

The Social Impacts on Leadership in Higher Education in Malaysia

Jane Teng Yan Fang

Department of Management & Leadership
Faculty of Management & Economics
Sultan Idris Education University
35900 Tanjong Malim Perak Malaysia
E-mail: jane.tyf@fpe.upsi.edu.my;

Abstract

The study investigated the external factors specifically on the social impacts towards leadership in Higher education in Malaysia. The paper aims to highlight the social impacts in the areas namely, indirect communication, preserving face, status gap, self-interest, and Malaysian culture towards the leadership in higher institutions. The study employed a qualitative paradigm where a total of thirty two respondents were interviewed. The findings show that social impacts contribute significantly towards the construction of leadership and leadership effectiveness at Higher Education in Malaysia. Thus, this implies that leadership is being constructed by the surrounding environment, that a simple formula for leadership does not exist.

Keywords Leadership, higher education, social impact, culture, communication

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing research attention for the impact of leadership at various settings namely, the schools, organizations and NGOs. It was reported that leaders and leadership has direct implications towards the culture and its working environment and vice versa. At the same time, most theories of leadership development stressed how to be effective within the status quo. Specifically, leaders at the higher education settings challenge is not merely in “rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic”, but to keep the ship from sinking.

Studies on leadership has shown some shifting towards focusing on the daily practice of leadership including its moral, emotional, and relational aspects, rather than its rational, objective, and technical ones (Carroll et al., 2008). The focus of looking at leadership is more in its activity rather than through the traits and heroics of individual actors under the longstanding ‘great man’ theory (Cherry, 2013).

Since leadership has become an increasingly central component in many organizational settings, Ford (2010) suggests a more critical and reflexive approach

to the study of leadership, in which attention should be given to situations, events institutions, ideas, social practices and processes. The development of more critical approaches needs to adopt a more culturally sensitive and locally based interpretive approach, which takes accounts of an individual's experiences, social circle and its culture.

Besides that, leadership research has found that leadership which can accommodate diversity has positive effects on a multi level, multi culture organization (Hay, 2008). For example, given the scenario above, subordinates in an educational institution characterized that their behaviours are more likely than those in other working environment to express satisfaction with their leaders. However, little is known about the influence of the social aspects on leadership at the higher educational institutions.

Obviously, the studying of leadership should moved from being static to being action oriented, leadership gradually started being viewed as a process; thus putting the focus on the interaction between the many factors that occur within an organization – the external and internal factors. The external factors include the political perspectives. However, this study was carried out to examine the internal factor that is the social impacts towards leadership in higher education. The social impacts were investigated within the paradigm of communication, values and culture within the Malaysian context. Eventually, the leadership and its quality are being discussed in order to provide a clear scenario of leadership at Higher Education in Malaysia.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

Looking on higher education establishments, they are undergoing a phenomenal amount of change driven by various factors. For example, government, economy, international market, technology, and others. Traditionally, universities have been governed on a collegial basis, focusing on developing knowledge both in the students attending and through research activities (Middlehurst & Elton, 1992).

In today's dynamic environment, the increasing levels of public scrutiny is now widespread across the higher educational system around the world that focuses on the efficiency of the public scrutiny of universities and is associated with management and developmental responses (Davies *et al.*, 2001). Such changes include more scrutiny and accountability in the usage of public funds, value of money in the deployment of resources, combined with pressure to increase entrepreneurial activities and enhance the quality of individual and institutional performances. Universities now substantially conduct their activities in a more business-like manner and, as such, need a concerted effort by all, to succeed. Academics and support staff struggle, on occasions, to identify what they are trying to do and even to identify who the customers are. Furthermore, McCaffery (2010) asserts, higher education staff have become alienated and the prevailing mentality within the sector is survivalist – one of the endurance rather than enjoyment; a frustration over a perceived lack of resources, excessive accountability and the erosion of traditional university values.

The impact of changes were explicated in institutional cultures and structures; on individual and collective roles; as well as on associated skills and experiences, that resonate in the experiences of higher educational reform in many countries. With

regard to Malaysian context, higher educational sector is inclusively part of the global players that needs to prepare itself to deal with charted and unprecedented national and world challenges. It plays a vital role in Malaysian's intellectual, economic, cultural and social development. It educates country's future workforces, nurtures future leaders, drives much of the economic and regional success, facilitates cultural and trade links with other countries and enriches our social and environmental landscape. Eventually, its holds national expectation in stimulating knowledge and inspiring innovative and creative society based on economic well being (Haslam, 2001).

