Curriculum Change Management Amidst Pandemic Crisis: Comparative Study of Academic Leadership in Quantity Surveying Program

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly led to unprecedented curriculum change in the higher education institutions in Malaysia. For institutions that were not used to applying online teaching and learning by its nature, the pandemic crisis has imposed a forceful demand for all to shift the existing curricula to online mode overnight, which created a huge challenge for the academic leaders. Hence, this study intended to study and contrast the curriculum change management by academic leaders resulting from the pandemic crisis, as well as the successful leadership styles in handling the crisis-driven change. The study adopted a qualitative research method via a one-to-one semi-structured online interview. Two academic leaders who managed the quantity surveying program in the higher education institutions in Sarawak and Selangor were purposely selected by the researcher to participate in this study, aided by some predefined criteria in the respondent selection. The qualitative data were analysed and deduced using thematic coding through ATLAS.ti software. The findings showed that Kotter’s 8-step framework was useful and supported curriculum change management well in the academic context during the pandemic crisis. In addition, the academic leaders were discovered to adopt a transformational leadership style in successfully handling disruptions and managing the curriculum change due to the pandemic crisis.

Contribution/Originality: This paper contributed to the existing literature about curriculum change management and leadership models. The findings from this study offered a deeper understanding of how crisis-driven curriculum change can be handled and managed effectively by academic leaders, as well as the type of leadership style that shall be embraced to drive the change successfully.
1. Introduction

Higher institutions are often complex and dynamic in nature with distinctive cultures, practices, and beliefs. Hence, managing curriculum change in the Covid-19 pandemic has become a huge challenge for leaders. Prompt response from academic leaders was essential in dealing with this crisis to ensure the academic team was well-informed about the Covid-19 pandemic problem. For higher institutions in Malaysia, the academic leaders played a vital role in ensuring important instructions from the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) were communicated clearly to the academic team when all the teaching and learning activities were shifted to the online mode due to lockdown. For academic units that were not used to applying online teaching and learning by its nature, shifting all the existing curricula to online overnight in the light of urgent was a stressful task. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the leaders of institutions experienced high psychological stress due to the pressure of time, uncertainty, and the lack of information in making the decision (Dumulescu & Muţiu, 2021). In facing the increased complexity and uncertainties, academic leaders shall be 'resilient' to quickly adapt and bounce back from difficult situations, as well as be ‘antifragile’ to indirectly gain benefits through self-organisation and adaptation (Mulla, 2019).

Hence, this research paper aimed to study and contrast the curriculum change management of the academic leaders in two higher education institutions in Malaysia that offered quantity surveying programs. Their curriculum change management process and leadership style in managing curriculum change were studied and compared to find out how the academic leaders from the two higher institutions responded to the curriculum change challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. The term curriculum comprises four important areas, namely the subject content, process, pedagogy, and assessment (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2012). In the context of this study, only the areas of pedagogy and assessment in curriculum change were covered. The detailed discussion on the change of assessment components was not covered in this paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Roles of Academic Leaders in Driving Change

Leadership is defined as being able to influence the team members, getting everyone engaged to complete a task for achieving the desired goals (Saroyan, Getahun & Gebre, 2011). They also specified that academic leadership is a type of leadership found in the academic settings or educational institutions, and commonly refers to top managers, presidents or principals, chancellors, deans, or heads of departments who are involved in decision making at different levels. According to Sidhu (2021), the academic leader model of the 21st century shall be of high visibility, someone who establishes a clear mission and vision, develops learning-centered schedules, provides resource support in the curriculum implementation, and monitors the effectiveness of the curriculum in the organisation. For driving curriculum change, the leader shall be empowered with the authority and empower others within the line of authority in the change process. When the leader delegates empowerment to the academic team, a broad form of transformational leadership evolves indirectly (Swenson, 1998).

