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A Review on Competency-Based Succession Planning at Higher Education Institution in Malaysia

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Abstract

This conceptual paper highlights the necessity to have a proper workforce and succession planning in place in order to have the right leadership in the right place at the right time. Leaders who are incompetent or exhausted may impose adverse impacts on the effectiveness of succession planning. Nowadays, leaders face complex challenges than those in the past with increasing workloads and responsibilities to ensure that organisational agendas are sustained. Competent and skilled leaders are needed to carry out this task. Therefore, an organisation should be proactive and strategise for future performance through succession planning. This study proposes a model of competency-based succession planning in higher education institutions by reviewing the literature that focuses on the relationship between individual competency, training, personality trait, and organisational culture. The study reveals that developing talent incorporated with competency in higher education institution is a crucial part of succession planning. Even if the institution has a systematic plan in place, succession planning will not progress smoothly unless that institution has a willing, capable, and well-prepared successor. Competency based succession planning models present a plan to build the necessary competency in the present and future, as well as a criterion for assessing academic leader requirements.

Keywords: Succession Planning, Individual Competency, Leadership, Talent Pool, Higher Education Institution.

Introduction

Research Background

Nowadays, the key role of strategic positions in higher education institutions (HEIs) has become more complex and unpredictable. They are responsible to a wide range of stakeholders and constituents, both on and off-campus, including students, faculties, and administrative staff. This challenge is ever changing due to the landscape of HEIs, department chairs face increasing demands for competency across all aspects of their job duties, and the problems they face become more difficult (Baker et al., 2019; Kruse, 2020; Patton, 2020). Moreover, the changing landscape of HEIs including the decrease in federal and state funding, the changing student demographics of colleges and universities, the continued rise of for-

profit institutions, the changing role of technology in the classroom, and the growing population of academically underprepared students (Claybourne et al., 2020; Rizvi & Beech, 2017; Yenney, 2018).

The uncertainty of this environment will affect leadership patterns, making leaders more competent of leading higher education institutions through problems and challenges. Studies have argued that leadership in HEIs is not similar to other organisations since it represents a unique set of leadership challenges (Anderson, 2015; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). The department head must be agile and flexible, able to competently deal with multiple issues arising with upper administration, fellow faculty, staff, and alumni (Tietjen-Smith et al., 2020). In fact, Smith & Wolverson (2010) argued that the members of a higher education institution are often operating in an environment that has little supervision but have a powerful voice in significant institutional decisions. However, due to the lack of training, many departments heads experience role strain and subsequent burnout. This leads to a high turnover rate for administrators at this level (Tietjen-Smith et al., 2020). On the other hand, the lack of qualified successor and talent pool will cause many of these positions to remain vacant for months before being filled by a new talent who must first understand the institution's culture before they can be effective. With that, an effective succession plan involves a smooth transition process for the timely filling of strategic roles by qualified persons. This includes recruiting new talent, searching for executives, selecting assessments, onboarding the new leader, and successfully transitioning between exiting and incoming leaders (Claybourne et al., 2020).

The Implementation of Succession Planning in Higher Education Institution

Leadership development is stigmatised in higher education institutions. Leaders in HEIs have been reluctant to develop and implement succession planning (Buckway, 2020). Higher education institutions have a reputation for being excessively bureaucratic, especially regarding the recruitment process. According to Boggs (2003), the top leadership positions at HEIs are traditionally developed over the ranks as administrators and management of faculty. The situation becomes worse when these pools of future leaders also begin to decrease as the employees are not necessarily moving to the next level of leadership and are approaching retirement age. Consequently, HEIs are facing an impending leadership crisis, which is the lack of a future leader, and they need to have formal succession planning to ensure their organisational leadership continuity in the future (Ahmad et al., 2020; Yenney, 2018).

Besides, developing an effective succession plan in higher education institutions also needs to consider current demographic and economic trends (Sweeney, 2013). Based on the Inside Higher Ed 2021 report, many college and university presidents had announced a desire to leave their respective positions; this trend is driven by their increasing age (Lemons, 2021). The same situation also happens with senior administrators in higher education who will retire or choose to leave their positions with greater frequency (Barton, 2019; Claybourne et al., 2020). Meanwhile, a survey of college chief executive officers reported growing leader vacancies, with 80 per cent of college presidents plan to leave office in the next 10 years and 35 per cent within 5 years (Phillippe, 2016).