Therefore, it is timely, to look closer into the contextual or surrounding factors that may construct the leadership in public Higher Education in Malaysia. The role of Higher Education as the catalyst of socio-economic development in Malaysia is undoubtedly critical. Measures to enhance the activities, performance and reputation of higher educational institutions are therefore crucial to ensure that these organizations are capable of meeting the increasing demands for higher education from the local and foreign markets. It is indeed apt that an in-depth approach looks into the leadership and its environment.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

The study employed a qualitative method in soliciting data. A total of thirty-two respondents were interviewed. They comprised of twenty seven male and five female of the top management persons at the respective higher institutions. They are currently holding various positions such as the Deputy Vice Chancellors, Directors, Deputy Directors, Deans and Heads of Departments. The number of the respondents according to gender is shown in Table1.

Table 1 The number of the Respondents according to Position and Gender

	Deputy VC	Deans	Directors	Dep. Directors	HOD
Male	2	6	7	7	5
Female	1	1	1	0	2

In total, thirty respondents were interviewed, twenty seven are male. The Deputy Vice Chancellors consists of a male and a female. There are six male Deans and only 1 female Dean There is seven male Directors and a female Director. The Deputy Directors consists of seven male only. The Head of Department consists of five males and two females.

The study employed certain elements of case study. Observations were carried out and document analysis was incorporated during data collection to ensure a detailed contextual analysis, so as to obtain a deep understanding of the dynamics of the phenomenon in higher education context. A few institutions were selected under the administration of higher education. It attempted to understand the extent, nature, problems and difficulties experienced by the leaders from the selected departments and higher educational institutions in undertaking leadership roles. Several sessions of in-depth interviews using the semi-structured questions were asked upon respondents

during interviews. A review into some episodes of the experience were recalled and recorded. Thus, the strategy of critical incident technique and discourse analysis had also been adopted as methods to obtain relevant and quality data. The historical records as well as the current documents from the national and organizational document categories had been examined.

For purpose of confidentiality, and adhering to the ethics on research, the actual names of the institution and respondents were not used in this paper. The data obtained from all the sixty-four interviews were collectively analysed to uncover common themes and sub-themes on impacts of the external factors towards leadership at Higher Education in Malaysia.

FINDINGS

The results of the investigation towards the social impacts upon leadership in higher education in Malaysia are presented and discussed in this section. The social impacts are categorized into five sub themes: indirect communication, preserving face, status gap, self-interest and culture within Malaysian context.

- i. Indirect communication
- ii. Preserving face
- iii. Status gap
- iv. Self interest
- v. Malaysian culture

Social Impacts

The social background has been dynamic in higher educational institutional. Basically, Malaysia is a multi race and multi cultural society. Thus, working culture may not differ significantly between the Malay, Chinese and Indian. However despite the similarities; these three main ethnics do have their distinct cultural and religious heritages (Kennedy, 2002), which have certain influence towards the way the lead in an institution. According to Kennedy, the key cultural and religious values underpin the behaviour and beliefs of Malay leaders; serve to create differences between leadership styles in Malaysia and those in other regions of the world.

Indirect communication

It was found that the majority of the staff and academics in public higher institutions are Malays. Thus, inevitably the Malay's culture has dominated the workplace environment. Consequently, the leadership and organisational culture have been overshadowed by this cultural. And, one of the aspects of indirectly ways of expressing oneself is rooted in the organization. A respondent shared his experience.

I have been invited to be involved in this project at this ministry which is a quite big national level project, the Secretary General was there. Something seemed not right, so I voiced it during the discussion. Then immediately after the meeting, one

officer told me that I should not bring up the matter, it was improper for me to voice it upfront. Truly so, I was no longer called for another meeting after the incident, it was completely silent and they left me out of the picture. They launched the ceremony but I was not informed.

Leaders may forego openness in the interest of maintaining social harmony (Mansor & Kennady, 2000). The respondent's discourse depicted the characteristic of the high-context communication that involves emotion and close relationships (Hall, 1998). The phrase ... *'then one person calmed me down and advised me not to proceed'* implies the indirect way of expressing views as an attempt to secure relationship with other party. While doing so, emotion plays a key role in ensuring that face value for both sides is preserved and respect for elders and higher ranking leaders take precedence.

