

NPQEL: DEVELOPING SCHOOL LEADERS IN A VUCA EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

There is an immediate need for school leaders (PGBs) today to adapt with the changes of the educational environment and transform themselves radically. Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB) as a training institute has come up with innovative activities under new version of National Professional Qualification for Educational Leader (NPQEL) programme to prove their competency in the highly competitive and volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. It has become differentiating factor for IAB to attract, engage, develop and retain the right talent in the inevitable VUCA climate of the educational environment so that only the fittest talent can survive. What learning and development is required through leadership education to address this challenge? What design and assessment method will assure that these learning outcomes are attained? What findings demonstrate that the outcomes persist and have meaning? This conceptual paper presents an attempts on how IAB can have sustainable NPQEL programme in the VUCA world.

Keywords: School leader, NPQEL, VUCA Educational Environment, Vertical Development, Leadership competencies

INTRODUCTION

The environment has changed and it is more volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous. It is essential that today's organizations can alter, flex and adapt to succeed in the VUCA world around them, although many organizations are uncomfortable with the prospect of change. VUCA has defined the new context of leadership and VUCA environment which changes at a rapid pace, demand a different style of leadership. To be successful in the 21st century, the skills needed for educational leadership have also changed where more complex and adaptive thinking abilities are needed. Most of PGBs are developed from job related skills learning and training; while these are largely still significant, they are never growing quick enough or in the correct approaches to coordinate with the new condition.

In educational context, VUCA environment challenge is no longer just a leadership challenge, it is about development challenge on how to grow school leaders own development. Yet many training institutes have spent more time on developing competencies (horizontal development) than focusing on a developmental stages (vertical development). This challenge of developing school leaders in an increasingly disruptive VUCA educational world has brought IAB to redesign

a National Professional Qualification for Educational Leader (NPQEL) training programme to a new version of NPQEL so called NPQEL 2.0; where a school leader is led through a transition from one developmental stage/order of mind to another and which took into account the challenge of a VUCA educational environment.

National Professional Qualification for Educational Leader (NPQEL)

The NPQEL is a continuation of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) programme which was launched on 1st June, 1999. In 2008, the NPQH was renamed to NPQEL and its implementation was enhanced to enable the NPQEL certificate to be awarded as the Competency Assessment Level (PTK) certificate. The NPQEL is the only programme at the national level to produce efficient and competent school successors in Malaysia. Accordingly, in 2014, the Ministry of Education (KPM) has approved that the NPQEL certificate is a mandatory requirement for the appointment of school leaders (PGB) under KPM. In September 2016, the NPQEL training content and approach have been changed and it was renamed as a new version of NPQEL or NPQEL 2.0 (IAB, 2016).

VUCA Educational Environment

Change is not a new occurrence in the world around us; what is new is the accelerated pace and intensity of change. Education is always influenced by the context in which it is implemented; this context can be local and can be influenced by the regional or national elements (Michalak *et al.*, 2018). A VUCA environment is all about change (Lau, 2017). The rapidly evolving demands of the 21st century include everything from climate change to demography, shifting customer requirements and expectations, the rise of technology, globalization, new markets, and new attitudes to work. Leaders must now operate in a way that inspires and engages people, while simultaneously addressing changing customer requirements and delivering results. Finally, all of these need to be achieved with a sense of urgency, as the experienced leaders of the “Baby Boomer” generation continue to retire at faster pace (Bawany, 2016). VUCA leaders must be self-aware about their strengths and weaknesses as leaders, adaptable, open to change, and knowledgeable about their organization beyond their function (Petrie, 2014).

Volatility refers to the ease and speed in which a situation can change; driven by an overwhelming volume of information. Thus the methods of training educational leaders for solving school problems change rapidly as well. PGB need to have a broader skillset, one that equips them to think and act strategically in a VUCA educational environment.

Meanwhile, uncertainty refers to the absence of predictability in issues and situation. Our educational environments are distinguished by our inability to know everything for certain, making it difficult to predict outcomes. There is also uncertainty about how the PGB can improve on their own leadership practices because it is difficult for them to use past issues and experiences as predictors of future outcomes.

Complexity refers to difficulty to understand causes and factors involved in a problem which adds to the difficulty of decision-making, without leaving the confusion that it creates. Thus PGBs need to be equipped with the necessary problem solving and decision making tools for operating and leading school to maximize their leadership impact.

