Strategies for Transforming Doctoral Non-Completion into Academic Leadership Empowerment: Insights from Higher Education Management Practices

Mohamad Zahir Zainudin[1*], Sazelin Arif[1], Ali Hafizar Mohammad Rawi[2], Muhammad Zaki Zaini[3]

[1]Institute Pengurusan Technology dan Keusahawanan Universiti Technical Malaysia Melaka, MALAYSIA

[2]Centre for Language Learning University Technical Malaysia Melaka, MALAYSIA

[3]Faculty of Islamic Economics and Finance University Islam Sultan Sharif Ali, BRUNEI

***Corresponding author**

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ABSTRACT

Doctoral non-completion among academic staff presents a persistent challenge for higher education institutions seeking to maintain competitiveness and leadership capacity. This study explores strategies for transforming doctoral non-completion into academic leadership empowerment within a Malaysian university context. Using a qualitative case study design at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three senior academic leaders. Thematic analysis revealed three interrelated strategies which are structured personal development, empathetic and collaborative culture, and faculty development and career advancement. These strategies collectively reposition non-completion as a developmental pathway rather than a terminal setback. Findings align with Malaysia's Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 and AKEPT's leadership agenda. The noble purpose of this study is to provide actionable insights that enable universities to retain talent, safeguard institutional reputation, and accelerate leadership capacity while doctoral completion remains in progress.

Keywords: Academic leadership; doctoral non- completion; higher education management; leadership empowerment; faculty development.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions worldwide recognize the critical role of doctoral qualifications in sustaining academic excellence, research productivity, and institutional reputation. In Malaysia, the government has invested substantially through initiatives such as the Academic Staff Training Scheme (SLAB/SLAI) to increase the proportion of academic staff holding PhDs. Despite these efforts, doctoral non-completion remains a significant challenge. At Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), for instance, only 68% of academic staff successfully completed their doctoral studies between 2002 and 2022, leaving 32% unable to finish within the allocated time.

This issue poses dual concerns: the professional trajectory of faculty members and the strategic objectives of universities striving for global competitiveness. While academic staff who fail to complete their PhDs return to teaching roles, their leadership potential and institutional contribution may be compromised. Existing literature emphasizes the importance of academic leadership in driving innovation, fostering collaboration, and ensuring quality education. However, limited research addresses how universities can empower academic leadership among faculty members who experience doctoral setbacks.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring strategies employed by higher education management to transform doctoral non-completion into opportunities for leadership empowerment. Specifically, it investigates institutional practices that support personal development, career advancement, and cultural integration for returning faculty. By focusing on these strategies, the research contributes actionable insights for policymakers and administrators seeking to optimize human capital and maintain institutional resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of academic leadership in higher education is widely recognised as a multidimensional construct encompassing formal administrative roles and broader capacities for influencing teaching, research, and institutional culture (Rowley & Sherman, 2003; Ramsden, 1998; Spendlove, 2007). Leadership development frameworks emphasise qualities such as authenticity, trust, and ethical relationships, which are associated with improved organisational performance and faculty engagement (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Boyatzis, Rochford, & Taylor, 2015). In the Malaysian context, academic leadership is categorised into teaching, research, public, and management domains, reflecting the need for holistic strategies to strengthen leadership pipelines (Azman, Halim, & Komoo, 2012). These perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how universities can empower leadership among faculty who return without completing their doctoral studies.

Doctoral non-completion remains a global challenge, with attrition rates influenced by multiple factors including academic self-efficacy, study strategies, institutional adjustment, and social support (Delnoij et al., 2020; Laurie et al., 2020). Systematic reviews highlight that interventions such as coaching, peer mentoring, and structured workload adjustments can mitigate these risks, yet many programmes fail to address the most critical predictors effectively (Delnoij et al., 2019; Hutchings, 2017). Department-level studies further reveal that financial support and targeted career development significantly predict completion and time-to-degree, whereas generic academic assistance shows inconsistent effects (Zhou & Okahana, 2019). These findings underscore the importance of institutional strategies that go beyond completion metrics to focus on leadership empowerment for non-completers.

Psychosocial wellbeing is another determinant of doctoral success, with evidence showing that students often under-utilise institutional mental health services and rely on external supports, signalling gaps in signposting and supervisor training (Waight & Giordano, 2018). In engineering education, workload intensity and limited access to wellbeing advisors negatively affect persistence, suggesting that recalibrated workloads and embedded support roles are essential (Chadha et al., 2021). Peer support mechanisms, when culturally sensitive and formally recognised, have been shown to reduce isolation and foster resilience among doctoral candidates (Newlands et al., 2025; Frantz et al., 2022). These insights are relevant for institutions seeking to create empathetic and collaborative cultures for returning faculty.

