

The Role of Academic Leaders in Leading and Managing Curriculum Change and Innovation in Two Foreign Branch Campus Universities in Sarawak

(Peranan Pemimpin Akademik dalam Memimpin dan Mengurus Perubahan dan Inovasi Kurikulum di Dua Universiti Kampus Cawangan Luar Negara di Sarawak)

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Abstract

This is a comparative study to investigate the role of academic leaders in leading and managing curriculum change and innovation in two foreign branch campus universities (FBCUs) in Sarawak. To facilitate the investigation of this study, two research objectives act as the guideline: (1) To identify the approach used by academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation in two FBCUs during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic, and (2) To compare the role of academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation between two FBCUs during Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic. The qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with two academic leaders from two higher education providers (HEPs) were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of this study were consistent between the two HEPs and with past studies noting that curriculum change and innovation should be in a structured and proper manner. The conclusion was drawn and recommendations were provided for future practices and adoption by HEPs, as well as for future research.

Keywords: Curriculum change, curriculum innovation, academic leader, foreign branch campus university, pandemic, post-pandemic

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Traditionally and going back to the basics, the curriculum is a planned and guided learning process with intended outcomes. The curriculum is a systematic construction of knowledge, skills, and values (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1993; Tanner, 1980). Therefore, a complete curriculum should have content, process and organisation, pedagogy, and assessment (Silver, 2022). The basis of education assumed the philosophical belief that every child is capable of learning. Over the years, the foundation of the curriculum changes based on philosophical, historical, psychological, and sociological aspects (Leong, 2022; Law, 2022). To keep up with time and to stay relevant, change is the only constant. Without a doubt, the change affects the curriculum and education as well. As education and higher education are preparing students to be graduates for the workforce, curriculum change, and innovation are inevitable but necessary.

In the higher education sector, moving on from the Covid-19 pandemic, hybrid learning is the way to go. Everyone is talking about asynchronous and synchronous, which previously were alien terms. During the pandemic and even post-pandemic, everyone thought that we would be going back to normal. But there is no going back, the new normal is here to stay. The pandemic forced the adoption and adaptation of new ways of learning and created a new breed of students (Noel et al., 2022; Simon, 2022). The new breed of students no longer wants the traditional classroom setting and practices. Regarding that, higher education providers (HEPs) need to remain agile and embrace curriculum review to adopt change and implement innovation (Patria, 2012). Therefore, this study is looking at post-pandemic and the way forward on how the new normal is being institutionalized and practised for sustainability through the management of curriculum change and innovation by academic leaders at HEPs.

AIM OF STUDY

Due to unprecedented times, HEPs were forced to adapt and adopt to changes rapidly. Many did not have the time to evaluate and reflect on the strategies and actions taken during the pandemic. It was mostly trial and error. It was also just to get by and not know if it is sufficient or not. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate how the role of academic leaders lead and manage curriculum change and innovation in two Foreign Branch Campus Universities (FBCUs) in Sarawak, for the 21st-century classroom in line with Education 4.0, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic. As we are moving into the post-pandemic era, it is only right for us to look into the classroom practices of the new normal.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study are:

- i. To identify the approach used by academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation in two FBCUs during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic.
- ii. To compare the role of academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation between two FBCUs during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic.

Research Questions

The research questions of this study are:

- i. What was/were the approach(es) used by academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation in two FBCUs during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic?

- ii. Were there any similarities and differences in the role of academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation between two FBCUs during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

CURRICULUM

At the very heart of education is the curriculum. The curriculum is the standard-based sequence properly planned and implemented by teachers to ensure students' achievement and proficiency. In laymen's terms, it is simply the study plan or plan for classroom practices (learning, teaching and assessment). From primary, secondary to tertiary levels, curriculum is broadly defined as a planned sequence of instruction or experiences of what is learnt and how it is learnt (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2012; Sund, 2022). As the old English saying, change is the only constant, it is inevitable for HEPs to review their curriculum at the institutional level and be aware of the competitive climate (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2012). Therefore, HEPs should be more prepared for unprecedented times by being proactive and not reactive; by constantly reviewing their curriculum for change by being innovative (Hilt & Riese, 2022; Jang, 2022).

According to Sulaiman et al. (2015), there are several types of curriculum change: substitution, alteration, perturbations, restructuring, and value-oriented. Each type of change has its characteristics and arises from certain circumstances. In the higher education sector, continuous quality improvement is very crucial and the process and mechanism in assuring it are rigorous. HEPs are required to set up an internal quality assurance department to manage these processes and mechanisms. Change is not something new or newly occurred, most organizations and individuals encounter it regularly. It is unavoidable and inevitable for HEPs as well (Abd Kadir, 2022). Every aspect of the HEPs is subjected to change to stay competitive.

