Servant leadership and academics outcomes in higher education: the role of job satisfaction

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of servant leadership on work engagement and affective commitment among academics in higher education. Moreover, the paper highlights the role of job satisfaction as an intervening mechanism among the examined variables.

Design/methodology/approach – Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to academics working in the Palestinian higher education sector. We used structural equation modelling to examine the hypotheses.

Findings – A positive relationship was found between servant leadership and affective commitment. The relationship between servant leadership and work engagement is fully mediated by job satisfaction, whereas partial mediation was found between servant leadership and affective commitment. Both work engagement and affective commitment have a positive impact on academics' job performance.

Practical implications – The paper provides a fertile ground for higher education managers concerning the role of leadership in stimulating work engagement and organisational commitment among academics.

Originality/value – First, the paper is one of the few studies that empirically examines servant leadership in higher education using data coming from a non-Western context because most of the servant leadership research is conducted in the Western part of the world (Parris and Peachey, 2013). Second, we empirically provide evidence for the argument that servant leadership is needed in higher education. Third, the paper contributes to the limited body of research on work engagement and commitment in the higher education sector.

Keywords Performance, Affective commitment, Work engagement, Higher education, Servant leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Academic organisations are knowledge-intensive, and superior performance relies mainly on the commitment and engagement of their academic staff. If academic organisations seek to achieve a competitive advantage, focusing on academic staff is fundamental (Simmons, 2002). Academic

staff provide a source of competitive excellence to universities, as their competencies and experiences cannot easily be replaced (Bowen and Ford, 2002; Shrand and Ronnie, 2019). The academic sector relies on the engagement and the commitment of their academic staff more than any other sector (Oshagbemi, 2000). Engaged employees demonstrate higher levels of loyalty and psychological commitment to their organisations than employees who are not engaged (Lovakov, 2016). Although highly engaged employees tend to be committed to their organisations, the two concepts of commitment and engagement are not the same: Engagement is related to the work itself, whereas commitment is related to the organisation (Maslach *et al.*, 2001). Recruiting and retaining engaged employees in academic institutions is an important factor for success (Shuck and Wollard, 2010). The engagement of academic staff has a demonstrably significant effect on students' success and the achievement of educational objectives (González-Rico *et al.*, 2018; Hajdarpasic *et al.*, 2015). For instance, the engagement of academic staff stimulates research publications and outcomes (Christensen *et al.*, 2020). In other words, both the quality of academic contributions and the success of educational organisations rely mainly on the engagement of the academic staff (Christensen *et al.*, 2020; Gloria and Steinhardt, 2017). Moreover, commitment to higher education is a significant element in achieving high performance among academics (Eisinga *et al.*, 2010). In general, previous research suggests that the well-being of employees is positively associated with their performance (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017).

In higher education settings, different studies have been carried out on topics such as the satisfaction of academics with their jobs (Smerek and Peterson, 2007), academic staff turnover (Johnsrud *et al.*, 2000), staff spirit (Rosser, 2004) and staff commitment (Nazir and Islam, 2017). Although several researchers have studied employees' engagement and its consequences (Cole *et al.*, 2012; Saks, 2006), academic staff engagement and commitment are areas which are not well explored in the research (Wilkins *et al.*, 2017). Most research on engagement and commitment has been conducted in the business sector (Daniels, 2016; Lovakov, 2016).

Academic institutions are complex institutions with limited resources, and retaining highly committed and engaged staff needs to be a priority. Yet, achieving elevated levels of staff engagement is not an easy task because it requires high levels of energy and resources (Macey and Schneider, 2008). An important driver to achieving higher levels of energy among employees can be servant leadership (De Clercq *et al.*, 2014). This leadership style puts followers as a priority and focuses on their growth and personal development (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2011). According to Wheeler (2012), servant leadership fits best with the values of academic institutions more than any other type of leadership does. Leadership research has demonstrated a relationship between work engagement and diverse styles of leadership (Den Hartog and Belschak, 2012; Macey and Schneider, 2008),and has investigated the links between commitment and transformational leadership behaviours (Tahir *et al.*, 2014). However, studies on the impact of servant leadership on employee work engagement and organisational commitment in higher education are scarce.

In response to these research gaps, our paper tries to examine and empirically validate the relationship among servant leadership, work engagement and organisational commitment in higher education settings. The paper also proposes servant leadership as being an antecedent to job satisfaction, whereas work engagement and organisational commitment are consequences of job satisfaction. Moreover, the paper theorises that both work engagement and organisational commitment have a positive relationship with job performance among academic staff.

Servant leadership
Servant leadership is a form of leadership which is attributed to Greenleaf (2002) and which is receiving considerable attention from researchers and scholars. This extraordinary style of leading – in which one leads through serving followers – seeks to fulfil the needs of others, which will ultimately motivate others to follow (Greenleaf, 2002). Servant leadership is concerned with

how to enable followers to accomplish the determined organisational objectives. A recent definition of servant leadership was provided by Eva *et al.* (2019, p. 114), in which they mentioned that:

Servant leadership is:

- an other-oriented approach to leadership;
- manifested through one-on-one prioritising of follower individual needs and interests; and
- an outward reorientation of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organisation and the larger community.

