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AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP IN ACADEMIC CAREER DEVELOPMENT: EVIDENCE FROM INDONESIAN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is a crucial variable proven to enhance work commitment, creativity, and professional development of employees in various fields, including higher education. Most existing research focuses on secular universities in the West, while Islamic religious universities rarely receive attention, despite their unique characteristics influenced by spiritual values, religious traditions, and local culture. This study aimed to examine the influence of authentic leadership on lecturers' career development at an Islamic religious university in Indonesia. Using an explanatory sequential mixed method design, this study combines quantitative analysis through Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) and qualitative analysis based on thematic analysis using NVivo. The quantitative results show a strong and significant positive influence between authentic leadership and lecturers' career development (path coefficient = 0.698; $p < 0.001$), with an R-square of 0.487 (moderate), indicating a contribution of 48.7%. Qualitative analysis confirms that integrity, relational transparency, balanced processing, and communication dynamics with superiors play significant roles in determining the success of a lecturer's functional promotion. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of authentic leadership perspectives with local spiritual and cultural values, presenting a context that is rarely explored in the international literature. This state-of-the-art research confirms that lecturer career development depends not only on academic performance but also on ethical, transparent, and equitable leadership practices. These findings broaden the global discourse on

authentic leadership and provide practical recommendations for religious higher-education institutions to build a career system that balances professionalism, ethics, and spirituality.

KEYWORDS: Authentic Leadership, Academic Career Development, Islamic Higher Education, Indonesia, Leadership in Higher Education, Faculty Development, Quality Education, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Authentic leadership has become an important topic in higher education management studies. Various studies have shown that authentic leadership contributes to increased work commitment (Bai & Chen, 2022; Du et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Shehadeh, 2024; Silva et al., 2023). This commitment is crucial for career development because it fosters a supportive and engaging work environment (Abbas et al., 2023). This leadership style emphasizes the dimensions of self-awareness, transparency in relationships, objective information processing, and internalized moral perspective as the main pillars (Artinger et al., 2025; Asif et al., 2025; Ataei et al., 2025; Born et al., 2025; Shao et al., 2025; Siswanti & Muafi, 2025). Authentic leadership attributes, such as self-awareness and relational transparency, significantly impact job performance and creativity.

These factors are essential for lecturers to excel in their roles and pursue career advancement opportunities (Hsu et al., 2024). Mentor-mentee relationships, supported by authentic leadership, play a significant role in employee career development. Mentors who demonstrate authentic leadership qualities can provide their mentees with valuable guidance, support, and opportunities for career advancement (Sitterding & Broome, 2023). However, existing studies have largely focused on secular universities and large educational institutions in Western countries, emphasizing academic productivity and modern governance.

In the global literature, research exploring authentic leadership within Islamic religious higher education institutions, particularly in Indonesia, remains rare. However, these institutions possess unique characteristics, where governance is influenced not only by formal regulations but also by spiritual values, religious traditions, and inherent local culture. This gap is crucial, as lecturers' career development in Islamic religious higher education institutions is often influenced by non-material factors, such as spiritual blessings, respect for tradition, and attachment to the religious community (Herminingsih et al., 2025; Wahyuningsih & A.S., 2025; Zulpikar et al., 2024).

This study aims to fill this gap. The primary focus of the study is to examine the influence of authentic leadership on the career development of lecturers at an Islamic religious university in Indonesia. Using a micro-case study context, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how authentic leadership operates in a religiously imbued environment and how it impacts lecturers' career

development patterns.

The novelty of this research lies in three aspects. First, it presents a new perspective by linking authentic leadership to dimensions of spirituality and local culture, rather than solely to indicators of academic productivity. Second, the research was conducted in an Islamic religious university, a context that is rarely studied in the international literature, thus enriching the global discourse on authentic leadership practices. Third, the use of a case study approach at a single institution allowed for an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of lecturer leadership and careers that might otherwise be overlooked in large-scale quantitative research.

Thus, this research not only complements existing literature but also offers theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it broadens the understanding of authentic leadership in a context different from the majority of previous studies. Practically, this research provides insights for leaders of religious higher education institutions on how to implement authentic leadership to foster lecturer career development and create an academic ecosystem that balances professionalism, spirituality, and ethics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lecturer career development in higher education is a structured process designed to enhance professional competence, deepen academic insight, and clarify the direction of their career development. This process not only impacts individual growth but also contributes to the institution's overall success. By aligning lecturers' aspirations with the university's vision and mission, effective career development can strengthen the quality of education, research, and broader academic contributions (Ngoc et al., 2020; Suryadi et al., 2020).

Career development focuses more on the process of developing individual competencies and strategic planning. The effectiveness of this process is reflected in increased work productivity, both in terms of the quality and quantity of output produced. In other words, investing in career development is key to achieving more efficient and productive work results (Eliason et al., 2014). Meanwhile, career development is also key to creating synergy between individual needs and organizational goals, thereby resulting in increased productivity through enhanced capabilities, job fit, and higher work morale (McDonald & Hite, 2023).

Policies that support human resource development, the role of superiors in opening access and career opportunities are also crucial factors in

encouraging the professional progress of lecturers' careers (McDonald & Hite, 2023). However, in practice, challenges such as high workloads, lack of directed career planning, and structural inequalities from leaders in the form of unfair rewards or recognition, remain serious obstacles to academic career development (Welch *et al.*, 2019).

