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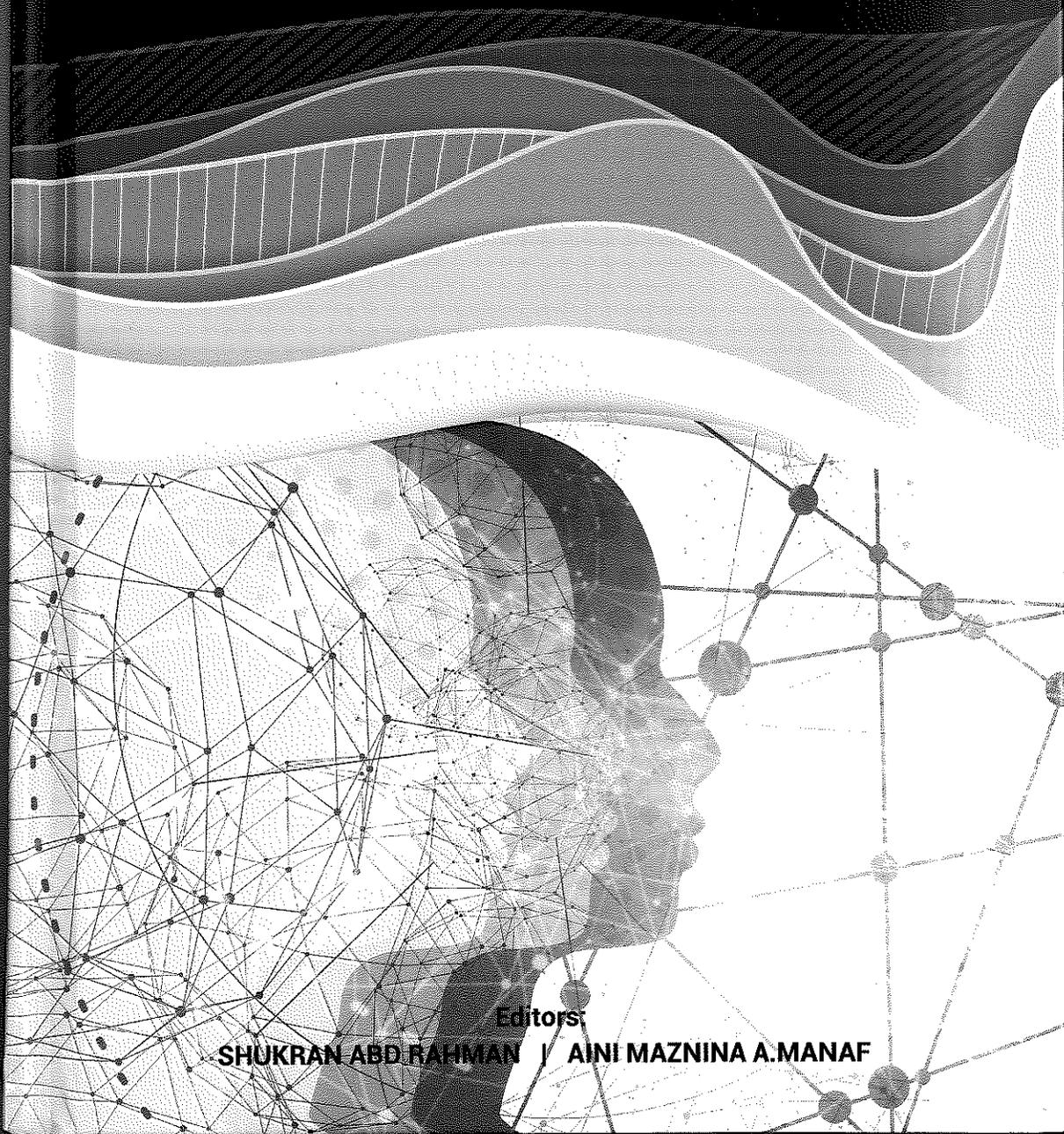
THE ROLES OF INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

Editors:

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MENTAL HEALTH AS THE CORE OF INSTITUTIONAL WELL-BEING: THE ROLES OF INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