Servant leaders are different from other leaders because they focus on the growth and development of their followers. These leaders are both ethical and authentic, and they motivate their followers through a special leadership style (Autry, 2007). According to van Dierendonck (2011), this special leadership style is characterised by humility, stewardship, interpersonal acceptance, empowering, providing direction and authenticity. According to Carter and Baghurst (2014), servant leaders create a particular organisational culture to address customers' concerns, ethics and employee engagement – where both followers and leaders are united to achieve organisational objectives.

The role of servant leaders is to empower followers through trust and development, which in turn inspires employees, who make decisions that influence the success of the organisation (Keith, 2015; van Dierendonck, 2011). In other words, servant leaders motivate followers and provide them services rather than directing them (Stone *et al.*, 2004). In addition, servant leaders demonstrate appreciation towards their subordinates and show a sense of accountability towards their personal development and growth (Ehrhart, 2004). Another role played by servant leaders is to serve as an ethical example, motivating their subordinates to abandon dishonourable practices.

Servant leadership demonstrated to be beneficial to the organisation and employees alike. For instance, Ehrhart (2004) found that servant leaders' behaviours have a positive impact on organisational citizenship behaviours and justice perceptions among employees. Moreover, Russell and Stone (2002) highlight the importance of servant leadership for improving organisational performance because it creates a sort of organisational culture in which followers demonstrate positive behaviours and attitudes. Other empirical evidence found that servant leadership is positively associated with employee voice behaviour (Chughtai, 2016; Lapointe and Vandenberghe, 2018), thriving at work (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2018), employee creativity (Yang *et al.*, 2017), job performance (Schwarz *et al.*, 2016), employee organisational citizenship behaviour (Amah, 2018) and group social capital (Linuesa-Langreo *et al.*, 2017) . These empirical results are in line with the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which explains the mechanism through which servant leadership stimulates positive attitudes and behaviours at the workplace. In fact, the behaviours practised by servant leaders are appreciated and valued by employees, which in turn lead them to reciprocate with positive work-related outcomes.

On another note, servant leadership differs from other styles of leadership such as transformational leadership or charismatic leadership. For instance, servant leaders differ from transformational leaders in their major goal, in that servant leaders put followers as a priority through serving them, whereas transformational leaders call for developing their followers whose performance enhances organisational performance (Stone *et al.*, 2004; van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014). In general, it has been argued that servant leadership, in comparison to other styles of leadership, provides a better prediction of individual and organisational outcomes (Hoch *et al.*, 2018; Ling *et al.*, 2017).

In higher education, leadership may tend towards being ineffective and leaders may sometimes focus more on their individual needs rather than on institutional ones (Greenleaf, 2002). Concerning

servant leadership, Taylor-Gillham (1998) reported that servant leaders in educational settings need to promote a work environment that is composed of integrity, equality and a strong human spirit. Servant leadership can bring several benefits to the educational environment. These benefits include improved student achievement, staff development and community building (Greenfield and Andrews, 1961).

Servant leadership and work engagement

Work engagement's role as a key driver for organisational success received notable interest among human resource (HR) researchers and scholars (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2008). Studying what makes employees demonstrate higher levels of engagement is a topic of great concern for HR scholars (Shuck *et al.*, 2013). Employees with higher levels of engagement show elevated levels of enthusiasm towards their work (May *et al.*, 2004) and are viewed as a source of energy and inspiration for others (Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2009). In general, previous research suggests the critical role that work engagement plays for both job and organisational performance (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008; Shuck *et al.*, 2013).

Schaufeli *et al.* (2002, p. 74) defined work engagement as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption". In addition, Kowske *et al.* (2009) added that work engagement is the degree to which workers are driven to contribute to corporate success and are prepared to make efforts to achieve tasks that are necessary to the attainment of organisational objectives. Individuals who are highly engaged are mentally and emotionally connected to their work and have higher continuation will (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2019; Aboramadan *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, disengaged employees tend to show higher levels of absenteeism, behave negatively and commit unethical practices (Blanchard and Hodges, 2003).

On another note, work engagement differs from other constructs such as organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006). More specifically, work engagement is reflected in the behavioural part of the work (Macey and Schneider, 2008), whereas job satisfaction refers more to the work experiences of the employee himself (Alvinius *et al.*, 2017), and organisational commitment is an attitudinal concept (Meyer and Allen, 1997).