CURRICULUM CHANGE AND INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Without a doubt, the higher education sector is the most affected when it comes to change, especially in this era of disruption and post pandemically (Munawiroh et al., 2022). As the main supplier of the skilled workforce, HEPs need to be agile and quick to adopt to changes. The adoption of new technology in HEPs appeared to be apparent and consistent. The implications of the changes to the curriculum through classroom practices made possible by technical innovations are becoming increasingly visible (Hilt & Riese, 2022). Law (2022) further supported this by stating that HEPs are incorporating technology as part of innovation. Driven by technological changes, the higher education sector is also heavily influenced by factors such as globalization, knowledge and data, multiculturalism, and the redefinition of learning and knowledge acquisition (Simon, 2022). Any changes, whether it is institutional, social, cultural, or broader policy contexts change in the environment or ecosystem, will leave a dent or gap (Law, 2022; Meier et al., 2022). It seems like symbiosis; one affecting or triggering the other or one relying on the other.

According to Bhuttah et al. (2019), the models of the curriculum should be cyclical and not deductive or inductive. Although curriculum change can be assumed as a complex process, it is necessary and capable of providing a complete intervention. Simon (2022) posited that curriculum change and innovation have cultivated global consciousness, multiculturalism, environmental issues, and ethics and built talents infused through interdisciplinary approaches in curriculum and pedagogy. Hasanefendic et al. (2017) further supported that generally, HEPs are urged to innovate their teaching and learning and other classroom practices to complement today's turbulent job market and socio-economic needs change, as well as to sufficiently train the workforce. Future skill sets are essential in ensuring that graduates can keep on learning, unlearn and relearn.

CHALLENGES OF CURRICULUM CHANGE AND INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The higher education sector is a complex social system with several interrelated subsystems (Abd Kadir, 2022). When change is mentioned, there is always resistance to change and there will always be stakeholders who refuse to change. Many scholars have discussed the management of change, and there is no one size fits all model (Kang et al., 2022; Song et al., 2022). The processes and aspects involved in curriculum change and innovation are varied and depend on the context, stakeholders and external factors such as political and socio-economic (Cerna, 2013). To process a successful change implementation, HEPs should have a proper planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation strategy. The process should be cyclical and involve all stakeholders. Without stakeholders' buy-in, change will not be able to be implemented. Therefore, the change process and aspects can be discussed as two-dimensional implications; top-down and bottom-up (Pekkola et al., 2022).

In a study conducted by Honkimäki et al. (2022), showed that when HEPs used top-down processes to manage curriculum change or reform, it did not produce the best possible result. When further elaborated, from the perspective of academicians, the main challenge is in guidance on the process, managerial practices, and lack of involvement at the grassroots level (Buchashvili et al., 2022; Honkimäki et al., 2022). The bottom-up process, on the other hand, although can be self-organized must involve proper consultation with the appropriate, if not all stakeholders (Law, 2022). Therefore, to fully appreciate the role of change and innovation management in curriculum, going back to the basics is very essential by asking whether the intended change happened as expected (Simon, 2022).

Managing the change and innovation process can be sensitive as it involves stakeholders from various levels. Therefore, to ensure or to achieve change and innovation, policy provisions must be put in place and implementation must provide stakeholders with experiences envisaged in the new curriculum (Simon, 2022). In practice, curriculum change, and innovation require a proper and structured mechanism in place, and the mechanism must also have a review and monitoring process in place. Jonathan and Sibiziwe (2022) supported this claim by stating that the change process needs to focus more on the practicality of the mechanism employed, from translating policy into practice. In contrast, Simon (2022) begged to differ by stressing that proper planning and sufficient resources such as human and monetary, are very crucial in the process and aspects of change and innovation. As the process of change and innovation needed humans to be the drivers and receivers, Law (2022) pointed out that stakeholders should be motivated rather than ordered. In short, top-down cannot be implemented without being implemented through operational activities, while bottom-up focused on organizational and national policies as well as international and global trends (Kang et al., 2022; Song et al., 2022).

