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**Title:** *Search for Academic Excellence in Public Universities through Multi-level Leadership Practices: Lessons Learnt from East Asia*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

University leadership matters (Day & Leithwood, 2007; M Fullan, 2005; Hallinger, 2007; P. Ramsden, 1998) and given the changing contexts, needs to be smart (Mulford, 2010). The importance of university leaders increases in national, regional and global contexts. There is thus much to be gained by focusing more closely on the practice of university leadership or more specifically, university leaders’ actions (Hallinger, 2007; Marginson, 2011; Middlehurst, 1999; P Ramsden, 1998).

Academic interest in university leadership has produced a steady stream of research addressing roles, qualities, actions, strategies and styles of leaders. Although numerous studies on university leadership are conducted mostly from a single country or ‘hometown’ view, dominantly the American and Western ones (Altbach, 2010; Clark, 1984), surprisingly little systematic empirical research activity has been conducted on executive leadership actions, from cross-national comparative views, especially in East Asian public universities contexts, leaving such a research gap or a blank spot that needs to be investigated. This empirical study into university leadership in East Asia’s public university context is conducted to narrow that gap. Although the study is limited to only four cross-national territories in East Asia – China, Hong Kong, Thailand and Vietnam, the lessons learnt from the good university leadership practices in this empirical study may be of value, and transferable worldwide where higher education reforms all call for more strengthened university leadership at all levels, especially at executive levels. At the same time, this much-needed cross-national study can also make contribution to broaden and deepen one’s scholarly understanding of the cross-national university leadership.

It is undeniable that the American system of higher education is reputable all over the World for its top World- class universities in all top 100 university ranking lists and American university leadership is, therefore, worth learning from. This is also true for other advanced systems of higher education in the West such as in the UK and the Netherlands in Europe, in Australia and Canada where their competent university leadership offers a good source of inspiration for other countries elsewhere. It is reasonably tempting to look at examples from the USA and the UK in Europe, from Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific or the Singaporean, South Korean, Singaporean, Japanese examples in Asian. Universities in those developed countries are recognized in both literature and practice to be advanced and mature with their high performing universities always ranked among top universities in the World ranking lists. However, this study’s chosen geographical focus on East Asia is justified on the ground that the availability or the dominance of international research literature on American or Western university leadership does not reflect the full international picture of university leadership reality and in some cases, may dangerously lead to the misunderstanding that the Western university leadership is applicable or the same in the non-Western contexts. This explains why, among many other honorable scholars in education leadership, Phillip Hallinger (2007) emphasizes a strong need to avoid Western, North-American bias of university leadership and highlights blank spots and blind spots regarding non-Western university leadership that needs investigation.

At the same time, the emergence of World-class universities in East Asia at an astonishing pace over the past decade really catches national, regional and international attention. East Asian nations are getting more and more popular and are gaining increasing reputation in almost all areas including its higher education with an impressive rise of successful universities listed in both Asia’s and World’s top university ranking lists. ‘The path followed by East Asian countries has led to prosperity, stability and international respect’ (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2009). The achievements in higher education in some Asian countries are ‘examples of excellence’ (Zhao, 2011). Highlighting these impressive Asian achievements, Zhao (2011, p.viii) wrote:

*‘Some Asian countries have consistently performed extremely well on international comparative studies… The extraordinary academic accomplishment in Asian countries has impressed many other nations, and in some cases, has led to reflections or criticisms in higher education in their own country.’*

With specific reference Confucian heritage societies of East Asia, Simon Marginson (2011), in a recent 2011 ASHE annual conference titled *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenges of a Changing Future* made a strong statement highlighting the achievement of East Asia’s Confucian societies:

*‘The emergence of fast developing ‘World - Class’ higher education in the Confucian heritage societies of East Asia has changed the worldwide map of higher education. Japan with its mature science system and longstanding high participation rate has been joined by South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore in South East Asia and notably, Hong Kong SAR and Mainland China, and Thailand. The pace of change is astonishing.’(Marginson, 2011, p. 5)*

Despite such astonishing pace of change, university leadership in East Asia, according to the same author, is ‘as yet little understood in the West, is marked by exceptional dynamism.’ (Marginson, 2011). This study is expected to provide a better understanding of university leadership in East Asia, making East Asian university leadership better known to the World.

Although the study acknowledges the importance of university leaders at multiple levels, ranging from academic staff’s levels (teacher leadership) up to departmental/faculty/school levels (departmental leadership) and to executive levels (central/executive leadership), the study chooses university executive leaders being the main research subjects in focus. They consist of Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors whose formal positions are described variously as chief academic officers, principal academic and administrative officers or chief executives of the university (Middlehurst, 1993). It is undeniable that teachers and students have important roles to play in the quality of universities. However, this study takes the view that Vice-Chancellor’s leadership or university executive leadership ‘is absolutely crucial to the success of the institution,’ (The Jarratt Report, 1985) and is, therefore, of equally important role.

 It is also important to note that in universities, while teachers and students’ actions are visible, leaders’ actions are not. What teachers and students do in class can be observed, or even videoed for analytical review or further improvement whereas university leaders’ actions seem to be in a ‘black box’ and thus need more sophisticated investigation. This study makes a serious attempt to uncover such a ‘black box’ and empirically investigate the executive leadership actions and conditions shaping their actions in East Asian contexts. The variations among leadership practices of the four flagships public universities under investigation in four various territorial contexts provide a useful comparison and an opportunity for drawing practical lessons for university leaders inside and outside East Asia.

