretically grounded insights applicable to similar faith-based and resource-constrained higher education contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings are organized into three interrelated themes that capture how justice is enacted through ethical leadership in higher education governance: (1) procedural justice in budget management, (2) distributive justice in workload allocation, and (3) justice tensions in reward and recognition systems. Across cases, ethical leadership emerged as a key mediating factor shaping how fairness was understood, negotiated, and experienced by lecturers.

1. Procedural Justice in Budget Management: Transparency as Moral Practice

Across all cases, budget management was identified as the most sensitive governance domain and the primary source of justice-related concerns among lecturers. Participants consistently emphasized that perceptions of fairness were shaped less by the

size of available resources than by the transparency and consistency of budgeting procedures. Leaders who openly communicated budget constraints, decision criteria, and institutional priorities were perceived as more ethically legitimate, even when funding was limited.

In institutions where budgeting processes were centralized and opaque, lecturers reported uncertainty and suspicion regarding fund allocation, particularly for research support and professional development. Conversely, ethical leadership was reflected in practices such as participatory budget discussions, disclosure of financial priorities, and explicit justification of funding decisions. These practices reinforced perceptions of procedural justice by signaling respect, accountability, and moral consistency.

Importantly, transparency functioned not merely as an administrative tool but as a moral practice. Leaders who framed budgeting decisions in ethical terms – emphasizing fairness, institutional sustainability, and collective responsibility – were more likely to maintain trust among academic staff, even under financial pressure.

2. Distributive Justice in Workload Allocation: Between Formal Rules and Informal Negotiation

Workload distribution emerged as a central indicator of distributive justice for lecturers, directly affecting teaching quality, research productivity, and work-life balance. Formal workload guidelines existed in all cases, typically specifying teaching hours and academic responsibilities. However, the enactment of these rules varied significantly depending on leadership practices.

Lecturers perceived workload allocation as fair when leaders applied criteria consistently and demonstrated sensitivity to individual circumstances, such as research commitments, administrative duties, or career stage. Ethical leadership was evident when workload decisions were accompanied by clear explanations and opportunities for dialogue. In such cases, lecturers interpreted fairness not solely in numerical terms but as equitable treatment grounded in professional judgment.

By contrast, perceptions of injustice emerged when workload assignments were shaped by informal favoritism, personal proximity to leaders, or unspoken expectations. In these contexts, lecturers described ethical dissonance between institutional claims of fairness and the realities of workload practices. This dissonance was particularly pronounced when heavy teaching loads were assigned without transparent justification or compensatory mechanisms.

3. Justice Tensions in Reward and Recognition Systems

Reward systems—including financial incentives, promotion opportunities, and symbolic recognition—represented the most contested justice domain. Participants widely acknowledged institutional constraints that limited material rewards. However, dissatisfaction arose when reward mechanisms lacked clear criteria or appeared disconnected from actual performance.

Ethical leadership played a critical role in mitigating justice tensions by clarifying evaluation standards, aligning rewards with institutional values, and ensuring consistency in recognition practices. Lecturers expressed stronger perceptions of justice

when leaders emphasized process fairness, such as transparent performance evaluation and equitable access to opportunities, rather than focusing solely on outcomes.

In several cases, symbolic rewards – public acknowledgment, leadership trust, and opportunities for professional development – were perceived as ethically meaningful substitutes for limited financial incentives. However, when reward systems were perceived as arbitrary or selectively applied, lecturers interpreted them as violations of both distributive and procedural justice, undermining the moral credibility of institutional leadership.

Cross-Cutting Pattern: Ethical Leadership as a Justice-Enabling Condition

Across all themes, ethical leadership emerged not as a personal trait but as a governance condition that enabled or constrained justice practices. Leaders who consistently aligned ethical values with decision-making processes fostered perceptions of fairness despite structural limitations. Conversely, inconsistencies between ethical rhetoric and enacted practices intensified perceptions of injustice and eroded trust.

The findings suggest that justice in higher education governance is less about eliminating inequality – which is often structurally unavoidable – and more about how leaders ethically manage and justify such inequalities through transparent, consistent, and accountable practices.

Discussion

This study advances the literature on ethical leadership and organizational justice by demonstrating how justice is enacted as a governance practice in higher education institutions rather than as an abstract moral ideal. The findings reveal that ethical leadership operates as a mediating mechanism through which distributive and procedural justice are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized in the everyday management of budgets, workloads, and reward systems.