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CONTENTS

Contents

PREFACE

Mental Health as the Core of Institutional Well-Being: The Roles of Institutional Leaders

It is a pleasure for Akademi Kepimpinan Pendidikan Tinggi (AKEPT) to be part of this collaborative effort with the International Islamic University Malaysia in focusing on mental health issues which is one of the core components of institutional well-being. It befits the function of AKEPT which is to nurture the ability of higher education institutional leaders so that they have good levels of awareness, and competencies to promote mental health and well-being among the community in the institution they lead.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world in 2020, academic administrators, academic leaders and academics have put in various initiatives in finding ways in managing work-related issues as well as in addressing personal challenges, including those that relate to their mental health and well-being. Higher learning institutions (HLIs) have taken the necessary measures to safeguard individuals' health. HLI leaders and managers have put in many strategies to position the health and safety of their staff and students as priority. They have implemented many programmes to help their staff and students in making adjustments to the new environment, particularly when they encounter various constraints that affect their well-being.

5

Leadership Competencies for University Leaders during Crises

Rabi'ah Aminudin, Norhaslinda Jamaiudin and Dzulkifli Abdul Razak

Introduction

The current model of the education system has its flaws and the weaknesses are exacerbated by the occurrence of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The current model of higher learning institutions (HLIs) is mired with unhealthy cultures and traditions such as greed, self-interest and excessive capitalism that have taken away the true values of education, such as compassion and human development. The model of HLI in managing crises need to be revisited to ensure HLI's ability to serve its purpose of existence, which is to build better human civilization with a sense of humanity even during times of crises.

The trend in HLI leadership is characterised by the presence of leaders whose work is disconnected from the real functions of HLI which should play an important role in humanizing education. Generally, some of the leaders' focus appears to be associated with their vested interest and not on giving back to the society. Some of them take the crises for granted as they view spending time in managing the situation brings no direct benefit to them. This type of transactional leadership further worsened the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic as there was always an expectation of receiving something in return for any action taken.

Without that incentive of benefitting from their actions, there is a lack of motivation to improve the situation and give back to society. Universities should reform their values and traditions to include societal development as part of their missions to serve the community and humanity at large. This necessitates a comprehensive approach to human development; by not only focusing on human development from the perspective of human capital but also developing everyone in spiritual, physical, mental, intellectual and religious dimensions which include an emphasis on values and ethics. This is important as the modern world has focused largely on material and wealth possessions as indicators of success and neglected important aspects of humanity such as empathy, sympathy and love. For higher learning institutions to reform themselves and continue to be relevant to modern society, especially in times of crises, it requires positive leaders who can navigate the higher learning institutions through tumultuous times, reconstruct the society and move forward through an uncertain future which can be a daunting task to many.

Higher Education's Crisis Management

Before COVID-19, higher learning institutions were not spared from having comprehensive crisis management plans due to the nature of HLIs as organizations. However, before the spread of COVID-19, most of the crises faced by HLI were more localized, such as mass shooting at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 2007, the South African student protests in 2017 and regional political instability as witnessed in the Arab spring in 2010-2011. These crises have brought forward attention to the preparedness of HLIs in facing challenging times as well as highlighted HLIs' roles in society. Despite that, history has shown that universities have been in crisis and they managed to overcome the crisis using inventive methods (Croucher & Waghorne, 2020).

In December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was alerted with the report on a viral pneumonia in Wuhan, China. By

early January 2020, the Chinese government announced that the viral pneumonia phenomenon was caused by a novel coronavirus. Since then, the virus has spread globally and led to more than 603,927,234 cases worldwide and resulted in 6,493,773 deaths until September 2022. Before the mass administration of the vaccine in the late 2020, governments around the world resorted to various approaches to managing the pandemic including movement restrictions, contact tracing, border closures and increasing public health facilities.