In the transformative leadership model, the leader empowers the followers and develops them into leaders by responding to their personal needs and by aligning the goals and objectives of the individual followers with the leader, the team, and the organisation (Bass
Bass and Riggio (2006) described the followers are most committed and motivated to do more than what they intended, as the leader inspires them to commit to a shared goal, and challenges them to be innovative. They summarise four main components in this vertical leadership style, namely idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Idealised influence sees the leader as the role model to their followers and as a risk-taker who demonstrates high morality and ethics; inspirational motivation sees the leader challenges the followers with a clear goal with attractive future states; intellectual stimulation sees the leader encourages the followers to be creative and innovations in creating ideas; individualised consideration sees the leader accepts the individual differences and develops the followers with monitoring and supports. Transformational leadership positively builds a strong trust among the team members in an organization (Braun, Peus, Weisweiler & Frey, 2013).

According to Saroyan et al. (2011), a transactional relationship between a leader and followers commences prior to having a transformational relationship. However, the qualities of transformational leadership must exist to function as a change agent in the organisation. In transactional leadership, transaction or exchange of conditions takes place among the leader, followers, and the team to ensure the requirements are fulfilled with rewards as the motivators (Braun et al., 2013). This model of leadership has clear managerial structures and followers know their roles and expectations. The contingent reward system in this model is regarded as transactional when the reward is a material one, however, can be transformational if the reward is in a psychological form such as by giving praise (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Lavery (2011) mentioned that the structures and procedures in the transactional model make the system appears to be rigid, thus forbidding change and development to be made in an organisation.

In another opposite spectrum, the third type of passive leadership, namely laissez-faire leadership occurs when avoidance of leadership is found in the organisation and with the absence of rewards. Although this leadership model has been always regarded as ineffective, Barnett, Marsh, and Rhonda (2005) argued that this leadership style may foster positive collegial relations when there is less supervision, and a genuine atmosphere of working together is created through feedback and collegial support from peers. Supported by a meta-analysis of Yang (2015), the non-involvement of laissez-faire leadership could be positive at the point in which the roles of the team members are clear and unambiguous, resulting in self-leadership and self-empowerment. Yang (2015) proposed a balanced approach of laissez-faire leadership, considering the timing of early-stage and later stage, as well as the knowledge level when leading a team in the change management process.

In this study, the three leadership constructs which are classified under the Full Range of Leadership Model (FRLM) defined by Bass and Avolio (1994) were chosen to study the behaviours of academic leaders in managing the curriculum change during Covid-19 pandemic. The model chosen contains nine leadership elements specified in Dimitrov and Darova (2018) namely:

i. Idealised influence (attributes) – associated with transformational leadership;
ii. Idealised influence (behaviours) – associated with transformational leadership;
iii. Inspirational motivation – associated with transformational leadership;
iv. Intellectual stimulation – associated with transformational leadership;
v. Individual consideration – associated with transformational leadership;
vi. Contingent reward – associated with transaction leadership;
vii. Management by exception (active) – associated with transaction leadership;
viii. Management by exception (passive) – associated with laissez-faire;
ix. Laissez-faire.

2.2. Management of Curriculum Change During Covid-19 Pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a leader must be coherent, flexible, participative, and open to the opinions of team members to carefully manage change during the crisis (Ţălu, Nazarov, Vilanova, 2020). In the educational context, a collaboration between leaders and academic members within the Department is crucial to solving various complex issues and challenges that arose during the Covid-19 pandemic in curriculum change, especially when traditional face-to-face teaching was forced to be shifted to online mode. According to Nathanial and Heyden (2020), there are five important steps for leaders in managing crises based on their crisis management model. First, it is important for leaders to frame the crisis, engage people early and communicate what to be followed in handling the crisis. Second, leaders shall explore the crisis with the establishment of approaches to solve the crisis and the right indicators to enhance the confidence of people. Third, leaders shall establish a clear communication of a list of options with purposes and put them into action. Fourth, implementation of the planned strategies with constant monitoring shall be made. Fifth, performing evaluations, adapting, and engaging in continuous learning as a leader is regarded as the next crucial step in this crisis management framework.

