

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP IN IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION IN THE FACULTY OF ECONOMICS, UNIVERSITY OF NIAS

By

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of academic leadership in improving student retention at the Faculty of Economics, Nias University. The high number of inactive and absent students indicates serious challenges in the management of academic services and leadership effectiveness within the faculty. The research approach used was descriptive qualitative with a phenomenological method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving key informants such as the dean, vice dean, head of study program, academic advisors, students, and alumni. The results show that academic leadership at the Faculty of Economics, Nias University, has a significant influence on student retention through three main mechanisms: (1) strengthening academic communication and coordination, (2) personal guidance and mentoring of students through academic advisors, and (3) creating a participatory and supportive academic climate. However, limitations in the intensity of academic guidance and the low capacity of lecturers to provide psychosocial support to students are still found. Factors such as economic constraints, low learning motivation, and limited facilities also worsen the retention rate. This study recommends the application of transformational and visionary leadership styles, strengthening the academic guidance system, and implementing data-based policies to monitor the risk of dropout early. The results of this study are expected to be a basis for faculties in designing academic leadership strategies that are oriented towards increasing student retention and academic success.

Keywords: Academic Leadership, Student Retention, Higher Education, Nias University, Educational Management.

PERAN KEPEMIMPINAN AKADEMIK DALAM MENINGKATKAN RETENSI MAHASISWA DI FAKULTAS EKONOMI UNIVERSITAS NIAS

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran kepemimpinan akademik dalam meningkatkan retensi mahasiswa di Fakultas Ekonomi Universitas Nias. Fenomena tingginya angka mahasiswa tidak aktif dan cuti menunjukkan adanya tantangan serius dalam pengelolaan layanan akademik dan efektivitas kepemimpinan di lingkungan fakultas. Pendekatan penelitian yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan metode fenomenologis. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan informan kunci seperti dekan, wakil dekan, ketua program studi, dosen pembimbing akademik, mahasiswa, dan alumni. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan akademik di Fakultas Ekonomi Universitas Nias memiliki pengaruh signifikan terhadap retensi mahasiswa melalui tiga mekanisme utama: (1) penguatan komunikasi dan koordinasi akademik, (2) pembinaan dan pendampingan personal mahasiswa melalui dosen pembimbing akademik, dan (3) penciptaan iklim akademik yang partisipatif dan suportif. Namun, masih ditemukan keterbatasan dalam

intensitas bimbingan akademik serta rendahnya kapasitas dosen dalam memberikan dukungan psikososial kepada mahasiswa. Faktor-faktor seperti kendala ekonomi, motivasi belajar yang rendah, dan keterbatasan fasilitas turut memperburuk tingkat retensi. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan penerapan gaya kepemimpinan transformasional dan visioner, penguatan sistem bimbingan akademik, serta implementasi kebijakan berbasis data untuk memantau risiko dropout secara dini. Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat menjadi dasar bagi fakultas dalam merancang strategi kepemimpinan akademik yang berorientasi pada peningkatan retensi dan keberhasilan studi mahasiswa.

Kata kunci: *Kepemimpinan Akademik, Retensi Mahasiswa, Pendidikan Tinggi, Universitas Nias, Manajemen Pendidikan.*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a strategic role in producing superior and adaptive human resources in the era of globalization. A university's success is no longer measured solely by the number of new students, but also by its retention and graduation rates. Student retention reflects the extent to which an institution is able to create a learning environment that supports continued study. In Indonesia, the issue of retention is increasingly relevant as many universities, particularly in rural areas, face challenges in retaining students until graduation. One important determinant of student retention is academic leadership. Academic leadership is not merely related to administrative functions, but also to the leader's ability to build an inclusive academic climate, provide emotional support, and develop the potential of the academic community. Effective leadership models such as servant leadership and transformational leadership have been shown to increase student engagement and loyalty to the institution (Edi Andriansyah, 2024; Nomin et al., 2025). In the context of regional higher education, a leadership style based on communication, empathy, and empowerment is crucial to addressing the diverse needs of students.

The Faculty of Economics at Nias University faces significant challenges related to student retention. Based on internal data, 309 students were inactive and on leave during the 2021–2024 period. This figure indicates a decline in learning motivation and a high potential for dropout. This situation indicates that the role of academic leadership in creating an effective and sustainable mentoring system is not yet optimal. Proactive, communicative, and responsive leadership to student needs is needed to build student engagement and commitment to the institution. Thus, this study seeks to analyze in depth how the role of academic leadership in increasing student retention in the Faculty of Economics, Nias University, as well as formulate

strategies that can be implemented to strengthen student engagement and study success in the regional higher education environment.

