Framework to Humanise Research Support in Academic Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Purpose
The purpose of the study is to identify the attributes to build a successful research management ecosystem, to understand the extent to which identified attributes contribute to   successful research support environment, and to develop a framework for strong research management in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Methodology
This study used a mixed-method approach. Through recorded discussion with academics and non-academics involved in research and research support, we identified the areas to be addressed for an efficient research experience. We then conducted a pilot study with 50 participants to validate the findings from the qualitative analysis.

Findings
We found that a research management ecosystem system requires ethical conduct from individuals and an ethical culture which is grounded on honourable behaviour of all organisational participants. This is not only aligned to Malaysian codes of responsible conduct in research but is also in accordance with existing guidelines. A new framework is suggested in this paper based on which, universities can create a research ecosystem that balances global goals with local relevance, resulting in a collaborative working model that is more strategic.

1. Introduction

The ever-evolving landscape of research management is a fundamentally human endeavour that encompasses individuals and institutions. Research management activities and/or guidelines are crucial for research integrity which is of concern not only in HEIs in Malaysia but also in several other parts of the world (Nguyen & Gremberg, 2018). According to Olsen et. al. (2018) the 'publish or perish' culture in Malaysia is of concern since it could lead to research misconduct, which could have a spillover effect on institutional reputation. Putri et. al. (2023) indicate that environment, values, figure organisation, habit, network culture, and adaptability to environmental change are crucial to inculcate a sound research culture in HEIs. A good research management, therefore, requires research management committees to address concerns regarding research integrity and reputation management. Ideally research management will involve the planning, coordination, and control of research activities towards achieving individual and institutional research objectives. Yang-Yoshihara et. al. (2023) suggest the need for adequate resources and resources management to enhance research activities in HEIs. This encompasses a range of responsibilities across different stakeholders, from proposal development review, legal aspects, due diligence, project planning and resource allocation to the monitoring of progress, finance, risk management and compliance with regulation. Effective research management and governance are, therefore, crucial for maximising the impact of research activities, ensuring accountability, facilitating the smooth progress of projects from inception to completion and enhancing institution's reputation (Miotto et. al., 2020). Within the Higher Education Institution (HEIs), research managers and administrators are pivotal in ensuring success and effectiveness of research management landscape and sustainability of stakeholder engagement. Governance without human integrity and ethics can cause serious flaws in decision-making, strategic alliances, and sustainable education, which means that humanising governance is integral to good governance and management (Mino, 2020). Therefore, a paradigm shift towards human-centric approaches must be emphasised. However, this area has not been explored in the past specifically in the context of research management. There is indeed a dearth of research work that have explored the role of research management centres in developing research culture within HEIs. The specific role of research management centres can involve recognising and valuing the contributions of individuals involved in research, fostering a supportive and collaborative environment, and exploiting technology for sound research outputs, all of which require strong ethical leadership, ethical culture, integrity and openness. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that explores the aspect of humanising the research support system in HEIs through the lens of virtue ethics, which emphasises the importance of individual character and wisdom in decision making (Ainley, 2017). Although some studies have contributed to the understanding of virtues in teaching specially in online classes (Harisson & Laco, 2022), none have focused specifically on research.

The virtues (integrity of the researcher) of ethical research practices are, therefore, explored in this study through qualitative methodology. While studies have been conducted on a similar area in the corporate context, there is a lack of focus on academia, particularly in articulating the ways in which virtues are embedded into research management skills. We focus on this limitation and expand on previous studies by studying the contribution of virtues in research management. We contribute by committing ourselves to the United Nations' principles of responsible management education through a transformative journey that is not just an organisational necessity but also a commitment to recognise and enhance the human dimension towards driving research excellence. This approach acknowledges that behind every research project, there are people with unique perspectives, skills, and needs. The

principles identified in this paper set the stage for a deeper exploration into reshaping the operational models for research management and fostering a high-performance culture that drives impactful research and leads the university towards overall success in a dynamic environment.