Although the level of strictness varies across the globe, government interventions have affected the dynamics of society and its institutions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that more than 1.5 billion students including university students were affected by the educational institutions' closures during the pandemic. Hence, higher learning institutions and their communities were physically and psychologically affected by COVID-19 as universities were forced to close and movements were limited. In the conduct of teaching and learning activities, universities were forced to transition from conducting classes physically to using online platforms. Physical research activities such as attending labs and conducting fieldwork were stalled, and tight border control resulted in international students and staff stranded outside of their countries.

For the first time in modern history, HLIs were confronted with a mega-crisis at a global level. As the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented large-scale crisis, higher learning institutions were not adequately prepared. In addition to that, the constant changes in government policies affected the operations of HLIs from border closures to restrictions on people's movement. This has presented HLIs with pressures to adapt and reform their practices, especially in their teaching and learning, and research activities that were traditionally conducted physically. Although it emerged as a public health crisis, it resulted in a human-induced crisis due to the lengthy period. The trickle-down effects of the public health crisis led to a deficit of public trust in HLIs, an increase in mental health-related issues such as depression, burned-out and anxiety among staff and students, as well as damage to HLIs' reputation as a platform that develops and empowers societies (Younger, 2020).

HLIs are forced to revisit their business mode as they have emulated the private sectors over the years, treating education as a business commodity, rather than being good public service. COVID-19 has also disrupted the financial health of HLIs (DePietro, 2020; Startz, 2020). Reduction of tuition fees, minimization of students' boarding facilities and lower enrolment by both domestic and international students had dented universities' coffer. Universities are made to re-evaluate their purpose of establishment and their roles in society. Fundamentally, HLIs have the moral obligation to empower people using knowledge, awareness, skills and good values embedded in their curricula to create an equitable and sustainable future (Chatterton, 2000; Cortese,2003). As such, HLIs require a comprehensive crisis management plan which includes competent leadership of the organization that upholds the five pillars of education as outlined in the UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development Blueprint which are: 1) learning to know, 2) learning to be, 3) learning to live together, 4) learning to do, and 5) learning to transform oneself and society.

Leadership in Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs)

Leadership in HLIs has been a contentious issue that needs to be addressed as HLIs are becoming more complex and have to deal with new challenges and uncertainties over the past few decades (Drew, 2010; Luna, 2012; Gigliotti, 2019; Russell, Gonzales, & Barkhoff, 2021). The issue of HLI leadership has even resulted in the offering of leadership training programmes by universities such as Leadership in Higher Education by Capella University, MA in Higher Education Leadership by the University of San Diego and Crisis Leadership in Higher Education by Harvard Graduate School of Education. This illustrates that there are demands for management and leadership knowledge and skill specifically for higher learning institutions as the operations of HLIs are unique to the sector. The challenges faced by academic leaders are also inimitable and require a specific set of skills, knowledge and values (Middlehurst, 2007; Zhao & Zhu, 2021).

This necessitates leaders of HLIs to have a well-rounded understanding of the functions and roles of HLIs in society, especially considering that academia is often mired in complex social, economic

and political contexts in their operations, resulting in conflicting expectations and role images between the stakeholders and policy actors (Goldring & Greenfield, 2005). Furthermore, due to the complexity of the sector, academic leaders are expected to be able to resolve tensions between the academic staff and the administrative staff as more often than not, both sides have conflicting interests thus requiring delicate balancing to thread the issues as well as adequate experiences on the ground that enables them to fit in better in their academic leaders' shoes (Smith & Hughy, 2006; Drew, 2010). Drew (2010) argues that effective strategic leadership is one of the important factors in the administration of HLIs. Strategic leadership requires a certain level of competency to ensure that the leaders are able to delegate the vision of the university to all levels as well as influence the behaviours of the HLI community.

