JBS Nexus

Beyond Tradition: Revolutionary Leadership in Academia

Abd Rahman Ahmad[1*], Hairul Rizad Md Sapry[2]

[1]   *Johor Business School,*
   Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400 Batu Pahat, Johor, MALAYSIA

[2]   *Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UNIKL) Kampus Cawangan Malaysian Institute of Industrial Technology,*
   Jalan Persiaran Sinaran Ilmu, Bandar Seri Alam, 81750 Masai, Johor, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding Author: arahman@uthm.edu.my
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30880/jbsnexus.2025.02.01.003

Abstract

This paper looks into the importance of leadership for encouraging new approaches and cultural changes in higher education institutions. In higher education, leaders help guide the organisation's journey of transformation. Today, institutions need to be innovative and able to adapt to changing global, technological and social realities. This paper also reviews how leadership contributes to innovation by putting in place new programs and approaches that boost the institution's success. It also investigates how leaders affect and sustain the personality of the organisation, making it easier for people to cooperate, depend on and trust one another and get better. Good leadership ensures that evolution matches the core beliefs of an institution. A well-defined culture can ensure that stakeholders are more positive and involved. It was found that strategies in higher education work best when leaders guide the vision, govern ethically, create new ideas and involve important parties in making the changes. Additionally, the study reveals that having good leaders is important for achieving success in institutions and colleges as well as maintaining their place in the current educational system. This study also highlights that transformational leadership relies on culture, and innovation is important for ensuring excellence, toughness and durability at institutions.

1. Introduction

Effective leaders impact individuals by cultivating integrity, passion, efficiency, talent, and honesty (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019a). In higher education, leadership is crucial for comprehending roles, executing vision and mission statements, and attaining institutional objectives (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017a). In the absence of robust leadership, the implementation of an institution's vision and mission is ineffective, resulting in unachieved objectives. Leadership is intrinsically linked to human interaction, as organisations rely on individuals collaborating towards shared objectives (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Leadership fundamentally necessitates the presence of both leaders and followers; in their absence, organisational development and advancement stagnate. Consequently, leadership is essential and requires the backing of all stakeholders to guarantee successful execution.

Leadership in higher education is essential at all levels, necessitating robust collaboration among leaders to execute strategies and promote institutional advancement (Elrod & Kezar, 2016). Leadership quality in educational institutions is a pivotal determinant of student success, subordinate only to teacher quality (Kezar & Gehrke, 2015a). Furthermore, the quality of leadership is affected by institutional innovation and organisational culture, which determine change strategies (Ruben et al., 2017). Institutional innovation is a component of social, political, and cultural innovation, and these factors collectively influence leadership efficacy in higher education

(Johannessen, 2013a). Leadership innovation entails the implementation of novel styles, systems, and strategies that improve organisational efficacy. Leaders are essential in directing these changes, guaranteeing their effective execution, and cultivating an environment where all members can adjust and participate (Elrod, 2014).

Meanwhile, culture is a crucial element of leadership, encompassing the collective values, attitudes, and customs within an organisation. In higher education, culture profoundly impacts leadership efficacy, acting as a crucial catalyst for ongoing enhancement and trust cultivation within the academic community (Bock, 2012). An robust institutional culture bolsters leadership initiatives by cultivating a sense of quality, accountability, and collective purpose (Ruben, 2016). Understanding organisational culture is crucial for leaders to adeptly navigate and manage cultural transitions. Considering that leadership styles differ across cultures, cultivating mutual trust among all stakeholders is essential for promoting a high-quality academic environment (Kezar & Maxey, 2016). An established institutional culture improves leadership efficacy, facilitating the influence and unification of individuals in pursuit of strategic objectives.

Leaders in higher education, such as principals, teachers, and lecturers, exemplify the development of professional academic cultures. They are essential in formulating best practices, cultivating talent, and maintaining professional standards (Atwood, 2010). Effective leadership necessitates internal fortitude and dedication from academic leaders to incorporate educational values and ethical principles into institutional practices (Gigliotti, 2017). By cultivating a professional culture anchored in robust leadership, higher education institutions can improve their overall quality and secure sustained success.

