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**Role of Sustainable Faculty Leadership in Shaping Learning Organizations
in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions**

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the role of sustainable leadership in fostering learning organizations within Malaysian public higher education institutions. Using focus group discussions with academic staff from three public universities, the research identifies how sustainability-driven leadership influences long-term strategic planning, institutional adaptability, and faculty empowerment. Thematic analysis reveals that sustainable leadership fosters innovation, cultural transformation, and alignment with institutional visions, thereby supporting continuous learning and enhancing organizational resilience. The results contribute to understanding leadership in the Malaysian context and recommend the integration of sustainable practices to enhance future readiness. The study also advocates for further research incorporating comparative and quantitative methods to improve generalizability.

Keywords: Sustainable Leadership; Learning Organization; Higher Education; Qualitative Research

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1.0 Introduction

In recent years, higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide have faced increasing pressure to adapt to rapidly changing social, technological and environmental conditions. In Malaysia, local universities are similarly challenged to remain competitive and relevant by fostering innovation, continuous learning and sustainable development. Leadership plays a pivotal role in enabling such transformation. Among contemporary approaches, sustainable leadership has gained recognition for its emphasis on long-term vision, ethical stewardship and adaptive capacity (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Visser & Courtice, 2011).

Unlike short-term management styles, sustainable leadership aligns with institutional strategies that support resilience and future readiness. This leadership approach connects closely with the concept of the learning organization, which refers to institutions that continuously transform themselves through shared vision, systems thinking and collective learning (Senge, 1997). Embedding

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sustainability into leadership practices ensures alignment with principles of environmental stewardship, social responsibility and economic viability.

In Malaysia, the Higher Education Blueprint 2015–2025 outlines strategies to sustain leadership commitment and ensure transformation continuity by monitoring progress and resolving institutional challenges (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Although the literature has explored sustainable development leadership traits, contextual and contingency approaches (Leal Filho et al., 2020), there remains a significant knowledge gap in understanding how sustainable leadership manifests in faculty level practices and impacts learning organization development in Malaysian public HEIs. Scholars such as Gerard et al. (2017) and Sharma (2019) affirm the potential of sustainable leadership to enhance educational quality, job satisfaction and organizational learning. However, empirical studies remain limited, especially within the unique cultural and governance frameworks of Malaysia's higher education system. Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of sustainable faculty leadership in shaping learning organizations in Malaysian public HEIs. In particular, it seeks to examine how sustainable leadership practices contribute to the formation and development of learning organizations within HEIs. Using a qualitative approach, the study investigates how academic leaders perceive and practice sustainability in leadership and how these practices support institutional adaptability, long-term strategic development, and faculty empowerment. The findings are intended to enrich the understanding of sustainable leadership and offer actionable insights for leadership development and policy in higher education

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education

Sustainable leadership emphasizes continuity, systemic improvement, and the long term well being of educational institutions and stakeholders. It is grounded in values such as ethical governance, inclusivity and capacity building (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004). In contrast to leadership models focused on short-term gains, sustainable leadership integrates environmental, economic and social considerations into institutional decision making (Visser & Courtice, 2011). In the context of higher education, sustainable leadership supports innovation, encourages adaptive systems and promotes inclusive collaboration (Fullan & Scott, 2009). Recent studies show that universities led by sustainability minded leaders demonstrate stronger alignment with sustainable development goals and increased organizational resilience (Bolden et al., 2023; Leal Filho et al., 2020). Nevertheless, applying these leadership values in practice can be complex due to varying institutional cultures and political constraints (Dyer & Dyer, 2017). Particularly in Malaysia, where hierarchical decision making is still prevalent, embedding sustainability in leadership at the faculty level remains a significant challenge

