


# Unpacking workplace favouritism: An analysis of academic staff perceptions in Namibia

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**Orientation:** In environments meant to nurture critical thought and equitable growth, such as higher education institutions, the silent undercurrent of favouritism dissolves not only individual morale but also the institutional integrity upon which academic excellence is built.

**Research purpose:** This study explores academic employees' perceptions of favouritism and reasons as to why they perceive favouritism.

**Motivation for the study:** This research builds on previous literature that provided insights into the implications of perceived leader favouritism but was unable to explain why employees may perceive their supervisors to be exhibiting favouritism.

**Research approach/design and method:** Qualitative methodology was employed to answer all research questions using semi-structured interviews with lecturers.

**Main findings:** It was found that some employees perceive favouritism because of leaders' internal marginalisation practices, e.g. excluding some employees from critical meetings. This forces employees to put less efforts in their work.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Favouritism lowers motivation, decreases job satisfaction and leads to reduced commitment or even withdrawal behaviour. In terms of theoretical implications, the study reinforces and contextualises the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory in a Namibian higher education setting, showing that differential treatment by leaders (ingroup vs. outgroup) significantly influences employees' perceptions of fairness and their commitment levels.

**Contribution/value-add:** This is one of the first studies to apply the LMX theory to analyse favouritism within a higher education setting in Namibia.

**Keywords:** academics commitment; favouritism; higher education; leader-member exchange theory; Namibia; perception; qualitative study.

## Introduction

In environments meant to nurture critical thought and equitable growth, such as higher education institutions, the silent undercurrent of favouritism dissolves not only individual morale but also the institutional integrity upon which academic excellence is built. While much has been written on organisational justice and leadership dynamics (Engelbrecht & Samuel, 2019; Gallant, 2014; Pearce et al., 2024; Shore & Chung, 2023), the majority of existing literature on workplace favouritism has been conducted in corporate or public service contexts, primarily in developed countries (Indvik & Johnson, 2012; Khaola & Coldwell, 2019; Lasisi et al., 2022). This geographic and contextual skew has left a notable gap in understanding how favouritism manifests in the academic environment, particularly within higher education institutions in developing countries such as Namibia. More critically, prior studies have often focused on the outcomes of perceived favouritism (Hsiung & Bolino, 2017), such as reduced job satisfaction, high turnover or diminished productivity, without deeply interrogating why employees perceive favouritism in the first place. The subjective, context-specific reasons behind these perceptions have remained largely unexplored.

Given that most existing studies either focus on corporate settings in developed economies or merely highlight the consequences of favouritism without critically exploring the underlying reasons why employees perceive favouritism or how these perceptions affect commitment, this study provides a groundbreaking qualitative investigation into how favouritism is perceived by lecturers at the University of Namibia and how it affects their

commitment to work. It is one of the first studies to apply the leader–member exchange (LMX) theory to analyse favouritism within a higher education setting in Namibia. It is also one of the first studies to explore the socio-cultural dimensions (e.g., tribalism and informal power networks) that contribute to perceived unfairness in task distribution and decision-making. It offers practical, evidence-based recommendations for leadership development, human resource (HR) policy reform and institutional performance appraisal systems.

The LMX theory highlights how differential treatment in the workplace, whether in terms of access to resources, decision-making influence or recognition, can significantly affect employees' attitudes, behaviours and overall commitment to the organisation. Within this framework, the study examines how academic staff at the University of Namibia perceive favouritism from their leaders and how such perceptions influence their commitment to work. The LMX theory is particularly relevant here because it allows the study to interpret favouritism not merely as a managerial flaw, but as a relational phenomenon rooted in unequal exchange relationships between leaders and subordinates. The study identifies key LMX constructs such as outgroup membership, low supervisory support, and internal inequity as recurring themes in the participants' experiences. For example, repeated allocation of opportunities to the same individuals, exclusion from decision-making processes and perceived tribal or social biases are all forms of low-quality leader–member exchanges. These are contrasted by a few high-quality exchanges in which lecturers feel included, recognised and respected, though these are rare.

This article is an essential reading for academics, university leaders, policymakers and HR professionals who are seeking to foster inclusive, equitable and high-performing educational institutions. It not only fills a literature gap but also provides actionable insights for improving organisational commitment, fairness and staff well-being in the academic workplace.

