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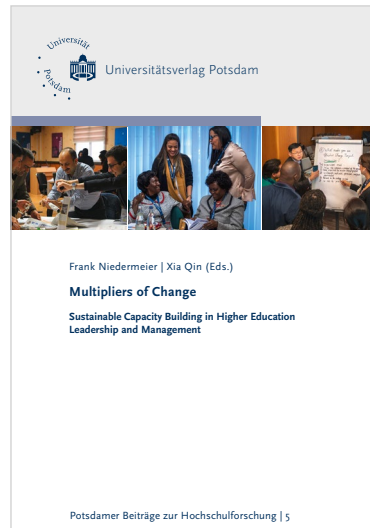
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Leadership Training in Malaysia: Impact and Implications

ABSTRACT: The higher education structure in Malaysia has experienced significant changes since the implementation of the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act of 1996. The unprecedented expansion of the higher education sector and the increasing autonomy conferred to universities have created a huge demand for competent university leadership that supports the development of higher educa-

tion in Malaysia. This article discusses the very first national multiplication training in Malaysia in 2014 and analyses such outcomes as the identification of good practices for future initiatives and applications in university leadership training.

KEYWORDS: university leadership in Malaysia, higher education, university management, training programme

1. Introduction

Higher education is continually transforming to meet with the varying calls for education. The development of the knowledge economy and changing demographics has led to an increase in the demands for quality tertiary education. At the same time, new financing mechanisms for higher education and shifting demands for skills as a result of technological progress and internationalisation have led to changing expectations. The evolving forces have resulted in the growing diversity of the higher education landscape. Not only do the size and types of higher education institutions differ, but also do the range and spread of programmes offered, in the mode of delivery, in learning experiences, and governance as well (Altbach et al., 2009; Staley & Trinkle, 2011; Mayer & Wilde, 2015; Wan & Sirat, 2018).

In Malaysia, the higher education structure has also experienced significant changes, especially with the passing of the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act in 1996. Before that year, only nine public universities and 156 private colleges offered undergraduate and post-graduate degree-granting programmes (Lee, 2002). Under the Act, however, private higher education institutions were also allowed to offer full degree programmes and foreign universities can set up branch campuses in Malaysia. The number of universities and other forms of private higher education institutions increased greatly after 1996. In 2020, the number of public universities had grown to 20 whilst the number of private higher education institutions accelerated to 443, which now include 10 branch campuses of foreign universities, 54 private universities and branch campuses, 37 private university colleges and branch campuses, and 342 colleges (Department of Higher Education, 2020). Moreover, more flexibility in academic programmes was offered and greater autonomy was granted to higher education institutions with the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) self-accreditation status.

The rapid expansion of the higher education sector in Malaysia and the increasing autonomy accorded to higher education institutions have raised concerns on two issues: (a) the readiness of university leaders to take up the roles and responsibilities of university management in the changing environment, and (b) the qualities of university leaders and managers to lead, support, and sustain the development of higher education in Malaysia. Effective higher education management is a critical component of developing quality and competitive higher education sector whereas the competitiveness of the higher education sector is one of

the factors contributing to the nation's competitiveness (Lopez-Leyva & Rhoades, 2016). According to Marginson (2006), most universities aspire to achieve the best qualifications in the various quality indicators; their concern to be ranked in the higher positions of world-class universities lists have increased; institutions compete for research funding, and to enrol the best and brightest students and integrate its academic staff with academically distinguished professors.

As administrative roles are considerably different from academic roles, there is a need to better prepare academic administrators on higher education management. Generally, academics are beyond question in the performance of their primary tasks of pedagogy and research, but not all are equally effective in the administrative and management roles. Some undertake to do their administrative tasks but without much training or orientation towards them. Motivated by the increasing needs to nurture more effective academic leaders and administrators in Malaysia, the first Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies (DIES) National Multiplication Trainings (NMT) programme was conducted in 2013–2014.

A total of 20 academic and non-academic leaders and administrators from 10 public and private higher education institutions attended and completed the NMT programme. Six years after the completion of the programme, it is now an opportune time to review the implications of the NMT programme. Therefore, the paper is structured to address the following issues:

1. To what extent had the NMT training achieved the objectives of the programme?
2. What best practices were learnt from the NMT training?
3. How did the participants evaluate the effectiveness of the programme and which aspects of the programme can be improved?

The main objective of the paper is to share the experience in organising the first NMT programme in Malaysia, to identify good practices, and to evaluate the outcomes of the NMT programme as well as aspects to be improved in future programmes.

