Instructional leadership and instructor development: A case study of Malaysia's research universities

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Abstract

Universities are affected by internal factors such as when certain self-imposed procedures complicate the delivery of teaching and learning and thus depriving students and lecturers of needed creativity, flexibility, and time to optimize meaningful learning. A lack of systematic succession planning in academic leadership may also detract from maintaining continuity in the teaching and learning of related policies and practices. All these factors contribute to the need to reconceptualize university teaching and learning. This study provided an in-depth look at the practices of instructional leadership in Malaysian research universities. Primary data were gathered from thematic in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that the research universities planned sustained programmes of educational development, adopted principles of effective learning and teaching, and designed conducive learning environments for students. Academics need a supportive culture to put these principles into practice. Finally, creating a learning culture depended not only on well-educated, well-meaning individual academics but also an academic community working together to create a student-centered attitude.

Keywords: academic leadership, educational development, instructional leadership, learning culture, principles of effective learning and teaching, research university

Introduction

From the original idea of the university, changes and developments have deeply affected and shaped universities teaching and learning (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008a). Universities have also become more like businesses in many aspects (Gonzales, 2010). Universities are affected by external factors such as changing expectations and demands from students and stakeholders, a more globally competitive environment, higher expectations from industry, outcomes based performance, and the role of technology in changing the way teaching and learning takes place. In terms of internal factors, some self-imposed procedures complicate the delivery of teaching and learning depriving students and lecturers of needed creativity, flexibility, and time to optimize meaningful learning. A lack of systematic succession planning in academic leadership detracts from maintaining continuity in teaching and learning related policies and practices. All these factors contribute to the need to reconceptualize university teaching and learning.

The Malaysian government has seen it as pertinent to steer the direction of the national higher education system to ensure national interest is protected and developed in line with Vision 2020. To achieve this goal, the government has launched the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020 and National Higher Education Action Plan 2001-2010 as the means to transform the Malaysian higher education system consistent with the aim to raise the capacity for knowledge and innovation of the expected first-class human capital. The first phase of Laying the Foundation has passed and it has entered the second phase. The second thrust of the plan, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, is

regarded as one of the key determinant factors to contribute to the transformation of higher learning institutions, especially the transformation of teaching and learning in research universities.

Higher education institutions are increasingly faced with pressures to change their practices of learning and teaching to meet the demands of industrial sectors, students, and goverment for accountability in the age of decreasing public funding (Kar, Hamidifar, & Kazerooni, 2013). In addition, universities in particular have to fulfill the pressures of meeting professional standards in relevant programmes and to use online learning to facilitate students' learning experiences. The emphasis is now on 'learning and teaching' rather than 'teaching and learning'. Therefore, full commitment to learning and teaching through the application of suitable models based on sound policies and strategies, and guided by strong academic leadership is demanded on universities to add value to students educational experiences.

In view of this situation, higher education aims to improve the practices of teaching and learning as one of the key determining factors to contribute to the transformation of the research universities and explore the factors contributing to effective instructional leadership in terms of learning and teaching at universities (Jeffrey W. Alstete, 2010), with the emphasis on industry community engagement, character building, entrepreneurship, employability in higher education. Therefore, the purpose was to identify how instructional leaders influence teachers' instructional practices; however, other factors influencing instructional leadership and the development of instructors.

Similarly, the existing literature has shown that recent theoretical changes and the way that student-focused in teaching are associated with deeper methods to learning (Trigwell & Prosser, 2004). The literature review also shows that, the way that lecturers experience the leadership of their division is an important precursor to the quality of student learning outcomes and their departmental achievement.

In theory, instructional leaders should consider how their leadership skills could transform an organization into meaningful change and development (Burns, 1978). To support the idea of transformational leadership another study on transformational leadership (Kalra, Pathak, & Jena, 2013) revealed that educational leaders need to be transformational instructional leaders, empowering others and enacting positive change within the organization.

All above leads to analyzing and determining the instructional gaps between the best practices in the structures and processes for teaching and learning of instructional leadership in the public institutions of higher learning and subsequently working out the objective basis on which to improve the process. Furthermore, the concept of instructional leadership has considerably been investigated in context of school in relation to the role of principal and instructional leaders in terms of teaching and learning.

