



# Challenges in Implementing Succession Planning in Higher Education Institutions

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## ABSTRACT:

Succession planning is a new concept in HEIs. The aim of this study is to capture the experiences of public universities on challenges in implementing succession planning. A qualitative descriptive methodology was used to obtain descriptions of succession planning challenges from participants who had personal experience with succession planning at university level. Themes discovered in the data included budget constraints, lack of organizational culture, lack of awareness of succession planning, external vs. internal hiring, and lack of competency models. Although succession planning in academia is nothing new, there is still no formal succession planning in the education sector. The study findings explored that the implementation of succession planning in public universities in Malaysia is still new due to several changes (example: technology and environment). This study explored that the lack of sufficient financial resources is the biggest challenge for implementing succession planning at universities. This study recommended the competency model in HEIs. In addition, the results of this study can help universities consider key challenges before the implementation phase.

## 1. Introduction

Succession planning is a process to identify and develop internal employees with skills and abilities to fill key leadership positions. In general, developing potential leaders in public higher education institutions is a challenging task. The selection of a successor depends on the internal and external attitudes in the organizations. The biggest problem in the public sector is the transition between new hires and the replacement of old employees. It is also important to remember that younger managers are likely to change careers several times during their careers. The selection of a successor for top positions is one of the most important decisions in HEIs. For example, selection of a vice chancellor in a higher education institution is such an important task. Succession planning, often referred to as talent development. However, in much of the public sector, particularly in the education sector, little has been done in the past to prepare key leaders for advancement. In the past, succession planning was largely viewed as a

substitute for replacement planning. This study is significant because an unexpected number of key higher education institution staff with institutional knowledge will either retire or move into new jobs over the next decade as the economy recovers. In addition to this competition is very high. Therefore, the traditional approach to succession planning of assigning specific roles to specific individuals no longer works. Rothwell (2010) argues that “succession planning and management are important for several reasons: The continued survival of the organization depends on having the right people in the right place at the right time”. The study of (Grossman, 2014, p. 44) stated that “various higher education institutions do not grasp the business model for promoting strong internal candidates as hiring data suggested that there is a distinct preference for external candidates”. According to (Armstrong, 2017) “Succession planning involves a deliberate process of identifying and developing future leaders among individuals who are already part of the organization”.



## 2. Succession Planning Implementation Challenges in Higher Education Institutions

It is often highlighted in the literature that due to the changing global environment and technology, succession planning faces major challenges during the implementation phase in the education sector. In the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the question of succession planning affects the sustainability of future leadership. This problem arises due to the lack of qualified and competent leadership candidates in HEIs. The future leaders must have a strong background and skills. Higher education leaders need to be skilled at networking and building relationships to develop teams and expand their knowledge. Pitre (2015,pg.1) points out that “while the importance of succession planning in higher education institutions is widely recognized, academic traditions often lead educational leaders to hesitate to fully implement effective succession plans”.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia are the backbone of Malaysian organizations in producing the best human capital. In 2015, Malaysia's education system saw a fresh start when the Prime Minister launched the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025) or PPPM (PT) for higher education, which plays an important role in public higher education institutions. The PPPM(PT) initiated the transformation of higher education offerings. The Blueprint (2015 to 2025) was important in improving the quality of graduates to ensure they could meet market demands. Similarly, in the 10th Malaysian Plan (10th MP), Malaysian Prime Minister Dato Seri Najib Razak insisted that HEIs must attract and retain the best talent. In addition, Akademi Kepimpinan Pendidikan Tinggi (AKEPT) established National Top Talent (NTT) to strengthen the talent pool for key leadership positions in Malaysia's higher education institutions.

In the recent past, only two studies have been conducted on the challenges of implementing succession planning in higher education institutions in Malaysia. The first study was conducted by Chia, Ghavifekr & Razak (2021). According to this study, several factors influence the implementation of succession planning practices in HEIs. Factors included budget constraints, compensation system, promotion criteria for senior positions, lack of talent, and a Vice Chancellor's short tenure. The second study was conducted by Keerio,

Ahmad & Abbas (2022) . According to this study national culture influences the implementation of succession planning. Therefore, the current study was conducted to identify main challenges when it comes to succession planning implementation phase in HEIs.

## 3. Research Question

What are the main challenges in implementing succession planning in public HEIs?

## 4. Method

This section described methodology used in the study to answer the research question. This includes research design, methodological approach, sample size, collecting data and analysis of data.

### *Design*

This section described the data analysis of qualitative content from the four selected universities in Malaysia. The content analysis provided a comprehensive summary of descriptions of implementation barriers to succession planning in HEIs. Data was collected by the registration department of four selected universities. A qualitative descriptive approach was used to get narrative responses from the four respondents. The researcher asked open-ended question to identify common themes based on the question, including:

Q. What are the main challenges in implementing succession planning in higher education institutions?

In this study open-ended questions allowed participants to provide statements about succession planning implementing challenges. The goal of this study was to understand the role of registrar department during transition phase such as succession planning.

