





Institutionalization of Coaching and Mentoring Practices for Leadership Development in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

In response to escalating global competition and the need for internal reforms, Malaysian public universities are increasingly recognizing the necessity for structured leadership succession. However, a significant gap exists in the systematic implementation of these practices. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, data were collected through interviews with senior management responsible for leadership development in selected public universities. The research revealed four primary themes: the formalization of coaching and mentoring programs, alignment with institutional objectives, strategic engagement of upper management, and the integration of profiling and psychometric assessments. While the findings indicate notable progress in establishing systematic leadership pipelines, challenges related to standardization and inclusivity remain. This study enriches the existing literature on leadership development and talent management in Malaysia, providing practical insights for policy formulation and institutional practices.

Keywords: Coaching; Mentoring; Leadership Development; Higher Education; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Leadership development within higher education institutions (HEIs) has garnered significant global attention as universities grapple with complex reforms, intensified competition, and increased demands for accountability and performance. In Malaysia, public universities face the dual challenge of maintaining academic excellence while advancing national transformation agendas. In this context, leadership succession emerges not only as an administrative concern but also as a strategic imperative for institutional resilience and long-term sustainability.

Coaching and mentoring are widely recognized as effective strategies for cultivating leadership capacity, promoting reflective practice, and transmitting institutional knowledge. Internationally, these practices are increasingly integrated into structured frameworks that support talent management and succession planning. However, in Malaysia, their adoption remains inconsistent. Many HEIs continue to rely on informal and ad hoc methods, with formalized systems still in the early stages of development. While some universities have started to incorporate coaching and mentoring into their leadership pipelines through talent identification, competency assessments, and structured development programs, implementation varies significantly across institutions.

This study is conceptually grounded in Human Capital Theory, which views leadership development as a strategic investment that enhances institutional capacity and long-term productivity. Complementary insights from Transformational Leadership Theory, Institutional Theory, and Social Capital Theory further elucidate how coaching and mentoring foster value-driven leaders, respond to external policy and cultural expectations, and build relational networks essential for effective succession planning.

Drawing on these theoretical frameworks, this study investigates the emerging institutionalization of coaching and mentoring within Malaysian public universities. By analyzing the perspectives of academic leaders, the research provides critical insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with embedding coaching and mentoring as strategic components of leadership development and succession planning within HEIs. Ultimately, this study addresses a gap in the Malaysian context while offering valuable comparative insights for the global discourse on leadership development in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership development in higher education is increasingly approached through structured methodologies that prioritize coaching, mentoring, and competency-based assessments. Internationally, universities in the United Kingdom and Australia have integrated leadership initiatives into sector-wide programs, aligning leadership pipelines with national priorities (Bolden et al., 2012; Blackmore, 2013). In the United States, leadership development tends to be competency-driven, incorporating reflective practices, coaching, and mentoring alongside evidence-based assessment tools (Day et al., 2014). Conversely, institutions in Singapore exemplify the successful integration of national policies with institutional strategies through leadership academies that combine mentoring with policy-mandated leadership pathways (Ng, 2012).

These global trends can be analyzed through several theoretical frameworks. Human Capital Theory views coaching and mentoring as strategic investments that enhance institutional performance and sustainability (Becker, 1993). Transformational Leadership Theory underscores the importance of developmental relationships in cultivating value-driven leaders who embody institutional missions and inspire change (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Institutional Theory elucidates how leadership development programs are situated within larger policy contexts, reflecting pressures for legitimacy, accountability, and alignment with global leadership standards (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Lastly, Social Capital Theory highlights how mentoring fosters trust, networks, and knowledge transfer, all of which are crucial for maintaining leadership pipelines and building resilient academic communities (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

In Malaysia, however, leadership development within public universities is still in the early stages of institutionalization. Although informal mentoring traditions have long been established, the implementation of structured and standardized programs remains inconsistent (Chia et al., 2021). Emerging initiatives, including profiling tools, leadership talent pools, and greater involvement from senior management, indicate a gradual movement toward formalization. Nonetheless, persistent challenges such as program variability, the lack of standardized frameworks, and insufficient representation of diverse leadership profiles highlight the necessity to examine how Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) adapt global best practices to their local cultural, organizational, and policy contexts.

