

Exploring Ihsan-based Leadership among Academic Leaders

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Abstract

Many studies on management discipline has explored and associating leadership with styles, culture, spirituality, integrity and many others. In more recent development, soul-based leadership has been outlined too. However, past literature was not exploring a God-centric “ihsan-based leadership”; instead the focus was merely on human-centric. Understanding ihsan and applying it within the framework of leadership is crucial for someone’s to perform their duty with ethics and integrity efficiently and effectively. As a consequence, one is left with the belief that there is still ample opportunity for research in leadership with an emphasis on ihsan which goes beyond culture and spirituality for academic leaders. This proposed research will be measured by using purely qualitative method and aims to explore the understanding and practice of ihsan from the perspective of intellectual leaders in performing their roles in teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community engagement. Thus, this paper discusses the conceptual view of ihsan-based leadership and outlines a proposition and research questions to investigate the understanding of ihsan and how it is supposed to be practiced among intellectual leadership in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Ihsan, academic leadership, teaching and learning, research, community engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of leadership has been debated and discussed for a long time. In Malaysia, predominantly studies on spirituality and leadership in educational setting have been in the picture since two decades ago (Abdul Ghani Abdullah, Naser Jamil Alzaidiyeen, Intsar Turki Aldarabah, 2009). Despite the rigorous research on spirituality and culture on leadership, the exploration to understand and define ihsan-based leadership and the practice has not been highlighted. What is ihsan-based leadership? And most importantly what is ihsan? How does this phenomenon defined and understood or even practiced?

Ihsan (إحسان) is originally an Arabic word which means doing good. Ihsan literally means to do with excellence, perfection, integrity and responsibility (Sidek Baba, 2012). The concept of Ihsan means as a responsible person and a person of quality where things is done in a very good manner, in a complete sense, in a nice and tasteful way and is never satisfied with anything other than a quality job in all for the sake of having good reward from God.

According to Finkelstein (2012), the very basic form of academic leadership is intellectual leadership. Therefore this study focuses intellectual leaders (Professors, Associate Professors or Senior lecturers) in performing their duties in teaching and learning, research and innovations and community engagement rather than institutional leaders in Universities such as Deans, Head of Department, Deputy Vice Chancellor or Vice Chancellor. However this terminology sometimes redundant in the function. Therefore, the term academic leaders will be used interchangeably with the term intellectual leaders throughout this article. This paper discusses issue which is beyond spirituality leadership but also emphasizes the influence of ihsan towards the roles of intellectual leadership in higher education institutions in the selected niche areas of interest such as teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community engagement.

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2. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

A review in the google search engine for instance, generated more than 400 million results on the topic of leadership and out of these more than 24 million are on the definitions of leadership. A book search on the Amazon.com website revealed 95,220 titles devoted to leadership (Bjugstad, 2006). In relation to this, Kanungo and Mendonca (1996) views that the understanding on the leadership phenomenon have been examined and probed in thousands of articles, papers and books but yet the understanding on the topic remains incomplete in spite of decades of research. Additionally, many past studies have been conducted on leadership however majority of the results were contradicting and inconclusive (Yulk, 2013). Despite elaborately discussed, the understanding on the leadership phenomenon has not increased (Ali, 2005). Therefore, in order to understand what leadership really means, over the past half century, numerous leadership theories have been developed and has been recognized that the majority of those theories were developed in the American region (Blair & Hunt, 1986; Yulk, 2013).

According to Shahin and Wright (2004) most leadership theories are North American in origin. Although a great deal of literature has seen investigation of Malaysian leadership style with association of spirituality and culture especially in the educational setting (Noraini Hashim et al., 2010; Sharma, 2010; Abdul Ghani Abdullah, 2009), no known research on ihsan-based leadership especially in the Malaysian context has been identified prior to that reported here. Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that leadership might be perceived differently when the leaders themselves understand what ihsan is and how ihsan should be implemented in their roles as academic leaders. Understanding ihsan and how it should be practised among academic leaders will be valuable to researchers and practitioners. Hence, there is a need to undertake a study to explore and understand ihsan among academic leadership in the Malaysian higher education institution context.

The question of how many of leaders or managers perform their duty with knowing that it is part of a good deed and will be rewarded by Allah as *ibadah* (manifestation of worship). Abu Ya'la Shaddad Ibn Aus, radiyallahu 'anhu, reported that the Messenger of Allah, sallallahu 'alayhi wassalam said:

"Verily, Allah has enjoined excellence (Ihsan) with regard to everything. So, when you kill, kill in a good way; when you slaughter, slaughter in a good way; so everyone of you should sharpen his knife, and let the slaughtered animal die comfortably" (Hadith narrated by Muslim).

