SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP AND THE PREPAREDNESS OF LEADERS IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract: *Sustainable leadership has become an essential paradigm in higher education as institutions navigate increasingly complex social, environmental, and ethical challenges. Malaysian public universities play a strategic role in developing youth leaders capable of advancing sustainability-oriented agendas in alignment with national development priorities. This study examines the preparedness of student leaders in public higher education institutions (HEIs) in Negeri Sembilan for sustainable leadership roles. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design, the research explores the lived experiences, perceptions, and developmental pathways of five purposively selected student leaders. Through thematic analysis, three major themes emerged—emotional intelligence, training and development, and organizational exposure—which collectively explain the dynamic interplay between personal competencies and institutional environments in shaping leadership readiness. The Motivation–Opportunity–Ability (MOA) framework served as the analytical lens, illustrating how emotional intelligence represents an ability, training enhances both motivation and skill, and organizational exposure provides or constrains opportunities for applied leadership. Findings indicate that while students display strong motivation and emerging sustainable leadership capabilities, institutional limitations—such as bureaucratic structures, inconsistent sustainability-focused training, and limited participatory governance—constrain authentic leadership engagement. This study contributes to scholarship on sustainability and leadership development by offering a holistic understanding of student leadership readiness and proposing institutional strategies for cultivating emotionally intelligent, ethically grounded, and sustainability-oriented future leaders.*

Keywords: *sustainable leadership, emotional intelligence, student development, higher education, Malaysia, leadership readiness, MOA framework.*

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Introduction

Sustainability has become a core expectation of twenty-first century leadership, with leaders increasingly expected to consider long-term societal, environmental, and ethical consequences in their decision-making (Visser & Courtice, 2011). As nations confront global challenges—including climate change, widening inequalities, and shifting socio-economic landscapes—the capacity to develop leaders who embody sustainable leadership principles has become critical. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are uniquely positioned in this regard, functioning as environments where young leaders acquire the values, competencies, and experiences that shape their future leadership trajectories.

In Malaysia, sustainability-related expectations are further reinforced by national development plans and commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which emphasizes quality, inclusive, and future-oriented education. Public universities are therefore tasked with nurturing students capable of contributing to the nation's sustainable development agenda through responsible, ethical, and socially conscious leadership. Despite growing emphasis on university-based leadership development initiatives, questions remain regarding the extent to which Malaysian student leaders are prepared to adopt sustainability-oriented leadership roles.
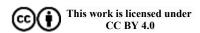
Sustainable leadership transcends traditional leadership models that prioritize efficiency, control, or short-term outcomes. Instead, it integrates long-term vision, ethical decision-making, environmental stewardship, and a systemic understanding of interrelated social dynamics. Scholars such as Hargreaves and Fink (2020) and Avery and Bergsteiner (2021) contend that sustainable leadership requires leaders to cultivate resilient, inclusive, and values-based cultures that endure beyond individual leadership tenures. Within Malaysian HEIs, this paradigm is particularly important as student leaders operate in diverse multicultural settings, navigate institutional complexities, and engage with peers facing varied socio-economic realities.

Leadership development among Malaysian university students has received growing scholarly attention, but research specifically examining sustainable leadership readiness remains limited. Much of the existing literature focuses on administrative leadership or institutional policies, rather than on students as emerging leaders. This creates a gap in understanding how personal competencies, training experiences, and institutional structures shape students' perceptions of their own leadership preparedness.

Drawing on the Motivation–Opportunity–Ability (MOA) framework, this study examines the preparedness of student leaders for sustainable leadership roles across three interconnected dimensions: (a) emotional intelligence as a core foundational ability; (b) leadership training and development as sources of motivation and competency-building; and (c) organizational exposure as the environmental opportunities that enable or constrain leadership enactment. The phenomenological approach provides deep insight into how student leaders make sense of their experiences and how institutional ecosystems influence their developmental journeys.

The study addresses the following research questions:

a) How do student leaders in Malaysian public higher education institutions perceive their preparedness for sustainable leadership?
b) What factors strengthen or hinder their development of sustainable leadership competencies?

By exploring these questions, the study contributes to efforts to strengthen student leadership ecosystems, enhance sustainability-based training, and promote emotionally intelligent and ethically grounded future leaders within Malaysian HEIs.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Sustainable Leadership in Higher Education

Sustainable leadership has evolved to address contemporary challenges that require leaders to prioritize long-term societal and environmental well-being. Avery and Bergsteiner (2021) describe sustainable leadership as leadership driven by values such as responsibility, ethical governance, and long-term resilience. Hargreaves and Fink (2020) similarly emphasize that sustainable leadership focuses on enduring organizational health and the preservation of resources, rather than short-term gains.