Coaching and mentoring are widely recognized as fundamental elements of leadership development frameworks across various sectors (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2018). Within educational environments, these practices intersect with organizational strategy, talent management, and succession planning (Day et al., 2014; Bolden et al., 2012). Coaching promotes reflective practice, encourages personal growth, and strengthens leadership capacity, while mentoring aids in role socialization, professional networking, and the transmission of institutional culture (Kram, 1985). However, in Malaysian HEIs, succession planning is often impeded by reliance on ad hoc arrangements and limited institutional frameworks (Chia et al., 2021).

Factors contributing to success identified in the literature include visible commitment from top management, systematic utilization of profiling and assessment tools, and alignment with institutional goals and values (Silzer & Dowell, 2009). Despite supportive policies, a gap persists between rhetoric and practice, highlighting the need for empirical investigation into how coaching and mentoring are operationalized within Malaysian universities.

Addressing this gap necessitates a comprehensive strategy that contextualizes leadership development within the unique cultural and organizational realities of HEIs. Effective frameworks should be evidence-based, supported by stakeholder engagement across institutional levels, and informed by data-driven tools that identify leadership potential and tailor development pathways. Equally vital is the cultivation of a culture of continuous learning and feedback, fostering adaptability, resilience, and transparency.

Ultimately, while Malaysian HEIs face significant challenges in leadership succession planning, substantial opportunities for advancement exist. By prioritizing structured coaching and mentoring initiatives, aligning these efforts with strategic objectives, and committing to systematic evaluation, universities can strengthen their leadership pipelines and ensure institutional sustainability amid complex sectoral demands.

Research Questions

How are Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) institutionalizing coaching and mentoring practices for leadership development?

METHOD

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive design involving five participants, a sample size considered adequate due to the group's homogeneity and specialized expertise. As Sandelowski (2000) points out, in qualitative descriptive research, sample adequacy is determined by the informational needs of the inquiry rather than by numerical representation.

The aim of this study was to investigate the institutionalization of coaching and mentoring practices in leadership succession within Malaysian public universities. A qualitative approach was chosen to effectively capture the nuanced interpretations individuals have of their experiences, especially regarding complex and context-specific issues like leadership development (Creswell, 2013).

Sample / Participants

Participant for this study was selected purposively to ensure representation from those directly involved in leadership development. The selection of participants is based on a few criteria: senior academician or institutional leaders involved in establishing a talent pool and succession planning initiatives; knowledgeable in the leadership development area and willing and able to serve as a key informant for this study. These criteria indicate that a key set of relevant actors for this study should be selected based on their work positions and experiences.

Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with leadership development top management personnel who oversee coaching and mentoring programs. They also experienced faculty members in leadership positions exposed to succession planning. The purpose of qualitative analysis is to interpret the data and the resulting themes and facilitate understanding of the phenomenon being studied. This interpretation can lead to a deeper understanding of the results and new ideas or theories about relationships and/or how and why the innovation was ineffective. The interpretive analysis was conducted in three stages: deconstruction, interpretation, and reconstruction. These stages occur after preparing the data for analysis, i.e., after transcription of the interviews and verification of the transcripts with the recording.

Secondary data such as strategic plans, materials, and documents related to university academic policies were used. Initially, the interview protocol questions were constructed based on a review of the relevant literature, which included books, journals, and other related materials. Data collection in this study will provide rich, thick descriptive data. Leaders from targeted universities will serve as the primary units of analysis. This qualitative inquiry aims to identify the main issues in the Malaysian higher education (HE) talent pool and developmental relationships from the perspectives of Malaysian academic leaders.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis generated five major themes: (i) nascent development initiatives, (ii) alignment with institutional goals and values, (iii) the role of upper management, (iv) profiling and psychometric assessment, and (v) inclusive and continuous development. Each theme is illustrated with participant perspectives and supported by existing scholarship.

Nascent Development Initiatives

Most public universities are still in the early stages of formalizing leadership development. Informal mentoring remains the predominant mode, echoing Chia et al. (2021), who noted that succession planning in Malaysian HEIs is not yet comprehensive or systematic.

As Participant A described:

“The culture of development was there but informally. We are in the process of setting up a talent pool. We don't have a talent pool yet since we just began this year.”

Participant B highlighted similar transitional efforts:

“...we have a coaching program but it's informal. We are about to start to institutionalize [a] coaching system. We are now at the phase of training the coaches. For the talent pool, we are about to start... If someone retires in the next year, they will start succession planning initiatives by finding who will tap the skill, and they will start the training and exposure.”

