

## **Leadership Management as an Integral Part of Succession Planning in HEIs: A Malaysian Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*Succession planning in local public HEIs is fast gaining attention, in not exactly a positive manner, where various loopholes and weaknesses of the system (if there is one) have become points of contention both in and outside the ivory towers. One of the main reasons of such unparalleled public interest is the expectations of the leader to produce ground-shaking transformations and reinstitute Malaysian HEIs to their formal glory. Truth is, the discourse can never be complete without invoking the other half of 'succession', i.e. 'leadership'. Succession planning goes hand in hand with leadership management, which actually resembles a Pandora box of underlying intricate and interrelated issues. Mishandling one or more issues can result in an incessant trickling of problems and ill symptoms, snowballing into a greater avalanche of crisis threatening to obliterate the very survival of HEIs itself. It is timely therefore, that the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has initiated urgent calls for review of the current succession execution and planning. This effort has inadvertently led to the realization and acknowledgement of leadership management as the long lost twin! Taking HEI as no different from a complex business organization, successful succession planning and leadership management models or strategies in the corporate can be adapted for effective implementation. This paper attempts to put the current situation and circumstances into perspective, and to propose a fundamental framework for a smooth transition of helmsmanship in HEIs, incorporating qualities of continuity, equality and credibility. Authorities are urged to not make complete adoption of existing models, which do not fit well with subtleties of the local scene, resulting in hiccups and paralysis of the HEI's governance and administrative organs. In other words, an all-encompassing mould must be cast to cater for the needs, context and factors that make up our HEIs, without which we will be encumbered by a perpetual game of merry-go-round, never finding the way forward.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

It is almost ironic the fact that succession planning and related matters are now the most debated topic in the HEI circle.

Considering that a university is no different from any respectable organizations in the constant quest forward, the irony is perhaps softened as the debate can only be fuelled by a genuine eagerness to stay relevant and competitive, hence the uneasiness stirring from within. Staying connected with the external environment, keeping constant vigil of the ever changing expectations and maintaining a heightened sense of awareness towards the wants and needs of society are basic rules for the survival of HEIs today. The ability to obtain updated information, and the even greater capacity to digest and filter the incoming data with significant bearing on the operations of a university are simply indispensable.

As such, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) for their timely detection of the problem and related issues of succession in local varsities, and decisively taking proactive steps towards handling it in a wholesome approach instead of meting out halfway measures. Workshops, seminars and conferences of late have raised the awareness for those less inquisitive, and encouraged a vibrant academic discourse among the more enlightened. Ivory towers, in their traditional role as the guiding and leading light for societal transformation and progression, are living up to the expectations by taking the bull by its horn, asking pertinent questions and seeking tangible, long term solutions.

Changes in the academic terrain have ushered in alterations in the governance, operational strategy, funding, teaching, research and every other aspect of the functionality of a university (Rothwell 2002, Coaldrake and Stedman 1999, Ramsden 1998). Universities are compelled to be always in the know of current situations so that appropriate anticipation and predictions can be made to cater for the effects of anticipated change. Horder (2000) proposed that institutional leadership must not only observe and monitor the evolving external factors, but introduce strategic responses to strengthen and prepare the relevant functional units in the face of changes. Updated strategies taking into account of non-linear, unpredictable developments (James 2002), enhanced innovation backed by sufficient risk management (Shattock 2003), as well as outsourced expertise via partnerships, collaboration and engagement (Marshall et al. 2000) are some possible measures in the face of challenging demands imposed by the sea of change surrounding IHEs. Kotter (2002) painted an even grimmer picture, lamenting on the financial strain and consequential problems that can plague an institution if the changes are not adeptly handled.

