

Leadership in Higher Education: Private Higher Education

Elizabeth Lee
Executive Director, Sunway University College

Introduction

In recent years, dramatic changes in higher education (HE) have occurred on a global scale and leaders in education are faced with new challenges and opportunities. Higher education can no longer be viewed solely as a national endeavour as overseas universities actively position themselves as alternate providers of HE. Local HE institutions (HEIs) are also looking outward, actively attracting international students to enrol in local institutions, or going global by setting up overseas branches. Recognising these changes, the Ministry of Higher Education has drawn up the National Higher Education Strategic Plan in 2007 to reform HE in the country. Within this Plan, leadership features prominently and in fact forms one of the five pillars for transforming HE in Malaysia.

What is Leadership

In the literature, there are many definitions of leadership. In this paper, the following definitions are proposed:

“Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow” (Kouzes and Posner, 2002).

“Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2004).

“Leadership is the ability of developing and communicating a vision to a group of people that will make that vision true” (Valenzuela, 2008).

The definitions suggest that leadership is largely about relationship and action, the ability of leaders to inspire and influence the whole team to transform a vision into reality and to move the institution to a higher level. The modern concept of leadership goes beyond the authority and charisma of a single leader, but rather emphasises collaborative endeavour between the leadership and its employees for collective advancement rather than through authoritative command. Whatever the view, there are certain central concepts of leadership which are considered important for private institutions.

What Constitutes a Good Leadership in Private Higher Education Institutions

a) Vision and commitment

The leadership of a private HEI is guided by its vision which provides the goal and direction for the institution to progress. The vision should be easily understood and clearly explained to all staff so that they can accept it as a common vision and are committed to their roles in achieving it. Strong

commitment by the leadership is essential to inspire others to change and to contribute towards its fulfilment and progress of the institution.

b) Leadership qualities and values

Leaders of private HEIs should possess certain positive qualities and values which enable them to motivate and influence their staff towards achieving a common goal. They should be honourable and conduct themselves in an ethical, impartial and fair manner in their dealings with their staff and clients. When required, they should demonstrate a sense of humour, be a good listener, broad-minded, and at times compassionate. By setting themselves as examples, these values will filter down to the staff and be gradually embraced into an institutional culture.

Private education is highly competitive and dynamic, and leaders should be well-informed on local and international developments in the industry and be constantly alert to change. Leaders should have agile minds to rapidly recognise potential threats and opportunities, and to take appropriate proactive steps to exploit them.

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c) Teamwork

Leaders cannot work in isolation and collaboration between leaders, staff and students is vital for the smooth running of the institution. Many leaders have embraced team leadership by providing substantial independence and responsibility in decision making to the Departments and Schools including course management, staff recruitment and student matters. Leaders should also make conscientious efforts to recognise individual staff by name as it cultivates a sense of

belonging, recognition and pride. The strength and weaknesses of each staff should be established, and opportunities provided for them to improve on their weaknesses or further develop their strength. Knowing individual staff allows the leadership to optimise job placement and promotion.

d) Rapport through communication

Communication is a powerful instrument for the leadership to cultivate strong rapport and commitment among its staff. Leaders must ensure that employees are well-informed about the institution, its current goals and overall strategy to achieve these goals. Staff should be clear on what is expected of them, the performance of the institution and their contributions towards achieving them. Such information will enable the staff to identify more closely with the institution, which then becomes 'our' institution.

e) Recognition and rewards for contribution

Due recognition is given to staff who have contributed to the institution. Private institutions reward their staff for their accomplishments, show appreciation for their work and motivate them to establish a higher level of achievement. Outstanding and dynamic staff are continually groomed into future leaders which is crucial for succession planning of the institution.