This paper begins by setting the scene in which increasing challenges are facing public universities worldwide. These challenges that are global in scale and shape highlight the importance of university leadership more than ever before. It is acknowledged that greater challenges demand stronger university leadership at all levels, ranging from Government levels to executive leadership and departmental leadership levels. The paper then discusses university leadership in conceptual and theoretical terms, followed by an empirical study investigating university leadership in practice. The paper provides a brief description of the methodology and data analysis for this empirical study before the findings are reported. Each of the findings is supported with empirical data collected from the interviews. The paper concludes with some implications for university leadership practice (for both university leaders and policy makers) as well as implications for further research (for researchers in the field).

**2. SETTING THE SCENCE: GLOBAL CHALLENGES FACING UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP**

***2.1 Internal Challenges***

It is well documented in the literature that universities, especially public universities are facing increasing global challenges. These global challenges can be expressed in terms of internal factors, ranging from general challenges of complexity or ambiguities (Cohen & March, 2000; M. Fullan, 2010; Hargreaves, 2010; Ling, 2005; Mulford, 2010) to specific challenges of degraded confidence and spirit of academic forces, waning status of academic work (Kehm, 2012; P. Ramsden, 1998). According to Cohen & March (2000), there are four fundamental internal ambiguities facing university leaders: the ambiguity of purpose, the ambiguity of power, the ambiguity of experience, and the ambiguity of success. While the ambiguity of purpose is related to the question as to in what terms leadership action be justified, the ambiguity of power addresses how powerful university leaders are. The ambiguity of experience refers to the way leaders make inferences about their experience whereas the ambiguity of success is concerned with when leaders are successful. In the final analysis, Cohen & March conclude that that ‘these ambiguities are fundamental to university presidents because they strike at the heart of the usual interpretations of leadership’. Such internal ambiguities and complexities facing universities call for more effective leadership in action to navigate through the complexity (Pearson, 2005).

***2.2. External Challenges***

Apart from such all – time internal complexity and ambiguities, universities are facing numerous external changes in the environment. External challenges facing university leadership are best captured by Ramsden (1998, p.347):

*‘Universities face an almost certain future of relentless variation in a more austere climate. Changes in the environment—mass higher education, knowledge growth, reduced public funding, increased emphasis on employment skills, pressures for more accountability have been reflected in fundamental internal changes. At the same time, standards of research and teaching have come under increasingly close examination, while inter- university competition has never been greater.’*

This statement highlights such external factors as mass higher education producing uncertain roles and functions of universities, the growth of knowledge, increasing external pressures from external stakeholders, more competitions for resources with the emergence of new providers of higher education, and most importantly stronger demand for higher quality of academic activities. Such external factors create a new environment of higher education which ‘is more turbulent, more threatening, and more competitive than was the case only a few decades ago’(Rich, 2006, p. 37). In fact, university leaders have to face all those challenges all at once, making their hard task even harder.

The question is, therefore, to identify which of those challenges are the main ones so that university leaders can put their focused efforts and limited resources in addressing them effectively and efficiently. In a recent study, Bryman (2007) identifies the main challenges facing university leaders worldwide by asking 100 university executive leaders from universities worldwide. The result of the study suggests that the five most cited challenges that 100 university leaders say they face are (1) maintaining academic quality with fewer resources, doing more with less, stretching and managing budgets (76 out of 100); (2) maintaining and leading academic people at a time of rapid change (60 out of 100); (3) turbulence and alteration in the higher education environment (35 out of 100); (4) student numbers and responding to new types of students (33 out of 100); (5) balancing own academic work with the demands of being academic leaders (15 out of 100). Bryman’s study clearly indicates that the greatest challenge facing university leaders is how to maintain academic excellence in the context of less financial resources. This finding is consistent with what Radloff (2005, p. 72) found earlier and called for ‘a stronger emphasis on [academic] quality within a financially stretched and competitive university systems.’ If this finding is true and accepted, the question is then how university leaders, especially those at executive levels *act* in practicein response to such main challenge of striving for academic excellence in the context of reduced financial resources.

***2.3 Roles of University Leadership in Face of Challenges***

There is a common consensus in the international research literature over the importance of effective leadership in higher education contexts in general and in university contexts in particular. Early in history, John Millett (1978, p.240) noted that ‘no one can assert that college and university leadership is of little importance in the affairs of higher education’. Two decades later, Paul Ramsden (1998, p.3) further highlighted that effective university leadership ‘can transform the common place and average [university] into the remarkable and excellent [university].’ PhillipHallinger (2007) explicates further by noting that leadership makes a difference indirectly on learning outcomes, learning climate, change implementation, education reform and crisis intervention.’ More recently, with reference to university governance, Henard & Mittlerle (2009, p. 57) acknowledges that ‘leadership is a key notion within governance arrangement.’ This acknowledgement echoed Schuster, Smith, Corak & Yamada (1994)’s earlier observation that ‘out of ten institutions studied, leadership had the most significant impact on governance effectiveness.’