2. The Effect of Institutional Innovation and Culture on Change Strategies in Higher Education

2.1 The Effect of Institutional Innovation in Higher Education

In higher education, innovation is essential to creating and forming new cultures. It is a simple idea that is simple to comprehend in educational settings. Innovation's influence comes from improvements in instructional strategies and student involvement, which generate fresh concepts that go beyond the confines of higher education (Johannessen, 2013b). Higher education leaders must welcome innovation in order to propel institutional advancement and maintain relevance in a changing academic environment.

Today's leaders must possess a wide range of abilities that go beyond simply inspiring change; they must also be able to interact with a variety of audiences in an effective manner (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019b). In order to make sure that institutional strategies meet academic and societal expectations, effective leaders build solid and reliable relationships with important stakeholders. Even though traditional academic values are still important, modern leadership must balance tradition and change in a way that promotes both innovation and continuity (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Moreover, the most successful leaders emphasis innovation as a key element of organizational success. According to Elrod and Kezar (2016), creativity and innovation are the cornerstones of progressive higher education and are crucial for the growth of entrepreneurs and the sustainability of the economy. Leaders can foster synergies between knowledge, experience, creativity, and career development by questioning outmoded customs while preserving the most beneficial elements of academic culture (Bock, 2012).

Furthermore, studies have shown how important innovation is for negotiating the complexity of today's educational landscape. Innovative methods are crucial for adjusting to the quick changes in technology and the changing demands of higher education, claims Ewart (2011). In order to improve learning outcomes, the most successful leaders exhibit proficiency with cutting-edge technologies and successfully incorporate them into educational environments. They must, however, also make sure that technology does not become a distraction but rather adds something worthwhile to the learning process (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017).

Higher education institutions can stay at the forefront of academic and societal advancement by cultivating an innovative culture, which will guarantee that students, instructors, and leaders all continue to prosper in a world that is constantly changing.

2.2 Culture on Change Strategies in Higher Education

Culture plays a significant role in shaping change strategies within higher education institutions. Institutional culture, which encompasses shared values, beliefs, and practices, influences how change is perceived, implemented, and sustained (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017b). A strong organizational culture fosters adaptability, promotes collaboration, and enhances the effectiveness of transformation efforts. Without a culture that supports change, even the most well-designed strategies risk failure (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019b).

Higher education institutions operate within a dynamic environment where technological advancements, policy shifts, and global trends necessitate continuous adaptation (Elrod & Kezar, 2016). The ability of an institution to respond effectively to these changes is heavily dependent on its cultural framework. Institutions

with an open and flexible culture are more likely to embrace innovative strategies and integrate new practices seamlessly (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Conversely, institutions with rigid and hierarchical cultures often encounter resistance, slowing the progress of change initiatives (Johannessen, 2013a).

A critical aspect of change strategies in higher education is leadership's role in shaping and reinforcing a culture that facilitates transformation. Leaders must actively engage stakeholders, communicate a clear vision, and foster an environment of trust to ensure cultural alignment with institutional goals (Kezar & Gehrke, 2015b). Successful change strategies prioritize inclusivity, ensuring that faculty, staff, and students collectively contribute to and embrace the change process (Bock, 2012).

Moreover, the interplay between institutional culture and change strategies is evident in the implementation of innovative teaching and learning methodologies. Research suggests that institutions fostering a culture of experimentation and continuous improvement are more successful in adopting new pedagogical approaches and digital transformation initiatives (Ruben et al., 2017). This is particularly crucial as universities worldwide are increasingly integrating technology-driven solutions to enhance learning experiences (Ewart, 2011).

Another important consideration is the influence of cultural resistance on change efforts. Resistance to change often stems from uncertainty, lack of awareness, or misalignment between institutional values and proposed strategies (Elrod & Kezar, 2016). To mitigate resistance, higher education leaders must focus on transparent communication, professional development programs, and inclusive decision-making processes that empower faculty and staff to take ownership of institutional transformation (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017a).