Challenges and Issues Confronting the Leadership of Private Higher Education Institutions

Higher education is rapidly changing and leaders in private HEIs are faced with changing sets of challenges as they struggle with increasing competition, escalating cost and demand for improved quality. Globalisation has also generated significant threat to local private institutions as many overseas universities have set up branch campuses within the country. Under such conditions, the leadership in private institutions has to exhibit considerable innovation and dynamism to confront the wide range of challenges facing them. These include:

a) Ensuring quality amidst escalating cost

For private institutions, the quality of education offered is one of the most important factors for their success and survival. However, quality education is expensive as franchising cost, staff salary, and the price of equipments and supporting resources have escalated tremendously. Further, they have to support a reasonable research programme which necessitates additional resources. To pay for their expenditures, private institutions have to rely mainly on their enrolment, but the fees charged must remain highly competitive owing to stiff competition in the sector. Under such pressures, the leadership of private institutions must be exceedingly innovative and resourceful to improve quality with rising costs.

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b) Expanding student enrolment in the face of mounting competition

Student enrolment is the key to the success of private institutions. Presently, higher education is extremely competitive as public and private HEIs compete for the same pool of students, whether local or foreign. Additionally, many overseas universities with substantially higher financial resources are advertising aggressively to draw local and foreign students to their local branches or overseas campuses. With such stiff competition, the leadership of private HEIs has to continually motivate and mobilise its staff to increase enrolment.

c) Sustaining a team of highly qualified academic staff

The university is as good as its academia, but good lecturers are not easily available. They come at a high price, and are highly mobile. Recruiting and retaining good lecturers is a persistent problem in private institutions as they are often attracted to the industries and public universities by higher remunerations. Hence, leaders of private institutions not only have to continually induce efficient lecturers to stay, but also introduce innovative ideas to recruit good academic staff.

d) Maintaining cost-effectiveness

Private institutions offer a wide range of niche programmes which they are comfortable with to generate a surplus. Until recently, many of these are franchised programmes which are costly and can include extra conditions such as staffing requirements. To be sustainable, private institutions should establish their own programmes although initial acceptance can be challenging as clients need to be convinced of their quality. Even so, many private institutions have started such

programmes which have been recognised by their clients as equivalent to quality education.

A further challenge for private institutions is that knowledge is rapidly expanding which necessitates continual upgrading of existing courses and the introduction of new and popular programmes. Such changes are costly, require recruitment of specialised lecturers and investment in new resources and time, especially when it necessitates approval and accreditation by the ministry.

e) Harnessing globalisation and internationalisation

Private HEIs have to meet new challenges brought about by increasing globalisation and internationalisation of modern higher education. Increasingly, the leadership of private HEIs has to engage with competition from branch campuses of overseas universities. To stay relevant, they have to weigh new initiatives to compete or co-operate with these global universities, or embark on globalisation themselves by setting up their own overseas branches.

Internationalisation has also become important for private universities as their customer base declined with increasing number of local students furthering their education overseas. They are forced to expand their enrolment by attracting international students globally and injecting a more international dimension into their curricula. These create new challenges including course adjustments, entry qualification, visa application, hostel facilities and cultural adaptation.

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f) Coping with bureaucracy

Government input and control is inevitable in any country, especially if it concerns education. In the majority of cases this is essential as it ensures quality within the industry. However, in some instances, bureaucracy has crept in,

hindering the smooth running and development of private institutions. Many of these have been overcome, but the issue remains as a challenge for leaders of private institutions.

Summary

Through the years, private HEIs have evolved their own form of leadership, each suited to the particular institution and its specific challenges. Although the forms of leadership are variable, they have nevertheless enabled private HEIs to survive and thrive in an ever-changing environment and set the way for future expansion. In fact, the leaderships of private HEIs in Malaysia have demonstrated considerable resilience and success on a global basis. The large number of overseas students from a wide range of countries enrolled in private institutions is a testimony of this. However, the leaders of private HEIs are well aware of the dynamism within the industry and are always ready to change to ensure private HEIs in Malaysia can thrive and remain sustainable in the future.

References

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