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Exploring the Motivation for and Barriers to Academic Leadership among Malaysian Polytechnic Lecturers of FELDA Settlement Background

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a study on the motivation for and barriers to effective academic leadership among Malaysian polytechnic lecturers of FELDA settlement background. In general, this study is to examine the academic leadership potential among Malaysian polytechnic lecturers notably in the fields of teaching and learning, research and innovation, academic writing, consultation as well as community services. Specifically, this study aims at exploring the motivation for and barriers to effective academic leadership among Malaysian polytechnic lecturers of FELDA settlement background. To achieve the objectives of this study, in-depth focused group interviews were conducted among 45 respondents. The respondents were selected based on the analysis done during the quantitative stage. The study found that motivation for effective academic leadership can be grouped under three main themes; (i) the organizational and managerial issues, (ii) organizational culture and environment (iii) personal experience and quality issues. Furthermore, the study has identified personal and family issues as the main barriers to effective academic leadership among Malaysian polytechnic lecturers. The findings are useful to the Department of Polytechnic Education, Ministry of Education, Malaysia. These findings show the need to equip its lecturers, particularly in academic leadership, so that the polytechnic lecturers are competent enough to actualize the transformation agenda of the Malaysian Higher Education. Further implications on FELDA in transforming its human capital are also discussed in the final section of this paper.

Keywords: Academic Leadership, Malaysian Polytechnics, Motivation, Barriers, FELDA

1.BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In an era of knowledge-based economy, the Malaysian higher education sector plays a critical role in producing first class and competitive human capital. In line with the transformation agenda of the Ministry of Higher Education, the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (PSPTN) was launched in 2007 followed by the Polytechnic Transformation Plan in 2010.

Apart from universities, PSPTN is also targeting change and transformation among other actors of higher education in Malaysia, particularly polytechnics and community colleges. Today, there are 27 polytechnics and 78 community colleges in the country. The two institutions play a significant role in producing human capital that are not only knowledgeable but also highly skilled and innovative in meeting the demands of a competitive global era.

Strategic directions of higher education institutions in this decade are no doubt heavily influenced and determined by the process of globalization. Hence, continuous efforts and initiatives have to be mobilized and coordinated by the government and relevant agencies to enhance academic leadership potential, especially among the generation of young academics to ensure that are highly competent and competitive to lead their institutions and to sustain the comparative advantage of Malaysian higher education in the future.

Malaysian Polytechnic Transformation Plan was launched in 2010 to help produce quality and innovative human capital needs by the country particularly in the innovation-led economy. Significantly, the transformation plan is consistent with National Higher Education Strategic Plan formulated by the Ministry of Higher Learning in 2007. The main objective of this transformation plan is to make polytechnic the leading institution of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) locally and internationally. The tools to measure the transformation agendas are based on the fore core elements of achievement. Firstly, to empower polytechnic to become competitive; secondly, to develop distinctive education programs as well as research on niche areas to spur the strength of polytechnic; thirdly, to produce specific high skills group of students and finally, to build image of polytechnic as Center of Technology (COT) and Center of Excellence (COE) in TVET.

This study has selected lecturers who were born and raised in rural areas for investigation. Specifically, respondents are lecturers from polytechnics all over Malaysia with a FELDA settlement background. The establishment of the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) in 1956 signified the Malaysian government's commitment to developing the rural areas and rural communities in order to eradicate poverty among the Malays. The huge investment by the Malaysian government involved the development of not only physical amenities and infrastructure but also an educational system to ensure that FELDA would have a sufficient talent pool in the future.

The lecturers from FELDA who currently work in local institutions of higher learning including the polytechnics are viewed as catalysts to help sustain the viability and sustainability of socio-economic FELDA in the future. Therefore, it is imperative that academic leadership among these lecturers be groomed and strengthened to produce quality human capital. The quantity and quality of academic leaders from FELDA in higher education will explicitly reflect the success of the Malaysian government national development policies, particularly in developing human capital from rural areas.

