

Visionary Leadership Among Department Heads: A Quantitative Study on Academics' Perceptions in Sabah, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to examine academics' perceptions of visionary leadership in Sabah, Malaysia. The sample comprised 56 academics from three private colleges in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, who responded to a structured questionnaire on Google Forms. Data were analyzed by using SPSS 29.0. Results showed that a low number of academics tend to perceive their department heads as visionary (only 55.3 to 69.0 percent). On the other hand, nonparametric tests revealed nonsignificant differences by way of gender, age, and job experience on visionary leadership. Additionally, Wilcoxon signed rank test based on a hypothesized value of 3.5 showed that all the items related to visionary leadership were significant at $p < 0.001$, having medians that were significantly different from the test value, and were likely to indicate strong disagreement. Lastly, in light of the findings, several recommendations were made on how PHEI leaders can incorporate visionary leadership in their daily administration.

Contribution/Originality: This research offers a valuable contribution by examining academics' perceptions of visionary leadership in Sabah, Malaysia. Besides narrowing the gap that exists in the educational leadership literature, it is the first quantitative study that examines academics' perceptions of an emerging leadership style at private higher educational institutions in Malaysia. Therefore, this study adds to the scanty evidence base on the role of visionary leadership in the Malaysian higher education landscape.

1. Introduction

According [Conley \(1996\)](#), many educational leaders tend to be vague, sometimes even skeptical, when it comes to establishing an organizational vision and mission. Nevertheless, the vision serves as an internal compass that enables leaders to explicitly share the beliefs, values, purposes, and goals that guide organizational behavior. Instead of being muddled by over-analysis, visionary leaders generate innovative ideas for discussions and are ready to take action. Acknowledging that certain issues cannot be resolved beforehand, visionary leaders are ready to modify their plans and strategies as the organization encounters different challenges at different times. Besides, they are also willing to release personal ownership when it is time for implementation, thus encouraging all staff to demonstrate strong commitment and dedication. Moreover, they also try to involve staff right at the beginning because the latter play the most dominant role in transforming abstract ideas into pragmatic pedagogical applications. Besides, staff can also better achieve teaching and learning outcomes when they act as active participants in the development and pursuit of the organization's mission and vision. Lastly, visionary leaders often establish an operational standard by which staff can assess their own work and contributions, which allows them to communicate in the same wavelength, while forming a mutual ground for setting realistic expectations amongst them.

Visionary leaders are often associated with directional change, which requires open-mindedness to blaze new paths. They purposefully articulate where a team is heading, while ensuring that staff have the autonomy to innovate curricula or programs, experiment with novel ideas, or take calculated risks in pedagogy. Moreover, visionary leaders often balance their management style by collaborating with the upper management or teaching team to integrate other leadership components into their administration. Overall, they tend to hold a unique worldview, motivate others to promote organization's strategic outlook and aspirations, and ultimately, help materialize the vision ([Michigan State University, 2025](#)).

Visionary leaders often perceive things at different angles and seize the new prospects and ventures in changing times; they embrace uncharted territories by regarding them as blank slates for experimentation, innovation, and spearheading new possibilities. To establish a broader organizational scope and its ultimate intent, visionary leaders often try to examine situations or issues in different perspectives, even when they seem insurmountable. Further, they also encourage staff to propel the organization's vision in unison by bringing individuals and the entire organization together, while leading them in the prevailing or dominant direction. Besides, they also present different scenarios through symbolism and metaphors by painting vivid pictures that inspire staff to energetically attain future goals. Additionally, visionary leaders also emphasize the importance of both individual staff and the entire team in aligning with the organization's vision, advancing with a vivid goal, and assuming their role in realizing the vision. Lastly, to materialize the organization's mandate, visionary leaders implement innovative ideas through actionable measures with charisma that is balanced by focus, discipline, and a particular course of action. They strive to actualize the organization's vision by operationalizing realistic goals, outlining a strategic plan for achieving those goals, and empowering staff to implement the plan as individuals as well as team members ([Michigan State University, 2025](#)).

According to [Tamer \(2021\)](#), visionary leaders tend to be farsighted and equipped with a vision of transformation, which provides staff with a strategic framework to pursue organizational objectives and progress. Further, they strive to enhance staff's professional and personal achievement by capitalizing on their expertise to fulfil organizational aims and purposes. They succinctly set and define achievable goals, and subsequently, relay them through effective verbal and written communication, which ensures that staff will fully grasp what awaits them and understand the significance of their contributions. Moreover, visionary leaders strive to achieve organizational agility by quickly adapting to sudden, unpredictable changes within the organization as well as outside. Firmly believing in the necessity of lifelong education, they incorporate continuous learning into the organizational structure and instill its value amongst staff, thus propagating a sense of innovative consciousness throughout the organization. Besides, they often envision how their organization can gain a competitive edge in the market, while being change-ready to respond to unforeseen circumstances. They also plan and execute every activity according to the expectations of the community they serve, thus allowing their organization to respond to parents and other stakeholders' demands and expectations in a timely and sensible manner. Lastly, in line with SDG 4 Quality Education, visionary leaders, with their high predictive ability and structural preparation, tend to adapt to the external environment and educational trends (e.g., digital education) more readily, which enables them to gain market dominance (i.e., international student enrollment) and accrue long-term organizational growth, characterized by profitability, environmental sustainability, and corporate social responsibility.

