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INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP

IN UNIVERSITIES: DOES TALENT MANAGEMENT MATTER?

LIDERAZGO INSTITUCIONAL EN LAS UNIVERSIDADES: ¿IMPORTA LA GESTIÓN DEL TALENTO?

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ABSTRACT

Over the last four decades, the issue on leadership in universities, particularly institutional leadership, has been under increasing scrutiny due to the importance of the role of the leader in managing his university effectively. This paper presents the qualitative findings on the concept of institutional leadership with a focus on Vice Chancellors, the need and challenges in developing a talent management system, and the competency skills framework of a unit under the Ministry of Higher Education. The findings of this study show that the appointment of a Vice Chancellor should be considered with an appropriate assessment tool to ensure that the goals of the university can be achieved. The appointment of a Vice Chancellor should also be considered by looking at the context of the university because the ecosystem of one university may be different from the ecosystem of other universities. This study also finds that there are systems that already exist in the universities. It also finds that a more extensive competency skills assessment system and talent management profiling system would assist in selecting the right candidate for a Vice Chancellor position. The findings of this study provide an understanding of the role of a Vice Chancellor and the importance of having a talent assessment system for higher education institutions.

Keywords: Institutional leadership, talent management, higher education institutions.

RESUMEN

Durante las últimas cuatro décadas, el tema del liderazgo en las universidades, en particular el liderazgo institucional, ha estado bajo un escrutinio cada vez mayor debido a la importancia del papel del líder en la gestión eficaz de su universidad. Este artículo presenta los hallazgos cualitativos sobre el concepto de liderazgo institucional con un enfoque en los vicerrectores, la necesidad y los desafíos en el desarrollo de un sistema de gestión del talento y el marco de competencias y habilidades de una unidad dependiente del Ministerio de Educación Superior. Los hallazgos de este estudio muestran que el nombramiento de un vicerrector debe considerarse con una herramienta de evaluación adecuada para garantizar que se puedan alcanzar los objetivos de la universidad. El nombramiento de un vicerrector también debe considerarse teniendo en cuenta el contexto de la universidad porque el ecosistema de una universidad puede ser diferente del ecosistema de otras universidades. Este estudio también encuentra que hay sistemas que ya existen en las universidades. También encuentra que un sistema más extenso de evaluación de habilidades de competencia y un sistema de perfiles de gestión del talento ayudarían a seleccionar al candidato adecuado para un puesto de vicerrector. Los hallazgos de este estudio proporcionan una comprensión del papel de un vicerrector y la importancia de tener un sistema de evaluación del talento para las instituciones de educación superior.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo institucional, gestión del talento, instituciones de educación superior.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of leadership has long been debated due to its importance in an organisation. Leadership is considered as one of the most observed but least understood phenomena that involves dynamic undertaking that both researchers and practitioners have struggled to make sense of for centuries (Burns, 1978; Mohamed Jais, et al., 2020). It is defined as the ability to support and enable a group of people to accomplish a common task.

According to Van Schalkwyk (2011), leadership refers to the mobilisation and influencing of people to work towards a common goal which is done through building interpersonal relationships and breaking of tradition to achieve an organisation's objectives. However, Smith & Wolverton (2010), suggested that leadership in higher education institutions is different as the higher education institutions present a unique set of leadership challenges. This difference is attributed to the members in a higher education institution often operating in an environment that has little supervision and yet has a powerful voice in significant institutional decisions.

Institutional leadership among academics is a pertinent aspect to be given due attention in higher education. Rotational by nature, incumbents of key positions, such as Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Dean, Directors, and many other positions, have stories and experiences to be shared. The complexity of universities is also a dimension to be considered. In the face of changing expectations and roles of university leaders, it is timely to handhold those who have had experiences with those who are new in the positions. Exchanging perspectives on leadership trait, styles, fundamentals of leadership, governance matters, diversity of roles, and how these attributes will significantly impact universities is the approach in strengthening the stability of institutional leaders in assuming their roles (Ahmad & Ahmad, 2019). The aspiration is to build leaders with a clarity of purpose in leading universities for the future generation who will eventually be key to the national agenda of a country.