Ambiguous refers to inability to interpret the meaning of an issues or situation due to cultural differences and diversity of thought. In this case PGBs must learn to listen intently to those around them and promote and support internal and external networks, interconnection and interdependency.

In a VUCA world, everything is interconnected and no one can predict what big changes are coming next. Leaders who are equal to the task are those who can deal with constant ambiguity, notice the key patterns amongst the noise, and look at the world through multiple stakeholder perspectives. These are both the types of capabilities that flourish at more advanced stages of development and those that produce outstanding leadership in complex times (Petrie, 2014). In today's problematic daily life, there is also no single solution, as there is on a laboratory task. Any given solution may fail or work only temporarily. Many distinct strategies and forms of solution thus may have to be revised to make progress on the problem. (Hoare, 2011). In a VUCA world, it is the developmental stage of the thinker and an advancement in a person's thinking capability that matters (Petrie, 2014).

Despite the problem of uncertainty of the best methods to adopt in educational leadership training in the 21st century world, this new VUCA educational environment requires training institute to change the focus and methods of leadership development that is necessary to promote growth and change in PGB cognitive capabilities and behaviors. We need to find options which are available to solve the problem. In fast moving VUCA educational world, then it is time for a fresh look at leadership development and it is time to acknowledge that VUCA educational environments are prompting engagement with vertical leadership development.

The NPQEL 2.0 Approach to Address VUCA Challenge:

1. What learning and development is applied through the NPQEL programme to address this challenge?

In order to meet the VUCA challenges and demands of the profession, we embedded the vertical development principles into the delivery method of the NPQEL 2.0 programme to develop particular skills, knowledge and cognitive capabilities. The 70:20:10 learning and development model delivery method applied in the NPQEL 2.0 programme was adapted from McCall, Lombardo & Eichinger (1996) and High Impact Organization Maturity Model by Deloitte (2013) which have greater impact on individual PGBs development and provide evidence that the PGBs have changes in their mindset and advancement in their thinking capability which results in the PGBs thinking to be more complex, systemic, strategic and interdependent ways. This method of learning holds that the PGBs obtain 70 percent of their knowledge from job-related skills and experiences, 20 percent through a variety of activities that include social learning, coaching,

mentoring, collaborative learning and other methods of interaction with peers; and 10 percent of professional development optimally comes from formal instruction and other educational events.

The 70:20:10 delivery model is considered to be of greatest value as a general guideline for organization seeking to maximize the effectiveness of their learning and development programme through other activities and inputs (Tucker & Rutherford, 2014). Learning that is connected to development is likely to be embedded in the life experiences of adults and intricately related to the context of adult life. As with development, learning in adulthood is shaped in part by the social context of the learner (Hoare & Hern, 2006).

To adapt and grow at higher level of development, PGBs need to be constantly involved in new experiences and challenges that foster learning. Some of these new opportunities will come their way through new experience, meeting others, or structured programme as shown in the diagram.

Studies show that people at higher level of development will perform better in complex environments and there was a clear correlation between higher levels of vertical development and higher levels of effectiveness. The reason that leaders at high levels of cognitive development are able to perform more effectively is because they can think in more complex ways (Petrie, 2014).

Table 1: Development activities in NPQEL 2.0 that PGBs undertake in each category in 70:20:10 Delivery Method

Experiential (Learn & Develop Through Experience)	Social Learning (Learn & Develop Through Others)	Training (Learn & Develop Through Structured Course)
Executive Presentations	Coaching	Hands-on Workshops
Apprentice 1	Protocol & Etiquette	Classes
Apprentice 2	Benchmarking Visits	eNPQEL
Benchmarking Visits	Corporate Networking & Linkages	
Corporate Networking & Linkages		
Leadership Talks		

2. What design has assured that these learning outcomes are attained?

In an effort to transform ourselves into an exemplary educational management and leadership institution, many programs in IAB are becoming more entrepreneurial, recognizing new opportunities and making changes required to respond to the needs of 21st century leaders. The development of educational leader training approach to enhance the way schools function and to survive in the age of VUCA chaos is the target of IAB. To master the change and not to remain indifferent to it, IAB has identified strategies to operate under conditions of VUCA challenges and leading reform efforts that go beyond providing content knowledge and has shifted into competency based training in the application of NPQEL 2.0.