## Research purpose and objectives

The aim of this study is to explore how lecturers and senior lecturers in higher education institutions, specifically at the University of Namibia, perceive their leaders in terms of favouritism, why they have these perceptions and how these contribute to their growth or hold them back in terms of their commitment to work. The aim is achieved through the following research questions:

- *How do lecturers in higher education institutions perceive favouritism by university leaders?*
- *What are the reasons behind lecturers' perceptions of different forms of favouritism in Namibian higher education institutions?*
- *In what ways do perceived forms of favouritism influence lecturers' commitment to their work?*

This study was undertaken in response to verbal concerns about perceived favouritism in Namibian higher education institutions, particularly among academic staff. In recent years, anecdotal evidence and informal reports (Vilho, 2023, Pulse HR, 2023) have highlighted issues such as biased task allocation, unequal access to professional development opportunities and internal cliques or tribal alignments that undermine collegiality and staff morale. However, these issues had not been systematically explored or documented within the Namibian academic setting, leaving a void in both theoretical and practical knowledge. This study seeks to address that void by investigating the lived experiences of lecturers at the University of Namibia through a qualitative, phenomenological lens. By examining how favouritism is perceived, the underlying causes of these perceptions, and their implications for work commitment, the research aims to generate evidence-based insights that can inform leadership practices, HR policies and institutional reforms. Ultimately, the study was motivated by a need to promote fairness, inclusion and improved organisational commitment in an environment central to national development and knowledge creation.

The researcher played a dual role as both an academic staff member at the University of Namibia and the principal investigator of the study. This insider position provided the researcher with valuable contextual knowledge and access to participants, facilitating trust and openness during data collection. However, the researcher was also aware of the potential for bias arising from her proximity to the research setting. These issues are addressed under the research methodology section of the article.

## Theoretical framework

Theorising favouritism in the workplace, Pearce et al. (2024) lamented that several antecedents (individual, supervisory, organisational and environmental) increase the likelihood that individuals would perceive favouritism in their workplaces. Individual antecedents include people with low generalised trust and those who have experienced workplace favouritism in the past. Supervisory antecedents comprise internal inequity and idiosyncratic deals and ambiguity in what is rewarded, outgroup membership and low supervisory support. Organisational antecedents comprise weak bureaucratisation and weak performance demands. Lastly, environmental antecedents include environmental uncertainty and corruption (Pearce et al., 2024). In this article, the researcher explores if academic employees' perceptions of favouritism are related to any of these antecedents and reasons as to why. The LMX theory, also known as the vertical dyad linkage theory, guides this exploration. According to the LMX theory, there is an argument that leaders treat followers differently, and followers do not always see their leader in the same way (Schyns & Day, 2010), which contributes to outgroup membership. Social capital defined as a collective asset in the form of shared norms, values, beliefs, trust, networks, social relations and institutions that facilitate cooperation

and collective action for mutual benefits at the workplace (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009) can have unintended consequences on economic systems, e.g., networks built on favouritism, nepotism or corruption that can exclude deserving individuals and hinder socio-economic progress (HR future, n.d.). Although different antecedents are listed separately, in practice, one should expect a great deal of mutual enhancement (or undermining) among these antecedents. For example, scholars have long noted that more environmental uncertainty is associated with less modernist bureaucratic formalisation. In addition, internal inequity, low supervisory support and outgroup membership may build on one another. For example, workers in the supervisor's outgroup are likely also to believe they have low supervisory support. However, in some settings, these antecedents can conflict with one another. An example of this would be in highly bureaucratic government organisations that monopolise the provision of certain services and are expected to conform to societal values. Weak performance pressures and meritocratic formalism would create conflicting pressures regarding workplace favouritism (Pearce et al., 2024).

## Literature review

Something as widely perceived as workplace favouritism deserves more systematic theoretical and empirical attention in the management literature (Pearce et al., 2024). This research builds on the work of Hsiung and Bolino (2017) who provided insights into the implications of perceived leader favouritism but were unable to explain why employees may perceive their supervisor to be exhibiting favouritism. Favouritism in the workplace means giving preferential treatment to one or more employees (Indvik & Johnson, 2012). Lasisi et al. (2022) lamented that the practice of favouritism or the perception that there is favouritism in the workplace and subsequently the subjective well-being of employees are factors in explaining the ever-increasing unemployment index and the deteriorating economic conditions of countries. This is because ill-treatment by supervisors through the practice of favouritism may, as a result, force employees to resign, thus contributing to unemployment. (Lasisi et al., 2022). According to Chen (2013), favouritism prevails in organisations that rely on subjective assessments of employee performance, and its harmful impact on the efficiency of the organisation is recognised (Chen, 2013). Favouritism attitudes and behaviours of the supervisors might have a negative effect on the organisational commitment of educators (Okçu & Uçar, 2016). Findings from a study in Russia indicate that favouritism suppresses healthy competition for senior positions within organisations and impedes high performers' career progress, which may lead to brain drain. It also facilitates corruption. Hence, inference should be drawn that it adversely affects organisational and economic development (Safina, 2015). However, favouritism could also benefit the employer when collusion among employees becomes a serious threat (Chen, 2013). Similarly, there may be some circumstances in which organisations benefit from

