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Leadership competency portfolio for universities: A behavioural event- interview approach

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Abstract

Leadership has long been disputed due to its importance in organizations particularly in higher education institutions. The Malaysian ministry of higher education established Akademi Kepimpinan Pendidikan Tinggi (AKEPT) which is involved in leadership talent management for the country's higher education institutions. This paper presents the development of an AKEPT leadership competency portfolio for universities using the Behavioural Event Interview (BEI) instrument. It used the qualitative group method through a focus group discussion. The findings showed that the BEI instrument can be used to determine the competency level of academics in universities. There are five levels of leadership competency: level 1 as an individual contributor, level 2 as daily task supervision, level 3 as managing a function, level 4 as integrating diverse functions and level 5 as leading the whole organization. This study found that the committee developed five competency variances comprising significantly exceeds, exceeds, suitable, developable and reviewable. This paper provides insight into how higher education institutions in Malaysia sustain an organizational culture of excellence. In addition, it provides a model for other educational institutions in developing a leadership competency portfolio.

Keywords: BEI, Competency portfolio, Higher education, Leadership, Malaysia, Organizational culture.

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1. Introduction

Today's modern, competitive, knowledge-based society has presented both huge opportunities and difficulties for universities worldwide including Malaysia. The difficulties at present include declining student enrolment and financial funds and grants that are getting smaller every year as well as the "hybrid" teaching and learning process that demands mastery and access to the internet and good technology among students and lecturers. As a result, universities assess and evaluate their techniques to make sure that the problems can be solved successfully. Effective leadership is one of the key strategies for overcoming these difficulties. A university's leadership environment is a collaboration of the institution's

successful leadership practices, individual variable traits, development strategies, academic and institutional development [1]. As a result, academics play a vital role in universities and developing academic leadership is important for addressing today's difficulties.

A substantial corpus of leadership literature has been studied. According to Burns [2], effective leaders inspire and motivate their teams through internal motivation. Since Burns' study, there has been significant discussion concerning the importance of leadership in an organisation. It is seen as a vital aspect and is putting more and more demands on an organisation for change, choice, flexibility and variety [3-5]. These studies looked at different angles and perspectives such as developing definitions of leadership (e.g., Burns [2]), behaviours, situational and abilities (e.g., Yukl [3]), multiple contexts and frameworks (e.g., Bass [6]), and transformational abilities [3]. Other studies have looked into leadership competencies [7] and subsequently, the development of multiple contexts (e.g., Mohamed Jais, et al. [8]). These studies have mostly concentrated on leadership suggesting that leadership is a competent leader who can compel his followers to perform in accordance with the objectives of his organisation, independent of the type of organisation [9].

Educational leadership is an area that has also received great attention from academic researchers due to the importance of ensuring that universities are operated efficiently and effectively [10]. Leadership in universities differs from other organisations due to the different environments where academics are the potential leaders with a strong voice in decision-making [7]. Thus, the universities depend highly on individual skills in guiding the subordinates toward organisational goals [2]. As noted by Smith and Wolverton [7], *"faculty members operate in an environment with little supervision yet maintain a powerful voice in significant institutional decisions. Leaders must balance the often-competing interests of these faculties against those of other constituents, including students, trustees, donors, government representatives and community members."* According to this viewpoint, a leader must maintain a balance between the interests of the faculties and departments and those of other stakeholders including students and the government [11].

Universities are also expected to foster the development of future leaders who will play significant roles within their institutions [12]. However, how do we identify the potential leaders among the academics and determine whether they are ready to be leaders in their organisations as deans, deputy vice chancellors or vice chancellors? Therefore, this study aims to provide an instrument to assess the academics interest in becoming future leaders in their organisation using the BEI instrument. This study can provide further understanding and assist AKEPT, a centre inside the Malaysian ministry of higher education and universities in Malaysia in maintaining a leadership competency portfolio for academics. A review of relevant literature is included in section 2. The research design is described in section 3. Section 4 presents the framework. This paper is concluded in section 5, the final section.

