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Research Article:

Human-Centred Academic Leadership in Digital Transformation of Higher Education: Insights from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived leadership experiences of two former Deans at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), with particular attention to how human-centred leadership was practised during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of digital transformation in higher education. A qualitative narrative inquiry design with reflexive thematic analysis was employed to investigate critical leadership incidents, decision-making processes, and adaptive strategies in the shift to remote learning, and digital pedagogy. The analysis identified five interrelated leadership themes, namely empathy-driven engagement, fairness in digital resource allocation, reciprocal trust-building through virtual communication, empowerment of faculty and students in technology-mediated learning, and adaptive responsiveness in technology-intensive contexts. The findings demonstrate the importance of emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, and situational agility in developing resilient, inclusive, and digital-ready educational ecosystems. By situating leadership within institutional transformation, the study provides practical insights for academic leaders seeking to promote innovation, digital well-being, and technology-enhanced teaching and learning in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: Human-centred leadership, digital transformation, narrative inquiry, post-pandemic recovery, academic deans, Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid acceleration of digital transformation in higher education has ushered in a complex era of disruption, innovation, and profound leadership challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic functioned not only as a crisis of health and infrastructure but also as a critical litmus test for institutional leadership worldwide. Universities were compelled to transition abruptly to online learning, safeguard academic continuity, and uphold the emotional and psychological well-being of their communities amid prolonged uncertainty (Marinoni et al., 2020). This rapid shift to digital environments also laid the foundation for today's AI-driven educational era, where academic leadership must increasingly navigate emerging technologies alongside human needs. In Malaysia, these disruptions exposed systemic vulnerabilities in educational ecosystems and intensified the demand for leadership that is agile, ethical, and emotionally intelligent (Nurdayana et al., 2025).

Amidst this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) landscape, human-centred academic leadership, defined by empathy, fairness, trust-building, and inclusive engagement emerged as a vital anchor for institutional resilience (Bryman, 2007; Fullan, 2020). Rather than defaulting to rigid managerialism, academic leaders were called to humanise digital transitions, foster psychological safety, and empower both faculty and students while navigating unfamiliar, tech-mediated pedagogical terrains. Leadership responses during this period were not merely operational but deeply personal, reflecting values embedded in compassion, justice, and adaptive moral reasoning (Kirkland & Sutch, 2009; Anwer & Ahmed Siddiqui, 2021).

Yet, despite increasing attention to leadership in times of disruption, the human dimension of leadership in higher education remains insufficiently theorised, particularly within Global South contexts such as Southeast Asia. Much of the existing scholarship privileges Western-centric models that prioritise individual authority, rational decision-making, and managerial efficiency, while overlooking culturally embedded narratives of leadership that emphasise emotional labour, spiritual values, and community-centred decision-making. These frameworks often fail to address dimensions that are central in many non-Western contexts, for example, the role of spiritual ethics in guiding leaders' moral responsibilities, the importance of collective traditions and relational obligations, and the need for equity-oriented responses to digital divides, which disproportionately affect Global South institutions. Consequently, leadership values such as *rahmah* (compassion) and *amanah* (trust), which are foundational in Islamic and Southeast Asian educational philosophies, are frequently absent from Western models. As a result, such frameworks risk becoming structurally sound but spiritually and culturally hollow, offering limited resonance with the lived realities of those navigating educational crises on the ground (Fry & Mai, 2023).

At its heart, this study is about people. It is about leaders who chose to respond to crisis not with control and fear, but with empathy, courage, and conscience. By capturing the lived leadership experiences of two former Deans at one of the faculties at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), this research uncovers not just what leaders did, but how they felt, struggled, connected, and persevered. Their narratives reveal the emotional and ethical weight of academic leadership during one of the most turbulent periods in recent

memory. In an era dominated by metrics, automation, and systemic volatility, this study seeks to humanise leadership to remind us that the most enduring impact of leadership is not measured in performance indicators, but in people. This study also investigates how these leaders enacted human-centred values amidst technological upheaval. These findings provide a timely and transferable leadership framework for higher education institutions striving to cultivate AI-ready, inclusive, and ethically grounded ecosystems.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of post-pandemic scholarship by amplifying context-rich and underrepresented voices from the Global South. It offers a grounded, human-centred perspective on what it means to lead in times of crisis and demonstrates how conscience, compassion, and care can remain central to academic leadership. In addition, the study examines the readiness of Malaysian academic leaders, represented by two former Deans, in addressing future challenges posed by digital transformations.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on leadership in higher education, significant conceptual and empirical gaps remain at the intersection of leadership and digital transformation. Globally, much of the literature has been dominated by Western-centric frameworks that prioritise managerial efficiency, technological adoption, and individual leadership agency, often overlooking relational, ethical, and culturally embedded dimensions of leadership practice. While recent studies have examined digital transformation in universities, they tend to focus on structural and technological readiness rather than the lived, human-centred experiences of academic leaders navigating such transitions.

Furthermore, there is a notable scarcity of in-depth qualitative studies that capture how leadership is enacted in context, particularly within Global South institutions where socio-cultural, spiritual, and institutional dynamics differ significantly from Western settings. In Southeast Asia, and Malaysia specifically, leadership practices are often informed by values such as *rahmah* (compassion) and *amanah* (trust), yet these dimensions remain under-theorised in global leadership discourse.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap by providing a narrative, human-centred account of academic leadership during digital transformation, situating the lived experiences of Malaysian university leaders within broader global debates on leadership, ethics, and technology in higher education.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To understand the people-first leadership values espoused by the Deans.
2. To examine strategies for cultivating an empathetic and trusting organisational culture.
3. To explore how the Deans managed challenges and change during the pandemic with a human-centric approach.
4. To identify ways the Deans empowered others and built leadership capacity for the future.

Based on these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What core human-centred values guided the leadership practices of the Deans at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSH), UTM?
2. How did the Deans foster a culture of empathy, trust and psychological safety within their faculty communities?
3. In what ways did the Deans respond to and manage institutional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic through a people-first leadership lens?
4. How did the Deans support, empower and build leadership potential among faculty, staff and students during and after the crisis?

