

Leading for adaptive performance in higher education institutions: Why do adaptive leadership, quality of work-life, and faculty commitment matter?

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Abstract

Purpose: Adaptive performance has gained momentum critically as they navigate rapid technological, pedagogical, and organizational change in higher education. In this context, the study aims to investigate the role of adaptive leadership, work-life balance, and commitment on faculty's adaptive performance.

Design/Methodology: The study uses an analytical research design based on stratified sampling techniques. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data using a survey from 406 full-time teaching faculty (professors, associate professors, and assistant professors) of Nepalese universities from December 2024 to April 2025. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the respondents' descriptive facts, while associations and effects of predictor variables were examined using inferential statistics.

Findings: The findings demonstrate that adaptive performance is not merely an individual capability, but a socially embedded outcome shaped by leadership-driven work environments and commitment. Adaptive leaders create supportive working environments through quality work-life practices that enhance commitment.

Originality/value: This study is original as it integrates the Adaptive Leadership, Quality Work-life framework, Job Demand Resource framework, and Pulakos' Adaptive Performance models to reveal distinct motivational pathways, offering a context-specific understanding of faculty adaptive performance. In this way, the study opens new discussions on how institutions can strategically enhance faculty adaptive performance through shaping leadership-driven work environments and commitment.

Keywords: Adaptive leadership, Adaptive performance, Career development, Commitment, Perceived organizational support, Work autonomy, Work-life balance

Jel Codes: J28, J24, I23, D23

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1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are experiencing rapid technological, pedagogical, and organizational changes that require faculty members to adapt their work behaviors and performance continuously. They are operating in a rapidly changing environment characterized by growing complexity and increasing uncertainty, leading to progressively confronting multifaceted demands, extending from academic excellence and research yield to innovation, internationalization, and social engagement (Blass & Hayward, 2014; Hassan et al., 2025; Zagni et al., 2025). Rapid digital transformation has changed the demand of the labor market, increasing expectations on advanced competencies, digital readiness, and adaptive skills in graduates. Universities are compelled to revise curricula, pedagogical practices, and service delivery continually. In addition, the rendering of higher education not only with knowledge but with experiential learning demands competitive pressure on HEIs to enhance academic quality and institutional responsiveness. In such environments, adaptive performance has become increasingly important for maintaining teaching effectiveness and institutional responsiveness. Maintaining a high level of commitment and adaptive performance of faculty is indispensable to meet such demands; however, HEIs in underdeveloped and developing economies face challenges in adapting to rapid changes, including internationalization, technological advancements, and emergent demands. Faculty members serve as principal agents in satisfying such expectations; however, the ability of academic staff to respond to change effectively, i.e., adaptive performance, is a critical determinant and complicated. Quality of work life experience, commitment to the institution (Sirgy et al., 2001; Abebe & Assemie, 2023), and profession are interlinked with individuals' capacity to learn, adjust, and innovate in response to novel and dynamic work demands, i.e., adaptive performance. A critical factor in this context is adaptive leadership, which may upscale the quality of work life (QWL) and commitment, which may significantly affect adaptive performance (Chughtai et al., 2024) of academic staff.

Leadership is vital to make faculty members proactive and positively deal with change and to achieve adaptive performance (Bonini et al., 2024), adopting a bottom-up approach (e.g., job crafting) (Park et al., 2020). Adaptive leadership contributes to creating working relationship conditions and sustainable behavior so that faculty members are motivated to adapt to new changes for adaptive behavior. Adaptive leadership refers to the leaders' capacity to mobilize subordinates (faculty and staff) in a complex, uncertain, and volatile environment and encourage followers to redefine problems, creating alternative ways to solve complex problems (Heifetz et al., 2009; Rahman et al., 2026). Leadership fostering and reinforcing processes rather than direct command and control mechanisms enables positive behavior (Gautam & Gautam, 2024) if followers feel comfortable with leaders, i.e., engagement and adaptability. Leading faculty members by reinforcing results and autonomy, collaborating for personal ability and skills, human psychological needs, and creating and maintaining trust stimulates adaptive behavior (Bonini et al., 2024). Leadership is responsible for proactive thinking to satisfy well-being needs, such as career advancement, adequate and fair compensation, work autonomy, and safe and healthy working conditions, which ultimately improve the employees' skills and performance (Alabduljader, 2022; Iwakiri et al., 2023).

