

The Mediating of Sustainable Competitive Advantage in Adaptive Leadership and Higher Education Performance

Sri Rustiyarningsih¹, Veronika Agustini Srimulyani², Haris Wibisono³

^{1,3}Accounting study program (PSDKU), Universitas Katolik Widya Mandala Surabaya, Indonesia

²Management study program (PSDKU), Universitas Katolik Widya Mandala Surabaya, Indonesia

Corresponding E-mail: sri.rustiyarningsih@ukwms.ac.id

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to test and prove the effect of adaptive leadership on higher education performance with the mediation of sustainable competitive advantage. The sample of this study is a study program at a private university in Madiun City. The sampling technique used a census because all private higher education study programs in Madiun City were taken as samples. The respondents of this study are the head of the study program and the secretary of the study program. Primary data was collected using a questionnaire in the form of a Google form and sent via WhatsApp to respondents, obtaining 32 data. The instrument is measured using a Likert scale of 1-5. Hypothesis testing uses path analysis and the Sobel Test. The research results prove that adaptive leadership has an influence on higher education performance. Adaptive leadership has a significant effect on sustainable competitive advantage and sustainable competitive advantage has a significant effect on higher education performance. The results of the path analysis test with SPSS and the results of the test with the Sobel test show sustainable competitive advantage as a mediation. The limitation of this research is that there are only a few respondents who filled out the questionnaire, so the generalization of the research results is weak.

Keywords— *adaptive leadership; Sustainable competitive advantage; higher education performance.*

Abstrak

Tujuan penelitian ini untuk menguji dan membuktikan pengaruh kepemimpinan adaptif terhadap kinerja perguruan tinggi dengan mediasi keunggulan kompetitif berkelanjutan. Sampel penelitian ini adalah program studi pada perguruan tinggi swasta di Kota Madiun. Pengambilan sampel menggunakan sensus karena semua program studi perguruan tinggi swasta di Kota Madiun diambil sebagai sampel. Responden penelitian ini ketua program studi dan sekretaris program studi. Pengumpulan data primer menggunakan kuesioner dalam bentuk *google form* dan dikirimkan melalui *whatsapp*, diperoleh sebanyak 32 data. Instrumen diukur menggunakan skala Likert 1-5. Pengujian hipotesis menggunakan analisis jalur dan Sobel Test. Hasil penelitian membuktikan kepemimpinan adaptif berpengaruh terhadap kinerja perguruan tinggi. Kepemimpinan adaptif berpengaruh signifikan terhadap keunggulan kompetitif berkelanjutan dan keunggulan kompetitif berkelanjutan berpengaruh signifikan terhadap kinerja perguruan tinggi. Hasil uji analisis jalur dengan SPSS dan hasil uji dengan Sobel test

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Corresponding_ author: sri.rustiyarningsih@ukwms.ac.id

menunjukkan keunggulan kompetitif berkelanjutan sebagai mediasi. Keterbatasan penelitian ini sedikitnya responden yang mengisi kuesioner sehingga generalisasi hasil riset lemah.

Kata kunci: *kepemimpinan adaptif; keunggulan kompetitif berkelanjutan; kinerja perguruan tinggi*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions face increasingly fierce competition, both with domestic universities and many foreign universities that have sprung up in Indonesia. Data published by the East Java BPS shows that the number of private universities, both under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, fluctuated from 496 to 2022, 490, 482, and 498 universities (BPS, 2023). From this data, there has been a significant decrease in numbers in 2021 considering that during the Covid-19 pandemic, 8 universities were closed. This indicates that it is not easy to be sustainable and survive when facing conditions of uncertainty and changes in the external environment.

The role of higher education leaders is very important in facing competition between Indonesian universities and foreign universities operating in Indonesia. Leaders play a major role in achieving organizational performance and competitive advantage. Apart from that, higher education institutions face various challenges, including demands for internationalization, changes in the labour market, demands for innovative learning methods, a changing labour market, and increasing demand for innovative teaching and learning methodologies.

The role of leaders is very important in achieving organizational performance. Findings Akparep et al., (2019) that leadership style affects organizational performance. Adaptive leadership affects organizational effectiveness (Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021). Adaptive leadership affects organizational performance (Wase & Ravishankar, 2023). Research on leadership and sustainable competitive advantage with private universities in Indonesia was conducted Sriwidadi, Arief, and Prabowo, (2016) which found that leadership did not affect sustainable competitive advantage. However, sustainable competitive advantage is proven to influence organizational performance. Leadership is needed to maintain a competitive advantage (Nisha et al., 2022).