The hadith teaches us the importance of applying perfection (Ihsan) in all our actions and deeds. It clarifies that even in slaughtering animals; we should apply perfection and goodness. Ihsan signifies that we should apply the same in our daily life and work practices, as well as in leadership too, in order to receive Allah's rewards and acceptance. Ihsan signifies the purifying or perfecting one's behaviour and deed. As an Islamic concept, it denotes the divine presence, as indicated in another hadith that when Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) was asked what is Ihsan, he said:

"It is to worship Allah as though you are seeing Him, and while you see Him not yet truly He sees you" (Hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim).

The hadith signifies that a human should do what Allah has commanded him/her to do as if he/she was standing before Allah and that would require being fully fearful and delegated to him, and requires to do worship according to the plan drawn by His messenger. Allah is seeing him/her, nothing is hidden from His actions, and will be called to account on it. If he/she acts well, this is good, and if he/she acts badly, this is bad. There is no doubt that if the wise servant remembered that Allah is watching them, he/she would have acted desiring in Allah's reward for the benevolent and fearing from the punishment that was prepared to the offenders.

Hadayanto, Afnan, Rahayu and Solimun, (2014) were among researchers who have conducted a quantitative study aimed to improve ihsan behaviour using organizational culture, leadership and personal values. One of the objectives of that study is to investigate whether leadership has a direct positive effect on ihsan behaviour. Branzei, Vertinsky and Camp (2007) have included ihsan behaviour (benevolent) in examining how culture influences individualist behaviour. Another research by Easterly and William (2011), distinguished between strong and weak leadership and shows that leadership strongly correlated with ihsan behaviour (benevolent). The understanding of Ihsan, have not been addressed efficiently in leadership research especially from eastern perspective. With this concern in mind, this study should be taken into consideration to be applied in Malaysian higher education context. Therefore, this paper intends to explore ihsan-based leadership by looking into the roles of academic leaders in teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community engagement. It gives some

basic literature review on the phenomenon involved and how research should be conducted based on the gap found and issues revealed. This paper will also outline the aims and research questions that will guide in embarking the proposed study.

3. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Study on *ihsan* associated with leadership is relatively a new field of study in Malaysia. There are fewer studies on *ihsan*-based leadership conducted in Malaysia. Most of the existing studies currently only focus on the *ihsan* behavior and conducted in Indonesia. *Ihsan* behaviour literally means to do well and there is relationship between *ihsan* behaviour and the organizational culture (Hadayanto, Afnan, Solimun, Rahayu and Ibrahim, 2014). There are probably no studies which directly explore the understanding and practice of *ihsan* on leadership and in particular academic leadership.

In many organisation or even academic institutions integrity values has been said to be crucial issue that closely related with ethics. In fact in Malaysia, National Integrity Plan (NIP) has been launched in order to establish a fully moral and ethical society whose citizens are strong in religious and spiritual values and instilled with the highest ethical standards (Izzaty Ulya Munirah et. al, 2015). Integrity has been widely discussed, however *ihsan*-based study is very limited and in fact the understanding and practice of *ihsan* is actually beyond the issue of integrity.

There are many books and journals that describe the meaning and characteristics of *Ihsan*, as well as in Al-Quran and Hadiths, there are a lack of research that focuses on the exploration of approaches and features on leadership based on *ihsan*. In 2008, the Emerald Group Publishing Limited launched the International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management with the objective of enabling Muslim scholars to share their findings in this area in a quality academic journal. One of the hottest topics has been the leadership principles that exist in the Islamic tradition. Unfortunately, there has been little empirical research to see how *ihsan* is practiced in leadership.

Apart from that, there are 78,600,000 results appears of search button on Islamic leadership in google search engine, but there are still very little research on *ihsan*-based leadership found among the number of results. Even though there were research on leadership been done among the academic personnel, but there is no known on *ihsan*-based leadership being conducted among the academic personnel especially in Malaysia. Thus, this study is an exploratory study that aims to fill those gaps.

Even though there were research conducted in higher education institutions in Malaysia that are related to discipline of leadership, but those research are still lacking in associating leadership with the important of teaching and learning, student outcome, and balancing the dual role of education as a vehicle for national development and self-development (Optokun, Noraini & Sariah, 2013). Therefore, this study is extended to find out how *ihsan* based leadership associated with three main responsibility of an academic; (a) teaching and learning, (b) research, and (c) community engagement.