Literature Review

1. Leadership Concept and Leadership Style

Leadership is the ability of an individual to influence, direct, and motivate organizational members to behave in accordance with shared goals (Sutrisno, 2020; Fahmi, 2021). In the context of higher education organizations, leadership is a determining factor in the success of human resource management and academic quality improvement. Various leadership styles have been identified in the literature, including:

1. Authoritarian leadership, which is oriented towards full control of the leader in decision making;
2. Democratic leadership, which emphasizes the active participation of organizational members; and
3. Laissez-faire leadership, which gives extensive autonomy to subordinates (Feriyanto & Triana, 2021).

Furthermore, Robbins (in Herawati & Ranteallo, 2020) categorizes leadership styles into four forms: charismatic, transactional, transformational, and visionary. Of the four, transformational and visionary leadership are most relevant to academic contexts because they focus on inspiration, individual development, and the creation of a long-term organizational vision. According to Kartono (in Herawati & Ranteallo, 2020), indicators of effective leadership include the ability to make decisions, motivate, communicate, control subordinates, and assume responsibility. The combination of these five aspects forms the basis for academic leaders to build a collaborative and quality-oriented work environment.

2. Academic Leadership

Academic leadership is a unique form of leadership in higher education, where leaders act not only as administrators but also as intellectuals, facilitators, and agents of change (Masitah et al., 2022). Academic leaders are responsible for ensuring the sustainability of the Tri Dharma of Higher Education and integrating scientific values into institutional governance. In this context,

visionary leadership (Hombore & Konorop, 2025) has high relevance because it requires the ability to formulate long-term strategic directions, encourage research and learning innovation, and strengthen collaboration with external stakeholders. Meanwhile, transformational leadership (Machsun Rifauddin et al., 2020) emphasizes motivation, inspiration, and empowerment of academic staff elements that play an important role in increasing student satisfaction and engagement. Effective academic leadership is characterized by four main competencies (Sulhan & Nurhamzah, 2021):

1. Managerial Skills,
2. Transformative Leadership,
3. Commitment To A Culture Of Quality, And
4. Interpersonal Communication Skills.

Through this combination of competencies, faculty leaders are able to create an academic culture oriented towards collaboration, innovation, and institutional sustainability.

3. The Concept of Student Retention

Student retention refers to a university's ability to retain students until they complete their studies (Moesarofah, 2021). Retention is an indicator of an institution's success in creating a supportive academic climate, effective advising services, and leadership responsive to student needs. Previous research has shown that student retention is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors include learning motivation, academic ability, and self-efficacy (Bahri, 2021), while external factors include teaching quality, campus climate, social support, and academic advising systems. Research by Melinda et al. (2020) adds that active learning strategies such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Reading, Questioning, and Answering (RQA) can improve retention by increasing student engagement and understanding.

In addition to pedagogical approaches, retention can also be improved through managerial interventions and institutional policies. Marwa Sulehu et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of a data-driven approach using predictive algorithms (Random Forest) to identify students at high risk of dropping out. Thus, student retention can be improved through a combination of academic strategies, emotional support, and evidence-based supervision.

4. The Relationship Between Academic Leadership and Student Retention

Academic leadership plays an indirect but significant role in student retention (Wijayanti et al., 2023). Communicative, empathetic, and proactive leaders can increase student engagement, reduce academic stress, and strengthen loyalty to the institution. From a servant leadership perspective, service-oriented leadership and empowerment of organizational members foster a stronger sense of belonging and commitment to the faculty. Thus, student retention is not only the result of a sound learning system, but also a reflection of the effectiveness of academic leadership in building interpersonal relationships, providing support, and creating a safe and motivating academic environment. At the Faculty of Economics, Nias University, visionary and participatory leadership is expected to address retention challenges by creating an integrated and humanistic academic guidance system.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological approach to deeply understand the role of academic leadership in improving student retention at the Faculty of Economics, Nias University. Location: Faculty of Economics, Nias University. Data source:

1. Primary: interviews/observations from faculty leaders and related parties (deans, vice academic deans, heads of study programs, academic supervisors/PAs, students, and alumni)
2. Secondary: academic/internal faculty documents and data as well as relevant literature.

Data collection techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation Data analysis: Miles & Huberman model: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data validity: strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods (comparing interview results between informants and confirming with documents)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Role of Academic Leadership in Improving Student Retention

The research findings indicate that academic leadership at the Faculty of Economics, Nias University, plays a strategic role in fostering a conducive academic climate and supporting the sustainability of student studies. Faculty leaders, particularly deans and heads of study programs,

practice a leadership style oriented toward service and participation. They strive to create open communication, regular discussion forums, and academic counseling services that allow students to directly address issues. These findings align with the concept of servant leadership, which emphasizes empathy, empowerment, and moral support for organizational members (Edi Andriansyah, 2024).

