Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

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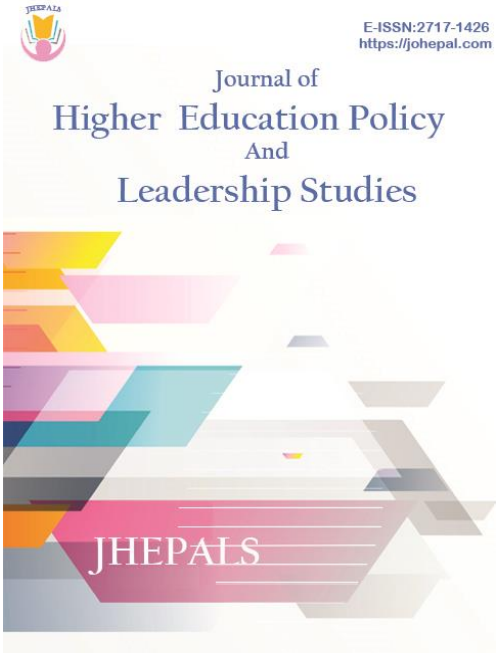

Building a Resilient Change-Oriented Virtual Leadership Framework for the Higher Education Sector: A Narrative Review

Yew-Chee Chew *

Email: yewchee.chew@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5441-9307

Siti Rohaida Mohamed Zainal *

Email: siti_rohaida@usm.my

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2588-5947

* *School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), MALAYSIA*

Colloquium Received	Colloquium Accepted	Published Online
2022/06/23	**2022/11/12**	**2022/12/31**

Cite colloquium as:

Chew, Y. C., & Mohamed Zainal, S. R. (2022). Building a resilient change-oriented virtual leadership framework for the higher education sector: A narrative review. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *3*(4), 135-141. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.52547/johepal.3.4.135

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.4.135]

"Colloquium"

Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 3 Issue: 4
pp. 135-141
DOI:
10.52547/johepal.3.4.135

Building A Resilient Change-Oriented Virtual Leadership Framework for the Higher Education Sector: A Narrative Review

Yew-Chee Chew *
Siti Rohaida Mohamed Zainal

Highlights

- The Covid-19 pandemic has forced many institutions to convert to the virtual work model in the blink of an eye, protecting the health of students and employees while maintaining digital productivity.
- Many pedagogues in higher education institutions reported that their remote work experience during the pandemic lacked leadership support and training, especially in the areas of information technology competencies.
- This issue clearly indicates that leadership and management were unprepared to deal with virtual transformation when the dynamic external influence calls for a virtual change.
- This paper uses a narrative review method to explore the historical context of telecommuting and critically review the development of virtual leadership literature in higher education, which finally leads to formation of a comprehensive virtual leadership conceptual framework that could be utilised in future research.

Keywords: Higher Education; Virtual Leadership; Change Management; McKinsey's 7s; Remote Work

*Corresponding author's email: yewchee.chew@gmail.com

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Introduction

The grim COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted businesses in Malaysia, especially the higher education industry. Many students suffered immensely as schools and universities were closed. Malaysian higher education institutions underwent profound changes in their daily operation when the government announced that the education sector was non-essential during the lockdown restrictions due to the pandemic. The emergency transition to virtual classes to curb the deadly virus had pushed many lecturers with little or no experience to adapt quickly to the new teaching and learning environment. Higher education leaders must overcome practical concerns such as technology automation, connectivity and interactions, assessments, and science lab experiments. Even though previous virtual leadership scholarships, such as Alward and Phelps (2019), attempted to define the meaning of virtual leadership in higher education, the literature on virtual leadership in higher education is still lacking. The future of virtual leadership in higher education is still vague. Perhaps, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has escalated stakeholders in higher education to rethink the new way of leadership and governance for future resilience and sustainability. Hence, this paper strives to fulfil the objectives of reviewing the literature using a narrative review method (Ferarri, 2015) and identify the themes of change-oriented virtual leadership to formulate a conceptual research framework that guides future research on change-oriented virtual leadership.