In another change management model developed by Kotter (2012), an 8-step change process is outlined: step one of creating an urgency of change; step two of forming a coalition; step three of establishing a vision of change; step four of communicating the change vision; step five of empowering employees by removing obstacles; step six of generating short-term wins; step seven of keeping the momentum of producing more change and step eight of anchoring new approaches in the culture (Kotter, 2012). In this model, the first three stages highlight the importance of creating a sense of urgency to drive the change process and convince the team members of the reason for making change through the establishment of a vision or direction. While steps four and five require continuous reiteration and encouragement to boost the motivation of team members (Wheeler, 2006). Wheeler (2006) also suggested that the progress of change shall be tracked and celebrated in the steps six and step seven for reducing the anxiety and ambiguity of team members.

3. Methodology

The research design used in this study was a qualitative approach. In addressing the research objectives, the curriculum change management process of the two higher institutions was investigated and deduced based on John Kotter’s 8-step framework, whereas the Full Range of Leadership Model (FRLM) by Bass and Avolio (1994) was used to study the leadership style of academic leaders in handling the crisis-driven change. The two higher education institutions that offer the Diploma in Quantity Surveying programs: one located in Sarawak, Malaysia, and another one located in Selangor, Malaysia were chosen for the study. The researcher applied the purposive judgment sampling method to select two respondents (the academic leaders) that could best address the research objective and have fulfilled several desired criteria to his knowledge (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Firstly, the researcher ensured that both academic leaders were involved in managing and implementing curriculum change during the Covid-19 pandemic. Secondly,
the programs managed by academic leaders shall be of the same field of nature, which was the quantity surveying program in this context of the study. Thirdly, both academic leaders were of the same gender. These were to ensure that the comparative study of the roles of academic leaders in managing curriculum change can be made fairly.

The researcher applied semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from two respondents. The one-to-one interview generally adopted the five phases recommended by Robson and McCartan (2016) that encompass introduction, warm-up, main body, cool-off, and closure. On the day of the one-to-one interview through Google Meet, each respondent was once again informed of the purpose of the research and their voluntary role in providing the data. They were informed of their rights as the research participants and how their responses will be used. Permission to record the interview session was requested before commencing the semi-structured interview so that the researcher could review the recorded data repeatedly and write out the recorded interview into textual documents for data analysis and discussions. Each interview session lasted approximately 40 to 45 minutes. The researcher applied a deductive approach when performing the thematic analysis by using ATLAS.ti research software.

4. Findings & Discussions

4.1. Programs and Academic Leaders Descriptions

The background descriptions of the two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that offered Quantity Surveying programs were explored through the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR) page. A brief comparison of the academic leaders (research respondents) in the two institutions is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Brief descriptions of respondents, HEIs & programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Leader</th>
<th>Respondent A</th>
<th>Respondent B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of Program Leadership</td>
<td>Less than 2 years</td>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of Institution</td>
<td>Selangor</td>
<td>Sarawak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Led</td>
<td>Quantity Surveying</td>
<td>Quantity Surveying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of Study</td>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>Full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of Delivery</td>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>Conventional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Type of Curriculum Change Due to Pandemic

Following the Movement Control Order (MCO) declared by the Prime Minister of Malaysia as well as with several advisory notes circulated by MQA and the professional body to HEIs during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the two academic leaders described the following drastic change in their program curriculum,

“The teaching and learning have evolved from conventional F2F (face-to-face) and NF2F (non-face-to-face) to online. The duration for F2F has to be changed, from 2 hours to slightly flexible to accommodate online teaching. The second one is the part of NF2F, from “open door policy” of students asking questions in the academic room, but now to online mode through WhatsApp, email, etc. Texts were received during the odd hours and..."
students highlighted hard to communicate with lecturers. Third, change also happened in the assessment... Board of QS and MQA give flexible guidelines and outlines, for example, to change the final exam to coursework.” (Respondent A)

“Our institution is kind of lucky. Previously, we had been using the learning platform called iTunes-U. We shared learning materials with the students and we were quite used to it. After that, we shifted to Google classroom before the pandemic too. During the pandemic, not really a big change to the department...only fully online teaching and a change in students’ submission method, for example, they need to submit tutorials or assignments, they have to submit in softcopy. When we mark and assess them, we have to do it in softcopy. Another change is in how the final exam is conducted, especially for measurement-related courses. We need to have drawings in these courses. It is very difficult to perform measurements on the screen if we don’t have the hardcopy drawings. We adopt a take-home exam system and students can do the work within some time frame... for us in QS, we need to conduct based on the Board of QS.” (Respondent B)