Quality work life (QWL), employees' feeling of how well the organizational environment fulfills their overall needs for well-being in the workplace (Cascio, 1998; Sirgy et al., 2001), has been linked to favorable organizational outcomes, such as improved employee performance (Sirgy et al., 2001) through their satisfaction and motivation (Soroya et al., 2022). QWL is associated with organizational performance (Ekanem & Agiren, 2025) because of improved physical and psychological working conditions encompassing elements such as job security, work autonomy, fair compensation, organizational support, and opportunities for career development (Koonmee et al., 2010). Satisfaction from QWL not only increases organizational continuity but also improves employee morale, motivation, and performance, leading to better organizational outcomes. Guest (1980) described a work environment that enhances QWL as one that is cooperative, adaptive, open, informal, and that emphasizes interpersonal relationships.

Despite the importance of QWL, many academic workplaces continue to struggle with creating a supportive work environment, particularly in developing countries, where resource constraints and administrative inefficiencies are common (Abebe & Assemie, 2023). Committed faculty members are more likely to invest effort into their work, engage in innovative teaching and research practices, and contribute to the institution's goals

(Meyer & Allen, 1991). In recent years, HEIs have involuntary to overwhelmed challenges of technological advancement, increased pressure to deliver quality education in the shortest possible time, the need to cope with the effects of artificial intelligence, and increased administrative complexities, which have intensified workplace stress, raising concerns about faculty well-being, institutional promise, and adaptive capacity (Mudrak et al., 2018; Tian et al., 2024). In the Nepalese context, QWL is often affected by factors such as low remuneration, inadequate infrastructure, and limited career progression opportunities (Shrestha et al., 2019) and leadership drive. These issues may lead to low satisfaction and reduced commitment to adaptive performance, resulting in heightened challenges for higher education institutions to achieve their goals of meeting universal challenges.

In today's rapidly developing academic environment, adaptive performance, the aptitude and capability to adjust to shifting roles, advancing technologies, teaching pedagogies, and labor market expectations, has emerged as a critical competency (Pulakos et al., 2000; Charbonnier-Voirin & Roussel, 2012). Adaptive performance involves the ability to acquire new skills, grasp change, and handle unanticipated challenges (Pulakos et al., 2000). In the rapidly transforming academic environment, adaptive performance among faculty members is essential for curriculum design, labor-market-based and effective implementation of new curricula best meeting didactic policies, and professional and ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools and technologies in teaching-learning activities. HEIs with highly committed leaders in achieving adaptive performance, effectively mobilizing faculty members through QWL practices, may be more likely to accomplish long-term efficiency, increased productivity, and profitability by effectively familiarizing themselves with changing environments (Koonmee et al., 2010; Mebarki et al., 2019). Although prior studies have examined quality of work life and organizational commitment in relation to employee outcomes, limited research has investigated their influence on adaptive performance among university faculty members, evident to developing higher education contexts.

Despite increasing attention to adaptive performance in research, only limited studies have examined its relationship with adaptive leadership, quality of work life, and organizational commitment within higher education institutions, particularly in developing countries where researchers focus on corporate settings. In a specified environment characterized by highly competitive and fast-changing socio-economic conditions, like in Nepal, there is a pressing need to investigate the role of workplace-related issues, i.e., QWL factors such as career development, perceived organizational support, work-life balance, and work autonomy, to augment faculty vow and adaptive performance. Thus, to address this gap, the present study focuses on full-time faculty members in Nepalese universities to examine the relationships among quality of work life, organizational commitment, and adaptive performance in the context of higher education in Nepal. Findings of the study will support improving overall institutional effectiveness of HEIs, promote innovation, continuous improvement in teaching pedagogy, and create a positive learning environment in HEIs to prepare students fit for a changing labor market demand modeling the adaptive leadership approach.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

This study is grounded in four well-known theories: Adaptive Leadership theory (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009), QWL (Walton, 1973), Job Demand – Resource (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and Pulakos Adaptive Performance Framework (Pulakos et al., 2002), interlocking theoretical perspectives linking leadership, work conditions, motivation, and performance by positioning adaptive leadership as the upstream driver of adaptive performance in higher education institutions. Adaptive leaders, according to Heifetz's adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009), are viewed as agents who drive faculty to navigate complex, changing academic environments by fostering learning, flexibility, and problem-solving capacity. They enable quality of work-life (employee well-being) with supportive, fair, and empowering work environments to outperform challenging tasks (job environment, JD-R approach). Such leaders shape QWL practices, conceptualized through Walton's framework as a bundle of organizational resources including fair compensation, safe working conditions, opportunities for growth, social integration, and work-life balance that enhance faculty well-being and engagement. Thus, adaptive leadership serves as the central behavioral mechanism that motivates and enables faculty to perform with the highest dedication in any evolving conditions. Walton's Quality of Work Life (QWL) framework (Walton, 1973) provides the substantive foundation, defining core workplace dimensions such as equitable remuneration, safe working, growth opportunities, social integration, and work-life balance that are positioned as the key antecedents in this study.