According to [Wang, Jin, and Yoo \(2024\)](#), visionary leaders tend to augment staff's morale and conviction by projecting a vivid vision that psychologically empowers them to achieve the organization's intents and purposes. As aforementioned, they also foster an organizational culture that underscores lifelong learning, which inspires staff to leverage on every opportunity to acquire novel knowledge to elevate their innovativeness, commitment, and career advancement. Additionally, visionary leaders provide appropriate guidance and assistance to staff based on the organization's vision by instilling a sense of responsibility, obligation, purpose, and work meaningfulness. Lastly, they create a provisional environment that advocates creative problem-solving, innovativeness, and critical thinking by ensuring that staff fully understand and endorse the organization's plans and strategies, while offering them guidance, resources, and scaffolding to successfully execute tasks.

[Ghadi \(2025\)](#) posited that visionary leadership tends to enhance staff's sense of job meaningfulness and belonging. Therefore, PHEIs should leverage on this management style to cultivate a sense of purpose and significance amongst staff. Further, they should implement visionary leadership development programs to propagate an organizational culture that makes academics feel valued and connected to the aspiration and outlook of the institution. Further, PHEIs should also offer training programs that can upgrade the visionary leadership skills among management personnel (deans, department heads, and coordinators), which help reinforce staff's expressiveness and purposefulness. This dual approach can propagate a prudent and inventive PHEI milieu characterized by a sense of purpose and direction, which reinforces staff's organizational identification, vocational calling, and reason for being.

1.1. Purpose and Significance of the Study

The primary purpose of the study was to examine the intricate dynamics of visionary leadership at PHEIs in Sabah, Malaysia by extracting insight from academics' perceptions of their department heads. Findings will underscore the critical role of visionary leadership in enhancing the teaching and learning process by fostering a sense of belonging, commitment, and unity, while shaping a shared vision via open communication, inclusivity, and empowerment. Further, the study will reveal the pivotal role of visionary leadership in cultivating a generative and collegial organizational fabric by aligning individual and collective efforts to a culture of continuous improvement and excellence. Additionally, findings will provide a useful framework for department heads to foster a communal and unified sense of direction and purpose by integrating visionary leadership elements into their management practices, besides prioritizing core values, collaboration, and adaptability. Moreover, the study will promote a holistic approach to educational leadership grounded on the visionary principles of transparency, bilateral communication, and accountability to foster a dynamic and innovative organizational culture that augments staff's collegiality, job motivation, enthusiasm, and organization commitment.

Additionally, findings this study will generate greater insight into the advantages of adopting a visionary leadership style to successfully lead and manage innovation and change in higher education within the Malaysian context. They will benefit PHEIs in terms of how best to incorporate visionary leadership components and values into their daily interaction with academics to increase their self-assertiveness, trust, self-efficacy, and overall psychological wealth. Moreover, findings will also offer practical implications on how visionary leadership functions to unite academics, guide them toward growth, and espouse a shared purpose that motivates them to engage in innovation and change caused by the ever-evolving educational landscape. Lastly, this study will provide valuable suggestions for PHEIs in exercising visionary leadership to formulate and convey a persuasive vision in the face of structural, technological, and strategic change, besides enriching the theoretical framework of visionary leadership and expanding its scope of application in the Malaysian context.

1.2. Research Questions

To guide the research process, ensure focus, and define the scope of the study, three research questions were formulated, which were succinct, focused, and relevant to the topic. Besides inviting exploration and discussion, the research questions were deemed answerable through quantitative research and statistical analysis, and are as follows:

- i. What were the descriptive statistics of visionary leadership among department heads at PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah?
- ii. Were there any significant differences in lecturers' perceptions of visionary leadership in terms of gender, age, and job experience?
- iii. Were there any significant differences in the visionary leadership items based on the hypothesized value of 3.5?

1.3. Scope of the Study

The study was limited to 56 academics from three PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Deans, coordinators, and registrars of 10 randomly chosen PHEIs were contacted via email, but only three agreed to help administer the questionnaire online. Academics were drawn

from culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse communities in Sabah. The sample size was determined according to both theoretical and statistical considerations. According to the central limit theorem, a minimum of 30 respondents is generally sufficient to ensure statistical power and generalizability for basic survey research (Roscoe, 1975; RUBIKTOP, 2023). The sample was deemed representative of academics from the PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu; hence, selection bias was minimized. Systematic random sampling of PHEIs was practiced to procure a diverse range of perspectives across different age, gender, and work experience. By allowing all eligible PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu an equal chance of selection, this method could prevent the under- or over-representation of specific groups, while increasing the generalizability of findings to a broader population of academics.

2. Review of Literature

The literature review enables the authors to provide an overview and synthesis of existing knowledge on visionary leadership. It also helps them establish a foundation for novel research by identifying key theories, methodologies, and discussions associated with visionary leadership, thus acting as a link between current knowledge and new research, while demonstrating the writers' comprehension on the key components of visionary leadership and justifying the need for further investigation. Lastly, the literature review enables the writers to develop a theoretical framework for the study, identify research gaps, and establish the context of the research.

2.2. Impact of Visionary Leadership

2.2.1. Strategic Alignment, Trust, Organizational Agility, Self, and Dimensions

Team managers who practice visionary leadership, while strategically aligned with the top management, tend to attain strategic consensus, which subsequently fosters strategic commitment (Ateş et al., 2018). Visionary managers' strategic alignment tends to positively influence staff by conveying details that synchronize with those of the upper management, thus helping them garner greater support from middle- and lower-rank managers in terms of realizing the organization's strategic prospects and ideals.