On the other hand, fair and transparent leadership is an external factor that can encourage lecturers' motivation to develop their careers (Clark, 2025). Leadership implemented with the principles of integrity, transparency, and accountability has also been proven to have a positive impact on strengthening the career development system in higher education environments (Kamamia *et al.*, 2019). Thus, leadership support is not merely a supplement, but an integral part of a sustainable strategy to foster and accelerate the career development potential of lecturers.

Leadership is essentially the ability to influence and inspire (Ford *et al.*, 2018). The view of leadership is often viewed as something functional. However, over time, leadership theory has undergone transformation through various approaches. Authentic leadership is one such approach. Authentic means being genuine. Terminologically, authentic leadership refers to a leadership style that emphasizes the authenticity of a leader's character. Authentic leadership is about knowing and being yourself, with all the strengths and imperfections that come with it (Vries, 2023). This can of course have both positive and negative connotations if simply read without understanding its true meaning. For example, if a leader is kind, their leadership will be good; conversely, if a leader is selfish, their leadership will be authoritarian. **The question arises** are these two cases considered authentic leadership, as they both emphasize authenticity? Of course not, because authentic leadership truly embodies the concept of transformational existentialism.

Vries (2023) suggests that the concept of existentialism is used to demonstrate a leader's understanding of the existential dimension, thus leading to greater awareness, reflection, and sincerity in their actions. In their leadership journey, an authentic leader often requires a transformational journey filled with reflection and existential suffering. Vries even symbolizes this with the symbols of the phoenix (a bird that burns and comes back to life) and the ouroboros (a dragon that eats its tail). This concept emphasizes that every true leader must experience psychological death and be reborn into a more mature, conscious version, acknowledging their shortcomings and

imperfections, and becoming stronger and wiser. An authentic leader is one who has self-awareness and acknowledges their dark side, improves themselves through psychological death and is reborn into a better version, abandoning illusions and ego. So the process of becoming an authentic leader is a process of transformational existentialism: not just values and integrity, but also stepping out of one's comfort zone, daring to face life's uncertainties, and becoming a better version of oneself. In short, according to Vries, to become an authentic leader, one must be able to face and slay the demons within oneself (Vries, 2023).

In line with Vries, Hanaway (2019) also emphasized that the core of authentic leadership is existentialism becoming an individual who is more responsible for the decisions they make consciously and honestly. Existentialism is not just a technique but a way of being (a way to become) a better version of themselves. Existentialist leaders are authentic leaders with full existential awareness (Hanaway, 2019). The broader presence and actions of leaders play a role as problem solvers, coordinators and collaborators (Garretsen *et al.*, 2020). In the context of higher education, academic leaders are responsible for formulating policies to ensure their institutions not only maintain academic excellence but also demonstrate the ability to adapt to the evolving demands of higher education. Leadership in this context is not simply understood as holding a formal position, but rather as a work style that is inspiring, communicative, and inclusive of many parties (Przytuła *et al.*, 2025).

In the traditionalist perspective, current academic leadership functions more as bureaucratic control than as a means of promoting academic freedom (Macfarlane *et al.*, 2024). In today's modern organizational era, effective leadership relies not only on intuition or experience but also requires a data-driven approach to improve decision-making effectiveness. One leadership approach that is gaining increasing attention is authentic leadership, which emphasizes transparency, morality, and integrity in the leader-subordinate relationship (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2020). However, in the increasingly digital era, authentic leadership needs to be strengthened by the ability to utilize data as a basis for strategic decision-making. Therefore, the concept of authentic leadership emerged as an integration of authentic leadership values with an analytical approach supported by data (Datnow *et al.*, 2017; Lok *et al.*, 2022).

Establishing genuine relationships and treating subordinates fairly and sincerely is one of the

hallmarks of authentic leadership. Successful authentic leaders go beyond simply implementing rewards and punishments, but also build long-term emotional bonds and trust with their subordinates. Without this approach, subordinates may simply feel like they're being paid to work, rather than being valued as a valuable asset to the organization (Jia et al., 2007). Therefore, authentic leaders who adhere to morality will ensure that the decisions taken are always fair, transparent, and responsible even under pressure or dilemma (MacKinnon, 2023).

In the context of educational organizations, especially universities, proactive university leaders play an important role in preventing excessive bureaucracy that can hinder the career development of lecturers (Dove & Douglas, 2023). The power hierarchy in educational institutions is often related to the moral image of the leader, where those in high positions may be seen as more oriented towards personal gain (Inesi & Rios, 2023). Therefore, maintaining the appropriate social distance between leaders and subordinates is essential to ensure smooth communication and proper micromanagement (Jensen et al., 2023).

In addition, authentic leadership in educational institutions and other sectors must ensure that decisions taken take into account all parties, avoid discrimination, and provide equal opportunities to employees (Ahmed, 2023). Leadership in a democratic organization must act as a protector, not an authoritarian ruler, because a democratic system can only develop with leadership that supports collective participation (Foltin, 2023). A good leader will use his power to build shared social responsibility and create a space for open discussion, not just to dominate and control (Inesi & Rios, 2023; Lindberg et al., 2024).