Yet, while Walton's model specifies what constitutes QWL, it does not explicate how these elements influence behavior, that is addressed through the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, which conceptualizes QWL factors as job resources that interact with job demands to shape motivation, strain, and engagement, thereby providing the explanatory mechanism linking workplace quality to employee commitment and adaptability (Chan et al., 2016). Job Demand–Resource (JD-R) model provides the explanatory mechanism through which these QWL resources function: adaptive leadership enriches job resources, which in turn stimulate a motivational process leading to higher levels of faculty commitment and energy. JD-R model further complements the adaptive-leadership-adaptive performance mechanism, as adaptive performance depends on employees' capacity to cope with changing job demands, which can be enhanced through job resourcefulness. Within the proposed framework, adaptive leadership is conceptualized as a key organizational resource that facilitates availability and effective utilization of resources. The Pulakos Adaptive Performance Framework accomplishes this by clearly defining the consequence construct, operationalizing adaptability through variables such as crisis management, problem solving, interpersonal flexibility, and rapid learning. This motivational pathway ultimately translates into adaptive performance, operationalized using the Pulakos Adaptive Performance Framework, which captures faculty members' ability to respond effectively to change, handle uncertainty, learn new skills, and solve novel problems. Thus, this study proposes a comprehensive research framework (Figure 1) of these four perspectives that produces a comprehensible, multidimensional framework that overcomes the boundaries of single-theory approaches, offering a richer and more predictive account of how adaptive leadership fosters adaptive performance in lively academic environments.

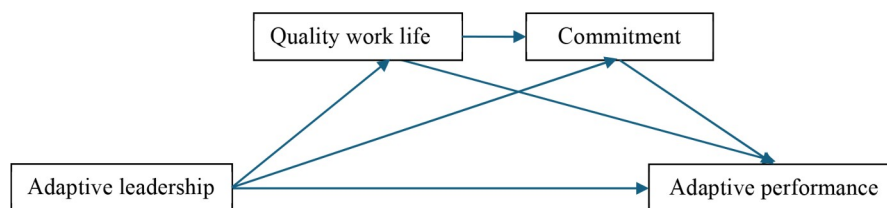


Figure 1. Research framework

In HEIs, QWL is vital as it affects faculty members' job satisfaction, commitment (Abebe & Assemie, 2023; Yadav et al., 2019), and performance (Singh, 2022; Al-Refaei et al., 2024). A strong quality QWL provides faculty members with essential resources, support, and a conducive environment necessary to thrive in their roles, thereby enhancing their productivity and overall performance.

Faculty commitment, i.e., emotional and psychological attachment to their institution, influences their willingness to support the institution's goals (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Mudrak et al., 2018; Tian et al., 2024). QWL strengthens affective, continuance, and normative commitment, which not only fosters faculty members' willingness to continue working in the organization but also motivates innovative ways of teaching, research, and publication. It further promotes an inclusive research culture that supports and enhances students' research skills. Their commitments help to produce human capital to handle global challenges. In the setting of higher education, faculty commitment is crucial for promoting an expected organizational atmosphere and augmenting results for ensuring institutional sustainability through adaptive performance. Further, job performance in higher education is a significant measure of faculty effectiveness, integrating teaching quality, research contributions, service to the HEIs, and community involvement (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

Supportive culture, mentoring, and professional development are significant elements in HEIs that progress QWL for academic staff (Baruch et al., 2014; Iqbal et al., 2024). Creating an environment that is supportive, inclusive, and motivating is vital for helping faculty flourish both personally and professionally (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Influencers such as work environment, institutional communication, compensation, and career growth opportunities encourage QWL in HEIs (Swamy et al., 2015; Singh & Maini, 2021). Adaptive performance has emotional components, as faculty need to handle stress, student demands, and institutional pressures while maintaining performance levels (Griffin et al., 2007; Charbonnier-Voirin & Roussel, 2012).