Given the increasing internal and external challenges facing university leadership on a global scale, the role of effective university leadership is even more strongly emphasized in the literature. The important role of university leadership in the face of changes in the higher education environment was best portrayed by Kotter (1990) who used a simple military analogy. Kotter (1990, p.1) compares the role of leadership in a peacetime army and leadership in a wartime army and wrote: ‘a peacetime army can actually survive with good administration and management up and down the hierarchy, coupled with good leadership concentrated at the very top. A wartime army, however, needs competent leadership at all levels.’ In light of this view, Kotter stresses the stronger demand for university leadership in the face of the changing environment in much the same way as the stronger requirements for more competent leadership in wartime. In his words, Kotter (1990, p.1) wrote: ‘leadership is about coping with change… More change always demands more leadership.’ Kotter’s assertion echoes what Millett (1978, p. 274) put earlier ‘the real test of campus … leadership will lie in the capacity of colleges and universities to respond to changing social circumstances.’ In a similar vein, more recently, Chalmers & O’Brien (2005, p. 71) called for a need for leaders acting mindfully to the challenges.’

**3. University Leadership in Conceptual Terms**

***3.1. Conceptualization of Leadership as Leaders’ Actions in Contexts***

Despite the well-acknowledged roles of university leadership in the global changing context, university leadership is open to numerous definitions and interpretations (Middlehurst, 1999). ‘Leadership has been a source of fascination and misunderstanding for millennia’ (Woodard, 1994, p.92). Many decades later, leadership is still a mystery as ‘what is to be understood by leadership itself is not clearly explained.’ (Henard & Mitterle, 2009, p. 57). Some authors even use the beauty analogy to emphasize the difficulty in interpreting leadership. Middlehurst (1993, p.7) wrote:

***‘****As with beauty, the existence or absence of leadership is largely dependent upon subjective judgment by observers with different interests and perspectives. Again with beauty, leadership is likely to consist of a number of separate elements, which only in combination can be said to represent the whole.’*

Reviewing the literature, Middlehurst (1999, p. 311) summarizes three dominant conceptions of leadership: (1) as a *role* carried out formally by the particular post –holders (Vice Chancellors or Rectors, Deans and Heads of Department, Course Leaders and Research Leaders); (2) as a *function* that can be and needs to be performed at different levels in an institution, in both formal and informal contexts; (3) as a *process* of social influence that guides individuals and groups towards particular goals. A distinction between the process of “leadership” and the socially-constructed role of “leader” was later made in many studies (i.e Bolden, Gosling, Marturano, & Dennison, 2003). In practice, however, it is very likely that there is the simultaneous use of all these conceptions, making leadership a difficult subject to investigate as all these three constituent characteristics are clustered tightly together and should not be isolated.

As for the substantive focus within a scope of a study, this study views that leadership resides in the actions of leaders, as Middlehurst (1993, p.18) puts it, ‘leadership is the particular action of leaders.’ Similarly, Ramsden (1998, p.9) emphasizes that leaders must be ‘people of actions’. The exercising of leadership is, therefore, reflected in leaders’ actions, and universities increasingly need strong and responsive leadership actions in responses to the changing environment of more challenges. In addition, leaders’ actions should not be considered in isolation of the context in which actions are chosen and taken because ‘leadership in the human context is behavioral and situational’. (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1989; Middlehurst, 1993; Razik & Swanson, 2010, Mulford, 2010). Putting it all together, this paper conceptualizes the notion leadership as leaders’ actions and argues that in order to understand university leadership, it is important to examine leaders’ actions in their contexts.

As far as approaches into studying university leadership are concerned, Middlehurst (1993) summarizes the two most common approaches. While the first approach is related to the perceptions of the leaders and the led or ‘the eye of the beholder,’ the other approach is concerned with the actions of leaders. Commenting on these two different approaches, Morgan (1991) notes that ‘perhaps the most difficult issue to clarify or reconcile is that of whether leadership resides in the eye of the beholder or in the actions of leaders.’ Morgan explicates further by noting that the two views are associated with alternative perspectives on reality (or different sociological paradigms: the subjectivist/interpretivist and the objectivist/functionalist. Considering the fact that each of the two views has its own rationales with both strengths and limitations and the reality reflects a combination of both subjectivist and objectivist views. This study integrates both the objectivist view and subjective view in one empirical study in which interviews with university leaders are used as the main tool of empirical investigation (a discussion on methodology is detailed in 5.2 below). Through interviews, university leaders were asked to share their perceptions (subjectivist views) and their experience in university leadership practices (objectivist views).

***3.2 Adair (1968)’s Action-Centered Leadership Model Revisited***

The conceptualization of leadership as leaders’ actions is related to John Adair (1968)’s model of leadership known as action-centered leadership. Adair’s action centered leadership model is well cited by leadership scholars since its development, especially in American and Western dominant literature on leadership. This action-centered leadership is still relevant today in contemporary societies, and has been regularly referred to in leadership development programs and studies. Through the proposed model of action centered leadership, Adair proposed that ‘people working in organizations had three inter-connected needs represented by three overlapping circles of needs: the need to complete the *task*, the need to be kept together as a working *group* and the need to achieve *individual* satisfaction at work (see table 1 below). In this model, Adair emphasizes the three key areas of leadership actions: the leader’s actions with regard to (a) *task* to be performed (ensuring that the required tasks are always done), (b) the *team* responsible for performing them, (building and reinforcing the team and fostering teamwork and team spirit and (c) the *individuals* in that team (developing each individual member of the team).