In higher education, sustainable leadership reflects the moral responsibility of universities to shape leaders who are capable of contributing to societal progress. Leal Filho et al. (2022) highlight that HEIs must integrate sustainability throughout institutional structures—including governance, curriculum, co-curricular programs, and community outreach. Student leadership, therefore, serves as a critical avenue through which sustainability values may be internalized and enacted.

In Malaysia, national policies encourage universities to nurture graduates with strong ethical foundations, civic-mindedness, and global perspectives. Emphasis on sustainability is evident in initiatives aligned with SDG 4, which stress education's role in building socially responsible citizens. Student leadership positions—whether in student representative councils, clubs, or community engagement platforms—serve as microcosms of real-world leadership environments, offering opportunities for students to develop sustainable leadership competencies.

Despite this, sustainability-focused leadership development remains uneven across Malaysian HEIs. Many institutions have yet to fully integrate sustainability principles into their leadership frameworks, resulting in training that is often generic rather than sustainability-driven.

Emotional Intelligence as a Foundation for Sustainable Leadership

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been widely acknowledged as a crucial determinant of leadership effectiveness. EI includes competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, motivation, and interpersonal skills (Goleman, 1995). Aminbeidokhti et al. (2023) found that emotionally intelligent leaders demonstrate adaptability, compassion, and ethical sensitivity—qualities aligned with sustainable leadership values. González et al. (2024) further emphasize that student leaders with high EI tend to create inclusive environments, manage conflict effectively, and cultivate trust-based relationships.

In diverse multicultural settings such as Malaysian universities, EI becomes particularly important. Leaders must recognize cultural nuances, navigate interpersonal tensions, and foster cohesion among students from different backgrounds. Sustainable leadership requires emotionally grounded decision-making that balances competing demands while preserving long-term welfare. Consequently, EI is positioned as a key ability within the MOA framework—an internal resource that shapes leaders' readiness and capacity to engage in sustainability-oriented behaviors.

Training and Development as Drivers of Leadership Competency

Training and development programs in HEIs are instrumental in shaping students' leadership identities, strengthening their skills, and enhancing their motivation. Day et al. (2021) argue that structured leadership training contributes to self-confidence, communication proficiency, strategic thinking, and ethical awareness. Elliott et al. (2023) highlights that program incorporating experiential learning significantly improve students' application of leadership concepts.

However, research suggests that many leadership programs remain generic and lack depth in sustainability integration. Fadeeva and Mochizuki (2021) caution that sustainability is often treated as an isolated topic rather than a foundational principle across leadership competencies. As a result, student leaders may learn administrative skills but struggle to engage in sustainability-oriented decision-making.

Within the MOA framework, training functions both as a source of motivation—cultivating students' desire to lead—and as a mechanism for developing leadership abilities. Its effectiveness, however, depends on alignment with sustainability goals and opportunities for practice.

Organizational Exposure and Opportunity Structures

Organizational exposure refers to students' participation in authentic leadership environments, including student councils, university governance committees, and community partnerships. Such exposure provides opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge, develop practical skills, and understand institutional cultures (Iqbal et al., 2023).

Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) posits that leadership development emerges through cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Student leaders gain confidence, negotiation skills, and resilience through active engagement in organizational processes.
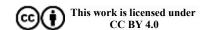
However, the quality of organizational exposure is shaped by institutional structures. Liao (2022) notes that hierarchical governance and bureaucratic procedures often limit student leaders' autonomy, reducing opportunities for meaningful participation. These structural constraints represent opportunity gaps within the MOA framework and may impede sustainable leadership development.

The MOA Framework in Leadership Studies

The Motivation–Opportunity–Ability (MOA) framework, introduced by MacInnis and Jaworski (1989), provides a holistic model for understanding behavior. In the context of leadership development:
a)   Motivation reflects readiness and desire to lead
b)   Opportunity refers to environmental conditions that allow leadership practice
c)   Ability encompasses skills and competencies required for effective leadership
Li et al. (2021) found that even highly motivated leaders cannot perform effectively if opportunities are lacking. The MOA framework is thus valuable in assessing leadership ecosystems within HEIs, identifying gaps in training, environmental support, or personal competencies.

Research Gap

Existing literature acknowledges the importance of sustainability and leadership development in HEIs, but research focusing on sustainable leadership readiness among Malaysian student leaders is limited. Leadership training programs exist, but their sustainability integration is inconsistent. Organizational exposure varies significantly across institutions, and bureaucratic limitations often constrain authentic student leadership. These gaps underscore the need for a holistic examination of student leadership readiness in Malaysia's public HEIs.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore student leaders' lived experiences and perceptions of sustainable leadership. Phenomenology is well-suited for capturing the essence of subjective experiences, particularly those involving personal values, emotions, and meaning-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Qualitative inquiry allows for a nuanced understanding of leadership development, emphasizing dynamic processes rather than static traits. This approach aligns with sustainability leadership scholarship that underscores relational, contextual, and human-centered dimensions of leadership readiness (Harrison et al., 2024).