This study focuses on examining the phenomenon of academic leadership in Malaysian polytechnics among lecturers from the FELDA settlement. Specifically, the study assesses the motivation for and barriers to effective academic leadership from the perspective of Malaysian polytechnic lecturers.

2. ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

It is important for institutions of higher education to develop academic leadership in order to respond effectively to complex educational, social, political, economic, and globalization concerns (Wisniewski, 2007). According to Gaither (2002), the emphasis on greater accountability, ability to lead change, student consumerism, research and innovation as well as increased cost of education have contributed to the changing role of academic leaders.

Academic leadership can be characterized as an act of support system with two different focuses: one party is involved in the change of an uncertain future while the other is focused on routine, instruction and predictability (Ramsden, 1998). As Leatt and Porter (2003) suggest, academic leadership development depends on three factors: individual leadership knowledge and skills, organizational improvement and strategic positioning of the organization.

Bikmoradi, A. (2009) highlights the prerequisite for effective academic leadership are shared vision and goals, teaching and research leadership, transformational and collaborative leadership, recognition and awards; fair and efficient management as well as the values of mutual trust and respect. Meanwhile, the study also highlights the obstacles that may hinder the effectiveness of academic leadership; politicking, a weak system of meritocracy, bureaucracy and centralization of power.

Another conceptual framework for academic leadership can be found in the work of Anum Siddique Hassan Aslam, Mannan Khan & Urooj Fatima (2011) who look at the relationships among academic leadership, faculty motivation and organizational effectiveness in the context of higher education. Their framework highlights three types of academic leadership roles at the university: research leadership, educational leadership and administrative leadership. Based on this framework, academic leadership along with the proper motivation will increase the effectiveness of higher education and increase student and faculty satisfaction.

In the study on succession planning in Malaysian public universities, Norzaini et. al. (2012) suggests four domains of academic leadership, and they are teaching leadership, research leadership, public leadership and management leadership. Teaching leadership can be defined as the ability and credibility in teaching practice which comprised graduate and post graduate student teaching and supervision. On the other hand, the quality of research leaders must be based on a strong publication record, success in grant applications and experience in supervising young researchers. Furthermore, research leaders must also be capable of translating research findings to teaching as well as be engaged actively in transferring knowledge and skills through community services.

Public leaders, on the other hand, are usually engaged actively in association like non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Based on their expertise, they contribute ideas and energy to resolve national and regional socio-economic issues. Public leaders usually give services to the community through consultation activities. However, management leaders are academia with attractive academic records and credible management skills who manage a department, faculty or university.

The study has noticed that the criteria for promotion for lecturers in Malaysian polytechnics are based on excellence in the following criteria: Teaching and Administration, Research,

Leadership and Community Services. Excellence in these criteria is similar to the criteria for promoting lecturers in public universities. The only difference in the latter is that there is an emphasis on academic publications and consultancy projects.

In order to ensure the success of the transformation agenda, the Department of Polytechnics Education in Malaysia has formulated various strategic plans to ensure that the competencies of polytechnic lecturers will be on a par with the competencies of university lecturers. Hence, in their efforts to develop their lecturers, equal attention is now being given towards developing their competencies in research, academic writing and consultation.

Based on the literature and customary practices of public universities in Malaysia, this study concludes that academic leadership framework for Malaysian polytechnic includes five main domains namely: Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation, Academic Writing and Publication, and Community Services.