***Figure 1: Action-centered Leadership Model (Adair, 1968)***



As can be seen from the figure above, when leaders choose to focus on *task –based* needs (the task circle), they direct the job to be one or addressing the task structuring need. When they choose to focus on *individual* needs (the individual circle), they focus on supporting and reviewing the individual people doing it. When they choose to address *team* needs (team circle), they coordinate and foster the work team as a whole. The figure above also shows that overlapping exists among these three circles, meaning a task –based action can be individual –based and/or team-based action at the same time. In Adair (1968) ’s words, ‘the successful leader acts in all three areas, often simultaneously. The function of leadership, exercised through the actions of leaders, according to Adair, was to ensure that ‘these three sets of needs were met and kept in balance’ (p.54). ’ Relatedly, Middlehurst asserts that leadership should be viewed as an activity which enables task, team and individual needs to be addressed while also being an expression of personality and character.’ (Middlehurst, 1993, p.20). Acknowledging the relevance and the significance of Adair (1973)’s famous action –centered leadership model, Middlehurst (2007, p.47) asserts that ‘Adair’s model marked a departure from U.S work on leadership at the time by focusing on the actions of leaders rather than the traits or qualities of leaders. … Adair’s scholarship made a valuable contribution to leadership ideas and practice in many sectors and countries… Adair’s work reached higher education.

With reference to Adair’s three circle diagram, Bolden et al. (2003, p. 11) note that this famous three circle diagram is a simplification of the variability of human interaction, but is a useful tool for thinking about what constitutes an effective leader in relation to the job one has to do. An effective leader carries out the functions and exhibits the behaviors depicted by the three circles. In addition, it should be noted that, situational and contingent elements call for different responses by the leader. In other words, a leader can give more or less emphasis on a particular focused need, depending on what the actual situation involves. In some particular situations, more task-based actions are in higher demand than individual based or team based actions while in other situations, more team based or individual based actions are needed. As the situations or contexts vary, Adair’s various circles may be correspondingly smaller or bigger. Based on the action centered leadership model, it can thus reasonably be interpreted that smart leadership or strategic leadership should consider the maximum overlapping of the circles. The more overlapping there is among these needs or these three circles, the better. As Adair (1988) puts it, ‘the action-centered leader knows how to make the system work to the benefit of all concerned.’ Leadership action should be at best task-based, individual based and team based at the same time. How leaders’ actions can meet all these three needs at once in real life thus requires a reality check through an empirical study.

**4. University Leadership in Theoretical Terms**

***4.1 Leadership Theories***

Given its importance, numerous leadership theories have been developed and evolved from ‘great man theories’ early in history to trait theories (up to late 1940s) to behavioral theories to the late 1960s to contingency theories, transactional theories, transformation theory and most recently dispersed leadership theory. Several attempts have been made so far to review and summarize these various leadership theories (Bensimon, Neuman, & Birnbaum, 1991; Bolden, et al., 2003). These different leadership theories are integrated in the table below. For example, Bensimon et al. (1991)examines works on leadership in the literature of higher education from the perspectives of theories and suggest implications of these studies for effective leadership in higher education. Bensimon et al. (1991, p.389) notes that ‘although studies of leadership in higher education have for traditionally been atheoretical, a resurgence of theoretical research has occurred in recent years, and several work has attempted to integrate findings in the higher education literature with more general theories of leadership.’

***Table 1: Leadership Theories (Adapted from Bensimon et al., 1989; Bolden et al., 2003)***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Period** | **Theories/Approaches** | **Theme** |
| Early in history | Great man theories | Leadership is linked to exceptional man’s innate quality |
| Up to late 1940s | Trait theories | Leadership is linked to personal qualities |
| Late 1940s to late 1960s | Behavioral theories | Leadership is associated with behavior and style (task or people oriented) |
| Late 1960s to present | Situational/Contingency theories | Leadership is affected by the context and situations (situational factors |
| 1970s to present | Cultural and symbolic theories | Leadership is the management of meaning |
| 1980s | Cognitive theories | Leadership is a social attribution |
| 1990s | Transactional theories | Leadership is the relationship between leaders and followers (contract) |
| 2000s | Transformational Theory | Leadership is creating desirable ‘visions’ or images of institutions, transforming performance |
| 2005s to present  | Dispersed leadership theory | Leadership is diffused throughout the organization, not lying solely with one leader |

As can be seen from the summarized table above, each leadership theory focuses on or is linked to a particular leadership element such as trait theories’ focus on leaders’ qualities, or behavioral theories’ focus on leaders’ behaviors or situational/contingency theories on leaders’ contexts. It is obvious that no single theory listed above can fully or completely explain leadership, as Woodard (1994, p.92) puts it ‘there is not single leadership theory or organizational theory that is right or complete; rather, leadership must be viewed from multiple leadership and organizational theories’. In view of this, Woodard presents an integrated perspective of leadership and calls for a need for new and multiple leadership approaches. In a similar vein, with reference to school contexts, Mulford (2010, p.200) observes that ‘it is interesting to note that proponents of instructional (Hallinger, 200), transformational (Leithwood et al., 2006) and distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) has, over time, moved well away from the one-size-fits-all, charismatic, heroic model of school leadership and expanded their understandings to include aspects of the context, antecedent conditions…’ This study sees a need to search for a relevant well –established theory that can capture the most essential elements of leadership - the aspect of contexts and the conceptualization of leadership as leaders’ actions.