Pedagogical innovations such as group supervision and technology-mediated peer learning have demonstrated effectiveness in sustaining scholarship and reducing isolation, offering scalable alternatives to traditional supervisory models (Hutchings, 2017; Lee, 2018). Similarly, non-cognitive support frameworks advocate for integrating resilience, self-regulation, and social belonging into postgraduate education, as these factors strongly influence retention and professional identity (Frantz et al., 2022). Peer mentoring programmes not only enhance mentee satisfaction but also develop leadership competencies among mentors, reinforcing the potential of structured support systems for academic leadership development (Brown & Chartier, 2025).

Policy frameworks such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 and AKEPT's leadership pathways emphasise empathy, collaboration, and organisational excellence as core leadership attributes (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015; AKEPT, 2022). Aligning with these national priorities, institutional strategies that transform doctoral non-completion into leadership empowerment should integrate three levers: structured personal development through workload flexibility and coaching, faculty development via professional certification and career pathways, and cultural interventions that normalise help-seeking and foster collaboration (Delnoij et al., 2020; Waight & Giordano, 2018). These approaches position non-completion not as a terminal failure but as an opportunity for leadership growth, consistent with the objectives of this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore strategies for transforming doctoral non

-completion into academic leadership empowerment within a Malaysian higher education context. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for capturing the nuanced perspectives of institutional leaders and understanding the social processes underpinning leadership development among returning faculty (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The case study method allowed for in-depth examination of a bounded system in Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) where doctoral non-completion is a recognised challenge and leadership development is a strategic priority.

Population and Sampling

The population comprised senior academic managers from UTeM's ten faculties, including deans and deputy deans responsible for academic affairs. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure participants possessed direct oversight of faculty members returning from study leave without completing their doctoral degrees. Selection criteria included: (a) holding a leadership position at faculty level, (b) involvement in managing study leave and reintegration processes, and (c) experience in implementing academic development initiatives. Three informants consented to participate: two deputy deans (academic) and one dean, representing faculties of engineering and information technology. This sample achieved thematic saturation, as subsequent interviews yielded redundant insights (Marshall, 1996; Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews designed to elicit rich narratives about institutional strategies and cultural practices. Interview questions were informed by the study's objectives and literature on academic leadership and doctoral persistence. Core prompts explored: Support mechanisms for returning staff (e.g., workload adjustments, mentoring, thesis completion opportunities), career development pathways beyond doctoral completion (e.g., professional certifications, leadership roles) and cultural and relational dimensions (e.g., empathy, collaboration, inclusion).

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented by field notes to capture contextual observations. The conversational style encouraged participants to share both formal policies and informal practices, revealing creative adaptations to institutional constraints.

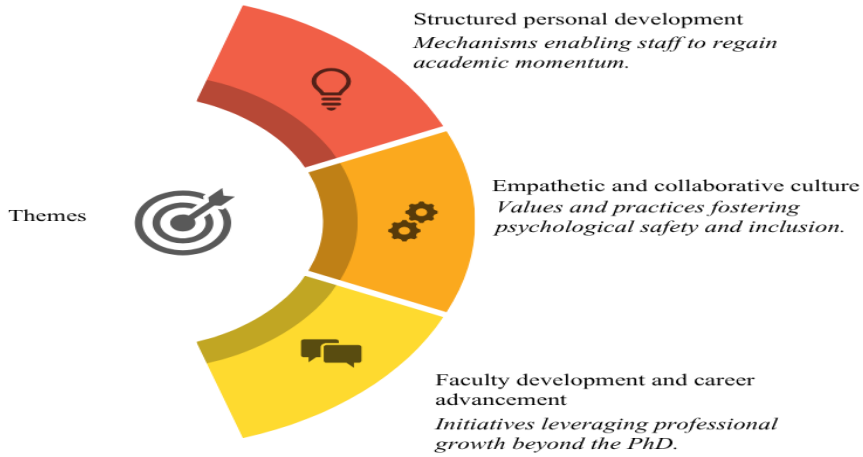
Table 1: Informant's background information

Informants	Academic Leadership Position	Type of University	Years of Experience Holding Position	Field
R1	Deputy Dean (Academic)	Public University	2y	Engineering
R2	Deputy Dean (Academic)	Public University	1y 5mth	Information Technology
R3	Dean	Public University	2y	Engineering

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Initial coding focused on identifying strategies aligned with empowerment rather than deficit framing. Codes were then clustered into three overarching themes (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Themes for the reserch findings



To enhance credibility, data triangulation was achieved by comparing responses across faculties and validating emerging themes against institutional documents and national leadership frameworks (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025; AKEPT guidelines). Reflexive memos were maintained throughout analysis to ensure interpretive rigour and minimise researcher bias.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Themes

The thematic analysis of interviews with three senior academic leaders revealed three interrelated strategies that higher education institutions employ to transform doctoral non-completion into academic leadership empowerment. These strategies are presented as themes: structured personal development, empathetic and collaborative culture and faculty development and career advancement.

