






HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK IN MALAYSIA: A REFINEMENT

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ABSTRACT

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This paper proposes a leadership competency framework for higher education institutions in Malaysia. It presents a two-year development process on the leadership competency in order to address the issues in identifying competent leaders in higher education institutions in Malaysia. This study utilizes a qualitative approach to achieve the research objectives. Specifically, an exploratory case study of a small unit under the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia is the focus of this paper. The study demonstrates that the existing leadership framework in higher education institutions needs to be refined to accommodate the demand changes. The practical implication of this paper is to provide an understanding on possible alternatives to the existing leadership competency framework in promoting excellence in all spheres of higher education, and academic excellence in particular. This paper provides a refined leadership competency framework specifically for higher education institutions in Malaysia.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on leadership competency frameworks, specifically for higher education institutions in Malaysia. This study provides a refined framework that can be used to assess the abilities of a leader.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of leadership has long been debated due to its importance in an organization. This is because leadership is considered to be one of the most observed but the least understood phenomenon that involves dynamic undertaking, and both researchers and practitioners have struggled for centuries to make sense of it (Burns, 1978). Leadership is considered a crucial factor and increasingly demands change, choice, flexibility, and variety in an organization (Bechtel, 2010; Wallin, 2009; Yukl, 2002). Delaying an organization, empowerment of individual employees, and the future for both individuals and organization lies in the value development of an individual as a leader (Chouhan & Srivastava, 2014; Ghani & Mohamed, 2018; Mohamed, Yahaya, & Ghani, 2020). This suggestion also applies to all organizations in general.

A lot of the existing literature has examined the issue of leadership in organizations. Early leadership research, such as Carlyle (1907), was established in a strongly individualistic cultural context that focused on examining leaders' characteristics (Hoffman, Woehr, Maldagen-Youngjohn, & Lyons, 2011). Subsequently, multiple contexts and frameworks were developed, such as those by Bass (1998); Bechtel (2010). These studies focused on examining leadership abilities, such as behaviors, situations and transformational abilities that influence their leadership style

and, consequently, organizational performance (Bechtel, 2010; Yukl, 2002). However, Wolverson and Gmelch (2002) and Anderson (2015) argued that higher education leadership is not similar to leadership in other organizations since it represents a unique set of challenges. As noted by Filan and Seagren (2003), higher education leadership can be seen as *dynamic, complex and multidimensional and thus offers numerous opportunities for further investigation due to its constant changes, adjustments and turbulent environment in the last decade*.

In his study, Lees (2006) posed the following question: *Why would a sane, rational person ever consider becoming a leader at a higher educational institution?* Subsequently, this led to the next question: *If the higher education leadership is unique, then what constitutes its competency?* Arguably, it is important to define the higher education leadership framework as leaders in higher educational institutions need to have a balance in between the interests of the faculties and departments as well as the interest of stakeholders. Using the Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT), a small unit under the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia as the setting, this paper examines the existing higher education leadership competency framework developed for 2015 and 2016, and subsequently refining the leadership competency framework to ensure academic excellence. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides a review of relevant literature. Section 3 outlines the modelling methodology, the framework is presented in section 4, and section 5 concludes the paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several definitions of leadership have been provided in the leadership literature due to its importance to an organization as early as the 1970s. One of the earliest definitions of leadership was given by Burns (1978), who defined leadership as *“leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values, motivations, aspirations, and expectations of both leaders and followers. Leadership is a special type of power and one needs to understand the essence of power. Leaders hold power. Leadership is relational, collective, and purposeful”*. Seidler (1996) defined leadership as *‘the process of influencing others and facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives’*. Dugan and Komives (2007), on the other hand, defined leadership as *“a relational, transformative, process-oriented, learned, and change-directed phenomenon”*. Another study defined leadership as *“a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow”* (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). In addition, leadership is a complex relationship between people based on trust, obligation, commitment, responsibility, and a shared vision of prosperity (Koen & Bitzer, 2010), which constitutes reflection of the leadership competency.