LEADERSHIP IN LEADING AND MANAGING CURRICULUM CHANGE AND INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

For a change to happen, it is very crucial to have a driving force. The role of leadership is the main driver in organizing and managing curriculum change. It is believed that stakeholders can be influenced and motivated by leaders, whether directly or indirectly (Abd Kadir, 2022; Law, 2022). In any organization, leaders are expected to create and implement new ideas by instilling culture. Leong (2022) posited that leaders should engage people early through communication, provide solutions to enhance confidence, establish clear communication, implement constant monitoring, and perform evaluation by adapting and engaging in continuous learning. On the opposing view, Buchashvili et al. (2022) pointed out that although believed to be the responsibility of leaders to drive and manage change change can only happen if all stakeholders cooperate and drive the change at individual and personal levels.

Conventionally, HEPs are managed as loosely coupled whereby linkages between different stakeholders are loose while academicians have autonomy (Baumann & Leišytė, 2022). There were fewer policies, and the daily operations were less rigid, but there was still a certain extent of bureaucracy. This is part and parcel of governance and compliance to assuring that quality and standards are maintained. Leišytė and Wilkesmann (2016) posited otherwise, stating that as the world becomes globalized, decision-making processes have recently become more top-down than ever. This claim was also supported by Honkimäki et al. (2022), whereby it is said that HEPS, with accountability demands, have become more corporate-like, and are more tightly coupled than before.

To ensure the smoothness of the change and innovation process, leaders should have prerequisite requirements in place to drive the change through institutionalization. The prerequisite requirements are and are not limited to, using technology in the process, managing resources, and collaborating effectively with stakeholders (Abd Kadir, 2022). With clear direction, academic leaders can respond to any situation or change accordingly. Even when the top-down approach was observed, initially with rigid and mandatory requirements, academic leaders throughout the process are still able to find flexibilities and permit minor changes (Leong, 2022). According to Simon (2022), curriculum change, and innovation is a learning process for the teachers, students, government and the community. A good understanding of change and a clear conception of the curriculum are necessary conditions for the smooth translation of a new curriculum into practice. Change can be a rough process, given the exposure to external factors. Policymakers in developing nations are vulnerable to internal and international pressures when it comes to policy and institutional reforms (Jonathan & Sibiziwe, 2022).

Education policy these days is strongly influenced by neoliberal ideals, which should be inclusive and diverse (Meier et al., 2022). Curriculum change and innovation should be leading to a better society through empowerment (Law, 2022). Since the pandemic, the paradigm has also shifted for the assessment of student learning. Due to remote and distance education, HEPs are designing more innovative and sustainable assessments, while ensuring that learning outcomes are appropriately measured as well. According to Shin et al. (2022), formative assessment is used to improve teaching and learning and other classroom practices throughout the semester. The curriculum needs to be agile and fluid now. It can be observed that HEPs are implementing alternative assessments as part of their formative, summative and even final assessment. Alternative assessment is not seeking the right answers, but seeking the best answer (Hunter et al., 2022). Therefore, there are no right or wrong answers and students are encouraged and motivated to be creative in providing solutions with proper justification.

DIRECTIONS IN MANAGING CURRICULUM CHANGE AND INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Simon (2022), to implement curriculum change and innovation, the common and widely accepted fact is that there must be a policy framework in place. Jonathan and Sibiziwe (2022) agreed by stating that hard policy instruments can be put in place to reduce resistance, while soft policy instruments incentivize stakeholders. So, what are the challenges? Simon (2022) identified several challenges in managing change and innovation – lack of teachers, inadequate well-trained teachers, limited financial resources, large class size (poor staff-student ratio), requiring a high degree of parental involvement and support, and lack of technological resources strongly affecting access to proper teaching and learning by stakeholders. Jonathan and Sibiziwe (2022) supported the claim by adding lack of access to digital devices, the Internet, and sufficient bandwidth contributed to the digital divide, especially in rural areas. With all these challenges noted, Leong (2022) found that the major challenge identified by academic leaders was ensuring students' satisfaction level and rate. Without a doubt, the success of curriculum change and innovation is challenging, and much discontent occurred among stakeholders, especially in driving the change with a planned agenda, guidelines, common goals and

recourses that can be limited (Honkimäki et al., 2022). To address this challenge, Jonathan and Sibiziwe (2022) believed that it can be done through capacity building by providing budget provisions to invest in material, intellectual or human resources.