Theme 1: Structured Personal Development

Participants emphasised the importance of creating structured opportunities for returning staff to regain academic momentum. This typically involved reducing teaching loads to approximately 9–10 hours per week, removing administrative responsibilities, and granting one to two semesters of protected time for thesis completion. Leaders also reported implementing milestone-based plans and providing academic coaching to sustain motivation. As one respondent explained, "We diagnose the barriers and give them space one or two semesters to complete their writing. The priority is progress, not penalties" (R1). Another added, "We trim the workload and remove admin tasks. The message is clear: finish first, then we build the rest" (R2). These measures were perceived not merely as remedial but as developmental, enabling staff to practise leadership-related skills such as prioritisation, self-management, and reflective learning.

Theme 2: Empathetic and Collaborative Culture

The third theme highlighted the role of empathy and collaboration in fostering psychological safety and inclusion. Leaders described responding swiftly to health or personal challenges and creating opportunities for scholarly interaction through seminars, visiting professors, and external examiner engagements. Such practices aimed to reduce isolation and restore professional identity. As one dean observed, "Every organisation should practise empathy. When health issues surface, we act quickly, support first, then structure" (R3). Another added, "If someone is stuck, we organise exposure, external examiners, visiting professors, so ideas flow and

confidence returns" (R1). Treating returning staff as colleagues rather than "failed students" was considered essential for rebuilding trust and belonging, which in turn accelerated leadership emergence.

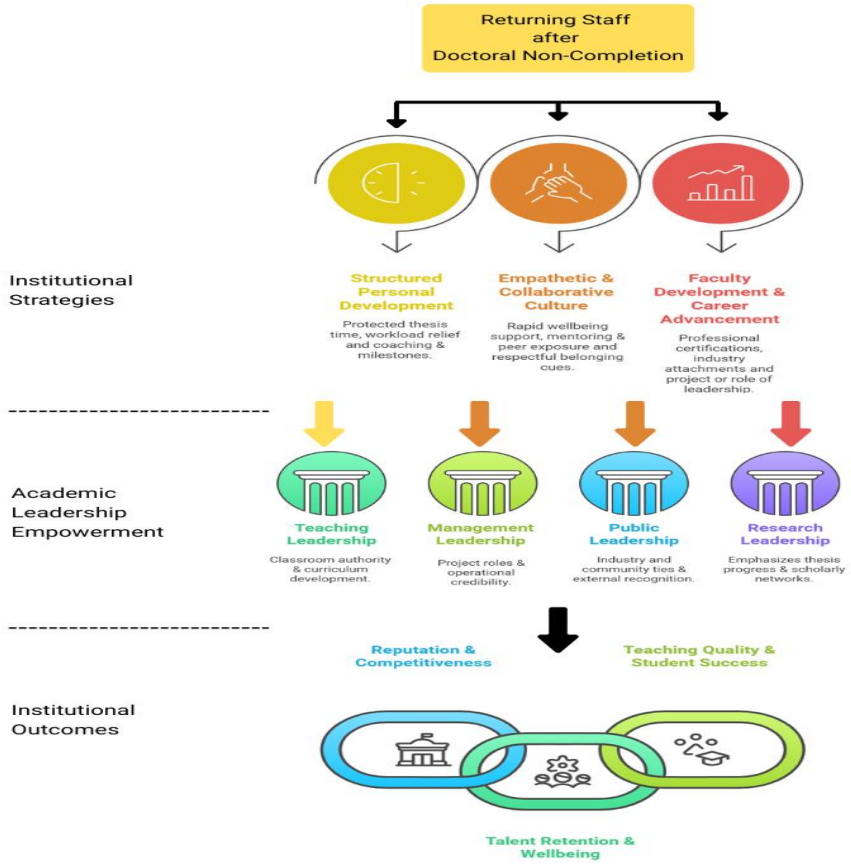
Theme 3: Faculty Development and Career Advancement

Beyond thesis recovery, institutional leaders actively promoted alternative pathways for professional growth. Strategies included encouraging staff to pursue professional certifications, engage in industry attachments, and assume faculty-level leadership roles such as project coordination or committee membership. A dedicated Study Leave Committee monitored individual trajectories to ensure alignment with career aspirations. One participant noted, "If motivation for the PhD is low, we pivot: professional certification, industry experience—anything that builds recognised competence and momentum" (R1). Another stressed, "We strongly encourage instructors to gain professional credentials; it boosts confidence, classroom authority, and external recognition" (R2). These initiatives decoupled leadership readiness from doctoral completion, allowing staff to demonstrate capability and influence across teaching, management, and engagement domains.