2. Literature Review

Several studies on leadership have attempted to provide definitions of educational leadership. The definition of education leadership is a combination of administration, leadership and management while also differentiating these concepts Adams, et al. [13]. Dimmock [14] acknowledged in his study, *"leaders [experience] tensions between competing elements of leadership, management and administration. Irrespective of how these terms are defined, leaders experience difficulty in deciding the balance between higher-order tasks designed to improve staff, student and performance (leadership), routine maintenance of present operations (management) and lower order duties (administration)"* This viewpoint is in line with Yukl's [3] claim that the notion of leadership is arbitrary and profoundly subjective and that there is no "right" definition. However, some definitions are more useful than others.

According to Filan and Seagren [15], due to its continuous change, modifications and volatile environment in the previous ten years, educational leadership might be viewed as *"dynamic, complex and multifaceted and offer several prospects for future inquiry."* Taylor [1] discovered that successful leadership in universities is a key to effective leadership. Universities should have a balance between academic leadership and institutional leadership for the benefit of all stakeholders, including students, faculty and departments and other [16]. Individual variables such as personal attributes, personal development plans, academic development responsibilities and institutional circumstances all contribute to educational leadership. According to Filan and Seagren [15], leadership at universities is classified into two types: academic leadership and institutional leadership. Academic leaders are experts and powerful individuals who are actively involved in their respective disciplines. They pursue knowledge and study with high integrity, whether by expanding theory and developing fresh ideas, driving methodological or pedagogical innovation or leading significant community engagement. An effective academic leader can provide a good example for other academics by implementing new and innovative teaching and learning methods, performing significant research and guiding others to achieve academic excellence [17]. They also lead with the highest integrity whether in methodological or instructional innovation or significant societal involvement.

On the other hand, institutional leaders are academics who show management skills by being adaptable, flexible, strategic and most effective. They are often referred to as the upper and middle management in a university performing management and administrative functions to realize the vision and mission of the institution [12]. The leadership position at the university is often a temporary appointment. During the appointment period, they need to manage and lead effectively. This includes formulating short-term, medium-term and long-term strategies that are in line with the established objectives of the institution's establishment. An institutional leader must always be sensitive to the wishes and priorities of subordinates and successfully balance them with the objectives of establishing an institution. They need to create opportunities and support the academic and administrative staff under their leadership to develop their talents and leadership. They also need to have vision and foresight and be able to balance idealism and realism through an optimistic and pragmatic approach. According to Mohamad, et al. [18], institutional leaders need to combine their strategic

management talents with holistic human values to promote well-being among students, staff, society and the country. They have the capability to encourage others and to balance realism and pragmatism through optimism and pragmatism. The dean, deputy vice chancellor and vice chancellor are examples of institutional leadership roles that have historically been thought of in the context of universities as temporary appointments for a specified length of time. The institutional leadership of the future leaders in universities was the main emphasis of this study.

Another body of literature examined leadership in terms of competency skills. Studies such as those by [Mohamad and Abdullah \[19\]](#) and [Smith and Wolverson \[7\]](#) suggest the abilities that a leader must possess to gain superior performance which if recognised would be able to produce better generations of leaders. The competency skills can range from behaviours, influence, power, situation and transformational abilities [20]. There are also studies that examine competency skills in educational leadership. In Malaysia, for example, a recent study by [Mohamed Jais, et al. \[8\]](#) reported the process of creating a leadership competency framework for universities in Malaysia and identifying qualified leaders for their institutions. They found that the framework should take into account the following five clusters: personal effectiveness, cognition, leading, impact and influence and achievement and action. However, their study did not provide ways on how to identify the level of these competency skills that potential leaders have. The higher education leadership competency framework for this study is shown in [Figure 1](#).