As baby boomers leave the workforce, fewer replacement workers are available to fill their position, which leads to a significant knowledge gap. Based on the Administrators in Higher Education Annual Report (CUPA-HR, 2019), the median age for each category of university

leaders is more than 50 years. This situation will certainly have implications for the institution's succession plan and long-term sustainability in the face of potential unforeseen challenges (Pritchard et al., 2019). Given the departure of the baby boomer generation in higher education, specifically in community colleges, this situation is predictive of an alarming leadership gap (Claybourne et al., 2020). Thus, this situation caused some institutions to be at the peak of the university leader transition. This indirectly gives an idea of the importance and preparation of a systematic succession plan that must be implemented immediately.

Although many corporate entities have begun to use succession planning to boost leadership development, higher education has been slow to embrace the concept. Many universities recognise the importance of succession planning, but cultural barriers prevent a formal method from being implemented. Furthermore, there is a lack of research relative to the effectiveness of this preference in higher education, even though evidence from the corporate sector indicates that inside preference results in better long term organisational performance (Cavanaugh, 2017). Succession planning has been effectively implemented across industries for many years but has not been as pervasive in higher education (Cavanaugh, 2017; Tietjen-Smith et al., 2020).

Current best practices of succession planning in public higher education institutions in Malaysia.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia play an essential role in ensuring the preparation of programmes and development of graduates to increase job marketability in the future (Zain et al., 2017). Generally, higher education institutions refer to a university, a university college, a university branch, a college, or polytechnic and community colleges. It includes both public and private institutions (MOE, 2006). Having a line of leadership and a group of talented individuals as potential future leaders is crucial in driving the ministry's agenda. This matter has been clearly outlined in the Strategic Initiative of the Malaysia Education Blueprint-Higher Education (PPPM-PT) 2015–2025 (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2015), which is to establish effective leadership and talent pool in HEIs and further strengthen the role of Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT) in the management of Public University Leadership pipeline.

In the context of HEIs, the issue of succession planning affects the sustainability of future leadership. This issue arises due to the lack of qualified and competent leader candidates available in higher education. It is necessary to identify and define leadership responsibilities for higher educational institutions to meet the government's transformation goals. Hence, the second shift (Leadership) in (PPPM-PT) 2015–2025 is being focused on. The quality of Malaysia's HEIs, and thus the higher education system, can only be as good as its academic community, which includes educators, researchers, institutional leaders, practitioners, and academic support staff, to successfully develop and manage this pillar. However, HEIs are now restricted in attracting, recruiting, and retaining top talent due to rigid career development pathways.

Based on the AKEPT Way Forward 2019–2025 report, the higher education sector recognises a total of 136 leadership key positions in the HE that hold great responsibility in shaping the community (Akademi Kepimpinan Pendidikan Tinggi, 2019). This demand of HE Leadership inspires AKEPT to construct an effective leadership talent management plan for higher

education sustainability. The sustenance of a competent and morally upright HE Leadership ecosystem ensures the continuity of excellence in executing strategic plans and transformation plans. Hence, this will directly improve the capability of Malaysia's HE system in producing leaders who are capable of steering and leading universities. In ensuring the sustainability of leadership for the filling of key positions, AKEPT has implemented the initiative to strengthen the National Top Talent (NTT) pool for the key leadership position in HE, 'Towards The Development of 2000 Talents' (AKEPT, 2019). According to AKEPT's talent profiling report, National Top Talent (NTT), the number of people profiled has reached 600; therefore, ongoing efforts with public universities are required to meet the specified goals.

AKEPT has identified the required framework of higher education leadership competencies (Mohamed Jais et al., 2021). The competencies consist of five main groups: (1) personnel effectiveness, (2) cognitive, (3) leadership, (4) impact and influence, and (5) achievements and actions. Therefore, this leadership competency framework can maintain a culture of organisational excellence in line with the aspirations of the Malaysian Education Development Plan (Higher Education 2015–2025). The key leadership positions are shown in Table 1.