2. Motivation and Design of the First NMT Training Programme in Malaysia

Realising the importance of cultivating an excellent pool of academic leaders and administrators for effective university management and development in Malaysia, and inspired by the intention of German Academic Exchange Services (DAAD) and DIES to leverage on the knowledge and competencies acquired by the DIES alumni to improve higher education management in the country, a training committee consisting of four DIES alumni was formed to implement the first multiplication training programme in Malaysia.

The first challenge encountered in the process of designing the programme was to define specific training objectives and to identify relevant topics to address the changing environment faced by higher education institutions. The scope of effective university management is indeed very broad. Among the topics considered included leadership development, staff development and performance evaluation, quality assurance, human resources management, financial management, internationalisation, project management, change management, curriculum development, research management, strategic planning and governance, just to name a few.

After a careful discussion on the scope and nature of the training, particularly in terms of the objectives of the first NMT training in Malaysia, the duration of the programme, as well as the delivery methods and targeted participants, the training committee decided that since the programme would be organised for the first time in Malaysia, the focus would be on providing practical knowledge and insights useful for academic administrators (both academics and non-academics personnel) in performing their administrative duties more efficiently and effectively.

The scope of the training was further defined to include eight topics which were relevant to university management and would reflect the needs of higher education management in Malaysia at that particular period. The topics were delivered in two contact phases with a duration of four days for each phase and an online discussion between the two contact phases (the gap between the two contact phases was three months). The first contact phase was the problem identification phase where participants were exposed to critical issues in university management. The second contact phase discussed the processes and methods that underlie the development and management of an academic institution. The topics covered in the programme were:

Contact Phase 1

1. Current Changes in Education Institutions
2. Academic Management and Leadership Development
3. Human Resource Management in Education Institutions
4. Staff Development and Performance Evaluation

Contact Phase 2

1. University Management and Organisation Development
2. Strategic Planning
3. Research Management
4. Quality Assurance

An important element of the NMT training was the construction of an individual Personal Action Plan (PAP) by each participant. During the first contact phase, participants were guided by the training committee in identifying key management challenges in the respective department or faculty and proposed actions that were to be taken in the next three months. Discussions with trainers on the implementation of the action plan were conducted through emails during the off-contact phase. In the second phase of the programme, participants reported their action plans, shared best practices in university management, and discussed further strategies to be developed.

To ensure the practicality and relevance of the training programme for participants with a diverse background, the training committee incorporated the methods learnt from other DAAD and DIES programmes to develop a unique, predominantly practice-oriented methodology. Through practical problem discussions, case studies, role-plays, and PAPs, participants were encouraged to relate the topics with actual difficulties they experienced in their workplace and to bring in their personal experiences for dialogue and exploration.

The targeted participants were young university leaders, preferably below 45 years old and held leadership positions in universities (such as Director, Dean, Deputy Dean, Head of Department, Programme Director, and Deputy Director). One of the requirements imposed was that the participants would be able to attend the complete training course. However, in actual implementation, some participants could not join the programme fully due to several reasons, i.e. family concerns, official duty in the university or overseas, etc. As participants were university leaders holding key positions such as Dean, Deputy Dean, Head of Programme, or Director, in their respective universities, it was a challenge to ask

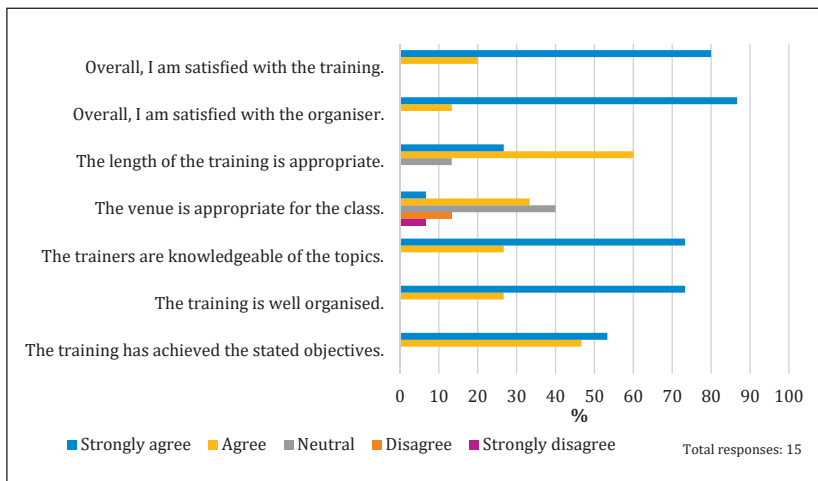
them to leave the office for four days in succession to attend the training. There was a debate among the training committee whether to penalise participants for not attending or completing the programme. For future programmes, there might be a need to set some rules on minimum participation to be eligible to ‘graduate’ from the programme.