Using the Akademi Kepimpinan Pendidikan Tinggi (AKEPT) as a case study, this paper explored the concept of institutional leadership with a focus on Vice Chancellors. In addition, this paper looks into the need and challenges in developing a talent management system to identify the leaders' competency skills so that they can lead their universities successfully. This study is important as there is a need to understand the paradigm shift and appoint a new breed of university leaders capable of navigating our new complex environment. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The following section, Section 2, provides a review of relevant literature. Section 3 outlines the research design. The findings are presented in Section 4, and Section 5 concludes this paper.

Institutional leadership involves the establishment and protection of institutional values and character, of which the orientation focuses more on self-maintenance and lean less on future or change orientation (Washington, et al., 2008). Institutional leadership refers to the top and middle management in the university that perform the management functions and inspire the realisation of the university's vision and mission (Leal, et al., 2020). They demonstrate their managerial capabilities by being flexible, adaptable, strategic, and, most of all, effective. In addition to being scholars in their own right, they are able to inspire others by creating, supporting, and sustaining environments for talents to flourish. They have vision and foresight, and are able to balance idealism and realism through optimism and pragmatism. Institutional leaders combine their strategic and managerial talents with holistic human values to promote well-being among students, staff, community, the nation, and humanity (Syed Mohamad, et al., 2017). In the university setting, institutional leadership positions have always been considered temporary appointments for a stipulated period.

Filan & Seagren (2003), noted that higher education leadership can be seen as *"dynamic, complex, and multidimensional, and thus offers numerous opportunities for further investigation due to its constants change, adjustments, and turbulent environment in the last decade"* (p. 21). This opinion was formed because the higher education system plays an important role in a society's development (Mustard, 1998), and has become more important due to globalisation and the knowledge-based economies (Muhammed, et al., 2011; Garwe, 2013). The aim of the higher education system is to ensure that the quality of education is upheld, which is an important criterion in measuring the performance of a university. However, the quality of education can be affected by various challenges.

For example, Garwe (2013), argued that *"the need for quality was brought about by the global trends in higher education, such as massification, funding reduction, and adoption of new public management ideals with their stress on the accountability and efficiency domains".* (p. 1)

In overcoming these challenges, Chetsanga (2011), suggested that institutional leaderships, such as the Vice Chancellors, are the gatekeepers of quality and hold the primary responsibility in upholding quality assurance. These leaders need to have strong and visionary characteristics that are capable to turn their visions into reality

(Garwe, 2013). This need indicates that the correct selection of a leader in the universities is imperative. However, Bargh, et al. (1996), found that the Vice Chancellors that were appointed in the universities were often prominent academics who did not possess any formal training beyond their academic credentials, achievements, and experiences in the academia. Thus, this weakness leads to the following questions: 1. What exactly is the task of a Vice Chancellor? and 2. What are the competency skills that he must possess in order to become a good leader?

Leadership competencies refer to the knowledge, skills, behaviours, and attributes that are important for good leadership that comprises key characteristics of a good leader (Wallin, 2009; Smith & Wolverton, 2010). Mohamad & Abdullah (2017) defined leadership competencies as "*the skills of a leader that contribute to superior performance. By developing leadership competencies, organisations can better identify and develop their next generation of leaders*". Leadership competencies are critical to succeed in the various positions in an organisation (Yukl, 2002). McClelland (1973), posited that aptitude and intelligence are not sufficient in measuring competency skills, rather, clusters of life outcomes (e.g., occupational outcomes) and social ones (e.g., leadership and interpersonal skills) should also be taken into considerations.

A body of the literature has suggested that, in assessing the competency skills of a leader, two perspectives of leadership development need to be evaluated. The first perspective is the individual perspective that concerns the activities and experiences that can increase job-related skills and knowledge. It offers opportunities for employees to change and transform their organisation (Chouhan & Srivastava, 2014). The second perspective is the organisational perspective that concerns personal and professional growth and the ability to sustain, grow, and transform organisations (Zulfiqar, et al., 2020; Nadeem, et al., 2020). These two perspectives can be nurtured and developed over time in order to become competent leaders (Ghani & Mohamed Jais, 2018).

In Mohamed Jais, et al. (2020), study, they provided a more comprehensive detail of a leader. They reported five components of competency skills that a leader should be evaluated on. The five components are personal effectiveness, cognition, leading, impact and influence, and achievement and action. Personal effectiveness refers to the ability of the leader in utilising his skills, talent, and energy to reach a goal or set of goals in his life, which include self-confidence, empathy, organisational commitment, and values and ethics. Cognition refers to a leader who understands what needs to be done, which

include conceptual thinking, decision making ability, and planning and organising.