Succession matters and leadership issues are not unique Malaysian affairs, but faced by HEIs all over the world, with difference in the degrees of acceptance and change put forth to capture the gradual downfall (Marshall 2008). Small comfort maybe! The singular address of leadership in higher education has remained the core of literature on leadership in higher education until less than a decade ago. These studies portrayed a rather stereoscopic view on the traits, capabilities, knowledge and skills required by a leader of teaching and learning institutions, leaving a gaping chasm on how people with such qualities, or leaders, can be born (e.g. Wolverson et al. 2005, Marshall 200, Middlehurst 1993). It is little wonder then that succession planning and leadership management in academic institutions were not paired up and seen in a symbiotic context until more recently, as they were thus far research areas pursued independently from one another. Moreover, most of these cross-disciplinary studies were conducted in the context of business organizations, not HEIs, such as reports by Groves (2006), Ip and Jacobs (2006) as well as Conger and Fulmer (2003). Our naivety could therefore be excused due to the late ‘discovery’ of the relevant intelligentsia, perhaps.

This sets the background to the central discussion of the paper, i.e. developing a viable succession planning procedure in HEIs supported by an integrated leadership management system. It is easy to brush aside the relations of the two and maintain the status quo of running them in parallel but mutually exclusive courses, but it will be much harder to face the eternal haunting of inevitable crumbling institutional excellence as the price of our ignorance, or worse, arrogance.

## **2.0 Current situation and challenges: Why the mess?**

The challenges, or more aptly, the issues revolving around succession planning in HEIs can be summarized into six (6) pressing components, as presented in the [AKEPT's Leadership Workshop](#) in [October 2011](#). [Figure 1](#) shows an adaptation of the original diagram. Following is a brief account of each component made in view of the prevalent scenarios in local HEIs. Note that it is more than a mere elaboration of cause-and-effect, but the reflection of an urgent need to address the issues before it is too late.

**Administrative work: unsatisfactory and discouraging outcomes**

It would be unacceptable to imagine that all leaders appointed to hold offices in a university lack desirable qualities or commendable aptitudes. Nonetheless as a sole fighter cannot win the war, the disillusionment of losing an uphill battle, one after another, can be very daunting and discouraging. An energetic leader charging ahead with enthusiastic reforms cannot go far without the collective support of his or her office. Unfortunately this is not uncommon, as agents of change are rarely welcome and widely perceived as intruders on the comfort zone of the subordinates. Besides, newly proposed improvement plans can hardly be expected to take off without sufficient organizational backing. Certain new policies or ideas may even be construed as ruffling the feathers of senior staff, or worse, stir up a hornet's nest! These internal and external factors combined could dampen the spirit of a leader, who eventually gives up to just 'go with the flow'. Progress will be halted as leadership falls victim to coerced conformity.

**External factors: lack of self-governance and autonomy**

This can be associated with winds of change blowing in the nation's political, economical and social platforms, which seep into the ivory towers and cause unrest. It is undesirable of course, and verges on tarnishing the sanctity and compromising the independence of an institution, but the university does not always get to call the final shots. For instance, in pursuit of industrialization of the country, HEIs will certainly be called upon to generate the necessary human resources to propel the industries. Leaders with engineering or technological background could inevitably be considered preferable to those with arts degrees. Former CEOs of private industrial players may even be roped in to steer the university in fulfilling the nation's predetermined niche. This could disrupt existing succession plans, and interrupt development blueprints carved out for the respective universities. It would be just as well as taking two steps forward and one step back, again!

**Self-centredness: unheeded call for greater good**

The current system of meriting and rewarding personal professional achievements seem to have been a double-edged sword. On one hand, it has been a prime driver for the academicians to strive for excellence in research particularly. On the other hand though, it has reduced our university lecturers into 'writing machines' with little or no interest in the survival or well-being of the institution. It will take an immense amount of prodding and reasoning to make them spare a thought or moment for the university's succession problems, for instance. To what end and for what cause may be questions not easily answered to convince these young, ambitious lot to juggle between administrative or managerial tasks and their professional development. The self-centred predisposition to serve one's personal interest rules over the much diminished sense of organizational belonging, let alone the willingness to make sacrifices by heeding the wistful calls to shoulder leadership responsibilities.