Some participants stressed the absence of systematic frameworks. Participant D noted:

“We don’t have any framework even from [the] human resources department... everybody [is] doing their own thing. Before this we just have informal coaching and mentoring, meaning that we just give them space and authority and guide them.”

Nevertheless, a minority of institutions have moved further ahead. Participant E described a structured program: “We have a proper program. We select those excellently good... In 2019 we select 13 people, and we train them. And in 2020, we have another group... They must attend certain training and programs. They will become successors. We have a psychology test and then we invite them for an interview.”

Similarly, Participant A noted the establishment of a leadership institute:

“Now we have an institute of leadership and development. We train the coach first... We appoint professors and top management and train them first as a coach. Then dean, rector, and deputy become participants.”

These findings mirror earlier studies that show how mentoring in HEIs often begins informally before becoming institutionalized (Muslim et al., 2022; Chang, Longman & Franco, 2014).

Alignment with Institutional Goals and Values

Participants emphasized that developmental initiatives increasingly align with institutional missions and values. Such alignment ensures relevance and strengthens legitimacy. Participant D explained:

“Efforts must link with the university agenda and must really follow the path of either teaching or research or leadership. Basically, there are a few aspects to focus on networking, communication, and human development. These elements will be the basis for our coaching program.”

Participant A described structured briefings to ensure shared understanding:

“Before we start the breakout session between the coach and participant, we will call them and give a briefing on what are the objective[s] that need to be achieved by our institution... I compile all the findings and distribute them to the coach and coachee.”

This reflects Hanson’s (2013) argument that leadership development is most effective when tied to strategic priorities. Similarly, alignment with institutional values has been linked to stronger organizational commitment (Frontiers in Education, 2024).

Role of Upper Management

Upper management emerged as critical actors in leadership development. Their involvement lends credibility, resources, and strategic direction. As Participant B stated:

“The management team has the final say in the appointment in the talent pool. However, management looks from a helicopter view and has no bias. In this regard, interviews and votes are very important and mapping is very crucial to scrutinize the background and track record of the talent.”

Participant D described reliance on senior-level recommendations:

“1st rule that we established is we will look to a database that consists of recommendations from all the deans, all the directors, and from [the] Vice Chancellor. Those are that we look first.”

For some institutions, senior leaders also serve as coaches. Participant A noted:

“For leadership coaching, we appoint coaches among professors and top management. We will get an external coach to train them on how to be a good coach. Then we will appoint the dean, deputy dean, rector, and deputy rector as a participant in this program.”

This aligns with Longenecker and Insch (2018), who highlight that senior leaders are pivotal in shaping the scope, legitimacy, and sustainability of leadership development initiatives.

Profiling and Psychometric Assessment

Another emerging trend is the adoption of profiling and psychometric tools to ensure objectivity in leadership selection. Participant D emphasized:

“...leadership track needs a proper profiling because there is a tendency of nepotism. So, candidates need to comply with Public Service Department requirements. This is the first rule.”

She further explained:

“We already executed this June to start with training and modules so we can put in everyone in our system. Our leadership profiling involved around 200 talents. We get the names from directors, and we map them properly... those are the leadership talent pool for succession planning.”

Participant C also supported the use of psychometrics:

“Profiling and the psychometric test are very important to be a good leader because we need certain attributes... not all people can be a dean or leaders.”

Competency-based interviews were another tool, as Participant A noted:

“We appoint a retired professor, with no personal interest, to be a panel... We want to identify their strength and the suitable position and what training they need. That is the objective of a competency-based interview.”

Such practices echo calls in the literature for evidence-based, transparent assessment to minimize bias (Wilson et al., 2021; Rosch & Seemiller, 2018).

Inclusive and Continuous Development

Finally, participants underscored that leadership development should span all levels and operate continuously, even during crises. Participant B reported:

“Our Vice Chancellor wants the leadership development program from the lower level to the highest leadership position. He said that we need to have a ready talent pool for all positions. So, we have four levels. The first is coaching and the second level is a development plan. We categorized it into four levels because we want to institutionalize it.”

Participant A described continuity during the COVID-19 restrictions:

“Competency-based interview was conducted to identify the aptitude and potential of the talent pool. This is a continuous practice. We also conducted competency-based interview during the movement control order. During that time, we conducted an online interview.”

This demonstrates institutional commitment to sustaining leadership development pipelines even under challenging circumstances. Comparable findings are noted by Alston & Hansman (2020), who stress that inclusive, sustained mentoring fosters long-term leadership capacity and organizational resilience.