In higher education, academic staff engagement is crucial because low levels of engagement might lead to several problems, including the quality of teaching and research. Work engagement in education has been studied by several researchers, and the main focus was to examine its consequences and antecedents. For instance, Barkhuizen and Rothmann (2006) reported that academics who have research degrees such as PhD show a greater level of engagement. These authors reported that factors such as rewards, recognition and appreciation from the leader can increase the level of engagement. Bexley *et al.* (2011) reported that Australian academics form their intention to leave their institutions because of job insecurity, remuneration issues, organisational culture and institutional management. Selmer *et al.* (2014) found that knowledge sharing is positively associated with different forms of engagement among Danish academics. Barkhuizen *et al.* (2014) demonstrated a relationship between the availability of job resources and work engagement among South African academics.

The research suggests the important role servant leaders play in enhancing employee feelings towards their work (Ayers, 2008). Servant leadership fuels vigour among subordinates (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), because they recognise their unique skills and competencies (van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). As such, followers tend to experience positive emotions towards their work (Page and Wong, 2000) because of the extraordinary caring behaviour of the servant leader. By doing so, servant leadership creates a sort of

psychological safety net among employees (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2011), which will ultimately encourage their engagement (Greenleaf, 2002).

Empirically, very few studies have been conducted on the servant leadership–work engagement relationship. Moreover, these studies have been conducted in non-academic contexts. Among those, the studies of Carter and Baghurst (2014), Coetzer *et al.* (2017), De Clercq *et al.* (2014), Kaur (2018) and Ling *et al.* (2017) found that servant leadership exerts a positive impact on employee work engagement. Given the previous discussion, we posit the following hypothesis:

H1. Servant leadership has a positive influence on the work engagement of academics.

Servant leadership and affective organisational commitment

Organisational commitment has attracted attention from diverse theoretical and empirical aspects (Kim *et al.*, 2017; Macedo *et al.*, 2016) because it is considered to be a critical organisational issue for administrators and HR managers (Reade and Lee, 2012). This concept is defined as the extent to which an employee is able to be energetic and to feel proud of being with a particular organisation (Mowday *et al.*, 1979). In different terms, organisational commitment is determined by regard (Powell and Meyer, 2004) and individual identification (Mowday *et al.*, 1979). Moreover, according to Allen and Meyer (1990), organisational commitment has three forms: emotional attachment (affective commitment), obligation (normative commitment) and perceived cost (continuous commitment). These forms are widely used by different researchers to measure organisational commitment (Klein *et al.*, 2009; Thomsen *et al.*, 2016).

In higher education, organisational commitment was studied among the teaching staff in universities in different contexts. For instance, Lovakov (2016) found that academic inbreeding is a significant predictor of both affective and normative commitment. Wilkins *et al.* (2017) studied commitment to higher education in three countries: UK, Malaysia and UAE. The results demonstrate that employees at home campuses have higher motivation and commitment in comparison to their counterparts in international branch campuses. Further, affective commitment was found to be significantly related both to the availability of time for academics to learn and their ability to share their opinions and ideas (Southcombe *et al.*, 2015). Finally, Tahir *et al.* (2014) found that transformational leaders' behaviours strongly affect academics' commitment.

Concerning the relationship between leadership and commitment, previous research suggests that leadership is crucial for enhancing organisational commitment (Dick, 2011; Jackson *et al.*, 2013). More specifically, Rafferty and Griffin (2004) found that transformational leaders' behaviours have a positive impact on employee organisational commitment. Stone *et al.* (2004) found that transformational and servant leadership have common aspects, which are trust, vision, respect, integrity and delegation. This suggests that servant leadership can play a role in enhancing organisational commitment among followers.

Hampton *et al.* (1986) reported that consideration, which is another aspect of servant leadership, is positively associated with organisational commitment. Another study by Liden *et al.* (2008) found that helping followers grow has a positive effect on employee organisational commitment. Finally, Kaur (2018), Jaramillo *et al.* (2009), Ling *et al.* (2017) and Miao *et al.* (2014) demonstrated a positive relationship between servant leaders' behaviours and employee organisational commitment. Carter and Baghurst (2014), in a qualitative study, found that servant leadership has an impact on employees' organisational commitment. Based on this, it seems that employees, who perceive their leaders as being

more serving and less selfish, are more likely to feel emotionally attached and dedicated to their organisations. Hence, the following hypothesis is posited:

H2. Servant leadership has a positive influence on the affective commitment of academics.

Mediating role of job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is regarded as being the most studied work-related attitude in the field of organisational behaviour (Alvinius *et al.*, 2017). Job satisfaction can be defined as being a pleasant feeling that employees have about their jobs (Akehurst *et al.*, 2009). Similarly, Weiss (2002) contends that job satisfaction is a positive assessment that an individual makes about his job. Furthermore, it is the psychological situation which explains the emotions of a person about his job (Hellriegel *et al.*, 2005).

Job satisfaction is of extreme importance because when employees are satisfied with their jobs, they demonstrate positive work behaviours such as low turnover, productivity, low absenteeism and higher performance (Meyer *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, job satisfaction among employees can be fostered by team building, empowerment, rewards, coaching, training and effective communication (Cook, 2008).