**Ambivalence: unwanted leadership roles**

If little emphasis is placed on the importance of grooming our own leaders as future successors, it is not surprising to find disquieting ambivalence and nonchalance towards assuming leadership roles among the young academicians. Many are of the opinion that the anointed successors are already in line, and those outside the loop are considered ill-advised to attempt at intervening. Some may choose to be immersed in purely academic endeavours to climb the steep ladder of corporate ivory tower, turning a blind eye to institutional problems and shunning active participation in the university's shaping-up exercises (see preceding discussion). Whether the reason is personal, self-serving or simply ignorance, these attitudes deprive us of potential talents and agents of positive change, which would serve as a welcome breath of fresh air in the varsity's sometimes musky administrative and managerial chambers.

**New blood: leadership not deemed an essential trait**

In the recruitment of new academic staff, leadership qualities are either not emphasized or non-existent in the requirement list. Traits such as those expected of a leader capable of transformation, including charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, do not seem to score as high points as those underlining the potential candidate's prowess in publication. An induction to the organization under misguided emphasis like this can barely be expected to encourage a healthy bloom of the leadership talent pool. Worse still, it is just as good as ingraining in these new recruits the invincibility of the opaque succession mechanism well greased to run for a long time to come, hence effectively suffocating any aspirations to lead or change. The root of this issue lies further down the line, way before the candidates earn their strings of degrees and academic scrolls, where 'soft' skills are being paid lip service at best in schools, and even homes.

### Not lucrative: being leaders does not pay well

In these days of dire and calamitous economic chaos, even the once impartial and noble academicians have to be cut some slack for wanting to secure financial stability while performing the rudimentary duties in the IHEs. Consultations with industries, book-writing and tendering of expert services are just some avenues for generating the much sort after extra income in a university. Perfectly legal and even encouraged (to fulfill the more enterprising aspects of being a lecturer), holding offices in leadership roles pales in stark comparison in terms of monetary return. The additional workload that threatens to infringe on after-work hours, not to mention the often disrupted schedule of teaching, learning and research, are not always seen as being fairly and adequately balanced by the allowance paid to office bearers. In short, the carrot dangled may be a wee bit too small to lure the potential leaders out of hiding, or to motivate the incumbents to go the extra mile.

Apparently, the above discussion does not only encapsulate the issues and challenges of succession planning, but more importantly, highlights the inseparable and intertwined symbiotic relationship between succession planning and leadership management. In a nutshell, the issues and problems lie not in the lack of succession planning alone, but the absence of a coordinated leadership management system too.

