

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Volume 18 No. 2 2026

DOI: 10.21315/eimj2026.18.2.2

ARTICLE INFO

Submitted: 12-03-2025

Accepted: 11-07-2025

Online: 30-06-2026

Who Will Lead Next? A Qualitative Study on Leadership Succession Planning in a Malaysian Dental School

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To cite this article: Lin GSS, Wong WW, Yakob DK, Lim CAC, Friedlander LT. Who will lead next? a qualitative study on leadership succession planning in a Malaysian dental school. *Education in Medicine Journal*. 2026;18(2):17–32. <https://doi.org/10.21315/eimj2026.18.2.2>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/eimj2026.18.2.2>

ABSTRACT

Within higher education, leadership succession planning fosters institutional stability and sustainability. This qualitative study explored the perceived challenges and strategies related to leadership succession planning among faculty leaders at a Malaysian public dental school. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight senior faculty members. Thematic analysis identified four major themes: (a) challenges in leadership succession planning; (b) strategies for succession planning; (c) impacts of succession planning; and (d) qualities of future leaders. Challenges highlighted included five sub-themes such as unclear role descriptions, insufficient training for leadership positions, staff shortages and workload constraints, faculty reluctance towards leadership roles, and leadership turnover and organisational instability. Strategies included faculty documentation and guidelines, and talent identification and mentoring. The impacts of succession planning were faculty continuity and leadership sustainability, and faculty development and organisational culture. Meanwhile, future leaders required credibility and leading by example, adaptability, and selflessness and effective communication skills. These findings suggested the need for well-structured leadership succession planning to promote long-term growth and resilience. It also provided valuable insights to help other schools adopt the present framework and enhance their succession planning processes.

Keywords: Administration, Educational management, Faculty, Higher education, Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Strong leadership within higher institutions is essential for optimising student success and growing future leaders and teachers (1). Leadership can influence group dynamics and affect outcomes by guiding and motivating individuals of an organisation towards a shared goal through building relationships and support (2). Leadership in higher education extends

beyond administrative duties and it involves ongoing curriculum review and organisational development, which in dentistry is important for influencing healthcare delivery (3, 4). Leadership within dental schools plays a crucial role in shaping and executing institutional strategies across teaching, research, and administration (5). Active engagement in research and innovation is equally vital for advancing professional practice and promoting evidence-based care. Succession planning is, therefore, essential in dentistry training for visionary thinking and curriculum planning to continually enhance the quality of education and the healthcare that is provided to patients.

A key component of university organisational management is leadership succession planning (6). This is particularly crucial in a dental faculty where the institution's core principles are defined by clinical and academic excellence. Succession planning goes beyond simply 'filling' academic or administrative positions. Notably, this process includes identifying and developing potential future leaders who will take over important roles in the organisation when existing leaders leave their current positions (6). This intentional approach towards succession planning aspires to the continuity, stability, and effectiveness needed to meet institutional goals (7, 8). Dental schools operate in dynamic academic environments that demand strong leadership and efficient management at all levels to ensure excellence in patient care, high-quality clinical and academic training for students, and a robust foundation in research (9).

Despite its undeniable importance, understanding leadership succession planning within dental education is still evolving. Within a dental training environment, leadership succession planning is necessary to uphold standards for both healthcare and education. Indeed, while there have been reports from the nursing and pharmacy sectors (7, 10, 11), some of the unique experiences faced by leaders within dental schools are unclear. The expertise and institutional knowledge of faculty leaders, along with the complexities and challenges of ensuring a smooth leadership transition, are often underestimated (12). Effective leadership succession planning is unquestionably important for dental schools' sustainability and performance. However, the transition from one leader to another can be fraught with multifaceted challenges (2, 13). Undeniably, when challenges are not understood and strategies to enhance performance are not adopted, effective leadership within dental schools can be compromised. Thus, the present study aimed to explore the perceptions of leadership succession planning in a Malaysian public dental school among faculty leaders.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Human Capital Theory and Situational Leadership Theory to frame its exploration of leadership succession in dental education. Human Capital Theory highlights that individuals' skills, knowledge, and experiences are valuable assets to an organisation. This theory was originally proposed by Becker (14), who suggested the importance of investing in the development of individuals' capabilities to enhance organisational performance. This theory also highlights the need for dental institutions to invest in identifying and nurturing future leaders capable of sustaining institutional stability and addressing the evolving demands of 21st-century dental education. On the other hand, the Situational Leadership Theory, developed by Hersey and Blanchard (15) suggests that leadership effectiveness is contingent upon adapting leadership style to the followers' maturity level and the situation's specifics. This theory highlights the necessity for prospective leaders to be versatile and