However, the majority of higher education research on leadership largely fail to notice the role of the instructional leadership both informal; distributed leaders (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008) and formal leaders in universities. Taking into account that conducting research is more highly valued and rewarded in context of higher education, this gap generally might reveal the priorities of academic circles. However, the existing literature lacks attention to leading teaching and learning activities runs against to the trend of offering instructional development for academics in the world (Grant et al., 2009). Therefore, the role of instructional leadership has not been examined in the context of higher education. This research aims to fill this gap in existing literature to examine the role of instructional leaders at higher education in research universities in Malaysia. Generally, the study aims to conceptualize effective instructional leadership at development of instructors in Malaysian higher education universities. Findings of this research will help MOHE to enhance the quality of instructional leadership in learning and teaching.

Research questions

This research addresses to answer the following questions:
   1) What are the current practices of leadership in teaching and learning in selected universities?
   2) How do instructional leaders orientate the teaching and learning process in universities ?

Teaching and learning in higher education

Most researches in the area of teaching and learning have concentrated on two roles of leadership namely heads of department (Knight & Trowler, 2000) or department chairs (Smith & Wolverton, 2010), specifically for creating a culture where effective teaching is rewarded and valued, and chief executives such as vice chancellors (Ferguson, Hassin, & Bargh, 2008) for establishing the objectives of the university and creating the environment where improvements in teaching are welcomed (Richards, 2011).

Instructional leaders have to be especially skilled at recognizing the learning programs, engagement projects, strategic developments research initiatives, approaches, structures, quality improvements, and priorities, that are aligned to their objective and that they are leveraged to continue progress in the operational context. Additionally, they have to also ensure that the changes that have been agreed on are implemented successfully and they are continuous and sustainable (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008b).

According to Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, (2009) instructional leaders' developmental requirements should be considered as the primary issue if the institutions are serious in enhancing the academic standards and quality; the universities are required to invest in developments in the academic area that allows for targeted support in particular strategic levels .Researches in Australia, New Zealand South Africa, Canada Scandinavia, Oman and South East Asia, have consistently proven that the requirements of the leaders of L & T are practical, specific higher education and role insights into the best methods in ensuring 'good ideas' work in ways that are beneficial to students and increase the bottom line of universities (Smith & Wolverton, 2010).

A major function of instructional leadership is to have an impact on students learning and progress, and raise the standard of the teachers and staffs' performance. This can be done through increasing motivation, commitment, skills, knowledge, and working environment. A recent national study that was carried out over a period of four years showed the differences in the work, lifestyles and impact of teachers in English schools which affirms the importance of leadership along with mediating effect to commitment of teachers, effectiveness and resilience and the main function of understanding successful and effective leadership (Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008).

In particular, a study reflected that effective instructional leaders in learning and teaching in Australia have a high knowledge and capabilities in this area. Other criteria that they possess include being self-aware, committed, decisive, empathetic and influential with a diverse group of people, flexible and skillful at analyzing and strategizing. Even though these criteria was observed across all the leaders who were researched, it was found that a more senior instructional leaders tended to show a more profound and integrated set of capabilities (Allen, 2007).

Several essential roles were identifies especially for leaders in learning and teaching of higher learning institutions. The attitude, methodologies and interpersonal skills were identified to be most useful in assisting staff to change working environments were closely related to those perused by the highly effective academic lectures with their scholars. This knowledge is essential as it reveals that the most successful instructional leaders both assist their staff in engaging and learning how to carry out the required changes besides establishing a supportive and efficient environment that encourages a productive learning atmosphere (Leaders & Digest, 2002). Since the formal or informal aspects of engaging with others can be beneficial or detrimental to students' learning, the relationship with staff as they react and learn to reach their objectives in their job functions is equally important.

The instructional leadership capability framework

In this study instructional leadership capability framework has been adapted from Scott, Coates & Anderson (2008) which has been tested for validity by various past researchers such as (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008) and (Scott et al., 2008a).The framework clarifies learning and working in a dynamic and challenging environment. It reveals how leadership in higher education can be a much-contextualized atmosphere. The capability and competency sectors are integrated and have common factors among them.