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.: An overview of key leadership positions in Malaysia's Public Higher Education

Key Position	Total
Vice Chancellor & Deputy Vice Chancellor	88
Director General of Higher Education Department	1
Deputy Director General of Higher Education Department	2
Director General of Polytechnic & Community Colleges	1
Deputy Director General of Polytechnic & Community Colleges	4
Registrar	20
Bursar	20
Total	136

Source: AKEPT Way Forward 2019–2025

Succession planning in HEIs, particularly public universities, is still an issue that needs to be appropriately addressed. Furthermore, the current succession plan is still unstructured, and there is no single standard of a comprehensive action plan. The succession plan is nothing new for federal officials as the guidelines on implementing succession planning have been introduced since 2006 based on the policy document *Pekeliling Perkhidmatan Bilangan 3 Tahun 2006* (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2006). However, the emphasis on succession planning is inconsistent in public sector organisations and higher education (Bano, 2018; Jaladdin, 2009). In fact, leadership characteristics also influence effective succession planning in the public sector and HEIs (Ahmad et al., 2018; Ishak & Kamil, 2016).

Having effective succession planning in place can significantly reduce the risk operational instability and organization performance during leadership transition, particularly when it comes to strategic issues in education, as far as appointing the rightful candidate to hold academic manager positions is concerned. This usually happens at the end of tenure, long absence, or appointment vacancy (Abdullah et al., 2009). Hence, succession planning helps in ensuring an organisation's long-term viability. Several studies were performed on the

practices, strategies, and effectiveness of succession planning implementation in HEIs (Abdullah et al., 2009; Ahmad et al., 2018; Ahmad, Ming, et al., 2020; Bano, 2018; Chia & Ghavifekr, 2019; Ishak & Kamil, 2016).

The level of individual competencies in the organisation is one aspect that influences the implementation of an efficient succession plan. Malaysia's public universities must design acceptable competency-based models to determine how the university's succession planning system will be executed in the future. Overall, succession planning is still a problem that has yet to be definitively resolved and a topic that is still worth studying in organisational and academic research. The research area encompasses numerous industries and sectors, including higher education institutions, small and medium enterprises, private companies, government-linked companies, public-listed companies, and the federal government. In fact, the studies have also evolved in focusing on various factors that contribute to the effectiveness of succession planning in Malaysia. The majority of studies conducted in the public sector focused on HEIs, particularly public universities. In conclusion, the study of succession planning at Malaysian public universities remains a priority and relevant towards improving the stability of succession planning and promoting HEIs involvement in addressing competent talent development and continuing leadership growth. This is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Studies of related constructs on succession planning in Public Higher Education, Malaysia (2009–2020)

Author(s)	Culture	Implementa	Personality	Talent	Governance	Barriers &	Understandi	Organisatio	Leadership	Assesmen	Knowledge	Career	Manageme	Manageme	Potential	Rewards &	IT System	Integrated	Competenc	Training &	Strategic	Budget		
Abdullah et al. (2009)	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓				✓						✓	✓					
Muslim et al. (2012)	✓						✓							✓	✓				✓	✓				
Shamsuddin et al. (2012)						✓				✓					✓	✓				✓	✓			
Othman (2012)									✓		✓	✓								✓				
Azman et al. (2012)	✓				✓				✓			✓								✓				
Sirat et al. (2012)																								
Ishak and Kamil (2016)									✓		✓	✓												
Mustafa Kamil et al. (2016)		✓																						
Ahmad et al. (2018)		✓					✓						✓	✓										
Bano (2018)		✓																✓						
Chia and Ghavifekr (2019)		✓				✓							✓			✓				✓				
Abd Rahma	✓														✓				✓					

Methodology

This research reviews studies in the literature that are primarily related to individual competency and succession planning. The literature has been divided into an overview of succession planning, best practices of succession planning in higher education institutions, individual competencies and the interaction between training, personality traits, and organisational culture in the study.