In summary, across these five themes, the findings illustrate both progress and challenges in institutionalizing leadership development in Malaysian public universities. Informal mentoring still dominates, but structured coaching, psychometric tools, and strategic alignment are emerging. Importantly, senior management’s active involvement and a commitment to continuity position these initiatives to evolve into more comprehensive, sustainable frameworks.

DISCUSSION

The formalization of coaching and mentoring within leadership development represents a significant shift from informal, ad hoc practices to structured and strategically integrated initiatives. Recent findings indicate that universities are increasingly institutionalizing these processes by training internal coaches, developing leadership talent pools, and establishing comprehensive frameworks for program delivery. This transition underscores a growing recognition of coaching and mentoring as essential mechanisms for professional growth and leadership continuity.

The advantages of formalization are manifold. Structured programs ensure consistency, quality assurance, and the ability to evaluate outcomes effectively. By setting clear goals, monitoring progress, and providing personalized feedback, these programs strengthen the developmental process and enhance the achievement of leadership competencies. Participants have noted that such approaches create clearer leadership pathways and more meaningful developmental experiences. This aligns with global evidence suggesting that outcome-driven, systematic programs enhance leadership capacity (Day et al., 2014).

A pivotal aspect of this evolution is the establishment of leadership talent pools, which serve as strategic reserves for high-potential individuals. These pools support succession planning and reduce the risk of leadership gaps. Beyond mere risk management, talent pools represent a proactive investment in institutional resilience by aligning leadership development with long-term organizational objectives.

Equally important is the implementation of standardized frameworks for program delivery. These frameworks create a common language, establish performance benchmarks, and ensure alignment with institutional visions. By embedding leadership development within organizational systems, they foster a culture of reflective practice and continuous learning. Furthermore, they enhance transparency and comparability, facilitating more robust evaluations across various programs.

Strategic alignment with institutional missions, values, and national education policies further bolsters program relevance. When positioned as enablers of academic excellence, research productivity, and societal contributions, coaching and mentoring gain greater legitimacy. Senior management plays a crucial role, not only as sponsors but also as active mentors and coaches. Their visible engagement signals a commitment to institutional values, enhances credibility, and sets a positive tone for a culture of learning and talent development.

The integration of profiling tools and psychometric assessments marks another significant advancement in this field. These tools provide objective insights into leadership potential and competency gaps, complementing traditional mentoring relationships. By minimizing reliance on subjective judgment, these assessments promote inclusivity and meritocracy, allowing for the recognition of diverse leadership capacities. Furthermore, by highlighting non-traditional strengths such as adaptability, collaboration, and emotional intelligence, institutions can cultivate diverse and agile leadership pipelines, better equipped to tackle evolving challenges.

The broader implications of these developments are twofold. First, coaching and mentoring have transitioned from peripheral activities to institutional imperatives closely linked to strategic planning, talent management, and organizational sustainability. Second, universities, as custodians of knowledge and societal leaders, are expected to exemplify effective leadership development practices that can navigate complex educational and societal transformations. This raises critical considerations regarding scalability, resource allocation, and the adaptability of global leadership models within local cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) are currently at a crucial juncture in formalizing coaching and mentoring as essential components of leadership development. While informal practices are still prevalent, there is a growing trend towards structured and strategically aligned initiatives. These efforts are bolstered by the integration of institutional values, active engagement from senior leadership, and the utilization of evidence-based tools, such as profiling and competency assessments. These advancements enhance the credibility, objectivity, and sustainability of leadership pipelines; however, challenges remain, including program inconsistency, the lack of standardized frameworks, and limited diversity in leadership representation.

Grounded in Human Capital Theory, this study posits that coaching and mentoring are strategic investments that enhance institutional capacity and long-term resilience. Supporting perspectives from Transformational Leadership Theory, Institutional Theory, and Social Capital Theory emphasize the significance of value-driven leadership, policy alignment, and relational networks in fortifying leadership pipelines. Collectively, these insights underscore the necessity for unified frameworks, systematic evaluation, and inclusive strategies to ensure that leadership development is both effective and equitable.

Beyond the Malaysian context, the findings contribute to the global discourse by illustrating that structured, theoretically informed coaching and mentoring can cultivate leaders who are not only technically proficient but also aligned with institutional missions, adaptable to change, and capable of fostering long-term organizational success. Future research should investigate longitudinal impacts and cross-national comparisons to further advance both theory and practice in higher education leadership development.

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