adaptable, capable of employing different leadership styles as circumstances demand. In the higher education context, it supports designing leadership development programmes that equip emerging leaders with the skills to manage educational, research, and clinical environments. Thus, the integration of these two theories provides a robust framework for examining leadership in a dental training environment (Figure 1).

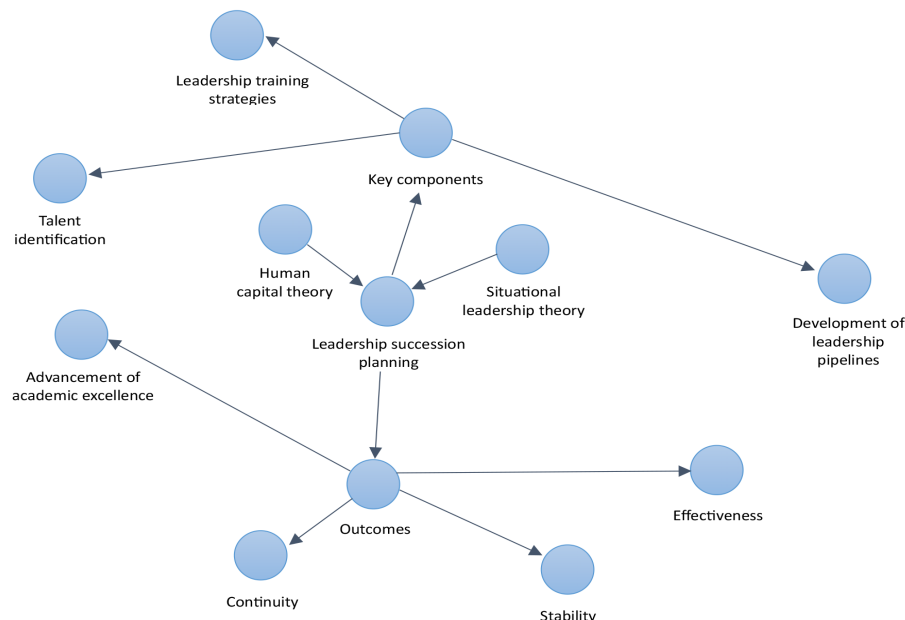


Figure 1: The conceptual framework of the present study.

METHODS

Study Design

This exploratory qualitative case study examined leadership succession planning, including its challenges and strategies, within a Malaysian public dental school. Grounded in a theoretical framework, the study posits that leaders' skills, knowledge, and experiences are critical to organisational growth. The study adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines (16).

Target Population and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants with substantial experience and direct involvement in leadership processes. The study targeted the current academic leaders at the Kulliyyah of Dentistry, International Islamic University Malaysia, who are responsible for leadership succession planning. Exclusion criteria included individuals with less than three months in a leadership role or those not engaged in current faculty leadership planning activities. Out of 12 eligible participants, recruitment was conducted through email and telephone invitations, where the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations were clearly explained. A relationship between the investigators and participants was not established prior to the commencement of the study. Participants were recruited through formal channels, ensuring a professional boundary between investigators and interviewees.