QWL, a positive work environment, encourages continuous learning and cognitive flexibility, both of which are key to adaptive performance (Baruch et al., 2014). The role of job autonomy and meaningful work in raising job-crafting behaviors becomes more significant when faculty members experience greater organizational change and exhibit higher adaptive performance (Gautam et al., 2023; Nie et al., 2023; Nayak & Sahoo, 2015).

Faculty members with high commitment are particularly motivated to embrace change and acquire the skills necessary to adapt to the changing academic settings (Gautam, 2020; Joo et al., 2015; Jung et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020; Ramdhan et al., 2022). Higher commitment results in eagerness for continuous learning, and professional growth enhances the faculty's ability to adapt to their abilities, enabling them to contribute more effectively to institutional goals. Faculty who are highly committed tend to adapt more successfully to new teaching methods, curriculum updates, and institutional reforms, improving students' learning outcomes and exposing a more innovative and dynamic academic environment (Gilboa et al., 2008). The association between faculty commitment and adaptive performance creates a mutually reinforcing relationship that benefits both the individual faculty and the institution. When faculty are dedicated to the institution's mission and goals, they are more likely to handle organizational changes and adapt their teaching and research practices, which strengthens the institution's capacity to flourish in an increasingly competitive and changing educational background (Hakanen et al., 2006). Organizational values play a decisive role in shaping events, influencing employee behavior (Gautam, 2022) and significantly affecting leadership adaptive performance (Naranjo-Valencia et al., 2016). In higher education, there is a possibility of a mediating role of faculty commitment in predicting adaptive performance of faculty through QWL. Strong commitment promotes the motivation needed for faculty members to effectively direct changing environments. Commitment can shape how faculty perceive institutional changes and respond to them, enhancing their adaptability (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Faculty with a high level of commitment are more likely to engage in lifelong learning, adopt innovative teaching strategies, and align with institutional reforms, which ultimately strengthen their adaptive performance (Park & Rainey, 2007).

Based on such evidence, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Adaptive leadership significantly and positively influences adaptive performance.

H2: Adaptive leadership significantly and positively influences perceived QWL.

H3: Perceived quality of work-life significantly and positively influences adaptive performance.

H4: Quality of work life significantly and positively influences the effect of adaptive leadership on adaptive performance.

H5: Adaptive leadership has a significant positive effect on faculty commitment.

H6: Faculty commitment has a significant positive effect on their adaptive performance.

H7: Faculty commitment significantly and positively influences the effect of adaptive leadership on adaptive performance.

H8: Perceived quality of work-life significantly and positively influences faculty commitment.

H9: Perceived QWL and faculty commitment significantly mediate the influence of adaptive leadership on adaptive performance.

3. Methodology

Nepalese higher education institutions represent more than a convenient research setting. They provide a theoretically relevant context due to their rapid expansion, increasing internationalization, and growing competitive pressures. With 14 national-level and 6 province-level universities, over 1,400 colleges with more than 600,000 higher education students, and recent government initiatives encouraging foreign university participation, the sector is undergoing substantial transformation. These changes require faculty members to continuously adapt to evolving academic and organizational demands, making Nepal an appropriate setting for examining adaptive leadership, quality of work life, family cohesion, and adaptive performance.

It is assumed that the external reality exists but recognizes that it cannot be observed or measured with complete certainty because all empirical observations are subject to measurement error and researcher and respondent bias. It is assumed that the knowledge is tentative and can be strengthened through systematic empirical investigation, rigorous research design, and statistical hypothesis testing. Thus, this study follows the

post-positivism philosophical foundation as it aims to examine theoretically derived relationships among constructs using survey data and quantitative analysis with an explanatory research design. The total population for the study consists of 8,124 teaching faculty members from seven universities in Nepal: Far Western University, Mid-Western University, Nepal Sanskrit University, Pokhara University, Purbanchal University, Kathmandu University, and Tribhuvan University. Of these, 4,962 are lecturers/assistant professors, 2,366 are associate professors, and 796 are professors (University Grant Commission, 2021).

