

Factors Influencing the Development of Holistic Resilient Leadership among University Students: Readiness for Malaysian Future Leaders

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Abstract

This paper explores the factors influencing the development of holistic and resilient leadership on the part of university students in Malaysia, with an emphasis on their readiness to become future leaders. As the world faces increasingly complex challenges, Malaysian universities are pivotal in providing students with leadership qualities beyond cognitive and technical skills. The study highlights how holistic leadership, which integrates emotional, ethical, intellectual, and social dimensions, equips students to adapt to diverse leadership environments. Resilience, a key leadership trait, is essential for overcoming adversity and navigating the uncertainties of today's volatile landscape. Drawing on leadership development theories and real-world examples from Malaysian universities, the paper examines how programs focusing on emotional intelligence, adaptability, and transformational leadership are crucial in shaping future leaders. It also identifies key elements such as mentorship, experiential learning, and external support systems significantly contributing to students' leadership readiness. Furthermore, the research addresses the importance of cultural and contextual factors in developing leadership capabilities, particularly in Malaysia's diverse socio-cultural environment. The findings suggest that universities must integrate holistic leadership frameworks into their educational curricula to better prepare students for future leadership roles. By fostering resilience, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making, such programs can ensure that Malaysia's future leaders are well-equipped to drive national development, foster innovation, and address socio-economic disparities in an increasingly dynamic global context.

Keywords: Holistic Leadership, Resilient Leadership, University Students, Leadership Development, Future Leaders Malaysia

Introduction

Leadership qualities that transcend technical expertise are increasingly crucial in rapid technological advancements, socio-economic transformations, and global uncertainties. The ability to lead holistically and resiliently—encompassing emotional intelligence, ethical integrity, intellectual aptitude, and social awareness—has become essential for navigating the challenges of a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Coutu, 2002; Fernandez, Clerkin, & Ruderman, 2020). In Malaysia, where the aspirations of a progressive nation are rooted in cultivating innovative and inclusive leaders, university students hold a pivotal role as architects of the country's future trajectory.

Leadership development, particularly in the context of university students, holds profound importance for Malaysia's socio-economic landscape. This focus aligns with the country's goals of fostering capable leaders who can address emerging challenges such as global competitiveness, socio-economic disparities, and sustainability concerns. Research conducted at Universiti Utara Malaysia has demonstrated that holistic leadership qualities—spanning resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence—enhance students' capacity for effective decision-making, peer inspiration, and navigating adversity in complex environments (Syed Muhamad et al., 2017; Leadbeater et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the emphasis on leadership development in Malaysia's National Education Blueprint 2013–2025 highlights its critical role in driving national progress. Programs like the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) have successfully equipped educational leaders with essential technical and cognitive skills (MOHE, 2015; Donnie et al., 2020). However, a significant gap remains in developing leadership competencies that integrate emotional, ethical, and social dimensions. Addressing this gap is imperative to prepare university students as holistic and resilient leaders capable of driving national innovation, fostering inclusivity, and addressing socio-economic disparities.

This study is significant because it explores the factors that influence the development of holistic and resilient leadership among university students. By investigating elements such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, and mentorship, the research provides actionable insights for various stakeholders. For educators, the findings inform curriculum design, ensuring alignment with the dynamic demands of modern workplaces. Policymakers can leverage these insights to bridge gaps in leadership preparation, while employers benefit from hiring leaders capable of navigating uncertainty and driving organisational growth (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Atkins et al., 2019).

Moreover, this study contributes to understanding how Malaysia's diverse socio-cultural context shapes leadership development. It underscores the role of experiential learning, mentorship, and external support systems in fostering leadership qualities essential for addressing the challenges of a globally interconnected world.

In conclusion, this research highlights the critical need for Malaysian universities to adopt holistic leadership frameworks that prioritise resilience, adaptability, and ethical decision-making. By doing so, future leaders will be better equipped to tackle the complexities of the modern world and ensure sustainable progress for the nation. This study thus serves as a

foundation for advancing leadership development that meets current demands and anticipates future challenges.

Literature Review

Theories of Leadership Development

Leadership development theories typically emphasise cultivating essential skills such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, and transformational leadership. Emotional intelligence (EQ), which encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, constitutes a fundamental component in numerous leadership paradigms. Leaders must also adapt to varying contexts, enhancing their capacity to lead effectively during crises or significant change. Transformational leadership inspires and motivates followers through a shared vision and personal development.

