Assessing Leadership Capabilities:
A Systematic Profiling Approach in Higher Education

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Leadership in higher education

The complex, evolving, and dynamic environment confronting global higher education requires institutions to develop the capacity to adapt and modify new models of knowledge and change to remain competitive and meet the demands of stakeholders. The role of the leadership is more pronounced than ever now, having to contend with and address issues, amongst others, on:

- shifts in leadership theory and practice which call for a focus on 'leading', which leads to more creative, shared, and collaborative approaches (Davis & Jones, 2014);
- leadership sustainability which includes lack of interest, expertise, resources, and gender issues (Filho et al., 2020);
- managing change and coping with challenges in post-war contexts such broadened access to education, tension between accountability and autonomy, changes in funding and access, and the political role of students (Altbach et al., 2017) and the rapidly changing social and technological environments, institutional constraints, and lack of resources (Smith & Vass, 2019);
- tensions between innovation and operation, requiring agile leadership to create an adaptive space for innovation transformation (Tsai et al., 2019);
- demoralization of academic work, a culture of incivility, and negatively which impacts the wellbeing of faculty and staff (Bosetti & Heffernan, 2021).

These challenges underscore the importance of strong leadership in higher education

needs (Suyunovich, 2023; Shukla, 2023; Cherkashyn, 2021; Sauphayana, 2021; Choudhary & Paharia, 2018).

Talent excellence is a specific emphasis in the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025. Operationally, the term refers to an attribute of an academic community that contributes to the excellent standing and reputation of Malaysian higher education. The community comprised of academics who continuously work towards the enhancement of quality, who support professional development and lead in teaching and learning, and are excellent in research and innovation. In the supplementary Malaysia Higher Education Action Plan (2022-2025), Shift 2 on Talent Excellence delineates two strategies, four initiatives and eight programmes to enhance efforts and contribute towards an academic community that is relevant, referred and respected on both local and international platforms.

To translate the plan, the Malaysian Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT) plays an instrumental role at the central level. Of the eight programmes lined up for Talent Excellence, three are assigned to AKEPT:

i)   Strengthening talent management
ii)   Succession planning
iii)   Leadership for (university) executives

The central idea behind these programmes is that firstly, universities are to identify their academics and administrators who show potential to be at the helm of university leadership. In other words, all universities are expected to have a succession planning strategy on place. Working with the nation's higher education institutions, AKEPT provides facilitation in the training and nurturing of these individuals to become future leaders, ensuring sufficient and competent talent to be pooled accordingly, to be developed to serve the needs of the institutions. The training and nurturing take place in two ways: on-site on the job training, i.e. experiential learning; and via modular programmes that focus on knowledge and skills required in both talent management and competency-based training. AKEPT also offers a training programme that specifically tailors to the areas of leadership skills and competencies of university leadership at the executive level. Talent targeted for this programme are those already in the top and middle management level, focusing on areas such as governance, higher education management and internationalisation. The nurturing is also important as preparation for the talent to be profiled in a structured and systematic manner. The profiling exercise is done in every three-year cycle, underlying which is the idea that one's leadership competencies would have matured and expanded over time and through experience, for which the growth would show in the results of the profiling. Secondly, this group of people will be in the radar of both the institutional talent management unit of their respective institutions and AKEPT, to be selected and recommended to the Ministry and institutions, as and when the need for various levels of institutional leadership arises.

The mandate for the profiling programme has resulted in AKEPT exploring ways to contribute towards the achievement of the profiling objectives. The result is AKEPT's own assessment centre where various instruments are deployed to fulfil a standardized individual profiling exercise. Technology plays a huge part in this endeavour, for various reasons but mostly for the sheer volume of data that AKEPT manages, given the breadth and depth of the instruments, and also the number of people to be profiled, analysis for which requires data analytics proper. Concern for objective selection of candidates is also a paramount contributor to the use of a proper system. This shall now be discussed further.

Establishment of a competency framework

A study comparing academic leadership capability and competencies between Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia found that higher leadership capabilities and competencies are associated with higher performance effectiveness in higher education (Ghasemy, Hussin & Daud, 2016).

Studies suggest that useful competencies in leadership of higher education institutions include academic credibility, people skills, servant leadership, soft skills, and a framework of personnel effectiveness, cognition, leading, impact and influence, and achievement and action (Negussie & Hirgo, 2023; Thornton et al., 2018; Loureiro, Dieguez & Ferreira, 2022; Cherkashyn, 2021). Additionally, regarding sustainable development, competencies such as systemic thinking, anticipatory thinking, and critical thinking are deemed as key (Rieckmann, 2012). The wide array of competencies suggests the requirement of a competency framework. Criticism abounds on the necessity of such a framework, such as the views of Bryman & Lilley (2009) that no single type of leadership stood out as particularly effective or ineffective in higher education institutions, and competency frameworks tend to underestimate contextual factors. Nonetheless, at AKEPT we believe that competency frameworks remain appropriate and valid for leadership development in higher education, as they are found to assist in leadership development and offer insight into developing leadership capabilities in higher education institutions (Black, 2015).