Not only job satisfaction but also the relationship between the leader and the follower define the level of influence on employee job satisfaction (De Cremer, 2003). Furthermore, it was found that the reasons for employee dissatisfaction mainly stem from the confusing nature of the job demands coming from ineffective leadership styles (Schyns and Sanders, 2007).

Servant leadership contributes to shaping employee positive attitudes in addition to creating a positive work atmosphere for both the organisation and employees (Eva *et al.*, 2019; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010). Based on this, we can posit that when employees perceive the quality of the leader positively, they are more likely to exhibit enthusiasm, wisdom and performance at full capacity (Bambale, 2014). More specifically, followers show higher levels of satisfaction when they have leaders whose main concern is the wellbeing of the followers (Yukl, 2010). Empirically speaking, Kaur (2018), Neubert *et al.* (2016) and Amah (2018) found that servant leadership plays a significant role in elevating employee job satisfaction.

Furthermore, it can be argued that satisfied employees exhibit higher levels of employee engagement (Blizzard, 2004; Saks, 2006). Previous research lends support for the job satisfaction and work engagement relationship (Garg *et al.*, 2018; Harter *et al.*, 2002; Kaur, 2018). In the same line of inquiry, job satisfaction is viewed as being an antecedent to organisational commitment (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). This implies that happy and contented employees show higher levels of dedication and attachment to their organisation. This argument has received support from the previous research of Dirani and Kuchinke (2011) and Kaur (2018), who found that satisfied employees are more likely to exhibit higher levels of organisational commitment. Based on this discussion, we posit the following two hypotheses:

H3. Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement of academics.

H4. Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between servant leadership and affective organisational commitment of academics.

Work engagement, affective organisational commitment and task performance

The existing theory suggests that work engagement can improve job performance by creating positive feelings, which fosters the motivation to perform job duties and tasks

(Parker and Griffin, 2011). Several empirical studies found that work engagement is a significant predictor of job performance. For instance, Stairs and Galpin (2010) found that job performance can be impacted by higher levels of employee engagement. The findings are consistent with other empirical studies (Anitha, 2014; Gorgievski *et al.*, 2010; Ismail *et al.*, 2019) which confirmed the existence of a positive relationship between work engagement and job performance. Moreover, Christensen *et al.* (2020) reported that work engagement among academics enhances their research publications. In this regard, the following hypothesis can be posited:

H5. Work engagement has a positive influence on the task performance of academics.

Similarly, the level of organisational commitment among employees has been found to negatively impact job stress (Sager, 1990) and positively impact job performance (Yousef, 2000). Previous research confirms the positive effect that organisational commitment exerts on job performance (Baugh and Roberts, 1994; Chen *et al.*, 2006; Ward and Davis, 1995). The role of organisational commitment is not restricted only to performance. For instance, previous empirical studies suggest the positive impact that organisational commitment can have on in-role behaviours (Hackett *et al.*, 1994). Similarly, it is demonstrated that organisational commitment has a positive impact on extra-role behaviours (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1998; Meyer *et al.*, 1993). Hence, based on these studies, we suggest the following hypothesis:

H6. Affective organisational commitment has a positive influence on the task performance of academics.

Research model
We propose a model of the effects of servant leadership on academic staff work engagement and affective commitment via the mediating effect of job satisfaction in higher education institutions. Furthermore, the model seeks to investigate the effect of both work engagement and affective commitment on task performance of academic staff, as presented in Figure 1.

Methods and procedures
The study represents the findings of a quantitative-based study using data from the higher education sector in Palestine ($n = 12$ universities) with the objective of examining the impact of servant leadership both on work engagement and on affective commitment, taking into account job satisfaction as a mediating mechanism. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education (National Report, 2016), there are 49 higher education institutions in Palestine, and most of them are young. Our selection of those 12 universities was based on the fact that these institutions are the biggest in terms of size, number of faculty and number of academic programmes provided. The data collection method was a questionnaire administered to academic staff in the Palestinian higher education institutions. The method of distribution and collection used to guarantee a high response rate was the drop-off and pick-up method (Bryman, 2012). The questionnaire items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale in which 1 indicates absolute disagreement and 7 indicates absolute agreement. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed, and 324 were collected and validated for statistical analysis. This represents an acceptable response rate of 54 per cent. The analysis used to test the proposed hypotheses was structural equation modelling using partial least-squares techniques (Hair *et al.*, 2018). Two techniques were used: the evaluation of outer and inner models and the indirect effects using the bootstrapping method to test the mediation effects (Henseler *et al.*, 2009).
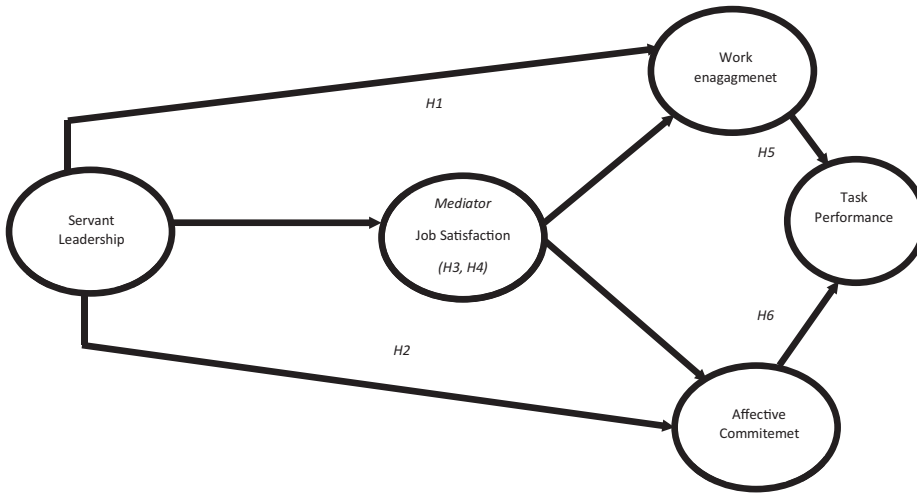
Figure 1.
Research model