favouritism, for example, in instances where hiring workers' friends or family into well-paying jobs can serve as an additional mechanism for managerial control (workers might perform well so that their managers will take their referral suggestions) (Pearce et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, favouritism in the workplace can lead to negative reactions from group members and undermine work group cohesiveness (Othman et al., 2010). When employees feel some of their colleagues are favoured over others and decide to leave the organisation, it is the organisational performance that suffers, and this ultimately affects the economy of a country, especially if an employee decides to leave without taking up another job. In his study, Umair (2024) found that favouritism and customer incivilities had a positive correlation with employees' cynicism and work withdrawal. Umair (2024) concluded that an organisation can enhance its performance by preventing the conditions that make workers more likely to become cynical on the job. It is important for leaders to be made aware about favouritism and that necessary measures should be taken to avoid this type of behaviour (Sakçak et al., 2021). The only way to make leaders aware of this behaviour is when studies on perceptions of favouritism are carried out (Sakçak et al., 2021). Favouritism leads to low productivity, unrest, turnover intention or turnover (Joseph & Alhassan, 2023). It is therefore important to explore why employees perceive favouritism in the workplace and the implications of this on their work, particularly in higher education institutions in Namibia. The literature on favouritism in higher education is largely unavailable. The few documented works on the subject do not adequately address favouritism involving staff in HEIs (Joseph & Alhassan, 2023), hence this study.

The practice of favouritism is worrying because most job applicants crave genuine employment equity; however, nepotism, cronyism and favouritism are still rife, and Namibia is no exception (Pulse HR, 2023). Nepotism, cronyism and favouritism practices are disadvantaging and disenfranchising. Some companies have 'inner circles' consisting of a small group of individuals who have close relationships with top management or leaders or hold positions of power within the organisation. This group often gets preferential treatment, such as better work assignments, more opportunities for training or advancement and access to options not available to other employees (Pulse HR, 2023). In testing a model for turnover intention among lecturers at the University of Namibia, Pieters et al. (2020) found that organisational commitment in Namibia, particularly among lecturers in higher education institutions, impacts the turnover intention through work engagement. Organisational commitment also impacts the turnover intention directly. In another study, Pieters et al. (2022) opined that providing a healthy interaction at work among lecturers, ensuring that conflict resolution is performed amicably, and employees have a platform to voice their concerns and procedures to resolve such issues, positively impact affective commitment to work in Namibia.

In a study by Quan-Baffour and Johnson (2019), some academic colleagues (84%) felt they were not treated equally, while 18 (40%) participants mentioned that they had been victims of the practice of double standards from some of their senior supervisors. The study by Quan-Baffour and Johnson (2019) did not highlight what implications this has on work commitment, but there is argument from Okçu and Uçar (2016) that when supervisors such as school administrators avoid displaying favouritism attitudes and behaviours, treat employees fairly and include all employees in decision-making process and activities of the organisation, they will ensure positive results in terms of organisational commitment. This will provide human resource management (HRM) an opportunity to alert leaders and encourage them to do better so that it does not affect the performance and intentions for employees to leave. Leaders in different organisations could also learn from the results of this research on how they should treat their subordinates in ways that do not create an impression of favouritism.