Studies in the leadership literature defined leadership competency as *“the skills of a leader that contribute to superior performance. By developing leadership competencies, organizations can better identify and develop their next generation of leaders”* (Mohamad & Abdullah, 2017). Leadership competency constitutes knowledge, skills and behavior (Smith & Wolverson, 2010) that represent key characteristics for a leader to have in order to achieve desirable organizational outcomes (Trichy, 1997; Wallin, 2009). Studies examining leadership competency have included traits such as behaviors, transactions, influence, power, and situational and transformational abilities (Bass, 1998; Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Hickman, 2016; Schyns & Hansbrough, 2010; Schyns. & Schilling, 2013). Other studies have also included occupational and social outcomes such as leadership and interpersonal skills (McClelland, 1973; Tok & Bacak, 2013), since aptitude and intelligence are not sufficient to predict successful performance. Katsinas and Kempner (2005) viewed leadership competency from two perspectives namely, organizational perspective, which relates to personal and professional growth that allows one’s ability to sustain, grow and transform organizations, and individual perspective, which relates to activities and experiences that improve job-related skills and knowledge.

Some of the leadership literature has also developed several competency frameworks for leadership (Frankovelgia & Riddle, 2010; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2017; Ruben, 2019). The studies in this literature used a quantitative or qualitative approach in an attempt to develop a leadership competency framework. A similar trend was shown in the higher education leadership framework, for example,

Wolverton and Gmelch (2002) in developing their framework found five competencies in a higher education leadership framework. The first is analytical, which represents creativity and strategic thinking; second is communication, which refers to oral and written abilities; third is students' affairs that represent students' needs and legal considerations; fourth is behavioral, which refers to unselfish behavior and strong focus on actual behavior; and the last competency is external relations, which refers to time spent on external-related issues.

3. MODELLING METHODOLOGY

3.1. The Setting

This exploratory case study used a small unit in the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia, known as AKEPT, as the setting. AKEPT was established in 2008 to assist higher education institutions in developing the minds of potential leaders. This unit has been actively involved in leadership talent management for higher education institutions in Malaysia since 2015. In 2019, 494 academics from 20 public universities, polytechnics and other higher education agencies were profiled through the AKEPT Leadership Assessment Centre. Three approaches namely, psychometric test, behavioral event interview (BEI), and strategic plan presentation (SPP) were used to assess potential leaders.

In 2013, AKEPT developed their first higher education leadership framework from 2015 to 2016. Five clusters were included in the leadership competency framework: personal effectiveness, cognition, leadership, impact and influence, and achievement and action. The life span of this framework was for two years and, subsequently, would be reassessed to consider any new developments and demands of higher education. Ideally, the initiative to gauge the leadership competency framework will help to execute a more strategic leadership development plan for effective and efficient talent management.

3.2. The Instrument

This study utilized focus group discussions and individual interviews. The focus group included individuals from the AKEPT Leadership Competency and Instrument Committee, which consists of experts from various fields who have vast experience in leadership and were hence deemed suitable for this study, and the purpose of the focus group was to extract a richer view of leadership competency frameworks from the viewpoints of the committee. The questions were developed with reference to their first higher education leadership framework and some modifications were necessary (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). The issues discussed in the focus group included revisiting AKEPT's first higher education leadership framework, the cluster type that needs to be included in the new leadership competency framework, the appropriate competency themes, the placement of the competency themes in the clusters, and determining the suitability of the competency themes in gauging potential leaders in higher education institutions.

The focus group discussions were conducted twice over a period of one year. There were 12 members in the committee, and during the discussions they were encouraged to propose new ideas on the best leadership competency themes in developing a leadership competency framework. Upon completion of the focus group discussions, the qualitative data was coded and categorized to identify the competency theme variables that could be included as part of the refined higher education leadership competency framework.

3.3. The Model

Figure 1 presents the model for analyzing the leadership competency framework for higher education institutions in Malaysia.