Respondents' characteristics

Most of the respondents were male (60 per cent). Of the respondents, 5 per cent were 30-35 years old, 65 per cent were 35-45 and 30 per cent were 45 years or older. More than half of the respondents (55 per cent) had 5-10 years of experience, whereas 45 per cent had more than 10 years of experience. Of the respondents, 40 per cent were associate professors, 50 per cent were assistant professors and 10 per cent were full professors. And, 70 per cent of the respondents were academics with no administrative duties, whereas 30 per cent were holding administrative tasks besides their academic load.

Instrumentation

Servant leadership

This construct was measured with the seven-item scale adapted from Liden *et al.* (2015). A sample item is "My leader puts my best interests ahead of his/her own." The internal consistency value for this construct is 0.942.

Job satisfaction

We borrowed the six-item scale developed by Brayfield and Rothe (1951) to measure this variable. A sample item is "I feel that I am happier in my work than most other people." The internal consistency value for this construct is 0.942.

Work engagement

We measured this variable using the nine-item scale adapted from Schaufeli *et al.* (2006). A sample item is "At my work, I feel bursting with energy." The internal consistency value for this construct is 0.940.

Affective commitment
This construct was measured using the nine-item scale borrowed from Allen and Meyer (1990). A sample item is "I really feel as if this organisation's problems are my own." The internal consistency value for this construct is 0.953.

Task performance
We measured this variable using the six-item scale from Borman and Motowidlo (1993). A sample item is "I achieve objectives that are assigned to me." The internal consistency value for this construct is 0.897.

Results
Initial analysis
Table I shows the initial analysis of the means, standard deviations and correlations of all examined variables in this study. The results show positive correlations among servant leadership, job satisfaction, work engagement and affective commitment. The values of mean and standard deviations are as follows: servant leadership (mean = 4.89, SD: 1.26), job satisfaction (mean = 5.28, SD: 1.25), work engagement (mean = 5.47, SD: 1.05), affective commitment (mean = 5.68, SD: 1.04) and task performance (mean = 5.76, SD: 0.79). Significant strong correlations were found among servant leadership, job satisfaction, work engagement and affective commitment. Examples of these correlations are servant leadership and work engagement ($r = 0.415$, $p = 0.000$), servant leadership and affective commitment ($r = 0.486$, $p = 0.000$) and servant leadership and job satisfaction ($r = 0.482$, $p = 0.000$). Moreover, positive correlations are found between work engagement and task performance ($r = 0.514$, $p = 0.000$) and between affective commitment and task performance ($r = 0.489$, $p = 0.000$).

Common method bias consideration and model fit
As the data collected in this study originated from a single source and based on the suggestions by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), Harman's single factor test was used to assess the degree of common method bias. The results of the exploratory factor analysis generated five factors in which the measured variables did not load to a single factor and the general factor does not explain a majority of variance (47.73 per cent), which was below the cut-off value of 50 per cent. This gives an indication that the data is free of common bias.

To check for the model fit, two measures were used. First, the standardised root-mean-square residual (SRMR = 0.067) was lower than 0.08, and second, the normed fit index (NFI = 0.91) was higher than 0.90 (Hair *et al.*, 2018).

Constructs	Mean	SD	(SL)	(JS)	(WE)	(AC)	(TP)
(SL)	4.89	1.26	1				
(JS)	5.28	1.25	0.482**	1			
(WE)	5.47	1.05	0.415**	0.756**	1		
(AC)	5.68	1.04	0.486**	0.810**	0.748**	1	
(TP)	5.76	0.79	0.257**	0.342**	0.514**	0.489**	1

Table I.
Means, SDs and correlations

Notes: **Significant at the 0.01 level. $N = 324$. SL: servant leadership; JS: job satisfaction; WE: work engagement; AC: affective commitment; TP: task performance

Assessing the measurement model
To assess the internal consistency, we analysed the factor loading for the items on their latent variables. All of the items were kept in the model, and no item was omitted, because all of the items' loadings are higher than 0.7 (as presented in Table II). We have also calculated the composite reliability and average variance extracted for all variables (Hulland, 1999). Based on the results provided in Table II, all values of CRs are higher than 0.7 and AVEs are higher than 0.5, as had been suggested by Hulland (1999). Therefore, the model demonstrates internal consistency and reliability.