Redesigning Individual Competencies Associated with Effectiveness of Succession Planning: Three Antecedent Factors for Higher Education Management Capabilities

Perspective of succession planning

Succession planning is a process that ensures the organisation is prepared for the future. According to Buckway (2020), succession planning is a process to identify potential leadership vacancies, develop new leaders, and provide knowledge transfer systems to ensure optimal functioning of the organisation during leadership changes. Ali & Mehreen (2019) empirically investigated the relationship between succession planning and worker performance in the service sector. They found that performance appraisal and succession planning are both highly related to employee performance. Succession planning also promotes employee loyalty, engagement, and morale, as well as reducing the impact of re-engineering and downsizing. Most significantly, it provides a diversified pool of skilled and talented individuals within a company. In fact, succession planning is seen as a retention strategy that strengthens the firm's ability to retain its workers or discourages the employees from quitting the firm (Abbassi & Hollman, 2000). In another context, succession planning is conceived of as a risk management strategy designed to mitigate the loss of key leaders in large organisations (Rothwell, 2016).

Succession planning is a core component of the human resources strategy. However, it is not exclusively owned by human resources but rather is the responsibility of everyone in a leadership position. It is incumbent upon leadership to invest in people to ensure a deep and continuous supply of talent. Nevertheless, the role of the Human Resource Department (HRD) is still relevant and important in ensuring that HRD can leverage past expertise in leadership succession planning that must also include future competencies and requisite levels of innovation (Jackson & Dunn-Jensen, 2021). It is further described by Hampel et al., (2010) that succession planning is more than just the concept of filling a position in the future; it involves a structured process of identifying key positions and their requisite qualifications and competencies, selecting potential internal candidates, targeting development and tracking those candidates, selecting a successor, and ensuring a commitment of resources. Succession planning requires a successor who is competent and skilled in the leadership needs of the company. In today's marketplaces, a successful successor ensures that the business remains stable and viable (Ali & Mehreen, 2020; Santora & Bozer, 2015).

A succession plan will be more effective if it can be implemented in conjunction with other support processes. It begins with the organisation's strategic planning, which is based on a clear vision and mission and incorporates management and support from other departments within the organisation. A good succession plan is supported by strategic HR systems such as learning and developing key talent, recruiting and selecting internal and external talents, and managing performance to drive competence in identified talents (Ahmad et al., 2018). By integrating succession planning and leadership development, the organisation will get the

best of both attention to the skills required for senior management positions along with an educational system that can help managers develop those skills (Conger & Fulmer, 2003). Moreover, by incorporating succession planning into the firm's overall growth strategy, the company will be able to create a path for retiring employees to pass on their years of experience and crucial working relationships before they leave.

Perspective of individual competency

Since the early 1970s, when psychologists discovered that traditional tests such as academic aptitude and knowledge-based tests could not correctly predict occupational performance, employers have used competency to help recruit and manage their employees. In this process, the necessary competencies are determined. On that basis, the treasury of human resources is provided to ensure continuity of leadership for key positions. The organisation is assured that in order to fill the important role within the organisation, employees are gradually recruited and nurtured. Moreover, traditional human resource management methods are less flexible than a competency-based strategy, which stresses important competencies for organisational sustainability and high productivity.

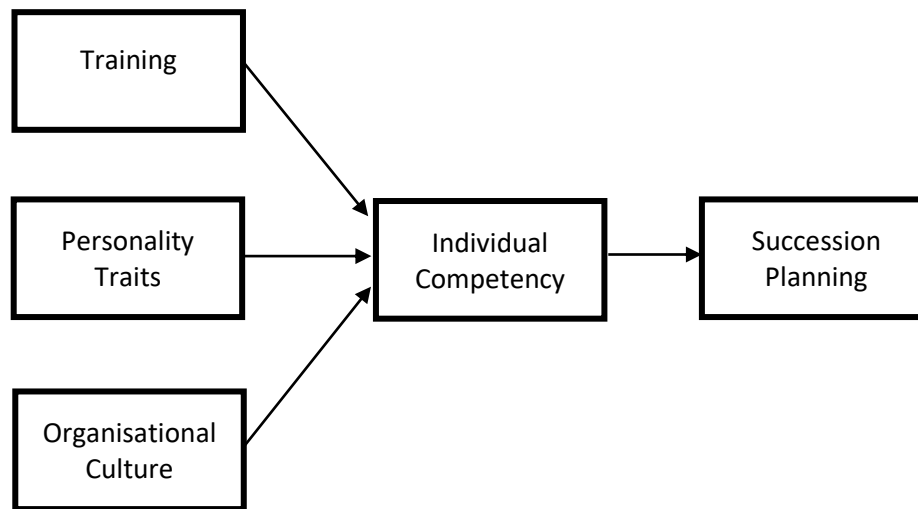
Boyatzis (2008) defined competency as the underlying characteristics of an individual, which are related to effective performance. Furthermore, Takey & Carvalho (2015) argued that competencies refer to the ability to mobilise, integrate, and transfer knowledge, skills, and resources to reach or surpass the configured performance in work assignments, adding economic and social values to the organisation and the individual. As a result, it is understood that competencies have a link to the role of the position and will influence job performance. The higher level of in-role and extra-role task efforts, which are determined by increased competence and commitment of employees, result in an effective organisational function (M.S. et al., 2017). Finally, it is concluded that there is a link between organisational performance and competence (Mahmood et al., 2018; Otoo, 2019; Salman et al., 2020).