The Competencies Model

The leader of an organization is expected to not just lead, but to be a role model, in addition to maintaining organizational vision and mission. The leader is expected to possess certain competencies – adequate skills, knowledge, and abilities – these include not only attributes of job-holders but also personal characteristics required for job performance (Guravan & McGuire, 2001). According to Spencer and Spencer (1993), there are five types of competencies that are categorized into two dimensions: visible and hidden competencies. Visible competencies include knowledge and skill competencies; these are known as functional competencies. These competencies determine one's ability to carry out duties and address the ability of an individual to perform effectively in job-relevant conditions. Meanwhile, characteristics of people and self-concept, traits and motive competencies are usually hidden. Hidden competencies are also known as generic competencies. Characteristics of people, self-concepts, traits and motivations can be categorized into two competencies: core and professional. Core competencies encompass all personal attributes and values such as discipline, integrity, transparency, justice and accountability. Professional competency is based on knowledge and skills such as leadership quality, effective teamwork, communication

and individual credibility. Out of these two types, generic competency is more difficult to be instilled.

Over the last 20 years, more organizations have included competencies as a key part of their performance management system (Kessler, 2008). As we move forward, competency is seen as being increasingly important to bolster individual and organizational performance (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). This has become the focal point in management for both the public and private sectors. These findings are aligned with prior research that identified some of these competencies as determinants of organizational performance. A related study found that cognitive, emotional, social and leadership competencies result in enhanced organizational performance (Almatrooshi et al., 2016). The insertion of competency models into numerous levels of management is seen as a driving force for better performance and successful work-related functions. In this regard, an appropriate competency framework is essential in supporting organizational change for better performance (Wallick & Stager, 2002; Vakola, Saderquist & Prastacos, 2007).

Leadership Competencies in Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs)

The discussion on leadership and competencies has gained public attention and its importance has been highly debated since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for qualified and competent leaders is crucial since the performance of organizations depends on the skill levels and competencies of their leaders. In this regard, leadership and competencies related to leadership are significantly important in improving organizational effectiveness and success including in HLIs. A study by Johanim et al. (2022) discovered a significant relationship between job performance and leadership competencies. By focusing on institutional leaders at HLIs, the study explains that the effect of competencies on the job performances of institutional leaders would be more pronounced when leaders have a highly proactive personality. The latter significantly moderates the relationship between leadership and the leading-change dimension. The study confirms that this type of generic competency helps to

improve leaders' ability to create transformational change in highly dynamic higher learning environments.

A growing body of evidence has focused on the importance of leadership competencies as a new dimension of leadership development. This includes the possession of both generic and functional competencies for effective leadership at HLIs (Spendlove, 2007). Top management in higher learning institutions is expected to demonstrate high academic credibility and experienced university life. The study also reveals that extensive research and teaching activities would enhance a leader's functional competency. It could be assumed that these capabilities are largely acquired on the job and work experience. In addition, people skills are equally as important to leading. People skills are broadly represented in transformational leadership attributes which include openness, honesty, the need to consult others, the ability to listen, negotiate and persuade, as well as an ability to think broadly and strategically, and being able to engage with people (Spendlove, 2007; Quintana, Ruiz & Vila, 2014).

The possession of both functional and generic competencies is highly regarded since the nature of leadership in HLI is complex and challenging. This can in part be attributed to traditional values of academic freedom, the collegial nature and the university governance system which are largely under the influence of both government and public values. Since leaders are considered to be the first-in-command, it is fundamental for them to have both academic and professional backgrounds. Their abilities to respond to the growing complexities of institutional management would steadily improve via competency development. Thus, their experience, knowledge and personal skills must be replenished and accentuated for a greater purpose. This process should begin far earlier in the career of those in leadership positions so that those climbing the ladder are aware of the attitudes, behaviour and knowledge good leaders possess. Having these three elements of competency – attitudes, behaviour and knowledge – may assist in leadership development in meeting the increasing demands of the HLI sector. It was suggested that HLI leaders need a combination of leadership and management competencies to address these challenges and to enable the adaptation to new circumstances in higher

learning (Black, 2015). Known as leadership agility, this competency enables the HLI sector to thrive in a fast-changing environment, for instance during a pandemic.