The LMX theory explores how leaders and managers develop relationships with team members, and it explains how those relationships can either contribute to growth or hold people back. While Xu et al. (2022) believed that there are upsides to leaders displaying favouritism to some employees because employees can shift from viewing those who are favoured as a threat to seeing them as a resource for self-improvement, most researchers (Daskin, 2013; Ravaria, 2020; Sharma, 2022) believe that there are detrimental effects to leaders displaying favouritism. There are two categories of favouritism, i.e., ingroup and outgroup favouritism, in the workplace. Ingroup favouritism is a more potent engine for discriminatory impact than is outgroup directed hostility (Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014). Ravaria (2020) argued that when leaders begin leaning towards their preferred workers for each significant venture or choice of the organisation other than their abilities, the organisation or department being led would confront troublesome circumstances by picking representatives because of partiality as opposed to the workers who have the right stuff required and are great at their work. In some cases, the employees tend to leave the job as they feel they are not treated equally compared to the other employees. Daskin (2013) contended that favouritism in the workplace has a significant positive impact on organisational politics and job stress, while Sharma (2022) asserted that leader favouritism does not lead to better work performance as it disrupts harmony. Moreover, favouritism also breeds resentment and a lack of trust within the team. When team members do not trust each other, it becomes difficult to collaborate effectively. Pieters et al. (2020) suggested that employees should all be included in decision-making, should work in a pleasant working environment and be given training opportunities to develop. To ensure that institutions reach their goals, job satisfaction needs to be assessed regularly to ensure that lecturers are satisfied, committed and willing to contribute to the success of the organisation.

Workplace favouritism literature has been skewed in context, that is, most of the studies within this domain have been conducted in developed states (Abubakar et al., 2017; Fu, 2015; Pearce & Wang, 2023; Tekiner & Aydin, 2015) and not much has been done in the context of higher education (Joseph & Alshassan, 2023). This is evidence to show that there is a literature gap on workplace favouritism not only in developing economies, including Namibia, but also in higher education institutions. More research on perceptions of favouritism could offer insights in relation to how to achieve fairer processes and systems at work (Yang et al., 2021).

Following the above, the research gap that this study intends to fill is how the perception of favouritism by lecturers in higher education institutions in Namibia has implications for their work commitment. The article makes a meaningful theoretical contribution in three ways:

- Contextualising LMX theory within Namibian academia, a setting not widely studied.
- Demonstrating how perceptions of favouritism are shaped by interpersonal, organisational and cultural factors.
- Validating the importance of equitable leader–member relationships as a determinant of organisational commitment in the higher education sector.

## Research design

### Research approach

A phenomenological qualitative approach was used to answer the research questions. The goal of phenomenological research is to understand the meaning that the topic of the study has for the study participants. Researchers using phenomenology seek to describe meaning through the themes that emerge from the interview data (Dodgson, 2017). The content of the interview guide comprised of the following questions: What is your understanding of favouritism? As per your definition of favouritism, do you think it is practised at your work and/or department? Why do you think favouritism is practised and how is it practised?

### Research strategy

An exploratory embedded single case study research design was used. The researchers believed that a case study was the best strategy to use because the study intended to explore the perceptions of different academics from different departments in one university. This was done to contribute to the understanding of how favouritism is perceived by employees (Budiyanto et al., 2019).

### Research method

Semi-structured interviews were the main method of data collection to determine the perceptions of lecturers towards favouritism. Semi-structured interviews are discussions, usually one-on-one between an interviewer and an individual, meant to gather information on a specific set of topics (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Semi-structured

interview method is the best method when the researcher wants to explore participants' thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a particular topic (in this case workplace favouritism) and to delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Because of this, the structure of these questions is often open-ended and allows for flexibility as compared to questionnaires. Interview guides were developed to obtain information about the causes of perception of favouritism or why employees perceive that there is favouritism in the workplace. To assure trustworthiness of the interviews, participants were selected based on their knowledge and experience (excluding staff with dual roles, e.g., deans and Heads of Departments (HODs), i.e., leaders and teachers at the same time), which enhances the relevance and depth of insights and supports meaningful comparisons with other settings. Also, these interviews were conducted with lecturers who had been employed for more than 1 year, ensuring that participants had sufficient exposure to workplace dynamics to provide informed insights.

### Research participants and sampling methods

A non-probability sampling type, specifically purposive sampling, was used to create a sample size. Purposive sampling refers to the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Saunders et al., 2019). Purposive sampling was ideal because the aim of the study was to study lecturers who have worked for at least 1 year in the same faculty. Those with at least more than 1 year of working experience were considered to have more experience on the topic and therefore possessed more information compared to those who worked for less than 1 year. In terms of the sample size, most qualitative studies generally follow the concept of saturation when the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation (Saunders et al., 2018). The number of people interviewed was determined through the saturation method. This means data collection stopped when there was no more new data emerging. Twenty-one participants made up the sample size.