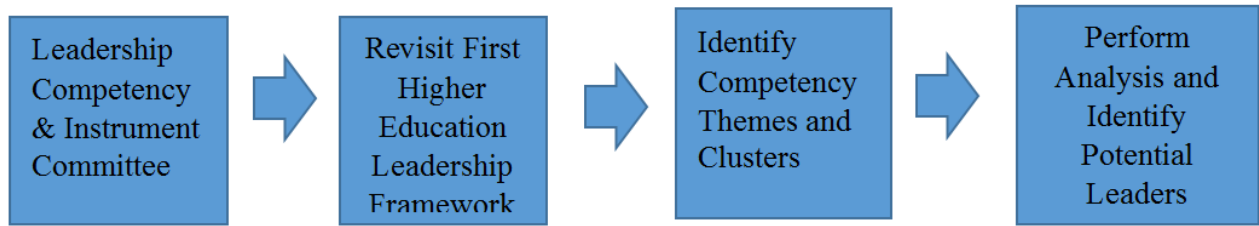


Figure 1. Model used in this study.

Source: AKEPT Standard Operating Procedure for Leadership Profiling.

This study also reviewed documentation as part of the data collection in order to further enhance the credibility of the proposed components (Alias & Abdul, 2003; Trichy, 1997). Two main references were used to develop the new framework: the Pekeliling Perkhidmatan Bilangan 3 Tahun (2006), and the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education 2015-2025). In addition, the committee also revisited the first higher education leadership developed in 2014 and reviewed past initiatives on the overall development to ensure clarity of understanding. The committee also reviewed the statistics of public and private universities in Malaysia. Finally, the committee reviewed and identified past and current deliverables of the generic leadership competency in Malaysian higher education institutions. The competency themes were then conceptualized and an overall conclusion was made to represent the refined framework.

4. THE FRAMEWORK

This study found that the aspiration of the Malaysian government in higher education institutions influence the conceptualization of the leadership competency themes. The effectiveness of this framework should be at five levels namely, leading whole organization, integrating diverse functions, managing function, supervising day-to-day tasks and individual contributor. The leadership competency framework consists of five main clusters, which is similar to the existing higher education leadership competency framework. Although the number of clusters remains unchanged, the titles of the clusters have changed to personnel effectiveness, cognition, leading, impact, and influence and, and achievement and action. Such changes are necessary for effective leadership in higher education institutions and to accommodate the changing demand of leadership. The participants from the focus group were then requested to identify possible issues in each cluster. The issues reflecting the quality of higher education leadership competency framework for each cluster are presented below.

4.1. Personnel Effectiveness

Issue 1: Does the leader have self-confidence?

Self-confidence refers to an individual's level of certainty about his or her ability to handle situations, which is formed through complex internal processes of judgment and self-persuasion (Axelrod, 2017). A good leader must possess self-confidence as it is an essential trait in leadership that influences others. AKEPT needs to assess this trait by looking at how a leader addresses self-doubt, how they eliminate negative triggers, and how they overcome mistakes. Particularly, a leader should be able to play a role of psychological empowerment (Goodstadt & Kipnis, 1970) and goal-setting (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991) for his subordinates.

Issue 2: Does the leader have empathy?

Empathy refers to the ability of a leader to experience and relate to the thoughts and emotions of their staff (Gentry, Sadri, & Weber, 2016), and a good leader must have empathy to inspire understanding and knowledge (Bass, 1998). A leader should have the ability to put himself or herself in their staffs' shoes and imagine what their staff is going through in a particular situation. Often, leaders show empathy to their staff, indicating that they care about their needs and achievements (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Previous studies

have also shown that empathy has a significant influence on job performance and that empathy is more important to job performance in some cultures than others (Gentry et al., 2016; Humprey, Burch, & Adams, 2016). Hence, AKEPT needs to assess whether a potential leader possesses this quality to ensure high quality leadership in higher education institutions.

Issue 3: Does the leader have organizational commitment?