***4.2 Institutional Theory***

 Conceptualizing leadership as leaders’ actions in their context, this study advances the use of institutional theory in university leadership contexts. According to Scott (2004, p. Viii, italics added), the founder of institutional theory, ‘institutional theory provides the most *promising* and *productive l*ens for viewing organizations and their actions in contemporary society’. Various versions of institutional theory have been developed and refined by institutionalists, but the commonality among these versions is related to the essence of institutional theory, which suggests that ‘the way people [including leaders] behave/act is affected by institutional arrangements’. (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; W. R. Scott, Ruef, Mendel, & Carronna, 2000). Institutional theorists place emphasis on the environment or context where organizations [including universities] operate and the interaction of organizational contexts and organizational action.’ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Greenwood, 2000; Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1981; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Institutional theory’s emphasis on actions and contexts is in line with the paper’s conceptualization of leadership as leaders’ actions. Institutional theory, together with Adair (1968)’s action-centered leadership model is used to guide the study and more specifically to understand the case under investigation.

**5. University Leadership in Practice: An Empirical Study**

***5.1 Methodology: Research Sites and Research Participants***

Given the focus of the study is on good practices of public university leadership an empirical study is conducted to explore how public university leaders at executive levels in selected East Asian universities act in response to the most common global challenge of maintaining academic excellence in the turbulent external and internal environment. Cross-national multiple case studies were conducted in this empirical study. Acknowledging the benefits of multiple case studies over a single case, Yin (2003, p.46-47) cited Herriot & Firestone (1983) who noted ‘the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is, therefore, regarded as being more robust’. The researcher believes that multiple case studies into university leadership actions and conditions for action can provide more compelling and more robust evidence regarding real life leadership actions and their subjective conditions (their perceptions on institutional conditions).

Four flagship public universities from four different territories in East Asia were selected as research sites for the study: The University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong), Peking University (China), the Mahidol University (Thailand), Hanoi University (Vietnam). The chosen sites of Hong Kong, China, Thailand and Vietnam were selected on the grounds that they are all in East Asia which is the decided geographical focus of the study and a majority of their universities in these four territories are public universities, which are the decided scope of the study. Any territories in East Asia (like Japan) which are dominated by private universities are, therefore, excluded from the study.

In addition, given the cross-national comparative nature of the study, this study follows Nowak (1977, p. 20)’s three proposed criteria in the selection of nations for cross-national comparative studies of economic, political and cultural criteria. Economically, the World Bank classifies world countries according to their economic incomes. Based on the World Bank’s world country classification, Hong Kong represents a developed State (a high income economy), China and Thailand developing countries (middle income economies) and Vietnam, a country in transition (a low income economy). Politically, Vietnam and China are socialist countries while Hong Kong is a capitalist and Thailand is a constitutional monarchy. Culturally, Thailand is a Buddhist country; Hong Kong, China, and Vietnam are Confucian countries. All these economic, political and cultural differences among Vietnam, Hong Kong, China and Thailand reflect a picture of contextual diversity in East Asia. It is also important to note that these chosen four territories are not intended to represent a comprehensive, or even representative sample of public university leadership actions. However, an empirical study in these four different territories can show a variation of university leaders’ actions towards the same goal of academic excellence in various national economic, political and cultural contexts in the same region of East Asia.

In order to choose four particular public universities in each research site, the study uses university rankings for choosing three public universities outside Vietnam. Although university rankings are a controversial topic among scholars and practitioners, this study believes that recognized university ranking lists offer a good point of reference reflecting the reputation and prestige of those universities highly ranked in the ranking lists, as Trow (1984, p. 135) puts it ‘when we speak of the ranking of a college or a university, we ordinarily mean its prestige status based on its perceived quality and distinction as an academic institution.’ The specific rankings for each chosen university are listed in table 2 below, detailing the country rankings, Asian rankings and World-class top university rankings. Although the Mahidol University, Peking University and the University of Hong Kong are ranked in all ranking lists, Hanoi University (from Vietnam) is not ranked in any lists. In fact, no single Vietnamese university has ever been ranked in any World class ranking lists. Hanoi University is, however, chosen for the study because it is recognized to be a flagship public university by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) as one of the most innovative public universities in the North of Vietnam over recent years, and its reputation for its innovation and initiatives by university leaders towards academic excellence is well recognized in the public media.