To examine the discriminant validity condition, the Fornell and Larcker (1981) technique was used by estimating the square root of the AVE and by comparing it with the correlations within latent variables. The results presented in Table III show that all square roots of the AVE are higher than the correlations within the examined variables. Hence, the discriminant validity condition was met.

Assessing the structural model
Figure 2 shows that the R^2 values for job satisfaction, work engagement, affective commitment and task performance exceed the acceptable moderate ratio, as suggested by Hair *et al.* (2018). Job satisfaction has an R^2 value of 0.232, work engagement has an R^2 value of 0.575, affective commitment has an R^2 value of 0.708 and task performance has an R^2 value of 0.289.

Direct effects and indirect effects
The findings, provided in Figure 2, show that servant leadership does not exert a significant direct effect on work engagement ($T = 1.080$, $p = 0.280$). Although the direct effect was not significant, there is still a positive effect of servant leadership on work engagement, as indicated in our correlation matrix. Hence, *H1* was supported. The results that the direct effect was not significant may suggest a full mediation effect.

On the other hand, servant leadership has a direct significant effect on affective commitment ($T = 2.521$, $p = 0.012$). This indicates that *H2* was supported. Also, work engagement significantly affects task performance ($T = 4.533$, $p = 0.000$), and affective commitment is shown to be a significant predictor of task performance ($T = 2.432$, $p = 0.015$), indicating that both *H5* and *H6* were supported.

For the purpose of examining the mediating effects of job satisfaction in the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement and between servant leadership and affective commitment, the bootstrapping technique was used to check for indirect effects (Shrout and Bolger, 2002). The results, provided in Figure 2, show that the indirect effect of job satisfaction in the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement is significant ($T = 6.348$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting a mediation effect and supporting *H3*.

As the direct effect between servant leadership and work engagement was not significant, the results here suggest a full mediation effect of job satisfaction between servant leadership and work engagement. Furthermore, the results show that the indirect effect of job satisfaction in the relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment is significant ($T = 6.185$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting a partial mediation effect and supporting *H4*.

Discussion and implications
The aim of this study was to examine:

Constructs	Scale items	Loadings	T values	CR	AVE
Servant leadership	1. My leader can tell if something work-related is going wrong	0.882**	65.563	0.953	0.742
	2. My leader makes my career development a priority	0.829**	35.064		
	3. I would seek help from my leader if I had a personal problem	0.771**	27.958		
	4. My leader emphasizes the importance of giving back to the community	0.932**	127.927		
	5. My leader puts my best interests ahead of his/her own	0.859**	36.725		
	6. My leader gives me the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that I feel is best	0.905**	73.003		
	7. My leader would not compromise ethical principles to achieve success	0.841**	30.543		
Work engagement	1. At my work, I feel bursting with energy	0.889**	54.831	0.964	0.748
	2. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous	0.905**	80.954		
	3. I am enthusiastic about my job	0.879**	57.436		
	4. My job inspires me	0.853**	40.030		
	5. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	0.867**	55.789		
	6. I feel happy when I am working intensely	0.775**	25.686		
	7. I am proud of the work that I do	0.873**	54.096		
	8. I am immersed in my work (Removed)	0.899**	68.524		
	9. I get carried away when I am working	0.837**	46.743		
Task performance	1. I outperform my colleagues in this institute	0.758**	25.602	0.921	0.661
	2. I handle emergencies well	0.828**	44.138		
	3. I achieve objectives that are assigned to me	0.854**	46.066		
	4. I am never late nor take off early from work	0.720**	19.962		
	5. I aim to attain perfection in my work	0.869**	47.891		
	6. I am prudent and seldom make mistakes	0.840**	47.452		
Affective commitment	1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in this institution	0.862**	35.024	0.961	0.755
	2. I enjoy discussing my institution with people outside it	0.899**	61.666		
	3. I really feel as if this institution's problems are my own	0.865**	48.180		
	4. I think that I could easily become as attached to another institution as I am to this one (R)	0.847**	37.210		
	5. I do not feel like 'part of the family' here (R)	0.878**	48.510		
	6. I do not feel 'emotionally attached' to this institution (R)	0.897**	61.598		
	7. This institution has a great deal of personal meaning to me	0.859**	43.334		
	8. I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization (R)	0.846**	44.378		
Job satisfaction	1. I enjoy my work more than my leisure time	0.891**	50.613	0.954	0.778
	2. I feel that I am happier in my work than most other people	0.926**	95.352		

(continued)

Table II.
Factor loading,
AVEs and CRs

Constructs	Scale items	Loadings	T values	CR	AVE
	3. I find real enjoyment in my work	0.931**	97.900		
	4. Most days I am enthusiastic about my work	0.849**	38.049		
	5. My job is usually interesting enough to keep me from getting bored	0.802**	30.430		
	6. My job is like a hobby to me	0.888**	50.333		

Notes: SRMR = 0.067; NFI = 0.91; ** significant at 0.01

Table II.