Over time, leadership development theories have expanded to incorporate broader concepts, such as holistic leadership and resilience, to address the complexities of modern environments. These newer models emphasise the importance of self-awareness, empathy, and adding value to followers while recognising the need for continuous learning, emotional maturity, and adaptability in navigating complex challenges with integrity and vision (Fernandez et al., 2020).

Leadership development theories encompass several diverse approaches, integrating holistic leadership and resilience to equip Malaysians as future leaders. Therefore, this study discusses two main traits: (1) holism and (2) resilience.

Concept of Holistic Leadership

This concept emphasises a comprehensive approach to leadership that integrates mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions. Holistic leaders align their leadership style with personal values and purpose, creating environments that foster trust, authenticity, and overall well-being within their teams. This approach encourages a balance between personal fulfilment and professional responsibilities. Holistic leadership emphasises the role of each dimension and its interplay in developing well-rounded and holistic leaders. For instance, by cultivating a more profound sense of meaning, purpose, and interconnectedness, spiritual intelligence can complement the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills fostered by emotional intelligence, thereby enhancing students' ability to navigate challenges and play a crucial role in shaping student resilience (Chaudhary et al., 2024).

In other words, holistic leadership refers to the ability of leaders to approach challenges and opportunities from a broad perspective, considering not just the immediate needs of the situation but also the long-term consequences of their decisions. It involves integrating cognitive, emotional, ethical, and interpersonal competencies.

Concept of Resilience in Leadership

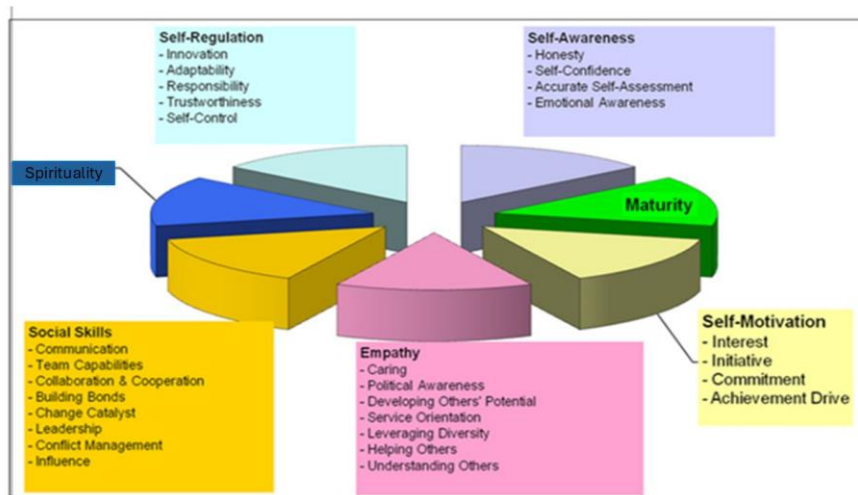
Resilient leadership is the ability of leaders to adapt, recover, and grow through adversity. It involves mental, emotional, physical, and social capacities. Leaders build resilience through mindfulness, exercise, gratitude, and fostering strong social connections. Resilience allows leaders to maintain their effectiveness under stress, enhancing personal and organisational

well-being. It focuses on recovering quickly from setbacks, adapting to change, and persisting in adversity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

The Role of Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

Emotional intelligence/quotient (EQ) is a term popularised by Daniel Goleman in 1998 and has gained popularity among academicians for its role in becoming an indicator of an individual's success. From an academic perspective, a study showed that emotional intelligence is the third most important predictor of academic performance, after intelligence and conscientiousness (MacCann et al., 2020; Harun et al., 2022). Relating EQ's impact on resilience, students with higher levels of emotional intelligence report better overall well-being and higher resilience in facing challenges (Lubis & Maliki, 2022), demonstrating its importance in holistic leaders. According to Goleman (1998), Emotional Intelligence/quotient (EQ) can be defined as the ability to recognise our feelings and those of others, to motivate ourselves, and to handle our emotions well to have the best for ourselves and our relationships. EQ comprises five domains: self-awareness, Self-regulation, Social skills, Empathy and Self-motivation. The concept of emotional intelligence has been modified to the Malaysia context by Ishak et al. (2004) according to the local norms, with 7 domains and 28 subdomains as follows:



Source: Ishak et al. (2024)

In a study carried out on 148 student representative council members at the National University of Malaysia, their profile of leadership and profile for emotional intelligence was collected by two questionnaires: the Malaysia Emotion Quotient Inventory (MEQI) and the Malaysia Leadership Audit Trail Inventory (MLATI). Not only was their level of emotional intelligence index and leadership high, but the analysis also showed a significant positive correlation between leadership and social-emotional intelligence among the student representative council members UKM (Harun et al., 2022).