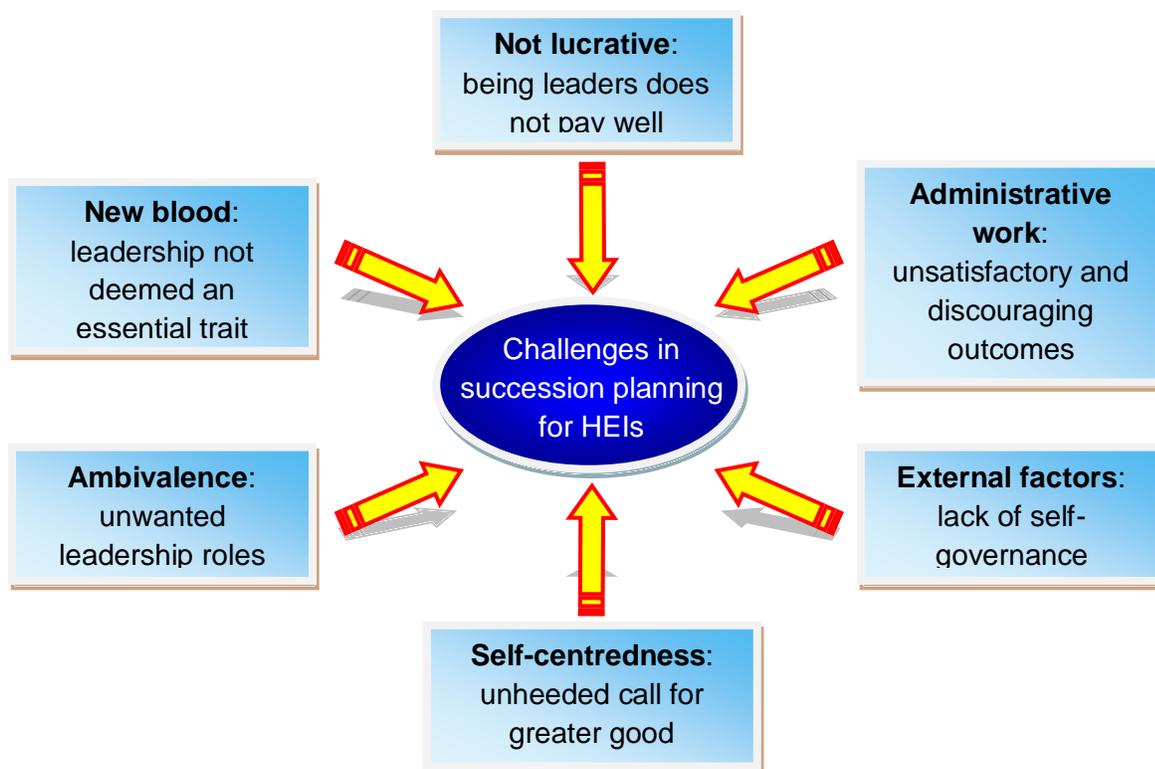


Figure 1. Challenges faced by succession planning in HEIs (adapted from AKEPT's Leadership Workshop 2011).

### 3.0 Business models: Are they for universities?

Unimpeded flow of information cascading through the ranks is plausibly the most vital asset of a successful organization, facilitated by a clear, precise and timely dissemination mechanism. This suggests a leadership model anchored at the top but fostered at all levels. These notions were originally articulated in the literature of business management, operations and strategic development (e.g. Syner et al. 2007, Hanna 2003, Lamond 2001). Nonetheless it is not difficult to notice the similarities between an academic organization and a business one, and how with suitable adaptations and adjustments, principles that work in the business world can be made to succeed in the IHEs.

On succession planning per se, the change of leaders has the same impact in a university as in a multinational company, affecting areas of productivity, efficiency, progress, competitiveness, teamwork and others (Kransdorff 1996). Ul Hassan et al. (2011) summarised the definition of effective leadership well by tracking the evolution over time: the emphasis on personal favourable traits as a leader in the 20's-30's made way to complementary behavioural theories in leadership, followed by refinement of both traits and behavioural models since the 70's till today. Clearly, the requirements and expectations of organizational leadership are applicable to both universities and private firms. Both organizations need to tread with caution when succession is concerned, to minimize the disruption and maximize the continuity. Such fluidity and adaptability is much sort after and equally applicable in both worlds.

Reviewing the proven methods adopted in the business organizations, in conjunction with the issues and challenges laid out in section 2.0, a conceptual model relating the major factors and components is conceived in a symbiotic framework, as presented in the ensuing section (Figure 2). Succession planning and leadership management are woven together in a singular framework, with the key components appearing to stand alone respectively, but intersect and converge at many junctures in reality: both independent and inter-dependent at the same time.