The third component is leading, which refers to the ability of the leader to lead his team towards achieving organisational goals. Examples of this ability include teamwork, adaptability, and leveraging diversity. The fourth component is impact and influence that refers to the leader's ability in providing an impact on his subordinates and organisation. This ability includes organisational and environmental awareness and relationship building. The last component is achievement and action which relates to the leader having strategic and creative capabilities and is motivated to get things done in a purposeful and visionary way. The capabilities include achievement oriented, initiative, proactive, and information seeking.

This study chose AKEPT, a small unit under the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia, as the setting. This unit was established in 2008 with the aim of training and developing leaders with the required quality and are respected in order to bring an impact on local higher learning institutions and elevating their standing globally. Since 2015, AKEPT has been actively involved in leadership talent management for higher education institutions in Malaysia. It aligns with the aspiration of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025, which clearly states the need for building competent leaders towards talent excellence. 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, behavioural event interview (BEI), and strategic plan presentation (SPP) were used to assess the potential leaders. AKEPT also formed a committee to assist in the development of the leaders' competency skills in the universities. When necessary, AKEPT also invited academics from the universities for roundtable discussions.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised the qualitative approach to achieve its research objective. Roundtable discussions were conducted with experienced Chairman of the Board of Directors, former Director Generals of Higher Education, Vice Chancellors, former Vice Chancellors, Registrars, and former Registrars who were involved in contributing their views and determining the way forward for the universities. They were also asked on the competency skills that a leader should have. The roundtable discussions were recorded, and the recordings were transcribed and coded. Subsequently, the coded data was categorised to determine the competency themes that form part of the higher education leadership competency framework. In

this paper, evidence from the transcriptions is quoted verbatim, without corrections of any errors.

DEVELOPMENT

This study presents the findings from the roundtable discussions with the experienced leaders in an attempt to identify what would be the appropriate competency skills that a leader should possess. The roundtable discussions started off with asking the participants the concept of a Vice Chancellor in universities, followed by the need for an evaluation system through talent management for Vice Chancellors, the need to have an instrument to identify and measure competency skills of potential leaders, and, finally, AKEPT's competency skills framework. Evidence from four of the participants who participated actively in the roundtable discussions were chosen for this paper.

A vice-chancellor is seen to play a role within the university community comparable to a prime minister or premier in a larger political community since universities are communities on their own rights, and they are characterised by high levels of interest in the surrounding community and in their own state of health and productivity (Aitkin, 1998). This study requested the participants to express their opinion on the concept of a Vice Chancellor. Participant B provided his opinion:

There is also one more element that I am a bit disturbed about because one questions we need to understand is 'what kind of leader are we looking at to be the Vice Chancellor?' Do we want someone who is serious? Or do you want to have Mr Carefree? Very good in PR, very good in other things. Don't ask him about work, there is someone who will take care of that.

Participant B further explained:

There are different kinds of Vice Chancellors. For example, in US, the role of the university's President is different. Looking for money. He does not care what is happening in the university. He will ask the Provost to do that. We need to understand that. When we look at UK, what's the role of the VC? Some of them is very figure head, not administrative. Don't talk to him about what you are talking about. It doesn't matter whether he is a full professor who doesn't know anything about the administration. He has the full support staff to help him. That's what I mean by touch and go. There is also France, another touch and go. You don't become the President of a university beyond 1 term, which is 2 years. Changeable. Very chaotic. Basically, because they don't see the role of the Vice Chancellor as someone hands-on to build the institution. In Australia, I saw the appointment of the VC advertised in newspapers with the criteria to be a Vice Chancellor. We need to understand

this with the help of AKEPT. We need to identify the kind of people we are talking about in a university leadership. There are people who can touch and go, there are people who cannot do that. We need to set our criteria. Otherwise it would be very difficult for us to move forward to identify the standards and so on.