Future Leaders

A future leader is equipped to lead in a rapidly changing, globalised, and technology-driven environment. The post-COVID-19 pandemic era led to more digitalisation in various fields, including leadership and teaching learning activities, demonstrating the importance of IT literacy among future leaders. Although AI is nothing new, it has recently become far more

visible within the education sector because of GenAI, specifically in the application ChatGPT (Chen et al., 2020). AI has incrementally begun to transform how teachers teach, students learn, and schools function (Kamalov et al., 2023), which has inevitable implications for leadership in the new age. At the same time, the rapid progression of a technology-driven environment has many benefits; it is essential to note the negative implications and challenges that come with it, such as repression of creativity, reliance and dependence, which can lead to poor performance among aspiring and bright leaders (Hargreaves, 2023). Hence, it is essential to foster important skills and values alongside IT literacy in future leaders, such as critical appraisal and analytical skills. Future leaders are distinguished by their adaptability, emotional intelligence, and ability to leverage new technologies while fostering innovation and resilience within their teams. Unlike traditional leadership, future leadership strongly emphasises sustainability, ethical decision-making, inclusivity, and cultural intelligence to manage increasingly diverse workforces.

Readiness Indicator

University students' readiness for leadership roles is often assessed through various indicators, including self-efficacy, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. These indicators reflect students' capacity to navigate challenges and lead effectively in diverse environments. According to Sarita et al. (2022), emotional intelligence is crucial in enhancing leadership capabilities, suggesting that students with higher emotional awareness are prepared to handle leadership responsibilities more efficiently. This can visualise themselves as resilient and successful in managing their emotions to better their self-management skills (Filice et al., 2024). Moreover, resilience has been identified as a key readiness indicator, enabling students to recover from setbacks and maintain motivation in their leadership pursuits (Yusof et al., 2020).

Current Programs and Initiatives

In Malaysia, numerous programs and initiatives aim to foster leadership development among university students. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has introduced various policies to promote leadership skills as part of the national education framework. The introduction of the Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT) by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2008, along with profiling systems and projects, is one of the many efforts MOHE has shown in developing leadership skills among university students. Another example is the National Youth Skills Program, which encourages students to participate in extracurricular activities that enhance their leadership competencies (MOHE, 2022). Universities such as Universiti Malaya and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia have established leadership development centres providing workshops, seminars, and mentorship opportunities to cultivate resilient student leadership (Hashim et al., 2020).

Many national programs are a foundation for the leadership development initiatives implemented within educational institutions and governmental bodies. By fostering collaboration between academic institutions and governmental bodies, these programs aim to develop holistic, resilient leaders prepared to meet future demands. In Malaysia, universities have increasingly incorporated leadership modules and extracurricular activities that focus on critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication, all essential for developing well-rounded leaders (Hashim et al., 2020).

Other recent programs organised by MOHE by collaborating with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and other leading national bodies include the International Young Future Leaders Summit 2024 (FUTURE 2024), gathering 1000 student leaders locally and internationally from 46 countries. This program, which was the first of its kind, aimed to provide opportunities for current and future student leaders to showcase their leadership and public speaking talent while providing opportunities for students to improve their networking among student leaders from across the globe (MOHE, 2024).

The Academy of Nationhood Malaysia (AKM) organises a yearly initiative known as Malaysia Future Leaders School (MFLS) that was started in 2020 with five general objectives, which are Leadership, Nationhood, Development of character and identity, Entrepreneurship and Volunteerism, with one of the specific objectives being to develop character and identity of young leaders that are equipped with resilience (i-LEAD, 2020). There has even been a study conducted among 234 MFLS participants to evaluate the positive development of these youths in 8 domains known as 8Cs: Caring, Competent, Character, Confident, Cooperation, Considerate, Competitive and Contribution. This is done using an instrument specified to evaluate those 8Cs known as Instrumen Kajian Penilaian Pembangunan Belia Positif 8C, which is adapted from the Positive Youth Development model (PYD) by Lerner et al., 2005 and 2011. The overall score for all aspects was 76.46 out of 100, which is satisfactory. This shows that MFLS participation aided very positively in developing the 8Cs among youths. Interestingly, for the domain of Character and contribution, the overall score was the highest of all eight domains, ranking at 85.61 and 87.34, respectively (IYRES, 2021). These initiatives and programs demonstrate the role and importance of organising programs as a practical way to develop future leaders in various aspects.