The Rise of Virtual Leadership

The word telecommuting is an old term used, and the idea of telecommuting was first coined by Nilles (1976) in his book, where he started the notion of moving work to the workers rather than moving the workers to work. Many view virtual leadership as an organisation's highly robust and dynamic system, which could be in the form of structural support with multi-level shared leadership (Trenerry et al., 2021). Avolio and Kahai (2003) indicated that virtual teams highly depend on technology, and the need to learn to be tech-savvy further complicates how leaders manage virtual teams. In other words, technology mediates leadership effectiveness in the virtual environment. However, it could become toxic when leaders possess inconsistencies, mistrust, loss of energy, and lack of organisational direction or motivation if non-verbal virtual communication is not handled appropriately.

Trenerry et al. (2021) also added that managing a virtual team requires different transformational, communicational and technological competencies. Some scholars, such as Helmold (2021), have considered change management as core to virtual leadership, while others felt managing a virtual team needs consideration of cross-cultural barriers, inclusiveness and diversity (Eisenberg et al., 2021). As virtual leaders mostly manage team members through the virtual environment, scholars felt that transformational or transactional leadership, coupled with the appropriate personality and behaviour, has a tremendous influence on virtual teams. Research also described transformational leadership in the virtual environment as self-led teams which mediate employee motivation. In contrast, several others felt that managing a virtual team is all about inspirational influence to drive an extensively dispersed team. Although virtual teams could provide much

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flexibility and autonomy to employees, establishing trust in various ways is crucial to encourage productivity and team direction.

Virtual Leadership in Higher Education

The virtual classroom is not a new concept in higher education, as an extensive body of literature has dwelled on technology and the digitalisation of teaching and learning in higher education. Arnold and Sangra (2021) reviewed 49 articles on higher education e-leadership literature published between 2013 and 2017. The article seems to imply that leadership in higher education is tied heavily to technology, e-learning, ICT, digital transformation, curriculum or instructional design, as well as teaching and learning innovation. Although technology is core to a virtual environment in higher education, leadership for remote higher education is far more complicated than just adopting technological sophistication and implementing innovative instructional designs. Research on virtual leadership from the perspective of management is often neglected as many scholars perceive immediate pertinent areas related to technology, learning and teaching as more critical and relevant.

The evolution of distance learning and the development of digital convenience have elevated partial or complete off-campus learning to new possibilities. The accessibility of quality electronic publications and libraries has since emerged to allow vast flexibility in curriculum development. It has provided a dream come true for many people who never had the opportunity to learn or gain a qualification. However, Brabazon (2007) once critiqued the higher education system as "throwing money at technology in education, not education in technology". For example, higher education leaders failed to recognise the danger of students researching using the internet, notably Google, as high-quality academic experts do not filter search engine results. This trend is especially devastating for undergraduate students as they are assumed to have interpretive skills to filter the results generated by a mere search engine. Researchers and leaders need to be more selective, critical, and strategic in adopting technology in higher education, regardless of research or higher education administration.

Sathithada and Niramitchainont (2019) suggested that e-leaders anticipate three future sustainable higher education e-leadership scenarios: international collaboration, innovation and environmental sustainability, and addressing deprived situations caused by users' unstrained behaviours, ageing society and generation gaps. Much similar research also focused on distributed leadership in the online learning environment. Merely understanding how to use technology to teach or conduct meetings will not guarantee leadership success virtually. University leaders are calibre professors who are often not trained for administration work. Alward and Phelps (2019) also added the importance of leadership competencies such as trust, emotional intelligence, training and development, communication, team building, technology, leadership styles, employee recognition and motivation, and other virtual leadership competencies distinctive to higher education.

Changed-Oriented Framework

Helmold (2021) explained that a few factors triggered the behaviour, styles and working concept changes – digitisation, connectivity, globalisation and demographic change.

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Helmold named this new way of work New Work. New Work in higher education has also become increasingly important during times of crisis and other external environmental influences. Change management is a risky business as the endeavour usually fails to meet expectations or involves a high opportunity or process costs. Nevertheless, change management initiatives are crucial as they could prevent problems and increase organisational resilience. Founded by former McKinsey consultants Peters and Waterman, Jr. (1982), frameworks such as McKinsey 7s outline the interrelated factors that influence the ability to change in an organisation. Although some virtual leadership literature in higher education attempted to highlight the importance of change management, several other transformational-oriented leadership tends to emphasise motivational components such as trust, inspirational, distributed and shared leadership. All the concepts appeared to be fragmented, particularly in the context of higher education.