This approach also strengthens student motivation and engagement with the campus, which, according to Wijayanti et al. (2023), is a key prerequisite for increased retention. In this context, transformative leadership—which motivates and inspires students to persevere through academic challenges appears effective. Faculty leaders act as mentors and facilitators, not simply administrators. Students respond positively to the humanistic and supportive leadership style, although some feel the intensity of mentoring is limited. These findings are consistent with Robbins' theory (in Herawati & Ranteallo, 2020), which asserts that transformational leadership encourages positive changes in the behavior and attitudes of subordinates through inspiration and individualized attention. In the context of the Faculty of Economics, this style plays a crucial role in building students' self-confidence, enabling them to complete their studies despite facing economic and academic limitations.

2. Academic Leadership Strategies to Increase Retention

Based on thematic analysis, the faculty's academic leadership strategy encompasses structural, interpersonal, and systemic aspects. Structurally, the faculty has implemented an Integrated Academic Information System (SIMAT) as a tool for monitoring student development (GPA, attendance, and study progress). This system enables early detection of students at risk of dropping out and serves as the basis for developing data-driven academic policies. This approach supports evidence-based management practices as suggested by Sulehu et al. (2025), who emphasize the importance of using academic data to predict potential dropout and design preventive interventions. Interpersonally, academic advisors (PAs) are key actors in implementing retention strategies. However, their role remains suboptimal due to time constraints and administrative burdens. Interpersonal training and psychopedagogical guidance are needed to enable PAs to provide more personalized support. This aligns with the findings of Machsun Rifauddin et al. (2020) that effective academic leadership requires individual attention and intellectual stimulation for students.

In addition to administrative and personal approaches, the faculty also develops affective and

social strategies such as peer mentoring, soft skills training, and the formation of learning communities. Mentoring activities by senior students and alumni have been shown to increase social resilience and learning motivation in new students. This is reinforced by Musyaffa (2020), who stated that social support from peers plays a significant role in reducing academic stress and increasing commitment to study. Thus, the academic leadership strategy at the Faculty of Economics is holistic, integrating technology, personal development, faculty capacity building, and student empowerment through an inclusive academic community. This model aligns with Sulhan & Nurhamzah's (2021) recommendations on the importance of collaborative and adaptive leadership in building a culture of quality in higher education.

3. Factors Causing Low Student Retention

Analysis of interview results shows that the low retention rate at the Faculty of Economics, Nias University is caused by a combination of internal student factors, external academic environment factors, and institutional structural constraints. Internal factors include low motivation to study, choosing a major that doesn't align with one's interests, and low self-efficacy. These findings align with Bahri's (2021) research, which confirms that intrinsic motivation is directly related to students' academic resilience. External factors include economic constraints, lack of campus facilities, and weak academic guidance systems. Some students drop out of college due to financial difficulties, a factor Moesarofah (2021) also found to be a major cause of low retention rates at regional universities.

Institutional factors include suboptimal coordination between academic leadership elements, the workload of supervising lecturers, and the lack of professional counseling within the faculty. This reinforces Hombore & Konorop's (2025) view that the success of higher education institutions is largely determined by the quality of governance and visionary leadership that can address the socio-economic needs of students in developing regions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results and discussion, it can be concluded that academic leadership at the Faculty of Economics, Nias University plays a strategic role in increasing student retention through strengthening communication, coordinating academic policies, and creating a supportive learning climate. More participatory and transformative leadership has been shown to encourage student engagement and strengthen their self-confidence to persist until they complete their

studies. Strategies that have been implemented and have the potential to strengthen retention include utilizing SIMAT to monitor study progress and early detection of at-risk students, strengthening the role of academic advisors (PA) as the spearhead of mentoring, and regular evaluation forums to ensure prompt interventions for academic and non-academic issues. In addition to structural strategies, this study also emphasizes the importance of affective-social approaches, such as empathetic mentoring, motivational reinforcement, and community support (peer/alumni mentoring) in building student academic resilience.

However, the implementation of academic leadership still faces challenges, particularly the uneven intensity of mentoring and the limited capacity and time of academic advisors. Low student retention is also influenced by multidimensional factors, including economic constraints, low motivation to learn, and suboptimal institutional support and facilities. Therefore, improving retention requires strengthening integrated academic leadership: data-driven, collaborative, and sensitive to students' psychosocial needs. Overall, this study confirms that student retention cannot be addressed with a purely administrative approach, but requires holistic academic leadership that combines monitoring systems, personal development, and continuous strengthening of the socio-academic environment.

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