Ethical Leadership Beyond Moral Rhetoric

Consistent with ethical leadership theory, the findings confirm that leaders who demonstrate transparency, consistency, and moral accountability foster stronger perceptions of justice among academic staff [3]. However, this study extends prior research by showing that ethical leadership in higher education is less about personal moral traits and more about how leaders institutionalize ethics through governance practices. Ethical leadership was enacted not merely through ethical discourse but through concrete actions, such as opening budgeting processes to scrutiny, clarifying workload criteria, and justifying reward decisions.

This finding challenges leadership studies that conceptualize ethical leadership primarily at the interpersonal level. In the context of higher education governance, ethical leadership functions as a structural capability that shapes organizational procedures [16]. This perspective aligns with recent critiques that call for moving beyond virtue-based understandings of ethical leadership toward process-oriented and practice-based approaches [10].

Reframing Organizational Justice as Ethical Practice

The results also refine organizational justice theory by highlighting the centrality of procedural justice in resource-constrained academic environments. While distributive justice remains important, lecturers in this study consistently evaluated fairness based on the transparency, consistency, and moral justification of decision-making processes rather than on outcomes alone. This supports prior arguments that procedural justice exerts a stronger influence on trust and legitimacy when resources are scarce [2].

Importantly, the findings suggest that organizational justice in higher education should be understood as an ethical practice embedded in leadership decisions, not merely as a subjective perception or attitudinal outcome. Justice emerged as a negotiated process shaped by dialogue, explanation, and ethical reasoning. This insight extends Colquitt et al.'s multidimensional justice framework by emphasizing the moral work performed by leaders in sustaining justice under structural constraints [1].

Justice Tensions and Ethical Dissonance in Higher Education Governance

A key contribution of this study lies in its identification of justice tensions arising from inconsistencies between ethical claims and governance practices. In faith-based institutions that explicitly promote moral and religious values, such inconsistencies generated heightened perceptions of injustice and ethical dissonance among lecturers. This finding resonates with prior research on ethical hypocrisy and moral licensing, which suggests that ethical rhetoric can backfire when not supported by consistent action [9].

The study thus contributes to emerging debates on ethical leadership by demonstrating that ethical legitimacy is fragile and contingent upon sustained alignment between values and practices. In higher education contexts, where professional autonomy and moral expectations are high, even minor procedural inconsistencies can significantly undermine trust in leadership.

Theoretical Contributions

This study offers three main theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualizes ethical leadership as a governance mechanism that translates ethical values into concrete institutional practices. Second, it extends organizational justice theory by foregrounding procedural justice as the primary lens through which fairness is evaluated in resource-constrained academic settings. Third, it contributes contextually grounded insights from private, faith-based higher education institutions in the Global South, addressing a persistent gap in the predominantly Western-centric literature.

By integrating ethical leadership theory with organizational justice perspectives, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how fairness is enacted in higher education governance. Rather than treating justice as a static norm or an individual perception, the findings position justice as an ethical accomplishment shaped by leadership decisions, institutional constraints, and moral expectations.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study demonstrates that justice in higher education governance is not merely a managerial outcome but an ethical accomplishment shaped by leadership practices. By examining budget management, workload distribution, and reward systems in private Islamic higher education institutions, the findings show that ethical leadership operates as a governance mechanism through which distributive and procedural justice are enacted and legitimized. Fairness was experienced by lecturers not solely through equitable outcomes but through transparent, consistent, and morally justified decision-making processes. **Implication :** Theoretically, this study advances ethical leadership research by repositioning ethical leadership from an interpersonal virtue to a structural and procedural capability embedded in governance practices. It also extends organizational justice theory by highlighting the primacy of procedural justice in resource-constrained academic environments, where leaders' ethical reasoning and transparency can mitigate structural inequalities. By situating these insights within faith-based higher education institutions in the Global South, the study contributes contextually grounded evidence to a literature that remains largely Western-centric. Practically, the findings suggest that higher education leaders should prioritize ethical transparency and procedural clarity in budgeting, workload allocation, and reward systems. Even under financial constraints, leaders can strengthen perceptions of justice by openly communicating decision criteria, ensuring consistency in governance processes, and aligning institutional practices with stated ethical values. For faith-based institutions in particular, ethical credibility depends on the congruence between moral commitments and everyday leadership decisions. **Limitation :** Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study is based on a qualitative multiple-case design within a specific regional and institutional context. While this approach provides in-depth insights into justice practices, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization. Instead, the study offers analytical insights that may be transferable to similar faith-based or resource-constrained higher education settings. Second, the study relies primarily on interviews and document data, which may reflect participants' interpretations and retrospective accounts of leadership practices. Although triangulation was employed to enhance credibility, future research could incorporate observational or longitudinal designs to capture the dynamics of ethical leadership and justice practices over time. **Future Research :** Future studies may also extend this research by examining the relationship between ethical leadership, organizational justice, and concrete outcomes such as lecturer retention, research productivity, or institutional performance. Comparative research across public and private universities, or across different religious and cultural contexts, would further enrich understanding of how ethical leadership operates under varying governance regimes. Finally, mixed-methods approaches could strengthen the empirical link between justice perceptions and measurable organizational outcomes in higher education.