To summarise the specific objectives of this study are as follows:

i) To identify and understand the virtues that lead to a successful research management ecosystem.

ii) To understand the extent to which the virtues identified contribute to a successful research support environment.

iii) To develop a virtue-based framework for effective research management in HEIs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research management and integrity

In line with good research practices, research management emphasises the need for individuals, institutions and nations to be committed throughout the research process from priority setting to completing the research and in the use of financial, intellectual and physical resources. Many institutions have therefore developed guidelines for potential researchers. For example, Quitoras and Abuso (2021) explain that the research management in the Philippines encompasses best practices such as funding deserving researchers, screening quality research and showcasing such best practices to encourage young researchers and organising research ethics workshops. Similarly, the Malaysian code of responsible conduct in research covers many practices for the researchers. However, there is little information on how institutions can manage research ethically. This seems to be dependent on the research management leadership in institutions. Supporters of ethical leadership describe the importance of communication, transparency and managerial practices that lead to sustainable institutions.

2.2 Ethical Leadership and virtues

The concept of ethical leadership involves leaders who not only possess virtues but actively integrate these principles into their managerial practices. Ethical leadership is important for sustainability of organisations specifically if they operate in a highly competitive environment (Hsies et. al., 2021). Higher education industry has not only become complex but is also global, facing challenges, such as of sustainability, rankings and accreditations, which eventually leads to good brand image (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2019). This justifies the need for ethical leadership in educational sectors. The foundation of ethical leadership is built on two fundamental pillars, the individual who personally and independently possesses moral character and that of a leader (manager) who adheres to moral principles and sets the tone at the top helping to nourish the organisational culture (Crews, 2015). Being recognised as an ethical leader goes beyond personal ethical conduct. An ethical leader role must actively direct the followers to focus on organisation's values, instilling principles that will shape the actions of all employees (Al Halbusi et. al., 2024). Ethical leaders are instrumental in establishing and promoting a moral tone within the research management ecosystem and creating organisational citizenship (Pio & Lengkong, 2020) They create a tone driven by morals and virtues by consistently demonstrating ethical behaviour, fostering an environment where ethical considerations are prioritised in decision-making

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[1] https://accountancy.uitm.edu.my/images/e-Sharing/Booklet_The_Malaysian_Code_of_Responsible_Conduct_in_Research.pdf

processes. The ethical leadership model developed by Kar (2014) suggests prioritising virtues through vision, voice and values for success.

For academia however, the pressures of securing funding, monitoring expenditure and navigating the research landscape can contribute to stress, anxiety, and other psychological well-being challenges (Yousaf et. al., 2019) for the researchers. Thus, another virtue of an ethical leader involves being cognizant of employees well-being. In a research context, this goes beyond ensuring the success of the projects by actively prioritising the well-being of researchers, acknowledging the importance of work-life balance and the psychological well-being of staff by voicing our concerns so that constructive changes can be made on timely basis (Yousaf et. al., 2019) thus enhancing employee performance through strong bonding with employees (Baloyi, 2020). By fostering a workplace culture that values well-being, leaders set the stage for increased job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity among researchers (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). This approach is in line with the principles of ethical leadership that prioritizes the development and welfare of team members.

The third virtue in ethical leadership encompassing inclusion, equity and diversity (Coleman, 2023). Inclusion involves creating an environment where every individual, regardless of their background, feels valued, respected, and included. Diversity encompasses the myriad of differences that individuals bring to the workplace, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, age, and cultural background (Coleman, 2023).

Finally, effective communication lies at the heart of ethical leadership, serving as the cornerstone for building trust, transparency, and a positive organisational culture. Ethical leaders recognise and prioritise communication mechanism, ensuring that information is shared openly and honestly (Abu Bakar & Connaughton, 2022). Ethical leaders share information openly, even when faced with difficult decisions or challenges. Transparent communication builds credibility and helps foster a culture of honesty and integrity (De Cremer et al., 2009).

While these four virtues have been suggested by previous researchers, collaboration is also very important for success in academia and research. Collaboration, in the context of research management, serves as a foundational element for accelerating knowledge generation and maximising resource utilisation. Thomson and Perry (2006) pointed out that collaborative efforts facilitate the pooling of diverse expertise, expediting the generation of new knowledge (Aldieri et. al., 2020). This pooling of expertise not only encourages interdisciplinary approaches but also accelerates the exploration of research questions, leading to innovative breakthroughs. Additionally, Kotsonis (2022) emphasised the importance of virtue-based collaboration for success in academia and explained the need for good collaborators in every segment of academia following the principles of virtues. This would mean developing mutually beneficial relationships whilst foregoing self-interest. For ethical leaders it would imply sharing authority, responsibility and accountability (Modha, 2021).