The pandemic changed the educational sector forever. Higher learning institutions (HLIs) experienced unprecedented changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis revealed structural weaknesses in teaching and learning, assessment and resources management that exposed many students to a degradation of their educational experience (Radwan et al., 2020). As a result, this degradation contributed to an increasing number of students suffering from mental health problems. To provide a positive academic environment in times of crisis, HLIs need competent leaders who can ensure the smooth transition of teaching and learning activities due to lockdowns. As decision-makers, they play an essential part in the implementation of remote teaching and learning in addition to ensuring students' engagement in distance learning. Successful e-learning implementation is largely determined by academic leadership competencies. A study by Radwan et al. (2020) indicates that academic leadership competencies had direct and significant effects on student learning outcomes (SLOs) such as cognitive, skill and affective outcomes. Thus, institutions must help academic leaders to develop the right competencies for them to greatly contribute to the university and nation's development.

Adaptability in times of crises requires leaders to equip themselves with another dimension of competencies including e-competencies (Chaudhary et al., 2022). This issue is very much relevant since the pandemic shifted teaching and learning processes at most HLIs. Leaders are expected to embrace the digital transformation taking place and reassess their capabilities such as equipping themselves with the latest ICT skills including e-communication skills, e-technological skills and e-change management skills. These three-core e-competencies need to be ingrained in managing organizations during the pandemic. Possessing these attributes would help leaders become more resilient and able to withstand challenges throughout the crisis.

It is worth noting that the development of leadership competencies has become one of the priorities of HLIs. In the case of higher learning

sectors, leaders are expected to respond to the needs of communities. We need leaders who can protect people, understand students' basic needs in remote teaching and learning, identify new working parameters during Covid-19 and deal effectively with mental health, occupational stress, and well-being of staff, academics and students in HLIs. Given existing expectations, leaders must have strong personal attributes and building capacity, as well as a vision for greater adaptability in times of crises (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021). In meeting those challenges, leaders must acknowledge new responsibilities due to changing learning environments. Thus, having an experienced leader with an adaptable mindset is an added advantage to institutions. On this note, there is great demand for leaders who are capable of rebuilding the capacity of universities to become resilient in a post-pandemic world.

The readiness of HLIs in dealing with uncertainties was evident during the pandemic. Despite numerous challenges, many higher learning institutions underwent a smooth transition and successfully adapted to the rapidly changing situation. As evidenced by several studies, leadership in this time of crisis transcended the transactional nature of leadership to include true leaders who were genuine, adaptive and possessed a strong desire to preserve and protect society in changing circumstances. Leaders must understand the roles played by universities to contribute to society and advance successful changes in the academic context.

Reforming HLI Leadership: Transactional to Transformational Leadership

As COVID-19 highlights and exacerbates social inequality in society, HLIs' roles should be questioned on whether they have achieved social inclusion as one of the purposes of education is to be the leveler in society. Balanced education should enable people to connect and understand the true meaning of humanity as it allows us to have a holistic view of a whole human person; his mental, spiritual, physical and intellectual health and none of these dimensions should be neglected in order to produce responsible and complete human beings. As such, HLI leaders need to revisit the true meaning of

their establishment and not focus on the numerical output-oriented performance measurement. HLI leaders should be able to understand the challenges and maladies of the modern world. The modern world is plagued with the existential vacuum that leads to issues such as loneliness and continuous search for a purposeful life due to many factors, including the rapid advancement of technology and excessive materialism. Furthermore, in the era of Anthropocene, in their pursuit of excellence, HLIs can no longer afford to neglect the social, geopolitical and environmental changes that have resulted from human activities. HLIs should be the frontrunner in providing new ideas and creative solutions to the world that is full of uncertainties.

As universities and colleges adapt to accelerated changes in society, they also move away from the traditional bureaucratic model of administration and adopted managerial practices, especially with the introduction of the New Public Management (NPM) model which borrows private practices to enhance the efficiency of public sector organizations (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018). As NPM influences grow stronger, universities start to embody private practices resulting in the creation of a hybrid model of organization in which universities begin to act like private entities with more centralized decision-making processes. Carvalho and Santiago (2010) encapsulate that due to the pressure applied to HLIs to embed NPM model, which relies on centralized decision-making, strong executive leadership and business-like performance, this has led to the limitation of academic control and saw the rise of managerialism. The increasing managerial control over academia sees the academic leadership take shape in the form of transactional leadership.

