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Developing new generation of educational leaders for world class university

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text:

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the meanings of being World Class University (WCU) and roles and competencies of new generation of educational leaders leading WCU. The data are collected through the qualitative methods of three focus group and eight in-depth interviews of professors. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed according to themes. The findings indicated some of the difficulties in defining WCU, the importance of research excellence in WCU and the effect of globalization and internationalization. Findings indicated that we do need a new generation of leaders with certain traits, competencies and playing various leadership roles.

1. Introduction

What is world class university? According to Altbach (2003) a World Class University (WCU) is a dynamic concept that warrants further discussion as most countries in the world strongly feel the need to have their very own reputable institutions that are highly regarded by the global community. Altbach (2003: 2) mentioned few characteristics of WCU that can be used as a benchmark for further intellectual debate, namely:

1. Ranking among the foremost in the world (of an international standard of excellence)
2. Excellence in research, teaching and extension (recognized by international and local peers and the ones that expand the frontiers of knowledge)
3. Recruiting and retaining top quality academics and students via providing an atmosphere of intellectual excitement and academic freedom
4. Operating with a significant measure of internal self-governance and accountability to the government, industry and community
5. Providing adequate resources and facilities for advanced and creative research, teaching and extension services
6. Operating with sufficient, consistent and long-term funding from the government, industry and community in the form of research grant endowment and contribution from university alumni.

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It is almost true that a world class university provides a membership of the exclusive group, an international recognition and status given by the global community (Salmi, 2009). However, a realistic perspective is needed in suggesting how to develop world class universities across the globe.

Ultimately, the idea of a world class university provides an avenue for interesting and valuable intellectual discourse, that it circles around (Altbach, 2003):

1. International academic standard and improvement
2. The roles of universities in society
3. How academic institutions position themselves in a ‘boundary-less’ higher education system (local and global)

Salmi (2009) reiterated Alden and Lin’s (2004) suggestions on key characteristics of a world class university which include international reputation and recognition; attraction of international talents; excellent research and innovations; abundant resources (finances and facilities); and ability to make an impact on society.

1.1. New Generation of Educational Leadership

To have a WCU, we have to compete globally. This means that Malaysia needs a new generation of leaders that can compete at the global stage. Caligiuri referred to leaders of the future as global leaders, which she defined as:

1. Executives who are in job with some international scope
2. Leaders who must manage through the complex, changing, and often ambiguous global environment
3. Leaders, who are involved in foreign markets, conceive strategies on a global basis, manage and motivate geographically dispersed and diverse teams

In the near future, Malaysia intends to develop world class organizations to spear the way forward in its mission to be a developed nation. For example, we need universities that are ranked in the top 100 in the world ranking. Right now the top Malaysian university is only ranked in the 200-300 position while others are ranked more than the 300 position. But to achieve world class status, Malaysian universities need leaders who can compete on the global playing field. Ulrich in commenting about leadership in Asia emphasized that: “As Asian countries, industries and organizations undergo economic, social, technological and demographic changes, the quality of leadership will be a key to responding to those changes” (2010:1). Our universities will also have to adjust to various changes, especially in terms of global competition. No more that we can look to our national boundary, but we have to look to the world as a whole, which provides a more complex and dynamic environment for Malaysians to conduct their business. Business may not be the usual concern about Malaysia, but with a worldwide focus. Malaysia needs to develop new generation of leaders.

When discussing new generation of leaders, Ket de Vries (2005) introduced the concept of global leaders to fulfil the need of the 21st century organizations. They need a different set of competencies:

As executive [global leaders] in the twenty-first century, you need a different set of competencies as did peers in the fairly recent past. Today, your position, status, and seniority are less important than your ability to change. You have to anticipate what lies ahead, recognize discontinuities in your environment, and predicts what those discontinuities mean. You must possess a clear vision for your organization and its place in the world of business and be able to communicate that vision and transform into reality. You need to draw on diverse experiences, understand the value of diversity, and build cooperation among people with various backgrounds. You must be able to pay close attention to what your constituents and urge those who are typically silent to have a voice.
Ket de Vries (2005) suggested the competencies for excellent global leadership, which he grouped into 12 dimensions: Visioning, empowering, energizing, designing and aligning, rewarding and feedback, team building, outside orientation, global mindset, tenacity, emotional intelligence, life balance and resilient to stress.