***Table 2: Rankings of the chosen public universities in the ranking lists***



*Note: No single Vietnamese university is ranked in any lists. Country ranking list is not available in Vietnam either.*

***5.2 Data Collection Instrument: Semi-structured Interviews***

The tool of investigation for the study is through interviews. Semi-structured in-depth face – to-face interviews were conducted with 18 Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, or Presidents and Vice Presidents during the researcher’s field trips to four flagship universities in each territory (from 3 to 5 interviews in each university, making up 100% of all Vice Chancellor positions in Vietnamese universities and 65% of those in universities outside Vietnam). Although it would be ideal that 100% of all executive leaders in each university should be interviewed to enrich the data, in reality, due to research participants’ availability of time and willingness to participate in the research, interviews can only be conducted with those university executive leaders who signed the consent forms for interviews. Through interviews, executive leaders at Hanoi University (Vietnam), the Peking University (China), the University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong) and the Mahidol University (Thailand) shared not only their insights on conditions for successful university leadership (what shape their actions) but also their real -life experience in taking strategic actions (what their actions are) towards the common goal of academic excellence.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, general open questions were asked during semi-structured interviews. Of the total, a set of ten straightforward questions were designed in English and then translated into Vietnamese prior to the interviews. Considering research participants’ preference of language for interviews, English was used as the main language of communication in interviews with public university leaders in Thailand, Hong Kong, and China while Vietnamese was used in interviews in Vietnam. During each interview, the same set of ten general questions were asked and based on interviewees’ specific responses, more specific follow –up questions were then posed spontaneously. Specifically, interviewees were asked to elaborate or explicate further any of the relevant points regarding their real leadership actions and their perceptions on their conditions for actions, depending on their answers. Both the general and follow up questions focus on leadership actions and perceptions of Vice Chancellors on the conditions that shape their leadership actions. In order to keep the interviews focused, the study assumes that all universities are in pursuit of their academic goals, striving towards academic excellence, more specifically excellence in teaching, learning and research. These ten semi-structured interview questions are:

*1. How does your university get to where it is now in terms of its goal of academic excellence? Why?*

*2. What initiatives are your university pursuing at the moment? What is your perceived success of the initiatives?*

*3. What leadership actions have you taken in supporting academic excellence activities in your university? How are they implemented? Why have you chosen those actions?*

*4. What have you done to help leaders at departmental/faculty/school levels to perform their departmental leadership roles?*

*5. What is your perceived responsiveness to Department/faculty/school’s needs?*

*6. What is your perceived responsiveness to external governing bodies?*

*7. How effective are your university’s leadership actions on the whole?*

*8. What are the facilitating factors for your university’s leadership action towards academic excellence?*

*9. What are the constraining factors for your university’s leadership action towards academic excellence?*

*10. What do you wish to learn/share with executive leaders from other universities?*

During the interviews, the content of the interviews were recorded, field trip notes were taken in the form of worksheets (see appendix 1 & 2), which are used as data analysis tools right at the time of data collection. Information from these worksheets was then used in the later stage of data analysis as a useful reference point for developing a coding frame (see appendix 3).

***5.3 Interview Data Analysis***

Each of the 18 recorded interviews was transcribed, translated into English (where Vietnamese is used as a language of interviews) and coded immediately right after each interview. Transcribed texts were coded for both description and themes of each interview. The transcribed texts were then analyzed by the researcher taking the five following steps adapted from Creswell (2008, p. 251)

Step 1: Initially read through the transcribed text data (consisting of hundreds of pages long for the whole 18 transcribed interviews) to get a sense of the data

Step 2: Divide the transcribed text into segments of information

Step 3: Label the segments of information with codes, resulting in as many as 40 codes/themes

Step 4: Reduce overlap and redundancy of codes to 20 codes/themes (half of the initial codes/themes in step 3)

Step 5: Collapse 20 codes/themes (in step 4) into only 10 codes/themes (see appendix 3)

It is important to note that the data analysis is guided by the use of institutional theory and action-centered leadership model. Yin (2003) acknowledges the importance of theory in conducting empirical research by noting that ‘empirical research advances only when it is accompanied by theory and logical inquiry and not when treated as a mechanistic or data collection endeavor’. (Yin, 2003, p.xv). Yin further asserts that ‘articulating “theory” about what is being studied helps to operationalize case study designs and make them more explicit’ (2003, p.19). As mentioned earlier, this study is not theory –centered, but rather case –centered. Theories and concepts are used in this study, not to test or develop a theory, but rather to understand the case.

**6. Findings**

***6.1 Cross-national University Leaders’ Actions***

Within the scope of this paper which is to examine leaders’ actions and institutional conditions for their actions, the findings of the empirical study are selectively reported according to the two main themes (out of 10 coded themes – see appendix 3) of university leaders’ actions (what their actions are) and their perceived conditions shaping their taken actions (what shape their actions). For the theme of university leaders’ actions, the study uses Adair (1968)’s three overlapping circles of action-centered leadership model to explain and compare actions of executive leaders in four case studies while the institutional theory is used to explain the interaction between the institutional contexts on leaders’ actions. Rather than giving all detailed content of the interview, this paper selectively cites the quotations where appropriate to illuminate the points under discussion.