In decision making, leaders who rely solely on laws and procedures without considering situational morality can lose the trust of their team (Troy, 2024). Even though the principles of "just culture" and "no-blame" are implemented, many employees are still afraid to report incidents because they are worried about negative consequences or retaliation (Bouchard & Dion-labrie, 2025). Therefore, leaders must set strong ethical standards and set examples of ethical behavior to positively influence the work culture (Lindberg et al., 2024).

In many cases, leaders also tend to ignore the honesty of subordinates if it benefits them, thus increasing the risk of unethical practices within the organization (Karg et al., 2024). For this reason, good governance, which includes transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, is very important

in building employee trust in the organization (Kusnadi et al., 2024). However, good governance alone is not enough without effective leadership that can balance power with social responsibility (Al-Husseini, 2024).

More flexible leadership approaches, such as "smooth power," are increasingly relevant in the modern era. This leadership style does not rely on strict control, but rather uses subtle influence to help organizations adapt to change (Ohlsson et al., 2020). On the other hand, academic leadership in higher education is often influenced by political factors, especially in the appointment of rectors or the distribution of research funds, which can hinder meritocracy and transparency (Bhushan, 2023). As a reflection of the organization, a competent leader must have the courage to apologize for mistakes that occur and take responsibility for the actions of his subordinates (Wang et al., 2023). Authentic leadership also plays a role in reducing injustices in organizations, such as testimonial injustice, where individuals are disbelieved or ignored because of certain prejudices related to gender, race, or position in the organizational hierarchy (Tian & Nutbrown, 2023).

Leadership is not just about occupying a formal position and title (rational authority), but is also recognized based on personal character (charismatic authority), experience and expertise (expert authority), and recognition from the professional community (social authority) (Grimm et al., 2023). Thus, a leader must be able to influence, inspire, and create a balance between ethical values and a data-driven approach to achieve organizational goals that are sustainable and adaptive to changing times.

Authentic leadership is a leadership approach that emphasizes honesty, transparency, self-awareness, and a genuine relationship between leaders and subordinates (Hanaysha, 2022). This leadership model contributes significantly to creating an innovative work environment, where individuals are encouraged to be creative and innovative (Al-Regeb, 2023). Authentic leadership also plays a role in realizing inclusivity within the university environment by prioritizing shared interests, without discrimination against minority groups, and upholding the principles of morality, ethics, justice, and academic freedom (Sinha, 2020). Furthermore, authentic leadership is oriented towards building a fair, transparent, and trust-based work environment, by ensuring bias-free decision-making and encouraging the implementation of environmentally friendly practices in institutions (Srivastava et al., 2020)

So, the concept of authentic leadership in an organization is an integration of transparency, morality, trust, objectivity, fairness, and prioritizing healthy relationships between leaders and subordinates, ensuring that organizational policies and strategies are based on strong evidence. Thus, authentic leadership is able to create a work environment that is ethical, innovative, adaptive to technological change, and oriented towards the welfare and development of human resources within the organization. Well, one form of human resource development carried out by authentic leadership in higher education is the career development of lecturers.

3. METHODS

This research was conducted at the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal, using a case study research method by adopting a mixed method design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, thus utilizing the strengths of both approaches to answer complex research questions, which cannot be fully answered with just one method (Bazeley, 2020; Gallo & Joo, 2018; Hoang & Nguyen, 2024; Minc *et al.*, 2022; Shannon-Baker, 2022). By prioritizing a clear philosophical stance, researchers can manage the challenges of effectively integrating the two methods, which in turn produces more in-depth and comprehensive findings (Coates, 2021; Gallo & Joo, 2018; Minc *et al.*, 2022; Shannon-Baker, 2022).

Research with a mixed methods approach consists of three main components First-**Data Collection and Analysis** This process includes the collection, analysis, and integration of both types of data, which can include surveys, experiments, interviews, and observations (Gallo & Joo, 2018). Second-**Research Design** The designs used include various models such as sequential exploratory design, explanatory sequence, and convergent. More advanced design frameworks involve multistage approaches, interventions, case studies, and participatory approaches (Fetters *et al.*, 2020; Minc *et al.*, 2022). Third-**Integration Strategy** The data integration process can be done by connecting, building, combining, and embedding, which serves to unify qualitative and quantitative data at various stages of research (Fetters *et al.*, 2020).

Mixed methods research is a powerful approach, combining the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods to provide deeper and more comprehensive insights into research questions (Gallo & Joo, 2018; Javdani *et al.*, 2023). Flexibility and ability in triangulating data makes it very useful

in complex fields such as health, education, and social sciences (De Allegri *et al.*, 2020; Javdani *et al.*, 2023; Minc *et al.*, 2022; Palinkas *et al.*, 2019). The explanatory sequential mixed methods design in a mixed methods approach allows researchers to first collect and analyze quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. This design has a two-phase structure (quantitative and qualitative) that allows for a deeper understanding of the research problem by integrating numerical data with more detailed contextual insights (Ivankova *et al.*, 2022; Perdomo, 2023; Yan, 2017).