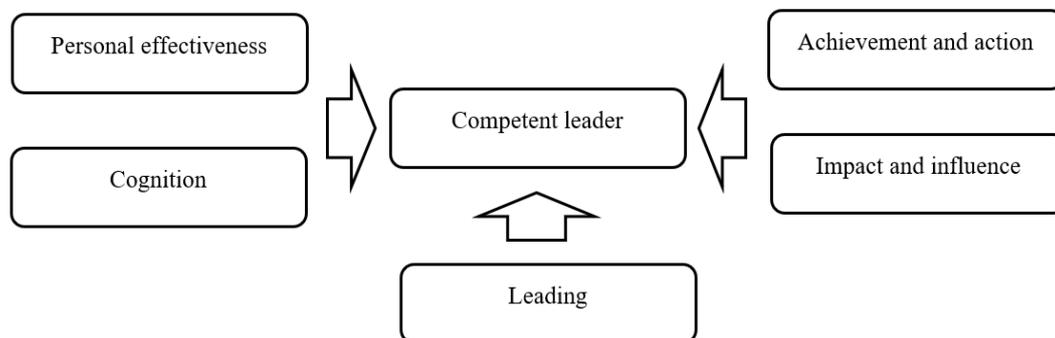


Figure 1.
Higher education leadership competency framework [8].

[McClelland \[21\]](#) proposed an instrument known as the Behavioural Event Interview (BEI) instrument to determine the leadership competency level of leaders. McClelland is a psychologist at Harvard University and the inventor of need theory and the thematic perception test. This instrument is a technique that has its origins in Flanagan's critical incident technique [22]. The critical incident technique focuses on the incident or event itself whereas the BEI instrument is concerned with the individual who was responsible for it [Spencer and Spencer \[23\]](#). The purpose of the BEI instrument is to collect very specific behavioural descriptions of how an individual goes about performing their work duties. The role of the interviewer is to elicit complete stories from the interviewee that describe the specific behaviours, thoughts and actions of the interviewee in real-world scenarios. This instrument requires the development of a series of "behavioural events" with a participant as part of the testing process. In each interview, the recording is analysed to look for evidence that the participant possesses the required competencies. The recording of the interview, the creation of transcripts and the analysis of the transcripts for competencies can take up to six hours for each individual interview. The elicitation of behavioural events is the most important step in the BEI interview. The person being interviewed is typically prompted to provide a comprehensive account of the five or six most significant experiences gained while working in a particular capacity. The scenarios should include two or three high points also known as "significant accomplishments" and two or three low points also known as "significant setbacks" [24].

3. Research Design

3.1. The Setting and Participants

This study was carried out at AKEPT, a centre inside Malaysia's ministry of higher education. The centre was established in 2008 to emphasise the importance of developing leaders in colleges. Since 2015, AKEPT has been involved in leadership talent management for Malaysian higher education institutions. This project is in accordance with Malaysia's education blueprint (higher education) 2015-2025. The Malaysian' education blueprint emphasises the importance of developing capable leaders who will lead to talent excellence. In order to determine the instrument to test the degrees of competency skills of the potential leaders in higher education institutions, this study used a focus group discussion. The focus group was made up of the AKEPT leadership competency and instrument committee. This committee was established with the goal of developing generic leadership competencies for Malaysia's higher education institutions. The members have expertise in a wide range of fields and possess a significant amount of experience in leadership and as a result, they are considered suitable for the purpose of this study to participate in the focus group discussions. During the discussion with focus groups, members of the committee encouraged the focus groups to discuss their suggestions regarding the most effective leadership competency topics that should be included in the development of a leadership competency framework.

This study also involved academics from various public universities, polytechnics and other related higher education agencies. These academics comprised of senior academics who have made significant contributions to the growth and

instruction within their department may be promoted to the position of senior lecturer. In educational establishments such as universities and other similar organisations, the administrators are responsible for things such as the administration of courses and the administration of assessments and they offer their expertise when it comes time to design courses. The senior lecturers are also the independent researchers of their respective fields within the academic community. Hence, they have already achieved academic leadership and are ready to assume an institutional leadership role.

3.2. Research Instruments and Data Collection

The focus group discussion was used in this study to provide a more complete perspective on the different methods for evaluating the competency skills of potential leaders from the committee's perspective. The twelve committee members who took part in the focus group discussion were urged to share their thoughts to evaluate the potential leaders' competency skills. The proposed instrument must be in line with the leadership competency framework's components of personal effectiveness, cognition, leading, impact and influence, achievement and action. In order to determine the instruments available to assess the competency skills of potential leaders in universities, the committee also undertook content analysis. The focus group discussions took place over a three-year span. Each session with the committee members was held four times over the course of three years. The qualitative data was coded when the focus group sessions were over.