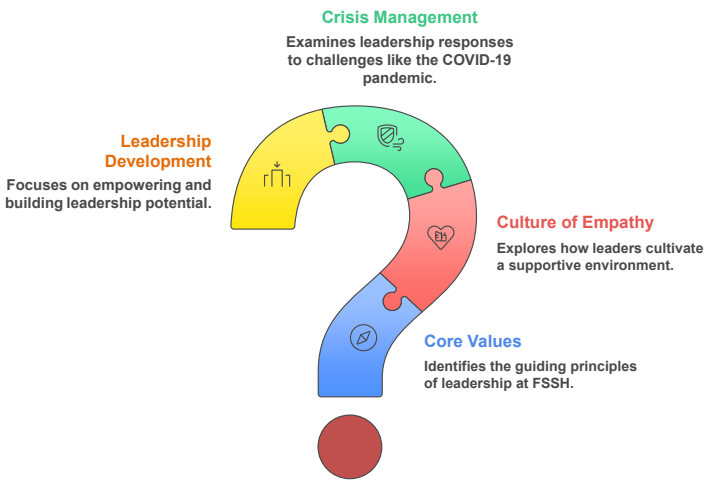

Figure 1. Main themes and research questions addressed by the research

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of leadership themes examined in this study. It shows that the leadership approach at FSSH is built around four interrelated dimensions: leadership development, which focuses on empowering individuals and building leadership capacity; crisis management, which examines leadership responses to challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic; culture of empathy, which highlights the creation of a supportive and people-cantred environment; and core values, which represent the guiding principles that shape leadership practices within the institution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic served as both a disruptor and a revealer of latent challenges within global higher education systems. Institutions were forced to pivot swiftly to online

modalities, sustain operations remotely, and support student and staff well-being amidst prolonged uncertainty (Marinoni et al., 2020). These conditions exposed critical gaps in leadership preparedness and institutional agility, particularly regarding emotional resilience, ethical decision-making, and digital inclusion (Ali, 2020).

In response, scholarly attention increasingly turned toward human-centred leadership, a paradigm grounded in empathy, relational trust, inclusiveness, and moral responsibility (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Noddings, 2013). This orientation aligns with broader theories such as emotional intelligence (EI) and servant leadership, both of which emphasise ethical action, relationship-building, and care-oriented decision-making (Goleman, 1998; Greenleaf, 1977). Research highlights that emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to manage anxiety, foster psychological safety, and navigate moral ambiguity; capacities essential during institutional disruption (Northouse, 2018; Tyczkowski et al., 2015).

Within Malaysian and Southeast Asian higher education, leadership styles emphasising service, compassion, and collaboration have been shown to promote institutional resilience and shared purpose (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Teh et al., 2022). These perspectives align with Islamic educational values such as *rahmah* (compassion) and *amanah* (trust), which underpin leadership philosophies emphasising morality, community well-being, and collective responsibility (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Additionally, transformative leadership, as outlined by Shields (2010) encourages leaders to challenge inequalities and prioritise human development alongside organisational change, making it particularly relevant in societies where education drives social transformation.

Much of the existing leadership literature continues to reflect Western-centric assumptions that privilege individual authority and managerial efficiency, with limited attention to culturally grounded, relational, or spiritual dimensions of leadership in Southeast Asia (Hallinger, 2018; Bush, 2025). The lived experiences of leaders in these contexts; especially how they enact care, fairness, and ethical reasoning within hierarchical or resource-constrained settings remain insufficiently documented (Anwer & Ahmed Siddiqui, 2021).

Further gaps arise from the emotional and digital toll of the pandemic. Faculty burnout, student disengagement, digital divides, and rapid pedagogical shifts placed unprecedented pressure on academic leaders (Crawford et al., 2020; Lederman, 2020). Leaders had to make rapid, high-stakes decisions concerning resource allocation, academic integrity, digital pedagogy, and mental health support often with limited guidance or precedent (Mugabekazi & Mukanziza, 2024). However, how such decisions were grounded in human-centred leadership principles remains poorly understood.

A new layer of complexity emerges in the post-pandemic transition toward AI-augmented education. Scholars warn that AI-driven systems risk reinforcing technocratic or efficiency-driven models that may neglect empathy, equity, and human relationships (Selwyn, 2022). Leadership frameworks must therefore integrate ethical considerations such as transparency, fairness, human oversight, and digital equity, particularly in institutions

where socio-economic disparities persist (Hashim, 2021). This highlights the need for frameworks that are both AI-ready and human-rooted.

Empirical studies that capture these culturally situated leadership responses particularly in the Malaysian context remain scarce. Marshall et al. (2022a) emphasise the importance of documenting adaptive leadership during crisis recovery, while narrative and lived-experience approaches are increasingly recommended for capturing the relational and ethical dimensions of leadership practice.

Given this background, UTM; a research-intensive and technology-driven institution provides a compelling context for examining how human-centred leadership was enacted during and after the pandemic. The experiences of two former Deans at the Faculty of FSSH offer valuable insights into how relational trust, ethical engagement, and emotional agility were mobilised to sustain institutional continuity, digital equity, and cultural transformation. These perspectives deepen understanding of the leadership principles needed to guide higher education institutions through the intertwined challenges of digital transformation and emerging AI integration.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by an integrative conceptual framework that brings together four complementary leadership theories: servant leadership, transformational leadership, emotional intelligence (EI), and distributed leadership. These frameworks collectively inform the understanding of human-centred leadership within digitally transforming higher education contexts.

Servant leadership provides the ethical foundation, emphasising care, humility, and prioritisation of followers' well-being (Greenleaf, 1977). Transformational leadership explains how leaders inspire change, foster innovation, and motivate institutional transformation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Emotional intelligence underpins leaders' ability to manage relationships, empathy, and psychological safety (Goleman, 1998), while distributed leadership highlights the importance of shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making (Spillane, 2006).

These theoretical lenses are integrated to examine how academic leaders enact people-first values, build trust, respond to crises, and empower others in digitally mediated environments. Each research question aligns with specific dimensions of the framework:

RQ1 → Servant & Ethical Leadership (values)

RQ2 → Emotional Intelligence & Relational Leadership (culture)

RQ3 → Transformational & Adaptive Leadership (crisis response)

RQ4 → Distributed Leadership (empowerment)

This integrated framework enables a holistic interpretation of leadership that bridges human values and technological transformation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a narrative inquiry design to examine how past Deans of Faculty A at UTM exercised human-centred leadership during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Narrative inquiry has been recognised as a suitable methodology for qualitative studies that involve personal stories and lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Since this research focused on the leadership experiences of former deans, narrative inquiry provided an appropriate lens to capture and interpret their accounts. The approach allows for in-depth storytelling that highlights the relational, emotional, and contextual dimensions of leadership (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Two former deans were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling. Both had served before, during, and immediately after the pandemic and were responsible for leading institutional transitions. Although the study involved only two participants, this sample size is methodologically appropriate for narrative inquiry, which prioritises depth over breadth. Narrative research is concerned with rich, contextually embedded accounts rather than generalisability (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). The two former Deans were selected due to their strategic leadership roles during a critical institutional period, having served as deans before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic a period of unprecedented disruption. And subsequent digital transformation phase. As key decision-makers, their experiences provide analytically significant cases that illuminate how leadership is enacted under conditions of uncertainty, crisis, and technological transition.