In the initial stage, quantitative data were obtained through a questionnaire with a Likert scale of 1-5. **Authentic leadership variables were measured using nine main indicators** self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, internal morality perspective, concern for people and organizations, personal responsibility, self-reflection and self-interrogation, emotional integrity, and continuous transformation of ethical practices. Meanwhile, **lecturer career development variables were measured using five indicators** academic career path, educator certification, performance management and career development plans, professional competency enhancement, and institutional support.

The study population comprised 127 permanent lecturers at the Islamic religious college that served as the case study location. The sampling technique used Stratified Proportional Random Sampling, with strata differentiated based on length of service (less than four years and more than four years) and functional position (Assistant Expert, Lecturer, and Associate Lecturer). The sample size was determined using the Cochran formula to produce a size proportional to the lecturer population. The collected quantitative data were then analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) using SmartPLS 4 software to test construct validity, reliability, and the relationship between the studied variables.

After the quantitative phase was completed, the research continued with a qualitative phase to enrich understanding and provide a more in-depth explanation of the findings. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and institutional document reviews involving purposively selected informants, including structural leaders, senior lecturers, junior lecturers, and human resource managers. Qualitative analysis was conducted using NVivo with a thematic analysis approach, which included coding, categorization, and the development of relevant themes.

The quantitative and qualitative results were then integrated to produce meta-inferences, namely comprehensive conclusions regarding the influence of authentic leadership on lecturers' career development. Through this explanatory sequential design, the study is expected to be able to answer the research questions more comprehensively, not only regarding the statistical relationships between variables, but also the social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape the reality on the ground.

The explanatory sequential mixed methods design is considered an integrated and effective approach in exploring the transformation of authentic leadership in lecturer career development through expertise mapping in higher education. This approach combines quantitative and qualitative data sequentially, starting with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by qualitative data, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Subedi, 2016).

In the context of higher education, this design has proven useful. For example, research conducted by Mardiana et al. (2022) used a combined method with a sequential explanatory design approach to examine efforts to improve teachers' innovative behavior through developing aspects of teamwork, empowerment, and the principal's visionary leadership. The results showed a positive relationship between these variables, emphasizing the importance of an integrated approach in educational research (Mardiana et al., 2022).

Additionally, research by Abu & Toyon (2021) discusses the phases and challenges of a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, providing insight into the complexities of sequentially collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data. This understanding is crucial in the context of authentic leadership transformation in higher education, where the integration of numerical data and contextual insights can improve decision-making regarding lecturer career development (Abu & Toyon, 2021). **Thus, the application of explanatory sequential mixed method design for the study From Authenticity to Advancement Exploring the Role of Authentic Leadership in Lecturer Career Development - Evidence from Indonesian Higher Education is considered to provide a more holistic and in-depth understanding, which in turn can support more effective policies and practices in higher education.**

4. RESULTS

The results of the research data processing show

that the indicators in the authentic leadership and career development variables are interrelated. The Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values were recorded above 0.70. Likewise, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and outer loadings values exceeded 0.50. These findings indicate that the instrument used is strong enough to measure each research variable. The discriminant validity test was also met because the discriminant validity Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) value was below 0.90. This means that the two variables can be clearly distinguished. Subsequent path analysis revealed that authentic leadership has a positive influence on the career development of lecturers at the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal. Thus, the research hypothesis is accepted. Details of the data processing results are shown in the following table and figure

Table 1: Convergent Validity.

Variables	Items	Outer Loadings	Alpha	CR	AVE
Authentic Leadership	AL1	0.876	0.974	0.976	0.696
	AL10	0.859			
	AL11	0.849			
	AL12	0.841			
	AL13	0.882			
	AL14	0.841			
	AL15	0.687			
	AL16	0.859			
	AL17	0.817			
	AL18	0.819			
	AL2	0.860			
	AL3	0.757			
	AL4	0.858			
	AL5	0.823			
	AL6	0.865			
AL7	0.847				
AL8	0.878				
AL9	0.777				
Career Development	CD1	0.847	0.931	0.940	0.595
	CD10	0.849			
	CD11	0.748			
	CD2	0.790			
	CD3	0.785			
	CD4	0.867			
	CD5	0.716			
	CD6	0.792			
	CD7	0.716			
	CD8	0.664			
CD9	0.677				

Following established PLS-SEM guidelines, we assessed indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity (Cheung et al., 2024; Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2022). All outer loadings exceeded 0.664, which is above the acceptable minimum of 0.40–0.70 and indicates that the indicators adequately represent their respective

constructs. Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.940 to 0.976, well above the recommended threshold of 0.70, thus confirming strong internal consistency reliability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged between 0.595 and 0.696, exceeding the cut-off value of 0.50 and therefore supporting convergent validity (Gefen et al., 2000; Henseler et al., 2025; Ringle et al., 2023). Taken together, these results demonstrate that the measurement model meets the accepted standards for construct validity and reliability in SEM-PLS.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity.

Variables	AL	CD
Authentic Leadership (AL)		
Career Development (CD)	0.712	

The hypothesis in this study measures the influence of authentic leadership on the career development of lecturers at the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal.

Table 3: Hypothesis Testing of the Influence of Authentic Leadership on Lecturer Career Development.