The BEI instrument was then tested on the academics in order to present an accurate picture of the academics. The end goal of the initiative is to determine the areas in which potential leaders are lacking in terms of their leadership competencies. This will allow for the implementation of a more strategic leadership development plan which will improve the organisation's ability to effectively and efficiently manage its talent pool. Four hundred and ninety four academics participated in this study.

3.3. The Model

The model for analysing the tool for universities in Malaysia is shown in [Figure 2](#). As part of the data collection for this study, documents were evaluated in order to further strengthen the validity of the instrument employed [25]. The materials consist of the literature pertaining to the instrument to gauge the competency levels of aspiring leaders and the AKEPT-developed leadership competency framework for higher education. This evaluation follows the Soft System Methodology defined by [Checkland](#) [26]. This study also examined the Malaysia Education Blueprint and Pekeliling Perkhidmatan Bilangan 3 [27, 28].

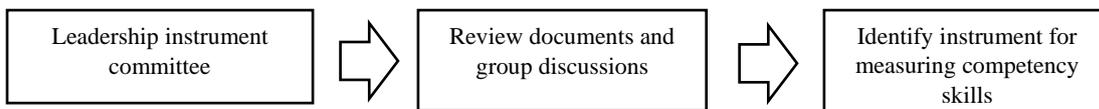


Figure 2.
Model for this study.

4. Findings

The evolution of the AKEPT-created leadership competency portfolio at universities is discussed in this paper. The realisation that the Malaysian government's desire for higher education institutions had influenced the conceptualization of the leadership competency criteria is credited with leading to the formation of the portfolio. The BEI instrument was used to create the leadership competency portfolio. The leadership competence framework for higher education institutions developed by [Mohamed Jais, et al.](#) [8] was used in this study to determine the academics' competency level. The framework's five key clusters were personal effectiveness, cognition, leading, impact and influence, achievement and action. The necessary abilities for the personal effectiveness cluster include self-assurance, empathy, organisational commitment, values and ethics. Conceptual thinking, analytical thinking, decision-making ability and planning and organising are among the skills in the cognition cluster. Teamwork and team leadership, leveraging diversity and change leadership are necessary abilities in the third cluster which is leadership. Impact and influence, organisational and environmental awareness and networking are abilities needed in a leader in the impact and influence cluster. The final skill cluster, achievement and orientation also include information seeker, initiative and proactive behaviour as well as achievement and orientation. [Table 1](#) displays the comprehensive framework for leadership competencies for institutions of higher learning.

Once the framework was observed, this study found that AKEPT has proposed a way to determine the leadership competency level based on the BEI instrument. AKEPT felt that the BEI instrument is an effective tool that involves the interviewee narrating specific events in which he or she was directly involved and the interviewer analysing the competency dimensions and proficiency levels displayed by the interviewee in those events. In preparation for the BEI, each interviewee would be required to complete and submit the behavioural-event questionnaire (BEQ). In the BEQ, every interviewee would document accounts of competency-specific events in which he or she was or has been involved either in current or past employment or societal engagements. This information is to ensure that significant behavioural events are not overlooked during the BEI sessions. Further discussions with the focus group found that the potential interviewees would be identified by their leadership competency level based on the five levels set in the higher education leadership framework.

Table 1.
Detailed higher education leadership competency framework.

Cluster	Competency
Cluster 1. Personal effectiveness	01. Self confidence 02. Empathy 03. Organisational commitment 04. Values and ethics
Cluster 2. Cognition	05. Conceptual thinking 06. Analytical thinking 07. Decision-making ability 08. Planning and organising
Cluster 3. Leading	09. Teamwork and team leadership 10. Leveraging diversity 11. Change leadership and adaptability
Cluster 4. Impact and influence	12. Impact and influence 13. Organisational and environmental awareness 14. Networking and relationship building
Cluster 5. Achievement and action	15. Achievement orientation 16. Initiative and proactive behaviour 17. Information seeker

Source: Mohamed Jais, et al. [8].