Global leaders have global concern and this means that future leaders need to focus on global networking. This extra role of global networking will focus on tasks that go beyond the national boundary. Caligiuri (2006: 220) identified ten of these tasks:

1. Work with colleagues from other countries
2. Interact with external clients from other countries
3. Interact with internal clients from other countries
4. Speak in a language other than their mother tongue at work
5. Supervise employees who are of different nationalities
6. Develop a strategic business plan on a worldwide basis for their unit
7. Manage a budget on a worldwide basis for their unit
8. Negotiate in other countries or with people from other countries
9. Manage foreign suppliers or vendors
10. Manage risk on a worldwide basis

Often, when we discussed about leadership we are referring to formal leadership. Formal educational leadership refers to those who occupy certain positions such as the Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Heads of Departments. They are very important figures and their contributions to achieving a WCU are undeniable. So much so the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has introduced a search committee to help in the process of selecting Vice Chancellors for Malaysian universities that include both public and private universities. Some of the criteria proposed for the selection are academic excellence, international recognition, and ability to lead and manage, respected by people of all levels, charismatic and have high moral values (Radin Umar Radin Suhadi, 2008).

But in promoting research and innovations, we also need the informal leaders or thought leaders. We would like to introduce and discuss what is termed as thought leadership. These are people who do not occupy any formal positions in the university but nevertheless are key individuals to research and innovations. Thought leaders are those who advocate new ideas, research findings or inventions. Thought leaders are those who are immersed in their own professional domain. Examples are researchers, who try to discover new things that add value to the organization, society and nation. They may spend more time in the laboratories instead of socializing with others, may not have the leadership ability and quality but may influence others through their ideas or inventions. Their leadership is about innovative change. Example of this kind of leadership is Albert Einstein, who through his theory of relativity has influenced much of the people in the world, directly or indirectly. Similarly inventors like Thomas Edison and Graham Bell, through their inventions have benefit people all over the world besides creating much wealth for their nations and others.

In short, thought leadership is not about position; or about climbing the leadership hierarchy. Its communication can be directed upwards, downwards or sideways. Thought leadership is very much related to the content or discipline that has been mastered and ability to generate and innovate ideas. Thought leaders are those who know of a better product or way of doing things that others do not have. Their leadership ends when people have accepted the ideas or products.

1.2. Research Questions

1. What is WCU as perceived by participants?
2. What types of leaders are needed for WCU?
3. What are the traits, roles and competencies of new generation of leaders for WCU?
2.0 Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the meanings of being WCU and also the types, traits, roles and competencies of the new generation of educational leaders leading WCU. The data were collected through the qualitative methods of focus group interviews and in-depth interviews with academicians and professors from two research universities in Malaysia. Three focus and eight in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting two to three hours. The identified participants were contacted and they participated voluntarily. The interviews were conducted at the university premises and other locations convenient to the researchers and participants. They were recorded with permission of the participants, transcribed verbatim and coded. Based on repetitive reading of the interview scripts and listening to the recorded interviews, emerging ideas and themes were developed.

3.0 Findings and Discussions

3.1. Research Question 1 on meanings of World Class University

Some of the responses of research participants on WCU were reported as below:

…if the university fulfils all the requirements related to the core business that includes teaching, research and providing service to the community. The university must make an impact on the community, nation and region. Of course the university needs to achieve world standards and be recognized internationally
…the quality of graduates produced is important. When they go out to the real world, they must make an impact and difference.
…world ranking depends on a lot of factors. It depends of what is evaluated and who is giving the feedback.

To be WCU, we need collaborative programs, more exchange of staff and students with top universities such as Harvard so that we can exchange ideas.

WCU is about networking and collaboration with world top universities know their standards and benchmark them, otherwise we are just looking at ourselves without comparing to others, and we must know what others are doing and collaborate with them.

I am very nervous about ‘ranking things’. People out there are not happy with public university, so they start attacking us, using the ranking list. They are serving their own agendas. So I am very concerned about the ranking business of higher education.