The research model proposing sustainable competitive advantage as a mediation is new in this study. Higher education, as an organization that works in a complex environment, often faces changes due to the rapid development of science, so it uses an adaptive approach as a response to uncertainty (Dunn, 2020). Research with universities as objects has not used many adaptive leadership variables (Pujianto et al., 2023); (Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021). Mews, (2019) found that transformational leadership is widely preferred by lecturers and employees in universities to improve sustainable performance. Adaptive leadership has not been widely associated with sustainable competitive advantage, so this study examines the effect of adaptive leadership in improving university performance through sustainable competitive advantage because the results of research on the influence of leadership on sustainable competitive advantage carried out by Teguh Sriwidadi, Muhtosim Arief, and Hartiwi Prabowo, (2016) and Faeq, (2022) are contradictory.

The research problems are: 1) Does adaptive leadership affect the performance of higher education institutions?; 2) Does adaptive leadership affect sustainable competitive advantage?; 3) Does sustainable competitive advantage affect the performance of higher education institutions?; 4) Does sustainable competitive advantage mediate the relationship between adaptive leadership and higher education institution performance?

This research aims to empirically prove the direct influence of adaptive leadership on higher education performance and the indirect influence through sustainable competitive advantage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adaptive leadership is a type of leadership that can mobilize people/subordinates to overcome tough challenges and develop (Pujianto et al., 2023). Adaptive leaders strive to mobilize knowledge quickly, are responsive to contextual needs, and strive to empower their colleagues to act.

Adaptive organizations can respond quickly to rapidly changing opportunities and demands so that they can determine strategies and make appropriate decisions. Adaptive leadership requires learning new ways to interpret what is happening around individuals in both personal and organizational contexts and by combining new ways of doing work (Heifetz, 2009).

Yukl & Mahsud, (2010) state that flexible and adaptive leadership involves changing behavior in appropriate ways as situations change. Heifetz, (2009) stated that the adaptive leadership model explores three main activities: (1) examining events and patterns around individuals in both personal and organizational contexts, (2) interpreting what individuals observe by developing various theories about what is happening, and (3) creating interventions centered on observations to address the adaptive challenges that have been identified.

Adaptive leadership, according to Ramalingam, is a type of leadership related to 4 things, namely: 1). Anticipation, namely anticipating possible future needs, trends, and options. 2). Articulation, namely articulating anticipated needs to build collective understanding and support for action. 3). Adaptation, adaptation intended for continuous learning and adjusting responses as necessary. And 4). Accountability relates to transparency in the decision-making process and openness to the challenges faced (Fitriani, 2023). In this study, adaptive leadership was measured using 15 question items which showed the adaptive leadership behavior being developed (Nöthel et al., 2023).

Sustainable competitive advantage is a company's advantage that maintains organizational growth consistently in various aspects. Sustainable competitive advantage places an organization in a superior position compared to other organizations in the future so that it will have better performance. To continue to be able to maintain being a superior organization, the organization must at least have a good reputation or quality (Satar et al., 2023).

According to Barney, for resources to create competitive advantage, they must have the following characteristics: 1). valuable: can improve efficiency and effectiveness so that it can outperform competitors; 2) rare: unique company resources; 3) cannot be imitated perfectly; and 4) there are no close substitutes. These characteristics are known as VRIN. In this study, sustainable competitive advantage was measured using 7 question items adopted from (Çağlıyan et al., 2022).

Higher education performance shows the results that have been achieved by higher education institutions in carrying out the tridharma activities, namely teaching, research, and community service. University rankings that are carried out include The Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), which was published in 2003, and The U.S. News and World Report College Rankings (USNWR) in the United States since the mid-1980s. News and World Report College Rankings (USNWR) in the United States since the mid-1980s. In Indonesia, accreditation is known as an assessment of the performance of study programs and higher education institutions. According to Bowers and Prato (2019), ranking results and accreditation results can be used to measure higher education performance. There is still debate about the ranking and the criticisms that arise. Apart from that, several studies use the Balance Score Card to measure higher education performance, which includes financial and non-financial performance. Santati et al., (2022) uses secondary data from higher

education strategic plans with 9 dimensions of higher education performance measurement, namely (1) economy, (2) efficiency, (3) effectiveness, (4) fairness, (5) efficacy, (6) ethics, (7) productivity, (8) process measurement, and (9) service quality measurement.