### Data collection

The institutional review board at the University of Namibia approved the research (ref. DEC FOC/20/08/15) on 21 August 2024. Respondents gave verbal consent before starting interviews. After ethical approval was granted, the researcher started with data collection by interviewing different academics (after obtaining consent) both face to face and online as some of the staff members were located too far away to be interviewed face to face. Namibia is a highly dispersed country, and travelling from one region to another requires sufficient financial resources. While the University of Namibia has four faculties, namely Faculty of Agriculture, Engineering and Natural Sciences; Faculty of Commerce, Management and Law; Faculty of Education and Human Sciences; and Faculty of Health Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, it operates 12 campuses across the country in

different regions. These include Eng. José Eduardo dos Santos Campus (Oshana Region), Hage Geingob Campus (Khomas Region), Hifikepunye Pohamba Campus (Oshana Region), Katima Mulilo Campus (Zambezi Region), Khomasdal Campus (Khomas Region), Main Campus (Khomas Region), Neudamm Campus (Khomas Region), Ogongo Campus (Omusati Region), Oshakati Campus (Oshana Region), Rundu Campus (Kavango East Region), Sam Nujoma Campus (Erongo Region) and Southern Campus (//Karas Region) (University of Namibia, 2024). Because of the lack of sufficient funds to travel to all these regions to conduct face-to-face interviews, the researcher approached different (9) participants individually face to face (at the main campus – the largest campus), while 12 others at other campuses (i.e., 1 from Hifikepunye Pohamba campus, 2 from Khomasdal campus, 1 from Southern campus, 2 from Ogongo campus and 1 from each of the other campuses) were asked through an online Google forms link and were encouraged to respond in as much as detail as possible. The availability and willingness of individuals determined the number of people who took part from each campus. The questions that were asked through the online Google forms link were the same as the ones asked face to face, e.g., explain how favouritism affects your commitment to work? Do you think some of your colleagues are favoured more than others by your supervisors? If yes, why do you think there is favouritism? – Please answer in detail. In instances where participants provided very brief answers, I followed up to seek further clarification. I encouraged those completing online to leave their contact details if they were comfortable to do so, so that I could contact them, if need be, for further clarification. Most of them provided detailed information as the researcher followed up with only three participants.

### Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Because the researcher is also an academic herself at the same university, to avoid biasness in the results, she was very transparent about the purpose of the research and her role. She emphasised that participation is voluntary, and responses will not impact professional relationships. She also had a research assistant as a neutral third party to conduct interviews with close colleagues to reduce bias (Saunders et al., 2019). Further, only staff members who are working strictly as academics, i.e., teaching staff, were included in the study and not academics who are also professionals, e.g., Deans and Heads of Departments, as these are considered as leaders of departments or faculties. To avoid skewness of the results, different staff members from all four faculties at the university were included. The researcher briefed the participants about the purpose of the study, and the participants consented orally to participate in the study. The researcher considered the potential impact of her role in the responses provided by colleagues by assuring participants that their identities will be kept confidential, especially in reporting findings. She also used pseudonyms and avoided including identifying details in the analysis. Secondly, she

shared transcripts or summaries with participants (known as member validation, see Saunders et al., 2019) to ensure that their views have been captured accurately and not misinterpreted through her lens as a fellow academic. Data were transcribed and cleaned before data analysis commenced. This process lasted for 3 weeks.

## Data analysis

To analyse the data, interviews were transcribed, and the ensuing transcriptions were checked for errors in spelling before commencing with data analysis. The researcher read the data several times to comprehend the content of the views held by lecturers about forms of favouritism. The data were then coded into segments. This process involved moving forward and backward through the transcripts, drawing on in-depth knowledge connected with the study, returning to the study question and thinking in terms of systems and theoretical concepts. After this, the third step involved marking relevant codes for further analysis to create categories. Fourthly, the researcher classified the coded data into predominant themes that explained lecturers' perception of favouritism. Examples of some of the codes formulated were *supporting some tribes, having cliques, unequal opportunities given, acting HOD role vested in same individuals and punishing some individuals and not others*. These codes, for example, led to the theme: 'practices of favouritism'. The method of analysis in this research project involved both deductive logic and inductive logic to analyse the data. This means that the researcher started off with observations from the literature or certain thematic categories from the literature (deductive) but was also open to emergent themes or codes in the interviews (inductive) that could shed light on the phenomenon under investigation (Braun et al., 2016). To support the analysis, the software ATLAS.Ti was used. For a computer-assisted analysis, following the Noticing things, Collecting things and Thinking about things (NCT) approach method. Friese suggested the use of the NCT approach for a critical analysis (Friese, 2014). Using the NCT method of analysis enabled the researcher to conduct a systematic analysis. The main aim was to put all the findings together and gain a coherent understanding of the phenomenon (Friese, 2014).