- the effect of servant leadership on work engagement and affective commitment among academics in higher education;
- the mediating effect of job satisfaction between servant leadership and work engagement and between servant leadership and affective commitmet; and
- the effect of work engagement and affective commitment on the task performance of academics.

In the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement, our results did not find a positive effect exerted by servant leadership on work engagement. The results were in line with previous studies, which had found a positive link between servant leadership and work engagement (Carter and Baghurst, 2014; De Clercq *et al.*, 2014; Kaur, 2018). At the same time, the results indicate a positive significant impact of servant leadership on

Constructs	SL	JS	WE	AC	TP
SL	(0.861)				
JS	0.482**	(0.882)			
WE	0.415**	0.756**	(0.865)		
AC	0.486**	0.810**	0.748**	(0.869)	
TP	0.257**	0.342**	0.514**	0.489**	(0.813)

Note: **Significant at the 0.01 level

Table III.
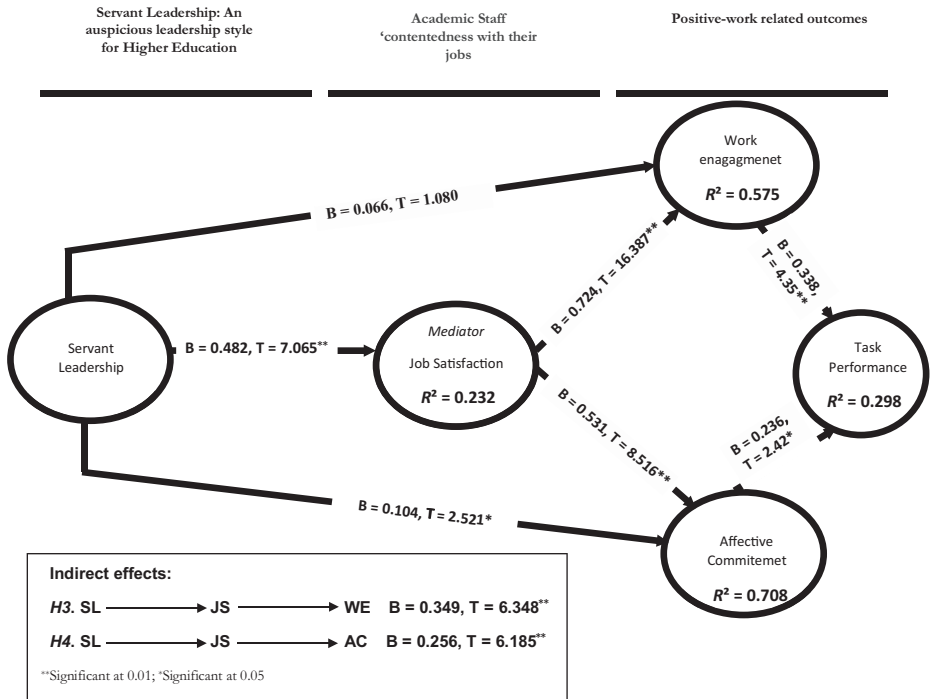Discriminant validity: Fornell and Larcker criteria

Figure 2.
Structural equation model results

affective commitment. The results were consistent with previous empirical research concerning the association between servant leadership and commitment (Carter and Baghurst, 2014; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2009; Kaur, 2018). The results suggest that when academics perceive their leaders as less selfish and more caring, academic staff are more likely to exhibit higher levels of affective commitment.

Because servant leaders place employee interests over their owns through empowering them and developing their skills, employees feel the obligation to reciprocate (Ling *et al.*, 2017) through displaying higher levels of commitment and work engagement. Employees at the workplace show concerns regarding how their leaders behave within the organisation. Therefore, the servant leadership approach of helping, directing and supporting employees is essential for these employees to dedicate themselves to their work and organisations. These supportive behaviours will be exchanged by employees by showing greater levels of reciprocation. To this end, our results suggest that the presence of servant leaders provide an effective leading approach in higher education institutions, which lends empirical support for the argument that higher education institutions require servant leaders (Barnes, 2015).

The mediating effects of job satisfaction were significant between servant leadership and work engagement and between servant leadership and affective commitment. These results are in line with Kaur (2018), who found that job satisfaction plays a significant mediating role between servant leadership and employee outcomes. In the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement, we found a full mediation effect of job satisfaction. This suggests that the effect of servant leadership on the work engagement of academics is dependent on their job satisfaction. Hence, although servant leaders spread positive energy among their subordinates, this does not get automatically translated into positive outcomes and it depends on various organisational conditions (Smith *et al.*, 2004).