From the findings, both HEIs were found to have shifted their conventional mode of teaching and learning to fully online during the pandemic period in response to the lockdown instruction. Apart from complying with the MQA advisory notes, the curriculum change was also made by referring to the professional body that accredits the Quantity Surveying program, namely the Board of Quantity Surveyors Malaysia (BQSM). Furthermore, both academic leaders reported another major change in the assessment method of courses in the program. The traditional way of conducting final exams has been changed to other mechanisms such as coursework, and take-home exams as a substitution for the on-campus final exam during the pandemic crisis. The curriculum change made for the two higher institutions was crisis-driven and the changes encompassed the areas of pedagogy and assessment.

4.2. Curriculum Change Processes

4.2.1. Creating Urgency and Building Coalition

The Covid-19 pandemic created a sense of urgency for the HEIs following the lockdown instructions. In implementing this unplanned curriculum change during the pandemic crisis, both HEIs were found to apply a similar strategy of organising numerous meetings to kick off the urgency of change when all higher institutions were instructed to close the physical operation on 18 March 2020. The guiding coalition was built through regular and fast-paced discussions between the Academic Leaders and the members to allow the unplanned change to occur in a speedy manner without creating further damage and disruptions to the teaching and learning activities. In Kotter’s (2012) 8-step framework, these actions fall under steps 1 and 2 in the curriculum change process. The following are responses described by the Academic Leaders when being asked about their initial responses to the crisis-driven curriculum change,

“We had to abide by all the SOPs and instructions. We met a lot online than usual, we needed to work from home and packed everything up.” (Respondent A)
“The first step was to have a meeting and discuss what are the possible ways to conduct class. There were lots of meetings, days and night, sometimes we were suddenly called for meetings... we solved problem by problem as the situation was uncertain.” (Respondent B)

4.2.2. Forming Equations and Communicating Strategies

A clear direction allows the academic team to respond accordingly during the crisis. In the interview, the Academic Leaders were asked about the specific criteria or goals to be attained when implementing the change. A clarion call from the top down was observed in both HEIs in this study in which the Academic Leaders had initially set some mandatory requirements for the academic team in the program although certain flexibilities were provided to permit the change in the early stage. Both HEIs emphasised the implementation of synchronous learning and non-synchronous learning, as well as the management of attendance records. The importance of providing recorded lectures was emphasised by both Academic Leaders for different purposes: to accommodate international students due to different time zone issues and to consider possible internet disruptions during the learning process, particularly for students in Sarawak. The Academic Leaders mentioned,

“Because there was no standard, in the beginning, I allowed flexibility for any platform...I emphasise synchronous and non-synchronous learning.... Attendance is another requirement. Every lecture has to show the attendance to include a screenshot as proof, as it is required by BQSM ... we must make sure we accommodate the international students with recordings...We have come out with ground rules to conduct the final exam.” (Respondent A)

“The instruction from top management is 60-40 synchronous-asynchronous implementation, it is up for lecturers to propose but we cannot run away from 60-40 or 50-50 approach. If you are having recordings, activities shall be provided for recording attendance. If you have online teaching, recordings have to be done and shared with students on google classroom, just in case, they missed out on certain parts due to the internet or their personal reasons.... Make sure the teaching and learning can be conducted without too much of changes. Next, is to make sure that changes once applied will not affect the performance of students.” (Respondent B)

In short, both Academic Leaders were found to have established their directions and strategies in managing the change process, followed by prompt communication with the academic team despite having some uncertainties in the initial phase. Likewise, their change processes were found consistent with steps 3 and 4 stated in John Kotter’s framework.