REFERENCES

- [1] J. A. Colquitt, D. E. Conlon, M. J. Wesson, C. O. L. H. Porter, and K. Y. Ng, "Justice at the Millennium: A Meta-Analytic Review of 25 Years of Organizational Justice Research," *J. Appl. Psychol.*, vol. 86, no. 3, pp. 425–445, 2001, doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.86.3.425.
- [2] J. Greenberg, "Organizational Justice: The Dynamics of Fairness in the Workplace," in *APA Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, vol. 3, S. Zedeck, Ed., American Psychological Association, 2011, pp. 271–327. doi: 10.1037/12171-008.
- [3] M. E. Brown, L. K. Treviño, and D. A. Harrison, "Ethical Leadership: A Social Learning Perspective for Construct Development and Testing," *Organ. Behav. Hum. Decis. Process.*, vol. 97, no. 2, pp. 117–134, 2005, doi: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002.
- [4] A. Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977.
- [5] M. E. Brown and L. K. Treviño, "Ethical Leadership: A Review and Future Directions," *Leadersh. Q.*, vol. 17, no. 6, pp. 595–616, 2006, doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.10.004.
- [6] D. De Cremer and D. van Knippenberg, "Leader Self-Sacrifice and Leadership Effectiveness: The Moderating Role of Leader Prototypicality," *J. Appl. Psychol.*, vol. 89, no. 2, pp. 326–334, 2004, doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.89.2.326.
- [7] J. C. Shin and J. Jung, "Academics' Job Satisfaction and Job Stress Across Countries in the Changing Academic Environments," *High. Educ.*, vol. 67, no. 5, pp. 603–620, 2014, doi: 10.1007/s10734-013-9668-y.
- [8] C. Fletcher, R. Boden, J. Kent, and J. Tinson, "Performing Women: The Gendered Effects of Academic Work," *Gender, Work & Organ.*, vol. 26, no. 5, pp. 594–609, 2019, doi: 10.1111/gwao.12305.
- [9] K. Lasthuizen, Z. van der Wal, and L. Huberts, "Integrity Violations and Corruption in Western Public Services: A Typology and Empirical Analysis," *Public Integr.*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 49–69, 2005, doi: 10.2753/PIN1099-9922070103.
- [10] M. Alvesson and K. Einola, "Warning for Excessive Positivity: Authentic Leadership and Other Traps in Leadership Studies," *Leadersh. Q.*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 383–395, 2019, doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.04.001.
- [11] M. E. Brown and M. S. Mitchell, "Ethical and Unethical Leadership: Exploring New Avenues for Future Research," *Bus. Ethics Q.*, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 583–616, 2010, doi: 10.5840/beq201020439.
- [12] M. Taamneh, "The impact of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behaviour in higher education institutions," *Cogent Soc. Sci.*, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 2294834, 2024, doi: 10.1080/23311875.2023.2294834.
- [13] E. Gidi, F. Assefa, and D. K. Mesfin, "Organizational justice practices by academic leadership in Ethiopian higher education: A qualitative case study," *SAGE Open*, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 21582440251415068, 2026, doi: 10.1177/21582440251415068.
- [14] R. K. Yin, "Case study research and applications: Design and methods," *J. Mix. Methods Res.*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 375–386, 2018, doi: 10.1177/1558689818755396.
- [15] J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018.
- [16] J. Stouten, M. van Dijke, and D. De Cremer, "Ethical Leadership: An Overview and Future Perspectives," *J. Pers. Psychol.*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 1–6, 2012, doi: 10.1027/1866-5888/a000059.

***Fitriyani (Corresponding Author)**

STAI Bumi Silamapari Lubuklinggau

Email: fitriyani@staibslg.ac.id

Ahmad Syukri

UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi

Email: ahmadsukriss@uinjambi.ac.id

Lukman Hakim

UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi

Email: lukmanhakim70.dr@gmail.com