Based on the data provided in previous studies, there was less data collected in regards of leadership in public institution of higher learning in Malaysia. Even though there are around 20 public universities in Malaysia, most of the previous studies were conducted in private universities as the data shows that more data, regarding the study on leadership, were collected within the private universities compared to public universities. Hence, this study is believed to be able to increase the number of studies in the field of academic leadership, and hoped to provide a wide range of information for future research on academic leadership. In addition, it might be useful for academic in its development strategy and lastly might assist organization such as Malaysian Higher Education Academy (AKEPT) to develop a framework and training module for academic leaders on *ihsan*-based leadership in the niche of teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Spirituality versus religiosity

Spirituality and religiosity has increasingly becomes a hot topic nowadays because of its important role in any companies or organizations. This phenomenon is obvious in business environments as concepts and issues of spirituality and religiosity in the workplace are more often being highlighted. Kouzes and Posner (2012) stated

that leaders in well organizations are looking for meaning and higher purpose to brought spirituality, religion and faith to the business's world. Kazmi (2004) also observed that the management discipline is experiencing an increasing interest in spirituality. Does the word of spirituality bring the same meaning with religiosity?

A lot of spirituality's definitions are offered in psychological literature. However, some collected definition of spirituality was by Vaill (2000) who views spirituality as having to do with human kind's search for meaning and he argues that the search for meaning has frequently led individuals to seek significance in their work. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) in their handbook stated that spirituality as "a framework of organizational values evidenced in culture that promotes employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a ways that provides feelings of completeness and joy". In addition, Schmit and Allshied (1991) described that spirituality is comprises into three categories which are a) personal inner experience b) values and c) outer behaviours.

There are some scholars emphasized that spirituality is differ from religiosity whereby Scott (1997) and Zinnbauer, et. al, (1997) have found various of definitions among hundreds of respondents, but the main conclusion of one analysis stated that "religion was predominantly associated with formal/organizational religion, while spirituality was more often associated with closeness with God and feelings of interconnectedness with the world and living things" (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Besides that, one of past research in the last 30 years found that religiousness is a system of beliefs and worship which a person practices, meanwhile spirituality means a personal life principle which connects a quality relationship to God (Enblem, 1992, p. 45).

Gholamreza Zandi, Mohamed Sulaiman, Babak Naysary and Nayal Rashed (2013) whereby stated that spirituality from Islamic perspective is something that related with religiosity, relationship with the Creator which is Allah and the practices that must be done as Muslims no matter who we are. Similar to Rulindo, Hidayat, & Mardhatillah (2011) who mentioned that spirituality is very much related to Islam because all aspect of Muslims' lives have to deal with it since the main purpose of man's creation is only to worship Allah. Spirituality in Islam is also based on *Tawhidic* paradigm (Unity of God) which is connects the worldly affairs (*al Duniyya*) and the hereafter (*al Akhirah*) in the context of business (Rahman, 1995; Beekun, 1997). The *Tawhidic* mind always remembers Allah, the Creator in any action or decision. Beekun (1997) asserted that The *Tawhidic* paradigm directs the responsibility to promote goodness (*'amr bil ma 'aruf*) and prevent evil (*nahi anil munkar*).

Gholamreza Zandi, Mohamed Sulaiman, Babak Naysary and Nayal Rasyed (2013) in their article titled 'The Relationship between Spirituality and Leader's Effectiveness: A Perspective from the Holy Qur'an' describes the word spirituality into three factors which are (1) belief in Allah (iman), (2) rituals (ibadat) and (3) repentance. However it must always supported and the foundation must be *ihsan* (to worship God as if you see Him, and if you cannot achieve this state of devotion then you must consider that He is looking at you). In the case of leadership, leading is a process of influencing others. As suggested by Nelson and Quick (2006: 214) leadership is "a process of guiding and directing the behaviour of people in the work environment". The constant feeling that God is watching is likely to prompt any leader with *ihsan* to behave at his best. How this belief should be applied for academic leaders in their responsibility in teaching and learning, conducting research and community engagement?

4.2 Ihsan

According to Sami (2013), term in the noble Quran and the noble tradition of the Prophet, the word "Al-Ihsan" refers to three different meanings:

- "Ihsan" as supreme spiritual aspiration "to worship Allah as if you saw Him", as defined in the very famous hadith of Jibril Alayhi Salam.
- "Ihsan" as good behaviour, such as a social behaviour of kindness, "kindness to parents, relatives, neighbours, orphans, the poorest etc." The verses that mention this are very numerous.
- "Ihsan" as an act of excellence; "Allah loves that when one of you accomplishes a work, that he accomplish it with excellence", narrated from Hadith.