A multi-stage sampling technique has been adapted to ensure a representative sample. First, a purposive sampling technique was applied to select campuses that meet predefined criteria, i.e., regional representation, with at least one campus in each province. Second, within the selected campuses, purposive sampling was adapted to select full-time faculty. Third, using stratified probability sampling, respondents were selected from different job positions. Once the study areas were determined, the sample size was set using stratified probability sampling, with strata based on the faculty's current job positions in the selected campuses. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) suggestion, resulting in a required sample size of 382; however, the study included 406 professors (247 Assistant Professors, 117 Associate Professors, and 42 Professors) teaching full-time in different campuses between December 2024 and April 2025, with an 86% response rate; 20 responses were discarded because of incompleteness.

A structured questionnaire was administered with a six-point Likert scale to weigh respondents' responses on each of the constructs, with responses ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (6) strongly agree. Items were adapted from theories anticipated in the study, contextualized, and later examined for validity. Few examples of the statements used in the questionnaire are as: My leader provides resources and guidance when I need to adapt to new demand (Adaptive leadership), My HEI supports my endeavor to participate actively in the larger professional community (career development opportunity); I ensure that my work commitments do not overlap with personal life (work-life balance); My HEI is attentive with overall satisfaction of faculty members (perceived organizational supports); my job enables me to my skills and talents effectively (work autonomy); I believe I have limited alternatives to contemplate leaving the department (continuance commitment); I hold the belief that individuals should maintain loyalty to their respective HEI (normative commitment); I have developed a deep emotional connection to this institution (affective commitment); I consistently enjoy job flexibility is something, I find very comfortable and accommodating (adaptive performance).

The study employed AMOS to perform structural equation modeling, allowing the simultaneous examination of measurement (factor) and structural relationships among latent constructs. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) has been used to assess model fitness and evaluate the validity of both constructs and latent variables. For this, latent variables career development opportunities, perceived organizational support, work-life balance, and work autonomy were combined into quality work life (latent construct). Similarly, affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment were combined into commitment. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed for validating the dedicated measurement model. All constructs were assessed for reliability and validity, including indicator reliability, internal consistency (Composite reliability), and convergent validity (average variance extracted, AVE). Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and cross-loading analysis. Model fit was evaluated using standard indices (e.g., GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, SRMR, NFI).

Given the cross-sectional and self-reported nature of the data, common method bias (CMB) was explicitly addressed. The study ensured respondent anonymity, reduced evaluation apprehension, and used clear and concise measurement items. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test approach was employed to assess the extent of method variance. The unrotated exploratory factor analysis revealed that the first factor accounted for less than 40% of the total variance, indicating that common method bias was not likely to be a serious threat to the validity of the study findings.

Demographic profile of respondents. In this study, most respondents were male (87.60 percent) in comparison to females (12.30 percent). Most respondents were over 50 years old (47.00 percent), while the smallest cohort of the age group was below 30 years (1.20 percent). In terms of educational qualifications, 56.40 percent of respondents had a master's degree, 18.20 percent held an MPhil. degrees, and 25.40 percent had a PhD.

Respondents from Purbanchal University (1.70 percent) were the least in number, followed by Nepal Sanskrit University (2.20 percent), Far Western University (3.70 percent), Mid-Western University (4.93 percent), Kathmandu University (5.91 percent), Pokhara University (14.78 percent), and Tribhuvan University (66.75 percent) proportionately to population. The researchers confirmed the anonymity of respondents and received written consent from the participants in the questionnaire (voluntary participation).

Descriptive analysis for the status of QWL, faculty commitment, and adaptive performance. In HEIs in Nepal, variables can be classified across different positional levels to assess their overall mean scale. Understanding these positional levels is key to identifying where specific involvements may be required and how various elements interact within the educational surroundings.

Variables	Mean	S. D
Career development opportunities	4.48	0.86
Work-life balance	4.51	0.77
Perceived organizational support	3.56	1.11
Work autonomy	4.19	0.88
Affective commitment	4.71	0.75
Normative commitment	4.57	0.76
Continuance commitment	4.96	0.95
Adaptive performance	4.67	0.64
Adaptive leadership	4.82	0.94

Table 1. Perceived mean satisfaction on the dimensions of QWL, commitment, and adaptive performance

Since the agreements of the respondents on each statement were measured on a six-point Likert scale, the average satisfaction on statement 3.5. An average value greater than 3.5 provided evidence of respondents' agreement towards strong agreement. Table 1 provides evidence of better satisfaction on QWL dimensions, i.e., career development opportunities (mean 4.48), work-life balance (mean 4.51), work autonomy (mean 4.19), and perceived organizational support (mean 3.56). Respondents agree that faculty members have higher job autonomy, while they perceive comparatively lower perceived organizational support. Respondents reported higher continuance commitment (mean 4.96), followed by affective commitment (mean 4.71) and normative commitment (4.57). In addition, they reported higher satisfaction with adaptive performance (mean 4.67), while the agreement on adaptive leadership was 4.82.