3. Feedback and Comments on the First NMT Programme in Malaysia

The training applied a continuous improvement approach to ensure the effectiveness of the NMT programme. Performance evaluation was conducted every day during the first and second contact phases to collect feedback and suggestions for improvement. Also, an overall evaluation was conducted at the end of the programme.

Figure 1 shows the overall evaluation obtained from the participants on the last day of the second contact phase. Generally, participants were satisfied with the training programme and considered it well-organised and achieving its objectives. However, conflicting opinions on the duration of the programme arose. Some commented that the duration was too long as they could not leave the office for four consecutive days in a week.

Figure 1: Overall Evaluation of the NMT Programme



On the other hand, some participants thought that the duration was rather short to cover so many topics in the programme. The programme was conducted in a city centre which was affected by much traffic and was considered by many participants as not very conducive for such training.

Table 1 highlights some of the comments expressed by the participants at the end of the programme. Generally, participants had benefited from the knowledge and experiences shared during the programme. The innovative ways of conducting the programme provided a favourable environment for learning from the trainers, as well as from peers.

The diverse background of the participants was helpful for meaningful discussions and learning, but also created some challenges in group dialogues. Some participants felt that more time should have been allocated for activities and discourse, presentations of case studies, and outdoor involvement for team-building purposes. A few additional topics for inclusion in the future programme were conflict management, crisis management, and strategic management.

A few additional topics for inclusion in the future programme were conflict management, crisis management, and strategic management. Indeed, there is a need to balance the different kinds of activities prepared for the programme in the future. One of the concrete outcomes of the NMT programme was the PAP reports prepared by participants.

To sum up, the participants were in the opinion that the programme was beneficial and they have gained new knowledge related to higher education management. It was well organised and the topics were relevant and the classroom activities provided the opportunity for them to learn and share new ideas about university management.

In addition to the positive comments given, the participants also shared views and suggestions for improvements, which included the selection of a more appropriate venue for the programme, and inclusion of some topics considered essential for academic leaders in dealing with the ever-changing environment of higher education institutions. The methodology can be further improved to include more interactive discussions and activities, as well as group discussions and brainstorming sessions. Generally, the participants strongly proposed that this NMT programme should be continually organised and offered in Malaysia.

Table 1: Participants' Comments and Suggestions

Question	Comments
What did you like most about the training?	The interaction with participants from other institutions
	New ideas to share, networking
	Trainers' background and experience, PAP sharing
	Group discussion on new topics
	Sharing of experience and introduction of new ideas from authors of books, etc.
	The materials, the trainers, and the participants
	Sharing knowledge and experiences
	Knowledge sharing between participants, group activities and presentations
	The knowledge shared by the trainers
	Sharing of experience, insights, and practical tips. Networking among the family of NMT
	An innovative and creative way of presenting the content of the workshop
The learning environment with less rigid way, more open to giving comments and ideas, diversified universities members	
What aspects of the training could be improved?	Some lecture parts can include more activities.
	Numbers of participants can be increased.
	Venue
	Very 'lecture approach'. Should have more case study and group presentations
	More time for discussion and brainstorming
	More engagement with the participants
	Can include the evening sessions for team building, group activities, games etc., provide accommodation for all participants
	More outdoor participation, more group activities Flip board and wireless application
Additional comments/suggestions:	Training can be conducted outside of Kuala Lumpur.
	Make it a continuous event. Let the participants become trainers in their organisations. Form a master group and continue the impact.
	A well-organised workshop. Well done, organiser. Topics could be more current and relevant. More discussion is appreciated.
	Should have the second phase on the training which focuses on other areas related to human resources, student management, crisis management, and basic financial analysis
	To have a second phase of the training on Conflict Management and Time Management for HODs/Deans
	This training could have proceeded to the next session with more outdoor activities, group involvement, thinking and decision-making skills.
	PAP needs to be monitored and improved to ensure the three-month projects. HOD achievement is not present.

