

Transformational Leadership and Empowerment as Catalysts for 21st Century Skills in Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of higher education in the 21st century is driven by globalization, technological advancement, and the demands of Industry 4.0, all of which require graduates to possess competencies beyond traditional academic knowledge. These competencies, collectively known as 21st century skills, include creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, adaptability, and digital literacy. Employers in Malaysia consistently highlight the gap between academic qualifications and workplace readiness, with many graduates underprepared for rapidly changing environments. While curriculum reform has been emphasized as a solution, leadership and empowerment practices within institutions are equally critical for embedding these competencies. Transformational leadership, characterized by inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence, has been widely recognized as a leadership style that fosters empowerment and innovation. Psychological empowerment, encompassing meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact, serves as the mechanism that links leadership to enhanced performance and skill acquisition. This paper proposes a quantitative framework examining the influence of transformational leadership on 21st century skills among Malaysian private university students, mediated by psychological empowerment. Data will be collected through stratified random sampling of 400–500 undergraduate students, using a structured questionnaire. Measurement instruments will include the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X) for leadership, Spreitzer's empowerment scale, and validated scales for 21st century skills. Data analysis will be conducted using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) via SmartPLS. The study is expected to provide empirical evidence supporting empowerment as a mediator and to contribute practical recommendations for higher education leaders and policymakers.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Empowerment, 21st Century Skills, Higher Education, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century presents both opportunities and challenges for higher education systems worldwide. Rapid technological innovations, globalization, and shifting workplace expectations have heightened the importance of preparing graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also innovative, adaptable, and collaborative. In Malaysia, this imperative has been reinforced by employers' consistent concerns regarding the "skills gap" among graduates. Despite strong academic credentials, graduates often lack critical competencies such as creativity, adaptability, and digital literacy, which are increasingly demanded in Industry 4.0 (Salleh et al., 2024).

The discourse on 21st century skills emphasize six competencies: creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, adaptability, and digital literacy. While these skills are crucial for workforce readiness, their integration into higher education remains inconsistent. Traditional teaching approaches tend to prioritize rote learning and content mastery, limiting opportunities for students to engage in problem-solving, critical inquiry,

and innovative thinking. This highlights the need for systemic approaches that go beyond curriculum reform to address institutional leadership and empowerment.

Transformational leadership is particularly relevant in this context. Transformational leaders articulate vision, inspire followers, and stimulate intellectual engagement, fostering institutional cultures that encourage innovation and adaptability (Yusof et al., 2022). Within educational settings, leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping policies, curricula, and learning environments that cultivate future-ready graduates. Importantly, leadership is not merely about administrators or faculty members but also about creating empowering environments where students perceive meaning, competence, and influence in their educational experiences.

This study proposes that transformational leadership, mediated by empowerment, can significantly enhance the acquisition of 21st century skills. The conceptual framework integrates three theoretical perspectives: Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985), Psychological Empowerment Theory (Spreitzer, 1995), and the 21st Century Skills Framework (P21, 2009; Salleh et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformational Leadership in Higher Education

Transformational leadership, conceptualized by Bass (1985), emphasizes vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. In higher education, such leaders inspire innovation and adaptability by fostering collaboration and critical thinking among faculty and students. Empirical evidence confirms that transformational leadership enhances academic creativity and institutional innovation (Yusof et al., 2022; AlDhaafri & Al-Swidi, 2023). Unlike transactional leadership, which emphasizes compliance, transformational leadership nurtures intrinsic motivation and essential for cultivating future-ready graduates.

Psychological Empowerment as a Mediator

Psychological empowerment consists of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). It is increasingly recognized as the mechanism through which leadership influences outcomes in education. Empowered students feel capable of directing their learning, engaging in inquiry, and applying knowledge creatively. Studies in Malaysian HEIs confirm that empowerment mediates leadership–innovation relationships, enabling enhanced student performance and innovation (Rahim & Ismail, 2023; Shahzad et al., 2024).

The 21st Century Skills in Higher Education

The P21 Framework (2009) and more recent extensions emphasize six competencies: creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, adaptability, and digital literacy (Salleh et al., 2024). These skills underpin graduates' readiness for Industry 4.0. However, rigid curricula and assessment-driven teaching in Malaysia often inhibit their integration (Hussin et al., 2022). Thus, cultivating these competencies requires not only curriculum reform but also leadership-driven empowerment strategies that reshape institutional culture.