3. Role of Leadership in Higher Education

Leadership is a fundamental driver of change in higher education. As discussed in Section 2.2, institutional culture plays a crucial role in shaping change strategies, and leadership acts as the catalyst for fostering an environment that embraces transformation (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017b). Without effective leadership, institutions risk stagnation, resistance to change, and misalignment between strategy and execution (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019a). In the context of higher education, leadership is more than just administrative authority; it involves setting strategic direction, fostering collaboration, and creating a culture that supports continuous innovation (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Higher education leaders, including university presidents, deans, and department heads, play a vital role in ensuring that institutional goals are achieved while maintaining ethical integrity and academic excellence (Elrod & Kezar, 2016).

3.1 Leadership as a Mediator in Institutional Change

Leadership is often seen as a balancing force between stability and transformation. While institutions must maintain their core values and traditions, they also need to evolve in response to external pressures such as technological advancements, policy shifts, and changing student demographics (Lin & McDonough, 2011). Strategic leadership ensures that change initiatives align with institutional culture, minimizing resistance and fostering a sense of shared purpose (García-Morales et al., 2012). Effective leaders recognize that change is not merely about structural adjustments but also about shaping mindsets and behaviors. They actively engage faculty, staff, and students in decision-making processes, ensuring that new initiatives are met with support rather than opposition (Kezar & Gehrke, 2015a). By doing so, they create an environment that is adaptable, resilient, and conducive to continuous improvement.

3.2 The Strategic Role of Leadership in Higher Education

Leadership in higher education includes various roles, each contributing directly to the institution's success and sustainability. The strategic initiatives of leaders are crucial in influencing institutional results, cultivating a supportive atmosphere, and maintaining the institution's relevance in a swiftly evolving academic environment. The subsequent key roles exemplify the complex nature of leadership in higher education:

3.2.1 Visionary Leadership

A robust leader in higher education transcends mere management, embodying a visionary who delineates a persuasive and lucid vision for the institution's future. This vision must correspond with the institution's fundamental values and long-term objectives, offering guidance and intent for all stakeholders. A visionary leader motivates faculty, staff, and students by cultivating a collective comprehension of the institution's mission, encouraging them to pursue shared goals (Gumusluoglu, 2009). In a time of global competition and technological progress, the capacity to conceptualize and articulate the future of higher education is essential for institutional success.

3.2.2 Change Facilitation

Effective leadership in higher education entails steering the institution through transitional phases. This encompasses not only overseeing organizational transitions but also cultivating a culture of adaptability and resilience. Leaders must identify when change is imperative and undertake proactive measures to manage it, ensuring that the institution adapts to address emerging challenges and opportunities. Change facilitation necessitates that leaders promote ongoing learning, foster innovation, and exemplify adaptive behaviors, thereby ensuring the institution's agility in response to external pressures, including evolving student demographics, financial limitations, and technological disruptions (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019a).

3.2.3 Ethical Stewardship

 Ethical stewardship is fundamental to effective governance in higher education. Integrity, transparency, and accountability are vital attributes for academic leaders who must uphold the trust of internal and external stakeholders. An ethical leader sets and maintains elevated standards of behavior, guaranteeing that the organization functions with integrity and equity. Ethical stewardship cultivates an atmosphere in which staff and students feel esteemed and appreciated, establishing a basis of trust that improves collaboration, academic excellence, and institutional integrity (Mulki et al., 2009). By exemplifying these values, leaders guarantee that their institutions uphold their reputation for excellence and ethical accountability.

3.2.4 Collaboration and Engagement

In higher education, collaboration is essential for advancing institutional development. Effective leaders foster robust, supportive relationships with internal and external stakeholders, encompassing faculty, students, administrators, and the wider community. By cultivating a culture of engagement, leaders guarantee that institutional initiatives obtain widespread support and feedback. This collaborative method fosters consensus on strategic priorities, generates synergies among departments, and enhances partnerships with industry, government, and other academic institutions. Effective leaders recognize that collaboration encompasses not only internal teamwork but also interaction with the wider academic and socio-political landscape to further the institution's mission (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017b).