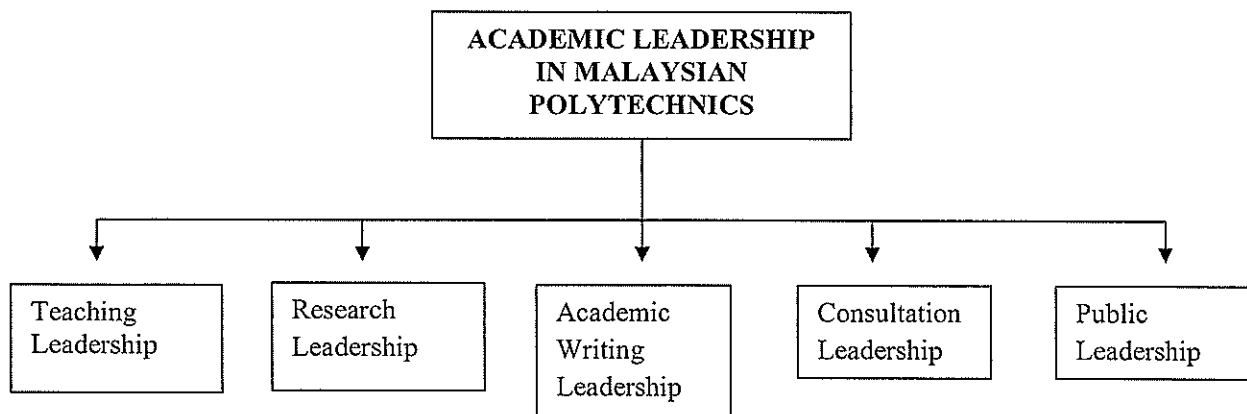


Figure 1: The conceptual framework of the Malaysian Polytechnic Academic Leadership

It is undeniable that the success of the transformation agenda of Malaysian needs the presence and functionality of academic leaders. Such study is perceived as timely to help strengthen human capital of Malaysian polytechnics. Due to the transformation plan, Malaysian polytechnic has been facing extensive tasks and responsibilities, as well as managerial, organizational and cultural challenges. In this case, continuous empowerment of academic leaders in polytechnics is deemed necessary to actualize the transformation agenda of Malaysian polytechnic in the near future.

3. METHODOLOGY

This section details the qualitative approach and analysis. During the profiling phase, the study identified 93 lecturers with FELDA background currently working in polytechnics all over Malaysia. During the quantitative phase, 45 lecturers were identified to participate in the focused group interviews. This method allows the researchers to explore the phenomenon under study by probing further during the interview sessions.

Qualitative data from the focused group interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Several repeating ideas are coded and led to the identification of major themes.

This study asserts that the motivation for academic leadership can be grouped under three major themes (i) Organizational and managerial issues (ii) Organizational culture and environment (iii) Personal experiences and qualities. Meanwhile, the barrier that may hamper the development of academic leadership mainly revolved around personal and family issues though does not undermine the barriers in organizational and managerial issues.

In-depth interviews with the top management in the Department of Polytechnic Education, Ministry of Education Malaysia were made to verify some of the findings specifically related to the scheme of polytechnic lecturers. The latter approach is viewed as instrumental to avoid misinterpretation.

4. MOTIVATION FOR ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

As mentioned earlier, the study found three main themes in analyzing the motivation for academic leadership among polytechnic lecturers with FELDA background;

- 1) Organizational and managerial issues
- 2) Organization culture and environment
- 3) Personal experience and qualities

The majority of the participants agreed that opportunities for continuing education and professional development through training and attending courses might motivate the development of academic leadership. They also stressed that every lecturer had to be given equal chance to pursue their career and develop their professionalism. The participants also point out that there is an urgent need for them to learn more about various dimensions of academic leadership so that they will be better equipped to cope with the complex ecosystem of higher learning. Among the required competencies are in the field of research and academic writing.

The majority of them agreed that an opportunity to continue studies at a higher level would be a motivational factor in the development of their academic leadership. Meanwhile, with regard to the promotion system, the participants unanimously agreed that a fair and transparent promotion policy with minimum criteria requirements would also enhance their academic leadership. The participants unanimously declined seniority as important criteria for promotion. They viewed a performance-based management system an appropriate strategy to motivate lecturers.