Ethics and compliance play significant roles in collaborative initiatives, as emphasised by Olsson and Meek (2019). Effective management and advisory services concerning legal obligations, compliance, and funding requirements are critical for ensuring that collaborative efforts adhere to established standards.

Managing these aspects not only safeguards the integrity of research but also streamlines the collaborative process.

Resource optimisation is another significant benefit of collaboration in research management as mentioned by Nguyen and Meek (2016). Collaborative efforts significantly contribute to cultivating a supportive research culture and help to enhance knowledge sharing and contribute to incremental innovations (Le et. al., 2020). Shabbir & Khalid (2016) highlighted the fact that collaboration nurtures an environment where mutual support and shared goals prevail among researchers and research support personnel. This collaborative culture not only strengthens individual researchers but also enhances collective research endeavours, fostering an ecosystem that nurtures innovation and growth.

Good Governance

Governance, management, and leadership are all integral to ethical leadership which can maximise stakeholder value. Since research involves multiple stakeholders comprising of internal and external parties, it is imperative for research managers to ensure that research expectations are met, and institutions are benefitted through quality research and reputation enhancement (Ariail & Crumbley, 2016). The implementation of robust governance structures is not merely a compliance measure but a fundamental building block for establishing trust among managers and stakeholders. A good manager is known to be open, accountable and fair, and respectful.

Past experiences of people suggest that employees are fully aware of the rights in their respective roles and when they demand these rights, managers are morally bound to support employees to develop mutual trust and respect (Bhana & Bayat, 2020). In academia, this helps to strengthen the relationship between research managers and researchers. The accountability of the research managers and researchers towards their external stakeholders is important to maintain organisational reputation. Similarly, leaders are expected to upskill themselves following technological, regulatory and situational changes order to portray competence.

In most cases, inclusivity and respect are inextricably linked to each other. Respect will lead to the practice of allowing equal opportunities to deserving individuals rather than being biased towards preferred individuals. Such culture is indicative of the professionalism of leaders (Fu et. al., 2020). Research managers will need to ensure inclusion in diversity since diverse teams are known to lead to better governance and higher performance (Creary, 2019). This is because the research team is likely to become motivated as they feel a sense of belonging, trust, and support throughout the execution of the project.

3. Methods or materials and just methods or premise

We used a mixed method approach whereby the qualitative study involved focus group discussions with academic, researchers and research administrators in a private university in Malaysia. The interview questions were drafted to get a generic understanding of research culture and virtue-based ethics within the university. The conversations were recorded, and then decoded using NVivo and interpreted by the researchers. A total of 14 participants were put together in a focus group discussion. The participants for the focus group belonged to a private higher education institution. Further, a questionnaire was

developed based on the response from focus group. The questionnaire was distributed to 50 participants from different departments at the same institution. The basic criterion used to choose the participants for both methods was that they must be involved in either conducting research or assisting academic researchers, for example at the Research Management Centre (RMC). The sampling method involved convenient sampling. The potential participants were contacted via email or phone calls and their willingness to participate in the study was sought prior to inviting them for focus group discussion/ filling the questionnaire. Ethics approval was obtained from the University's Ethics Committee prior to the focus group discussions or sharing the questionnaire with the participants. The key questions that this study sought to answer through the focus group discussions were:

  i) What qualities of an individual guide his or her actions in successful management of research in higher education?
  ii) How do individuals behave differently or through shared beliefs in a group setting?
  iii) What individual traits can be nurtured to form organisational culture?

For the quantitative data analysis simple analysis of mean scores and standard deviations were used to interpret the outcome which provided guidance to develop a fundamental framework of policies that can nurture good behaviour and help to humanise research management within the university.

4. Findings and Discussion

The interviews of 14 individuals were used to answer the questions presented in section 3 of this paper. There were 55% males and 45% females which ensured gender balance. There was a mix of different positions held by the participants within the institution's hierarchy which included representatives from middle, lower and top management. The thematic analysis revealed that participants valued ethical individualism (a belief that practice of ethics is vested on individuals) and ethical culture which will have to be demonstrated and practiced by top leaders. Participants felt that it was important for institutions to practice integrity, accountability, fairness, commitment and transparency in supporting the researchers throughout their research process. However, to cultivate ethical practice of ethical individualism by leaders and researchers was found to be very crucial. To achieve ethical individualism, researchers and research managers must practise professionalism in decision making, involve continuous two-way communication and demonstrate virtuous behaviour through high levels of commitment in achieving organisational objectives. Some excerpts from the thematic analysis are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Excerpts from the thematic analysis.