4.2.3. Empowering Actions and Generating Short Term Goals

One of the major challenges found by both Academic Leaders was to make sure students were satisfied with the online learning experience. In Kotter’s (2012) framework, this dissatisfaction issue or other barriers shall be handled professionally to unfreeze and smoothen the change process in step 5. Hence, improved satisfaction of students in online
learning is considered one of the short-term goals that must be achieved by both institutions in step 6 to ensure the change process is energised. According to Respondent A, complaints were received from students as there was no standardisation in the teaching platform in the initial stage. Some of their lecturers were not familiar with technology tools in teaching. Thus, the institution has taken prompt action to introduce its own teaching and learning management platform to the academic team with training provided prior to full implementation in September 2020 to improve the online learning experience of their students. In contrast, no training evidence was mentioned by Respondent B, although complaints from students were received in online learning. The Academic Leader in institution B was observed to empower the academic staff to self-adapt to the challenges for permitting individual growth. However, the Academic Leader provided support and assistance when any of the members sought solutions, such as solving the software accessibility problem. The Academic Leaders described,

“Some of them (lecturers) are good, tech-savvy, some of them are not. I have to allocate some time just to teach them how to navigate things. I am lucky to have my team, if I cannot make it, the others will share. Some even did screen recordings of the navigation and shared them on WhatsApp group… One of the supports provided is training arranged by the university. The timings are very flexible 8-5pm, for those who cannot join the first slot, they can join the second one…” (Respondent A)

“We need to adjust ourselves for online teaching… I would appreciate they come to me with solutions instead of problems, of course, I still give guidance if they are not so comfortable with certain kinds of methods, platforms, apps etc. A staff of mine brought up problems timely about software, I managed to propose the solution and help to solve the problems… Even sometimes it is not compulsory to do that, as long as I can help them, I will help them up. That’s the best way to motivate them.” (Respondent B)

Despite not having strong evidence to illustrate how the satisfaction of students for both institutions had improved over time through supporting numerical data, however, both Academic Leaders were found to have taken timely actions to resolve the issues in online learning after negative feedbacks were received from the students. Positive improvement was observed and Respondent B commented, “The students are more comfortable and responsive to the approaches we applied.”

4.2.4. Building the Culture of Continuous Improvement for Anchoring Change

During the interview, both Academic Leaders were given a closed-ended question to describe the adaptation of their team members towards curriculum change during the pandemic crisis at different timings during the interview sessions. They were given a closed-ended question with a 5-point scale: (1) Very poor; (2) Poor; (3) Average; (4) Good; (5) Excellent, in evaluating the adaption of the team at the time of sudden change and after a period of implementation. The researcher found the same outcome from both respondents in which they gave a score of “(3) Average” at the beginning of the discussion and replied with a score of “(4) Good” after the curriculum change has been implemented for a period of time in the final part of the interviews. In other words, both Academic Leaders agreed that continuous improvement is needed as there is still room to reach “(5) Excellent”. For areas to be improved, the Academic Leader from institution A emphasised
the collaboration and communication aspect, whereas the quality aspect was highlighted
by Academic Leader from institution B. Probing questions were given to determine the
areas of concern succeeding the closed-ended question. The following were their feedback,

“We are getting matured, but there are certain things that we still struggle...about sharing information online. During my time, the biggest challenge was the accreditation to the QS program, how do we share information... google drive was the platform we used. We quite juggle with subject file sharing, most of us share the same files in other subjects in google drive, which makes google drive messy. Now, the institution starts to use MS Team, everyone registered with company emails, communication is more effective through chat team rather than previous by using WhatsApp.” (Respondent A)

Monitoring is done through feedback reports. Evaluation exercises are also carried out by the students, another approach is we have constant monitoring for lecturers to fill in their concerns and students’ concerns on google sheets weekly... Now, the improvement would be in the quality we can produce, the videos and recordings, we are more matured in it. We have improved but continuous improvement is still important. We are into blended learning now. (Respondent B)

In Kotter’s (2012) 8-step framework, analysing what has been done in the change process is an important step to cement the change in step 7 prior to celebrating the full refreezing in step 8. In this study, the change management process of the two institutions was found to be consistent with Kotter’s (2012) framework and had reached step 7 and step 8 at the time of this research study.