Having just one dimension such as the capability dimension is insufficient in creating a successful leader. Interpersonal and personal skills and cognitive skills are necessary to provide the competencies of skills; knowledge and expertise are in place.
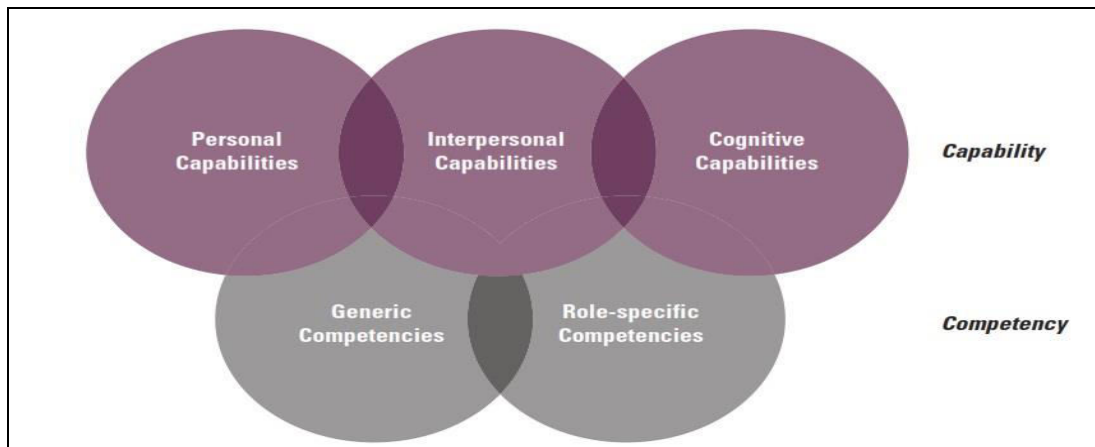

Figure 1. *Instructional leadership capability framework*

The framework has 3 overlapping dimensions quality of leadership namely cognitive, personal, and interpersonal. These 2 associated types of knowledge and skill namely generic competencies and role-specific competencies support these dimensions. Generic competencies include skills such as organizing, running meetings, using IT, and understanding the operations of the university. Role-specific competencies include the expertise involved in the area of L & T in higher education. In order for instructional leaders to be effective, all five dimensions are required and the skills are mutually beneficial (Scott, Bell, Coates & Grebennikov, 2010).

The key competencies highlighted in this framework on instructional leadership capability include generic and role-specific skill and knowledge. These competencies are like the foundation in achieving an effective leader as it helps to form and provide a partnership with all the other dimensions (Ramsden, Prosser, Trigwell & Martin, 2007). The ability to lead has been found to be most prevalent in times of crisis and it is during these times that the entire capabilities have to come together to resolve problems.
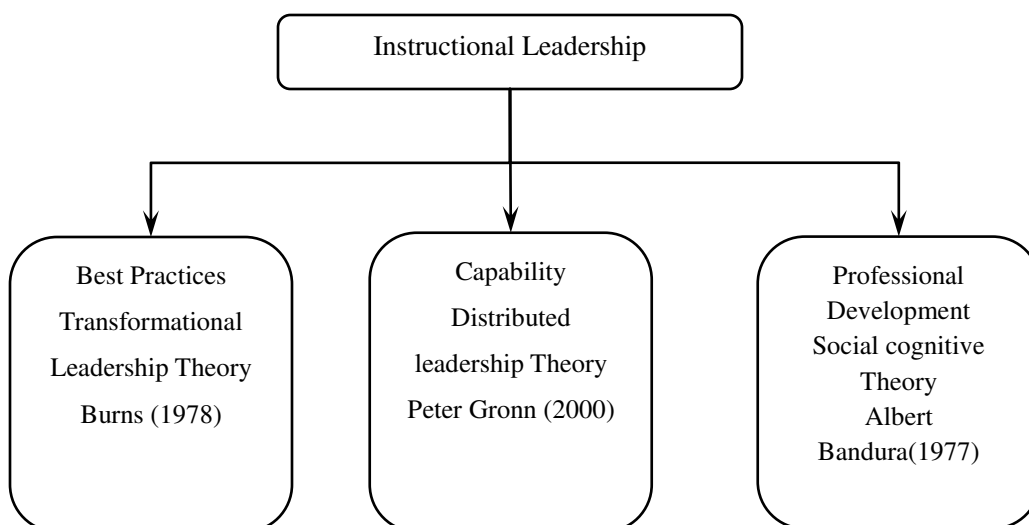