Adaptive leadership is a leadership model with a leadership paradigm that can quickly adapt to the changes facing the organization, is agile, versatile, and flexible (Fitriani, 2023). Leaders with an adaptive mindset in higher education are needed because higher education institutions are facing rapid changes as a result of government policies and the demands of the world of work as well as developments in information technology that affect higher education operations. Organizations that have leaders with an adaptive paradigm tend to improve performance because leaders act quickly and make decisions, and can influence people in the organization to adapt to changes so that they can together achieve the expected performance.

Adaptive leadership has been shown to affect organizational performance (Wase & Ravishankar, 2023); (Stukes, 2021) with its ability to encourage people in the organization to achieve performance; (Ngatno & Dewi, 2019) with its ability to adapt to conditions and changes faced. Achieving organizational performance depends on leadership style (Akpaprep et al., 2019); (Kafetzopoulos et al., 2022). Leadership plays an important role in achieving organizational performance.

H1: Adaptive leadership has a significant effect on higher education performance

Adaptive leadership is a leadership style that can adapt to the situation they are exposed to. Adaptive leaders can evaluate the environment and determine the approach needed, thus, adaptive leaders influence sustainable competitive advantage because leaders can choose and implement quick actions according to changes and developments in the organizational environment. Leaders can adapt well to internal and external changes and problems within the company. Faeq, (2022) found that leadership influences sustainable competitive advantage.

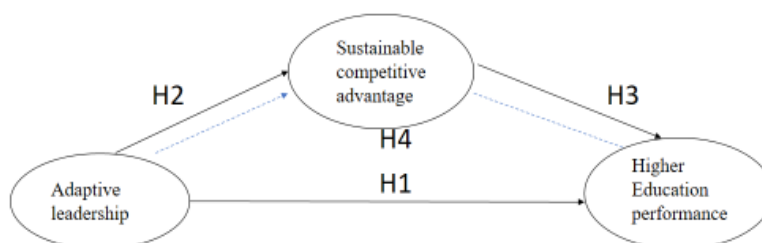
H2: Adaptive leadership influences sustainable competitive advantage

Higher education institutions that can create a competitive advantage will have the strength to be competitive with other universities because the products and services provided will remain in demand by prospective students. Wahyudin, (2015) found that the higher the competitive advantage, the higher the performance of that university. Sustainable competitiveness has been found to affect company performance (Lestari et al., 2020); (Haseeb et al., 2019); (Liao & Maulana Suprpto, 2024).

H3: Sustainable competitive advantage influences higher education performance.

H4: Sustainable competitive advantage mediates the relationship between adaptive leadership and higher education performance.

The Conceptual Framework is presented in figure



Source: Author (2024)

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a quantitative study that tests the causal relationship between the variables studied. The variables chosen in this research are adaptive leadership, higher education performance, and sustainable competitive advantage. Adaptive leadership was measured using a 15-item adaptive leadership behavior questionnaire developed (Nöthel et al., 2023). Sustainable competitive advantage was measured using 7 question items adopted from (Çağlıyan et al., 2022). Performance higher education was measured using 19 items adopted from (Setiawati, 2017). The response option for adaptive leadership, sustainable competitive advantage, and higher education performance items were based on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree – 5= strongly agree)

The population of this research is study programs at private universities in Madiun. The samples for this research were all private university study programs in Madiun. Higher education (universities, colleges, and vocational) in Madiun based on data from the LLDikti region VII website (<http://LLDiktiWilayahVII>) in 2024, there are 6 universities with a total of 45 study programs. The sampling technique used census sampling. The respondents in this research were the heads of study programs/departments and secretaries of study programs/departments. The study program is the spearhead in the success of a higher education organization. Data collection will take place from May to June 2024. Data were collected using a questionnaire sent directly to respondents in the form of a Google form sent via WhatsApp; 32 respondents participated in this research.