Based on activity highlights shared by interviewed leaders, the researcher summarizes their actions into their perceived need focus: task needs, individual needs and team/group needs. Using Adair’s action –centered leadership model (see figure 1), it is not easy to separate and classify leaders’ shared actions or activities into separate circles of task –based actions, individual based and team-based actions. This might reflect the overlapping of circles indicated in Adair’s proposed model. For example, in China, one of the participants shares a highlighted activity towards academic excellence: ‘we organize teaching competition committee campus wide and best teachers are recognized in our university bulletin.’ Such activity of teaching competition can be classified either as task –based activity (achieving the task of evaluating teachers’ teaching conference through a campus wide conference), or an individual based activity (providing support activity to show case best performance of individual teachers in the competition), or a team based activity (building a team of best performing teachers in the university). Similarly, in Hong Kong, one activity mentioned by one of the interviewed leaders was that ‘we try numerous ways to understand needs of researchers and identify areas that need improvements within limited resources.’ Again, this activity, on the surface, might be classified as an individual needs focused activity but at the same time the activity itself can help the University of Hong Kong build a good team of researchers, and ultimately help achieve the task of improving research performance of the university.

However, based on the shared perceptions of interviewed leaders on the purposefulness of each highlighted activity focus, the actions taken by university leaders are then classified into three types of actions, as proposed in Adair’s action centered leadership model (see appendix 4). For example, a university president’s action of inspecting the Department’s academic activity, particularly, Departments’ teaching time in Vietnam is perceived to address the task need and, therefore, classifies as a task-based action. Whereas, the action or organizing a two day retreat a year for all university leaders campus wide in Thailand or the action of inviting well-known local and international experts to attend the university’s two day retreat are grouped into a team-based activity. By doing so, actions shared by all interviewed leaders are analyzed in a computer software - Nvivo 9, compared cross-cases and graphed as follows in figure 2:

***Figure 2: Cross-National Comparison of University Leaders’ Action in Focus***

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Figure 2 above shows a variation in focus of university leaders’ actions on individual needs, team needs and task needs. As can be seen from figure 2, a majority of leaders’ actions in China, Thailand and Hong Kong are perceived to be individual needs focused (60%, 67% and 55% respectively) while a majority of leaders’ actions in Vietnam are intentionally task-focused. In addition, in all three public universities outside Vietnam, a convergent pattern of university leaders’ actions in Hong Kong, China and Thailand is that priorities are given first to individual need focus, followed by team need focus and task need focus. Whereas in Vietnam where no single public university is listed, priorities are given to task needs, followed by individual need and team need. This finding related to university leaders’ emphasis on individual need focus in non Vietnamese contexts is consistent with Barnett, McCormick, & Conners (2001)’s study on transformational leadership in school contexts. Barnett et al.’s study is based on teachers perceptions on leadership and asserts that ‘individual concern was the best predictor of teacher outcomes, accounting for 65% of the variance’. (p.36). Their study supports the idea that when the school leader is perceived by teachers to address individual teachers’ needs, they are more likely to be satisfied, put in extra effort and view the school leader or principal as an effective leader. Relatedly, this particular empirical study, with a focus on public university contexts, suggests that university leaders in at least 3 public universities in East Asia do place emphasis on individual teachers’ need when organizing activities towards academic excellence. This finding offers a good lesson for university leaders in such a low-income economy as Vietnam who are striving for academic excellence and thus should place more emphasis on individual needs through their activities. This lesson is relevant for Vietnam in which individual lecturers and researchers’ needs have not been met, resulting in academics’ dissatisfaction that in turn discourages young generations from choosing academic careers in university sector (Vnexpress, 2012). Although task needs and team needs are of no less importance, strategic leadership should be reflected through more focused activities on individual needs, which at the same time help leaders address both task needs and team needs as well. This is therefore well recognized in the literature that ‘a single action by leaders can be multi-functional’ (Adair, 1989, 2004) and ‘a single input by leaders can have multiple outcomes’ (Mulford, 2010, p. 187).

***6.2 Interaction of Institutional Conditions on Leaders’ Actions***

Interviewed leaders’ perceptions on constraining and facilitating factors for their actions are analyzed in light of institutional theory, which suggests that there is an influence of institutional forces like institutional *rules* and *structure* on university leaders’ actions. Interviewed leaders’ perceived factors are therefore coded into two up-front codes of rules, structures, plus any open codes emerging from the interview data. By combing both up front codes and open codes, the analysis of the interview data shows that university leaders in Vietnam and Thailand perceive Government’s rule rigidity and centralized structural arrangements as inhibiting factors influencing their intentions and motivations to act. Whereas their counterparts in Hong Kong and China perceive their Government specific guidance, rule flexibility and widely distributed structures to be facilitating factors impacting positively on their willingness to act and take initiatives. For example, in Hong Kong, there is a consistency in interviewed leaders’ positive perceptions on Government rules, e.g. ‘We enjoy little government intervention into our university's affairs.’ With the same positive attitude towards the structural arrangements, a Hong Kong leader consistently views that

‘*The presence of UGC [University Grants Committee] really facilitates our actions at university levels. UGC creates friendly rivalry (friendly competition) among universities. UGC-funded institutions**play an extremely important role in maintaining and upgrading education quality in the entire higher education sector. On the whole, we like the government’s setup: UGC, university council senate. ‘We are lucky to have UGC, university council and Senate.’*

A Chinese leader similarly shared that ‘in China, the State Council provides us with clear guidance and recommendations only. Actions for leaders are not prescribed but guided in written documents.’