The integration of a competency model with human resource systems has a substantial impact on organisational performance as well as the efficacy of the HR function (Talukdar, 2015). It is a relatively novel approach and an important strategic business tool that focuses on competencies that support the integration of HR activities and processes with organisational strategies, goals, and values (Ganie & Saleem, 2018). As a result, this competency-based approach is primarily concerned with the application of a set of competencies for managing human resources and key human resource activities such as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, and career development, so that performance contributes efficiently and effectively to organisational results (Draganidis & Mentzas, 2006).

The Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual model of Competency Based Succession Planning for the role of individual competency as a mediator in the relationship between training, personality characteristics, and organisational culture on succession planning as show in Figure 3

Figure 3: The Competency-Based Succession Planning Framework



Relationship between Training and Individual Competency

Tomorrow's leaders will not be the same as yesterday's leaders; therefore, institutions are encouraged to create and strengthen their current leadership development programmes beyond the emphasis on traditional leadership skills. Training is planned and systematic activities which are focused on enhancing the level of skills, knowledge, and competency (Nassazi, 2013). The focus is on various activities that can directly or indirectly either improve inherent capabilities or assist in developing required competencies (Ravichandran & Mishra, 2018; Sung & Choi, 2018).

Furthermore, organisations need well-planned human resource development (HRD) programmes, such as on- and off-the-job training, job rotation, and educational programmes and seminars to improve and develop employee competency (Salman et al., 2020). Without support and access to leadership development opportunities, many individuals may experience burnout and derail their administrative careers, while others may remain in place but be ineffective in their roles. Losing promising people or retaining less competent leaders is bad for the organisation and affects the morale of everyone with whom they work (Morris & Laipple, 2015). As a result, it will create leaders who are incompetent or exhausted, which may harm the organisation with ripple effects across other administrators, faculties, researchers, and students (Morris & Laipple, 2015)

Potnuru & Sahoo (2016) asserted that there is a positive relationship between human resource development interventions and employee competencies. However, Cheng & Hampson (2008) argued that the effect of training is not guaranteed to improve work performance. Meanwhile, employees' competencies are enhanced through training and development initiatives (Kaur & Kaur, 2020). Researchers and practitioners are increasingly agreeing that work experiences influence learning by improving managerial competencies (Srikanth & Jomon, 2020). Thus, enhancing employee competencies through training and development contribute to enhancing succession planning adaptability.

Relationship Between Personality Traits and Individual Competency

Personality traits are pervasive and enduring styles of thought, emotional expression, and behaviour that account for individual differences (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Personality traits are enduring characteristics that describe an individual's behaviour (Robbin et al., 2016; Schein, 2017). The more consistent a quality is, and the more often it appears in various contexts, the more essential it is in describing an individual. Individual personality traits are the primary drivers of behaviour and can be used to explain why people behave the way they do in different contexts.

Spencer & Spencer (1993) argued that personality traits include a cluster of knowledge, skills, traits, motives, and self-concept. An individual with positive personality can strive to be more committed to improving the performance of an organisation (Alainati, 2015; Heromi et al., 2016). Thus, it is important to match an individual's personality traits with their task. Without a proper job matching with employee personality, the employee may not be able to perform their task efficiently (Heromi et al., 2016).