According to Jonathan and Sibiziwe (2022), while hard policy instruments were effective during the initiation and early implementation phase, to overcome resistance, a backup plan is always needed to sustain any hostile situation in the higher education landscape. In a perfect world, a successful curriculum change and innovation process has trust among the stakeholders. But that is far from the truth. Honkimäki et al. (2022) highlighted that trust is built by showing appreciation through feedback and engagement with stakeholders. So, to summarize, the conceptualization and implementation of curriculum change, and innovation is a long and continuing process, and there may never be a final or complete product. Therefore, to remain timely and relevant, Meier et al. (2022) reminded us that curriculum should be diverse, equitable, inclusive, and socially just in the pluralistic societies of the 21st century. It is believed that change driven by clear policies and top management has a higher chance of transcending barriers and being implemented successfully (Jonathan & Sibiziwe, 2022). In addition, stakeholders perceived that the top-down and bottom-up approaches in curriculum reform have different impacts (Honkimäki et al., 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This is a qualitative study carried out through semi-structured interviews (Crabtree & Miller, 2022) with two academic leaders identified between two HEPs in Sarawak, Malaysia.

DATA COLLECTION

To answer the two research questions, the data collected is qualitative. The data collection process is deployed in a structured manner to be able to provide comparative analysis. The data collection process is done using the semi-structured interview protocol via the Google Meet platform which is believed to be more cost-efficient and convenient for both interviewer and interviewees (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). The interview protocol is guided by the Chicago School's Philip Carspecken's Critical Ethnography framework (Carspecken, 2013). Through the framework, concrete lead-off questions were prepared with potential follow-up queries, to provide prompting questions in case interviewees did not respond accordingly.

INSTRUMENTATION AND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The interview questions did not include the name, age and gender of the interviewees as deemed not relevant to the intended research findings and outcomes. To provide a better context based on their operational tasks, the interviewees' profiles were mainly to describe their role as academic leaders in their HEPs. The instrumentation consisted of open-ended questions as stated in the table below.

Table 1. List of Open-ended questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
Respondents' Profile	Briefly describe your role as the academic leader in your university.
What was/were the approach(es) used by academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation in two FBCUs?	<p>Concrete lead-off question 1 In your role as an academic leader, describe one current curriculum change and innovation that was implemented by your university and headed by you.</p> <p>Potential follow-up queries Briefly describe your leadership style.</p> <p>Concrete lead-off question 2 What were the challenges you faced in managing curriculum change and innovation? How did you handle the challenges?</p>
Were there any similarities and differences in the role of academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation between the two FBCUs?	<p>Potential follow-up queries. In managing curriculum change and innovation, is there a time you need to step in to solve an issue or problem using your authority?</p> <p>Concrete lead-off question 3 Given the opportunity, when resources are not limited, how would you manage curriculum change and innovation?</p> <p>Potential follow-up queries. What was the approach taken by your university during the pandemic to manage curriculum change and innovation? Was it based on what others were doing?</p> <p>Concrete lead-off question 4 Was there any benchmarking done with another university on the practices of managing curriculum change and innovation?</p> <p>Potential follow-up queries. Now that we are moving into the post-pandemic era, looking back, what would you have done differently?</p>

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The semi-structured interview sessions were conducted independently in two separate sessions. The interview sessions were kept below forty minutes for a more focused approach and not to take up too much time from the busy schedule of the interviewees. As to kickstart the interview sessions, icebreaking was done through casual conversation between the interviewer and interviewees (Wray & Barrett, 2022). Then, the interviewer read out the research objectives and research questions with the interviewees were allowed to seek clarification if needed (Jain & Brockova, 2022). In this study, the confidentiality statement was read and both interviewer and interviewee declared that there is no conflict of interest. The interviewer also informed the interviewees that the responses obtained is solely for this study only. They will remain anonymous and unidentifiable. The interviewees have the option to terminate the interview session at any point they desire and their participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

As this study involved interviewing to collect data, various consents were sought, and confidentiality statements were provided to the interviewees. Firstly, consent was obtained from the selected HEPs to participate in this study. Secondly, the HEPs identified the interviewees and the interviewees agreed to participate in this study. They are briefed on

remaining anonymous and unidentifiable, and the data collected is to be used solely for this study only. As mentioned earlier, this study is entirely voluntary, and the interviewees could terminate the interview session at any point they desire.

The interview sessions were unrecorded. Although without any audio/video recordings may create doubts about the validity and credibility of the data, doing a recording may mean that something might not get said at all by the interviewees (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). Therefore, in order not to affect the interview process, the interviewer chose to carry out the interviews without using any recording methods.

SAMPLE

The purposive sampling technique, which is also called judgment sampling, is used to concentrate on people with particular characteristics who will better be able to assist with the relevant research (Etikan et al., 2016). Both HEPs are FBCUs that are private and mature, operating for more than twenty years with approximately five thousand students in the population. Both HEPs are also self-accrediting universities as per status granted by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and governed by the Australian regulators, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). Therefore, with these strong characteristics, the two said HEPs were purposely selected to gain further understanding of this topic to provide immediate recommendations and comprehensive perspectives for future research.