Integrated Perspective

Collectively, these strategies illustrate how institutional interventions can reposition doctoral non-completion as an opportunity for leadership development rather than a terminal setback. By combining structured academic recovery, career diversification, and cultural empathy, universities create conditions for returning staff to contribute meaningfully to teaching, research, and governance, thereby sustaining institutional competitiveness and talent retention.

Figure 2: Model of transforming non-completion into leadership empowerment



DISCUSSION

Structured Personal Development

The strategy of providing protected time, workload reduction, and milestone-based coaching directly targets modifiable predictors of doctoral persistence such as study strategies, self-efficacy, and institutional

adjustment (Delnoij et al., 2020; Laurie et al., 2020). By granting one to two semesters of focused writing and removing administrative duties, institutions create conditions that reduce stress and enable returning staff to regain scholarly momentum (Waight & Giordano, 2018; Chadha et al., 2021).

These interventions extend beyond remediation; they cultivate leadership-related behaviours such as prioritisation, reflective learning, and disciplined follow-through. This aligns with evidence that structured academic recovery fosters resilience and self-regulation skills central to leadership development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Boyatzis et al., 2015). Incorporating group supervision further strengthens connectedness and reduces isolation, consistent with Hutchings (2017), who advocates collaborative models for sustaining scholarship.

Empathetic and Collaborative Culture

Empathy-driven practices, including rapid response to health challenges and respectful reintegration, emerged as critical for restoring professional identity. This finding resonates with Waight and Giordano (2018), who highlight the under-utilisation of institutional mental health services and the need for proactive support structures. By treating returning staff as colleagues rather than "failed students," leaders reinforce belonging and trust as key antecedents of leadership emergence (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Exposure to external examiners, visiting professors, and scholarly networks provides intellectual stimulation and confidence-building opportunities. Such collaborative circuits mirror evidence on peer mentoring and group learning as mechanisms for reducing isolation and enhancing resilience (Frantz et al., 2022; Newlands et al., 2025). These practices not only support academic recovery but also signal leadership readiness through public engagement and scholarly visibility.

Faculty Development and Career Advancement

Institutional strategies that promote professional certifications, industry attachments, and faculty-level leadership roles enable staff to demonstrate competence and influence without waiting for PhD completion. This approach aligns with Azman et al. (2012), who conceptualise academic leadership across teaching, research, public engagement, and management domains. It also reflects Zhou and Okahana's (2019) findings that career-relevant supports are more predictive of success than generic academic assistance.

By institutionalising alternative advancement pathways, universities create visible signals of leadership capability such as project coordination and external partnerships that enhance credibility and retention. These measures operationalise Malaysia's Education Blueprint (2015–2025) and AKEPT's leadership agenda, which emphasise holistic leadership development and industry engagement as pillars of national competitiveness (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015; AKEPT, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that doctoral non-completion need not represent a terminal failure; rather, it can serve as a strategic entry point for academic leadership empowerment when supported by targeted institutional interventions. Three interrelated strategies; structured personal development, empathetic and collaborative culture, and faculty development and career advancement emerged as critical levers for transforming setbacks into leadership opportunities.

From a practical standpoint, universities should institutionalise protected recovery periods with reduced teaching loads and milestone-based coaching to restore scholarly momentum. Parallel career pathways, including professional certifications, industry engagement, and faculty-level leadership roles, should be embedded within staff development frameworks to decouple leadership readiness from doctoral completion. Equally important is the cultivation of an empathetic and collaborative culture, which fosters psychological safety, encourages help-seeking, and strengthens scholarly networks through exposure to external experts and peer mentoring.

These strategies align closely with Malaysia's Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 and the Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT) agenda, which emphasise holistic leadership development, talent optimisation, and institutional resilience. By operationalising these national priorities at faculty level, universities can retain valuable human capital, safeguard institutional reputation, and accelerate leadership capacity even as doctoral completion remains in progress.

In sum, the proposed framework offers a pragmatic response to a persistent challenge in higher education, bridging the gap between policy aspirations and institutional realities. Its adoption can contribute to sustaining academic excellence and positioning Malaysian universities competitively within the global knowledge economy.

CONCLUSION

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research employed a single-case design focused on Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), which limits the generalisability of findings to other institutional contexts. Second, the sample size was small (n = 3), comprising only senior academic leaders; perspectives from returning staff who experienced doctoral non-completion were not included, which may have introduced a managerial bias. Third, the qualitative approach, while providing depth, does not allow for statistical inference or measurement of the effectiveness of the identified strategies. Finally, cultural and policy factors specific to Malaysia may influence the applicability of these strategies in different national or institutional settings. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating multi-institutional samples**,** mixed-method designs, and comparative analyses to validate and extend the proposed framework.

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