However, there was a minority view that demanded a review of the existing promotion criteria which were not fixed or often changing. This uncertainty of the criteria for promotion tended to affect their motivation. Meanwhile, the respondents unanimously agreed that the annual performance assessment might motivate their academic leadership if implemented in a transparent and objective manner. The overall summary of motivation for academic leadership is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Motivation for Academic Leadership in Theme 1

Motivation for Academic Leadership in Organizational and Managerial Issues
Have a variety and ample opportunities for personal and career development
Have opportunities to continue studies to a higher level
Criteria for promotion must be minimum, clear and fixed
Transparent and fair annual performance assessment
Fair promotion process

Most of the respondents also agreed that an efficient management system and an environment conducive to organization might stimulate the motivation for academic leadership. An environment conducive to positive working culture in the department and the campus might promote synergy and collaboration especially in the field of research and innovation. Whereas, workplace relationships based on jealousy, hatred, lack of self-respect are viewed as destructive to the development of academic leadership. Good relationships with superiors and management could facilitate the execution and implementation of academic responsibilities or duties in an organization.

Table 2: Motivation for Academic Leadership in Theme 2

Motivation for Academic Leadership in Organizational Culture and Environment
Strong support from Head of Department for personal development and professionalism
The existence of a mentor to provide guidance and advise in developing career and professionalism
Culture of mutual respect and understanding among colleagues regardless of thinking and working styles
Positive relationship with the administration and management
Balanced teaching workload
Encouragement and support from colleagues and effective team teaching

Conducive organizational culture and environment required dynamic and supportive heads of departments who are wise in decision-making and have clear missions. This is due to the fact that head of the department will be a point of reference in many cases related to professional and personal matters. With a clear vision the heads of department may bring the organization towards a better future. On the other hand, mentors are needed to guide and coach the young lecturers to pursue their career and professionalism. However, it is also expected that the young lecturers will reach out to senior and experienced lecturers to share their knowledge and expertise. This may trigger the development of culture of knowledge sharing in the organization.

With regard to personal experiences and qualities, this study asserts that childhood experiences of hardship and sufferings had motivated the lecturers to excel in their early school education. The majority of the respondents believed that it was only through education that they could improve their lives. The respondents also expressed their thankfulness to their parents who had sacrificed uncompromisingly for their success in studies. Thus, this study claims that positive values such as patience, courage and perseverance could lead to further academic development.

The majority of them also admitted that the FELDA socio-cultural ecosystem which they had experienced also influenced their personal qualities. The positive values like brotherhood, caring and cooperation had been conceptualized as common shared values among FELDA members and which they felt should be further sustained and strengthened in the future. According to them, the positive values were developed from the neighborhood system, youth development and entrepreneurial programmes organized by FELDA, government and NGOs. The summary of motivation for academic leadership from personal experience and qualities are shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Motivation for Academic Leadership in Theme 3

Motivation for Academic Leadership in personal experiences and qualities
The roles of parents who placed great emphasis on education
Strong belief system on a career as an educator
Culture of mutual respect and understanding among colleagues regardless of thinking and working styles
Effective FELDA support system and shared values
Personal qualities and skills

5. BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

From the analysis of qualitative data, this study found that family is the main barrier that may hinder the development of academic leadership from the perspective of polytechnic lecturers. Majority of the respondents said their family consideration particularly the spouses have a strong influence on their career choice. They also reported that family commitments can limit their drive to seek for promotion. If the promotion required them to move physically to another hometown or state, they are not prepared to compromise family for career promotion. Most of the married respondents viewed financial commitment as barrier for them to pursue their studies to a higher level thus may hinder the development of academic leadership.

A significant issue that emerged from this study is the mismatch that occurred between a polytechnic lecturer's field of study and the subject he or she had to teach at the polytechnic. This situation may affect the overall picture of academic leadership as lecturers are not able to develop further in their fields of expertise.