Table 2 presents the position levels to differentiate the leadership competencies of potential leaders. The findings show five levels of leadership competency: Level 1 as an individual contributor, Level 2 as daily task supervision, Level 3 as managing a function, Level 4 as integrating diverse functions, and Level 5 as leading the whole organisation. Level 1 describes the type of task that has no supervision from others such as typical repetitive tasks and tasks that are completed within the same day. Level 2 describes that the supervision is often for mostly repetitive tasks within the same process or operation or that there is no supervision involved but coordination with others' jobs is required. Level 3 involves the supervision of varied processes within the same function while Level 4 describes the supervision of dissimilar functions.

Table 2
Position Level.

Level	Descriptors
Level 1: Individual contributor	No supervision of others; typical repetitive tasks; tasks are completed within the same day, e.g., many clerical and trade jobs, lecturers.
Level 2: Supervising day-to-day tasks	Supervision of different, mostly repetitive tasks within the same process or operation or no supervision involved but requiring coordination with the jobs of others, e.g., the deputy head.
Level 3: Managing function	Supervision of varied processes within the same function, e.g., head of faculty, centre, academy, or institute.
Level 4: Integrating diverse functions	Supervision of dissimilar functions, e.g., deputy vice chancellor.
Level 5: Leading the whole organisation	Lead and steer the whole organisation, e.g., vice chancellor.

Subsequently, the committee developed five competency variances as shown in Table 3 ranging in value from +1.51 and above representing success that “significantly exceeds” to -1 and below which represents ‘reviewable’. The potential leader has “significantly exceeded” the position requirement and should be considered for position one above the target position within 24 months to avoid demotivation. Meanwhile, -1 and below indicate that the potential leader is not ready to hold the targeted position and should be considered for alternative positions.

Table 3.
Leadership competency variance.

Competency variance	Succession status	Descriptors
+1.51 and above	Significantly Exceeds	Significantly exceeds the position's requirements. It is best considered for position 1 above the target position within 24 months to avoid demotivation.
+0.50 to +1.50	Exceeds	Exceeds the target position's requirement. Best placed in the target position within 18 months to avoid possible demotivation.
-0.49 to +0.49	Suitable	Ready to assume the target position immediately.
-0.99 to -0.50	Developable	Target for development competencies with -0.50 or wider gaps. Reassess for suitability for the target position at the end of the competency development initiative.
-1 and below	Reviewable	Consider the subject for alternative positions.

5. Conclusion

This study described the process of creating a leadership competency portfolio in order to determine the levels of leadership potential present in the educational institutions of Malaysia. The higher education leadership framework served as the basis for the development of a leadership competency portfolio based on five competencies. These five competencies are personal effectiveness, cognition, leading, impact and influence and achievement and action. It also indicated that AKEPT had successfully constructed an instrument to ascertain the competency levels of potential leaders using the BEI instrument based on the higher education leadership competency framework. The BEI instrument in AKEPT was then tested on 494 academics from 20 public universities, polytechnics and other related higher education agencies who were profiled through the AKEPT leadership assessment centre. The initiative's ultimate goal is to determine the areas in which potential leaders are lacking in terms of their leadership competencies so that a more strategic leadership development plan can be implemented for effective and efficient talent management.

The academics were profiled in two stages. The first stage involves the potential interviewees completing the BEQ to determine their levels of leadership competency skills. Subsequently, the potential interviewees would be gauged based on the five competency variances. If an academic is identified as a potential vice chancellor, he or she would be identified at level 5. Based on his or her response in BEQ, AKEPT would be able to identify whether he or she is ready to become a vice chancellor by using the variance indicator. If the variance indicator returns a "suitable" score (-0.49 to +0.49), the academic is ready to assume the role of a vice chancellor.

In conclusion, the creation of a leadership competency portfolio based on the BEI instrument can help AKEPT make better selections for positions as potential leaders in institutions of higher learning. The findings are also consistent with previous studies that have attempted to measure competencies using BEI instruments such as De Oliveira Dias and Alymer [24]. This research offers some insight into how to use the BEI instrument to assess academics' potential to lead their organisations in the future.

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