4.3. Curriculum Change Management & Leadership Styles

Findings from the interviews indicated that both Academic Leaders were in the middle management position in their respective institutions, playing the significant roles of communicating the change instructions issued by the top-level, such as from the accreditation bodies, dean, deputy dean of the institutions to the academic team. In the initial phase of curriculum change implementation, both Academic Leaders were found to provide flexible guidelines to the academic team to implement the required change when top-down instructions were still undefined and vague. For instance, they acted in deciding the teaching platforms for conducting synchronous and asynchronous sessions, with the consideration of various limitations and constraints such as internet, hardware, and software. These considerations were detected based on the following statements,

“At that time some lecturers do not have laptops and hardware etc., the department especially me, I have to understand the situations for everyone.” (Respondent A)

“In such a short time, we couldn’t guarantee everyone can perform when implementing the change.” (Respondent B)
When the top-down instructions were subsequently refined during the curriculum change period, they were to abide by the instructions and set it mandatory for everyone to implement the required change in the program. They described,

“The university has come up with guidelines to clarify further with staff and pass to Program Leaders, and my role is to disseminate the information to the staff and students again...As we entered June, September; it has become compulsory to use new Teaching and Learning Management System.” (Respondent A)

“For any instructions or policies that have been confirmed by the top management, they will be circulated to me. Depending on the need, if I need to make a further explanation, I will call for a virtual meeting, beforehand I will forward the same email to staff.” (Respondent B)

Furthermore, the researcher discovered that in handling crisis-driven change, both Academic Leaders actively applied team discussions in making their decisions. However, Respondent B was found to make prompt decisions using her own cognitive or intellectual experience when the situation was urgent and the team was unable to give reasonable input. In contrast, acquiring mutual understanding was perceived as an important step for Respondent A in managing curriculum change. However, there was no evidence of applying cognitive or intellectual experience in decision-making process during the interview session. Hence, the researcher believed that sound decision-making can be affected by the size of the academic team involved in the department, as well as the size of HEIs in this study. It is important for achieving a shared sense of rationale for change, particularly when the size of stakeholders involved is large (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2012). In this context, institution A had a larger size of team members and thus, was more complex in its work culture and its environment in comparison with institution B. For empowering the team members in a much larger size to implement the change, brainstorming of possible obstacles and threats among the team members becomes crucial for boosting the confidence of the members, which could be a norm in the large HEI. The following are some important statements to justify their decision-making methods,

“I managed to get everybody who teaches measurement subjects, to get mutual understanding and mutual concern that we should run the final exam for 8 hours period.” (Respondent A)

“In my department, for certain opinions, I will ask my staff, if the staff couldn’t give reasonable answers or due to the reasons that I had to act fast...I will need to make the decision.” (Respondent B)

In another spectrum of comparison, the leadership styles of the two Academic Leaders in managing the curriculum change during the crisis were juxtaposed and studied. The researcher discovered a mix of transactional and transformational leadership traits were demonstrated by each Academic Leader through their speeches during the semi-structured interviews. A Full Range of Leadership Model (FRLM) defined by Bass and Avolio (1994) was used to qualitatively classify the qualities of Academic Leaders after analysing the interview transcripts thematically through ATLAS.ti software. The summary of the leadership qualities of the Academic Leaders in managing curriculum change is illustrated in the Sankey diagram in Figure 1.
From the findings, Respondent A demonstrated a profound trait in the element of ‘individualised consideration’ under transformational leadership. However, Respondent B demonstrated balanced traits of transformational leadership elements such as ‘individualised consideration’, ‘idealised influence (behaviours)’, and ‘intellectual stimulation’ when leading the team members in responding to curriculum change. The Covid-19 pandemic crisis was an unexpected and unprecedented event that had created chaos in the traditional curriculum implementation. It could be observed that both Academic Leaders embraced a collaborative approach and challenged their team members to express their ideas and concerns for solving any possible issues arising during the teaching and learning in a fast-paced manner. The finding showed that Respondent A was profound towards adopting active listening, contact, and support approaches to boost the morale of the team to stimulate the change process. Her empathy skill assisted her to foster good relationships within the team while encouraging, inspiring, and empowering the members to achieve their goals. On the other hand, Respondent B also showed good empathy to the team and instantaneously encouraged ‘self-actualisation’ when leading her team in dealing with the curriculum change process. In the early interview, Respondent B stated that her team was familiar with an online platform namely ‘iTunes-U’ before the pandemic struck. The institution had been actively sharing teaching and learning materials with students online. Hence, Respondent B was more towards providing room and authority to the team members to enable them to be creative and innovative in solving unknown problems that arose during the crisis. In the meantime, support was rendered by the academic leader to motivate the team members during the change process.