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	p-value	95% Path Coefficient Confidence Interval		f-square
			Lower Limit	Upper Limit	
H0: There is no influence of authentic leadership on the career development of lecturers at the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal. H1: There is a positive influence of authentic leadership on the career development of lecturers at the Mandailing Natal State Islamic College.	0.698	0.000	0.610	0.795	0.949

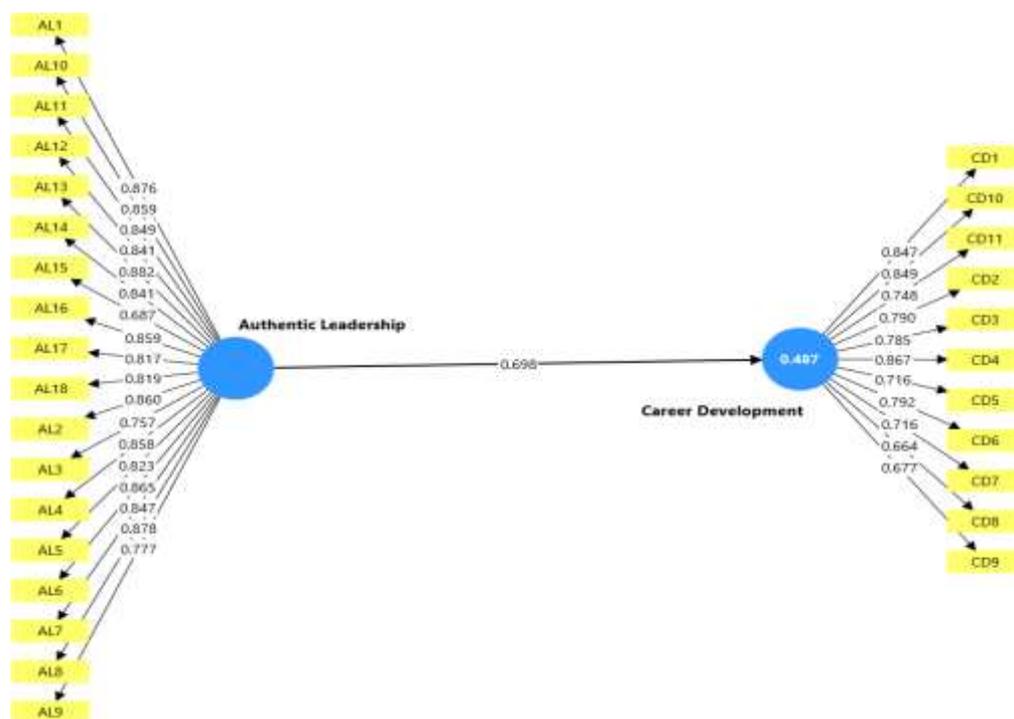


Figure 1: The Influence of Authentic Leadership on Lecturer Career Development.

Based on the data analysis results in Table 3, it was found that the null hypothesis (H0) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H1) was accepted. This finding confirms the assumption that authentic leadership has a positive effect on the career development of lecturers at the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal. This is reflected in the path coefficient value of 0.698 with a p-value of 0.000, which is smaller than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant relationship. This means that any increase

in the application of an authentic leadership style has the potential to encourage improvements in lecturer career development.

Table 4: F-square Values.

F-square value	Category
≤ 0.02	Low
≥ 0.15	Moderate
≥ 0.35	Tall

Source: (Hair et al., 2010, 2019)

With a 95% confidence level, the magnitude of the influence is estimated to be in the range of 0.610 to 0.795. Furthermore, the f-square value of 0.949 far exceeds the threshold of 0.35, indicating that authentic leadership has a strong impact on the career development of lecturers at the Mandailing Natal State Islamic College.

Table 5: R Square Value of Authentic Leadership-Career Development.

Research variables	R square	Mean	Standard deviation	p-value
Authentic Leadership - Career Development	0.487	0.503	0.066	0.000

Table 6: Interpretation of the Value of the Coefficient of Determination (R2).

R ² value	Interpretation	Percentage (%)	Interpretation
0.00 – 0.10	Weak	< 10%	Very low
0.11 – 0.30	Modest (moderate-low)	10% – 30%	Low
0.31 – 0.50	Moderate	31% – 50%	Currently
0.51 – 0.75	Substantial (strong)	51%– 75%	Tall
>0.75	Very substantial (very strong)	> 75%	Very high

Table 5 shows that authentic leadership makes a significant contribution to the career development of

lecturers at the Mandailing Natal State Islamic College. This is evident from the R-square value of 0.487 (moderate), which, when multiplied by 100, represents a contribution of 48.7%. Table 6 interprets this figure as moderate, indicating that the influence of authentic leadership on lecturer career development is moderate but significant enough to be considered in institutional strategies.

In response to this issue, there are several important steps that university leaders should take seriously. First, it is crucial to implement the principle of transparency in every academic promotion process to avoid policy ambiguity, inconsistent implementation, and perceptions of unfairness that could hinder lecturers' understanding of promotion procedures to higher levels (Elhakim, 2024).

The results of qualitative data exploration using the Project Map feature in NVivo software provide a comprehensive visual depiction of the interrelationships between themes and subthemes that emerge in the context of lecturer career development. Through this mapping, several key interconnected elements are identified, reflecting the complexity of lecturer career processes influenced by factors such as leadership. This visualization not only emphasizes the pattern of relationships between categories but also shows how key concepts support each other in forming theoretical constructs relevant to the research focus.