#### 4.0 A symbiotic framework: Top-down or bottom-up?

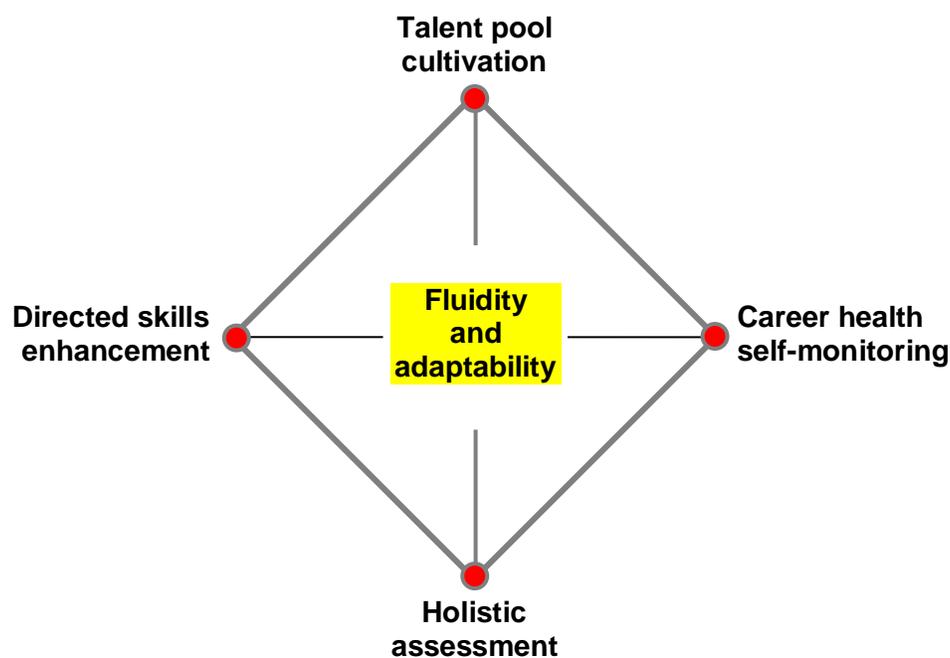


Figure 2. Symbiosis of key components in a coupled succession planning - leadership management framework.

##### Talent pool cultivation

This component constitutes the fundamental building block of a university's well-being, both in the short- and long-term. As reported by González (2010), highly successful organizations are generally not without a critical mass of advocates with a passionate espousal of succession planning as vital to the very survival and sustainability of the organisation. It involves the identification, categorization and gradation of talents, to ensure a rich and unbroken supply of potential candidates to fill the leadership positions. This also serves as an avenue for the relevant committee, task force or in-house talent scout to keep tab of the talent pool's continued health, vital for the survival of a university in today's competitive higher education arena. It is not just an exercise of tagging the 'chosen ones', but a critical entry point to the personal grooming and development process. There are a number of tools available for this purpose, and the Bank of America's 'identify star potential' metrics is among the more popular ones. The metrics is based on the direct correlation between leadership traits and performance levels, where members of staff are assessed in an objective manner.

Through the identification and assessment, potential leaders can then be groomed accordingly with tailor-made development programmes. On the other end of the spectrum, it is also useful to ascertain the weaker performers, so that suitable upgrading or booster camps, for example, can be conducted to strengthen the weaker links. This regular performance monitoring avoids performance stagnation of the 'chosen ones' and halts further degradation of 'under performers'. It is no doubt a delicate procedure, but certainly not an elimination exercise but one to ensure a sustainable succession plan.

### **Directed skills enhancement**

Leaders in the business world today are expected to inspire others through their hard work, as well commitment towards people and organization (Sarros and Santora, 2001). The same can be said of HEIs, where foundation of the hard work and commitment lies in a strong command of the relevant skills and know-how of considerable scope. Directed skills enhancement involves both one-off educational and training courses with follow-up field exposure. The inherent philosophy of this skills enhancement approach is to encourage 'lateral expansion' of potentials, by engaging them in cross-functional development of talents. The outcome would be an all-rounder leader with minimized weak points, fortified strengths and ability to adapt within short notice. It is of great importance too to have experienced seniors conducting leadership development programmes, where their first hand experience makes relevant and engaging inputs for the juniors. The component also comprises of a functional mentor-mentee system, which is targeted at developing the psycho-social and psycho-functional capabilities of future leaders. This is opposed to the conventional one-to-one mentoring, but an extensive network of multi-disciplinary and multi-facet system to provide maximum exposure to the younger generation. It taps on the rich repository of senior staff's experience to guide the juniors in finding their own footing in the managerial or administrative positions. This exemplifies the university's recognition and acknowledgement of the seniors, creating an invaluable exit legacy for the retiring seniors. It is fair deal indeed, as the long-serving seniors had their share of expertise and experience accumulated at the university's expense too. Gathered and put in written record, this could make the university's most prized treasure, accumulating and growing over the years to become a one of its kind in-house wisdom, to be passed on from one generation of leaders to the next.