Participant(s)	Excerpts
1 & 4	*Having compassion for staff with specific difficulties and cherishing their good work motivate them to commit their time and effort to their job*
3, 8 & 10	*It is important to recognise the skill set of all researchers to utilise their strengths for organisational growth*
11	*Employees must be accountable for their assigned roles and tasks (FG1) as well as actions and decisions. If researchers make decisions that are unfavourable, researchers must be accountable for it*
9 & 2	*An individual should demonstrate professionalism and independence in order to ensure an equal treatment to all staff*
5	*Commitment is demonstrated when employees take initiatives for self-improvement and self-development*

**Table 1:** (cont.) Excerpts from the thematic analysis.

Participant(s)	Excerpts
6 & 7	*Being transparent to each other in an organisational setting as well as being open to others' criticisms and opinions would contribute to positive motivation employees and enhance commitment to the organisation*
12	*Researchers help to create future leaders for the betterment of the country through appropriate succession planning and staff grooming*

The excerpts suggest that strong researchers and good research managers can together create an environment of good practices that set the right tone and forms a culture in the organisation. The findings are in agreement with research conducted by (Bhana & Bayat, 2020; Fu et. al, 2020). Apart from the factors identified in past researcher, our study identified other factors such as commitment and integrity. In contrast there were little discussions on collaborations suggesting that some fundamental virtues must be entrenched in universities before delving into collaborations.

Through the quantitative study this research tried to gain a broader understanding of the perceptions of research participants with regards to how important they perceive certain attributes to be. We surveyed 50 participants on their views of ethical individualism and ethical culture. A questionnaire consisting of five items each for ethical individualism and ethical culture was developed and disseminated through convenient sampling. A total of 40% of the responses came from males while 60% was from females. In terms of age group, 65% responses were from ages between 20 to 40 years. For organisational hierarchy almost equal contributions came from middle and lower management (45% each).

With respect to ethical individualism, more than 80% participant agreed to the importance of integrity while 90% agreed that two-way commitment of every individual was important and 96% agreed that they had to align with the organisational objectives through ethical two interactions. To form ethical culture, 70% participants agreed on instilling values such as responsible use of resources, while 90% agreed that leaders set the tone at top and set the right examples. Another] 76% agreed that openness and equal opportunities are important for ethical culture.

Based on the finding, a conceptual framework was developed for strong research management in institutions of higher education as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Framework for humanising research management in institutions of higher education.
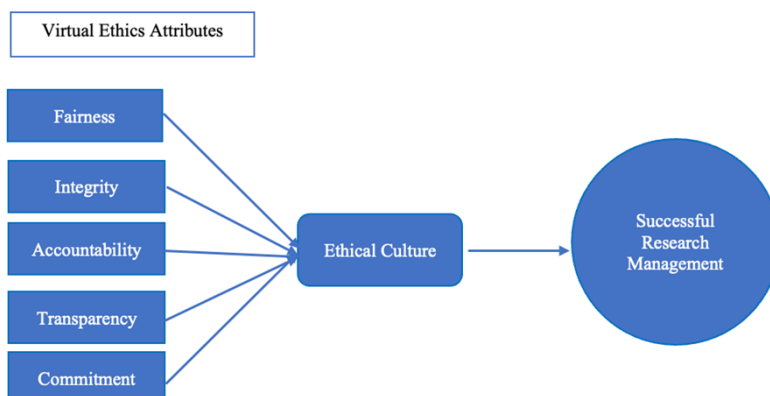
5. Conclusion

We found that a research management ecosystem system requires an ethical individualism and ethical culture that is a result of the virtuous behaviour of all organisational participants. This is not only in line with the guidelines of the Malaysian codes of responsible conduct in research but also helps to enhance the responsibility of the researchers and research managers in conducting and managing research. By embracing such a framework, universities can create a research ecosystem that balances global goals with local relevance, resulting in a more strategic collaborative working model. The findings reported in this paper is generalisable across institutions. However, the implementation may be tailored to individual institutions depending upon their size and objectives. Hence, the effectiveness of the implementation of the approaches and tools can be studied further. By contributing to humanising research management through ethical behaviour we can collectively contribute to United Nations' principles of responsible management education.

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