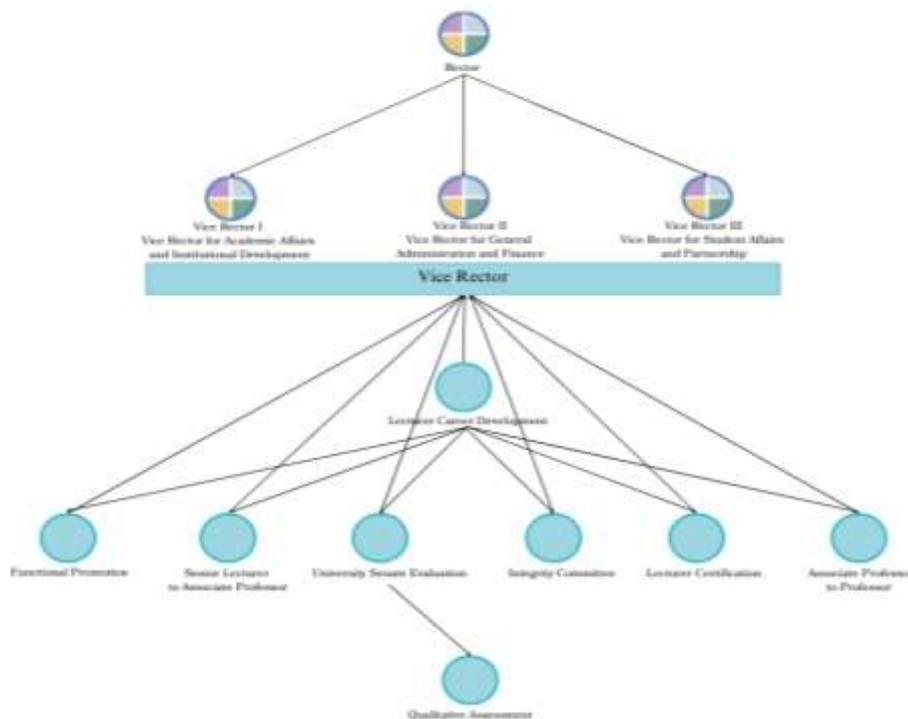


Figure 2: Project Map: The Influence of Authentic Leadership on Lecturer Career Development.

The project map above clearly demonstrates that the leadership role at the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal significantly determines the career development of lecturers, particularly in the promotion process. This process is not merely a technical matter, but also involves a strong dynamic of values and perceptions from policymakers, particularly through the existence of the Integrity Committee and the Senate forum. These two units are the primary determinants in deciding whether a lecturer is worthy of promotion to a higher functional position, from Assistant Expert, Lecturer, Associate Lecturer, to Professor. Although the Integrity Committee functions to assess the completeness and validity of documents, the final decision rests with the Senate, which assesses them based on qualitative aspects and personal integrity.

The most striking illustration is seen in the case of a permanent lecturer who had only been teaching at the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal for one year after transferring from another PTKIN. He proposed a promotion from Lecturer to Associate Lecturer. Administratively, all requirements had been met, but his proposal was rejected. When confirmed, the Deputy Chairperson for Academic and Institutional Affairs said, "Look, he just moved, he's only been teaching for a year. He's never been seen marching, he wears jeans to campus, and now he's already submitted a study assignment to pursue a doctorate. His contribution to the State Islamic College has not been seen, despite his extensive scientific work." This demonstrates that perceptions of loyalty, discipline, and personal integrity are major considerations in senate decision-making.

This rejection naturally caused disappointment among the lecturers. The Vice Chair for Academic and Institutional Affairs explained, "We're not rejecting or canceling the application, we're just postponing it." However, several lecturers questioned the transparency and working mechanisms of the Integrity Committee and Senate. **DKU I, a lecturer whose proposal for associate professor was also rejected, expressed his concerns** "We don't know when the integrity team was formed or what the criteria for its members are. Suddenly, there's a decree. They assess eligibility and decide on integrity. If an employee's performance targets are good, their integrity shouldn't be questioned. But some employees have good performance targets but don't pass the integrity assessment. What's the criteria for failing the integrity assessment? I'm not complaining; it's our right; we've met all the requirements, but why is this being made so difficult?"

Similar criticisms were also voiced regarding the employee performance target assessment process. DB IV stated that he had published an article in Scopus, but his employee performance target rating was only "good." The informant then reported this to the Deputy Chairperson for General Administration and Finance, who holds the authority to assess employee performance targets. The response was, "Ask the chairman. If it's okay, the chairman will change it." Eventually, the chairman met with him and the rating was changed to "excellent." This suggests that ratings can change not only based on performance, but also on communication and closeness.

A similar sentiment was expressed by DB I, who felt his employee performance targets were unfair compared to other colleagues who had publications in OJS, but received excellent employee performance target scores due to their close personal relationships with their superiors. "I have publications in SINTA 2, but why are my employee performance targets the same as those who only publish in OJS? Some even get excellent scores just because they helped create flyers or websites, even though their publications are mediocre (OJS journals)." WK 2's response at that time was because they requested excellent employee performance target scores, arguing that they had helped their superiors a lot, while the informant did not request this and the SKP score could no longer be changed because their status had been approved in the application. As a result, the informant could not be promoted from III/b to III/c, while his other two colleagues were promoted to III/c, even though they were in the same class when they were appointed as permanent lecturers in 2022.