Transactional leadership is not able to achieve a vision needed to elevate HLIs to a higher level of excellence. This is because transactional leadership limits the relationship between the leaders and the followers solely based on the exchange of benefits. Often, in the transactional leadership model, employers would align the requirements of the organizations with the interests of the subordinates (Burns, 1978) and therefore, it is seen as unidimensional. As transactional leadership is widely prevalent in HLI settings, it has led to a calculative culture in which one will only act if there are benefits in store for them although

it is not intended to be so. Although studies documented that the transactional leadership model has its advantages in increasing staff performance and motivation levels, it also may hamper employees' self-development and personal growth (Aboramadan & Kundi, 2020).

HLIs need to adapt the transformational model together with the transactional leadership model. A hybrid of both leadership models is shown to be more effective than a singular use of the leadership model (Hansen & Pihl-Thingvad, 2018). The transformational leadership model is often praised for its ability to transcend the leader-follower's relationship beyond the exchange of benefits as the transformational leadership model focuses on the self-development of the employees by providing them with a vision that they share with the organization's leadership and work towards achieving the same goal together with the management. This enables the followers to transform their behaviours, attitudes and values as they embrace the same vision instead of merely complying with the instructions given by the leaders (Jyoti & Bhau, 2015). Studies have shown that transformational leadership resulted in higher motivation, improved creativity level and better performance (Bass, 1997; Hannes & Johnson, 2015; Jamali et al., 2021). HLI leaders should embrace transformational leadership as a means to boost morality, lead with empathy and inspire the community to be a positive agent of change in society. Furthermore, transformational leadership is not only limited to the upper echelon of university management but can also be practised by all members of the HLI community at all levels. Therefore, transformational leadership can bring more value as it can lead to a robust transformation of the institution as it does not only focus on rewards and punishment, rather it seeks to provide greater satisfaction and joy to the members of the organization by being involved in the process. An effort to transform the organization will enable members to learn how to make the team transformational and the cycle continues until each member of the organization embraces the vision of the leader and work towards it together (Bass, 1997; Putra et al., 2021; Fauzi, Martin, & Ravesangar, 2021).

In addition, transformational leadership touches on another dimension not previously discussed in other leadership models which is the spiritual aspect. Spirituality in the post-materialistic world is an important aspect to be addressed especially as a human society realizes that materials alone such as money and wealth are not adequate to fulfil human needs. Furthermore, spirituality provides human beings meaning for their existence and a sense of belonging in society. Studies find that there is positive correlation between transformational leadership and academic members' mental and spiritual wellness as the employees reported higher sense of belonging to the organization and better work engagement (Arokiasamy & Tat, 2019; Nauman et al., 2019).

The pandemic jolted shock to HLIs that business should not be run as usual anymore. According to de Godoy and Ribas (2021), the world has moved beyond the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous setting and entered a new phase of brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible epochs (BANI). The world of BANI is characterized by high levels of anxiety, fragility, excessive information, rapid advancement of technology and irregularities. If HLIs are to stay relevant and grow more egalitarian, it must also exponentially adapt in response to global concerns. There needs to be serious self-reflection by HLI leadership on how to bring their HLIs out of their comfort zone and be a game changer in the ever-changing society. COVID-19 is a reminder that universities should be at the frontline to respond and adapt to a crisis as a model for societies. This highlights the need for universities to have adequate capacity-building initiatives which empower individuals. Capacity building here refers to the ability to upscale themselves and others around them. Furthermore, transformative leadership of HLIs will bring positive changes to the communities around as they will bring with them constructive initiatives as all members of HLIs from all levels, students to staff, to act and work together not only within their groups but also with all the affected stakeholders around them with empathy and compassion.