Data were analyzed, and data quality testing was carried out, including data validity and reliability tests. Hypothesis testing used path analysis with the help of SPSS and the Sobel Test. Testing the hypothesis of a mediating variable using path analysis is accepted if the direct effect is smaller than the total effect, which is a combination of direct and indirect effects. The regression equation in this study is as follows:

$$Y_2 = a + b X_1 + e \dots\dots\dots(1)$$

$$Y_1 = a + b_1 X_1 + e \dots\dots\dots(2)$$

$$Y_2 = a + b_1 X_1 + b_2 Y_1 + e \dots\dots\dots(3)$$

Explanation:

Y₂: higher education performance; Y₁: sustainable competitive advantage; X₁: adaptive leadership; a: constant; b₁; b₂: intercept; e: error

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The demographics of the research respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent Demography

Particulars	Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	11	34,38
	Female	21	65,63
Age (years)	25 – 35	13	40,63
	36 – 45	12	37,50
	46 – 55	5	15,63
	>55	2	6,25
Education	Master	24	75,00
	Doctoral	8	25,00

Period of work	<10 years	19	59,38
	10 – 20 years	10	31,25
	>20 years	3	9,38

Source: Own Primary Data (2024)

Based on table 1, it is obtained a description of the respondents of this study, 65.63% of the study program heads and study program secretaries at universities in the Madiun City area are women with an age range of 25-35 years and most of them have worked for less than 10 years as much as 59,38%, and most of them have S2 (masters) education as much as 75%. These data show that the heads of study programs and study program secretaries are mostly young and have sufficient work experience and productive periods so that respondents can follow the rapid changes in the environment and technology in managing study programs.

The results of the data quality test, including the validity and reliability tests, are presented in tables 2 and 3. The results of the validity test in Table 2 show the validity test after removing several invalid questions in the first test. The sustainable competitive advantage variable questionnaire statements 3 and 4 were discarded because they were invalid. There were 3 statements in the college performance variable questionnaire that were discarded because the results of the validity test of the three statements were invalid. While the statements in the adaptive leadership variable questionnaire were all valid. The results of the validity test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Validity Test Result

Questionnaire items	Higher Education Performance (KPT)		Adaptive Leadership (AL)		Sustainable competitive advantage (SCA)	
	Sig.	Description	Sig.	Description	Sig.	description
Item 1	0,002	Valid	0,000	valid	0,000	Valid
Item 2	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid
Item 3	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid	discarded invalid	
Item 4	discarded invalid		0,000	Valid	discarded invalid	
Item 5	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid
Item 6	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid
Item 7	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid
Item 8	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid		
Item 9	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid		
Item 10	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid		
Item 11	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid		
Item12	discarded invalid		0,000	Valid		
Item 13	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid		
Item 14	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid		
Item 15	0,000	Valid	0,000	Valid		
Item 16	0,000	Valid				
Item17	0,000	Valid				
Item 18	discarded invalid					
Item 19	0,002	Valid				

Source: output SPSS (2024)

The results of the reliability test are presented in Table 3. The Cronbach Alpha value of the variables of higher education performance, adaptive leadership, and sustainable competitive advantage was above 0,7 so that the statement items in the questionnaire were declared reliable (Taherdoost, 2018).

Table 3. Reliability Test Result

Variable	Cronbach Alpha	Questionnaire item	Analysis
Higher Education Performance	0,927	16	Reliable
Adaptive Leadership	0,951	15	Reliable

Sustainable Competitive Advantage	0,896	5	Reliable
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Source: Output SPSS, 2024

The results of the descriptive statistical test of the research data are presented in Table 4, showing that the performance of higher education institutions has an average of 3,51, meaning that the average respondent perceives the performance of higher education institutions as quite good. Adaptive leadership has an average value of 3,78, indicating that the average respondent perceives their leadership as quite capable of adapting to environmental changes because most of them are still young. Sustainable competitive advantage has an average value of 3,16, indicating that the average respondent perceives competitive advantage as quite good due to the variety of higher education institutions, both in terms of the number of students and their accreditation.

Table 4. Statistic descriptive

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Adaptive Leadership	32	3,7831	0,62968
Sustainable competitive advantage	32	3,1688	0,86227
Higher education performance	32	3,5191	0,56432

Source: Output SPSS, 2024

The results of the data normality test using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test obtained the result that the significance value of 0,200 is greater than 0,05 so that the research data is stated to have a normal distribution. Data normality test result is showed in table 5.

Table 5. Kolmogorov-Smirnov Data Normality Test

Unstandardized Residual	
Data (N)	32
Test statistic	0,104
P-value	0,200

Source: Output SPSS, 2024

The classical assumption test includes a multicollinearity test and a heteroscedasticity test. Meanwhile, the autocorrelation test is not used because the data obtained is cross-section data. The multicollinearity test is assessed from the VIF results and tolerance values, if the VIF value is less than 10 and the tolerance value is above 0,1 then the regression model is declared free from multicollinearity because the VIF value of the adaptive leadership variable and the VIF value of sustainable competitive advantage are each 1,337 while the tolerance value of 0,740 is greater than 0.1.