3.2.5 Innovation Management

In the swiftly changing landscape of education, leadership in higher education entails fostering innovation. Leaders must incorporate emerging trends and technologies into academic and administrative processes, ensuring the institution remains at the forefront of knowledge creation and dissemination. By advancing innovation management, leaders can cultivate a culture that embraces new ideas and evolves institutional practices to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Innovation, whether via advanced learning technologies, interdisciplinary program development, or novel administrative systems, is essential for institutional growth and competitiveness (Johannessen, 2013a). Leaders must adopt a proactive approach, consistently pursuing avenues for enhancement while meeting the needs and expectations of students, faculty, and the broader community.

3.3 Leadership as the Foundation of Institutional Culture

The culture within higher education institutions profoundly impacts the efficacy of change strategies, as previously discussed. Institutional culture comprises the collective values, beliefs, and practices that direct behavior within the organization. Leadership is pivotal in shaping, reinforcing, and evolving this culture. Effective leadership cultivates an atmosphere in which shared values are articulated distinctly, guaranteeing that all members of the institution comprehend their responsibilities in attaining common objectives. By emphasizing open communication and transparency, leaders can cultivate trust and guarantee alignment between the institution's overarching objectives and individual contributions (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017b).

An established and cohesive institutional culture bolsters organizational commitment, diminishes resistance to change, and enhances overall performance. When leadership actively fosters a culture of collaboration and innovation, it enables faculty, staff, and students to significantly contribute to the institution's advancement. Leaders who cultivate a culture of inclusivity affirm the value of diverse perspectives, resulting in enhanced decision-making and the enactment of policies that address the needs of the entire academic community. Moreover, leaders who promote innovation foster an atmosphere that stimulates creative thinking and problem-solving, crucial for maintaining the institution's adaptability to the changing requirements of society and the global educational context (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). A robust institutional culture in higher education is essential for fostering a collective sense of purpose and direction. Leaders who effectively cultivate such a culture empower their institutions to swiftly adapt to challenges, guaranteeing sustained success and growth despite external pressures such as economic limitations or policy changes.

3.4 Leadership and Organizational Success in Higher Education

The influence of leadership on organizational success in higher education is acknowledged by investors, policymakers, and academic stakeholders. Studies consistently demonstrate that institutions guided by visionary and strategic leaders exhibit superior performance across various metrics, including student outcomes, faculty engagement, research productivity, and financial sustainability (Ruben et al., 2017). Effective leadership offers a definitive direction and guarantees the efficient allocation of resources, leading to enhanced academic performance and institutional reputation.

Leaders in higher education must be capable of inspiring and motivating others, fostering a sense of community, and advancing institutional initiatives that facilitate progress. This leadership transcends mere authority or control; it emphasizes cultivating a culture of collaboration, ethical accountability, and perpetual enhancement. Leaders who harmonize tradition with innovation—by safeguarding institutional values while adopting new methodologies and technologies—guarantee that their institutions remain at the vanguard of academic and societal progress (Elrod & Kezar, 2016). This equilibrium is essential for maneuvering through the intricate and competitive landscape of higher education, where institutions must adjust to external transformations such as technological progress and changing student requirements. In contrast, ineffective leadership may result in organizational stagnation. In the absence of robust leadership, institutions may encounter misalignment of priorities, insufficient cohesion among stakeholders, and an inability to achieve strategic objectives. Leadership deficiencies can lead to stagnation, reduced institutional prestige, and inferior student performance. Consequently, leadership is not simply a functional necessity in higher education; it is the foundation of organizational success, propelling the institution towards its long-term vision and objectives.

4. Conclusion

Leadership is essential in influencing institutional innovation, culture, and change strategies within higher education. Effective leadership facilitates the successful execution of vision and mission, ensuring that institutions remain competitive and responsive to changing challenges. In the absence of robust leadership, an institution may encounter difficulties in attaining its strategic goals, leading to stagnation and inefficiency. Institutional culture is intricately connected to leadership, as it affects decision-making, organizational conduct, and the capacity to adapt to change. A robust leadership presence cultivates a culture of innovation, collaboration, and ongoing enhancement, which is vital for improving educational quality and institutional reputation. Leadership directs faculty, staff, and students towards common objectives, thereby prioritizing academic excellence and institutional advancement. Furthermore, leadership impacts the caliber of graduates, providing them with essential skills, knowledge, and adaptability to make significant contributions to society. A leader's capacity to cultivate an environment that fosters talent, promotes innovation, and values cultural diversity enhances an institution's standing in the global academic arena. As higher education evolves, leadership must be adaptable, visionary, and dedicated to cultivating a culture that promotes institutional advancement. The efficacy of any transformation strategy relies on leaders' capacity to motivate change, foster trust, and cultivate a robust academic community. Leadership transcends mere institutional management; it involves influencing the future of education to align with the exigencies of a swiftly evolving world.