To provide more comprehensive and focused findings to the research questions, the samples are further narrowed to only the School of Business of the two HEPs. Both business schools are accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), which is the highest accreditation for business schools globally. This accreditation is rigorous and covers many specific areas of learning and teaching. Therefore, the two HEPs is selected to understand how the academic leaders manage curriculum change and innovation, in addition to complying with various regulators and accreditation body.

Profile of Respondents

As per agreement with the respondents or interviewees, all respondents will remain anonymous and therefore, they are to be identified or coded (Palinkas et al., 2015) as Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2. Both are academic leaders involved in learning and teaching and accreditation matters in both HEPs. During the pandemic, their roles were instrumental in the learning and teaching activities and compliance with accreditation matters, ensuring the smooth transition of online learning while complying with various quality assurance matters and regulators. In short, their roles were key and crucial in leading and managing the curriculum change and innovation in their HEPs.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The qualitative data are analyzed using thematic analysis based on the sequence of the research questions (Clarke et al., 2015). To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, qualitative researchers create comparative cases or look for similarities and differences across accounts to ensure that different perspectives are represented (Noble & Smith, 2015). All the data was transcribed in detail and done immediately after each interview to minimise recall bias (Rutakumwa et al., 2020) and the interview transcript was confirmed by the interviewees after the interview session to ensure the final version sufficiently and accurately covered their intended responses (Noble & Smith, 2015).

ROLE OF ACADEMIC LEADERS IN LEADING AND MANAGING CURRICULUM CHANGE AND INNOVATION

When asked to briefly describe their roles as academic leaders in their HEPs, both interviewees were consistent with their responses. Both interviewees mentioned their roles are providing leadership and advisory role to colleagues and other stakeholders at all levels. This could be the fact that how both the business schools and universities are set up are similar in nature. Both were complying with similar regulators and accreditation bodies, hence adhering to the same requirements.

"I am required to provide strategic leadership and oversight by working closely with other members of the Faculty Executive Group, including the Head of School, Deputy Head of School, Discipline Leaders, and Course Directors. My main role, apart from learning and teaching, is to advise the Dean and Head of School on accreditation matters that require management attention to fulfil requirements as stipulated by accreditation bodies."

"My role in the business school at the faculty is to provide leadership in maintaining a long-standing record of professional or self-accreditation while facilitating curriculum enhancement to meet requirements from internal and external stakeholders. It is to ensure compliance with relevant regulators and accreditation bodies."

From the findings, it can be observed that the common themes are strategic leadership and providing support to stakeholders, both internal and external. Both interviewees also confirmed that they played crucial roles in leading and managing curriculum change and innovation. This is evident through their daily operational tasks, whereby the interviewees mentioned driving change and organizational culture, empowering staff, effective communication and periodic review and change.

"Lead and drive change to elicit a strong commitment to the School, Faculty and University's Strategic Plans."

"Empower staff through effective communication and consultation to achieve the faculty's objectives."

"Participate in the development of an organizational culture which is focused on driving excellence."

"Support organizational change activities to ensure enhanced staff performance and motivation."

"Collecting reflective feedback from various stakeholders on curriculum effectiveness."

"Facilitating and liaising with a range of internal and external stakeholders in managing curriculum enhancement initiatives that are consistent with the vision/strategic directions of the university and accreditation bodies."

"Working closely with the quality unit to ensure relevant professional or self-accreditation for the program is carried out promptly, this includes coordination of all documents required for submission, accreditation visits and any other reporting thereafter."

"Working with colleagues to review curriculum periodically as part of the Continual Quality Improvement process required by the accreditation bodies. This includes necessary curriculum changes/improvement required to close all concerns which are reported during any accreditation exercise."

From the findings or responses provided by both interviewees, the keywords identified were also consistent with past studies, whereby it is believed that stakeholders can be influenced and motivated by leaders, whether directly or indirectly (Abd Kadir, 2022; Law, 2022). In any organization, leaders are expected to create and implement new ideas by instilling culture. Leong (2022) posited that leaders should engage people early through communication, provide solutions to enhance confidence, establish clear communication, implement constant monitoring, and perform evaluation by adapting and engaging in continuous learning. Therefore, it can be said that the role of academic leaders is very crucial in leading and managing curriculum change and innovation.