In their investigation, Saher and Ayub (2020) disclosed that visionary leadership tends to be significantly and positively related to trust in leaders, which results in organizational innovation and change. Findings imply that visionary leaders tend to display trustworthy actions that make staff perceive organizational change as a positive phenomenon, which increases the likelihood of meeting market requirements to improve organizational profitability and sustainability. Besides, visionary leaders tend to embrace innovation and change by establishing high emotional commitment to the position that they are advocating, besides developing trust amongst staff to reduce resistance to change. On the other hand, Tamer (2021), who examined the impact of visionary leadership on organizational agility, confirmed a parallel and meaningful relationship between visionary leadership and organizational agility. Findings imply that visionary leaders tend to effectively predict changes and confront uncertainties with flexibility, responsiveness, and speed.

Additionally, Liu et al. (2022) found that visionary leadership tends to stimulate staff to include leaders in self, which in turn enhances their leadership capacity, initiative, and competence. Additionally, the interpersonal relationship between visionary leaders and

staff tends to promote staff's sense of future orientation. Findings imply that visionary leadership can be optimized from a staff-centric outlook, which tends to favorably impact staff's work behavior, attitudes, and job outcomes. Lastly, due to its contingent impact on staff's future orientation, visionary leadership tends to spur them to perform concurrently with the organization's intentions and targets, which is crucial for organizational transformation and progress in a fluid global environment.

On the other hand, [Golafshani and Siamian \(2023\)](#), who explored the elements of visionary leadership among university academics, disclosed that it primarily consists of two dimensions, including individual and organizational. The individual dimension pertains to the characteristics, skills, and behaviors of visionary leaders, while the organizational dimension includes their thematic, schematic, and matric roles. Besides, findings also revealed that the highest standard coefficient tends to be related to the visionary leaders' characteristics and their schematic role, implying that they tend to possess the fundamental attributes in clarifying the organization's systematic functioning to design, analyze, and troubleshoot. Further, [Widodo and Permana \(2023\)](#) postulated that visionary leadership, together with organizational commitment, tends to have a significant impact on teachers' organizational citizenship behavior and work-life quality. Findings imply that visionary principals who elaborate on the school's direction and goals tend to raise teachers' enthusiasm and commitment, while encouraging them to strive for self-development through active involvement in extracurricular activities and manifestation of their sense of responsibility.

2.2.2. Cognitive Uncertainty, Organizational Agility, and Leader-follower Congruence

In a study that investigated the impact of visionary leadership on cognitive uncertainty, [Bernards \(2023\)](#) found that it tends to significantly reduce cognitive uncertainty through team cohesion and servant leadership. Visionary leaders tend to reduce cognitive uncertainty by ensuring that staff fully acknowledge and promote team goals. To transform team goals into measurable staff contributions, visionary leaders strive to operationalize them, and subsequently, effectuate how staff can contribute to achieving them. Additionally, they also tend to alleviate cognitive uncertainty by expounding crucial aims and objectives, besides prioritizing them over other matters based on the organization's design and endeavor. By encouraging staff to internalize the organization's overall purpose, visionary leaders enable them to properly weigh conflicting goals and reframe vague ones to align with the organization's overall aim, core values, and intentions. Similarly, [Buss et al. \(2023\)](#) discovered that work centrality tends to act as a prominent antecedent of visionary leadership, especially for leaders with low organizational tenure. Findings imply that visionary leaders' work centrality tends to foster a strong bond between staff and the organization by increasing their work meaningfulness, which in turn, increases job motivation and organizational commitment.

In a study that examined the impact of visionary leadership on staff's organizational agility, [Yilmaz \(2023\)](#) found that visionary leadership tends to have a significant and positive impact on organizational agility. Findings imply that visionary leadership tends to prioritize staff's distinctive personality traits to increase organizational engagement and output, which positively influences organizational agility. Visionary leaders tend to provide flexibility that allows staff to adequately express complex ideas, while promptly responding to the organization's evolving needs, alternatives, and predilections. Besides, their flexibility also enables them to provide different types and quantities of offerings

by taking calculated risks and displaying anticipation about the possibility of failure, which make staff feel optimistic, excited, and determined to face uncertainties. Additionally, visionary leaders' risk-taking behavior tends to have a significant and positive effect on the organization's speed and reliability in terms of offering new products or services. Besides reassuring staff that the organization has expert and authorized human resources to promote intra- and extra-organizational collaboration, visionary leaders also demonstrate obvious respect toward their strengths and efforts. Lastly, they make staff feel nurtured and valued by acknowledging and honoring their views and feelings, which helps establish a synergistic environment for them to heed and address important matters as part of a collegial and cohesive team.

In their research, [Cai, Fan, and Wang \(2023\)](#) concurred that group-level visionary leadership tends to significantly reinforce the relationship between individual-level visionary leadership and leader-follower accord, while goal commitment appears to magnify the impact of leader-follower accord on creativity. Findings imply that visionary leadership tends to act as a contextual (group-level) and a subjective (individual-level) impetus, which stimulates group and individual creativity, respectively. Moreover, visionary leadership also acts as a precursor of creativity, which propels leaders to implement experiential measures to help staff align themselves to the organization's endeavors by displaying high goal commitment and leader-follower accord. Lastly, visionary leaders tend to adjust their goals and plans by succinctly conveying their aims and objectives personally or modifying staff's perceptions and attitudes; specifically, they strive to augment team creativity by facilitating staff's interpersonal communication, while constantly disseminating the organization's undertakings.