Organizational commitment refers to the strength of an employee's identification with an organization (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). This consists of three components, namely belief in the objectives and values of the organization, working hard for the benefit of the organization, and having a strong desire to continue working for the organization (Dirzyte, Patapas, Smalskys, & Udaviciute, 2013; Luthans, 2012). Hence, AKEPT needs to assess how strong a leader's organizational commitment is towards their institution, their willingness to work on behalf of the organization, and the likelihood of remaining a member.

Issue 4: Does the leader understand values and ethics?

Values and ethics refer to aspects of complex relationships that are based on trust, obligation, commitment, responsibility, and a shared vision of prosperity. Specifically, ethical leadership is a demonstration of appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships through two way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Cogaltay, Yalcin, & Karadag, 2016). The values and ethics of leadership reflects these complexities and present many challenges for those who want to do the right thing (Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts, & Chonko, 2009). A good leader must know what he or she values, and recognize the importance of ethical behavior (Mohamed et al., 2020; Othman & Abdul Rahman, 2014). Hence, AKEPT needs to assess whether a leader demonstrates values and ethics. A leader should be able to identify and share their values and create trust by doing what they said they would do and not make empty promises.

4.2. Cognition

Issue 1: Does the leader have conceptual thinking?

Conceptual thinking refers to an individual's cognitive capacity to understand and respond to a situation, which includes making sense of the moral and ethical dilemmas that may arise (Batliwala, 2010). Conceptual thinking is a skill that is important for a leader in ensuring that the organizational goals are achieved. AKEPT needs to ensure that a leader has conceptual thinking abilities (Peachey, Zhou, Damon, & Burton, 2015). A leader must have the ability to look at the overall picture and analyze hypothetical situations or concepts in order to compile insights. AKEPT can then determine whether a leader would show good judgment regarding why something is being done or happening.

Issue 2: Does the leader have analytical thinking?

Analytical thinking refers to the ability of an individual to analyze arguments, making inferences using inductive or deductive reasoning, judging and making decisions to solve problems (Paul, 1992; Willingham, 2007). To be a good leader, he or she must have the ability to analyze, reflect upon, synthesize, and contextualize information. They also need to possess analytical skills in terms of asking and answering questions for clarification, defining terms, identifying assumptions, interpreting and explaining and reasoning verbally (Lai, 2011; Paul, 1992; Willingham, 2007). AKEPT needs to assess whether a leader can weigh the pros and cons to solve complex problems.

Issue 3: Does the leader have decision-making ability?

Decision-making refers to the cognitive process that results from a selection of beliefs or courses of action among several options (Lucena, De, & Popadiuk, 2019). For a leader to make a decision, they need to be able to establish decision-making processes and communicate how short-term and long-term decisions will be made, who has input, and ensure that decisions are made by individuals best suited to the task. AKEPT also needs to assess a leader's sense of urgency in terms of making timely decisions, using intuition as well as data in the face of ambiguity, and subsequently take follow-up actions to support decisions. They must also be willing to make and stand by controversial decisions that will benefit their institution.

Issue 4: Is the leader good at planning and organizing?

Planning refers to the conscious process of selecting and developing the best course of action to accomplish clearly defined objectives, while organizing is the process of arranging tasks or resources for optimum use (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). In assessing the competencies of a leader, AKEPT needs to look at plans put in place to achieve short- and long-term goals. A leader should have the ability to accurately scope and secure resources needed to accomplish projects, and manage time and resources effectively, prioritizing efforts according to organizational goals (Grol & Wensing, 2013). AKEPT also need to assess whether a leader provides contingency plans by proactively planning for unforeseen circumstances.

4.3. Leading

Issue 1: Does the leader have teamwork and team leadership skills?

Teamwork refers to the ability to work cooperatively with others in order to achieve organizational goals (Hunziker et al., 2011). AKEPT must assess whether a leader can delegate tasks to the appropriate individuals or group, and subsequently promote collaboration among the team members and encourage others to cooperate and coordinate efforts. In addition, a leader should be able to encourage others to proactively solve problems. AKEPT should also assess whether a leader can manage conflicts by creating models and encourage others to manage conflict openly and productively. A leader should be able to lead team meetings and prioritize team morale and productivity (Rosen & Callaly, 2005). Upon accomplishments a leader should celebrate with their team members.