2.2 Learning Organizations and Leadership

Peter Senge's (1997) theory of the learning organization provides a useful framework for understand how institutions can continuously evolve. Learning organizations are defined by five key disciplines: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning. These principles foster environments where individuals and groups are encouraged to reflect, collaborate, and innovate. Leadership plays a crucial role in establishing a learning culture. Leaders act as facilitators of shared vision, encourage open dialogue, and empower members to take ownership of their learning journeys (Dixon, 1999). More recent research underscores that when leadership incorporates sustainability principles, it enhances organizational learning by embedding long-term thinking and strategic adaptability (Lozano et al., 2013; Rana et al., 2016). Within higher education, a learning organization approach enhances responsiveness to external shifts, including policy changes, technological innovation, and evolving student needs. A leadership culture that integrates coaching, reflective practice, and mentorship has been found to support self directed learning and team development (Chen & Gabrenya Jr., 2021).

2.3 Sustainable Leadership and Learning Organizations in Malaysia

Malaysia's higher education sector is shaped by policy frameworks such as the Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint 2015–2025, which stresses internationalization, innovation, and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Within this evolving policy landscape, sustainable leadership has been recognized as vital to driving systemic change in public universities. However, studies exploring how these leadership practices actually translate into institutional learning behaviors remain scarce. Empirical research by Zain et al. (2017) and Cheng & Zhu (2021) shows that Malaysian HEIs face challenges in aligning leadership with the dynamics of sustainability and knowledge transfer. Cultural factors such as collectivism and respect for hierarchy can both support and hinder the adoption of sustainable, inclusive leadership. These complexities suggest the need for a more nuanced understanding of how faculty level leaders in Malaysia enact sustainability in their decision-making, influence collaboration, and promote continuous learning.

2.4 Research Gap and Theoretical Foundation

While the concepts of sustainable leadership and learning organizations are individually well established, their intersection especially in faculty level leadership contexts is not well documented. Few studies examine how sustainability principles are operationalized by academic leaders in Malaysian HEIs to foster learning organization characteristics. This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Senge's Learning Organization Theory (1997), which offers a system based lens to analyze how institutions cultivate knowledge, collaboration, continuous learning and Hargreaves and Fink's Sustainable Leadership Model (2004), which emphasizes the importance of preserving and building institutional capacity for long term success.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how sustainable leadership practices are implemented and experienced by academic staff in Malaysian public higher education institutions (HEIs). Qualitative methods were considered appropriate to gain an in depth understanding of leadership perceptions, behaviors and institutional culture within real life educational settings. To collect rich and contextually relevant data, the study used Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as the primary method. FGDs were selected for their ability to elicit diverse perspectives, encourage dialogue, and uncover shared meanings across participants (Krueger & Casey, 2014). This method was particularly suited to capturing the collective voice of academic staff regarding sustainability practices in leadership. The discussions were conducted virtually via Google Slides platforms for accessibility and convenience. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants with direct experience in academic leadership roles. A total of five academic staff members from three public HEIs in Malaysia participated in the study. These participants held positions such as head of department, program coordinator, and senior lecturer and were involved in institutional planning and decision making processes.

Participant selection criteria included a minimum of 5 years of experience in higher education, active engagement in academic governance or leadership activities and willingness to share reflections on leadership and institutional change. This sampling approach ensured the inclusion of informed and diverse voices aligned with the research objectives. The FGD was conducted via Google Slides, enabling academic staff to respond to each question. Participants were given one to two weeks to complete their input, with follow up reminders provided. A semi structured discussion guide was developed to ensure consistency across sessions while allowing for flexibility in responses. All FGD sessions were recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: Familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the final report. To ensure analytical rigor, an expert checking process was conducted with two senior scholars in educational leadership. They reviewed the emergent themes and coding structure for relevance and coherence. Additionally, peer review was applied through an independent coder who cross checked the transcripts. Any coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Malaya's research ethics committee. Participants were briefed about the study's aims, assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and provided informed consent. They were also given the right to withdraw at any point during the study.

4.0 Findings

Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed three interrelated themes that reflect how sustainable leadership practices contribute to the development of learning organizations in Malaysian public higher education institutions (HEIs). Each theme aligns with one or more of the study's research objectives and offers insight into leadership strategies that enable continuous learning, innovation, and institutional resilience.