Research Setting

The study was conducted across public higher education institutions in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. These institutions represent diverse student populations and leadership structures, offering rich contexts for examining leadership experiences. Differences in governance, co-curricular offerings, and leadership development programs provided a holistic understanding of sustainable leadership readiness across similar institutional types.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had substantial experience in student leadership roles. Inclusion criteria were:
Current or former formal leadership positions (e.g., student council, club president, committee chair).
a)   At least one year of leadership experience.
b)   Active participation in organizational decision-making.
c)   Ability to provide reflective accounts of their experiences.

A total of five student leaders participated. While modest, this sample aligns with phenomenological research norms that prioritize depth over breadth (Vagle, 2018).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via online platforms depending on participants' convenience. Questions explored perceptions of sustainable leadership, emotional and interpersonal experiences, exposure to training, and organizational challenges. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework, was used to analyze the data. Both inductive and deductive coding approaches were employed to ensure that themes emerged organically while remaining grounded in the MOA framework. Three major themes were identified:

1)   Emotional intelligence as a foundation for effective leadership
2)   Training and development as catalysts for growth
3)   Organizational exposure as essential for applied leadership

Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were ensured through:

1)   Member checking
2)   Audit trails
3)   Reflexive journaling
4)   Thick descriptions

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained, and participants were briefed on confidentiality, voluntary participation, and withdrawal rights. Pseudonyms were used in reporting.

Findings

Theme 1: Emotional Intelligence as a Foundation for Effective Leadership

Participants consistently described emotional intelligence (EI) as central to their leadership effectiveness. Leadership in HEIs was seen as inherently relational, requiring empathy, communication, conflict management, and self-regulation. Students found themselves mediating conflicts, supporting distressed members, and navigating diverse personalities. EI allowed them to build trust, maintain team cohesion, and respond ethically to challenging situations. Emotional resilience emerged as particularly important. Student leaders often encountered stress, criticism, or pressure, and EI enabled them to remain composed and confident.

Theme 2: Training and Development as Catalysts for Growth

Participants attributed much of their leadership readiness to training programs such as workshops, leadership camps, and seminars. Training helped them understand leadership theories, clarify their roles, and cultivate self-confidence. Training experiences strengthened both their motivation to lead and their skillsets. However, participants noted that many programs were generic and lacked emphasis on sustainability. They expressed a preference for experiential learning, mentoring, and continuity in training.

Theme 3: Organizational Exposure as an Essential Platform for Practice

Student leaders described organizational exposure as critical for applying theoretical knowledge. Engagement in student councils, committees, and clubs helped them develop negotiation, event management, diplomacy, and decision-making skills. Interacting with administrators revealed institutional constraints such as bureaucratic delays and hierarchical structures, which sometimes hindered meaningful participation. Despite these challenges, organizational exposure contributed to leadership maturity and real-world understanding.

Discussion

Findings demonstrate that sustainable leadership readiness emerges from the interplay of emotional intelligence, training, and organizational exposure. EI represents the ability dimension of leadership readiness, enabling ethical and relational competence. Training enhances motivation and competency-building, while organizational exposure provides opportunities for practice. However, institutional constraints limit the opportunities available to student leaders, creating mismatches within the MOA framework. These gaps hinder sustainable leadership development despite students' inherent motivation and abilities. Implications include the need for HEIs to integrate sustainability into training, expand authentic leadership opportunities, reduce bureaucratic barriers, and foster mentorship ecosystems.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on sustainable leadership development among university students can be strengthened through broader and more diverse methodological and contextual approaches. Expanding the participant pool across various regions and institutional types—including research universities, private institutions, and TVET colleges—would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different organizational cultures influence leadership preparedness. Comparative studies between public and private HEIs may also reveal structural or cultural factors that shape sustainability-oriented leadership behaviors. In addition, mixed-methods designs that integrate surveys with qualitative inquiry could generate richer, multidimensional insights into emotional intelligence, motivation, and opportunity structures within student leadership ecosystems. Longitudinal studies would further enhance understanding by tracking the evolution of leadership competencies and sustainability values over time. Finally, intervention-based research evaluating specific leadership training models, sustainability education modules, or emotional intelligence programs would offer empirical evidence on the effectiveness of targeted development strategies, supporting HEIs in designing more impactful and future-ready leadership frameworks.

Conclusion

This study examined the preparedness of Malaysian student leaders for sustainable leadership roles through a phenomenological analysis guided by the MOA framework. Findings reveal that emotional intelligence, training, and organizational exposure significantly influence leadership readiness. However, institutional constraints—especially limited meaningful opportunities—pose major challenges. To cultivate sustainability-oriented future leaders, Malaysian HEIs must enhance emotional intelligence development, prioritize sustainability in leadership training, empower student leaders through participatory governance, and strengthen leadership ecosystems that support long-term resilience and ethical decision-making.

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