## Reporting style

When reporting the findings of the study, the researcher used pseudonyms such as 'Participant 1' to avoid revealing the identities of the participants.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Namibia's Ethics Committee (REC) (No. DEC FOC/20/08/15).

## Results

The purpose of this research is to explore the underlying factors that lead employees to perceive their leaders as exhibiting favouritism. Qualitative methodology was

therefore employed to answer all research questions. The results are presented as per the research question of the study. However, demographic information will be presented first to provide a quantitative description in order to understand the profile of participants who took part.

## Demographics

Most academics (54%) who participated in the study are employed at the university for more than 5 years, followed by those who worked at the university for longer than 10 years. Most of the participants who participated are from the Faculty of Commerce Management and Law and the Faculty of Education and Human Sciences. These are the two largest faculties at the university.

Three main themes emerged from the data, namely practices of favouritism, reasons for the perception of favouritism and how favouritism affects commitment to work. The results are presented as follows.

## Lecturers' perceptions of practices of favouritism

Participants were asked what they consider as favouritism or how favouritism is practised. Many academics perceive favouritism to be associated with how projects and work are allocated, how information is shared and the choices of where to work from. This is evidenced by the following quotes:

'My leader supports certain tribes and disregards others.'  
(Participant 2, Female, Lecturer)

'Praising certain colleague always, even if it is not him/her who deserves to be praised, being involved in secret projects while all colleagues are unaware, travelling, working from home anytime or day they feel like without being questioned.'  
(Participant 12, Female, Lecturer)

'Favoured people are getting away with mistakes that they were supposed to be punished for, they are being protected, they are not attending meetings and activities and they are protected.'  
(Participant 13, Female, Lecturer)

'Certain staff members and HOD always have mini meetings. Furthermore, HODs give some members of the department opportunity to grow [*put them into projects for them to gain skills and experience through collaboration and travel to countries for academic development*]. Also, the same people are allowed to work from home, while others are required to be at work always.'  
(Participant 14, Female, Lecturer)

'Even the role of acting HOD is vested in the same individuals all the time. Module coordinator ship is given to the same person year in year out.'  
(Participant 4, Male, Senior Lecturer)

'Some people are given opportunity that aren't offered to others. This is an element of favouritism.'  
(Participant 6, Male, Lecturer)

## Reasons for perceptions of favouritism

Different staff members perceive the reasons for favouritism to be mainly because of tasks being assigned to the same people all the time, friendships between

leaders and members (ingroup favouritism) as well as people knowing each other prior to joining the department or have similar beliefs or interests. The following quotes illustrate:

'I believe it is due to personal biases. When there are benefits the same people are given preferential treatment to be selected. When one is not favoured, s/he will not be selected for those specific tasks. Also, sometimes the same favoured people do not attend meetings, and they are protected by the supervisor giving nice excuses where they are to protect these individuals.' (Participant 13, Female, Senior Lecturer)

'Because some people share similar interests with the leader, supervisors have created cliques with a few staff members within the departments and in the faculty and they call each other by their clique names. Some colleagues are even allowed to do certain things that other colleagues would be reprimanded of.' (Participant 3, Female, Lecture)

'To advance friends' personal lives and professionally because when there is a project which pays, only certain individuals are informed and invited to participate in it and the rest of the department are left out, to do work which doesn't require extra payments. Also, some colleagues are forever working from home and no actions are taken against them.' (Participant 15, Female, Senior Lecturer)

'The supervisor shares some information with few close colleagues. Examples may include things discussed in management meetings as well as things discussed with external stakeholders.' (Participant 11, Male, Lecturer)

'To give unnecessary pressure and stress to some individuals and not others. For example, no regular staff meetings are called and work-related matters such as departmental or faculty projects are discussed with a few and always the same staff members. Some staff members are forced to teach modules regardless of not having knowledge and competency to teach such a module.' (Participant 14, Female, Lecturer)

However, there are some colleagues who have not experienced favouritism or would not call it favouritism:

'I have not experienced it in our department. We are treated with dignity and fairness.' (Participant 1, Male, Senior Lecturer)

'Not what I have observed thus far. If it happened sure favouritism is at workplace is worse because resources would not be equitably shared and allocation to staff. May lead to nepotism and lack of respect and accountability among staff and subordinates.' (Participant 7, Male, Lecturer)

'I cannot really say that colleagues are favoured. In my opinion, the supervisors tend to rather delegate to colleagues that are present, willing and avail themselves to complete tasks on time. Because of that supervisors tend to work with those colleagues more, but I would not say it's favouritism.' (Participant 19, Female, Senior Lecturer)