According to Laskaris (2015), when adults join a training programme, they bring with them two elements: they have varying levels of knowledge and they learn at varying pace. Competency based training programme recognize these differences and match the training with the learner; and it also focus on the trainees. If implemented effectively, competency based training can improve quality and consistency, reduce costs, shorten the time required to complete and provide true measures of employee learning.

With that in mind, IAB ensures that PGBs receive extensive, in-depth clinical experiences with coaching and mentoring support and meet the demands of the VUCA educational environment by exemplifying and embedding in NPQEL 2.0, the mastery of 21st century skills such as strategic thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration and decision making. The approach that we have already adopted and implemented in this competency based training so called NPQEL 2.0 is a problem based learning concept (PBL) and a situational experiences activity (SEA) design of learning which has improved PGB's competencies and skills needed to be a VUCA educational leaders. Thus, IAB has come out with the new version of the NPQEL Competency Framework of Educational Leadership needed to lead successfully in a VUCA educational world.

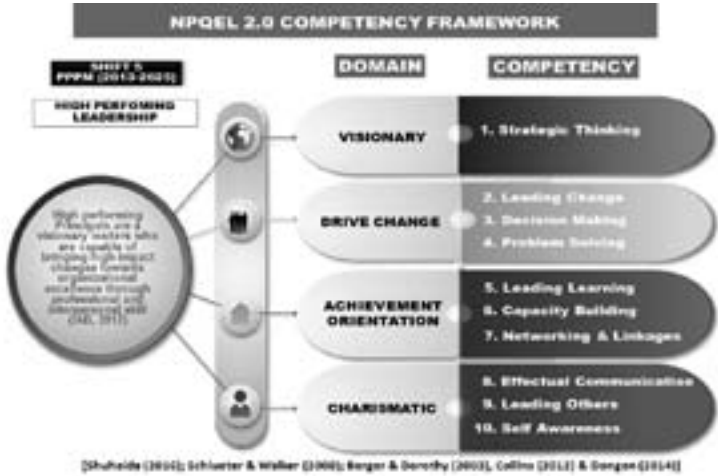


Figure 1: NPQEL 2.0 Competency Framework of Educational Leadership

At the end of the NPQEL 2.0 programme, IAB ensures that high performing PGBs possess ten competencies that is categorized into four major competency domains: (1) Visionary; (2) Drive Change; (3) Achievement Orientation; and (4) Charismatic. The ten competencies are Strategic Thinking, Decision Making, Leading Change, Solving Problems, Leading Learning, Capacity Building, Building Networking and Linkages, Effectual Communication, Leading Others and Self Awareness.

The NPQEL 2.0 which runs in three (3) phases for each intake involved two (2) modes of execution ie online mode (e-NPQEL) and face to face mode. The face to face mode has three activities to be completed by each and every PGB namely executive presentations, field work activities and group activities (see Appendix

for details). All of these activities will eventually be assessed using those 10 competencies that the trainees need as a high performing PGBs in a VUCA educational environment.

3. What assessment method have assured that these learning outcomes are attained?

For a new idea of leadership development, we need a new approach to leadership assessment. We need to be able to measure not only the usual styles, traits and intellectual capabilities, but also the way individuals make sense of information, relationships and the world around them (Vessey & Jeffkins, 2018). The meaningful assessment of competence takes into account developmental and incremental learning factors and attends to overall competence in both integrated and competency by competency formats at all stages of training and professional development (Kaslow *et al.*, 2004; Roberts *et al.*, 2005).

Competency based assessment is a process where an assessor works with a trainee to collect evidence of competence, using the benchmarks provided by the unit standards that comprise the national qualifications (Biggs, 1996; Witty & Gaston, 2008). The assessment of competence is generally viewed as a process of obtaining evidence on performance by one or a number of means and making judgements on the basis of that evidence about an individual's competence to meet certain prescribed standards (Hager *et al.*, 2006). This entails careful analysis of which competencies and aspects of these competencies should be mastered at which stages of professional development (e.g., novice, intermediate, advanced, proficient, expert, master). This will result in benchmarks, behavioral indicators associated with each domain that provide descriptions and examples of expected performance at each developmental stage (APA, 2007).