Factors	Estimated Model
P-value	0.000
Chi-Square/df	1.765
RMSEA	0.043
GFI	0.905
AGFI	0.881
SRMR	0.055
NFI	0.900
TLI	0.941
CFI	0.950

Table 2. Measurement model fit analysis

Table 2 provides evidence of good fit of the model with p-value <0.05, Chi-square/df = 1.765, RMSEA < 0.05. Similarly, the other indicators, i.e., AGFI (0.881), NFI (0.90), GFI (0.905), TLI (0.941), and CFI (0.95), indicate an excellent fit.

Table 3 provided evidence of good internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.7$) for the model's constructs. Further, the composite reliability above 0.80 confirms reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeding 0.50 support convergent validity.

Construct	Alpha	CR	AVE	AL	WB	CD	POS	AU	AU	NC	CC	AP
Adaptive Leadership (AL)	.887	.851	.662	1								
Work-Life Balance (WB)	.856	.858	.666	.48**	1							
Career Development (CD)	.790	.825	.568	.42**	.45**	1						
Perceived Organizational Support (POS)	.863	.863	.611	.51**	.54**	.58**	1					
Work Autonomy (AU)	.855	.856	.664	.53**	.50**	.55**	.61**	1				
Affective Commitment	.802	.792	.493	.56**	.58**	.52**	.61**	.57**	1			
Normative Commitment	.741	.717	.523	.46**	.48**	.44**	.50**	.47**	.69**	1		
Continuance Commitment	.822	.825	.611	.40**	.43**	.39**	.45**	.42**	.60**	.62**	1	
Adaptive Performance (AP)	.884	.848	.657	.59**	.56**	.54**	.60**	.58**	.66**	.63**	.55**	1

Table 3. Test of reliability, convergent validity of constructs and Inter-Construct Correlation Matrix (MTMT)

Discriminant validity (Table 3) was assessed using the multitrait–multimethod (MTMT) correlation matrix of composite variables. The inter-construct correlations below 0.8 provided adequate discriminant validity of measures. The positive, significant inter-construct correlations of moderate magnitude provided evidence of theoretical alignment without evidence of multicollinearity. Furthermore, the reliability and validity of the measurement model enabled hypothesis testing.

4. Results and Discussion

The structural equation model (SEM) illustrates the relationships among several constructs: adaptive leadership (AL) as a predictor of adaptive performance (AP), with mediating effects of quality of work life (QWL) and commitment (FC). The hypothesized serial mediation model was tested using bias-corrected and accelerated intervals using 5000 bootstraps.

Table 4 provides direct, indirect, and total effects of various adaptive leadership on adaptive performance. The study revealed a positive and significant total effect of adaptive leadership on adaptive performance. Introducing quality work-life and commitment in the model, the direct effect of adaptive performance became non-significant, indicating the presence of mediation effects.

The indirect effect in the serial mediation path was positive and significant (non-zero CI), along with the positive and significant indirect effects of quality work-life and commitment in separate mediation paths. These results provide evidence of strong mediation effects, suggesting that adaptive leadership influences adaptive performance primarily first by enhancing faculty work experiences and subsequently strengthening their commitment. These results provide evidence to support all the hypotheses developed.

As hypothesized in the study, findings are more insightful to explain how adaptive leaders can lead their followers for adaptive performance integrating Adaptive Leadership theory (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009), Walton's (1973) Quality of Work Life (QWL) framework, the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and the Adaptive Performance framework (Pulakos et al., 2002). Results suggest that leaders concentrating on leadership-driven contextual and psychological processes can lead higher education institutions (HEIs) to motivate faculty members to cope with the changing context and organizational success. The present findings therefore reinforce the broader leadership literature by confirming that adaptive leadership remains an important predictor of employee adaptability within educational settings. The study has emphasized that adaptive leaders encourage flexibility, problem-solving, collaborative learning, and responsiveness to institutional change, all of which contribute to higher adaptive performance.