Also, their extended tenure and leadership roles during institutional transformation make them analytically significant, as they provide longitudinal insights into leadership adaptation across crisis and recovery phases. Rather than seeking representativeness, Furthermore, each interview lasted over two hours, generating deep narrative data, which enhances the analytical richness and credibility of the findings. Therefore, the value of this study lies not in sample size, but in the depth, relevance, and explanatory power of the selected cases. the study aims for analytical generalisation, where findings contribute to theory-building in human-centred leadership and digital transformation contexts. Table 1 shows the backgrounds of the participants.

According to Table 1, the number of samples of for narrative inquiry research is suitable.

Table 1:. Participants background

No.	Participant	Gender	Years at UTM	Dean tenure	Roles
1	Dean A	Male	27 years	6 years	• Provided strategic leadership and governance for the faculty. • Oversaw academic programmes, research, and student development. • Managed faculty resources, staffing, and financial planning. • Fostered industry linkages, international collaborations, and community engagement. • Promoted digital transformation and innovation in teaching and learning.

DATA COLLECTION

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Each interview took place face-to-face during a two-hour visit to the participants' personal offices, after their term as Dean had ended. The interview protocol began with an initial ten-minute segment of informal conversation, including greetings and inquiries about their current state, in recognition of their stature as senior professors at UTM. This was followed by prompts for recall and reflection on their leadership experiences before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The subsequent discussion focused on sharing stories and experiences across several areas: people-first leadership values, strategies for cultivating an empathetic and trusting organisational culture, challenges and adaptive responses during the pandemic through a human-centred approach, and efforts to empower others and build leadership capacity for the future. Participants reflected on their leadership values, strategies, and institutional experiences in depth. Each interview lasted more than two hours, providing rich narrative data for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the UTM Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was secured, with participants given the option to remain anonymous or be identified. All personal and sensitive data were handled confidentially.

DATA ANALYSIS

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify key patterns across the narratives. This approach is consistent with the interpretivist constructivist

stance of the study, which views meaning as co-constructed between researcher and participants rather than treated as objective fact. Reflexive TA, as elaborated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), is particularly suited to exploring how participants make sense of their experiences because it allows patterns of meaning to be developed while acknowledging the active role of the researcher in interpretation. Within narrative inquiry, stories are not only retold but also examined for the insights they provide into human actions and contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

In this study, reflexive TA offered a systematic yet flexible way of identifying themes across narratives while preserving the individuality of each account. It was used to surface recurring patterns such as empathy, fairness, and trust, which were central to the participants' leadership experiences. In this sense, reflexive TA complemented narrative inquiry by providing both depth and coherence, ensuring that individual voices were respected while also enabling broader interpretive insights to emerge.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six iterative phases (summarised in Figure 2). First, transcripts were read and re-read to build familiarity with the data and note initial observations. Second, inductive codes were generated to capture meaningful features of the narratives. Third, related codes were grouped to form potential themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against the data set to ensure they reflected the accounts accurately and coherently. Fifth, themes were defined and refined by clarifying their scope and relation to the study's research objectives. Finally, the analytic account was produced by integrating the themes with illustrative extracts from the participants' narratives.

In practice, the coding process began with line-by-line open coding of transcripts using NVivo, where segments of text were assigned initial descriptive labels such as "empathetic response," "fair decision-making," and "digital adaptation challenges." These codes were iteratively refined through constant comparison, merging similar codes and discarding redundancies.

For example, early codes such as "helping staff," "listening to students," and "emotional support" were later clustered into the broader theme of empathy-driven leadership. Similarly, codes related to "delegation," "mentoring," and "shared responsibility" were synthesised into the theme of empowerment and distributed leadership.

Reflexivity was central throughout the process, with researchers maintaining analytic memos to critically reflect on how their assumptions, backgrounds, and positionality influenced interpretation. Themes were not treated as emerging passively from the data but as actively constructed through engagement between researcher and narrative, consistent with Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach.

Figure 2 presents the stages of the qualitative data analysis process adopted in this study. It shows that the analysis began with familiarisation, where the researcher carefully reviewed the collected data to gain an overall understanding. This was followed by coding, in which meaningful data segments were identified and labelled. The next stage involved theming,

where related codes were grouped into broader categories or themes. Subsequently, the themes were reviewed to ensure consistency and relevance to the research objectives. Finally, the refinement stage was carried out to clarify, improve, and finalise the themes for accurate interpretation and presentation of the findings.

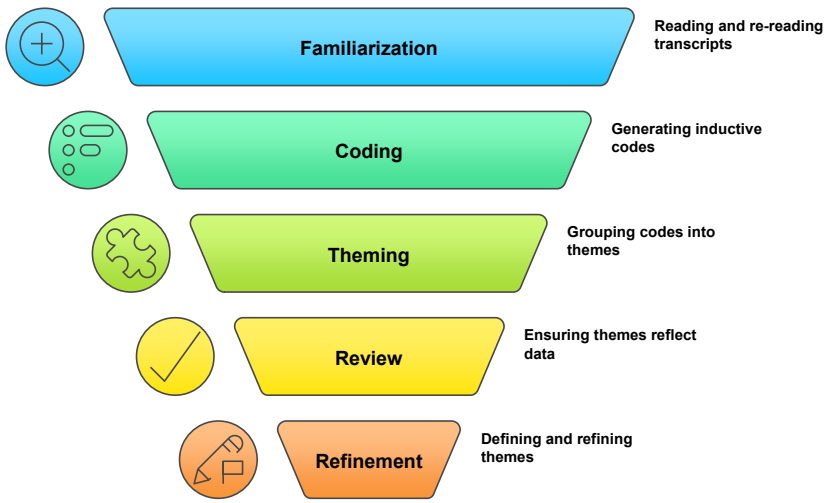

Figure 2. Braun and Clarke's six iterative phases adopted by this study

To ensure rigour, trustworthiness was addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria. Credibility was strengthened through member checking and peer debriefing, which provided opportunities for both participants and peers to review and confirm the interpretations. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of analytic procedures, with NVivo used to organise data and track coding decisions. Confirmability was enhanced by keeping reflexive memos that documented assumptions and reflections throughout the study. Transferability was facilitated by providing thick, detailed descriptions of the institutional context and participants' leadership experiences, allowing readers to judge the applicability of findings in other settings. Together, these strategies reinforced transparency and methodological soundness.