Data Collection

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were selected as the primary data collection tool to capture participants' leadership experiences and perspectives on succession planning. The interview guide, informed by the study's objectives and literature review, comprised open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive reflections on personal experiences. Key areas of inquiry included obstacles to succession planning, mitigation approaches, their impacts, effective leadership qualities and suggestions for improving leadership transitions within the institution. To ensure clarity and relevance, the interview guide underwent content validation by two faculty members from another institution with expertise in qualitative research and organisational leadership who were not directly involved in the study.

Two investigators (first and third authors), both experienced qualitative researchers with backgrounds in health professions education, facilitated the interviews at times convenient for participants, offering scheduling flexibility to accommodate their commitments. Before each session, participants received reminder emails, and alternate arrangements were prepared to address potential technical issues. Each interview started with an overview of the research objectives and participants' rights, followed by investigators engaging in casual conversation to create a comfortable environment before moving to the guided questions. The interviews, conducted in private rooms, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Additional reflexive field notes were taken during the sessions to ensure accurate transcription and informed analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed thematically, following a systematic process of coding and theme development. Data analysis commenced with repeated readings of transcripts to ensure familiarity and identify meaningful segments. Initial codes were generated by two investigators who acted as the initial coders and subsequently organised into broader themes through an iterative process of comparison and refinement. NVivo software (NVivo version 12, QSR International Pty Ltd.) was utilised to facilitate data management, organisation, and analysis. A subset of the data was independently coded by a secondary researcher to check for code consistency, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. Member checking was conducted by inviting some participants to review preliminary findings to confirm accuracy and relevance.

RESULTS

Eight faculty members, comprising the top leaders of the faculty, and four heads of departments or units, consented to participate in the study. The interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, and by the seventh interview, data saturation was evident. However, one additional participant was included to ensure the perspectives of all key leadership roles were represented and to confirm the consistency of emerging themes. Following the member-checking process, two participants requested minor edits to their transcripts, primarily to clarify statements or correct misinterpretations of technical terms. These edits were incorporated to ensure that the final transcripts accurately reflected participants' experiences and perspectives. Four major themes with corresponding sub-themes emerged from the analysis (Figure 2), along with illustrative quotes from participants, identified by the prefix 'P' followed by a number representing the interviewee.



Figure 2: The major themes and sub-themes of the present findings.

Theme 1: Challenges in Leadership Succession Planning

Sub-theme 1: Unclear role descriptions

Participants highlighted significant challenges during leadership succession, primarily due to a lack of clarity about the role's scope and the absence of role descriptions. Some felt uncertain and unprepared when assuming leadership roles, as there was no structured documentation outlining responsibilities or succession pathways. A perceived lack of direction from top management further compounded the issue, with one participant noting that even former leaders could not provide clarity. The absence of a formal system to guide duties was a recurring concern.

There's no black and white from top management, and literally ... You do not know anything ... Um ... and if you ask the previous person (former leader), they also do not know what to do. [P1]

When I took the position from the previous person (former leader), unfortunately, I didn't get the proper job description about the position I will be taking on ... There is no proper documentation. [P2]

I didn't see a general list of tasks to perform ... I have not received the whole details of my job scope. [P3]

I don't see any clear path, to be honest ... I don't see any clear line of succession or to say next you will be in line. [P4]

We do not have a clear system where it states ... This is your job description, or where they outline the exact duties and responsibilities of each role. [P5]

Didn't really have a proper document for the transition ... no *fail meja* (desk file) to refer like a guide on what to do as head of the unit (or department). [P6]

Sub-theme 2: Insufficient training for leadership positions

The findings revealed a significant gap in structured training and preparedness for leadership roles, resulting in new academic staff frequently facing a steep learning curve. Participants highlighted the absence of formal leadership training or ongoing professional development, even after years of service, with one noting a lack of empowerment and development opportunities for future leaders. The challenges experienced during the transition to leadership roles were consistently attributed to insufficient training and support.