A sharper critique came from DKP IV "Person A is already good he has Scopus, his community service is okay, but because he is considered to be argumentative, his grade is failed. This is what someone at the central level said, if you want a very good SKP grade, you have to bow down to the chairman every day." This statement illustrates the bitter reality experienced by some lecturers, where objectivity is sometimes obscured by the subjectivity of their leaders. One informant even mentioned that in the workplace, sometimes high performance can still be considered non-contributory simply because it is seen as undermining the system.

"The assessment process is sometimes subjective in our opinion, but objective in their (the leadership's) opinion. Our views can't always be the same. No matter how hard we try, for example, to get an associate professor to the point of exploding with files, even if they've had a high score since 2017, they

can't mentally handle it. It's not their destiny (due to the leadership's qualitative assessment). Subjective or not, the leadership can't be blamed, no matter what," said DKP IV.

On the other hand, DKP III added, "A good grade is in line with expectations, a very good grade is above expectations. The final result for assessing good and very good is the leader's assessment. Even if your work results are above expectations. The key to employee performance targets is the leadership." Responding to this, Deputy Chief of Staff I acknowledged that in the past there was indeed a bias in assessment standards. "In the past, the standard grade was indeed biased." However, he stated that starting in 2024, employee performance target assessments would be performance-based and more measurable. Responding to the disappointment, he added, "I believe that past sins can be corrected with good deeds in the future. In our religion, goodness erases badness." A statement that implies hope that the system will move in a more equitable direction.

From all the explanations and dynamics depicted, that the process of promotion of functional lecturers at the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal is not only determined by the fulfillment of the elements of the Tri Dharma of Higher Education and the quality of scientific publications, but also greatly influenced by performance assessments by the leadership, which now replaces the KUM system. The target value of employee performance in the category of "good" (25 points) or "very good" (37.5 points) is the key to obtaining credit points for application to a higher level. However, in addition to administrative aspects and academic substance, the existence of the integrity committee and the role of the senate play a central role in deciding a lecturer's eligibility for promotion.

This situation demands leadership that is not only assertive but also authentic, true to values, open to criticism, and capable of upholding justice. The lecturers hope that this process will be carried out more transparently and objectively, without being influenced by emotional attachments or personal considerations. Ultimately, authentic leaders are those who can see the people behind the numbers and the human values behind the documents. Without this, perceptions of injustice will persist amidst collective efforts to build more dignified educational institutions.

5. DISCUSSION

The direction and dynamics of a lecturer's career are greatly influenced by the quality of leadership

within their institution. Authentic leadership at the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal has been shown to significantly impact lecturers' career success. This is reflected in the analysis results, which show a path coefficient of 0.698 and a p-value of 0.000, well below the 0.05 threshold, indicating a statistically significant relationship. In other words, the stronger the application of authentic leadership, the greater the potential for improving lecturers' career development. Indicators of authentic leaders' concern for others provide tangible support for lecturers. This attention fosters motivation for them to focus more on improving and developing their academic careers (Andriansyah et al., 2024; Cahyadi et al., 2024) both internally and externally.

Leadership in this context is not simply about structure, but rather a tangible manifestation of strategic institutional support. The characteristics of an authentic, transparent leader foster honest and open communication, enabling lecturers to express their career aspirations and plan future development in a more focused manner (Durrah et al., 2024; Hsu et al., 2024). Furthermore, caring for the people and organizations they lead can also help lecturers lay the foundation for more mature career development. Authentic leadership, through transparent communication indicators, can increase employee trust and engagement. Ultimately, it is crucial for enhancing work initiative (Jiang & Shen, 2023; Kim et al., 2022), so that it has a positive impact on the future career development of employees.

Interview findings related to transparency in communication regarding lecturers' functional promotions revealed that some lecturers did not even clearly understand the promotion process from associate professor to associate professor. Furthermore, the failure to communicate transparently to the lecturers in integrity team and senate meetings raised serious issues, particularly when they were declared unsuccessful in the promotion process.

The lack of direct communication or confirmation from the senate actually raises suspicions of subjectivity and unfairness, given the qualitative and closed nature of senate meetings. Under these circumstances, "No matter how many scientific works or publications a proposing lecturer produces, if the senate members deem it unworthy based on moral, ethical, or other qualitative considerations, the proposal can be rejected," said the Deputy Chairperson for Academic and Institutional Affairs, representing the State Islamic College of Mandailing Natal. This practice deserves attention and immediate correction, as it risks eroding lecturers'

trust in the integrity and fairness of leadership at the institutional level. One of the fundamentals of authentic leadership is active listening (Wong *et al.*, 2010). Active listening helps build trust and engagement between leaders and employees. When this happens consistently, it leads to higher job satisfaction (Bamford *et al.*, 2013; Kim *et al.*, 2022).