In order to assist the assessor, IAB under the competency based assessment approach includes the NPQEL 2.0 Assessment Competency Framework which consists of 10 competency elements and number of competencies to be focused in each and every activity involved in the NPQEL 2.0. At IAB, competency based assessment involves collecting evidence demonstrated by the PGBs, by articulating competencies and developing evidence of competencies during their activities, or during the presentation of the assignment; in order to prove that a PGB can perform against the elements of competence and performance criteria as stated in the Kamus Kompetensi (Competency Dictionary). The competency standards in Kamus Kompetensi are defined based on expected job performance in a specific competency context and have four (4) parts: description of the competency, the scale to be used, the description of the scale to be used in that particular competency and the illustration of it. The competency standard is composed of different competency elements and each of these in turn contains the specific performance criteria expected level of the observable behavior to be measured. The measurement uses the Rubric Rating Scale for Competencies by Harvard School of Education and consists of five (5) level of scale for competencies ie awareness, basics, intermediate, advanced and experts.

Overall, rubrics promote consistency in scoring, encourage self-improvement, encourage self-assessment, motivate learners to achieve the next level, provide timely feedback and improve performance (Boateng *et al.*, 2009). Our assessment

experience shows us that developmental stage is not fixed. Vertical capacities do not equate to IQ, age or experience, or to particular personality styles; they are something qualitatively different. As we have found, people of the same age, with similar training in the same institution can show significant differences in terms of stage. We can all continue to develop our vertical capacities, and when assessing, it is also useful to understand both the leading and trailing edges of individuals between development stages and across each of the aspect of conceptual and personal factor, and consider these in the context of the role. An understanding of vertical capacities help us, as assessors, to look beneath the surface to see the potential in these individuals.

4. What findings demonstrate that the outcomes persist and have meaning?

Monitoring and evaluation of any programme is vital to determine whether it works, to help refine programme delivery, and to provide evidence for continuing support of the programme. Evaluation will not only provide feedback on the effectiveness of a programme but will also help to determine whether the programme is appropriate for the target population, whether there are any problems with its implementation and support, and whether there are any ongoing concerns that need to be resolved as the programme is implemented (Toom, 2018).

Outcome evaluation is where the outcomes are measured to see if the programme was successful. Measuring a change in outcomes is probably the most common form of evaluation as it provides information as to whether the programme has actually made a difference. Whereas impact assessment will determine whether the programme has brought about a change. The impact, or programme effect, refers to a change in the target population that has been brought about by the programme – that is, a change that would not have occurred if the programme had not happened (Penfield *et al.*, 2014).

The outcome evaluation and the impact assessment of the NPQEL 2.0 programme has been carried out using Kirkpatrick's model which was conducted on the first intake PGBs of the programme in 2018. Kirkpatrick's model assesses the effectiveness of the NPQEL 2.0 programme at four (4) levels: response of the PGBs to the training experience by using administered questionnaire; the PGB's learning outcome and increase in knowledge, skill and attitude towards the attendance experience which are measured through pre-test and post-test; the PGB's change in behavior and improvement (whether the learning is transferred into practice in the workplace) by using observational checklist after 6 to 12 months of appointment as PGB; and results (the ultimate impact of the training).

The results of the first level Kirkpatrick evaluation indicated that PGBs who participated in the new version of the NPQEL or NPQEL 2.0 declared that the quality of this programme was excellent. They were completely satisfied with the way of IAB conducting activities of the programme. The results of the second level Kirkpatrick's evaluation about the PGBs learning revealed that there was a significant difference between the total scores, preparation of PGBs and use of new training delivery methods before and after the programme. To measure the third level of Kirkpatrick's programme evaluation method, the researchers observed the PGBs' behavior using the job performed by them 6 to 12 months after

they were appointed as school principal. According to the results, the behavior change across all of the competency dimensions was significant.

CONCLUSION

Although the VUCA world may seem overwhelming, we can use principles from vertical development to establish a set of leadership practices that will serve us and our organization. PGBs who undergo the vertical development training such as the NPQEL 2.0, show progress, in regard to how they “make sense” of their VUCA educational environment. They transform their mindset at higher levels of cognitive development, are able to perform more effectively and they can think in more complex ways.

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