In their quantitative research, [Wang, Jin, and Yoo \(2024\)](#) discovered that visionary leadership tends to have a significant and positive influence on psychological empowerment and innovative performance amongst information technology staff. Moreover, psychological empowerment also partially mediated the impact of visionary leadership on innovativeness. Findings imply that visionary leaders tend to motivate staff by emphasizing a progressive learning culture, which in turn, promotes psychological empowerment and creative performance. Similarly, [Yang and Yang \(2024\)](#) disclosed that visionary leaders tend to significantly and positively influence staff to form a strong psychological bond with the organization by identifying with, and showing loyalty to, the organization and its pursuits.

In a recent study, [Ghadi \(2025\)](#) exposed a significant and positive relationship between visionary leadership and job crafting, with psychological meaningfulness as mediator and organizational identification as moderator. Findings imply that visionary leaders tend to offer an effective framework in promoting staff's psychological meaningfulness, organizational identification, and job crafting. Moreover, [Saleh et al. \(2025\)](#) concurred that visionary leadership tends to significantly influence nurse interns' creativity, organizational effectiveness, and perceived organizational support. Findings imply that visionary leaders tend to inspire nurse interns to become more effectual problem-solvers who demonstrate better overall performance; in brief, they propel them to develop their creative potential, take calculated risks, and brainstorm diverse, innovative ideas. Lastly, they tend to display high capacity in expressing a succinct and compelling future direction, aligning team activities, and cultivating an innovative mindset, all of which inevitably contribute to organizational effectiveness and advancement.

2.2.3. *Entrepreneurship, Organizational Identity, and Job Performance*

Thenmozhi and Radhikaashree (2024), in their examination on the impact of visionary leadership on entrepreneurship, disclosed that visionary leadership, together with organizational excellence, tends to be significantly related to entrepreneurship, characterized by innovativeness, proactivity, risk-taking, and assertive competition. Additionally, it also tends to partially mediate the relationship between entrepreneurship and organizational excellence. Findings imply that visionary leaders tend to promptly adapt structures and policies to promote entrepreneurship, which enables the organization to achieve corporate excellence through management strategy empowerment. On the other hand, Tawa et al. (2024) posited that visionary leadership, together with organizational commitment, tends to influence special education teachers' instructional efficacy. Findings imply that school principals should improve their visionary leadership competencies to create a vibrant and responsive teaching environment that promotes inclusive education for all, which is endorsed by SDG 4 Quality Education.

Farhan (2024) found that visionary leadership, together with an innovative mindset, can create a unique organizational identity that promotes differentiation and continuous organizational development. Visionary leaders seek to inspire staff by perpetuating the culture of innovation and instilling an innovative mindset to encourage calculated risk-taking and transform the organization's vision and mission into fruitful actions by analyzing its situation, target, and purpose to determine the strategic choices that can yield long-term competitiveness and sustainability. Besides pinpointing the factors that facilitate organizational development, visionary leaders also implement measures, procedures, and strategies that can help the organization perform beyond expectations.

On the other hand, the impact of visionary leadership on civil servants' performance was examined by Marlita (2024). Findings revealed that visionary leaders, characterized by innovative thinking, integrity, and high spiritual values, tend to have a significant and positive impact on job performance due to their ability to formulate a vision and implement measures that enhance job competence, organizational commitment, and innovativeness. Findings underscore the significance of visionary leadership on job performance through influencing, motivating, and enabling staff to promote organizational effectiveness; visionary leaders tend to provide clear guidelines and resources to increase work meaningfulness, idea sharing, and unity amongst staff.

2.2.4. *Visionary Leadership and Organizational Commitment*

In an empirical study on visionary leadership and organizational commitment, Dhammika (2016) unveiled a significant and positive relationship between the two variables. Further, leader-member exchange (LMX) was also found to have a significant indirect impact on the relationship between visionary leadership and organizational commitment. Similarly, Kesumayani et al. (2020) elucidated that visionary leadership tends to exert a significant and positive influence on staff's organizational commitment and work-life balance. Syarif and Herlina (2019), who examined the impact of visionary leadership on teachers' self-efficacy and organizational commitment, found that visionary leadership tends to be significantly and positively related with organizational commitment and self-efficacy. Additionally, Heni et al. (2020), who analyzed the relationship between visionary leadership, organizational commitment, and work-life balance, expounded that visionary leadership tends to have a significant and positive

influence on organizational commitment and work-life balance. Similarly, [Basri and Purba \(2021\)](#) revealed that visionary leadership tends to significantly and positively influence organizational commitment among private university lecturers. Overall, findings imply that visionary leadership can help create an academic environment that is conducive to promoting job satisfaction, loyalty, and organizational commitment amongst academics.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

A quantitative research approach was employed in the study; it was chosen for its suitability in systematically investigating attributes linked to visionary leadership. The research design was aligned to the primary purpose of the study, which was to investigate PHEI academics' perceptions of visionary leadership in Sabah, Malaysia. The quantitative approach enabled the writers to objectively evaluate perceived visionary leadership of department heads at three PHEIs in Sabah. It also provided the appropriate statistical method to determine if significant differences by way of gender, age, and job experience existed in perceived visionary leadership through SPSS 29.0 data analysis and interpretation. Additionally, a Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to collect data from PHEI academics, thus guaranteeing adequate representation within the sample. Items were standardized so that all academics received the same questions with identical wording. Besides, a questionnaire was used because it was (1) cost-effective and timesaving, (2) easy to administer to small groups of academics from three different PHEIs, (3) anonymous and suitable for the topic, and (4) self-paced. Lastly, the quantitative design was useful to analyze numerical data, thus providing empirical information needed to report findings, draw conclusions, and make recommendations on how to promote visionary leadership to improve job motivation, sense of belonging, organizational commitment, and psychological wellbeing among PHEI academics.