Secondly, the assessment of employee performance targets is sometimes subjective and biased, as directly acknowledged by the Deputy Head of Academic and Institutional Affairs, "In the past, the standard values were indeed biased. Moreover, when we first set employee performance targets, we had very limited training (in terms of knowledge). By 2024, our employee performance targets will be performance-based, making them more measurable." Regarding subjectivity in employee performance target assessments, **he answered**

"I believe that the way to correct past sins is to improve the future. Even if we fix them backward (employee performance targets), the system is locked in (cannot be changed). If I were in that position, if I met you, I would apologize. In our religious concept, goodness can erase evil. This means that a vision for change in the future can correct past mistakes."

This kind of non-objective assessment is certainly detrimental to lecturers, considering that employee performance targets play a strategic role in determining eligibility for promotion. For example, a lecturer who should have received a "very good" grade with a score of 37.5 points was instead awarded only a "good" grade of 25 points. Consequently, the process of accumulating the minimum credit points, which could have taken three years, could potentially be delayed to four years or even more.

This kind of subjective evaluation not only slows down a lecturer's career, but also creates a sense of injustice, especially if the assessment is influenced by personal bias or the internal political dynamics of the institution (Shoukat Malik & Sagheer, 2022). To avoid such practices, university leaders need to foster a culture of transparent, data-driven assessment that consistently upholds professional ethics. This approach will not only strengthen the integrity of the evaluation system but also minimize the influence of cognitive bias in the performance appraisal process (Deshpande, 2025).

One concrete manifestation of career development is job promotion, which in the context of vertical mobility should be based on the principles of objectivity, fairness, and performance. Brown & Associates (2002) emphasizes that promotions

should not be based solely on length of service, but rather on a combination of achievement, competence, potential, and organizational needs. Therefore, a fair and transparent assessment system is crucial so that promotions truly reflect an individual's abilities, rather than being influenced by bias or specific interests. In this way, job promotions not only serve as a form of recognition for individual contributions but also serve as a career development strategy that can foster a healthy, fair, and motivating work climate (Brown, 2002).

A number of critics believe that authentic leadership is basically difficult to separate from the element of subjectivity, because this concept emphasizes the authenticity of the self and the personal values of a leader (Ford & Harding, 2011). This subjective element is often seen as contradicting the demand for maintaining complete objectivity in assessing performance. Other critics also emphasize that the notion of authenticity emphasizes self-honesty over rigorous self-reflection. Therefore, an authentic leader is required to be sensitive to potential personal biases and strive to balance them through ethical decision-making, in line with the moral values and goals of the organization (Chang & Diddams, 2009). Subjectivity is ultimately an inseparable part of authentic leadership; it influences how leaders understand themselves and build relationships with others. Awareness in recognizing and managing this subjectivity can make authentic leadership practices grow more pure and effective, because authentic leadership actually contains the concept of transformational existentialism. Hanaway (2019) suggests that existentialism is not just a technique but a way of being (a way to become) a better version. An existentialist leader is an authentic leader with full existential awareness (Hanaway, 2019).

Existentialism views self-change (transformation) as a subjective, emic, and personal process. Therefore, authenticity becomes increasingly apparent. A person truly chooses their own path in life (Crowell, 2024; Zhu *et al.*, 2024). However, this process is never certain; there is always uncertainty. However, in existentialism, that is precisely where the value of authenticity lies. So, simply put, being authentic according to existentialism equates to having the courage to change personally, despite the uncertainty, because only then can we truly be ourselves. Existentialism provides a philosophical foundation for authentic leadership (Binder, 2024; Dwan & Willig, 2021; Russo-Netzer, 2025). A leader who undergoes personal transformation from within (emic). They are authentic because they are rooted in

self-awareness, not pretense or imitation. Authenticity is tested in uncertainty, when leaders remain true to their personal values while adapting to changing realities. **In other words, an authentic leader is a practical existentialist** they dare to be themselves, make moral choices in the face of uncertainty, and allow their personal transformation to inspire others.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm that authentic leadership plays a significant role in encouraging the career development of lecturers at Islamic religious universities. Quantitative analysis using SEM-PLS indicates a strong positive relationship, while qualitative results show that transparency, integrity, and fairness in the performance evaluation and promotion processes are determining factors that are often more influential than academic achievement. Thus, lecturer career development is influenced not only by scientific productivity but also by leadership qualities that emphasize humanitarian values, ethics, and spirituality.

6.1. Implications

The findings of this study provide several important lessons for higher education policy. First, the academic promotion process should be implemented more openly and clearly, so that lecturers can understand the applicable assessment standards and not feel disadvantaged by bias or

subjectivity. Second, the role of higher education leaders is crucial; therefore, they need to be equipped with authentic leadership values such as honesty, transparency, and responsibility to serve as role models and support lecturers' career paths. Third, a healthy academic environment is supported not only by professionalism but also by appreciation for the efforts and achievements of each lecturer. By creating a balance between work demands and appropriate appreciation, lecturer career development can be more equitable, humane, and sustainable.

6.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted at only one Islamic religious college, so the results cannot be fully generalized to other contexts. Second, the use of an explanatory sequential mixed methods design provided depth of analysis, but also faced time and resource constraints that could have affected the breadth of qualitative data exploration. Third, although authentic leadership and career development variables were comprehensively tested, other factors such as individual motivation, external support, and national policy dynamics were not fully considered. Finally, given the strong integration of spirituality and local cultural traditions, potential cultural bias may also shape how authentic leadership is perceived and practiced, which should be considered in future cross-cultural research.

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