Issue 2: Can the leader leverage diversity?

Leveraging diversity refers to managerial practices often discussed in terms of sound business management, judgement, and expertise to assist an organization to become culturally competent (Dotson & Nuru-Jeter, 2012). A leader must know how to bring people from diverse backgrounds into their organization. This is because diversity promotes competition and effectively creates a diverse customer base, which leads to increased market share and unleashes creativity, innovation, and improved group problem solving (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). AKEPT should assess whether a leader has the ability to leverage diversity by looking at how they evaluate the levels of diversity not only in terms of knowledge and expertise, but also in terms of race, gender, and culture.

Issue 3: Does the leader have change leadership and adaptability?

Adaptability in leadership refers to different ways of thinking and enables leaders to shift and experiment as situations change (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Wang, Demerouti, & Le Blanc, 2017). A good leader possesses a ready to change attitude and has a sense of directiveness and assertiveness and should be able to model organizational values and maintain a strong character at all times. AKEPT needs to assess whether a leader can anticipate and seize new opportunities that align with strategic goals. It is also important for a leader to be able to manage change and address resistance to change by understanding its effects on the organization and key stakeholders (Calarco & Gurvis, 2006).

4.4. Impact and Influence

Issue 1: Can the leader impact and influence other people?

Impact and influence refers to ability of an individual to persuade and convince others to support an idea, agenda or direction, which is often linked to organizational performance (Cattlelan, 2011). AKEPT needs to assess a leader's adaptivity to personal leadership or approaches that can be used to influence others. AKEPT also needs to assess whether a leader can make a case in terms of appeals to emotions and reason based on data and concrete evidence. In addition, a leader should anticipate reactions and address concerns of staff to gain their support in achieving a goal. A leader must also have the ability to motivate his staff to take action and achieve goals, even in the absence of a direct relationship (Yidong & Xinxin, 2013).

Issue 2: Does the leader have organizational and environmental awareness?

Organizational and environmental awareness refers to an individual's understanding of the organization and environment regarding current capacity, abilities, potentials and results (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). In addition, a leader needs to be aware of organizational and environmental aspects and use their understanding of the nature of relationships and decision-making processes to communicate effectively (Pitagorsky, 2003). AKEPT needs to ensure that a leader can create an inclusive environment that respects the cultures and community in their institution. A leader should also be able to adjust their behavior based on cultural norms and cues, as well as appreciating the diversity in terms of creating and sustaining an environment in which people from different backgrounds can succeed (Zilahy & Huisingh, 2009).

Issue 3: Can the leader build relationships and networks?

Networking in leadership refers to the building of relationships and making alliances with the aim of meeting organizational goals (Grayson & Baldwin, 2011). AKEPT should assess whether a leader has the ability to develop mutually beneficial relationships and partnerships based on trust, respect, and achievement of common goals. A leader also must be able to gain the trust of key stakeholders by listening and seeking to understand their views and needs (Pearce, 2007). Finally, a leader must be able to demonstrate respect and appreciation for others by showing empathy, valuing their time and contributions, and be responsive to their needs. Building coalitions will gain support by aligning ideas with the needs and priorities of others.

4.5. Achievement and Action

Issue 1: Does the leader have achievement orientation?

Achievement orientation refers to how individual interests and reactions to tasks result in different patterns of cognition and behavior (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). That is, a leader sets challenging goals for his employees and expects them to perform at their highest level, and in doing so shows confidence in his employees' ability to meet his expectations (Xenikou & Simosi, 2006). AKEPT needs to assess whether a leader demonstrates high expectations by setting challenging goals for themselves and others. A leader should make efforts to go above and beyond typical expectations and make necessary sacrifices to achieve exceptional results. In addition, a leader should follow through on commitments with an appropriate sense of urgency. AKEPT should also assess a leader by looking at their flexibility when planning, or when situations change unexpectedly, to ensure that they can effectively adjust to achieve successful outcomes.