Figure 2. *Theoretical framework instructional leadership*

This theoretical framework of instructional leadership describes the scope of responsibilities of the instructional leader and the school's leadership team with respect to leading learning. However, it is also useful to place these responsibilities into the broader context of how leadership achieves its effects in schools. Instructional leadership framework in this study is based on following theories: Transformational leadership was developed by Burns (1978), occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to a higher level of motivation, performance, and morality(Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders are highly interactive, passionate, empowering and visionary (Hackman, 2004). Second theory is Distributed leadership by Gronn, (2002) was a first and foremost theory about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines and structures. Moreover another theory is employed in this study is Social cognitive theory (SCT) from the work of Albert Bandura & Erlbaum, (2001)emphasizes that learning occurs in a social context and provides a framework for designing, implementing and evaluating programs. The attempt of all three theories is to assess their contribution to the investigation of the effects of leadership on educational outcomes (Bandura & Erlbaum, 2001).

Methodology

This exploratory study took a qualitative approach for data collection and analysis. Qualitative methods are effective when describing complex phenomena, illuminating experience, and interpreting events from informants with widely differing stakes and roles. The participants of this study involved the instructional leaders as well as the development of instructors in Malaysian research universities.

For collecting the qualitative data in this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Deputy Vice-Chancellors/Deputy rectors in charge of learning and teaching from the research universities of Malaysia. Moreover, the strategic plans, materials, and documents related to the academic policies of universities were used.

This research project relies on interviewing to explore instructional leaders career experiences. Interviewing enabled us to collect the instructional leaders accounts of how they enacted and developed their career. These accounts include events and the processes involved at different stages in their careers.Furthermore, personal and in-depth account of the instructional leaders lived experiences justifies my preference for using interviewing instead of questionnaires in the study. I initially constructed the interview protocol questions based on my review of the relevant literature, which included books, journals, and other related materials. The interview schedule was used to assist me in obtaining relevant information from the leaders. The interview protocol contained questions on the professors' academic and career histories, significant events, experiences and related factors that they believe are related to their academic socialization. Data collection in this study sought to provide rich, thick descriptive data that would identify and describe the instructional leadership behaviors that positively influence on teaching and learning and the organizational capacity and coherence of universities and support the development of instructors. Leaders from targeted universities served as the primary units of analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis in this study was implemented through two strategies. The study of the material culture (Marshall & Rossman, 1999)of the universities included a review of relevant documents and the identification and observation of artifacts. Artifacts, "the entities designed to shape and enable organizational practices," (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons & Hopkins, 2007). Provide concrete examples of the implementation of initiatives that are attributed to improved student achievement. The second strategy utilized for data collection in this study was interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Interviews were conducted individually with instructional leaders. The multiple points of information served to triangulate data (Maxwell, 2004) and subsequently prevented the researcher from accepting initial impressions of collected data.

A matrix was utilized to establish what data would be considered as evidence of a given category (see Figure 3). A system of color-coding datum was utilized to code sources of data and subcategories were labeled in the margin of sources.

Throughout the coding process, it was clear that overlap between the work of the leaders and the leadership of instructional leader exists (Glaser, 2013). At times the overlap was significant enough that it could not be avoided and the datum was subsequently dually coded. The categories that make up the typology were used to organize the final report. The data for each interview were re-coded as themes emerged within each of the broader categories.

All themes and their corresponding data points were catalogued into a single data summary document (Collins, 2003). Unrelated themes that emerged during the analysis process were not automatically discounted and contributed to the subsequent cross-data analysis. The final level of analysis was a cross-data analysis that is framed by the questions posed in this study. Single cases were compared to find consistencies and differences across data. The goal of this process was to develop general answers to the research questions (Yin & Liu, 2002). All research questions and their corresponding data points were catalogued into a single data summary document.
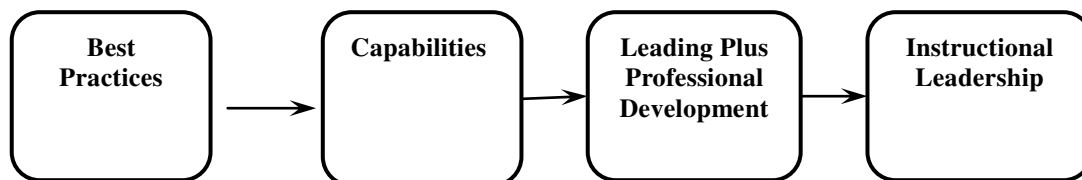