At AKEPT, this was to be the main challenge i.e., the establishment of a competency framework that would be context-appropriate and sensitive, and that would refer to competencies that are regarded as important by stakeholders of Malaysia higher education institutions. A study in 2020 led to the establishment of a competency framework Competency Framework 1.0), which comprised five clusters of Personnel Effectiveness, Cognition, Leading, Impact and Influence, and Achievement and Action, with a combined total of 19 competencies (Jais, Yahaya & Ghani, 2021). Each of these clusters defines competencies (or issues) via which good leadership is identified. A review of the framework was conducted in 2023, keeping the five clusters intact with minor modifications on the competencies (existing competencies combined, expanded

and/or new competencies added), resulting in Competency Framework 2.0 with 15 competencies. In addition, four central tenets were introduced to the framework – of Wisdom, Justice, Courage and Temperance. These were drawn from classical philosophy as four virtues of mind and character, or the components of pleasant morality as described by Al-Ghazali.

The instruments and the system

With the competencies defined, the next task was to embed them in instruments to be used for the purpose of profiling. Four instruments are put together to help assessors establish the leadership readiness level of an individual.

i) Behavioural Event Interview (BEI)
    The instrument (with a correlation coefficient at 0.61) requires an individual to describe how they have responded to a series of situations. The descriptions have to be based on actual events and behaviour. The purpose of BEI is to map one's experience-action to AKEPT's leadership competencies. The experience-fit-job-ready analysis provides an individual's baseline competency, which in turn guides training needs and indicates the individual's overall aggregated competency level, which can be mapped against the succession status of any of the levels: Level 1 (individual contributor, no supervision of others; lecturer), Level 2 (supervising day-to-day tasks; e.g., deputy head), Level 3 (managing function; e.g., faculty head), Level 4 (integrating diverse functions; DVC level) and Level 5 (leading whole organisation; VC level).

ii) Institutional Leader Directory (ILead)
    This is an MCQ instrument, which requires an individual to run a self-assessment on leadership aptitude that measures motivation, readiness, and leadership style. Developed by AKEPT, the items for leadership style were based on Blake and Mouton's theory. The analysis is guided by the Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid (1964), a two-dimensional model plotting "concern for production" and "concern for people," depicting five basic managerial styles and their combinations: country-club leadership, team leadership, impoverished leadership, produce or perish leadership, and middle-of-the-road leadership. These styles suggest an individual's take on managerial leadership, conflict resolution, and organizational development. The final analysis of this instrument is a description of one's overall style – whether it is transactional, transformational, laissez-fayre etc.

iii) Strategic Paper Presentation (SPP)
    This part of the evaluation entails a presentation on strategic planning, to visualize strategic approaches and operationalize with clarity. The purpose of the presentation is to sell 'how-to(s)' into executable initiatives at institutional level.

The presentation will reveal one's strategic tact, vision and finesse to lead institutionally.

iv) Leadership Curriculum Vitae (CurVE Lead)
This is essentially a guided CV which showcases one's leadership qualities. Unlike the mainstream academic CV, CurVE Lead requires the presentation of one's achievement related to leadership standing, experiences, network and resources.

All the instruments are placed in a platform aptly named UniLEAD. The system is run at AKEPT and is currently entering Phase 2 of its development. An individual who is keyed-in into the system by AKEPT administrators would have been identified to be profiled by the institution where they are based. The nomination rests on the assumption that the institution has established a system or mechanism through which identification is done, which should also be part of its succession planning strategy.

Once they are in the system, an individual's demographics and details relevant to academic experience and institutional leadership are compiled, as a precursor to more extensive data that is to be obtained following the individual's responses to the four instruments and the corresponding data analysis. Data resulting from the analyses are presented to the national Search Committee, to form meaning that is relevant to the institutional context in which the individual is being considered for its leadership position. The Search Committee is responsible for making recommendations to the Minister of Higher Education, of suitable candidates for the post of Vice-Chancellor after consideration of the data and an interview process.

Other than being a secure archive and a multiple access (but strictly controlled) platform with a smart reporting system that generates individual/group reports with necessary information on leadership assessment, UniLEAD is also responsible to perform a door-to door task to manage talent development initiatives. Talents that are identified with competency gap(s) (after profiling) are strategically nominated to attend development programs, where UniLEAD shall be responsible for invitation, on-site registration, storage of documentation (modules, notes and assessments) up to feedback forms and certification. All these data are then merged into the individual talent's page that will aid the smart reporting system for nomination of talent for various strategic posts.

The utilization of UniLEAD has contributed to three benefits in particular: i) increased efficiency and consistency of the process of identifying talent for institutional strategic posts; ii) the provision of a comprehensive competency and job-fit report on one's leadership potential and standing, and perhaps most significantly, iii) moves the process of decision-making on a candidate's suitability from intuition-based to one that is data-driven.

Moving forward

The current system development is at Phase 2 out of three, which will be completed in 2026. In the pipeline, we hope to achieve the following:

- The system to allow specific parties to have immediate access to data (levels of access will vary across users); the plan in to allow access to individuals profiled and the institutions, amongst others;
- At present the profiling analysis is heavily utilised for the identification and nomination for the National Top Talent (NTT) – a term referring to those at the level of preparedness to be Vice Chancellors. The system is hoped to be used also for both Level 3 and Level 4 leaders. For this to happen, getting buy-ins from higher education institutions is necessary, as well as getting a rigorous system in place (Phase 3, in 2026);
- It is hoped that the system would be able to capture details of leadership training at AKEPT for individuals nominated by their institutions, thus building a database that would enable fast nomination of leadership talents with very little dependency on institutional information and data;
- We also have plans to incorporate training effectiveness evaluation in the system, for continuous improvement and to identify which programmes result in the most significant impact.

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