Overview of Leadership Development Programs Available in Malaysian Universities

Leadership learning that is generative and developmental is one way to address complex systems present in our society (Hastings & Sunderman, 2019). Malaysian institutions of higher education provide an extensive array of leadership development initiatives specifically designed to address the varied requirements of the student population. Programs often include training in communication skills, conflict resolution, and strategic thinking, all essential for effective leadership. Furthermore, these programs frequently incorporate experiential learning opportunities like community service and internships to provide students with practical leadership experiences (van der Meer et al., 2019). Programs and leadership training are important among student leaders because they increase their self-efficacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, multicultural knowledge, and sense of belonging to their community (van der Meer et al., 2019). Therefore, training and development are imperative for leadership learning (van der Meer et al., 2019; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). In addition, according to Komives et al. (2005), leadership education enhances self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and the ability to lead diverse groups.

Recent Studies

Recent studies have highlighted a growing interest in holistic approaches to leadership development, emphasising the integration of psychological, emotional, and social dimensions. For example, a survey conducted by Sarita et al. (2022) explored the influence of comprehensive leadership training on the resilience and adaptability of students, revealing that these programs markedly enhanced students' readiness for prospective leadership

positions. Moreover, research trends indicate a shift toward understanding the role of cultural factors in leadership development, particularly in the Malaysian context, where diversity and multiculturalism are prevalent (Zainal Abidin et al., 2021; Atkins & Shrubbs, 2019). This trend underscores the importance of context-specific approaches in shaping resilient leaders for Malaysia's future.

Recent studies showed that increased uncertainty and disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic have changed how universities operate. According to Edmondson (2021), the changes emanating from the post-COVID era have created a new paradigm shift for universities; the ensuing “chaos” will “separate the agile from the fragile.” During COVID-19, many universities had to pivot their leadership approach to adapt to the “new norm” (Marshall & Broome, 2020), revealing how Barbados and Canada changed their mode of leadership to adapt to the crisis. In that article, courageous leadership was cited as the most significant feature of great leaders (Marshall & Broome, 2020). Hence, universities play an important role in preparing leaders for ‘out of the box’ situations such as a health pandemic by providing an environment and an example of leadership in unexpected scenarios.

Recent studies have highlighted a growing interest in holistic approaches to leadership development, emphasising the integration of psychological, emotional, and social dimensions. For example, a study conducted by Sarita et al. (2022) explored the influence of comprehensive leadership training on the resilience and adaptability of students, revealing that these programs markedly enhanced students' readiness for prospective leadership positions. Moreover, research trends indicate a shift toward understanding the role of cultural factors in leadership development, particularly in the Malaysian context, where diversity and multiculturalism are prevalent (Zainal Abidin et al., 2021; Atkins & Shrubbs, 2019). This trend underscores the importance of context-specific approaches in shaping resilient leaders for Malaysia's future.

Additionally, previous study investigates factors contributing to resilient leadership development, identifying mentorship, supportive peer networks, and experiential learning as key influences, and stress the importance of creating environments that foster resilience through robust support systems (Hashim et al., 2020). Zainal Abidin et al. (2021) examine the cultural context of Malaysia concerning leadership development, arguing that understanding local dynamics is essential for effective program development. By incorporating culturally relevant practices, universities can enhance students' readiness for community leadership roles. The literature reviewed underscores the critical role of resilience in developing holistic leadership for Malaysian university students. Integrating emotional intelligence, mentorship, and cultural understanding into leadership programs can significantly enhance students' preparedness for future challenges, ensuring they are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of contemporary leadership.

Proposed Framework: The Integrated Leadership Resilience Model (ILRM)

Building upon the findings and theories discussed in this paper, the Integrated Leadership Resilience Model (ILRM) is proposed as a comprehensive framework to address the leadership development needs of university students in Malaysia. The ILRM combines holistic leadership, resilience, and emotional intelligence elements tailored to Malaysia's socio-cultural and

educational context. This framework seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and practical applications, providing a structured approach to nurturing future-ready leaders.

Components of the Model

1. Holistic Leadership

- Holistic leadership integrates mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions, ensuring leaders can make balanced decisions while fostering trust and authenticity (Fernandez et al., 2020). This dimension is critical for addressing the diverse challenges faced by modern leaders, particularly in multicultural settings like Malaysia.