To be WCU means:
…our research must be strong
…we must have good extension so that we can become consultant to industry
…people outside refer to us for consultation
…our work must have an impact on mankind, for example conducting research to cure cancer
…must have good funding for research and funds must also come from international agencies

The criteria of a WCU:
It must be well known and respected among peers
The core business must fulfil the special mission (one of the universities was established to promote the Malay language to international level and in step with leading world trend).
The core processes involved in attaining this status are change, research and services to communities
The whole process must be supported by infrastructures that promote excellence.
The graduates are sought after by public and private sector.
It is a world class university:
…if it is well known, if you are known not because of what you tell people, but what people said about you. It is a bit subjective.
…the quality of the programs will also come from the staff that you have and the staff that you have will operate well and will perform well in a good environment. And there must be good interaction between all stake holders. All stake holders meaning the administrative part of the university, the academic part of the university, the student body and the community. There must be linkages between all those things …and marketability of the students is high.

We are WCU if:
Our graduates are employable and desired by employers domestically and internationally
Our academic staff is well known and respected worldwide in their field/research
Our academic program can attract international students
Our academic environment attracts staff internationally.

The debates on WCU will continue, focusing on the major issue of ranking. Everybody and every nation want a WCU, but not everyone agrees as to what a WCU is. One of the main criteria that crops up in the discussion, is about given the recognition worldwide. It is also about reputation of the university in the world, related to the standards of excellence achieved by the university in its core business of teaching, research and service to the community.

3.2. Research Question 2 on types of leadership: Formal leadership vs. thought leadership

Some of the participants’ feedback related to thought leadership, who they refer as academic leaders.

There are many kinds of leaders.... transactional and transformational…? Now, we want different kind of leadership that is academic leadership and administrative leadership. Academic leadership is ability to develop the field of study and so on. Administrative leadership started as an academic but they venture to administration. So, they have a good sense of what is needed in the academics fields. But at the same time, they have pretty good managerial skills. So, a really good leader would need to have all these characteristics. He or she is known in the academic fields, and at the same time they demonstrate good administrative skills. And then, if they are charismatic, that is even better. And we have the right combination of the really good leader…and they bring big changes. That is what you want. Not just good leader but the one that transform to a quite big extend. So, you need all these characteristics.

…being a researcher sends a signal to the faculty that you, the leader, share their scholarly values and general understanding of the culture of the academia.

…academic leadership is more towards developing the field of study and so on.

…it is important that you [research leaders] should be able to draw money and so on

Thus there are two types of leaders in university, the formal leaders and thought leaders. Formal leaders are those who hold official positions while thought leaders are researchers who often lead research groups or projects. These leaders are just equally important to WCU.

For our universities to be involved as global players, they need both the formal leaders as well as thought leadership. Formal leaders are those who try to achieve the vision and mission of the organizations through their positions. On the other hand, thought leadership is related to those who brought innovative change through their ideas and products.
3.3. Research Question 3 on Traits, Competencies and Roles of New Generation of Leaders

3.3.1. Traits

Some of the traits identified from the study needed by new generation of leaders are: Strong determination, integrity, boldness, perseverance, ambition, creativity, imagination, curiosity, originality, visionary and contribution to society.

3.3.2. Competencies and Roles

The study also identified some crucial roles and competencies related to new generation of educational leadership. For these leaders to play their roles effectively, they must understand two aspects that affect the environment of WCU – globalization and internationalization. Globalization relates to external factors that affect the university operation while internationalization is a process controlled by universities that they have to do in order to gain world recognition and reputation. Some of the key roles and competencies of new generation leaders relate to getting connected to others in the world. They need to collaborate and network with others. University leaders, whether formal or informal, have to play key leadership roles such as getting funding from international bodies, conducting international programs and conducting collaborative research with world renowned researchers. They also play the roles of entrepreneur where they encourage new ideas and change in universities. They also should encourage commercialization of ideas, innovation and R & D research results. In addition, they also must play the roles of change agent and good managers. In order to be effective, these new generation of leaders must possess the competencies to perform those roles.

4.0 Conclusion

In terms of new generation of educational leadership for WCU, we need to identify the right leader to transform and lead our university to world class standing. We need a number of experienced and well known researchers and scientists to be our thought leaders. The universities and MOHE have important roles in identifying and developing new generation of leaders who have a global outlook for WCU in Malaysia and the region. Leadership has to be developed and nurtured. Thus a systematic program for global leadership is a good step forward in achieving WCU and definitely MOHE and the respective universities can take a vital lead in this leadership development for WCU. A systematic program for new generation of educational leadership to lead Malaysian universities towards world class standing is a good step forward.

References