Theme 1: Empirical Framework Formation

(Aligned with Objective 2: To examine how sustainable leadership contributes to learning organization development).

Participants described sustainable leadership as a guiding framework that shapes long term institutional strategy, rather than a self contained initiative. Sustainability was embedded into everyday leadership thinking, policy development and decision making processes. "Sustainable leadership pushes us to think beyond short-term KPIs. It builds a structure where reflection and learning are part of our routine, not just targets," (*Participant 3, Senior Lecturer*). Leaders emphasized aligning leadership actions with shared values and visions, consistent with Senge's concept of shared vision and systems thinking (Senge, 1997). This theme indicates that sustainable leadership establishes a strategic mindset within institutions, one that prioritizes reflection, resilience, and long term educational value.

Theme 2: Institutional Adaptability

(Aligned with Objective 3: To identify leadership elements that enable institutional adaptability).

This theme underscores the role of leadership in facilitating responsiveness to changing educational landscapes. Participants reported that sustainability minded leaders were more willing to support innovation, pilot new pedagogical approaches and adapt to unforeseen circumstances (e.g., policy changes, digital shifts). "We were able to pivot quickly during the pandemic because leadership didn't micromanage they trusted teams to innovate," (*Participant 2, Head of Department*). Sustainable leadership was credited for fostering institutional agility, allowing HEIs to be more open to experimentation and reflective learning. Leaders who emphasized inclusivity and support were better positioned to steer teams through transitions (Terblanche et al., 2018).

Theme 3: Faculty Empowerment and Vision

(Aligned with Objective 1: To explore academic leaders' perceptions of sustainable leadership).

Faculty members described feeling more engaged and motivated when leadership was participative and future focused. Empowerment came through transparent communication, involvement in policy formulation, and recognition of academic contributions. "When our voice matters in planning, we feel part of something bigger like we're shaping the university, not just working for it," (*Participant 5, Programme Coordinator*). This theme revealed that sustainable leadership cultivates a collaborative and purpose-driven culture, reinforcing elements of Senge's team learning and personal mastery. It encourages distributed leadership, where academic staff are both contributors and co owners of the institutional vision. The analysis of the focus group discussions reveals that sustainable leadership plays a pivotal role in cultivating learning organizations within Malaysian public higher education institutions. First, it fosters long-term strategic thinking by embedding sustainability principles into institutional planning, thereby promoting a culture of continuous reflection and resilience. Second, it enhances institutional adaptability by empowering leaders to respond effectively to change, support innovation and navigate complexity with agility. Finally, sustainable leadership contributes to faculty empowerment by encouraging inclusive participation in

decision making, fostering collaboration and aligning individual efforts with the broader institutional vision. Collectively, these leadership practices help shape environments that support ongoing learning, shared ownership and organizational transformation key characteristics of effective learning organizations.

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that sustainable leadership particularly when enacted at the faculty level serves as a critical enabler in fostering learning oriented environments within Malaysian public higher education institutions (HEIs). The themes that emerged from the focus group discussions not only reinforce the conceptual foundation of learning organizations as defined by Senge (1997), but also provide new insights into how sustainability principles are operationalized in real institutional settings. These insights deepen the understanding of how leadership can contribute to long-term organizational growth, adaptability, and faculty engagement (Maguate et al., 2024). The first theme, Empirical Framework Formation, illustrates how sustainable leadership goes beyond administrative oversight to embed values of continuity, ethical governance and shared purpose into institutional planning. This aligns with Senge's disciplines of shared vision and systems thinking, where long-term strategy is co-constructed and evolves over time. Participants indicated that sustainability principles were integral to shaping leadership approaches, ensuring that strategic planning remained forward looking and inclusive. Hargreaves and Fink (2004) conceptualize leaders as stewards of the future, entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding and enhancing the institution's capacity to serve future generations. The second theme, Institutional Adaptability, reflects the dynamic nature of HEIs and the necessity for leadership that can manage complexity, uncertainty and change.