Table 4: Barriers to Academic Leadership

Barriers to Academic Leadership
Feeling comfortable in one place does not want to move even offered the opportunity to be promoted
Little or no support and encouragement from family especially spouse on their roles as lecturers
Limited financial commitments to further study
Families especially spouses not supportive to the decision to further study
Overburden with teaching workload and no time for research grant hunting
Low motivation
Bureaucracy and centralization policies
Low level of competence, especially in teaching practices and R & D ventures

The findings revealed that the transformation plan vested on them extensive set of tasks and responsibilities while in reality they lack the required qualifications, experience and even interest. According to the findings, they are less prepared for academic leadership notably in research ventures and academic publication since their routine are more on teaching and students programmes. The participants also added that they are not well prepared to lead effectively because they are affected by factors like inexperience and low motivation.

Apart from personal and family issues, the study also found that centralization policies practices by Malaysian polytechnics might inhibit the development of academic leadership. Compared with their partners in universities, polytechnic lectures do not have autonomy in the curriculum development and even in planning their teaching plan. Such a centralized system can hinder creativity and leadership abilities of the lecturers. In polytechnics, they are more as executer rather than a planner or developer. Meanwhile these two criteria are among the important traits of academic leaders. Apart from financial problems, too much teaching workload may also hinder their efforts to pursue training and studies. In addition, the study found the polytechnic lecturers possessed moderate competency in R & D ventures as well as the execution of innovative teaching and implementation of OBE.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Participants of the study have identified that polytechnics are now facing challenges particularly innovative teaching technologies, diversity of learners, changing stakeholder expectations and expanding workloads. According to participants of this study, these new challenges have led to complex changes and overwhelming tasks and responsibilities on their roles as lecturers in polytechnics as well as on the concept of academic leadership.

Based on the observation and analysis, this study found that the transformation plan resulted to overwhelming tasks and responsibilities as well as challenges to polytechnic lecturers, and they are not sufficiently prepared to lead. However, the study does not deny the fact that majority of the respondents has great potential to become academic leaders of the future. However, changes cannot be made overnight. The lecturers' readiness to change and willingness to accept changes must be given extra consideration. In addition, the sharing of vision, goals and strategies of the transformation agenda must be rigorously done among all polytechnic communities.

Therefore, continuous development in academic and managerial skills and competencies are very much needed in order to equip them to cope with various new challenges in higher learning ecosystem nowadays. In order to develop the potential of academic leadership in higher education ecosystem, proactive efforts and strategic planning should be formulated and implemented by the relevant authorities, particularly the Department of Polytechnic Education.

The findings suggest that academic leadership in polytechnic is hampered by personal and family issues. Meanwhile, issues related to personal qualities and skills can also be enhanced with the full commitment given by the central management of polytechnic notably by allocating sufficient budget for training and continuing education. Rigorous training in leadership and managerial skills, effective communication and creative problem solving skills would be beneficial for future academic leaders. Concurrently, trainings in conflict, stress and management must also be given due consideration to future academic leaders for them to achieve balance between professional and personal lives. Similarly, the management shall not overlook the empowerment of organizational culture, values and routines so as to create conducive academic environment for the development of effective academic network and collaboration.

Issues related to management and systems can surely be overcome and improved. The issues of bureaucracy and centralization for instance could be minimized by increasing each polytechnic's autonomy in favor of participatory decision making at least academic autonomy in curricula development and research ventures. A strategy to gain sufficient autonomy and authority to direct resources can be formulated towards achieving the transformation objectives. If they were to be prepared to become a full-pledged university in the near future, no doubt this will be an important move that they must ready to take off.

At the same time as lecturers from FELDA background, they need to increase their capacity and involvement with their respective community. A strong networking system can be established between academics, graduates and ALUMNI of FELDA generation in higher education institutions throughout Malaysia. Recognition of this network by FELDA Global Venture Holding (FGVH) and Malaysian government will facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills to the FELDA community at large. Consequently, they can help to transform and sustain FELDA amidst the challenges in the highly globalized world.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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