The second part of the discussions requested for the participants' opinion on the need for an assessment system through talent management for Vice Chancellors. Talent assessment is a process used to identify which candidate will perform the best and be the right cultural fit. The participants noted that it is necessary for the universities to have a talent assessment in order to have a pool of talents that are ready when the need for a Vice Chancellor arises. Participant D responded:

The talent management succession? Maybe we could find a way of evaluating the performance of the VCs. I feel sorry for the VCs that are terminated before the end of their contract as if they have done something wrong. There is no evaluation, simply political intervention. I think there should be an evaluation. You develop the VCs, go through the selection to become VC, then you get appointed according to the contract for 3 years but was kicked out before it expires. It is not very fair. There must be something that we need to think about. Every time a new minister comes in, there will be changes.

Participant A provided her response on the talent management in higher education. She opined that:

There has to be, in my view, a seamless transition from what AKEPT is doing to what the university is doing. Because, like you say, you have identified the leaders and you have given them their profile and there are all those gaps which you are asking the universities to look into interventions. Who's going to do that in the university? Who's going to carry on the work? Identifying is just one part, but the more important part is the interventions, the career progression, the development, mentoring, coaching, whatever that's needed actually to develop, nurture, and groom a good leader.

Participant A also highlighted the need to have the right ecosystem in the universities. She commented:

Talking to the registrar and all that, I was given the impression that there is no proper development system, not just for the professors and the academic staff…… To me, this university ecosystem is such a critical thing to address because there are many, many gaps. Now I am still on the board. I'm spending half of my time at the university looking at so many things that need intervention. In order to develop the professors to be good leaders, you have

to have the right ecosystem in the university. You have to have the right support system.

This study then proceeded to request the participants to comment on the need to have an instrument to identify and measure the competency skills of the potential leaders. Participant C provided his opinion:

Coming back to the instrument, I think, again we would like to come with a constant report. If the description about the university, the focus, the vision of university can be described to the select committee then they will have the SC to really evaluate better. Actually, we have captured that intention by providing profiling. We take the initiative to get as much as possible the information about the university, the mission and vision, key statistics, number of students & staff, ranking and positions. Things like that are important for the panel to look at. I think the most current/accurate information should come from the Ministry or KPT. The role of KPT should really be to give the latest information about the state of affairs of the university. Internal issues of the university, outsiders do not know. Example, USM. You know that USM is working closely with UM and maybe better than UM, but they are slightly behind compared to other RUs. So there must be some issues there. If no one briefs the panel about the issues, then the panel is not going to evaluate about the candidate because information about the candidate is not in the report to address the specific issues of the university.

Participant A also agreed on the importance of an evaluation system when selecting the Vice Chancellors. She noted that:

The selection of the VC is so important that, perhaps, when you know that the system is going to expire, there has to be, first of all, discussion between LPU chairman, KPT DG, AKEPT, to sit down to do exactly this. To look at where the university is going, its strategic direction, its goals, and objectives, and have an idea of what kind of individual or leader that would make a good VC. Then only you go out to search. Right now we are using the generic template of VCs and advertising. Without having the benefit of this discussion to try and personalise the attributes to the requirement of the university. I think this first step (of course it will take time because we have 20 universities), but hopefully if we get the process right then there will not be a need to keep changing VC every 3 years. The committee's recommendation is that the VC has to be kept there at least to complete the job and that will take more than 3 years. We recommend 5 to 6 years, and if there is a necessity, because certain project is still ongoing, then extend for 1 more year. Of course, there has to be some limitation of time because you don't want somebody there

for too long because you will get comfortable etc. So, it is very destructive for the university to have a change of VC every 3 years. I think that process of selection and identification, not just for the candidates, but also of the needs of university, is very important to help us get the right candidate for that individual specific university. We have to do it on a more specific level; it cannot be generic.

She further commented:

Because we have an interview process, some of the missing elements we can try to extract during the interview. My bigger concern is during the short-listing of candidates. Because, if we don't get the right type of CV, we get these 187 pages of every article he has published, every student he has supervised, every speech he has ever given. That is not telling us whether this person makes a good leader of the university or not. We still get that kind of CVs. So, somebody has passed the screening and got to the interview, not so bad because we then will try to ask question and extract what we need. But, our worry is that, we may have allowed good candidates to slip through the screening process because all we have is the CV. And the CV is not telling us what we want to know about the leadership qualities of the candidates. Looking at this, we can guess only, 'Maybe this person is okay, the leadership at international level being chairman of certain international whatever.' But, that is really not good enough. We have now to teach our candidates to write a CV that is appropriate for this VC selection process. This leadership level requires different kind of CV.