Reflexivity and Positionality

The researchers acknowledged their prior academic affiliation with the institution and employed collaborative coding and external peer review to mitigate bias.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis revealed four interrelated domains of human-centred leadership practice, aligned with the study's objectives. This section integrates participants' narratives with current scholarship to enhance analytical depth and contextual understanding. In line with the study's focus on AI-driven educational transformation, the findings also highlight early leadership encounters with AI-enabled tools and the human-centred principles that guided decisions about their adoption and governance.

Emphasising People-First Values in Leadership

A dominant theme emerging from the narratives of both former deans is the people-first philosophy, wherein leadership is construed as a relational and ethical commitment rather than an exercise of hierarchical control. One dean expressed, "leadership is not about you, it's about others." This sentiment reflects the servant leadership ethos, which prioritises the growth, well-being, and autonomy of followers (Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

This people-first mindset was exemplified in the emphasis on developing others to become leaders in their own right. The dean elaborated, "you have to train every single person in the organization… so that they can lead themselves". This aligns with distributed leadership theory, which decentralizes authority and encourages shared ownership across the institution (Spillane, 2006). In doing so, the deans fostered a leadership culture where staff were not passive implementers but active co-creators of institutional success.

Another critical people-centred value was fairness and moral accountability, framed by the Islamic principle of *amanah* (trust). One dean reflected, "you have to be fair to everybody. and fair is putting the right thing at the right place at the right time." This reflects ethical leadership scholarship, which highlights fairness as a cornerstone of trust-building and institutional legitimacy (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Shields, 2010). The refusal to exercise positional authority arbitrarily such as manipulating promotions or student evaluations demonstrates what Greenleaf (1977) termed "humility in power," a hallmark of servant-leadership integrity.

Interestingly, the dean's statement "you are not god… you need to help" underlines the moral limits of institutional authority, reminding us that power in leadership must be balanced with restraint and compassion. This echoes the ethical imperative in transformative leadership, where leaders challenge systemic inequity while remaining deeply attuned to the dignity of each individual (Shields, 2010).

A further expression of this humanistic ethos was the practice of forgiveness and emotional regulation. One dean admitted, "there were times i was angry… but i needed to forgive and forget." This reflects emotional intelligence (EI) competencies, particularly self-regulation and empathy, which are crucial for building resilient, inclusive work cultures (Goleman, 1998; Tyczkowski et al., 2015). Research has shown that emotionally intelligent leaders are

more likely to inspire trust, reduce conflict and model psychological safety within teams (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

Moreover, genuine empathy and inclusivity were consistently emphasized. The deans actively rejected hierarchical treatment based on rank, with one stating, "student, parents, staff… everybody is important." This inclusive mindset resonates with relational leadership theory, which highlights mutual respect, dialogue, and authentic connection as central to effective leadership (Komives et al., 2005). Their insistence that staff treat every visitor especially students with dignity even amid stress and institutional pressure, represents compassionate leadership in practice (Noddings, 2013). This ethic was particularly critical during the COVID-19 crisis, when students faced unseen financial and emotional struggles. One dean recounted telling staff: "you have to take care of everybody in a nice way, because we don't know what they've been going through." This stance reflects the ethics of care framework, which recognises that institutional effectiveness is inseparable from human sensitivity and relational responsiveness (Held, 2006).

In sum, under Objective 1, the findings demonstrate that human-centred leadership during disruption is grounded in people-first values: humility, fairness, ethical restraint, relational trust and compassion. These values are not merely idealistic; they are operational strategies that enhance institutional coherence, morale and adaptability in volatile times. The findings validate and extend prior scholarship, confirming that putting people at the heart of leadership is not only morally right but practically effective in shaping resilient, inclusive and values-driven academic cultures (Marshall et al., 2022b; Selwyn, 2022).

Ethical and Values-Based Leadership in Digital Transformation

The findings reveal that leaders consistently emphasised ethical conduct, empathy, and value-driven decision-making during digital transformation processes. These attributes were not merely interpersonal traits but functioned as strategic tools for managing uncertainty and resistance among staff. From a theoretical standpoint, these findings strongly align with Servant Leadership, which prioritises the needs, growth, and well-being of followers. The leaders' emphasis on empathy and fairness reflects a service-oriented leadership philosophy that fosters trust and institutional commitment.

Additionally, the findings resonate with Emotional Intelligence, particularly in terms of self-awareness and relationship management. Leaders demonstrated the capacity to regulate emotions and respond constructively to staff concerns during digital transitions. Thus, ethical and emotionally intelligent leadership emerges as a foundational mechanism for facilitating digital transformation, rather than a peripheral attribute.

Cultivating an Organisational Culture of Empathy and Trust

Beyond espousing personal leadership values, both deans in this study actively sought to institutionalise empathy, mutual respect and trust within the cultural fabric of the Faculty

of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSH). A prominent strategy was the development of the "HEART" framework, which encapsulated five core human-centred elements: *Happy, Empathy, Appreciate, Responsible* and *Trust*. This acronym did not serve as a symbolic slogan, but as an operational compass to guide interactions and behaviours across all levels of the faculty.

Rather than enforcing a top-down culture, the HEART values were framed as mutual responsibilities *a reciprocal social contract* between leaders and staff. As one dean stated, "both must be happy… both must have empathy." This approach reflects the principles of reciprocal leadership and relational trust, which prioritise co-constructed emotional climates where care and accountability flow in both directions (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Komives et al., 2005). It resists hierarchical divides in emotional labour, instead advocating for a shared moral commitment to community well-being.

The HEART model resonates strongly with positive organisational scholarship (POS), particularly the idea that cultivating compassion and relational energy in the workplace leads to higher engagement, satisfaction and resilience (Cameron et al., 2003). By embedding HEART principles into daily faculty life, the deans established a cultural ecosystem wherein empathy became a norm, not a nicety.

A key component of this culture-building was psychological safety the belief that one can speak up, make mistakes or seek help without fear of retribution. This was particularly vital in the post-pandemic context, where uncertainty and emotional fatigue were high. One dean reported making concerted efforts to ensure transparency in promotions and academic evaluations, reassuring staff that leadership decisions were made justly and supportively. This approach aligns with transformational leadership, which fosters trust by consistently demonstrating integrity, individualised consideration and inspirational motivation (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Importantly, the cultivation of trust was not abstract. The deans modelled empathy through visible and repeated actions. One routinely visited student counters, greeted students personally, and invited dialogue a form of modelling emotional availability that research shows is crucial for embedding culture change (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013). When leaders exhibit empathy through embodied behaviour, it creates a powerful social cue for staff to internalize and replicate those values (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

The HEART culture extended to communication norms. The deans emphasized that emails from students or parents must be answered promptly, as a gesture of care. Such seemingly small acts reinforce an ethic of responsiveness, a key aspect of relational leadership in educational settings (Noddings, 2013). As one dean noted, this consistent modelling over time "made people more positive… more willing to help others," transforming passive staff into proactive agents of care. This echoes research in emotional contagion theory, which shows that positive relational behaviour tends to be mirrored and amplified within teams (Barsade, 2002).

In addition to cultural messaging and modelling, the deans enacted concrete practices to support staff well-being. One compelling example involved a dean personally contributing financial assistance to lower-income staff each year before school term began targeting those with children facing educational expenses. This form of quiet *sadaqah* (charity) underscores the blending of spiritual leadership with institutional care, rooted in the Islamic values of *rahmah* (compassion) and *amanah* (responsibility). Such moral-based gestures affirm the findings of Malik et al., (2020), who emphasise that leaders who integrate spiritual ethics foster greater organizational commitment in Malaysian academic contexts. These acts, though outside formal job scope, sent a powerful message: "you are seen. you are valued not just for your role, but as a whole person." Research by Kutsyuruba et al. (2021) highlights that during times of institutional crisis, this sense of holistic recognition becomes a cornerstone of staff morale, loyalty, and emotional resilience.

In summary, the findings under Objective 2 demonstrate that building an empathetic and trust-rich culture requires deliberate and sustained leadership strategies. These include establishing shared human-centred values (HEART), reinforcing transparency and mutual accountability, modelling relational behaviours and tangibly supporting staff well-being. In the face of institutional turbulence, such a culture becomes both a protective buffer and a generative force laying the groundwork for inclusive, ethical and emotionally resilient academic communities.

Trust, Relationships, and OrganisationalCulture

The study highlights the centrality of trust, collaboration, and relational engagement in navigating digital change. Participants emphasised that strong interpersonal relationships enhanced staff willingness to adopt new technologies. This finding aligns with Relational Leadership Theory, which conceptualises leadership as a socially constructed process embedded in interactions rather than authority alone.

Furthermore, the results reflect principles of Positive Organisational Scholarship, particularly the role of positive relationships in fostering resilience and institutional effectiveness. Trust-building practices observed in this study contributed to a supportive organisational climate that enabled digital innovation. Therefore, relational dynamics should be understood as structural enablers of transformation rather than soft, secondary factors.

Navigating Challenges and Change through a Human-Centred Approach

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a profound leadership crucible, demanding swift adaptation to ambiguity while preserving integrity and compassion. In this study, the deans' narratives revealed a nuanced practice of adaptive human-centred leadership, balancing empathy with firmness, flexibility with accountability. As crises unfolded, these leaders maintained a commitment to people-centred values while navigating institutional resistance, disrupted routines and psychological fatigue.

A key strategy was maintaining constructive dialogue in the face of dissent. Rather than silencing criticism, the deans encouraged open disagreement and transformed confrontation into collaborative reflection. One dean shared how they addressed opposition to new initiatives such as the elimination of a "fail" grade or the transition to online learning: "when you face disagreement… ask them, why do you disagree? tell me three things i've introduced that don't benefit others." This mirrors transformational leadership principles, wherein leaders challenge existing assumptions while stimulating critical engagement (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Beyond the immediate crisis management during the pandemic, the deans also confronted emerging decision-making challenges related to the introduction of AI-enabled systems in teaching and administrative processes. They described dilemmas with AI-assisted proctoring tools and automated grading features in university learning platforms, particularly concerning fairness, transparency, and the potential for digital inequality. Although these technologies promised efficiency, the deans insisted that all AI-supported decisions remain subject to human judgement, especially where algorithms risked misinterpretation or disadvantaging students with limited digital resources. This reinforced their people-first governance approach, prompting them to advocate for guidelines centred on equity, human oversight, and psychological safety in the institutional use of AI.

By creating a psychologically safe space for feedback and then following through with evidence-based decision-making, the dean fostered a sense of procedural fairness an essential component of ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006). When objections were rooted in personal discomfort rather than systemic harm, the deans remained empathetic yet assertive. As one leader told a critic, "you can be excused if this doesn't work for you but i must continue for the others." This reflects the moral courage to make unpopular decisions while upholding collective welfare, a trait emphasised in studies of crisis leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Such engagement also aligns with fair process leadership, in which leaders explain rationales transparently and give voice to stakeholders, even when decisions diverge from their preferences. This process increases trust and acceptance even amid disagreement (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003). Through clear communication and reasoned firmness, the deans neutralised baseless resistance without alienating dissenters.

Another layer of this human-centred navigation was the artful management of performance expectations in disrupted conditions. One dean remarked, "be firm…you must have your own stand… but you have to hear everything." This demonstrates authoritative (not authoritarian) leadership, blending high standards with deep listening (Goleman et al., 2013). The dean's approach to enforce deadlines yet remain flexible when legitimate needs arose embodied empathic enforcement. It reinforced self-regulation and trust, hallmarks of emotionally intelligent leadership (Goleman, 1998; Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Furthermore, the commitment to work-life boundaries illustrates ethical attunement. Staff who submitted their work on time were assured rest during holidays, whereas those who ignored tasks were warned of follow-ups even "on the morning of Eid." This accountability

with empathy is echoed in stewardship leadership, which encourages ownership and mutual responsibility within a shared mission (Block, 1993).

Most significantly, the deans' reflections portrayed adaptive leadership evolution over time. One shared, "the first year i micromanaged. the second, i empowered." This trajectory from control to trust aligns with the adaptive leadership framework proposed by Heifetz et al., (2009), where initial guidance is tight but gradually loosens as capacity and confidence build. The shift also corresponds to situational leadership theory, which suggests that different leadership styles are effective at different stages of team development (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988). Notably, the use of "fear energy" as a motivational tool warrants deeper reflection. While traditional leadership cautions against fear-based compliance, this study shows how initial fear, when framed positively and channelled constructively, can catalyse growth. A junior academic who was once afraid of the dean's strict demands later published 16 papers, attributing her productivity to that early push. As one researcher observed, "fear is energy… what makes you unique is how you transform it." This reflects transformational arousal, where emotionally charged states are redirected into achievement and resilience (Antonakis, 2012).

Importantly, the ultimate goal was not to sustain fear, but to convert it into self-motivation, ownership and eventually, culture. The dean explained: "it started with fear… then comes respect… then they trust themselves." This aligns with post-heroic leadership, which sees the leader's success in how others grow beyond dependence (Fletcher, 2004).

In sum, under Objective 3, the deans demonstrated that human-centred leadership is not about leniency or appeasement it is about principled courage, adaptive flexibility and transformational resolve. In times of crisis, they did not retreat into command-and-control models. Instead, they led with empathy, communicated with clarity, made hard decisions with humility, and slowly transformed fear into trust. Their stories reveal that when leaders hold both heart and backbone, they can shepherd institutions not only through turbulence but toward meaningful transformation.

Adaptive Leadership in Crisis and Uncertainty

Participants described leadership practices characterised by flexibility, responsiveness, and situational decision-making, especially in the face of rapid technological change and institutional uncertainty. These findings are strongly grounded in Adaptive Leadership, which emphasises leaders' ability to navigate complex, evolving challenges by mobilising people to learn and adapt. In addition, the findings reflect elements of crisis leadership, where leaders must act decisively under conditions of ambiguity. The ability to adjust strategies and respond dynamically to challenges indicates that digital transformation is inherently a non-linear and adaptive process. Thus, leadership effectiveness in this context depends not on rigid planning but on continuous adjustment and learning.

Empowering Others and Building Future Leadership Capacity

A final and significant theme to emerge from the data is the deans' commitment to cultivating leadership beyond themselves by empowering others and institutionalising leadership continuity. Human-centred leadership, as practiced by the deans of FSSH, UTM, was not about centralising authority, but about *multiplying leadership* throughout the faculty. As one dean remarked, "you need to produce your deputy to think and act the way you do. then, you have more than one dean."

This view reflects the principles of distributed leadership, in which leadership roles are diffused across an organisation, fostering shared responsibility, collaboration and autonomy (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2014). Rather than preserving positional power, the deans deliberately mentored senior colleagues such as associate deans and heads of department to internalise and operationalize the same values, vision and ethical leadership practices. This approach ensured continuity during crises and safeguarded institutional momentum in the face of leadership transitions.

More than delegation, empowerment was seen as an intentional development strategy. The deans mentored their teams to make value-aligned decisions independently and initiated new projects with confidence. This reflects empowering leadership theory, which emphasises enabling, supporting and trusting subordinates to exercise influence and innovation within their roles (Arnold et al., 2000; Ahearne et al., 2005). The deans' philosophy of "we have to work together… don't ever say this is not my job" embodies a collective ethos that resists siloed thinking and encourages organisational citizenship.

This leadership orientation also aligns with transformational leadership, particularly the dimension of individualised consideration, where leaders attend to each team member's development and potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006). One dean intentionally redesigned task distribution during meetings by assigning responsibilities to each attendee including non-academic staff signalling that everyone's contribution matters. As performance improved, she shifted from close supervision to greater autonomy, trusting the team to sustain progress. This scaffolded empowerment mirrors the situational leadership model, where directive support gradually transitions to delegative leadership as competence grows (Hersey et al., 2007).

As part of their broader effort to prepare the faculty for digital transformation, the deans also initiated informal capacity-building activities to support staff readiness for AI-enhanced educational systems. They encouraged lecturers to engage with AI-based analytics dashboards for monitoring student participation and to explore intelligent learning platforms capable of recommending personalised materials. Recognising apprehension among some staff, particularly concerning AI ethics, bias, and workload implications; the deans promoted a supportive culture grounded in training workshops, peer mentoring, and open dialogue. This ensured that the adoption of AI tools remained aligned with human-centred values, empowering staff to use technology responsibly while retaining professional autonomy and judgement.

Crucially, empowerment extended beyond operational functions to include career advancement and personal growth. One dean consistently reassured staff that "if you perform your responsibility at the best that you can, we will take care of your career, your promotion your anything." This represents a reciprocal leadership contract: individuals commit to institutional goals and in return, the institution commits to their advancement. Such reciprocity increases job satisfaction, engagement, and organizational loyalty (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

To actualise this promise, the deans worked to remove barriers to development addressing toxic supervisory practices, implementing structured complaint mechanisms, and coaching staff with high potential. These interventions parallel findings in inclusive leadership literature, where leaders actively dismantle inequities to create space for others to thrive (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). One researcher recalled that the dean was initially perceived as intimidating due to her high expectations, but over time, staff came to recognise that her tough feedback stemmed from a genuine desire to help them succeed. This transformative shift from fear to respect illustrates what Kouzes and Posner (2017) call "challenge with care", a dynamic wherein leaders stretch their people while standing beside them.

The leadership practices described also responded to the demands of the digital era. In empowering others, the deans integrated digital tools to support engagement and decentralise communication. Platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and WhatsApp were used not just for instruction, but also for leadership purposes conducting virtual meetings, mentoring sessions, and collaborative planning. These practices reflect the human-tech synergy required in modern academic leadership, wherein technology enables but does not replace relational leadership values (Fullan & Scott, 2009; Selwyn, 2022).

Ultimately, Objective 4 illustrates that human-centred leadership is deeply developmental. The deans measured their success not by personal acclaim, but by how many others they empowered to lead. Their efforts created not just responsive crisis teams during the pandemic, but long-term leadership capacity within the faculty. This foresight is essential in the volatile post-pandemic landscape, where sustainable leadership demands agile teams, distributed authority and a shared commitment to ethical growth. As one dean aptly noted, "one dean cannot carry an organisation alone especially in turbulent times. so i must create more than one dean."

Distributed and Empowering Leadership Practices

The findings indicate that leadership responsibilities were not centralised but shared across various actors within the institution. Participants highlighted collaboration, delegation, and staff involvement in decision-making processes. This aligns with Distributed Leadership, which views leadership as a collective activity distributed across individuals rather than concentrated in a single authority figure.

Moreover, the findings reflect principles of Empowering Leadership, where leaders enhance followers' autonomy, competence, and participation in organisational processes.

By empowering staff, leaders created a sense of ownership and accountability, which significantly facilitated the adoption of digital initiatives. Hence, distributed and empowering leadership practices serve as key drivers of sustainable digital transformation.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS AND THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

Drawing from the lived experiences of the former deans of the FSSH, UTM, this study reveals a compelling model of human-centred academic leadership that is ethically grounded, emotionally intelligent and strategically adaptive. The analysis of four core objectives surfaces interconnected leadership themes which provide practical guidance for navigating complexity in higher education. This section synthesises key lessons and themes.

Key Leadership Lessons from the Study

Thematic analysis across the four objectives highlights five overarching lessons. Figure 3 synthesises the key leadership lessons derived from the study's thematic analysis. It encapsulates five interrelated themes that define effective leadership practice: empowering others for sustained leadership, leading with empathy and ethics, fostering a caring organisational culture, balancing compassion with accountability, and embracing adaptability through continual learning. Together, these dimensions illustrate an integrative model of leadership that aligns ethical integrity, emotional intelligence, and organisational well-being with sustainable leadership continuity.

Figure 3 presents the major leadership lessons identified in this study. It shows that effective leadership is shaped by five interconnected dimensions: empowering others and enabling leadership continuity through distributed and inclusive leadership; leading with empathy and ethics through ethical and servant leadership practices; building a caring organizational culture through the HEART framework and positive organisational scholarship; balancing compassion with accountability through fair and emotionally aware leadership; and adapting and learning as a leader through adaptive leadership and continual learning. Collectively, these dimensions highlight that successful leadership requires empowerment, ethical conduct, supportive culture, accountability, and continuous development.

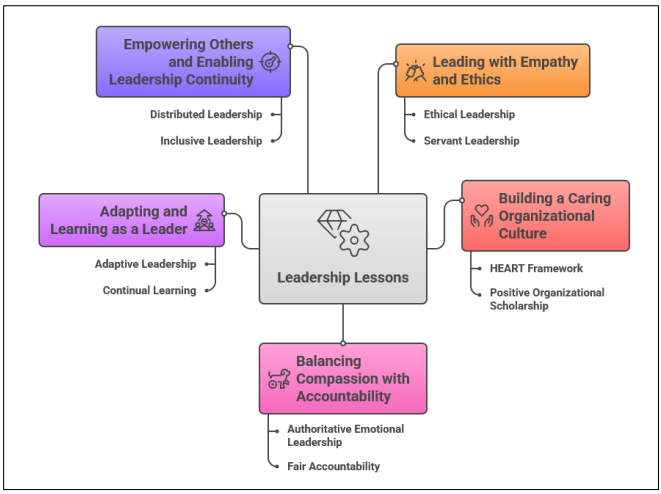

Figure 3. Key leadership lessons and thematic synthesis from the study

Leading with Empathy and Ethics

Leadership anchored in empathy, fairness and concern for others emerged as a foundational principle. The deans viewed leadership as a moral responsibility (*amanah*) to uplift others, not dominate them. This echoes the tenets of ethical leadership and servant leadership, where relational trust and moral accountability are central to effectiveness (Greenleaf, 1977; Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Building a Caring Organisational Culture

By introducing the HEART framework (Happy, Empathy, Appreciation, Responsibility and Trust), the deans institutionalised compassion and psychological safety. Leaders modelled kindness and mutual respect, fostering a culture of care that sustained morale and cohesion during the isolating pandemic period. This aligns with scholarship in positive organisational scholarship and relational leadership (Cameron et al., 2003; Noddings, 2013).

Balancing Compassion with Accountability

The study dispels the misconception that human-centred leadership is synonymous with leniency. The deans practiced what Goleman et al. (2013) describe as authoritative emotional leadership listening empathetically while maintaining high expectations. Resistance was met with reasoning, not rejection and accountability was exercised with fairness. As teams matured, initial fear transformed into respect and motivation.

In the context of emerging AI adoption in higher education, the findings also illustrate how human-centred leadership can guide ethical and responsible AI implementation. The people-first values demonstrated by the deans, namely fairness, empathy, transparency, and relational trust, mirror the core principles required for ethical AI governance, including fairness in algorithmic decision-making, protecting student privacy, and ensuring that technology serves human well-being rather than replacing human judgement. By emphasising inclusive communication and shared responsibility, the deans modelled a "human-in-the-loop" approach, where staff and students remain active decision-makers even as digital tools expand. These practices also align with the need for comprehensive staff training, digital literacy development, and emotional support structures as institutions increasingly integrate AI-driven teaching, assessment, and administrative systems. Thus, the human-centred leadership displayed by the deans provides a foundational ethical compass for navigating AI-enhanced educational environments in ways that remain equitable, compassionate, and educationally sound.

Adapting and Learning as a Leader

One of the most distinctive features of human-centred leadership during crisis is agility. The deans reflected on their own missteps, adjusted their leadership styles, and embraced continual learning. This embodies the adaptive leadership approach proposed by Heifetz et al. (2009), where leaders "get on the balcony" to reflect and recalibrate during turbulence.

Empowering Others and Enabling Leadership Continuity

Empowerment was not incidental it was intentional and strategic. The deans distributed leadership through mentoring, delegated responsibilities meaningfully, and invested in career advancement. This echoes theories of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), empowering leadership (Arnold et al., 2000) and inclusive leadership (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Their use of digital tools to encourage leadership in online teaching and research further expanded capacity-building in the digital era.

Thematic Synthesis of Study Objectives

To encapsulate the insights, the findings are organized under four major thematic domains aligned with the study's objectives:

People-first values in leadership

The deans practised servant leadership, emphasising ethical restraint, emotional intelligence and inclusive decision-making. Leadership was not about personal authority but about uplifting others and acting with integrity.

Cultivating empathy and trust

Using the HEART framework, the deans embedded empathy into institutional culture. Through role modelling, active listening and consistent communication, they created inclusive environments where individuals felt respected and heard.

Navigating challenges through ethical leadership

Faced with pandemic-induced crises, the deans demonstrated a balance between empathy and firmness. They engaged with dissent through fair process, made principled decisions and adapted their leadership style as teams gained confidence and autonomy.

Empowerment and leadership continuity

Empowerment was executed through structured delegation, career mentorship and behavioural coaching. The deans nurtured future leaders by enabling ownership, embedding shared values and removing barriers to growth ensuring organisational sustainability.

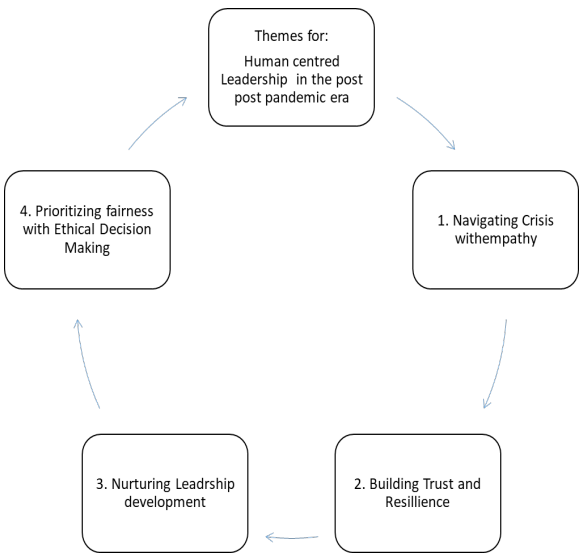

Figure 4. Emerging themes for human centred leadership in difficult times

Figure 4 illustrates themes for human-centered leadership in difficult times that is post pandemic era, among which navigate crisis with empathy as first step building trust and resilience as second then Nurturing leadership development as third and prioritising fairness with Ethical Decision making as the last step.

Collectively, these themes illustrate a leadership model that is profoundly human in orientation. In navigating one of the most disruptive periods in modern higher education, the former deans of FSSH did not rely on rigid hierarchies or bureaucratic control. Instead, they led with empathy, shared vision and strategic moral clarity. Their practice offers evidence that human-centred leadership is not only ethically sound but strategically effective.

The faculty's resilience during COVID-19 was not an accident; it was the result of intentional leadership that prioritised relationships over rules, empowerment over micromanagement and care over control. As higher education enters a post-pandemic era, these lessons serve as a call to action: investing in people is no longer optional it is a leadership imperative. Institutions that cultivate inclusive, ethical and adaptive leadership cultures will be better positioned to thrive in a future marked by uncertainty, technological disruption and social change.

The experience of FSSH, UTM affirms the growing scholarly consensus that the future of leadership is relational, distributed and values-driven. In times of crisis, such leadership not only sustains institutions it gives hope.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several important contributions to international scholarship on higher education leadership and digital transformation.

First, it advances leadership theory by demonstrating how multiple leadership frameworks including servant leadership, adaptive leadership, distributed leadership, and relational leadership operate in an integrated and mutually reinforcing manner within real-world academic contexts. Rather than functioning as isolated constructs, these theories are shown to interact dynamically in response to crisis, uncertainty, and digital disruption. This integrative perspective responds to growing calls for multi-theoretical and context-sensitive approaches in leadership research.

Second, the study extends the conceptualisation of digital transformation in higher education by foregrounding its human and ethical dimensions. While dominant literature often frames digital transformation as a technological or infrastructural shift, the findings demonstrate that its success is deeply contingent on emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, relational trust, and inclusive leadership practices. This contributes to a more holistic and human-centred theoretical understanding of digital transformation.

Third, this research contributes to the underrepresented Global South scholarship by providing empirically grounded insights from a Malaysian higher education context. In doing so, it challenges the dominance of Western-centric leadership models and enriches

global discourse by incorporating culturally embedded values such as *amanah* (trust) and *rahmah* (compassion), which shape leadership practice in non-Western contexts. This supports the broader decolonial agenda in leadership studies by diversifying theoretical perspectives.

Finally, the study contributes to emerging discussions on leadership in AI-driven educational environments. By illustrating how human-centred leadership principles can guide ethical decision-making in the adoption of AI technologies, the study provides a conceptual bridge between traditional leadership theories and future-oriented digital governance frameworks in higher education.

Practical Contributions

From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for academic leaders, institutional managers, and policymakers navigating digital transformation in higher education.

First, the study highlights the need for leadership development programmes to move beyond technical competencies by incorporating emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, and relational skills as core capabilities. Leaders who are able to balance technological innovation with human sensitivity are better positioned to manage change effectively.

Second, the findings emphasise the importance of cultivating human-centred organisational cultures, such as the HEART framework identified in this study. Institutions should intentionally embed values of empathy, trust, appreciation, and shared responsibility into their governance structures and daily practices to enhance staff engagement, well-being, and institutional resilience.

Third, the study demonstrates the effectiveness of distributed and empowering leadership approaches in managing complex and rapidly changing environments. By decentralising authority and building leadership capacity across all levels of the institution, universities can ensure continuity, adaptability, and collective ownership of digital initiatives.

Fourth, the findings provide practical guidance for ethical and inclusive digital transformation, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Policymakers and institutional leaders must recognise that technological investment alone is insufficient; successful transformation requires attention to digital equity, staff readiness, organisational culture, and psychological safety.

Finally, the study offers a context-sensitive leadership framework that can guide higher education institutions in navigating post-pandemic and AI-driven transformations. This framework is particularly relevant for institutions in developing regions, where infrastructural challenges, cultural dynamics, and resource limitations require adaptive, ethical, and human-centred leadership approaches.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a grounded and context-rich perspective on the portrayal of human-centred leadership within a post-pandemic higher education ecosystem. Through the narrative accounts of two former Deans of one of the faculties at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, it becomes evident that leadership rooted in empathy, ethical reasoning and empowerment is not merely aspirational it is essential in times of institutional stress and societal disruption. The findings reveal that human-centred leadership is not characterised by charisma or authority alone, but by the everyday moral courage to listen, to act justly, and to sustain community amidst crises. The Deans' strategies anchored in emotional intelligence, reciprocal trust, inclusive dialogue and adaptive vision were instrumental in maintaining not only operational continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in cultivating a resilient academic culture for the future.

Importantly, this study contributes to the growing body of leadership scholarship by offering real-world insights from the Global South, a region often underrepresented in theoretical models of educational leadership. The leadership experiences highlighted here underscore the potential of narrative inquiry to illuminate the relational and ethical dimensions of leadership that conventional metrics often overlook. Moreover, the significance of this research extends beyond its institutional setting. As higher education globally grapples with uncertainty, this study provides a practical and philosophical roadmap for current and emerging leaders who are called to lead with both head and heart. It invites a reimagining of leadership one that is people-first, value-driven, and spiritually attuned to the needs of its time. Future research may build on these findings by exploring how such leadership practices can be institutionalized, scaled and adapted across diverse cultural and organisational contexts. Ultimately, the lessons from FSSH remind us that in an era of rapid change, leadership grounded in humanity remains our most enduring guide.

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