Hyp.	Structural Path	Path Coefficient (Direct)	Indirect	Total effect	LLCI	ULCI	t-value	Result
H1	AL -> AP	0.11	-	0.29**	0.021	0.196	2.21	Supported
H2	AL -> QWL	0.48	-	-	0.351	0.592	7.36	Supported
H3	QWL -> AP	0.21	-	-	0.072	0.334	2.94	Supported
H4	AL->QWL-> AP	-	0.10*	0.29**	0.032	0.184	2.41	Partial Mediation
H5	AL -> FC	0.52	-	-	0.401	0.628	8.14	Supported
H6	FC -> AP	0.24	-	-	0.101	0.371	3.41	Supported
H7	AL->FC-> AP	-	0.12*	0.29**	0.040	0.210	2.76	Partial Mediation
H8	QWL -> FC	0.43	-	-	0.291	0.548	5.88	Supported
H9	AL->QWL->FC-> AP	-	0.21*	0.29**	0.110	0.341	4.89	Full Serial Mediation

Note: n=406. Bootstrap samples=5000; CI (Bias corrected and accelerated method (Bca)); LCI (Lower confidence interval at 2.5%), UCI (Upper confidence interval at 97.5%); **p <.001, * p<.05; AL – Adaptive leadership, QWL – Quality work life, FC- Faculty commitment, AP – Adaptive performance; QWL is a weighted average of work life balance, perceived organizational support, and work autonomy; FC is a weighted average of continuance, normative, and affective commitment.

Table 4. Direct, indirect, and total effect of serial mediation in predicting adaptive performance

Results emphasized Adaptive Leadership as the catalyst to mobilize subordinates to address complex, non-routine, and ill-defined challenges by creating supportive conditions for learning, experimentation, and change (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009). The findings of the study support Adaptive Leadership Theory by demonstrating that leaders who mobilize faculty members to address complex institutional challenges enhance employees' adaptive capabilities. Challenges for being updated regularly, not only in information, knowledge, and career but also in pedagogical innovation, balancing curricular and co-curricular activities, digital transformation, research pressure, and evolving stakeholders' expectations are common in the HEI contexts. The study suggests that adaptive leaders should focus on shaping the work environment (balancing quality of work life) and aligning faculty members' attitudinal responses to the changing expectations. The results align with the core proposition of Adaptive Leadership theory that leadership effectiveness lies in regulating distress, fostering engagement, and enabling followers to adapt, not in providing technical solutions. Adaptive leaders enhance leadership effectiveness by creating and enhancing the quality of work-life conditions, as quality of work-life dimensions are the contextual resources where institutional adaptability is increasingly necessary for organizational sustainability and educational effectiveness.

This study followed Walton's (1973) QWL framework, conceptualizing quality of work life as a comprehensive construct of job experiences such as career development opportunities, work-life balance, perceived organizational support, and work autonomy as the most essential contextual conditions that influence employees' well-being and effectiveness. The study revealed that adaptive leadership should positively shape these dimensions through structuring work environments to support faculty development and autonomy. These dimensions are further sources for job resources to buffer job demands and promote motivational processes as suggested by a JD-R perspective (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job resources strengthen faculty members to cope with ever-increasing expectations to improve cognitive, emotional, and temporal balance. Autonomy in teaching and research, opportunities for professional growth, institutional support, and flexibility in balancing work and personal responsibilities are the significant job resources that enable faculty members to remain vibrant and cope with these demands more effectively. This study stresses that job resources are the prerequisites for adaptive behavior that improves engagement and fosters positive attitudinal states for adaptive functioning. From the perspective of the JD-R model, adaptive leadership functions as a job resource that equips faculty members to cope with changing academic demands, thereby fostering adaptive performance.

The study underscores the significance of commitment as a psychological mechanism to translate the quality of work life into adaptive performance. Adaptive leadership acts as the catalyst for enhancing faculty commitment, linking work context to performance outcomes. Adaptive leaders focus on affective commitment as an instrumental mechanism in explaining adaptive performance, highlighting that faculty who are emotionally connected to their institutions are more committed to engaging in fulfilling expectations to cope with changes and persist in the face of uncertainty. Connecting with the JD-R model's motivational pathway, the findings

highlight the role of job resources to strengthen positive attitudes and commitment to drive performance. Adaptive leaders, applying the JD-R essence, ensure a high level of job resources, which in turn improves faculty members' willingness to invest discretionary effort, engage in continuous learning, and adapt teaching and research practices.