4. Impact and Implications of the First NMT Programme in Malaysia

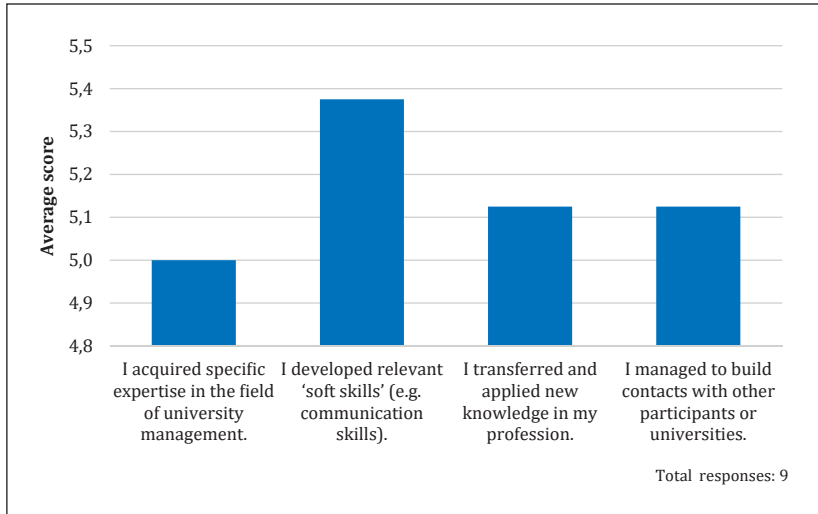
Whilst the evaluation conducted on the last day of the programme reflected the immediate impacts of the training on the participants, a survey conducted in 2020, six years after the conclusion of the programme, was still meaningful in assessing its effectiveness and applicability in developing the participants' capableness as university leaders.

A survey questionnaire was developed to gather participants' feedback on the impacts and effectiveness of the training programme. Out of 20 participants who had completed the first NMT training programme in Malaysia, nine responded. Of the nine respondents, five had moved up the academic ladder by becoming professors or associate professors, three had been promoted to higher university management positions as managers or directors, and one had changed institutions. Generally, the participants in the first NMT programme in Malaysia experienced upward movement and growth in the academic or management ladder during the past six years.

On the scale of 1 to 6 where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 6 = Strongly Agree, respondents were asked to express their opinion on the following three questions: (a) What kind of personal benefits did you gain through NMT training? (b) Which of the modules/projects of NMT strongly supported your career development? (c) Which opportunities did you use to pass on newly acquired knowledge and skills from the training course to your university?

Figure 2 to Figure 4 show the feedback from the respondents on the impacts and implications of the NMT programme. The average score was calculated for each option and used as an indicator to compare the various implications of the programme. On the types of personal benefits gained through NMT training, as shown in Figure 2, most of the respondents agreed that they have developed relevant soft skills, such as communication skills, through the NMT programme. Whilst building contacts with other participants or universities was considered to be one of the benefits gained from the programme by most of the respondents, one respondent did not seem to benefit from it. The reason could be that this respondent held a portfolio (in the counselling department) slightly different from that of the other participants, hence the opportunity for this respondent to develop meaningful contacts throughout the programme was limited.

Figure 2: What Kind of Personal Benefits Did You Gain through NMT?



The modules and activities designed for the programme covered various topics related to university management and governance. Depending on the position and responsibility of the respondents in the institution, the significance that each module brought had been different from one participant to another. For instance, quality assurance and research management were not so relevant to one respondent whose responsibility was related to the management of student affairs. In general, the module on 'Academic Management and Leadership Development' was considered to be important for career development by all the respondents (as shown in Figure 3). Also, respondents had highly commended the individual projects that they had to complete during the training programme, i.e. Personal Action Plan (PAP). PAP was helpful in the application of knowledge learnt from the programme.

One purpose of DIES in organising the NMT programme was to ensure that the knowledge acquired by the participants from the DIES training would be expanded and shared to more people in a multiplication manner. Participants who attended the NMT programme were expected to play their roles as multipliers to sustain DIES training and to promote continuous quality improvement in higher education management. Figure 4 shows that all respondents undertook one or more

Figure 3: Which of the Following Modules/Projects of NMT Strongly Support Your Career Development?