The communication style in higher education setting requires more subtle way of conveying your message. Most of the time subordinates remain silence of not wanting to express an opinion. Indeed, communication matters that the two-ways communication directly affects him/her and definition of his/her role. It was found in the analysis that this dominating leadership arises often.

One example is that staff will passively follow the leader's words or directives. As Malaysia is high in power distance culture (Hofstede, 1991), it is observed that in many situations, followers are in passive obedience to superiors, and have strong reverence to senior leaders. It seems uncommon for anybody to go against the leaders, particularly in a direct way, and even with polite manners. To disagree means putting one's own name on the 'black list' which will further affect career promotions, opportunities for attending any training programs, or being transferred to other places without consultation. This can be seen from the statement below

I tried to correct them. Then one person calmed me down and advised me not to proceed, because things will become worse. She went on to say if I was really unsatisfied, I can correct them by informing the person in-charge outside of the event.

In this case, the institution seems to have a rigid system, communication between status levels seems to serve as a substitute for real mobility towards higher level. Another even more salient phenomenon within the institution is the 'playing safe' strategy when a leader's behaviour is mainly to achieve his personal objectives. Many a times, it was found staff or academicians would not commit to agree or disagree in any decision making. Many of the respondents seem to experience this 'play safe' or they chose not commit to a situation, to get out of being 'made responsible' to a certain task. As one of the respondents voiced it out by saying, *'we are not here to oppose the leaders and get sack or black listed. It happens.'* So, in order to safe guard by themselves, it was found the staff normally would to choose to play safe in many occasions.

Playing safe

This is the likely reason why people keep silent when they disagree with any leader's ideas, and then they just reveal the grudges behind the scene. Lower level leaders prefer to 'play safe'. 'Playing safe' refers to the leader's unwillingness to take any feedback from followers to higher levels, or being selective about what feedback

to communicate. Only when the leaders feel their positions are not threatened, then they will bring the matters up. Any dissatisfactions and resentments were voiced out amongst themselves or within their small groups. A respondent highlighted his views in the statement below.

In (my) department, we don't say yes or no especially. We release our tension among themselves, and sometimes it creates the tendency for gossips. We don't say yes and no. Just talk among ourselves. To be safe ..

The existence of small groups was evident either among the peers, or research teams or subject groups. This was where they turned to, to release their exasperations and seek further views or advice, as they have limited opportunities to speak out their concerns direct to the top management.

Preserving face

Nonetheless, the insensitive remarks made by some younger generation subordinates reflect the contemporary Malay young generation attitudes. It connotes the changing phenomenon, that the modern Malays have adapted the new culture, as they travel to other countries and pick up new ways of seeing and doing things and incorporate them into their value system. Even so, amidst the new trend, the traditional cultural values are still intact and practiced by the people at large. A respondent put forth his opinion.

It is not good to talk even though very true in front of the senior people. Our culture is still very confining..we must give face. We have to think of his pride, his position. Compare to us young graduate so we 'give face'. It is not healthy but it is it.

Status Gap

There is a significant status and gap between the top, the middle and the lower level leaders as well as some other community in an organization. For example, there is a huge gap between the top leaders and the lower ranking staff, which indirectly signify the status gap. The great distances in terms of position have shaped the subservient environment, that likely to shape the community minds and feelings. A respondent reflected her experience.

We have levels. Those who are at the top, they are really on the top and those who are at the lower level, they are there, and there is a big gap. Therefore, there is a significant communications gap.

In this context, higher position leaders are perceived as possessing higher status and more inclined with power, and that they have certain privileges in shaping the culture and atmosphere of the community. Since status consciousness exists, the top or the authoritative leaders sometimes tend to be overpowered and subsequently would dominate the organization. A male respondent elaborated in the statement below.

We are still feudalistic society. That's why we have titles such as Dato', Tan Sri, and so forth. Let's say there is a same person like me sitting here, and he is just an ordinary professor (without any title), not many people will listen to him, the impact is not there.

The social status indicated by some titles such as Dato' and Tan Sri seem to become the influence factor for hegemonic practices in Malaysian organizations. The words '*the impact is not there*' mentioned by the above respondent refer to the authority or privilege that hypothetically possessed by those who have been conferred with certain titles given by royalty. Those who have the 'title', gain high respect and command, and there is low likelihood of them being opposed by the followers. And, it had created certain impact towards leadership in an organization. In general, the phenomenon of self interest prevails and that gives strong impact towards leadership in an organization.