I realised that even though I have been here for many years, I have not received any leadership training. [P3]

We do not empower them (future leaders) with any form of structured training ... they are left to figure things out on their own. [P5]

When I joined, there was no official training to become leaders ... and once my tenure ends, someone else could come in without proper training. There was no training—it was on-the-job learning for me. [P7]

It's as if you go from one role and then are suddenly promoted with no official training on how to fulfil it. [P8]

Sub-theme 3: Staff shortages and workload constraints

The findings indicated that staffing resources and workload significantly influence leadership succession planning within the faculty. Participants expressed the need for additional staff, with one expressing feeling overwhelmed by holding multiple roles simultaneously.

I need more people ... At the very beginning, I only have one part-timer staff. Then only I have one more additional staff after requesting it. But again ... I need more assistants to assist me. [P3]

The issue I had was the manpower issue ... Another issue, I think, is because I'm holding two posts now ... I think a bit overwhelmed. So, I feel like our unit could have extra manpower. [P4]

My unit is very small; we are very limited in number ... I think that one of the challenges is that there are limited staff members to choose who will be the next leader. [P5]

The main issue I faced was the lack of manpower ... and I was also the head of the unit ... it was kind of a big responsibility. [P6]

Sub-theme 4: Faculty reluctance towards leadership roles

Participants noted that faculty reluctance to assume leadership roles was driven by concerns related to increased workload and responsibilities. One participant claimed that, even when potential leaders were identified, they often hesitated to step into leadership positions. This resistance reflects broader apprehensions about balancing leadership duties with existing academic commitments.

Some people don't want to do admin work because they are already tired of current tasks. [P3]

Some lecturers who do not want to hold any position ... maybe they are worried, or they are not free to hold this position and they're hesitant. [P4]

Most of the time, people just don't feel like doing it for whatever reason ... Although we found someone who has the leadership traits, they refused to take it. [P5]

Perhaps people don't want to take on more work ... you need to do research, attend meetings, and learn new things. Some people don't want to leave their comfort zone ... Some people refuse to even chair a meeting. [P7]

Sub-theme 5: Leadership turnover and organisational instability

Several participants emphasised that frequent leadership turnover disrupts faculty stability and hampers long-term planning. Leadership roles often rotate every two years, preventing leaders from fully developing and embedding their initiatives. This short tenure leaves successors without a strong foundation to build upon, contributing to ongoing instability within the faculty.

The top management roles keep changing, (we) may not be able to do all the things that are being imposed by the previous management. [P3]

Especially when the top management is going to change after two years of tenure, who's going to be the next one? [P4]

Right now, I notice that each new leader often stops or changes the direction, which disrupts continuity. [P7]

Our leadership changes quite frequently ... This lack of stability can be a real challenge because building a strong academic environment takes time ... Frequent changes every two years make it tough to establish that stable foundation. [P8]

Theme 2: Strategies for Succession Planning

Sub-theme 1: Faculty documentation and guidelines

The findings highlighted the necessity of proper documentation and clear guidelines for effective leadership succession planning. Participants stressed that structured, detailed job scope documentation streamlines the handover process and minimises confusion.

I think maybe it will be good to have ... like a proper planning session of the job scope, like what the job is all about and what should be done, what's the responsibilities and how you can delegate tasks to others in your unit. [P1]

I really hope that there will be a proper file that documents and lists the key things that the next (leader) needs to do ... My advice is to have proper documentation. [P2]

It is important that there is proper documentation during the transition period, for example, the current tasks. [P3]

The faculty should provide a clear guideline or documentation, like a standard process, for the next person who becomes a leader. This way, new leaders know exactly what they need to do, and there's less confusion. [P6]

Sub-theme 2: Talent identification and mentoring

The findings demonstrated the importance of talent identification and providing structured guidance and mentorship in ensuring effective leadership succession planning. Participants emphasised the need for mentoring programmes to train and support potential leaders, fostering their confidence and readiness for leadership roles. In addition, they stressed the importance of establishing talent pools to systematically identify and nurture future leaders within the faculty.