Issue 2: Does the leader show initiative?

Initiative in leadership refers to an individual's ability to find new ways to perform beyond what is expected (Albertyn & Frick, 2016). AKEPT should assess if a leader takes the initiative to set both team and individual goals that align with the vision and mission of the organization. In addition, a leader should be able to obtain resources,

both monetary and non-monetary, to achieve team and individual goals. AKEPT also needs to assess whether a leader can consistently coach others towards goals, provide timely, relevant, and constructive feedback, and whether they can hold their staff and teams accountable. Subsequently, a leader should evaluate both team and individual performances regularly and identify learning needs.

Issue 3: Is the leader an information seeker?

Information seeking refers to an individual asking questions, looking for new ideas and being willing to research new ideas in order to become better informed (Chan & Misra, 1990). A leader is an information seeker if they can gather information from multiple relevant sources and stakeholders with the aim of solving problems.

Table-1. Higher education leadership competency framework.

Existing Competency Framework		Refined Competency Framework	
Cluster	Competency Theme	Cluster	Competency
Cluster 1 Impact and Influence	01. Impact & Influence 02. Organizational and Environmental Awareness 03. Relationship Building/Networking	Cluster 1 Personal Effectiveness	01. Self-Confidence 02. Empathy 03. Organizational Commitment 04. Values & Ethics
Cluster 2 Achievement & Action	04. Achievement Orientation/Drive 05. Initiative 06. Information Seeking	Cluster 2 Cognition	05. Conceptual Thinking 06. Analytical Thinking 07. Decision-Making Ability 08. Planning and Organizing
Cluster 3 Management	07. Teamwork & Cooperation 08. Team Leadership 09. Developing Others 10. Directiveness/Assertiveness 11. Vision & Strategic Direction	Cluster 3 Leading	09. Teamwork & Team Leadership 10. Leveraging Diversity 11. Change Leadership/Adaptability
Cluster 4 Cognition	12. Analytical Thinking 13. Conceptual Thinking 14. Decision Making 15. Planning and Organizing	Cluster 4 Impact & Influence	12. Impact & Influence 13. Organizational & Environmental Awareness 14. Networking/Relationship Building
Cluster 5 Personal Effectiveness	16. Self-Confidence 17. Empathy 18. Organizational Commitment 19. Values & Ethics	Cluster 5 Achievement & Action	15. Achievement Orientation 16. Initiative & Proactive Behavior 17. Information Seeker

Source: AKEPT Standard Operating Procedures for Leadership Profiling.

A leader can also interpret complexity and identify useful relationships from complex data in unrelated areas (Gallup, 2018; Hobson et al., 2013). AKEPT should assess whether a leader is able to anticipate and identify problems, ask for factual clarification, and request facts pertinent to a discussion in a timely manner (Hobson, Strupeck, & Szostek, 2010).

Table 1 presents the existing and refined higher education leadership competency frameworks in Malaysia. Comparing the two frameworks shows that cluster management has changed to a new cluster known as leading. The committee felt that these new clusters form a critical element in leadership excellence in higher education in Malaysia. Due to this change, the 19 competency themes in the existing competency framework have been revised into 17 competency themes shown in Table 1.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper presents the development process of a higher education leadership competency framework in order to address the issues in identifying competent leaders in higher education institutions in Malaysia. Using a qualitative and case study approach, this paper demonstrates that the existing leadership framework needs to be refined to accommodate the changing demands of higher education leadership. The clusters in the existing leadership competency framework have to be revisited and re-clustered in order to make the new higher education leadership competency framework more relevant in the environment today.

In sum, AKEPT has successfully come up with a leadership competency framework for the higher education institutions. This framework serves as a guideline in determining a competent leader suitable to the higher education environment. This paper provides some understanding on possible alternatives to the existing leadership competency framework in sustaining an organizational culture of excellence. The findings in this study also assist the universities in strategizing ways to achieve organizational goals.

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