Findings for Research Question 1

To answer Research Question 1, What was the approach used by academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation in two FBCUs during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic? two concrete lead-off questions were asked. To prompt the interviewees further, two potential follow-up queries were also prepared and asked when required during the interview sessions.

When Question 1 under Research Question 1 was asked, in your role as the academic leader, describe one current curriculum change and innovation that was implemented by your university and headed by you., both interviewees responded to the same context. Both interviewees acknowledged that the biggest curriculum change and innovation was the shift to online learning, hybrid learning and the adoption of technology.

“Fresh from the pandemic era, I think it is only time to provide the example of shifting to online learning and teaching. In these three years, the biggest curriculum changes and innovation is online and hybrid learning.”

“As the world and technology are rapidly advancing, the differentiated curriculum is in demand to provide a more fluid and organic structure to prepare graduates for the future. Technology is central to the higher education learning environment. The pandemic has pushed us to look more seriously into Education 4.0.”

The responses provided were consistent amongst both interviewees as well as with past studies. It was noted that curriculum change and innovation experienced were inevitable and necessary due to the information and digital age and changing workplace (Beetham & Sharpe, 2019; Williamson, 2013). From the findings or responses provided by both interviewees, the keywords identified were also consistent with current literature; differentiated curriculum (Herman et al., 2022), technology-based learning environment (Senior & Eli, 2022), Education 4.0 and 21st-century classroom (Leong, 2022). Without a doubt, curriculum change and innovation through classroom practices were made possible by technical innovations that are becoming increasingly visible (Hilt & Riese, 2022). Law (2022) further supported this by stating that HEPs are incorporating technology as part of innovation. Therefore, it can be said that during the pandemic, the higher education sector is heavily influenced and driven by technological changes (Simon, 2022).

When Question 2 under Research Question 1 was asked, what were the challenges you faced in managing curriculum change and innovation? How did you handle the challenges? both interviewees expressed the same sentiment and perhaps some grievances as well. It was a time of uncertainties and academic leaders were expected to act quickly and accurately. During the interview sessions, both interviewees let out a sigh of relief before providing their responses. Both mentioned that although not an easy period but was a learning curve for them and HEPs.

“I have to admit it was not easy nor smooth period. The change had to be done quickly and during the pandemic, it was firefighting so that students can continue

their studies. There was no democratic process, and everyone including students was forced to adopt and accept the change.”

“In a short period of time, about two weeks after the announcement of the movement control order, the semester went back to operation. The change was quick and buy-in from all stakeholders was very important. In the initial stage, the top-down approach was implemented as it was more like an order for everyone to shift to online learning. At that time, the only consultation was through the circulars published by the Ministry of Higher Education and AACSB. Later, the bottom-up approach was implemented by collecting feedback from stakeholders; both students and lecturers.”

From the findings gathered from both interviewees, the keywords identified were also consistent with past studies, whereby during the pandemic and in times of urgency, there is no democratic process (Beetham & Sharpe, 2019; Williamson, 2013) in leading and managing curriculum change and innovation. In addition, it was also noted that stakeholders can understand the situation and for the immediate change needed to happen, the top-down approach is necessary. However, as the change progressed to the next level, it is crucial for academic leaders to investigate a bottom-up approach by collecting feedback from stakeholders for improvement. This was consistent with the findings by Honkimäki et al. (2022), whereby stakeholders perceived that the top-down and bottom-up approaches in curriculum change, and innovation have different impacts and must be applied at different stages of the change.

Both interviewees further elaborated on the challenges faced and how they were still able to lead and manage the curriculum change and innovation effectively and smoothly. It was mentioned that during that time, there was no centralized mechanism in place to make the change. Academic leaders and HEPs were forced to think about what change needed to be made for business continuity.

“At that time, we were not focusing on student satisfaction. We were focusing on being able to provide alternative methods for achieving the intended learning outcomes. There were hundreds of units of study and hundreds of lecturers to deal with. There was no centralised mechanism in place. Luckily, the regulators and accreditation body provided guidelines and leeway in managing this change.”

“As the leader in managing this change, I provided check-in for both lecturers and students. For lecturers, a weekly online forum was conducted to gather feedback for improvement. While, for students, it was done through surveys at certain checkpoints of the semester. That way, minor alterations can be immediately made to enhance students’ learning experience. As there were non-physical interactions, the main challenge was mainly to check in on everyone’s mental health as it was a difficult time to cope with so many uncertainties. Not only that, lack of response is also another challenge. Stakeholders were not responsive.”