Figure 3. *Meta matrix perspectives in instructional leadership*

Finding and discussion

This qualitative research attempted to identify the current practices of leadership in teaching and learning in Malaysian Research Universities, secondly to investigate about how instructional leaders orientate the teaching and learning process in universities and thirdly, to examine how research universities develop the instructional capacity of instructors. Based on the in-depth interviews, the findings are as follows:

1) The first research question address the current practices of leadership in teaching and learning in research universities. The first sub theme among interviews and document analysis was recognized as vision driven for learning and teaching. Instructors, who focus on learning directly and indirectly, have powerful influences on students' achievement through the development of a strong culture on students learning.Instructional leaders highlighted the importance of learning and teaching in order to attract a new generation of leaders to this critical role as the current effective leadership of learning and teaching in universities to the individuals, surrounding communities and country (Scott et al., 2008b). Instructional leaders have a strong commitment to pedagogy, research and development should be driven by a strong grasp of how learning occurs and the effects of different forms of teaching on student learning. Furthermore, they must be aware of knowledge of the curriculum areas and factors, which need to be considered when designing relevant and effective curricula. They also emphasize on students' acheivement, instructional practice, maintaining faculty environment to support learning, clear communication that learning is the priority of the university. In addition, this study has found that the process of developing a community that is unified around one vision for faculties is one of aspect of culture building that has resulted in a sense of shared ownership to improve initiatives at university. Developing strong vision and mission statements can help stakeholders in each university to reach to such a common understanding.

The second common sub-theme related to best practices of instructional leaders, is identified as creating an environment for academic achievement; leaders to teachers, and students directly and indirectly communicate high expectations for student learning and instruction. The direct communication of leader's expectations takes the form of an explicit articulation of academic benchmarks to staff and verbal and written communication regarding student achievement report. Indirect communication of the leader's expectations is seen through communicating students with teachers via given academic benchmarks at the faculties, which are initiated and supported by instructional leaders. Therefore, increased student achievement is one indicator of instructional leadership.

It is clear that there is connection between leaders and the members of the faculty community to facilitate a university environment that makes the realization of those expectations possible. Instructional leaders in the interview believed that strong teacher professional communities, and collective work on improving instruction are key factors for raising achievement. According to interviews instructional leaders with their leadership teams in research universities are committed to distributed leadership and a focus on instruction to bring about deep student learning and high levels of student achievement.

These teams were given the permission to design and propose a curriculum that aligned roles, responsibilities, leadership practices, instruction and school culture to a focus on increased student achievement and the establishment of an effective university environment.

2) To answer the second research question, "How do instructional leaders orientate the teaching and learning process in universities". The second theme is coded as instructional leaders' leading capability, the following themes have been found in different interviews and document analysis to address this research question.This theme is defined as a main theme which includes five sub-themes:

Leaders 'interpersonal capabilities, instructional leaders evaluate followers, one to one instructional coaching, and leaders with the faculties and executive team to get the right people and investigate factors that hinder instructional leaders 'capability. The study has validated the key capabilities that were statistically identified in previous studies, which retained their importance across all of the leadership roles.

In the first sub-theme of capabilities, interpersonal capabilities have been identified as a vital factor in communicating instructional leaders with staff. It has been revealed the crucial role of interpersonal in effective leadership for learning and teaching.

Likewise, other previous studies in the area of higher education have comparably highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationship in effective leadership. For instance according to (Smith & Wolverton, 2010) leaders are those who have ability to resolve the tensions efficiently and effectively in the process of adapting". The ability to listen and respond suitably to other staff and understand social dynamics play a major role in aspect of the "community building". (Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002). In the same way, (Yusnita, Amin, & Muda, 2012) analyzed the components of leadership identified the ability of leader who has the capacity to sustain the faculty's morale and to resolve, reduce, and to avoid conflict among faculty members. Blom & Alvesson, (2014) in his study concentrated on the social and personal aspects of leadership and emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence.

Furthermore, one of the most important capability of leaders is coordinating and aligning the university's work vertically for curriculum development implementation and enhancement so the primary role is to serve as a department chair leading meetings every two weeks/monthly, focused on curriculum planning, "supporting" team members, observing team members quarterly in the classroom and providing formative feedback. This study reveals the necessary responsibility of instructional leader is to observe and evaluate instructors, coaching, and general administrative duties. Instructional leaders also attend to a myriad of administrative duties and tasks. The instructional support team coordinates the efforts of

the content area departments, aligning the university's work vertically for curriculum development, implementation and enhancement. The advisory teams organize the work horizontally, focusing on a particular group of students and their needs. This team meets every month for three hours.