The results of the heteroscedasticity test with a scatter plot graph are presented in Figure 2. The test results obtained did not show heteroscedasticity because the points spread above and below point 0 and did not form a certain pattern as in Figure 2.

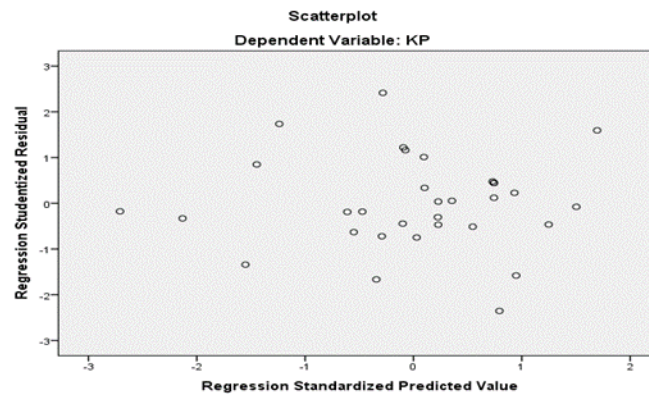


Figure 2. Heteroscedasticity Test Result

The results of hypothesis testing using path analysis and the Sobel test are presented in Table 6 and Figure 3. Based on the results of the hypothesis test in table 6, the following regression equation is obtained:

$$KP = 1,126 + 0,402 AL + 0,275 SCA$$

$$SCA = 0,569 + 0,678 AL$$

From this equation, it can be explained that the constant value of 1,126 indicates that if the value of the adaptive leadership variable and sustainable competitive advantage are constant, the value of the university performance is 1,126. Meanwhile, if the adaptive leadership variable increases by one unit, the performance of the university increases by 0,402, assuming the SCA variable is constant. If sustainable competitive advantage increases by one unit, the performance of the university increases by 0,275 assuming constant adaptive leadership.

Sustainable competitive advantage has a constant of 0,569, meaning that if adaptive leadership is constant, the value of sustainable competitive advantage is 0,569. If adaptive leadership increases by one unit, the sustainable competitive advantage increases by 0,678 units.

Table 6. Hypothesis Testing Result

Hypothesis	Unstandardized β	T Value	Standardized β	P-Value	Result
H1 AL \rightarrow KP	0,402	3,178	0,449	0,004	Accepted
H2 AL \rightarrow SCA	0,687	3,178	0,502	0,003	Accepted
H3 SCA \rightarrow KP	0,275	2,973	0,420	0,006	Accepted
H4 AL \rightarrow SCA \rightarrow KP (SobelTest) -	-	2,178	-	0,029	Accepted
R ² (square) = 0,567 (56,7%) and Adjusted R ² = 0,537 (53,7%)					

Source: output SPSS and Sobel Test, (2024)

The adjusted R² value of 0,537 indicates that the variables of adaptive leadership and sustainable competitive advantage influence higher education performance by 53,7%, while the remaining 46,3% is influenced by other variables outside the research model. The test results in Table 5 show H1 with a T-value of 3,178 with a significance of 0,004 smaller than 0,05. The results of this hypothesis test indicate that H1 is accepted, which means that adaptive leadership has a significant positive effect on the performance of higher education. Testing H2 obtained a significance value of 0,003, smaller than 0,05 with a T value of 3,178, so H2 was accepted, meaning that adaptive leadership had a significant positive effect on sustainable competitive advantage. The H3 hypothesis test obtained

a T value of 2,973 and a significance value of 0,006. These results indicate that sustainable competitive advantage has a significant positive effect on higher education performance.