In the relationship between work engagement and task performance, the results demonstrate that work engagement is a significant predictor of academics' task performance. The results are consistent with previous research, which found a positive relationship between these two constructs (Anitha, 2014; Gorgievski *et al.*, 2010; Ismail *et al.*, 2019). The results here confirm the existing theory concerning the link between work engagement and job performance. According to Parker and Griffin (2011), employee engagement leads to better job performance, because it stimulates motivation to perform job tasks and undertake responsibilities. Similarly, the results indicate a positive relationship between affective commitment and job performance. The results agree with the research of Yousef (2000) and Chen *et al.* (2006), who found that commitment has a positive impact on job performance. The results suggest that when academics feel attached to their organisations, this will result in higher job performance.

Our study has several theoretical and managerial implications. First, the paper contributes to the limited body of knowledge of employees' outcomes in higher education. Empirical studies on work engagement and organisational commitment within higher education are very limited (Wilkins *et al.*, 2017). Second, our study is one of the very few studies that investigate the effects of servant leadership on academics' outcomes in higher education in a non-Western context. Most of the research works on servant leadership and its consequences were conducted in Western contexts (Parris and Peachey, 2013). Moreover, there is a dearth of empirical research on servant leaders' behaviours in academic institutions and their impact on employee feelings and attitudes. Servant leadership is an important research topic for higher education, because the values of servant leaders fit best with those of academic institutions (Wheeler, 2012). Third, the paper is unique because it represents a study from a non-Western context using data coming from Palestinian

universities. Fourth, the paper proposes a model to investigate the effects of servant leadership on the work engagement and affective commitment of academics – highlighting the role of job satisfaction as an intervening variable that explains the examined relationships. Our study shows that the relationships between servant leadership and academics' outcomes is not simple but is affected by job satisfaction. Moreover, in this model, we examine the impact both of work engagement and of affective commitment on academics' task performance.

From a managerial perspective, the paper provides a roadmap for academic leaders on how their caring and selfless behaviours can contribute to academics' positive outcomes. Servant leadership demonstrates to play an important role in improving commitment and engagement (Greenleaf, 1998). The implementation of servant leadership in higher education can create an organisational culture in which employees feel committed to their organisation and are engaged in their work. Managers in higher education institutions must develop an environment that is characterised by engagement and commitment among professors through servant leadership behaviours. These institutions are advocated to put the servant leadership approach as a priority in their hiring strategies. This implies that these institutions should consider selecting and recruiting leaders who have a set of skills composed of integrity, empowerment, optimism, selflessness and empathy. Moreover, training to help managers and deans to adopt servant leadership' supportive behaviours would be essential in higher education. Finally, performance evaluation and rewarding policies are as well needed to encourage managers to practice the servant leader behaviours in everyday activities.

Moreover, the results call for the importance of having high levels of job satisfaction among academics, because this plays an intermediary role between leader–follower relationships. Satisfied and motivated academics are crucial for academic institutions to achieve quality research and teaching (Dubbelt et al., 2016). The study recommends university managers to design effective policies for academics' engagement and commitment, by focusing on what really motivates them to be satisfied, engaged and committed. Organisational policies, which seek to improve academics' engagement and commitment, must be implemented within a culture that promotes job satisfaction – because the relationship between job resources and academics' outcomes is dependent on job satisfaction.

Another recommendation from our study is that HR development professionals in higher education should be more aware of the effect of engagement and commitment on academics' task performance. They should help and enable academics to become more engaged and committed because this will bring diverse benefits to individual and organisational performance. Finally, high-performance organisations, such as in academia, need to create a work environment where positive-work outcomes are fostered, to reap the benefits of task performance. Furthermore, organising workshops and regular meetings may bring fruitful effects on increasing the levels of academic staff engagement.

Research limitation and future studies
Although the paper provides empirical and theoretical implications, it still has some limitations that need to be considered while interpreting the results. First, our research methods restrict the ability to build a cause-and-effect linkage between the examined variables. Hence, future research should consider conducting a longitudinal study (Cohen et al., 2011) to examine changes over time. Second, our analysis focused on the relationship between servant leadership and employee outcomes. Therefore, future research might consider comparing different styles of leadership and their effects on employee engagement

or commitment. Third, our research highlighted only the role of job satisfaction as a/the mediating mechanism between the examined variables. Future research might consider the role of trust in the leader (Payne *et al.*, 2010) and the perceptions of justice and tenure (Prottas *et al.*, 2017). Other future endeavours might include the level of overload among staff (Avery *et al.*, 2010) because it might provide a better explanation of why some staff are more engaged than others. Finally, our research is a non-Western study in the higher education sector; hence, cultural factors could influence the results. Therefore, future studies might consider collecting data from multiple and diverse contexts.

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