### *Sampling*

The most appropriate sampling method in qualitative research is purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling method is a feature of this methodology (Sandelowski, 2000). The registrar department meets the inclusion criteria of scope of the research. This section described the analysis from qualitative interviews conducted with four public universities in Malaysia. These universities belong to the Malaysian Technical Universities Network (MTUN). The main goal of MTUN universities is to



produce highly skilled workers and engineers who can support different sectors. The four technical universities are University Technical Melaka (UTeM), Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM), University Malaysia Pahang (UMP) and University Malaysia Perlis (UniMap). The Registrar's Office is not only playing an important role in HEIs Malaysia in managing the enrolment of staff and students but also responsible for all Human Resources Management activities. This includes academic support and social engagement for students and academic staff. The Registrar department has a very close relationship with the top management team. For example, some public universities in Malaysia have established a new department that plays an important role for the integrity and succession planning department within the registrar department (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, sampling from registrar department is the best source for succession planning implementation challenges.

## Data Collection

Two data collection methods were used for this study. First, the traditional method of distributing printed paper questionnaires was used. The second method was an online survey using Google Form. One respondent was interviewed to confirm the preliminary results. A pilot study was conducted to ensure the readability of the questionnaire content and to improve clarity. A review

of the literature revealed limited studies on the challenges in implementing succession planning in HEIs in Malaysia. Based on previous studies at HEIs in Malaysia, an open-ended question was asked to compare the results.

## Data Analysis

Demographic data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and presented in frequency and percentage. Self-report questionnaires were analyzed according to research questions. Self-reporting is one of the best ways to assess psychological well-being from an individual's perspective (Dixon and Johnson, 2020) because self-reporting questions include measures that require respondents to provide a direct response to their own behaviors, beliefs and attitudes, or intentions. Themes were discovered from a category. The analysis of this study has provided a descriptive summary of textual content.

## 5. Findings of the study

### 5.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1.1 shows the profile of the respondents. Three men and one woman took part in this study. In terms of work experience, 1 respondent has 1-5 years of work experience while 4 respondents have 5-10 years of experience in the field. All four participants came from the registrar department.

**Table 1.1 Respondents Profile**

Demographic	Category	Frequency
Gender	Male	3
	Female	1
Working Experience	1-5 Years	1
	5 to 10 Years	3
Department	Registrar	4

## Succession Planning Implementation Challenges

Higher education leaders face numerous challenges when implementing succession planning in HEIs. The

four participants highlighted the major challenges in implementing succession planning at universities. Table 2 shows the list of top challenges highlighted by respondents.

**Table 2: Succession Planning Implementation Challenges**

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Budget Constraints	4	100
Lack of Organizational culture	3	75
Lack of awareness about succession Planning	2	50
External Vs Internal Hiring	4	100
Lack of Competency Models	1	25

**Budget Constraints withing HEIs**

Table 2 shows that all (100%) respondents mentioned budget constraints. All participants in this study felt that the biggest obstacle appeared to be the lack of budget. All organizations face challenges in implementing changes, dealing with future issues or formal succession planning processes. For example, Budget is cutting in public universities in Malaysia.

**Lack of Organizational culture**

Three out of four respondents mentioned that the lack of a strong organizational culture prevents the implementation of succession planning in universities. 75% of respondents provide responses regarding the lack of an appropriate culture for succession planning.

**Lack of awareness about succession Planning**

Two out of four (50%) respondents highlighted, they were not aware of the practice of using succession plans in succession processes.

**External Vs Internal Hiring**

The responses regarding external and internal hiring were 100%. All participants were convinced that external and internal attitudes also influence the implementation of succession planning at universities.

**Lack of Competency Models**

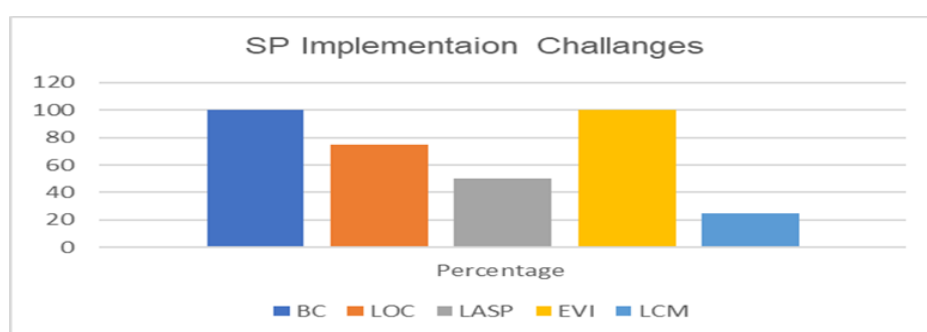
Only one (1) respondent believed that the lack of a competency model was one of the biggest challenges in implementing succession planning in universities. Additionally, the respondent stated that universities do not grasp the business model for promoting strong internal candidates.

**5.2 Category and Themes**

This section described the data analysis of qualitative content from the four selected universities in Malaysia. Study participants indicated that there are major obstacles in the implementation phase of succession planning at public HEIs.

**Category : Succession Planning Implementation Challenges**

The participants described numerous implementation challenges in succession planning at HEIs. The main challenges were grouped into the themes of budget constraints (BC) within universities, lack of organizational culture (LOC), lack of succession planning awareness (LASP), external vs. internal hiring (EVI) and lack of competency models (LCM). . Figure 1 shows participants' representative information about the barriers to succession planning.

**Figure 1: The percentage of challenges in implementing succession planning in HEIs**



## Theme I. Budget Constraints

The first issue that emerges from this category is budget constraints. This theme includes statements from participants stating that “financial resources to support leadership development and mentoring programs are limited. Financial resources include compensation and benefits for those seeking leadership positions”.

## Theme II: Lack of Organizational culture

The participants described the lack of organizational culture as a major challenge for implementing succession planning at universities. These included statements that “universities must introduce an organizational culture. Changing the culture in universities is a very difficult task, especially in public universities”.

## Theme III: Lack of awareness of succession planning

Participants described challenges in implementing succession planning, including the problem of lack of awareness of succession planning. These included statements that “succession planning was not a priority and that there was a lack of succession planning at both institutional and departmental levels”.

## Theme IV: External vs. Internal hiring

Participants presented the topic of “external vs. internal hiring.” This included the statement that public universities more often hire external candidates for leadership positions (example: chancellor or vice chancellor). The primary responses for internal hiring were aging factor and delay the retirement of key official. In addition, hiring external employees poses major problems for the company as the external candidate is not aware of the new environment.

## Theme V: The lack of competency models for HEIs

The participant described the lack of competency models for universities as a major challenge for the implementation of succession planning at universities. This also included the statement that competent and qualified managers are required to fulfill this task. In addition, a participant recommended introducing a framework and model for competency-based succession planning at universities.

## 5. Discussion of the key findings

This study identified the key challenges to implementing succession planning in higher education institutions. One of the major challenges is the lack of financial support from the Ministry of Education for formal succession planning programs. The results of the qualitative study indicated that a budget cut may affect the institution's approach to employee training and development. For example, the budget allocation to public universities in Malaysia was reduced to 70 percent (Abdullah,2017).The massive budget cut affects the quality of higher education and workforce development programs with limited resources. Budget restrictions for training and further education as well as successful implementation of succession planning will be a challenge. As universities focus on leadership, more money was required to conduct a leadership assessment to identify future candidates.

The participants highlighted the lack of organizational culture as a major challenge for implementing succession planning at the university level. The problem arises when top management is unwilling to engage in succession planning in HEIs. The top management leaders can help in the successful implementation of the plan. Organizational culture plays an important role in selecting promising future leaders through succession planning. Effective succession planning cannot be done in isolation; it must be linked to organizational behavior and incorporated into the organization's overall strategic planning (Mateso, 2010; Nazia,2022)

The third challenge indicates lack of awareness about succession planning. Based on the answers to the research questions about institutional efforts to raise awareness of succession planning at the faculty and organizational levels. Overall, the results indicate that although universities are involved in succession planning, there are still deficits in the implementation phase. Therefore, much work remains to be done to create awareness about succession planning at the faculty and organizational levels. Respondents also indicated that there may be some uncertainty about the process, such as fear about succession planning. Interestingly, all respondents were aware of term succession planning.

Responses regarding external vs. internal hiring were 100%. The question of whether leaders in higher education are hired externally or internally is always a





controversial issue. The qualitative data indicates that succession planning implementation in higher education institutions is impacted by the postponement of retirement of key employees and aging. Internal hires can be beneficial to educational institutions because, in some cases, internal candidates are very loyal to the institution, have clear organizational goals, and are familiar with current leadership. However, some institutions are not in favor of hiring an internal candidate due to budget constraints. External preferences are about finding qualified candidates with technical skills and experience for leadership positions. Barden(2006) study also noted difficulties with internal succession in the academic sector. Succession planning is an effective measure developed by academic institutions to evaluate internal employees and prepare them for critical leadership positions (Rothwell, 2010). In the study by (Bano, 2017), it is identified that “the private sector has more flexibility in external hiring managers compared to the public sector. This is because the public sector focuses on culture, institutional values, and strict budgetary policies. All participants agreed that both internal and external attitudes can influence the implementation of succession planning at universities.”

The participant highlighted the lack of competency models for universities as a major challenge for implementing succession planning in HEIs. The lack of a competency model for succession planning at universities is regrettable. Competency models are now commonly practiced in most organizations. Competency models are a viable tool to prepare the current and future workforce and retain skilled and experienced workers to meet the work demands in the education sector.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research is one of the few studies that has explored major challenges in implementing succession planning in HEIs. The results of this study are based on survey responses and interviews. These findings focus on the following issues: (a) Budget constraints within universities (b) Lack of organizational culture (c) Lack of awareness of succession planning (d) External vs. internal hiring (e) Lack of competency models. There are several recommendations that emerged from this research. Higher education practitioners need to provide more information about the importance of the succession planning process at the faculty and organizational levels.

The most important recommendation is that funds should be made available to HEIs. Because succession planning requires timely financial resources for employee development and financing management positions. In addition, internal staffing at department level appears to be greater, which could increase employee engagement and awareness. Additionally, top management should create cultural awareness and acceptance of succession planning initiatives at departmental and organizational levels.

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