Relationship Between Organisational Culture and Individual Competency

The organisational culture has been defined with different approaches. Schein (2017) defined organisational culture as shared basic assumptions that evolve about how things should be done, how the mission is to be achieved, how goals are to be met. Organisational culture typically involves defining shared values, principles, and expectations within an institution that an individual has (Abd Rahman & Nazia, 2019). In addition, Lee & Yu (2004) argued that relatively little research discusses the relationship between organisational culture and organisational performance or competencies. They found that the organisational culture or the on-job environment have a positive effect, not only on organisational performance but also on various organisational processes. Moreover, the stronger the cultural adaptation of the environment, the higher the proficiency level of competencies in the organisation (Alainati, 2015; Kotter & Heskett, 2011).

In the context of the relationship between employee and organisational culture, a theoretical description has been used to focus on employee and organisational suitability (Person–Organisational fit: P–O Fit). Person–organisation fit is the compatibility of characteristics between individuals and the organisation (Boon, 2017; Kristof-brown et al., 2005; Kristof, 1996). P–O Fit has both complementary and supplementary fit approaches. With the complementary approach, employees provide skills, knowledge, and abilities needed by employers, while employers provide resources and opportunities to employees (Kristof-brown et al., 2005; Kristof, 1996). Some studies have indicated that organisational culture significantly affects individual competence (Gorenak & Ferjan, 2015; Werbel & DeMarie, 2005). Hence, it can be inferred that the level of an individual's competencies, as measured by their appropriateness and level of adherence to organisational culture, will lead to the availability of talent for succession planning effectiveness.

Discussion

Leadership in higher education institutions is often related to an individual's ability to lead peers and subordinates and take action in order to build a successful and efficient organisation. To acquire such abilities, one must possess leadership competencies (Mohamed Jais et al., 2021; Srikanth & Jomon, 2020). Public universities must always ensure that they

have the right leaders in place if a rapid transition occurs. This is due to the complex landscape, resulting in a higher frequency of senior level administrators in higher education retiring or deciding to leave their posts (Barton, 2019; Claybourne et al., 2020). In relation to that, individuals with a diverse set of skills must be developed to produce leaders who are highly skilled and have personalities and values that align with the organisation. Higher education institution needs to put a competency management initiative in place to plan for the inevitable workforce changes. This is to ensure a loyal staff, a positive company culture, and long-term workforce sustainability. According to Hassan & Siddiqui (2020), succession planning improves employee commitment and motivation and decreases the impact of layoffs and fosters a diverse range of bright and competent human assets within the company.

In addition, competency based succession planning is to align to organisational goals and identify people based on specific competencies that will help institutions be more strategic and deliberate in their planning (Barton, 2019). It highlights the relevance of the relationship between competencies in the succession planning to accomplish the organisation's strategic goals. In relation to finding top talent for succession, it is critical to refine competencies related to the organisation's values and strategic planning. When considering the competencies and the best fit for positions, the head of the division should also note any gaps in the competencies of the individuals. Burke (2017) describes succession planning as a mechanism to match an individual's ability with the organisation's growing needs and equip workers with the necessary tools and skills to carry new leadership roles. Therefore, individuals who have the required set of competencies and conformity to the requirements of the position will provide an advantage in administering the organisation.

Niknamian (2020) showed that leadership competencies and skills are the prerequisites for appropriate execution of succession planning which could guarantee organisational stability and persistence. Thus, more attention should be paid to the implementation of individual development plans based on training structure, person–job fit by measuring the suitability of personality traits, and establishing high values and culture in the organisation to prepare a suitable platform for training competent personnel in the organisation, since organisational culture is made up of a set of shared values that guide the organisation. With a succession planning programme in place, higher education institutions will be able to focus on the future rather than the present. Considering future growth and industry changes ahead of time will offer the university more time to prepare for industry instability.

Conclusion

This study concludes that succession planning within higher education institutions should focus on individual competency as the process of identification and selection in determining the talent pool in an organisation. Hence, the findings from this study can be used as a guide for higher education institutions developing effective succession planning. Another finding of this study is the existence of a substantial link between training, personality attributes, and organisational culture towards effective succession planning. There is an urgent need for public university to invest in the training and development of individuals to equip them with the necessary competencies to pursue future leadership. Such activities ensure that organisations have talent in place to fill the leadership pipeline and help organisations stay highly competitive with minimum disruption to the mission. The leadership role needs to

inculcate and strengthen values and align with university business strategy through an effective succession planning.

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