From the responses provided by both interviewees, the keywords identified were also consistent with past studies whereby the change process should be adhering to a guiding process and procedures (Law, 2022). In layman’s terms, all stakeholders regardless of positions or titles, require some sort of guideline to execute their tasks as this will set some expectations and boundaries. In addition, as curriculum change and innovation is a process that needed humans to be the drivers and receivers, Law (2022) pointed out that stakeholders should be motivated rather than ordered. As to summarize Research Question 1, What was the approach used by academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation in two FBCUs during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic? it is found that successful curriculum change and innovation may require both top-down and bottom-up approaches, with strong leadership by academic leaders and acceptance by all stakeholders (Honkimäki et al., 2022). As to conclude, there was no perfect method

for leading and managing curriculum change. By focusing on outcome-based, it is believed that HEPs can make the change positively through academic leaders.

Findings for Research Question 2

To answer Research Question 2, Were there any differences in the role of academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation between two FBCUs during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic? two concrete leaf-off questions were asked. To prompt the interviewees further, two potential follow-up queries were also prepared and asked when required during the interview sessions.

When Question 3 under Research Question 2 was asked, Given the opportunity, when resources are not limited, how would you manage curriculum change and innovation? it was observed that both interviewees responded with a common theme of capability and capacity building amongst stakeholders. When resources are not limited, training is required to be provided for stakeholders as an ongoing initiative as part of capacity building. That way, all stakeholders would be ready or at least know how to respond when the next pandemic or unprecedented time hit again.

“The university should engage in ongoing capability-building activities to maintain or enhance academic staff competency. This is to be done through internal and external training—the latter through a staff development fund. With regards to the former, and specifically during the Covid-19 pandemic, Learning and Training workshops were provided to equip and upgrade academic staff capability to teach online—these were done synchronously (live) and asynchronously (recording). With that, given the resources, investment should be made on more high-tech gadgets to facilitate hybrid learning, such as the hyflex classrooms.”

“At the post-pandemic phase, support is provided with the hybrid classes where classes are conducted F2F and live streamed through MS Teams for students who cannot attend the F2F classes. This kind of support could have been provided during the pandemic. Learning from this pandemic, we should be proactive rather than reactive.”

“Capacity building should also be managed properly so that staff are ready for any kind of situation.”

These findings were consistent with past studies, whereby Simon (2022) identified a lack of teachers, inadequate well-trained teachers, limited financial resources, and a lack of technological resources as several challenges in managing curriculum change and innovation. One of the interviewees also further elaborated that additional resources should be set aside for unprecedented situations together with a proper plan in place.

“Resources should be allocated to prepare for any unprecedented time again. A proper and structured mechanism such as a continuity plan must be put in place for future usage.”

In practice, curriculum change, and innovation require a proper and structured mechanism in place, and the mechanism must also have a review and monitoring process in place. This finding is consistent with past studies, whereby managing curriculum change and innovation can be a sensitive process as it involves stakeholders from various levels, policy provisions must be put in place and implementation with sufficient resources such as human and monetary must be provided to stakeholders (Simon, 2022). Jonathan and Sibiziwe (2022) supported this claim by stating that the change process needs to focus more on the practicality of the mechanism employed, from translating policy into practice.

When Question 4 under Research Question 2 was asked, was there any benchmarking done with other universities on the practices of managing curriculum change and innovation? both interviewees gave somewhat the same indication that benchmarking was done subtly on the practices of managing curriculum change and innovation during the pandemic.

"Benchmarking was mostly done in 2021 and 2022, it was found that most universities spent considerable resources in producing, managing, and disseminating videos to support OTL during the pandemic."

"Leaders are needed to drive the change. Through my conversations with other academic leaders from other universities and through conferences, it was noted that there is no one framework or mechanism to administer change. Academic leaders need to be constantly agile and stay motivated to drive change. It is also important to ensure stakeholders' engagement and participation. Of course, above all, in this era of technology, using the latest and most advanced technology is the main priority. Most universities are adopting the latest technology to stay ahead of their competitors."

According to Law (2022), the change process required guiding processes and procedures. However, in the context of the two interviewees, at that time, there were no proper mechanisms and guidelines in place. And as the world is under lockdown, benchmarking was also not possible. Jonathan and Sibiziwe (2022) posited that curriculum change and innovation driven by clear policies and organizational leaders stand better chances of transcending barriers and adversities. In the same study, it was indicated that the utilization of hard and soft policy constitutes potent tools for mitigating the effects of the pandemic. Therefore, it can be said that the findings of this study are consistent with past studies of applying top-down and bottom-up approaches while remaining agile and adaptive to the situations.