In stark contrast, highlighting the rigidity of Government rules as a constraint for executive leadership action, an interviewed university leader in Vietnam noted:

*‘Government rules are too rigid for universities to navigate. They need to be reconsidered, or at least loosened. Our Ministry seems to cover too much [‘ôm đồm’], giving no flexibility for universities to maneuver. We need more financial autonomy, especially autonomy in setting tuition fees for students. We also need more organizational/structural autonomy. Another interviewed leader in Vietnam complains that ‘we lack management information. Our Departments’ leaders are not really clear about rules.’*

Similar to Vietnam, Thailand’s university leaders experience a lack of rule clarity, which is explicitly expressed by three out of 5 interviewed leaders: ‘we have unclear rules for financial incomes’ and ‘updated government regulations are too rigid for Thai universities, including our university to steer our leadership actions’. Surprisingly, in Thailand, a middle-income economy and in Vietnam, a low-income economy none of the leaders interviewed refers to the lacks of financial resources as their perceived inhibiting factors. A Thai interviewee said, ‘‘money is not a big issue for us”. Our universitycan recruit people with salaries that are lower than private sectors,’ while a Vietnamese interviewee notes that ‘financially, we do not lack money for improving research and teaching performance. The problem is that we can not disburse them. This might be interpreted that constraints in rules and structures, rather than resources are perceived by interviewed university leaders in these developing nations as inhibiting factors for leaders’ actions.

Apart from rules and structure, the emerging data from interviews also shows that interviewed leaders view actions taken by macro leaders at Government levels are positive factors in Hong Kong, Thailand, and China whereas none of interviewed leaders in Vietnam mentioned anything about macro leaders’ actions, which can thus be open for interpretation. For example, with reference to specific Government initiatives, a Chinese leader said:

*‘Project 211 and project 985 are great initiatives from the Government. These Chinese Government activity highlights help universities set clear goals and plan specific actions towards academic excellence.’*

In Hong Kong, an interviewed leader refers to ‘Hong Kong Education Bureau’s specific initiative of providing a teacher development web link on Education website,’ while another interviewed leader mentions the fact that ‘the UGCs makes recommendations in collaboration with universities and in consultation with the Government,’ and more specifically, ‘the UGC has taken periodic Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews (TLQPRs) of all UGC –funded universities and this really motivates us to take prompt action at university executive levels.’ This clearly shows that the presence and specificity of external leaders’ actions is perceived to be an influencing factor for executive leaders at university level in the non-Vietnamese contexts. However, the absence of macro leaders’ actions, which are not mentioned in any of the interviews with Vietnamese university leader can be inferred that either there might not be any actions at all at macro leadership levels (this is unlikely), or if there are actions, they might be too general and not specific enough to be perceived by university leaders to be an influencing factor. Another alternative explanation might be that macro leaders’ actions, in case there are, might not be well communicated to university executive leaders, resulting in their low degree of awareness of those actions.

**7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings of the study are summarized as (a) the need for executive leaders to balance all three inter-connected needs: the task to be performed, the team responsible for performing them, and the individuals in that team; and (b) the need for policy makers to recognize the interaction effects (as perceived by executive leaders) of institutional conditions (namely, flexible rules, widely distributed structures and specific leadership actions at macro levels) on executive leaders’ actions. The relevance of these findings is that they help to explain the notion of multi-layer leadership in university contexts, specifically university leadership at policy making layers and executive leaders’ layers. As a limitation of this study, it should be noted that the findings are limited to the perceptions of certain executive university leaders in certain contexts under investigation. The aim of this qualitative study is not to generalize these findings, given the sample size of the interviewees; rather, it is to provide avenues for further research to confirm findings through the perceptions of other groups or layers of university leaders such as university departmental leaders or teachers, lecturers and researchers themselves.

There are a number of implications of the study for researchers in the field. As for further research content, in addition to subjective interpretations of conditions for leadership actions, there is a need for further research on objective conditions for leadership actions, such as policy document analysis studies. A combination of both objective conditions and subjective conditions (leaders’ perceptions) can really reflect the full picture of leadership practices. Methodologically, in the dominantly qualitative research literature, researchers in the field should consider using quantitative research methods or mixed research methods to further investigate the interaction relationships of various institutional factors on different specific levels of university leaderships, not only on executive leadership but also on departmental academic leadership. Theoretically, more exploratory studies guided either by the institutional theory or other relevant integrated theories are needed to illuminate leadership actions and conditions for actions from more than one single perspective. Those proposed research content, methodology and theoretical approach together with more cross-national comparative studies into university leadership actions will definitely enrich research literature as well as real life practices of university leadership.

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**APPENDIX**

***Appendix 1: Worksheet 1: Interview Summary Forms***

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***Appendix 2: Worksheet 2: Fieldtrip Summary Notes***

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***Appendix 3: A coding Frame – 10 codes***

1. Pursued GOALS

2. Priorities & Commitment

3. Perceived POWER to make decisions

4. Perceived COMPLIANCE: voluntary, involuntary

5. Influencing FACTORS: Facilitating vs. Constraining

6. Perceived EXTERNAL CONTEXTS

7. Perceived INTERNAL CONTEXTS

8. INITIATIVES taken and their success/failure

9. Specificity of ACTIONS: high, intermediate, low

10. RESPONSIVENESS to Departmental needs & external governing bodies

***Appendix 4: Cross-National Executive University Leaders’ Shared Actions***

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