### **Career health self-monitoring**

Leaders are not born but often self-made over time (Bennis, 2009), implying an on-going process of tireless learning and re-learning along the way. As such, a regular self-monitoring system is essential, to assist potential leaders make amends of any shortcomings and sharpen any lacking skills within the earliest and shortest time possible. This component proposes the introduction of an integrated information management system for recording a staff's career history and charting his or her future path in the institution. It will be used as a self-monitoring tool by individual staff tending to their own data input, updates and amendments. Incorporated with analytical tools, the system also helps staff to assess their own strengths, weaknesses and inclinations, to map out current and corresponding possible future career development channels. Requests can also be made pertaining to personal career development, and the interactive system would give feedbacks on suitable openings or training courses on offer. The system makes one's performance and potential future 'transparent' to the individuals, by allowing objective measurements of one's capacity, performance and productivity. It helps a staff to identify where he or she stands in the ladder, where to head for and how to make it there. On the other hand, with suitable privacy and confidentiality assurance, the system can be made accessible to the superiors and serves as a real-time database for performance appraisal and talent-scouting. In short, the system helps to cultivate a sense of integrity, where the staff is responsible for the data accuracy. Succession will no longer be dependent solely on reports of one's direct superior, but through an open access to all managerial staff. It is an epitome of fair game policy in IHEs, where everyone and anyone can shine, i.e. a matter of choice.

### **Holistic assessment**

Dessler (2009) proposed that competencies at one's job can be observed and measured, in the context of demand and expectations of the position assigned to the individual. Considering that succession is not substitution or replacement, an objective measurement method free from personal judgements and preferences is required. Unlike a royal heir apparent who is bound by duty and bloodties to the throne, organizational successors in a university may be enticed by more lucrative offers from the other side of the fence. Greener pastures and better remunerations could be difficult to turn down by in-house talents.

Therefore regular assessment and monitoring are critical to gauge the moods, wants and grievances of the talent pool, especially, so that actions can be taken to nip the bud of unwanted dissatisfaction leading to disenfranchisement of potentials. Key areas for a holistic assessment usually coincide with an organisation's growth drivers, namely the functionality, operations and people issues, with sub-components focused on aspects of organizational structure, university's stakeholders and critical units to achieve the assigned growth targets. An appraisal system based on merits and with emphasis on rewards would encourage genuine efforts by the staff in carrying out their duties, which in turn gives an open view of the talent pool for succession planning and talent grooming. Lastly, involving senior staff in the skills enhancement programmes (mentioned earlier) make them excellent on-site observers, to gauge if the potentials are ready to assume the offices, and to pick up new, hidden gems unknown of before that.

### **5.0 Concluding remarks**

In the ever escalating challenges and competition faced by modern IHEs, succession planning and leadership management cease to be background issues or matters that can be taken lightly. Leaders today have the responsibilities to ensure a smooth transition of helmsmanship, which is supported by a viable leadership building mechanism. The framework presented in this paper puts the needs and aspirations of IHEs for leadership excellence, continuation and succession in an intricate symbiotic relationship, for securing the leaders of tomorrow today. It is not good enough to attract talent in leadership, for even the most sparkling jewel is originally wrapped in dirt and grime, to be trimmed and polished to perfection.

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