When prompted further on the way forward, now that we are moving into the post-pandemic era, looking back, what would you have done differently? both interviewees were grateful for the learning curve provided by the pandemic. The interviewees recorded that although it was stressful and challenging, it was also a fulfilling time and shifted the higher education sector into a whole new paradigm. One of the interviewees also mentioned that we should move on beyond the pandemic and focus on the future as hybrid learning and adoption of technology is the new norm.

"Given the opportunity to reflect, although stressful, I would not have done anything differently. The pandemic and the change implemented during that time taught us to be agile and embrace change open-heartedly. It was a challenging but fulfilling time and put education in a whole new paradigm."

"I believe we should move on beyond the pandemic. The future is all about hybrid learning and adoption of technology is the new norm. Hence, I believe nothing would have been done differently. We all adopted well and survived the pandemic era."

As to summarize Research Question 2, Were there any differences in the role of academic leaders in managing curriculum change and innovation between two FBCUs during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic? it was confirmed that there were no comparisons in the role of academic leaders and how they lead and managed the curriculum change and innovation between the two HEPs. This is consistent with the study done by Yokus (2022) whereby it was found that academic leaders can learn from the pandemic to develop a guiding model of educational leadership for the new normal. Moving forward, from the findings of this study and review of past studies conducted, the common theme noted is for HEPs or regulators to have a model or framework in place through feedback

sought from stakeholders (Leong, 2022; Jonathan & Sibiziwe, 2022; Law, 2022). As to conclude, it is noted that there were no differences between the two academic leaders from the two HEPs. Both interviewees also clearly stated that they would not have done anything differently as well.

CONCLUSION

It was an interesting time for humankind and for the higher education sector, everything was new as the paradigm suddenly shifted. Many of us thought that we will return to normal, but it is evident that the new normal is here to stay. From the findings, it can be concluded that there was no perfect method for leading and managing curriculum change. By focusing on outcome-based, it is believed that HEPs can make the change positively through academic leaders. In difficult times, it proved that leadership is very crucial in ensuring business continuity even when there is no plan in place. From the findings, it is noted that there were no differences between the two academic leaders from the two HEPs. Both interviewees also clearly stated that they would not have done anything differently as well. During the pandemic, as the world went into lockdown, actions were taken as firefighting methods. However, with efforts and timely actions taken to gather feedback from stakeholders, improvement was observed (Leong, 2022). This proved that if an opportunity was provided to stakeholders to feedback, resistance to change can turn into an improvement over time. In addition, from the findings, the main similarity between academic leaders is how they react and manage unprecedented time in ensuring the continuity of academic operations. After all, it was said that curriculum change or reform and innovation can fail due to rejection from stakeholders (Simon, 2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to Jonathan and Sibiziwe (2022), in today's day and age, many HEPs still lacked robust online programs, sufficient instructional design, technologically trained staff, appropriate course development processes, and sufficiently structured student support mechanisms. Whether it is a top-down or bottom-up approach, there must be some form of engagement with multiple stakeholders and relational strategies. As noted from the findings of this study and past studies, curriculum change, and innovation should be in a structured and proper manner. Ma and Cai (2021) recommended that three steps to a successful curriculum change, and innovation process are initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. Actions must be taken in a step-by-step approach and implemented at different stages. This will allow academic leaders to be able to focus and take the time to reflect before proceeding to the next stage. For change to be done successfully, it may be cyclical and continuous, therefore, constant review is required, and stakeholders' engagement is very crucial.

Overall, as a general guideline, for curriculum change and innovation to work, in addition to the implementation of soft and hard policies (Simon, 2022), below are some of the steps that must be taken by academic leaders at HEPs.

- Be very clear about why the change and innovation are necessary.
- Understanding the change and innovation process.
- Developing leadership and capacity building.
- Developing learning cultures amongst stakeholders.
- Utilizing current ideas – easier buy-in; and
- Communication, awareness, and sensitization.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper only covered the role of academic leaders in leading and managing curriculum change and innovation in two FBCUs in Sarawak during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic. For future research, researchers can consider conducting similar research in FBCUs in Peninsular Malaysia. In addition, researchers can also study on the similarities

and differences between academic leaders from Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak FBCUs. Furthermore, researchers can explore the similarities and differences between academic leaders from main campuses in different countries and FBCUs in Malaysia. Lastly, this paper only covered academic leaders from FBCUs in Sarawak. Therefore, for future research, researchers can consider a study on academic leaders from public and private HEPs in Malaysia.

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