### How favouritism affects commitment to work

It is very clear from the findings that favouritism influences some staff members' commitment to their work because they start to put in less efforts:

'There is no social cohesion amongst staff members. I have lost interest of being at work.' (Participant 3, Female, Lecturer)

'It de-motivate one from putting more effort whilst you know you will never be recognised by your effort. Personally, I do not even like going to the office.' (Participant 6, Male, Lecturer)

'I feel un-valued and unappreciated since one is forever checked up if you are at work and if it happens that I am not at work, I have to explain, why is not done to everyone? Why must some person be free to be where they want to be during working hours and not me? Why am I not part of the paid projects but be given extra modules for which do not count as part of my workload so that I can also earn extra income? This makes me feel like I'm nobody. I don't belong here.' (Participant 15, Female, Senior Lecturer)

'At times, it discourages me from positively contributing to the department.' Participant 9, Female, Lecturer

'It will lead one not to do as expected because of feeling of being sidelined and not recognised.' (Participant 6, Male, Lecturer)

Although there are some academics who have not experienced favouritism in their departments, they still opined that favouritism can lead to poor performance and affect one's self-esteem. This is narrated in the words of the following staff member as follows:

'It has not affected me personally, but it can lead to poor performance and lack of self-esteem, lack of motivation and feel not valuable to the team. Feel useless and not an asset to contribute to the mission, vision and strategic goals.' (Participant 18, Male, Lecturer)

Others tend to completely ignore what is happening around them and rather focus on their work although they may be affected:

'I tend to focus on things that matter to me, and I don't indulge into conversations unrelated to me even if I overhear them in the corridors.' (Participant 11, Male, Lecturer)

'I'm committed to my work. I try by all means to be there for my students, because that is my reason for being here.' (Participant 16, Female, Senior Lecturer)

'I am here to work, and I make sure I deliver.' (Participant 2, Female, Lecturer)

## Discussion

Most of the perceptions of favouritism emanate from supervisory antecedents, e.g., outgroup membership, internal inequity and ambiguity in what is rewarded. The results in this study do matter because they have gone to explain how relationships between leaders and members can either contribute to growth or hold people back as per the LMX theory. The results have gone on to demonstrate that the leader can indeed be a role model, an advocate and an ally for building work group inclusion (Shore & Chung, 2023). A statement from the findings like 'there is no social cohesion among staff members' is in line with Sharma (2022) who asserted that leader favouritism does not lead to better work performance as it disrupts harmony.

The perception that leaders support some staff members and not others based on tribes is similar to the results of Egwuonwu (2023) who demonstrated that certain managers

have a bias to favour members of their tribes, particularly those who reside in places with a dearth of employees of the same tribe. Leaders' practices of internal marginalisation (IM) of employees are one of the factors that confirm the existence of toxic leadership or toxic leaders, which has a profound psychological and emotional impact on workers and helps in employees dislike of work and leaving their jobs, increasing turnover, absenteeism and all organisational negative phenomena that affect workers on their organisational performance and even on the institutional performance as a whole (Saeed, 2023). Having staff members who do not feel they belong or are discouraged to show for work because of the type of leadership is concerning and it goes to justify Shore and Chung's (2023) argument that the leader can make specific role choices that engender less ostracism and more inclusion, and as a result, inspire a work setting in which both belongingness and uniqueness needs are fulfilled through members experiencing an inclusive work group environment. In higher education institutions especially, it is even more concerning because if those who are supposed to be role models (academics) to the future generation are demoralised and not encouraged to go the extra mile at work, it is the expectation that future organisations will be led by mediocre individuals as the quality of education may also be affected. Saeed (2023) opined that in order to solve the problems and to moderate the risky impact of favouritism (most often by toxic leaders), it is essential to solve these problems by turning to servant leadership (SL) where leaders avoid marginalisation practices, avoid favouritism practices and focus on all employee participation. It is also important that employees should refrain from adopting organisational silence in the face of toxic leadership and should be encouraged to report or expose such behaviours through appropriate channels.

In line with Egwuonwu (2023), reporting methods are required to ensure that disadvantaged employees can express their observations and feelings without fear of losing their employment or positions. In this way, favouritism based on these inappropriate factors will be reduced, but preference based on performance will be lauded. However, when employees observe a great deal of differentiation, this generally tempers the positive effects a high-quality LMX relationship exerts on their commitment to the work unit (van Breukelen et al., 2002). Egwuonwu (2023) lamented that organisations should implement measures to counteract these improper variables such as personal relationships and tribalism that, according to staff members, lead to favouritism. This could take the shape of more objective appraisal methods in which the work of each employee is evaluated, rather than the subjective opinions of the employees.