Apart from possessing the elements of transformational leadership, both Academic Leaders were found to demonstrate the transactional leadership element of ‘active management by exception’ while managing the curriculum change. This was considered a positive trait as the sudden strike of the Covid-19 pandemic has created panic and uncertainties in both HEIs. The stress level of academic staff rose to the maximum when
there was no direction on how to handle the situation in the initial stage. Their responses quoted,

“During covid, the state of mind is not like normal as lack of human interactions... Because of online, we have to put extra commitment, adapt to new things and etc. some of them are working extra hours, during odd hours.” (Respondent A)

“There was a staff who was very stressful of demanding herself to do perfect recordings. The staff resigned due to the incident as complaints were made by students.” (Respondent B)

In handling such negative scenarios, demonstrating the transactional leadership trait of ‘active management by exception’ was vital to enable the setting of achievable goals at all levels to boost the confidence of the team in the midst of crisis. Through this approach, confusion due to uncertainties could be eliminated as there was a clear chain of instruction and communication between the academic leaders and top management. In addition, continuous monitoring with constructive feedback from academic leaders could also help the team members to grow positively. This could avoid unrealistic goals perceived by the team members, such as demanding a perfect recording in teaching and eventually creating further chaos. Furthermore, it was found that the elements of ‘laissez-faire’ leadership traits were not detected in both Academic Leaders in successfully managing curriculum change during the pandemic crisis.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Managing curriculum change is a stressful task for academic leaders as it consumes time to unfreeze the norm, change it to the new one and refreeze it as a new norm. A good leader shall be like a shining beacon in a storm. In the event of a crisis, academic leaders need to capture the urgency of change and communicate the complexities through collaboration to establish mutual trust and confidence. The findings from this study indicated that outlining possible solutions and providing a clear direction with support was vital to speed up the change process. Other than that, being an empathic leader was another effective strategy to respond to a crisis with heart. Being an active listener could also assist the leaders to identify and solve any possible ‘change fatigue’ in the team. Additionally, this study also described that embracing transformational leadership was significant to leading the academic team in managing the curriculum change effectively, in which interaction, collaboration, and communication were the keys to coping with the change, which was of utmost importance during crisis situations (Pillai, 2013; ALHumeisat & ALBashabsheh, 2020). For leading curriculum change during the pandemic crisis, Kotter’s (2012) 8-step framework was found to be an effective change management model for academic leaders, which was well-supported by the results of this study.

The sudden invasion of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, though challenging and ambiguous, offers academic leaders and institutions an avenue to transform their curricula with progressive leadership strategies. Covid-19 is not all gloom and doom. Analysing the positive end of the spectrum, the pandemic has prepared academic leaders to be more proactive in responding to change and forge a change-ready culture in the institution to embrace more uncertainties and ambiguities in the 21st century. Instead of celebrating victory in adapting curriculum change due to pandemic crisis, academic leaders shall be prepared to embrace numerous challenges of managing curriculum change resulting from
the emergence of Education 4.0, Education 5.0, or perhaps, the possible attacks of destructive viruses due to the extensive use of digital technology in future’s teaching and learning environment. To sum, all leaders shall learn from the Murphy Law that states “if something can go wrong, it will”!

5.1. Limitations of Study

The qualitative findings from this study were concluded based on the two academic leaders in the higher education institutions in Malaysia. Owing to the small sample size and the research design used in this study was the qualitative method, the findings could not be generalised to a wider population. However, the researcher adopted a qualitative research design in this study as the main aim was to gather a meaningful and deeper understanding of the curriculum change management process of the academic leaders amidst pandemic crisis, not predominantly about numerical representativity. Additionally, the time factor was another significant limitation to the accuracy of this study as the interviews were conducted 1.5 years after the Covid-19 pandemic impact, in which the curriculum change due to the crisis event started in March 2020. Poor memory of events, external factors, and lack of time to fully recall information might result in inaccurate responses and affected the validity of data (Brewer, Hallman, Fielder & Kipen, 2004).

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