3.2. Research Location

This study was carried out in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, the capital city of the island state where quantitative research on visionary leadership at PHEIs is scarce. Kota Kinabalu was chosen for its distinctive tertiary milieu, which includes several private colleges that can provide a sufficiently representative sample of academics, thus allowing for a relatively accurate assessment of academics' perceptions of visionary leadership in Sabah.

3.3. Sample and Justification

The sample of this study comprised 56 academics ($n = 56$) from three PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. All respondents possess at least a bachelor's degree and are currently working full-time at their respective institutions. Initially, deans, coordinators, and registrars of 10 randomly chosen PHEIs were contacted via email, but ultimately, only three agreed to participate in the study. Administrators who exhibited interest in the study then shared the survey link with academics and urged them to respond. This selection procedure prioritized voluntary participation and convenient access, thus yielding a realistic and contextually relevant sample.

Respondents came from culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse communities in Sabah. The sample size was determined based on both theoretical and statistical considerations. According to the central limit theorem, a minimum of 30 participants is generally sufficient to ensure statistical power and generalizability for basic survey research (Roscoe, 1975; RUBIKTOP, 2023). Additionally, the sample was deemed representative of academics from the local PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu; hence, selection bias was minimized. Systematic random sampling of colleges was performed to gain a diverse range of perspectives in relation to age, gender, and work experience. By allowing all eligible PHEIs an equal chance of selection, this method could prevent the under- or over-representation of specific groups, while increasing the generalizability of findings to a broader population of PHEI academics. Further, PHEIs were chosen because of their physical proximity to the university college where the first writer serves as professor and head of its Master of Education in Leadership. In general, the study was delimited by location, accessibility, and the administrators' willingness to participate in the study.

While the sample size seemed small, it met the minimum requirement for quantitative research in the social sciences, particularly in educational leadership and educational psychology. For example, Roscoe (1975) recommended a sample size of 30 to 500 for most statistical research. This rule of thumb is supported by the central limit theorem, which stipulates that sampling distributions will approach normality when there are 30 or more respondents, thus allowing for accurate statistical inference. Lastly, the current sample size ensured a reasonable margin of error and enough power to identify modest effects in nonparametric analyses, such as the Kruskal-Wallis, Mann-Whitney U, and Wilcoxon signed rank tests, which were used to interpret data in the current study.

The sample consisted of 32.1 percent males and 67.9 percent females. Age-wise, 39.3 percent are 25 to 35 years old, 33.9 percent are 36 to 46 years old, 19.6 percent are 47 to 57 years old, and 7.1 percent are above 57 years old. Experience-wise, 21.4 percent have worked for less than five years, 16.1 percent have worked for six to 11 years, 35.7 percent have worked for 12 to 17 years, 8.9 percent have worked for 18 to 23 years, and 8.9 percent have worked for more than 23 years (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents ($n = 56$)

Item	Profile	Description	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	18	32.1%
		Female	38	67.9%
2	Age	25-35 years	22	39.3%
		36-46 years	19	33.9%
		47-57 years	11	19.6%
		above 57 years	4	7.1%
3	Job Experience (years)	Less than 5	12	21.4%
		6-11	9	16.1%
		12-17	20	35.7%
		18-23	5	8.9%
		More than 23	5	8.9%

3.4. Instrument

The Likert-scale Visionary Leadership Questionnaire was administered to examine academics' perceptions of visionary leadership at three PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. It

consists of 23 items derived from the literature (Daş, Yüksek, & Beşir, 2022; LeSourd, Tracz, & Grady, 1990).

3.4.1. Cronbach's Alpha Values

To determine the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted on 25 local teachers and data were analyzed using SPSS 29.0. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability; results indicated that the Cronbach's alpha of the Visionary Leadership Questionnaire is .75, indicating a reasonably good level of internal consistency with the items appearing to measure the same construct (visionary leadership).

3.4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was also conducted on the 25 local teachers' responses; results showed that its ρa , ρc , and average variance extracted (AVE) are 0.974, 0.971, and 0.590, respectively.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

Academics from three PHEIs were urged to complete the questionnaire online. They were told that completion of the survey was their indication of consent to voluntarily participate in the study. Ethical issues were prioritized throughout the data collection procedure. All academics granted informed consent in relation to the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and the possibility to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. To ensure confidentiality, all responses were anonymized and the data were securely stored. Only the first writer has access to the data, guaranteeing that they would be used solely for scholarly purposes.

Data were automatically transferred onto a spreadsheet and subsequently analyzed using SPSS 29.0. First, the mean and percentages of agreement on perceived visionary leadership were calculated. Second, Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences in academics' perceptions of visionary leadership in relation to age and job experience. Third, Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were any significant differences in terms of gender. Fourth, Wilcoxon signed rank test was used to determine if any of the visionary leadership items were significant at a hypothesized value of 3.5.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The mean score of PHEI academics' perceptions visionary leadership was 3.78 (out of 5.0). Percentages of agreement (strongly agree/agree) were collapsed to gain an overview of lecturers' perceptions of visionary leadership among department heads in at three PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Results showed that a low number of PHEI academics tend to perceive their department heads as visionary (only 55.3 to 69.0 percent) (Table 2). Only two items had slightly higher percentages of agreement, whereby 71.4 percent indicated that leaders should do what is needed to get desired results and that temporary disruption of organizational operations is sometimes necessary to achieve progress.