### Social and practical implications

Favouritism lowers motivation, decreases job satisfaction and leads to reduced commitment or even withdrawal behaviour. This is critical in higher education where quality teaching and student support rely on high staff engagement. When lecturers disengage because of perceived unfairness, it

may directly affect the quality of education, student–teacher interaction and institutional reputation. The student learning experience becomes collateral damage in a toxic work culture. Lecturers who perceive favouritism may experience heightened stress, anxiety and burnout because of feelings of unfairness or exclusion. This can impact their teaching quality and interactions with students and colleagues. Lecturers outside the favoured group may feel demotivated and disengaged, limiting their professional growth. Favouritism can create divisions among staff, with 'ingroups' (those perceived as favoured) and 'outgroups' (those excluded). This division can hinder effective collaboration, making team efforts less productive. If academicians' commitment to teaching is affected negatively, it also impacts their teaching, or they may decide to leave in the middle of the academic year, and the consequence is having students go for weeks without being taught, which disrupts their learning.

### Limitations and recommendations

The scope of the work focused on employees, i.e., lecturers without categorising them at different levels, for example, foreigners and locals, early career and more experienced employees. Nevertheless, the study highlighted several themes related to participants' perception of favouritism and how these impact their work. The author acknowledges that because of the study's qualitative research design, the results cannot be generalised and do not represent all the employees in the country. Nonetheless, there is an inherent value in qualitative research in terms of its ability to generate rich, in-depth responses, which is what this study also attempted to achieve. Based on the findings, strategies have been identified to address the issue of favouritism.

### The study offers the following recommendations

#### Integrate employee feedback into leadership appraisals

Human resource departments should incorporate staff perceptions of fairness and inclusivity into the performance appraisal process for academic leaders. This would provide a structured mechanism for employees to voice concerns about perceived favouritism and encourage accountability among leaders.

#### Develop clear institutional policies on favouritism

Universities should establish and enforce written guidelines that define what constitutes favouritism in the academic environment. These policies should include examples of unacceptable practices (e.g., biased task allocation and unequal access to opportunities) and outline procedures for redress.

#### Implement leadership training on inclusive practices

Mandatory leadership and ethics training should be provided for all Heads of Departments, Deans and supervisory staff. This training should focus on inclusive leadership, unbiased decision-making and the importance of equitable treatment in fostering staff engagement and organisational commitment.

### Establish anonymous reporting channels

To reduce fear of retaliation, institutions should create secure and anonymous platforms where employees can report perceived favouritism or exclusionary practices. These mechanisms should be managed independently to ensure trust and confidentiality.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyse lecturers' perceptions of favouritism by university leaders, examine why lecturers perceive the different forms of favouritism by university leaders and lastly determine how the different forms of favouritism have implications on their commitment to work.

Lecturers were asked to describe practices that they perceive as favouritism at work. It was highlighted to the participants that favouritism is how different employees are treated by the leader at work and how work is distributed among the group. Practices such as lack of recognition for some employees and being excluded from departmental activities were some of the issues reported. The reasons why lecturers perceive the different practices as favouritism ranged from tasks being assigned to the same people all the time, friendships between leaders and members (ingroup favouritism) and people knowing each other prior to joining the department. In terms of how favouritism affects commitment to work, employees' self-esteem is affected, and employees start to put less efforts into their work which ultimately affects their performance. A few of the employees acknowledged that they do not let practices of favouritism affect them but continue to work hard.

Regardless, favouritism is dangerous to the workplace, especially in higher education institutions, which are institutions that are supposed to be places of growth not only for staff members but also for students. When one's mental health or work commitment is affected by practices of favouritism at work, this individual may put their frustrations on students or may not often show up for their classes, which not only affects the quality of service to students but also creates bad reviews for the institution. Students are key stakeholders at higher education institutions as these institutions would not exist without them. Their opinions can therefore make or break an institution just like a leader's behaviour can make or break an individual and ultimately an institution. Future research could focus on leaders to understand whether leaders would consider practices identified in this study as favouritism or not. It will be good to follow those who exited or resigned from higher education institutions to determine whether favouritism had a role to play.

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## Author's contributions

E.M.A. is the sole author of this research article.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, E.M.A. upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or publisher. The author is responsible for this study's results, findings and content.

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