The next finding is related to capability of instructional leaders at research universities, is to get or hire the right people. They mentioned that the employment of qualified people on research universities has contributed to the development of a professional community that is unified around one vision and one mission of research universities.

To end, some factors hinder instructional leaders to improve the quality of instruction at higher education, this study found several reasons that instructional leaders confront with them while working at universities. First time second resources and lack of willingness to have difficult conversations. Both time and resources hinder the ability to improve instruction. This is most directly a result of having a lack of planned time to meet and discuss instruction and curriculum with staff members.

The last finding of this study is related to professional development of instructors. The finding has been revealed that the Malaysian government annually invests a large proportion of its income on education in both infrastructure and provision sectors and human resource development.

Professional development of instructors and the integrity of beliefs in pursuing organizational vision and strong professional development will support effective implementation of instrctional leaders' work. This function is realized through the instructional leaders focus on the success of university (rather than her own self-interest), on his/her being willing to do whatever it takes to achieve the mission of the university, and on her/his ability to get the right people working at the university. Instructional leaders made an attempt to get the right people through the deliberate use of shared leadership and the development of a nurturing relationship with staff.

According to existing literature (Afshari, Bakar, & Luan, 2008) student-centered approaches have been employed by Malaysian teacher education to facilitate learning in the Malaysian teacher education programs. These approaches make student to take more responsibility to actively engage in learning and to promote them to involve and participate in the learning process.

According to interview with instructional leaders in Malaysian research universities instructional leaders play an important role to conceptualize the learning and teaching functions in higher education institutions.

As a preliminary report summarized several conceptualizations related to learning and teaching mission:

The mission of these universities is to become top employer, top choice university. These universities will be renowned for producing students that will meet the standard set by employers. For every discipline, they have identified the top employers. High percentage of students do internship and eventually get job in these top companies. One of the instructional leaders explicitly mentioned that "Our mission is to make our students marketable in the market world. It is to make them industrially ready to get specified job. All programmes as well as learning and teaching goals are geared to fulfil our mission".

According to Goleman, (2013) "Teacher development is defined as professional growth a teacher achieved as a result of gaining experience and evaluating his or her teaching systematically". These professional developments can be achieved through gaining experiences for instance mentoring, participating in workshops or professional development meetings, or obtaining informal experiences by means of reading books, watching program in regard to any academic subjects (Ganser, 2000).

Conclusion

This study has undertaken to illuminate the instructional leadership and the development of instructors at Malaysian research universities. The first research question addresses the practices of instructional leaders at research universities.

Research on higher education leadership has generally overlooked leadership of teaching for student learning and development is broadly conceived. Yet, a focus on instructional leadership that puts teaching and learning at the center as particularly important in the current educational context (Fullan, 2006). Instructional best practices are general principles, guidelines, and suggestions for good and effective teaching that are supported by research.

1)   Instructional leadersarticulate and explain the vision and mission of the university; to develop the future of community and build the culture of shared ownership among instructors and staff. Developing strong vision and mission statements can help instructors and staff in each university to reach to such a common understanding.

2)   Leadership works towards the future of the university through the development and involvement of instructors to facilitate teaching and learning at research universities. Instructional leadership places a very important role in the function of teaching and learning in research universities. Malaysian research universities planned through continuous programs for educational development in order to connect theory with practice, instructors are supposed to learn using these principles efficiently to design appropriate learning environments for students (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2009). Secondly, instructors require a supportive culture if they intend to apply these principles into practice. Furthermore, creating a supportive learning culture is determined by well-educated, and also determined by academic community working collectively to generate a student-centered attitude (Marginson, 2013). To do so, sound instructional leadership is required. Moreover, instructional leaders at Malaysian research universities cultivate communication throughout the organization through team building. Another responsibility of instructional leaders is to recruit appropriate people at university.

3)   Professional development practices are grounded in the beliefs of instructional leadership. Professional development of instructors and the integrity of beliefs in pursuing organizational vision and strong professional development will support effective implementation of instrctional leaders' work. This function is realized through the instructional leaders focus on the success of university to achieve the mission of the university. Instructional leaders provide opportunity for professional develoment of instructors at higher education.

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