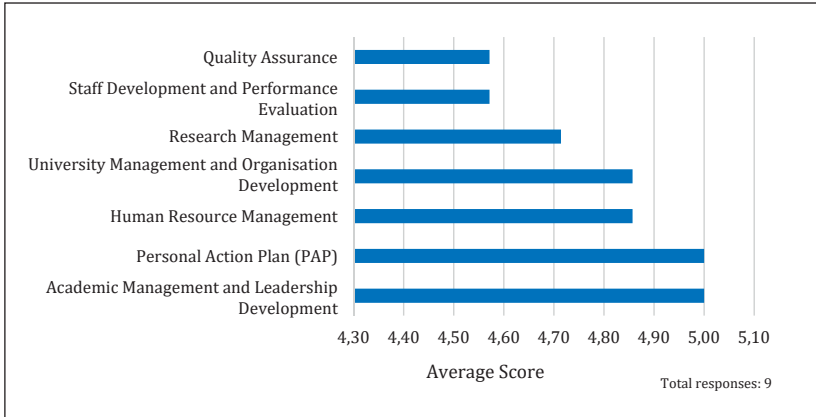
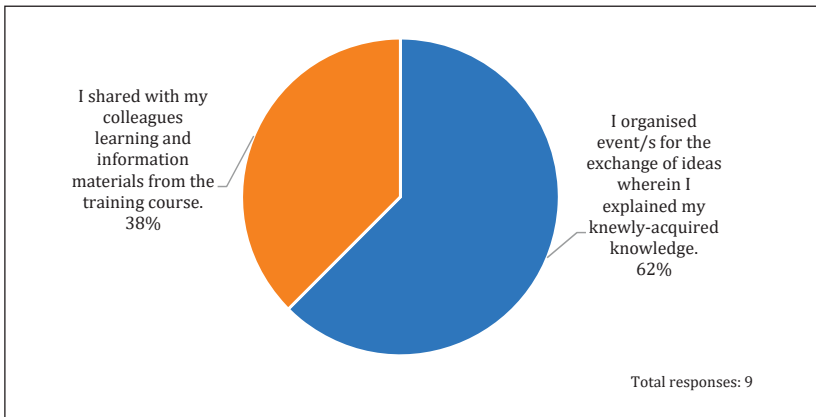


Figure 4: How Did You Pass on the Newly Acquired Knowledge and Skills from the Training Course to Your University?



methods of sharing their knowledge with colleagues from the same or different institutions. Based on the newly acquired knowledge and skills, some respondents had developed their materials and concepts and shared with their colleagues within their institutions. Some organised in-house training (i.e., mentored or supervised junior staff and nurtured young university leaders). The multiplication objective of NMT had been achieved.

5. Conclusion

The first NMT programme in Malaysia was a joint project spearheaded by four DIES alumni with the purpose to develop and implement a training programme to promote quality university leadership and management. The training committee comprised alumni who had attended the different programmes organised by DIES and had acquired different knowledge and skills. Many ideas were shared during the programme design stage which led to the unique and innovative structure and organisation of the first NMT training in Malaysia.

As the programme was specifically designed to focus on university management, with young university leaders in mind, the programme covered two broad areas of university administration, namely, (a) the critical aspects of higher education management, and (b) the processes involved in effective university management. Eight topics were selected and delivered in two contact phases. Each participant was required to prepare an individual's Personal Action Plan (PAP) during the programme.

A survey on impacts and implications was conducted six years after the programme ended. Generally, the findings revealed that participants had benefited substantially from the programme in terms of knowledge, best practices in higher education management, and sharing of experience and expertise among the participants and the speakers. The positive implications of the training were well reflected in the upward movements of the participants in their career ladder within a rather short period of six years.

Some respondents suggested that the targeted participants should be defined more specifically to focus on early or mid-career academics to prepare them for future administrative and leadership roles. In the first NMT programme, participants from academic and non-academic backgrounds were invited to join in, as the goal was to allow for the sharing

of opinions and experiences from diverse viewpoints. However, it was found that some topics were not relevant to some participants and the networking between different groups of participants was rather weak. Indeed, there had been advantages and disadvantages to inviting a diverse group of participants for a training programme. Hence the objectives of the programme must be spelt out clearly before identifying the targeted participants.

After the first NMT programme was completed in 2014, no other NMT programmes were conducted in Malaysia until 2019, when a group of DIES International Deans' Course Malaysian alumni started the inaugural IDC Malaysia Chapter (MyIDC) under the sponsorship of Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT), and the Malaysia Ministry of Education with support from DIES NMT. Many participants of 2014 NMT had strongly recommended that the NMT programme should be made an annual training programme in Malaysia to sustain the efforts of developing a critical base for effective university leaders and managers. This is particularly vital during these times of change that the world is experiencing now. Many new challenges and developments are affecting the management of higher education institutions, making the NMT training more relevant than before.

Due to an ever-changing environment in the academic landscape, especially with regards to the current outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, remote teaching and learning are fast becoming the new normal. The topics for academic leadership training and the mode of the training will have to change to reflect current developments (Kohtamäki, 2019). Hence, continuous exploration, learning, and sharing will become important components for future NMT programmes.

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