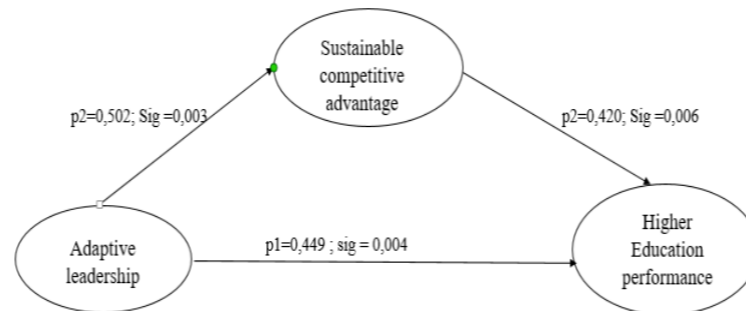


Figure 3. Path Analysis Result

The results of path analysis testing and the Sobel Test used to test hypothesis 4 are presented in Figures 4 and 5. Figure 4 shows that the direct influence of adaptive leadership on higher education performance is 0.449, while the indirect effect of adaptive leadership through sustainable competitive advantage on higher education performance is equal to $(0.502 \times 0.420) 0.210$. So the total effect is $(0.449 + 0.210) 0.659$. Because the direct effect is smaller than the total effect, sustainable competitive advantage is proven to mediate the effect of adaptive leadership on higher education performance.

Input:	Test statistic:	Std. Error:	p-value:
a 0.687	Sobel test: 2.17816538	0.08673584	0.02939373
b 0.275	Aroian test: 2.12315464	0.08898316	0.0337409
s _a 0.216	Goodman test: 2.23768634	0.08442872	0.02524152
s _b 0.092	Reset all	Calculate	

Input:	Test statistic:	Std. Error:	p-value:
a 0.687	Sobel test: 2.17816538	0.08673584	0.02939373
b 0.275	Aroian test: 2.12315464	0.08898316	0.0337409
s _a 0.216	Goodman test: 2.23768634	0.08442872	0.02524152
s _b 0.092	Reset all	Calculate	

Figure 4. Sobel Test Result

The results of the mediation test analysis with the Sobel test showed a Sobel test value of 2.1710 and a significance value (p-value) of 0.0299, which is smaller than 0.05, so hypothesis 4 is accepted, meaning that sustainable competitive advantage is proven to be an intervening variable.

Adaptive leadership has a significant positive effect on higher education performance, as evidenced by the results of the regression test obtained a p-value of $0.004 < \alpha = 0.05$. These results support research (Wamburu et al., 2022); (Stukes, 2021); (Wase & Ravishankar, 2023); (Ngatno & Dewi, 2019); (Akpaprep et al., 2019); (Kafetzopoulos et al., 2022) which found that adaptive leadership affects organizational performance. Adaptive leaders with the ability to manage subordinates in dealing with rapid changes in the business environment can improve the performance of higher education organizations. Private higher education leaders are required to be able to keep up with changes and adapt quickly so they can quickly make decisions if changes occur that have an impact on higher education performance.

Adaptive leadership has a significant effect on sustainable competitive advantage as evidenced by the results of hypothesis testing, which show a significance value of 0.003. The results of this study support the results of the study by Yang et al., (2022) that adaptive leadership has an impact on sustainable competitive advantage. Higher education organizations that have adaptive leaders can bring organizational members to have a competitive advantage so that the organization survives because leaders can adapt to changes and progress that are taking place and can encourage their subordinates to be innovative so that they can quickly adapt to changes in the organization. Sustainable competitive advantage also has a significant impact on improving higher education performance. The results of this study support research Wahyudin, (2015) that organizations that have sustainable competitive advantages increasingly improve organizational performance. These results are supported by the findings of (Lestari et al., 2020); (Liao & Maulana Suprpto, 2024).

This study found sustainable competitive advantage as a mediator in the relationship between adaptive leadership and university performance. Higher education's performance will increase if it has adaptive leadership and increase even more if higher education has a competitive advantage to ensure the sustainability of the organization.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the test results and analysis of research data is that adaptive leadership has a significant positive effect on the performance of universities. Universities that have adaptive leadership can improve performance because leaders can encourage and provide opportunities for subordinates to use their abilities to adapt to environmental changes.

Adaptive leadership has a significant impact on sustainable competitive advantage. Organizations that have adaptive leadership can bring the organization to have a competitive advantage compared to other organizations because leaders can facilitate and encourage subordinates to find and exploit competitive advantages.

Sustainable competitive advantage affects higher education performance. The higher the achievement of university performance is due to the university having a competitive advantage so that it attracts the interest of prospective new students to join the university. The results of this study found that sustainable competitive advantage mediates the influence between adaptive leadership and university performance. These findings indicate that university performance is higher if the organization has an adaptive leader and has a competitive advantage.

The limitation of this research is that there were very few respondents who participated. The next researcher will meet directly with respondents to increase the response rate and expand the scope of private higher education in East Java.

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