Table 2: Percentages of Agreement on Visionary Leadership

My department head believes that ...	1	2	3	4	5	4+5 (Collapsed)
Leaders should be reflective thinkers as well as action oriented	5.4	10.7	21.4	44.6	17.9	62.5
Leaders should maintain personal goals even if some patrons complain	3.6	5.4	32.1	35.7	23.2	58.9
Leaders should be committed to attaining their personal ideas for their organization	1.8	8.9	21.4	37.5	30.4	67.9
Leaders should do what is needed to get the results which they want	3.6	1.8	23.2	37.5	33.9	71.4
Leaders' values and beliefs are the major influence upon the work of the people in the organization	5.4	7.1	19.6	44.6	23.2	67.8
Leaders' own beliefs should be prominent in the atmosphere of the organization	0.0	8.9	25	46.4	19.6	66
Leaders must actively work to promote their ideals in the organization	1.8	8.9	23.2	37.5	26.8	64.3
Staff tend to work hard when leaders make organizational goals clear	12.5	3.6	25	37.5	19.6	57.1
Leaders should vigorously articulate organizational goals at every opportunity	5.4	12.5	25	42.9	14.3	57.2
In good organizations, the leader and staff are committed to common purposes	10.7	7.1	19.6	42.9	19.6	62.5
Organizational climate is different in each organization, which is strongly influenced by staff's beliefs about students and learning	5.4	10.7	21.4	44.6	17.9	62.5
Successful organizations have a clearly understood philosophy	3.6	5.4	32.1	35.7	23.2	58.9
Goals will be attained in an organization in which everyone knows what is important for success	1.8	8.9	21.4	37.5	30.4	67.9
Temporary disruption of organizational operations is sometimes necessary to achieve progress	3.6	1.8	23.2	37.5	33.9	71.4
A good leader can be expected to take innovative actions	5.4	7.1	19.6	44.6	23.2	67.8
Leaders should create an atmosphere of creativity in the organization	0.0	8.9	25	46.4	19.6	66
Good leaders are driven by a desire to create new ideas	1.8	8.9	23.2	37.5	26.8	64.3
Leaders must be willing to take risks	12.5	3.6	25	37.5	19.6	57.1
Leaders should be driven by the vision of a better future	5.4	12.5	25	42.9	14.3	57.2
Some leaders become well-known because they are heroic and visionary	16.1	7.1	21.4	30.4	25	55.4
Leaders should spend time actively planning for the future	10.7	10.7	17.9	35.7	25	60.7
Wise leaders focus on their organizations based on an image of what the organization should be in the future	10.7	3.6	26.8	30.4	28.6	59
Leaders should have a view of a future which is better than the present	7.1	5.4	32.1	35.7	19.6	55.3

Strongly agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly disagree = 1

4.2 Inferential Statistics

Nonparametric tests showed that there were no significant differences by way of gender, age, and job experience in visionary leadership (see [Table 3](#)).

Table 3: Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H Results

Visionary	Nonparametric test	p-value
Gender	Mann-Whitney U test	0.314
Age	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.812
Job Experience	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.223

Wilcoxon signed rank test based on a hypothesized value of 3.5 showed that all visionary items were significant at $p < 0.001$, having medians that were significantly different from the test value, and were likely to indicate strong disagreement (see [Table 4](#)).

Table 4: Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test on Visionary Leadership (Hypothesized Value = 3.5)

My department head believes that ...	p-value	Conclusion
Leaders should be reflective thinkers as well as action oriented	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders should maintain personal goals even if some patrons complain	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders should be committed to attaining their personal ideas for their organization	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders should do what is needed to get the results which they want	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders' values and beliefs are the major influence upon the work of the people in the organization	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders' own beliefs should be prominent in the atmosphere of the organization	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders must actively work to promote their ideals in the organization	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Staff tend to work hard when leaders make organizational goals clear	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders should vigorously articulate organizational goals at every opportunity	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
In good organizations, the leader and staff are committed to common purposes	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Organizational climate is different in each organization, which is strongly influenced by staff's beliefs about students and learning	<0.001** *	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement

Successful organizations have a clearly understood philosophy	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Goals will be attained in an organization in which everyone knows what is important for success	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Temporary disruption of organizational operations is sometimes necessary to achieve progress	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
A good leader can be expected to take innovative actions	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders should create an atmosphere of creativity in the organization	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Good leaders are driven by a desire to create new ideas	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders must be willing to take risks	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders should be driven by the vision of a better future	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Some leaders become well-known because they are heroic and visionary	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders should spend time actively planning for the future	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Wise leaders focus on their organizations based on an image of what the organization should be in the future	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Leaders should have a view of a future which is better than the present	<0.001** *	Median significantly differs from the test value indicating strong disagreement

*** $p < 0.001$

5. Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

First, nonparametric tests showed that there were no significant differences by way of gender, age, and job experience in academics' perceptions visionary leadership. Findings imply that demographic characteristics do not significantly influence academics' perceptions of visionary leadership. Second, low percentages of academics tend to perceive their department heads as visionary. Third, Wilcoxon signed rank test based on a hypothesized value of 3.5 showed that all the items related to visionary leadership were significant at $p < 0.001$, having medians that were significantly different from the test value and were likely to indicate strong disagreement.

5.2. Implications

5.2.1. Collectivist Culture and Top-down Leadership

Rather than visionary, Malaysian leaders tend to be collectivist and adopt hierarchical leadership, which is commonly practiced in American organizations; it is characterized by an authoritarian approach whereby key decisions on organizational direction, plans, and strategies are decided by the upper echelon, with staff are primarily acting as task completers. In brief, top executives in the organization exert almost complete control over the decision-making process ([Touro University Worldwide, 2019](#)). Additionally, [Jayasingam and Cheng \(2009\)](#) postulated that Malaysian employees tend to attribute leadership effectiveness to the practice of participative and nurturant-task leadership, which parallels with the nation's collectivist culture that emphasizes group concerns, team goals, and collective needs over individual performance and achievement. Instead of expecting their leaders to be visionary, Malaysian employees generally prefer to function as team members guided by an authority figure who establishes all the rules and regulations to be closely adhered to.