By referring with the above conceptual definition, this research tries to move forward to explore how this concept is understood by academic leaders to collect as much as possible definition and understanding of Ihsan. The question is about the meaning and understanding and how is *ihsan* being practiced in the academic leaders' main responsibilities of teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

4.3 Academic leadership

Each and every institutions of higher education are believed to achieve world standards of excellence as one of their goals. Leadership in academic learning environment is not just a focus on the organization's needs, but it is also a mission of the nation (Voon, Lo, Ngui & Peter, 2009). There are around twenty (20) public universities in Malaysia, and as to date there are fewer studies undertaken to explore ihsan-based leadership notion that exists within those universities. Data adapted from (Voon et al., 2009; Lo Ramayah & Run, 2009) shows that only 23.6% of the collected data in previous studies on leadership are from public universities, while 68.6% are of private universities. On the other hand, existing literature on leadership in Malaysian higher education indicates that studies on leadership in universities are just evolving. Hence, this provides wide opportunities to carry out a study on any area related to leadership in higher education institutions in Malaysia. Opatokun, Noraini & Sariah (2013) in their writing stated that in Malaysian context, research on higher education leadership is mostly not associated with important of teaching and learning, student outcome, and balancing the dual role of education as a vehicle for national development and self-development. Therefore, this study is proposed to investigate and understand the definition and characteristics of ihsan leadership among academic in public universities in Malaysia.

The roles of an academician are not only focus on teaching and learning alone. There is wide range of accountability for an academician. Academic accountability is an important thing to be taken care by academician and this is the process of how they lead themselves into the area of teaching, research and community engagement. In general, academic accountability refers to responsibility of an academician for everything that he does including the results of his works (Zulkifli, 2008). As a professional, an academician must carry out the responsibilities with sincerity and excellence in order to produce a high quality of human resource for the needs of the nation and the community generally. The leadership aspect is seen to be the target for this study as it embraced the roles of an academician; (1) teaching and learning, (2) research and (3) community engagement, as a main criterion to be associated with ihsan.

Academician are synonym with the duty of giving lectures in classes within the campus of even outside the campus. In Malaysia, performance criteria for academicians are as follows: (1) the scores of teaching and learning; (2) administrative score; (3) research grant score; (4) score of publications and research; (5) score of supervision; and (6) scores for professional services (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi, 2005). However, the task of imparting knowledge through teaching and learning is a major task that must be shouldered by every academician (Yong & Hamdan, 2008). They need to do preparations for teaching and learning, such as notes and exam questions, check and provide marks according to a predetermined marking scheme and the guidelines for a task that would be given to the students. This includes the responsibility to enter the marks onto the system established by the academic divisions of the university. They carry the traditions of knowledge; understanding, experiencing, practicing, delivering and spreading the knowledge to others.

Another role of an academician is to involves in research as they sees research as an activities to discovers information and creation of innovation that gives answer to question, problem or hypothesis. It is an erudite function of an academic which contribute to the increment of knowledge. In addition, each academician should also carry out the duty of supervision of the students either at the graduate or post-graduate as an academic advisor and supervisor for the postgraduate and doctorate (Azlina & Shiqah, 2010).

Apart from that, each academician is also encouraged to provide professional services to the community and society. They contribute their services particularly in their expertise in order to fulfil the social responsibility towards community. This is one of indicators for measuring success in career of academics (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011). Among the professional services that can be provided by academicians are in terms of the dissemination of knowledge and skills available to the community for the common good. It includes services as consultants for any journal, a project adviser by any institution to be examiners of the thesis for master's and doctoral students, a consultant to governmental institutions and private, and gives lectures by expertise available to the public.

As an academician, another task is to become a role model or leading by example in their duties. A good leader will influence their followers with all this goodness if their leadership is well enough as leader is important in Islam. The primary duties of a leader are to lead the people in offering prayers, to look after their interest with justice and run their activities in a disciplined and systematic way (Ahmad, 2006). Hence, this study will focus to explore how ihsan associated with leadership in the responsibility of academic leaders in teaching and learning,

research and engagement with the community. Even though there were more of responsibilities of an academician, but this study will only focus on those three main duties as they are most common duty of an academician.

5. RESEARCH AIM, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The principal aim of this study is to explore ihsan among academic leaders. This study aims to explore the understanding and practice of ihsan among intellectual leaders in teaching and learning, research and community engagement. In doing so, research questions were outlined to explore ihsan among academic leadership to depict on ihsan concept and the application of ihsan which related to the duties of academic personnel.

RQ1: What is the definition of Ihsan?

RQ2: What is the understanding of Ihsan from academic leaders' perspective?

RQ3: How does Ihsan being practiced by academic leaders in teaching and learning?

