

CHAPTER 4

Understanding Effective Malaysia Higher Education Leadership Styles Amidst the Pandemic

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

The role of leadership has never been inevitable, especially during crises such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic. In these particularly challenging times, leaders are forced to deal with complex and fragile settings as well as to adopt and adapt new norms in every aspect of life that we have never thought of and imagined before. This includes education, including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Notably, HEIs around the globe are shaken to the fore, forcing them to adapt to the digitalization of the teaching and learning experiences. In Malaysia, most HEI switched to online learning mode in the middle of march following the implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO) on 16th March 2020. As a result, Malaysian teachers and students are facing multiple challenges

in teaching and learning, particularly that of east Malaysian higher education institutions, due to poor connectivity.

Meanwhile, Malaysian higher education leaders are required to reconstruct and give meaning to the future direction of the education system. Leadership in higher education, as most of the existing works on leadership have agreed, is crucial to the success of higher academic institutions (Mohd Nasir, 2017). This includes the role of leadership in achieving a high level of organizational performance (Peterson, 2003); and in defining educational achievement of respective universities (Mahdinezhad, 2013), to name a few.

Research on leadership, however, dominated by Western experiences, develops within the context of Westerners. Research on leadership especially in developing countries such as in the context of Malaysia's HEI needs to be more and yet to be explored widely (Siddique, 2011; Yiing, 2009). Yiing, (2009), argues that there has been very little research examining the nexus between leadership concepts and theories and their relationship with other factors such as job satisfaction, conducted in the Malaysian context. Additionally, (Siddique, 2011) echoed this statement and found that leadership in higher education is not adequately explored and has been considered as a less important subject, especially in developing countries, including Malaysia.

Nevertheless, we found that there has been an upsurge in studies examining distributive models in Malaysian higher education for the past few years, albeit relatively still new and under researched. For instance, argues that distributed leadership styles have been widely practiced by public universities academic leaders. Musa (2021) also found that leaders can practice distribute leadership in an effort to adapt to a changing environment. Musa (2020), sought to understand the

practice of distributive leadership among senior university leaders and managers of a public university in Malaysia. Their research suggests that distributed leadership based on sharing among organization members is widely practiced in that public university.

Set against this, this paper seeks to assess the lacuna in the existing literature. In particular, it provides a critical review of several leadership styles that Malaysian academics prefer, namely transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire (Voon, 2009), but is currently under research especially on the matter concerning to leaders' responses and strategies during the pandemic. Also, it aims to analyze the degree to which leaders of Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have demonstrated agile leadership amidst Covid-19.

Here, we choose to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the three leadership styles namely, transactional, transformational leadership, and laissez-faire. These three leadership styles are chosen for critical review because it covers a wide range of engagement between leaders and workforce along with their effectiveness. Hence, reviewing these three leadership approaches with specific reference to Covid-19 Pandemic can shed light on the issues and challenges for HEI.

That aside, while some critique on the above-mentioned leadership approach exists, their strength should not be glossed over as each works well under specific circumstances. Indeed, studies pointed out that leaders who adopt different approaches in their leadership position will achieve desirable outcome of the educational institution. It follows that, though Transactional Leadership (TL) has received its fair amount of criticism because of its over-reliance on reward system and failure to motivate followers beyond the set goals, it has proven effective in the process of coordination not least with aid of well-defined