Self-Interest

The phenomenon of self interest was visible, particularly in the hierarchical structure in many organizations. Even though Malaysian leaders are not expected to be self-serving, in the sense of placing their own interest ahead of the group, the worst circumstance is where a leader is presumed to be asking for himself at the expense of his peers and group. This 'incident' is shared by a respondent in the below statement.

..Firstly, let's take the higher level leaders. I think they are more concerns with managing themselves rather than managing the organisation; for example they are more concerned about whether their positions will be renewed, because they are on contractual basis. However, this is understandable since anybody on a contract basis will be thinking the same.

The leaders will try to fit their actions with the ministry's programs, often times, they are just waiting for the instructions,.. it is quite obvious the fear is there, that they don't want to do something which might against the thinking of the higher level. When they see the minister is emphasising certain areas, they will readjust their focus, then abandon the previous one, so they are managing themselves more rather than managing the organisation.

The self-interest in this sense explicates the situation by which leaders tend to seek opportunities of pursuing their personal quest intertwining with accomplishing organizational objectives, and from the researcher's observation, in many instances personal quest superseded the organizational quest. The leaders deem to seek career satisfaction through implicit way to get out of the exasperation of the autocratic and legitimised structure. They were acting superficially to please the upper management and demonstrate their conforming behaviour. In order to have a better understanding regarding the social impacts towards leadership in higher education institutions, it is important to review through its culture.

Malaysian Culture

Malaysia is a multiracial and multi culture society. The Malays and the indigenous peoples make up 60 percent of its population, Chinese comprises of 31 percent and Indian about 8 percent. This implies that there is more than one culture in Malaysian organization and its leadership.

Malay Culture

The Malays within its culture encourages the indirect ways of communicating and giving feedbacks, passive obedience to superiors, strong reverence for elders and traditional leaders, and the importance of close relationship with higher levels in the workplace. No doubt these cultural values has been widely accepted by Malaysian people, however, in certain instances, the underpinning values has otherwise developed the authoritarian kinds of leadership amongst Malays. A respondent deliberated the statement below.

Ok let's talk about Malay culture. I might not be an expert in Malay culture but this is from my observation that a lot has to do with relationships that you know and because of that it creeps into the working condition. You have to foster good relationships with who you know, things are not direct, and everything takes place in an indirect way to. Saving face is extremely important. In the meeting nobody says things directly, because of culture again. The right person may be punished and the wrong person can get away with it because of face saving. So these are the things that work against the true leadership..

The phenomenon of indirect communication, face saving, status gap had in the long run shaped the leadership in an organization. The Malays have strong humane values and practices, for example, accommodating, forgiving, and peace loving attitude. However, these strong values tend to be misused particularly in the selection and recruitment process, promotion and disciplinary circumstances. These can result in leaders overlooking incidents of incompetence, low productivity and low performance and this is supported by an experience of a male respondent.

Through my experience as Head of Department, we cannot get rid of the appointment of staff based on cronyism which involves sympathy and empathy during the selection process, particularly when the candidate is related to the top people, even though he / she is not fully qualified. Similarly, during the promotion exercise for our staff, sometime due to seniority the person is sympathetically being considered to be promoted even though he has not demonstrated good performance.

As Malaysia is a multi cultural society. The mixed community has indirectly contributed to the social aspect of the construction of leadership. Even Chinese does not takes up a high percentage in terms of the working population in the public higher educational institutions but it does has some impacts of its culture.

Chinese Culture

Chinese culture has it own uniqueness in terms of leadership. In the context of Chiese, from a young age, the children are taught the principles that hard work is equal to success. Chinese parents always emphasise that if they work hard they will be successful and could become a good leader. Chinese place high regards on ethical behaviour, and they are expected to behave in a right ethical way.

However, In Malaysia, majority of Chinese work in private sector as they believed that *“with the hard work principle, high ethical attitude, and good management skills, Chinese could be a better leader”* and this is asserted by a female respondent. *They*

give greater emphasis on leadership qualities and performance rather than who is more powerful and authoritative.” To explain further about the leaders in government departments and public universities, which comprises more of Malays than any other ethnicities, a respondent put forward her opinion.