Way Forward

COVID-19 has highlighted that universities should no longer be untouchable, inaccessible and isolated 'ivory towers' that only focus on producing intellectuals. Universities have bigger roles to play in

society. The knowledge produced by universities should be accessible and impactful to society, moving away from the traditional elite-centric institutions. Universities have to undergo reforms in terms of their curricula design, institutional structures and most importantly, a shift in their paradigms. This requires a visionary, knowledgeable, skilful and positive leadership to penetrate the hearts and minds of the HLI communitieas to transform themselves and bring them beyond their comfort zones. Decolonizing knowledge production is an important step in this paradigm shift as the current model of HLIs was built and developed based on the Western hegemony of knowledge. This has led to an obsession with ranking and number games in academia politics while the real purpose of universities being established is side-lined.

The Sejahtera Framework adapted by the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is an example of a transformative leadership effort being applied from top down and bottom up and especially crucial during the times of crises. The Sejahtera concept reminded us to adopt a balanced and holistic approach towards higher learning by empowering the university community at all levels from the highest management to the students and staff, regardless of their ranking, to take action to address pressing issues faced by the society. To empower the higher learning communities, it is pertinent that they are provided with adequate resources and robust infrastructure to ensure the sustainability and continuity of the initiatives. The Sejahtera Framework reminds us that knowledge is not selfish in nature, rather it is meant to serve the community, including the environment that has been neglected for so long in the name of economic development. The triadic relationship between God, man (and woman), and the universe is the fundamental foundation of higher education. Knowledge without soul and values would create destruction rather than build civilization.

The Sejahtera concept emphasizes on the transformation of higher learning institutions as an accessible institution which brings 'kesejahteraan' to not only the community within the institution, but also to the society in general. The real meaning of education should protect the five elements of maqasid al-shari'ah which are faith, lineage, wealth, life and intellect of the society. Both the formal academic structure and non-formal student life are embedded with sejahtera

elements to create a conducive environment to produce a balanced graduate who has good qualities of leadership (Khalifah), high level of integrity (Amanah), knowledgeable (Iqra'), and beneficial to the society (Rahmatan lil-'Alamin).

Conclusion

HLIs play a crucial role in providing society with an integrated framework to not only save but to ensure the survival of humanity throughout future crises because of what has been seen as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this includes the mental health crisis. There are several antecedent factors to enhance leadership competencies as well as the role of the university in dealing with mental health. Firstly, the university must understand the roles it plays in educating people to be good humans and is not merely a training institution that increases economic prosperity and individual wealth. Current issues related to poor mental health during the pandemic tell us that education is not serving the purpose it has been meant to serve; instead, the system has become discriminative and thus has contributed to mental illness. Humanizing education is the best solution to dealing with the mental health crisis. This is essential in creating good human beings and goes on to benefit humanity. This is where the university must serve its purpose by educating people to be good humans by emphasizing the importance of spiritual health, physical health, mental health and intellectual health. As such, humanizing education would inevitably mitigate the mental health crisis through these four elements and develop human beings who have improved work-life balance. A leader needs to understand the role played by the university and education through this balanced perspective. It is time for us to reinvent the role of education and bring back the idea of humanizing education to level society and humanity holistically. This would ensure continuous engagement with the wider community, especially in times of crises. The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) has taken the initiative to develop the Sejahtera framework that genuinely plays its role as a provider for humanity.

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Mobilising Institutional Forces to Nurture Mental Health during Crises: The Experience of IIUM Mental Health and Psychosocial Care Team (IMPaCT)

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Introduction

The psychological care team in IIUM was established a day before the Movement Control Order (MCO) went into effect on March 18, 2020. Given the university management was preparing the university personnel to be prepared in entering into a lockdown condition, a group of Psychology, Social Sciences and Islamic Studies academics had come to a consensus on the need to make the university community be psychologically ready to live in the movement control order situation. This also led to the awareness of the need for an effective mental health response team to manage the psychological impacts the pandemic had and its effects on the IIUM community, therefore birthing the formation of the team.

The team was initially known as the IIUM COVID-19 Psychosocial Support Team and consisted of 14 individuals. The team expanded with the addition of people from diverse faculties, all of whom shared a similar purpose of empowering and fostering well-being. Currently, the team consists of 22 individuals from a variety of faculties, including the AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge