Effectiveness of Leadership Training Programs in Public Universities of Malaysia in Developing Students’ Knowledge of Leadership

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Abstract: This study explored the effectiveness of leadership training programs for residential college student leaders in public universities of Malaysia. The effectiveness of leadership training programs was determined by assessing whether or not student leaders believed the leadership training programs helped increase and enhance their (a) understanding of leadership knowledge, (b) leadership skills and (c) leadership performance-related attitudes. Leadership training effectiveness was further assessed by whether or not student leaders indicated they used the knowledge and skills gained from the leadership training programs in performing their duties as student leaders in residential college. The effectiveness of the leadership training programs was evaluated by using a survey instrument and focus group interviews. This study involved four public universities located in three regions. The sample was delimited to male and female student leaders who underwent a single, three-to-five day leadership training program conducted by the Department of Student Affairs of Malaysian public universities. The study revealed that in the views of the majority of participants, participation in the leadership training programs increased and enhanced their knowledge of leadership. There was no significant difference between male and female participants’ relative agreement in this regard.

Key words: Student leaders • Leadership training programs • Leadership effectiveness • Leadership knowledge • Residential college student leaders

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have argued that one of the core functions of the higher education is to prepare students to assume leadership roles [1-6]. Others have noted that higher education institutions play a fundamental role in the development of future leaders and in the preparation for service to the community [7-9]. Almost all higher education institutions have an expressed mission to develop student leaders or producers of future leaders [1] while others consider these institutions as student leadership development centers [10, 11].

Numerous valuable outcomes of leadership programs for undergraduate students have been identified [12]. These include (a) acquiring academic credit for work and community service; (b) improving student retention rates; (c) developing individuals’ affective and effective qualities; (d) developing life skills with application to personal and community situations; (e) increasing understanding of interpersonal relations and human dynamics; (f) developing nonacademic qualities that make students stronger candidates for professional and graduate school admissions; (g) increasing productivity of student leaders and student organizations; (h) developing a sense of competence, self-confidence and self-image; and (i) contributing positively to mental and physical health [2, 3, 13-17]. In addition to increased specific skills (such as goal setting, decision making and conflict resolution), students also increased their commitment to developing leadership in others, becoming involved with community action programs and promoting understanding across racial and ethnic groups [7, 5, 18, 19].

Interest in student leadership development remains high [20-24]. Posner and Brodsky [9] asserted that many higher education institutions provide some form of leadership development for their students. Other researchers have stated that most higher education...
institutions have one or more leadership programs in place for students \[25, 26\] ranging from short workshops to full-fledged degree programs specialize in leadership development \[27, 28\].

According to Burch \[29\] structured leadership programs for college students have become popular in recent years. The notion underlying the development of such programs is that leadership can be learned and refined through formal training \[3, 19, 22, 26, 30\]. There are three types of curricular and programmatic approaches to leadership development programs for college students: interdisciplinary courses taught by faculty members, professional programs and traditional student affairs approaches \[2, 31, 32\]. According to Callahan and Mabey \[31\] interdisciplinary courses focus on leadership theories, traits, behaviors and case studies. Professional programs focus on leadership from a disciplinary perspective such as educational leadership, business, or political leadership. Traditional student affairs approaches may include one-time noncredit programs coordinated mostly by student affairs administrators \[31\]. The latter is often called leadership training \[26\]. This type of leadership development has been applied in 16 public Malaysian universities, to train residential college student leaders and thus became the focus of this study. The locations of these universities are as follows: two in the north, two in the south, nine in the center, one in the west and two in the east.

Clark \[33\] contended that there is a need to increase the number and quality of leadership programs at higher education institutions. Leadership training programs are important because they provide vehicles for encouraging and implementing student development \[34-36\] and, without proper training, many students are unable to effectively assume leadership responsibilities \[37\].

Posner and Brodsky \[38\] suggested that leadership training should be designed to enhance students’ understanding and skills in challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way and encouraging the heart. These skills are likely to facilitate the effectiveness of student leaders’ future work organizations \[39\]. Such programs may include workshops to help students understand the specific behaviors and actions of effective leaders. Posner and Brodsky \[9\] posited that student affairs administrators need to assist students in developing the skills and competencies necessary to become effective student leaders.

**Research Question:** Following was the main research question of the present study:

In what ways did the leadership training programs increase male and female student leaders’ knowledge of leadership?

**Research Design and Methodology:** This study employed a mixed-methods design. The effectiveness of the leadership training programs was evaluated by using a survey instrument and focus group interviews. The emphasis was on quantitative survey data, with qualitative data from focus group interviews used to further clarify response themes.

The statistics employed to analyze the survey response data included descriptive statistics, Cronbach’s \(\alpha\) correlation and \(t\) tests. The qualitative data analysis was achieved by tape recording, transcribing, reading, rereading and coding. The data were coded relative to themes explored through the questions asked in the focus group interviews.

The first part of this study involved developing the survey instrument and collecting survey data via electronic and hard copy from all 242 residential college student leaders of four Malaysian public universities who participated in leadership training programs. The survey was administrated approximately seven months after the training programs. Two hundred twenty three participants (response rate 92.15%) responded by Internet or mail. Of this number, 111 were males (49.80%) and 112 were females (50.20%). The focus group interviews with six to eight residential college student leaders randomly selected from each university to further explicate and substantiate the survey data were conducted 14 to 24 days after the survey data collection.

Of that Figure, 223 participants (response rate 92.15%) responded by Internet or mail. Of this number, 111 were males (49.80%) and 112 were females (50.20%). Participant response rate for each participating university varied slightly from 89.09 to 98.53 percent. A total of 49 of the 55 Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) participants (response rate 89.09%), 55 of the 60 Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) participants (response rate 91.67%), 67 of the 68 Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) participants (response rate 98.53%) and 52 of the 59 Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) participants (response rate 88.34%) responded by Internet or mail.

Unless noted, participants mentioned hereafter are limited to the 223 respondents. Table 1 displays the demographic information of the UKM, UPM, UTM and UUM participants.
Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants from Four Universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Survey Participants</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male (F)</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia</td>
<td>25 (51%)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universiti Putra Malaysia</td>
<td>36 (65.5%)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universiti Teknologi Malaysia</td>
<td>22 (32.8%)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universiti Utara Malaysia</td>
<td>28 (53.8%)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: A Comparison of Male and Female Participants’ Responses to the Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Variables</th>
<th>Male (n = 111)</th>
<th>Female (n = 112)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of leadership</td>
<td>26.08 2.96</td>
<td>25.82 2.95</td>
<td>.66 221 .51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second part of this study involved conducting focus group interviews with 6 to 8 residential college student leaders randomly selected from each university to further explicate and substantiate the survey data. The focus group interviews were conducted 14 to 24 days after the survey data collection. Originally 10 (20.4%) of the 49 UKM participants, 15 (27.3%) of the 55 UPM participants, 12 (17.9%) of the 67 UTM participants and 12 (23.08%) of the 52 UUM participants responded affirmatively to the focus group request at the end of the survey. Of these, eight participants from each institution were randomly selected.

Analysis of Survey and Focus Group Data: As stated, all the survey statements were directly derived from research question. The themes related to survey statements under the research question were first analyzed using response frequency and percentages. Next, the statements were combined into a variable under the research question themes. To determine similarities or differences of perceptions between male and female participants on the research question themes, the following procedures were performed.

First, a reliability analysis of Cronbach’s coefficient \( \alpha \) was run on each of the four thematic total variables to determine inter-item reliability. The acceptable reliability \( \alpha \) level of total variable scales was set at 0.60 [40]. Finally, the mean total variable responses of male and female participants were then compared using a \( t \) test. The \( t \) test results, along with descriptive statistics, of the four total variable responses are illustrated in Table 2.

Knowledge of Leadership: Addressing the research question, “In what ways did the leadership training programs increase male and female student leaders’ knowledge of leadership?” were eight survey statements. These eight survey statements inquired after male and female participants’ relative agreement on the eight domains of knowledge of leadership. The eight domains of knowledge of leadership were: the definition of leaders and leadership, basic elements of leadership, leadership qualities and characteristics of effective leaders, purpose of leadership, importance of leadership, impact of leadership in organizations, differences between leadership and management and leadership styles. The eight survey statements were as follows:

Q1: I better understand the difference between leaders and leadership.
Q2: I have a better understanding of the relationship between leaders and follower.
Q3: I know more about leadership qualities and characteristics of effective leaders.
Q4: I better understand the purpose of effective leadership in organizations.
Q5: I have a better understanding of the importance of leadership in organizations.
Q6: I know more about the impact of ineffective leadership in organizations.
Q7: I better understand the difference between management and leadership.
Q8: I know the importance of applying appropriate leadership styles in my setting.

Table 3 displays male and female participants’ rankings of agreement with each survey statement for knowledge of leadership. Table 3 shows that 93.7% male and 97.3% female participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they better understood the difference between leaders and leadership, 88.2% male and 96.4% female participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had a better
understanding of the relationship between leaders and followers, 91% male and 85.8% female participants agreed or strongly agreed that they knew more about leadership qualities and characteristics of effective leaders, 94.5% male and 90.2% female participants agreed or strongly agreed that they better understood the purpose of effective leadership in organizations, 96.3% male and 95.6% female participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had a better understanding of the importance of leadership in organizations, 91.9% male and 92.9% female participants agreed or strongly agreed that they knew more about the impact of ineffective leadership in organizations, 81.1% male and 82.2% female participants agreed or strongly agreed that they better understood the difference between management and leadership and 87.4% male and 96.4% female participants agreed or strongly agreed that they knew the importance of applying appropriate leadership styles in their settings.

These data were interpreted as evidence that the majority of participants of both genders believed that participation in the leadership training programs increased and enhanced their knowledge of leadership. The eight statements were combined into a total variable. The combined total variable was oriented toward the notion that leadership training programs increased and enhanced the participants’ knowledge of leadership. A reliability analysis of Cronbach’s coefficient alpha was run on the total variable. An inter-item reliability of .75 was obtained for the male participants and .79 for the female participants. As both reliability alpha values were above .60, the analysis proceeded using a t test to compare the total variable mean values of male and female participants. A t value of .66 (df = 221), p = .51, two-tailed was obtained, indicating that there was no significant difference between male (n = 111, M = 26.08, sd = 2.96) and female (n = 112, M = 25.82, sd = 2.95) participants’ relative agreement with regard to the leadership training program helping increase and enhance their knowledge of leadership. The t test results and the descriptive statistics of the total variable response values are displayed in Table 2. To further illustrate the similarity of responses between male and female participants, the mean response values of the total variable (M = 26.08, M = 25.82) were divided by eight (the number of survey statements composing this total variable). Each survey statement on an average was ranked 3.26 by the male participants and 3.23 by the female participants, for a difference of 0.03. These figures indicate that overall both male and female participants agreed or strongly agreed that they knew the importance of applying appropriate leadership styles in their settings.

The qualitative data derived from the focus group interviews supported the quantitative data supplying additional evidence of increased knowledge of leadership. All the focus group participants indicated that the eight domains of leadership knowledge were addressed in the training programs. During the focus group sessions, the majority of male and female participants repeatedly revealed their ability to develop their own definitions of the term “leader” and “leadership” and the difference between the two terms. As one female UUM focus group participant noted:
We had no problem with the definition of leader…. We can develop and use our own definition based on what we understand. It is much easier to remember our own definition than to use others.

A majority of the participants commented that after they went through the many activities in the training program, they had a better understanding of the terms. They pointed out that the term “leader” refers to a “person” while the term “leadership” refers to a “process.” As one female UKM participant stated:

After we successfully went through these two activities, we had no problem finding the definitions. In fact, it was a good idea that our facilitator allowed us to develop our own definition of leader and leadership based on our experience and understanding.

The participant went on to say the following:

This activity helped clarify the meaning of leaders and leadership. I mean by looking back at what we did, we could find a simple meaning. Leaders refer to people or persons, while leadership is a process of influencing others to complete the assigned tasks. That’s exactly what we did in our activities.

During the explanation of the terms “leader” and “leadership,” the majority of the participants highlighted the term “goals” and “authority”. The term “goal,” however, was used interchangeably with the terms objectives, tasks, aims and purposes. Additionally, the participants were able to relate their functions as leaders in residential college to residential college goals. As one male UKM focus group participant contended, “Leadership is a way of focusing and motivating a group of people to achieve organizational goals.” In support of her male counterpart, one female UKM participant noted that “For me a leader is a person who influences other people to accomplish a purpose. In this case our purpose was to complete two outdoor activities.”

With regard to authority, the participants said that their appointment to the residential college student leader positions gave them the power to direct others in running the residential college. They, however, would rely on their knowledge and skills to influence residents to do what needed to be done. One male UPM participant observed the following:

Authorities are those who hold formal positions that give them power to direct the behavior of others. Because we are appointed to the leadership position, we are a good example of an authority. However, we may or may not be leaders, depending on whether we rely solely on our official positions to influence others. To be considered a leader, we need to use more of our knowledge and skills to direct the residents’ behavior in achieving the residence hall goals.

Evidence of the participants’ increased knowledge of leadership could also be noted during the explanation of their understanding of the terms discussed above. A majority of male and female participants highlighted the importance of specialization, one component or element of leadership and developing relationships with colleagues.
and student residents in uniting their strengths and overcoming their weaknesses. In their explanation of the terms, the participants also revealed their understanding of their limitation that they could not be good at everything and the need to develop relationships with others to get everything in residential college done. They asserted that developing relationships with others would compensate each other’s shortcomings. One male UKM participant pointed out the following:

To be a leader, we need each other to achieve our goals, because each of us has only some of the skills needed to do most of the jobs. Therefore, it is important that we surround ourselves with our colleagues and residents to fill the gaps. As we agreed, we can’t do everything by ourselves.

One female UTM participant argued:

We also know that leaders do not command excellence, but they build excellence. We cannot be a leader either in a vacuum or in every area that we can think of. We must specialize in one area. In our case, we are specialized in our area, that is residence halls and we have relationships with our residents. That makes us leaders.

During the focus group sessions, the majority of male and female participants revealed the many roles they played in the residential colleges that they were assigned to and the responsibilities they shouldered. Roles of program director, motivator, enforcement officer, expert, mediator, advisor, facilitator, information disseminator and friend were repeatedly stated in the focus group interview sessions. The participants seemed to understand the rationale of why they had to play those roles. One female UKM participant noted the following:

We play many roles at once. I guess this is the beauty of being a leader. But we must remember that being a leader means that we are also accountable and responsible for our group. The group’s success is dependent on us. Therefore, we need to be strong in order to coordinate activities, to do administrative tasks, establish a conducive environment, provide information, make referrals to campus services, assist residents with counseling, etc. and not to mention to handle residents’ problems.

Finally, during the focus group interview sessions, male and female participants revealed their understanding of the importance of strong leadership, their presence in residential colleges and the implication on student residents of their good and poor leadership. The majority of participants repeatedly noted in their responses that they were needed in residential colleges for effective planning, to look after student resident welfare, to develop a conducive learning environment, to integrate and coordinate group members’ strengths and to coordinate activities. One female UKM participant indicated the following:

Leaders are needed to coordinate activities in the organization. In our case resident assistants are important to residence halls for various reasons. For example, we are important to ensure that our residence hall operations go as planned. We make sure that our residence halls are very conducive for our residents. We are needed to ensure that the welfare of our residents is taken care of.

With regard to providing good or poor leadership, the majority of participants noted an understanding of the implication of their leadership in the overall residential colleges. The majority of participants, however, elaborated more about the implication of poor leadership than of good leadership. For example, they admitted many times that their poor leadership might jeopardize the residential colleges’ conducive environment and impede the student residents’ overall development. This situation might lead to many students not liking to live in the residential colleges. One male UPM participant observed that “poor leadership will hold back our residents from reaching their full potential. It also seriously impacts morale and the retention rate at residential colleges.”

CONCLUSIONS

An increase in leadership knowledge, skills and performance-related attitudes are the goals of leadership training program [3, 41]; thus, the leadership training programs for residential college student leaders conducted by the Department of Student Affairs of the four Malaysian public universities achieved their training program goals. The findings showed that the leadership training programs’ goals met the male and female participants’ needs and expectations. These findings were consistent with the literature. Many researchers have contended that training program goals must be relevant
not only to the participants’ social needs and situations but also to the wishes and background of the participants (42,43,34). Both the quantitative survey response data and the qualitative focus group data supported this conclusion.

The focus group participants indicated that they benefited from the training programs regardless of their previous leadership experience. The findings could be attributed to the fact that the leadership knowledge and skills presented in the training programs matched the male and female participants’ needs and expectations. The findings could also be attributed to the applicability of the leadership knowledge and skills to the male and female participants’ setting (residential colleges) and their outside campus life, as reported by focus group participants. A majority of focus group participants reported that they learned practical knowledge and skills. This practicality allowed them to immediately apply the leadership knowledge and skills even at their training sites. This coincided with the adult learning theory which indicated that effective training programs allow participants to see that the learning and their day-to-day activities are closely related and relevant [44].

The training programs provided opportunities for the male and female participants to apply knowledge and skills at the training site. The participants reported many times that they were given opportunities to apply skills and knowledge acquired. This theme was consistent with the literature. Anderson [45] and Barsi, Hand and Kress [46] contended that student leaders need to be given opportunities to apply both theoretical and practical experience for leading organizations while they are in the training programs. Whitt [24] noted that colleges need to generate opportunities for students to "practice leadership skills in settings that affirm experiences, challenge them to take risks, give them significant responsibility and support them when they fail" (p. 205). Callahan and Mabey [31] and Ender and McFadden [47] also noted the importance of giving the participants opportunities to apply knowledge and skills at the training place.

REFERENCES