Acknowledgement

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

*The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design**: Abd Rahman Ahmad, Hairul Rizad Md Sapry; **draft manuscript preparation**: Abd Rahman Ahmad. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

References

Atwood, M. A. (2010). Leadership in higher education: Its evolution and potential. Academic Leadership Journal, 2(1), Article 7.

Bock, A. J. (2012). Bringing clarity to the leadership of teaching and learning in higher education. Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education, 4(2), 168–183.

Elrod, S. L. (2014). Developing leadership in STEM fields: The PKAL Summer Leadership Institute. Journal of Leadership Studies, 8(1), 33–39.

Elrod, S. L., & Kezar, A. (2016). Increasing student success in STEM: A guide to systemic institutional change. Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Ewart, W. (2011). Innovation and leadership in higher education: Adapting to complexity in the 21st century. Journal of Higher Education Leadership, 29(1), 15-29.

García-Morales, V. J., Jiménez-Barrionuevo, M. M., & Gutiérrez-Gutiérrez, L. (2012). Transformational leadership influence on organizational performance through organizational learning and innovation. Journal of Business Research, 65(7), 1040-1050.

Gigliotti, R. A. (2017). Crisis leadership in higher education: Theory and practice. Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education, 9(3), 287–298.

Gigliotti, R. A., & Ruben, B. D. (2017). Leadership: Communication and social influence in personal and professional contexts. Kendall Hunt Publishing.

Gumusluoglu, L. (2009). Leadership and innovation: The role of transformational leadership in fostering innovation capability in organizations. Journal of Strategic Management, 4(1), 35-52.

Johannessen, J. (2013a). Innovation: A systemic perspective. International Journal of Innovation and Learning, 13(2), 121-139.

Johannessen, J.-A. (2013b). Institutional innovation and leadership. Journal of Educational Administration, 51(4), 481-494.

Kezar, A., & Gehrke, S. (2015a). Communities of transformation and their work scaling STEM reform. American Council on Education.

Kezar, A., & Gehrke, S. (2015b). Implicit theories of change as a barrier to change on college campuses: An examination of STEM reform. The Review of Higher Education, 38(4), 479–506.

Kezar, A., & Holcombe, E. (2017a). Shared leadership in higher education: Important lessons from research and practice. American Council on Education.

Kezar, A., & Holcombe, E. (2017b). The changing role of leadership in higher education: Addressing future challenges. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 39(5), 510-527.

Kezar, A., & Maxey, D. (2016). Envisioning the faculty for the 21st century: Moving to a mission-oriented and learner-centered model. Rutgers University Press.

Lin, H. E., & McDonough, E. F. III. (2011). Investigating the role of leadership in innovation processes: A strategic leadership perspective. Journal of Business Research, 64(8), 846-853.

Mulki, J. P., et al. (2009). The role of ethics and integrity in higher education leadership. Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies, 16(1), 19-32.

Mulki, J. P., Jaramillo, F., & Locander, W. B. (2009). Critical role of leadership on ethical climate and salesperson behaviors. Journal of Business Ethics, 86(2), 125-141.

Ruben, B. D. (2016). The excellence in higher education guide: A framework for the design, assessment, and continuous improvement of institutions, departments, and programs (8th ed.). Stylus Publishing.

Ruben, B. D., & Gigliotti, R. A. (2019a). Leadership, communication, and social influence: A theory of resonance, activation, and cultivation. Emerald Publishing.

Ruben, B. D., & Gigliotti, R. A. (2019b). Leading change in higher education: Strategies and insights. Journal of Higher Education Leadership, 29(3), 234-245.

Ruben, B. D., De Lisi, R., & Gigliotti, R. A. (2017). A guide for leaders in higher education: Core concepts, competencies, and tools. Stylus Publishing.