Leadership and Skills in Malaysian Private Universities

Private universities in Malaysia play an increasingly significant role in producing graduates for the global workforce. However, studies reveal gaps in empirical research connecting leadership, empowerment, and 21st century skills in this sector. Most existing research focuses on organizational innovation among staff (Rahim & Khushairi, 2024), with limited attention to student outcomes. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how leadership and empowerment shape graduates' acquisition of critical competencies in the Malaysian context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative survey design to examine the influence of transformational leadership on the acquisition of 21st century skills, with psychological empowerment as a mediating variable. The quantitative approach is appropriate as it enables empirical testing of relationships between latent constructs and provides robust generalizability across the student population in Malaysian private universities.

The target population consists of undergraduate students enrolled in private universities across Malaysia. A stratified random sampling method will be used to ensure representation across faculties and academic levels. A sample size of 400–500 respondents is planned, which is consistent with recommendations for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to achieve statistical power and model accuracy.

Data will be collected using a structured questionnaire divided into three parts: transformational leadership (measured by MLQ-5X), psychological empowerment (measured by Spreitzer's empowerment scale), and 21st century skills (validated scales covering creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, adaptability, and digital literacy). All items will be assessed using a five-point Likert scale. Data will then be analyzed using SmartPLS to evaluate both the measurement model (reliability and validity) and the structural model (direct, indirect, and mediation effects).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Leadership and Empowerment

It is hypothesized that transformational leadership will significantly predict psychological empowerment. Leaders who provide intellectual stimulation and individualized support enhance students' sense of meaning and competence, motivating them to engage actively in learning. This aligns with findings by Rahim and Ismail (2023), who showed that empowerment mediates the leadership–innovation relationship in Malaysian universities.

The Empowerment and 21st Century Skills

Psychological empowerment is expected to positively predict the acquisition of 21st century skills. Empowered students are more likely to engage in critical inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and creative tasks. Shahzad et al. (2024) emphasize that empowerment enhances innovation and adaptability, aligning with the skills demanded in Industry 4.0.

The Implications for Policy and Practice

The anticipated results have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study extends leadership and empowerment frameworks into the higher education sector, validating empowerment as a mediator of student outcomes. Practically, the findings will inform policymakers and institutional leaders about the importance of adopting transformational leadership practices that foster empowerment. This includes designing policies and teaching strategies that enhance student autonomy, digital literacy, and collaboration. By embedding empowerment into leadership practices, universities can better prepare graduates for the complexities of the global workforce.

Proposed Framework

The proposed framework for this study integrates three theoretical perspectives: Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985), Psychological Empowerment Theory (Spreitzer, 1995), and the 21st Century Skills Framework (P21, 2009; Salleh et al., 2024). As illustrated in Figure 1, transformational leadership is expected to influence the acquisition of 21st century skills indirectly through the mediating effect of psychological empowerment.

Transformational leaders inspire students through vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized support, creating an environment that enhances meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. These dimensions of empowerment strengthen students' intrinsic motivation and engagement, which in turn foster creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, adaptability, and digital literacy. Empowerment, therefore, functions as the mechanism that translates leadership behaviors into skill development.

This framework positions empowerment as a key mediator that links leadership to student outcomes, highlighting the importance of leadership practices in higher education that go beyond administrative management to directly influence students' readiness for Industry 4.0. By validating this framework through quantitative analysis, the

study is expected to contribute theoretically by extending empowerment models and practically by providing policy insights for leadership strategies in Malaysian private universities.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of transformational leadership and psychological empowerment in embedding 21st century skills within higher education. By adopting a quantitative approach, the research addresses limitations in prior studies that relied heavily on conceptual or qualitative designs. The expected contributions are twofold:

- Theoretical Contribution:** Extending transformational leadership and empowerment frameworks into educational contexts, confirming empowerment as a mediator.
- Practical Contribution:** Providing actionable insights for policymakers and leaders to embed empowerment-driven practices, ensuring graduates are innovative, adaptable, and competitive.

Ultimately, the study aims to strengthen higher education's capacity to produce graduates equipped for the demands of Industry 4.0 and beyond.

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