Participants associated sustainability driven leadership with greater institutional agility, particularly in times of disruption. This resonates with Fullan's (2005) model of leadership for systemic change, which advocates for adaptive strategies, distributed leadership, and an openness to experimentation. Within the Malaysian context where public universities often operate under centralized governance and shifting policy demands sustainable leadership was seen as an important counterbalance that encourages flexibility while maintaining alignment with core institutional values. The third theme, Faculty Empowerment and Vision, reinforces the essential role of academic staff in shaping the learning culture of HEIs. Faculty reported feeling more motivated and connected when involved in leadership processes and strategic decision making. This finding aligns with Senge's disciplines of team learning and personal mastery, where empowerment and shared ownership are foundational to learning organization. Moreover, in Malaysian HEIs where hierarchical norms and collectivist values shared leadership practices that emphasize transparency, inclusiveness and collaboration were perceived as particularly effective. These findings are consistent with Chen and Gabrenya Jr. (2021), who emphasize the role of culturally responsive leadership in fostering trust and knowledge sharing. Taken together, the findings support and extend existing theoretical models by showing how sustainability infused leadership practices contribute directly to the growth of learning organizations. The Malaysian case adds contextual richness by demonstrating how cultural and policy dimensions mediate the practice of leadership. This research highlights the importance of moving beyond abstract leadership frameworks and grounding them in specific institutional realities. By doing so, it provides a localized understanding of how sustainable leadership can shape university governance, academic innovation and organizational resilience.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that sustainable faculty leadership plays a fundamental role in shaping learning organizations within Malaysian public higher education institutions (HEIs). Through long-term strategic thinking, institutional adaptability and faculty empowerment, sustainable leadership creates a foundation for continuous learning, collaboration and innovation. The findings reaffirm the relevance of theoretical frameworks such as Senge's learning organization model and Hargreaves and Fink's sustainable leadership principles while contributing new contextual insights specific to Malaysia's higher education landscape. Notably, the study highlights how faculty level leadership, when guided by sustainability values, helps institutions navigate change more effectively, promote shared decision making and align academic goals with broader institutional visions. These practices are essential for HEIs aiming to remain competitive and responsive in a rapidly evolving global education environment. While the study provides valuable qualitative insights, it is subject to several limitations. First, the sample size was limited to five participants from three public HEIs within a specific geographic zone, which may restrict generalizability. Second, as the study relied solely on focus group discussions, the findings are shaped by self reported experiences, which may carry inherent subjectivity.

Third, the absence of triangulation with other data sources (e.g., document analysis or institutional reports) may limit the breadth of evidence. These limitations, however, also provide opportunities for future research to expand the inquiry using broader, more diverse methodologies. To build on the current study, the following directions are proposed for future research: Investigate the role of moderating and mediating variables, such as age, teaching experience, institutional support, and gender, in the relationship between sustainable leadership and learning organization development and employ mixed-method approaches, including surveys, interviews and document analysis, to enhance the robustness, validity, and generalizability of findings. In conclusion, sustainable leadership is not merely an idealistic concept, but a strategic necessity for Malaysian HEIs seeking to thrive in an increasingly complex and interconnected academic world. By embracing leadership models that prioritize adaptability, inclusiveness, and long term vision, universities can cultivate learning organizations capable of withstanding challenges and advancing meaningful transformation in higher education.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to educational leadership and organizational learning by linking sustainable leadership with learning organization practices. It emphasizes how long term vision and sustainability foster continuous growth and adaptability in universities, particularly within Malaysian public HEIs, offering valuable regional perspectives to global research. Beyond education, the findings are relevant to human resource development, public administration, organizational behaviour and strategic planning. These insights support leadership development, policy making and institutional transformation. The qualitative approach enriches understanding of leaders' lived experiences, providing depth beyond quantitative data. Overall, the study offers both theoretical and practical contributions, promoting flexible, sustainability focused leadership models to help higher education institutions navigate future challenges effectively.

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