I wish a few bosses should be out (from the government department). Why should they be there if they are not performing? If we look at foreign universities, relatively nobody (the leaders) sits on the low rail. So what is the standard of our leaders, or professors and associate professors?”

The evidence above had clearly shown the influence of the social aspects’ towards leadership in the educational settings. Considerable influence is often by individuals who take leadership into his own hand within the organizations. Relatively, competent staff, professional academicians promotes and support healthy leadership. Occasionally, the staff may be oriented to the status quo and exercise power to stop changes or leaders that are viewed as threatening. There is nevertheless a good deal to suggest to stakeholders the existing scenario of leadership at the higher education institutions—they have more to gain than lose if we want to see that educational purpose and institutional interest develop in harmony.

DISCUSSION

It is true that a university leader have to exert his leadership preliminary through others, only when he has a strong hand at the selection of his administrative. But appointment of leaders is seldom done after adequate consultation as it has been reviewed by the participants. It is believed, the president or CEO of an institution of higher education is measured largely by his capacity for institutional leadership. He shares responsibility for the definition and attainment of goals, for administrative action and for operating the communications system which links the academic community.. as a chief, he as obligations to innovate and initiate (Lassey & Fernandez, 1976). Thus, as a leader in the respective setting, a leader can envision new horizon and should persuade others to see them and to work toward them. So it is utmost important for the understanding of the social impacts towards leadership as presented and discussed.

Higher education in Malaysia has undergone massive expansion due to the increasing social demand which is partly brought by the social democratization of secondary education and the growing affluence of Malaysian society. With the expansion and diversification of higher education, the Malaysian government has to expand its role from being the main provider to a regulator and protector of higher education (Lee, 2000). As a provider, the government allocates resources to higher education institutions and provides funds for scholarships and student aid, research, and capital expenditures. As a protector, the government takes on the function of consumer advocacy by improving access to higher education, formulating policies to promote social equality, and by monitoring the quality of academic programmes. As a regulator, the government ensures oversight of new and emerging institutions through institutional licensing and programme accreditation. Hence, the leadership creates a significant impact to its environment, at large to the higher education in Malaysia.

The results showed that the social impact such as the communication, values and culture is significantly influencing the leaders at the higher education. The phenomenon revolves around indirect ways of communication, the culture of face saving and playing safe commonly found amongst the academicians and the staff. Eventually, the impacts shaped the type of leadership at the educational institutions. Nevertheless, the staff faced constraints in terms of ways of expressing their views, obligated to adhere the instructions even though they are not meaningful. The academicians and staff felt there was autonomy party upon them. It was observed that respondents who participated in study initiated interesting strategies or ways in gaining the respect and interest of the leaders to promote a more conducive working environment. For example, the preserve face and face saving. This attitude inevitably invites the implications of such social impacts to prevail.

However, it was found from the analysis in overcoming the challenges with the leaders, the participants in the interviews suggested that they continue to speak their mind and act professionally. They felt it is important as to secure the quality of the institutional or the clients. They felt that it was important for them open up communication with leaders to share their experiences and understanding on the common ground not being threaten or risking their 'rice bowl' (job). They will attempt to make an effort to confront the leaders with the challenge of freedom.

CONCLUSION

The investigation on the social aspects towards leadership in higher education has indicated the leadership is shaped and form by the types of communication, the values and its culture. This study reveals that some aspects of social influence created an impact towards the leadership in higher education and vice versa. The culture, values and status consciousness have become the substantial subject in leadership in the higher education context. The five elements of social factors put forth in this article significantly demonstrated that to lead and leadership in higher education are mainly shaped by this social elements. These influence directly and indirectly affect the leadership roles. Hence, it can be concluded that there is no one fix formula for leadership. Leadership is rather shaped and influence by the environment. On the other hand, leadership is found to give enormous impact at its environment.

The respondent, namely Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans, Director, Deputy Director and Heads of Department, faced the challenges in leading an institutions as the forces caused by the social factors is too vast. However, a successful leader is one who is keenly aware of those forces which are most relevant to his behaviours at any given time (Jane et al, 2011). In short, A leader accurately understand his himself, the individuals and group he is dealing with and the institution and most importantly the broader social environment in which he operates or leads. Nevertheless, the finding yielded has found to have benefited the stakeholders, and contributed to the understanding of leadership in higher education in Malaysia.

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