Similarly, [Surendran \(2017\)](#) quoted Iclif CEO Rajeev Peshawaria, who asserted that the type of leadership that works for Generation Z or post-millennials in Malaysia is autocratic leadership with a twist, whereby leaders need to earn their right to be authoritarian for staff to respect and trust them. People will listen to an authoritarian leader who has the organization's best interests at heart, especially an organization that emphasizes rapid innovation and change. Besides, [Peshawaria \(2017\)](#) postulated that, while many people tend to idealize democratic and all-inclusive leadership, authoritarian, top-down leadership has always been practiced and most effective in most Asian countries, including Malaysia. About half of the 16,000 senior and midlevel executives surveyed tend to display top-autocratic qualities by daring to be different and remaining firm in their decisions or actions. Moreover, 75 percent of them also affirmed that, to drive unprecedented success for an organization in a volatile and transient environment, hierarchical leadership is particularly effectual. Lastly, even employees in teal organizations also tend to prefer hierarchical, command-and-control leadership rather than self-management.

5.2.2. High Power Distance

Malaysian leaders tend to be non-visionary because of high power distance. [Ansari, Ahmad, and Aafaqi \(2004\)](#) asserted that Malaysians tend to perceive autocratic and directive managers as effective leaders because of the nation's high-power distance, which is described as a situation where a higher-ranking position gives a leader the authority and ultimate control. Rules and regulations tend to reinforce a leader's sense of control, authority, and power. Additionally, seniority is respected; hence, older authority figures are regarded as the primary decision-makers whom junior staff are obliged to follow. The general norm is that lower-ranking staff go along with their superiors, often by suppressing or displacing discontentment to appease the latter. Besides, Malaysians also value harmonious relationships, which make leaders reluctant to dispense negative feedback to staff who show compliance and submission to authority.

Lastly, due to the joint legacy of its feudal system and British colonial influence, Malaysia tends to have the highest power distance in the world ([Sweetman, 2012](#)). The Malaysian

culture is profoundly respectful of a complex, nuanced system of titled classes, granting greater power to those occupying the upper-tier of an organization. Lower-level staff tend to unflinchingly defer to higher-level individuals as if it is the natural order. Its corporate culture, rooted in deeply-held hierarchical values of the mainstream culture, makes it very difficult for PHEI leaders to shift to a more visionary style.

5.2.3. Paternalistic Leadership and Centralization

Malaysian leaders tend to be non-visionary because they prefer to practice paternalistic leadership. Power distance in Malaysia is very high due to cultural, historical, and socioeconomic influences. Further, hierarchical structures are deeply ingrained in Malaysian society, which demonstrates respect for such authoritative figures as elders, leaders, and individuals in powerful positions. Moreover, reverence for authority is evident in several facets of Malaysian society, including family structures, education, and professional interactions. Overall, Malaysian organizational behavior and management, grounded on respect for authority and preservation of social peace, tends to lean toward paternalistic leadership, with superiors offering clear directions and suggestions to subordinates (Lee, 2024; Lee et al. 2022).

Malaysian business organizations typically employ centralized decision-making procedures, whereby leaders offer precise guidance and make critical choices, while employees usually defer to their superiors and are less likely to question authority or openly voice dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, many Malaysian leaders strive to handle cultural dynamics by encouraging open communication, while combining authority and inclusion that acknowledges and honors hierarchical traditions. Lastly, they also try to implement culturally-sensitive personnel management that compensates staff according to both performance and tenure, besides merging meritocracy with respect for hierarchy and status (Lee, 2024; Lee et al. 2022).

5.3. Recommendations

5.3.1. Elements of Visionary Leadership

Liu et al. (2022) found that visionary leaders tend to encourage staff to take initiative, assume responsibility, and resolve problems autonomously by taking charge of situations more frequently. Therefore, PHEIs should incorporate visionary leadership elements to create a liberal environment that promotes vision sharing and two-way communication. Besides, they should also ensure that leaders at different levels build consensus and achieve unanimity on all organizational endeavors in a prompt manner. Further, for staff promotion, PHEIs should pay greater attention to individual attributes and visionary leadership components to create a blueprint for successful goal attainment. Moreover, visionary leaders also tend to focus on meeting staff's personalized growth needs and self-development. PHEI leaders should establish meaningful and productive relationships with staff by providing the necessary resources and support, besides increasing staff's desire for inclusion, self-mastery, and breakthroughs. Lastly, they need to encourage staff to become more future-oriented by underscoring the importance of prospective growth and self-discovery.

5.3.2. Change Management Strategies and Regular Assessment

In the ever-evolving landscape of PHEIs, visionary leadership remains a cornerstone for ensuring long-term viability by balancing profitability with social responsibility and environmental stewardship. To tap the benefits of visionary leadership, PHEIs need to introduce change management strategies and measure progress to adapt plans ([United Ceres College, 2023](#)). PHEIs should navigate the transition toward the desired outcomes by practicing dual communication, involving key stakeholders, and creating a sense of urgency to facilitate change management. To eliminate resistance to change, they need to foster a culture of openness and transparency, where constructive feedback is encouraged and acted upon. Additionally, they also need to provide adequate resources and support to staff who are often directly impacted by changes. Additionally, to successfully implement their future plans, PHEIs need visionary leaders who can establish clear goals and milestones to measure progress toward intended goals or aspirations. Visionary leaders are able to conduct regular staff appraisal and introduce feedback mechanisms to identify bottlenecks, while making the necessary adjustments. PHEI leaders need to be agile and adaptable, while willing to embrace the necessary changes to align with the organization's vision. By assessing progress and adapting plans accordingly through continuous evaluation and feedback, PHEI leaders can effectively evaluate the impact of their actions, while making informed decisions to orchestrate the institution in the right direction.

5.3.3. Overcoming Resistance and Balancing Innovation with Tradition

To become more visionary, PHEI leaders need to overcome resistance and balance innovation with tradition ([United Ceres College, 2023](#)). They need the ability to deal with change-resistant people, being aware that any effort to introduce new ideas, policies, or practices can be opposed by stakeholders who prefer the status quo. Therefore, PHEI leaders need to be cognizant of a variety of factors that are associated with change resistance, including fear of the unknown, lack of understanding about the benefits of change, or a sense of loss of control. Knowledge of such factors will enable them to take appropriate measures to enhance staff's internal locus of control to cope with inevitable change and inspire them to become more change-capable and resilient in the face of new challenges. Moreover, to become effective visionary leaders, PHEI leaders need to strike the right balance between fostering innovation and maintaining traditional values and practices. For PHEIs rooted in long-standing traditions, embracing change and innovation is often perceived as a threat to their values, identity, and history. Visionary leaders strive to show that it is vital for PHEIs to evolve and adapt to meet the demands of a rapidly changing educational landscape. As they navigate this challenge, PHEI leaders should communicate the importance of preserving core values, while also embracing transformation and novelty. By involving stakeholders in the decision-making process and emphasizing how innovation can enhance, rather than replace norms, traditions, and values, visionary leaders can successfully build a kaizen culture of innovativeness, adaptation, refinement, and elevation.

5.3.4 Welcoming Innovative Ideas and Embracing Failure

To develop visionary leadership, organizations need to acknowledge the cruciality of innovative ideas and embrace failure as a stepping stone ([The Alternative Board, 2024](#)). It is urgent for PHEIs to adopt innovative technologies because artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping business operations. PHEI leaders need to foster a culture of

curiosity and creativity by asking themselves if (1) staff are comfortable approaching them with novel ideas, (2) they inspire creative thinking, (3) the workplace culture encourages the generation and selection of innovative ideas to create marketable prototypes, and (4) they conduct regular brainstorming sessions to determine how emerging technologies or strategies can resolve existing problems and challenges. Lastly, PHEIs should not reprimand or penalize staff for making mistakes so that they will adopt the innovation funnel to systematically generate, evaluate, and prioritize innovative ideas, which ultimately lead to the development and launching of new programs or student services.

5.3.5. Acknowledgement, Focus, and Team Alignment

Visionary leadership emphasizes acknowledgement, focus, and team alignment ([The Alternative Board, 2024](#)). By acknowledging staff's contributions and efforts, PHEIs can increase trust, motivation, and dedication because giving credit where it is due inspires loyalty and aligns the team with the organization's mission and vision. Moreover, regular recognition also helps foster interpersonal connection and morale, especially in remote and hybrid work settings. For example, PHEIs can utilize Kudos or Microsoft Viva to track and celebrate staff's achievements in real-time. To make staff recognition a regular practice, PHEIs can also personalize feedback with congratulatory messages or public expression of thanks or praise. By creating a culture of respect and collaboration through highlighting staff's contributions, PHEIs can uplift staff and ensure that they feel valued every step they take.

Lastly, visionary leaders are fully focused and communicate the organization's vision and mission with staff to build a cohesive and effective team ([The Alternative Board, 2024](#)). To get staff to stay on track, enthusiastic, and driven, PHEIs need to keep them focused by empowering them with current knowledge, while continually measuring progress and rewarding accomplishments.

Besides concentrating on the mission and vision to inspire staff, PHEIs also need to establish the right team by asking if staff (1) endorse the organization's goals and objectives, (2) are aligned with the organization's goals and objectives, (3) welcome alterations and are change-capable, (4) are motivated to take action, (5) have the person-organization fit to innovate and transform, and (6) set professional and personal goals that are consistent with achieving the organization's intents and purposes.

5.3.6. Limitations of the Study

To conclude, this study only involved a single data source (PHEI academics); therefore, other data sources (deans, department heads, coordinators, principals) should be included in future research to increase generalizability of findings. Further, it only adopted a quantitative approach and did not include qualitative intents that underlie the cause-effect relationship between visionary leadership and variables that influence academics' perceptions (e.g., organizational commitment, job motivation, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence). Therefore, future research should consider using a mixed-method design by using different data collection and analytical methods. Although the nature of the survey did not allow the authors to draw conclusions in terms of antecedence or agency, it provides a good conceptual basis for conducting additional research to align visionary leadership with various management variables (e.g., strategies, ethical-moral values, human resource development) at PHEIs. Lastly, current

findings were based on a convenient sample and context, which could affect generalizability of findings. To improve its generalizability, this study should be replicated across diverse sociocultural settings with larger, randomized samples.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study has strictly adhered to all ethical procedures involving the use of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were ascertained of their anonymity, with their responses kept strictly confidential. They were also informed that the study was of low risk and that they could stop participating any time without any repercussions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no potential conflict of interest regarding this study in terms of the research, or publication of this article.

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