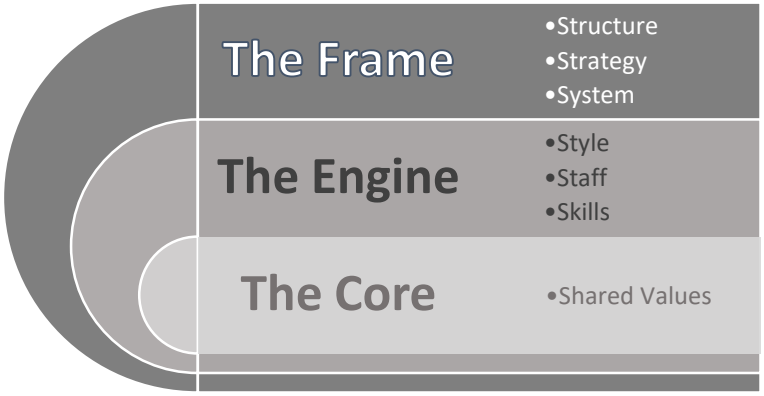

Figure 1. A conceptualisation of change-oriented virtual leadership (Adapted source: McKinsey & Company, 2008)

Table 1.
Change-Oriented Higher Education Virtual Leadership Variables (Adapted source: McKinsey & Company, 2008)

Component in Institution	Change-Oriented Virtual Leadership Thematic Variables in Higher Education
Structure	Multi-level, distributed, flexible & autonomous
Strategy	Dynamic, situational, lean & agile, change management
System	Technological dependence, AI automation, online tools
Style	Transformational, trust, inspirational, distributed, tech-oriented, self-led
Staff	Diversity management, geographically dispersed, KPI transparency, frequent training
Skills	Collaborative intelligence, tech-savvy, non-verbal communication
Shared Values	High-quality research, teaching & learning innovation, internationalisation, global partnership & collaboration

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Virtual transformation is not an overnight endeavour, and the change management process pertinently remains a solid framework to guide virtual leadership conceptualisation. In this article, the author offers a proposition of a change-oriented virtual leadership framework, adapting the McKinsey 7s (McKinsey & Company, 2008) as illustrated in Figure 1 and Table 1). The framework has three layers: the frame, the engine and the core of the virtual organisation. The frame forms the architectural pillars of the organisation, while the engine consists of the dynamics that drive the virtual team. The core is the primary mission and vision that the frame and engine strive to attain. This conceptual framework can guide future virtual leadership research, regardless of the higher education context or even in various other sectors. The virtual leadership framework is handy as it could be used to investigate unprecedented leadership changes in the dynamic business environment, or it could just serve as a starting point for exploring new governance that could be implemented in an institution's virtual transformation.

Conclusion

The pandemic has unfolded new possibilities for new research directions in virtual leadership. Cortellazzo et al. (2019) raised various questions about current virtual leadership research, which triggers reconsideration of the meaning of virtual leadership in the higher education sector. The authors acknowledged that the success of digitalisation implementation is highly related to the changes in organisational cultures and values. However, they doubted the integrity and capability of virtual leaders in planning and using technology and lamented that the roles of virtual leaders are still vaguely defined. The literature also lacks comprehensive quantitative studies. Hence, different independent and dependent variables could be formulated and tested with the conceptual framework proposed in this review. Future studies regarding the feasibility of retaining top talents in the country through enabling virtual leadership in higher education could also be explored further. Although the grass on the other side of the world may be greener, virtuality in higher education may be the tool to bridge the distance, enabling talents to enjoy a similar educational aspiration while remaining in their homeland, further decreasing the impact of brain drain in a nation due to emigration or re-expatriation.

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.4.135]

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding

The authors have no funding to report for this study.

Human Participants

No human participants are involved, as this is a fully conceptual paper.

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Mr. Yew-Chee Chew is a business lecturer at INTI International College Subang in Malaysia. His research focuses primarily on developing talent management through different collaborative mechanisms and the well-being of the workforce. A doctorate candidate in Universiti Sains Malaysia, he currently teaches various management and human resource subjects offered by the Swinburne University of Technology Australia and teaches music during his leisure time.

Dr. Siti Rohaida Mohamad Zainal is an Associate Prof. at the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Malaysia. She graduated with a BBA from the University of Missouri, Kansas City, USA and an MBA degree from the USM. She joined USM in August 2008 after completing her PhD at the UiTM, Shah Alam. Siti Rohaida is attached to Strategy and Organisational Management at USM and teaches HR courses. Currently, she is the Deputy Dean of Academic, Career and International.

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