Participant C provided his opinion:

Whatever the vision of the candidate, they know how to read the vision. If we have 5 candidates, we will have different views on how they going to bring the vision for the university. Whether it is, when matched with citation of the board, or existing system or problems, something is missing.

The participants were also asked about the existence of a talent management system in their universities. Most of the participants noted the existence of such system, indicating the importance of such system in the universities. Participant A commented:

Yes of course we started from scratch, but I have to fight for the system. In fact, the time when they were to review the constitution of the university for corporatisation of the university, I fight for this kind of system.

The last part of the roundtable discussions requested for the participants' opinion on the competency skills framework developed by AKEPT as shown in Mohamed Jais, et al. (2020). As mentioned earlier, Mohamed Jais, et al.

(2020), reported that AKEPT has identified five components of competency skills that a leader should be evaluated on. The five components are personal effectiveness, cognition, leading, impact and influence, and achievement and action. Within each component, several issues were identified in order to ensure that the evaluation of the potential leaders' competency skills can be performed successfully. Participant C explained:

Actually AKEPT is only helping compiling some information that we have. We are the custodian of the information and we do not provide the latest/accurate information. What we have is probably secondary in terms of data. I think information is very important. Otherwise we may choose the wrong candidate. This is based on my observation. Sometimes the panel already identified the issues/problem and try to rectify it by choosing certain type of VCs for that particular university. They can be from different university because of certain requirements. Sometimes when they go, they need to do some transformational initiative, to undo a lot of things. Maybe the same initiative. They know the problem but the insiders do not have the courage to solve it. Someone from outside, without any baggage, they can do it. Then, there is feedback that the outsider creates chaos. So, different perspectives can make our work go into the drain.

Participant D commented on AKEPT's effort in developing the leadership competency framework. He commented:

I think what you have done is very good actually. You have created a good framework for the competency. They really want to finetune somewhere. There must be a certain framework that is based on where you are now and where you want to be. Maybe for the university, because each university has different needs. When you are looking for VCs, you have to think in terms of where the university is now and where you expect the university to be in 5 years' time. So, there's a choice of VC and perhaps the committee will understand when they are looking for that person. Maybe AKEPT can develop a framework. Obviously it would be different for each university, but at least certain assumptions are made for the universities to develop their own framework which is supplementary to current ones.

Participant A provided her opinion:

I think that's absolutely right. The leaders and their organisations' needs, must be the capacity, the competencies, and the attributes that are quite specific to the needs of the organisation. So, not all universities are in the same category. You need to define what each category of university is, in fact within the same category of universities. Individually, they have different needs given their goals and aspirations. In the private sector, we also have what we call behavioural competencies, which is actually derived again from the mission and vision of the organisation, from our core values as well. Core values have a very significant influence on the attributes of the leaders. The leaders are role models and must behave or demonstrate in their behaviour or their conduct all these core values. So, we assess them on the basis of the behavioural competencies. No longer adequate for you to have only all the technical competencies, you must also have behavioural competencies. So far as AKEPT attributes are concerned, I agree with Prof. You have set standard of attributes, and then you have to work with each universities (20 of them) to see what are some of the very key attributes that they would need for their particular university, given for example, a start-up university requires complete different set of skills from a mature university. I think that additional attributes of the leaders are required for the individual university.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents the findings from a qualitative study on the concept of institutional leadership, focusing on Vice Chancellors. This paper also presents the findings on the need and challenges in developing a talent management system in order to identify the leaders' competency skills so that they can lead their universities successfully. In addition, this paper provides an understanding of AKEPT's competency skills framework. This study showed that the appointment of a Vice Chancellor should be considered with an appropriate assessment tool in order to ensure that the goals of a university can be achieved.

The appointment of a Vice Chancellor should also be considered by looking at the context of the university as the ecosystem of each university may be different. This study also found that there is an existing system in the universities. However, there is a need for a more extensive competency skills assessment system and talent management profiling system, which are provided by AKEPT. The findings in this study provide an understanding of the concept of institutional leadership and the importance of a talent assessment system in selecting the right candidate for a Vice Chancellor position.

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