RQ4: How does Ihsan being practiced by academic leaders in research and innovation?

RQ5: How does Ihsan being practiced by academic leaders in community engagement?

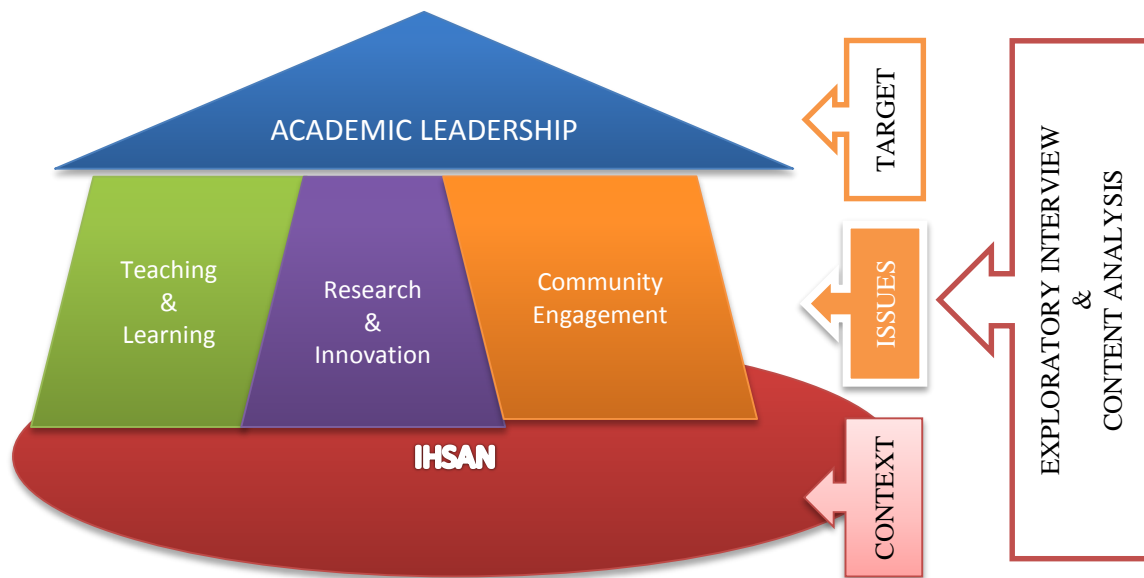


Figure 1: Research framework

6. METHODOLOGY

This study will apply a qualitative approach and will be conducted exploratory in nature which aims at collecting a rich quantity of data from the informants that will adopt a semi-structured interview method through an interview guide.

The targeted informants will be 20 informants (academic leaders). The purposive sampling will be applied for this study to obtain first-hand and reliable information from the academic leaders. Location of the study will confine to higher education institutions in the area of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Selangor and Negri Sembilan. In order to get more specific information, selected informants will be those who have multi-discipline background or basic Islamic integrated discipline.

The data collection procedure will focus on the preparation and collection of data through semi structured interview by emphasizing on the ethical aspects of researcher such as getting interview approval from related Higher Education Institutions, provide informed consent letter to informants, and seek approval to record interview.

The qualitative data analysis procedure for the proposed study will embark on three phases of Content Analyses namely preparation of data (Phase 1), exploration of data (Phase 2) and categorization of data (Phase 3). The first phase will be preparation of data whereby the raw data collected from the interview process will be transcribed accordingly. Then the exploration of data starts through the thinking process by researcher after reading through

the transcription to obtain the main information. After the thinking process, encoding of the related information will be performed through assigning of “key words” and identifying the number of informants who highlighted the same information based on the key words. The last phase will be the categorization of data where all the relevant information gathered will be analysed by applying the template and thematic analyses that uses a list of codes which can be determined based upon existing literature/theory and amended or added to as data are collected.

7. CONCLUSION

Ihsan-based literally mean to do well or to do at the very best by hoping reward from God. Thus, ihsan-based would mean to do excellently which leads to the improvement in academic tasks. Furthermore, it will create a new viewpoint of Ihsan-based than just focusing in the behaviour core. This study will create a benchmarking to another researcher in study to conduct an investigation between these two main elements which is leadership and ihsan-based. Apart from that, the study may lead to an interest of other researcher in starting the new research towards improvement in this area.

In addition, this study might provide information on the understanding of ihsan based leadership among the academician in public higher institution and the characteristic of ihsan based leadership. By investigating various characteristics of leadership, this study shed light on best practices when working in a higher education setting. This study might help other researcher or any organization to contribute in developing leadership framework based on the concept of ihsan and associated further to other area of academic duties.

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