Adaptive performance is multidimensional (Pulakos et al., 2002): encompassing problem-solving, learning, creativity, interpersonal adaptability, and coping with uncertainty. By creating and enhancing a dynamic and supportive work environment to create positive work experiences and strengthen commitment. Faculty adaptive behaviors are the consequences of effective leadership; however, the results suggest that such behaviors are unlikely to emerge solely from leadership directives. For this, leaders formulate and implement a fair and supportive work environment, compensation system, and employee relations. The finding also extends Pulakos et al. (2002) adaptive performance framework by demonstrating that these theoretical relationships hold within the context of Nepalese higher education.

Further, the findings support sequential mediating roles by integrating theories into a model in which adaptive leadership was hypothesized to predict adaptive performance of faculty members. Consistent with Adaptive Leadership Theory (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009), adaptive leaders create an environment that enables faculty members to respond effectively to changing academic demands. In this integrated model, adaptive leadership is supported as an upstream influencer creating job resources to fulfil the needs of different dimensions of quality of work life, which in turn foster commitment, ultimately enabling adaptive performance. From the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), adaptive leadership serves as a critical job resource that enhances faculty members' quality of work life by improving supportive working conditions and professional development opportunities, consistent with Walton's (1973) QWL framework. This integrative perspective supports the argument that adaptive performance in higher education is not merely an individual capability, but a socially and contextually embedded outcome shaped by leadership, institutional practices, and employee attitudes. Thus, this study suggests that higher education institutions should encourage adaptive leadership practices that promote flexibility, communication, employee support, and collaborative problem-solving. Institutional policies aimed at improving employees' quality of work life, including supportive work environments, work-life balance initiatives, and professional development opportunities, may further strengthen adaptive performance. Finally, this study summarizes the theoretical message that the improved quality of work life subsequently strengthens faculty members' commitment, which, in turn, enhances their ability to adapt to changing work situations, as reflected in Pulakos et al. (2002) Adaptive Performance Framework. The study suggests that adaptive leadership influences adaptive performance indirectly through the sequential mechanisms of quality of work life and commitment, providing a coherent theoretical explanation of the observed relationships.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that adaptive leadership alone is insufficient to enhance faculty adaptive performance; rather, in higher education institutions, performance is best realized through an integrative framework that improves quality of work life and strengthens organizational commitment. Adaptive behavior can be realized only through performance, made possible by an adaptive culture set by visionary and supportive leadership, which assures job resourcefulness and creates positive work experiences and behavioral commitment. The leadership should influence faculty performance indirectly by shaping a supportive work environment and strengthening commitment, drawing on an integrative approach of leadership with Adaptive Leadership theory, Quality of Work Life framework, Job Demands–Resources model, and the Adaptive Performance framework.

Adaptive leaders invest in creating critical job resources such as perceived organizational support, work autonomy, work-life balance, and career development opportunities to foster positive attitudinal states, i.e., affective commitment as a key psychological mechanism that translates work conditions into adaptive performance. The study emphasizes that higher education institutions should prioritize leadership-driven practices to promote learning, flexibility, and engagement for sustaining adaptive performance. This study contributes to the literature by identifying the sequential mechanisms through which adaptive leadership

promotes adaptive performance and offers practical guidance for university leaders seeking to build a resilient and adaptable academic workforce.

6. Theoretical Contributions

The findings offer actionable insights for higher education leaders and administrators. Adaptive leadership practices that enhance career development opportunities, perceived organizational support, work–life balance, and work autonomy are essential for fostering faculty adaptability. By strengthening these quality-of-work-life dimensions, institutions can promote faculty commitment—particularly affective commitment—which is critical for sustaining adaptive behaviors such as innovation, learning, and responsiveness to change. Leadership development initiatives in HEIs should therefore prioritize adaptive leadership competencies that focus on creating supportive, resource-rich work environments rather than relying solely on directive approaches.

7. Limitations and Future Research Scope

Cross-sectional data may limit the generalizability of causality between QWL dimensions, faculty commitment, and adaptive performance. Future research works are suggested to adapt experimental designs that may better capture causal pathways.

Findings are based on HEIs in Nepal, a developing-country context with unique cultural, economic, and institutional characteristics. The results may not generalize to other higher education systems without contextual adaptation. The study may also be limited because of the limitations of a cross-sectional survey. Future research can be a comparative study in different socio-economic contexts.

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Data availability

Data available upon request.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used AI ethically for source identification and suggestions for grammatical checks.

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