2. Resilience

- Resilience is adapting and recovering from setbacks while focusing on long-term objectives (Coutu, 2002). In the Malaysian context, resilience is further reinforced by collectivist cultural values that promote social support and community-based problem-solving (Zainal Abidin et al., 2021).

3. Emotional Intelligence

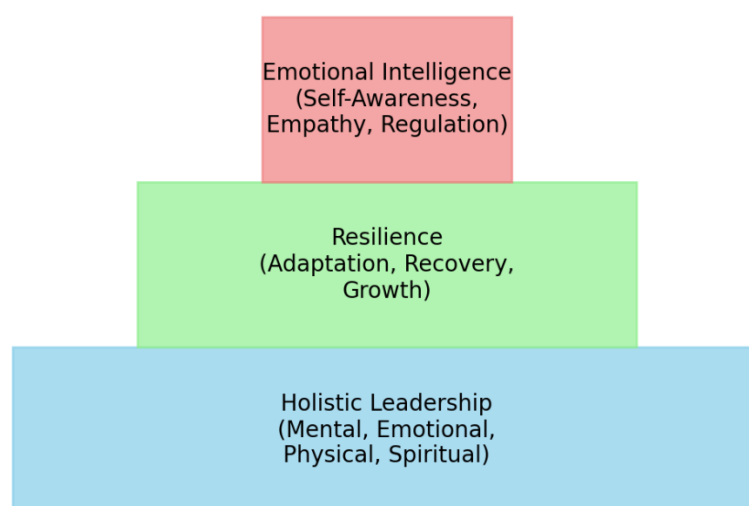
- Emotional intelligence (EQ) plays a pivotal role in effective leadership by enabling self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal communication. The adaptation of EQ for Malaysian leaders, as reflected in tools like the Malaysia Emotion Quotient Inventory (MEQI), demonstrates its relevance in cultivating adaptive and emotionally intelligent leaders (Harun et al., 2022).

Application of the Model

The Integrated Leadership Resilience Model (ILRM), as illustrated in Figure 2, combines Holistic Leadership, Resilience, and Emotional Intelligence to cultivate future-ready leaders in Malaysia. The ILRM aligns with existing leadership development programs like the Malaysia Future Leaders School (MFLS) and Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT) by emphasising adaptability, empathy, and balanced decision-making. These programs can adopt the ILRM to provide structured training that fosters ethical decision-making and emotional resilience. For instance, the Positive Youth Development Model (8Cs) in MFLS complements the ILRM by focusing on character and contribution, ensuring participants develop core leadership competencies.

Outputs: Future-Ready Leaders
Resilience, Integrity, Innovation

Integrated Leadership Resilience Model (ILRM)



Applications: MFLS, AKEPT, Cultural Context

Figure 2: The Integrated Leadership Resilience Model (ILRM)

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the importance of integrating holistic leadership, resilience, and emotional intelligence into leadership development programs. Malaysian universities are uniquely positioned to lead in this area by leveraging their diverse cultural and socio-economic environment. Integrating the ILRM into national programs such as MFLS and AKEPT offers a structured pathway to develop future-ready leaders who can navigate complex challenges.

Given Malaysia's increasing reliance on technology and multicultural landscape, the ILRM's adaptability to digital leadership contexts and culturally diverse teams warrants further exploration. Future research should also examine its scalability in addressing global leadership challenges, particularly in multicultural and multi-religious societies.

Future studies can explore the effectiveness of the ILRM by assessing its impact on leadership outcomes through longitudinal research. Comparative studies could also examine the ILRM's adaptability in other cultural contexts, thereby contributing to the global discourse on leadership development. This study provides a practical framework and enriches the theoretical discourse on leadership in dynamic environments by synthesising holistic leadership, resilience, and emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in an era marked by rapid technological advancements, global challenges, and ever-changing societal dynamics, the need for holistic, resilient leadership is more critical than ever. For Malaysia, a nation on the rise, fostering such leaders is crucial for ensuring sustainable growth. The readiness of future leaders in Malaysia, particularly in educational contexts, is shaped by various factors, including leadership training, personal and professional development, and the influence of transformational leadership. Leaders who are adaptable and skilled and capable of leading with empathy, making ethical decisions, and encouraging long-term vision are essential. This study has shown that the development of holistic, resilient leadership by university students plays a pivotal role in shaping Malaysian future leaders. The development of such leaders begins at the university level, where students are nurtured and prepared for future roles. Universities must continue to

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