Of course, you have to train new members as well. [P1]

You need that training before you go into the position. [P2]

To have a good succession plan, we need to identify, and they (future leaders) should have early exposure to the potential tasks. [P3]

We need to identify first, and we try to shape for the next few years. [P5]

I tried to support them and then tried to groom them into the roles or fields so that they could have more confidence to hold the post in the future ... And then, a mentoring program to guide the new leaders. [P6]

The first thing needed is a talent pool. We should identify and train a few individuals or at least ensure a baseline for selecting potential successors for the faculty. [P7]

I have already identified potential successors. If everything goes well, it should ensure continuity and stability. [P8]

Theme 3: Impact of Succession Planning

Sub-theme 1: Faculty continuity and leadership sustainability

Without structured leadership succession planning, faculty instability may arise, jeopardising leadership continuity and sustainability. Participants expressed that each new dean or leader often introduces different ideas, causing shifts in the faculty's direction. Moreover, participants emphasised the need for a clear succession plan to ensure smooth leadership transitions, allowing faculty goals to be consistently pursued across different leadership terms.

We don't know if the next team (leaders) will have the same goals as the current team... in which whatever the goals of the current one will still be progressed and can be continued by the next successor. [P2]

Succession planning has a big impact ... it's necessary for policy continuity and sustainability ... If there's a consistent vision shared by everyone, then no matter who becomes the leader, they can continue to carry forward. [P7]

Currently, each dean brings new ideas, and while that's not wrong, it leads to shifts in direction ... This cycle makes it hard to continue and sustain progress. [P7]

Without a succession plan, objectives become unclear, and the organisation becomes unstable. People start moving in different directions and there is no continuity in faculty strategies. [P8]

Sub-theme 2: Faculty development and organisational culture

The findings revealed the critical role of leadership succession planning in faculty development and shaping workplace culture. Participants acknowledged that leadership and administrative roles are integral to academic growth and should be embraced by all faculty members. However, concerns were raised about internal politics. The absence of succession planning was seen as a threat to faculty continuity and shared vision. Additionally, poor leadership transitions and inconsistent selection processes were perceived as risks to institutional development.

Everyone should hold leadership roles once you enter as an academician because one of your roles is to be an administrator ... besides involving in teaching, supervision and research, leadership and administration is a must. [P3]

The politics here is strong. Some people, umm ..., they (seniors) don't give positive feedback so much; sometimes, they just attack you personally. So, you have to be ready for that kind of thing ... need good succession planning to handle this culture. [P6]

If we continue like this (without succession planning), we'll keep falling behind ... A shared vision will help ensure that even as leaders change, the core objectives and culture remain steady, so we're always moving forward. [P7]

If you look at XXX (dental school)'s history, it was very successful ... Now, they seem to be less prominent. It seems that there's something not right with the organisation's development and culture, maybe due to the poor selection of leaders. [P8]

Theme 4: Qualities of Future Leaders

Sub-theme 1: Credibility and leading by example

Participants emphasised that credibility and the ability to 'walk the talk' are essential qualities for effective leadership. They mentioned that leaders should be appointed based on respect and credibility rather than popularity. Leading by example was seen as vital, with one participant noting that leaders who fail to perform their duties cannot expect others to follow. Avoiding favouritism was also considered critical within the institution.

When someone takes on (leadership) role ... they need to be a person with credibility. People should respect them. The person must "walk the talk". This is something we often lack. [P7]

They have to be someone who doesn't play favouritism—someone ethical. When I first joined as an academic, I thought these positions had power, but when I took on the role, I realised it's the opposite: I needed the support of my colleagues. [P7]

Credibility should come first ... Sometimes, it feels like candidates are chosen more because they are well-liked rather than for their experience. [P8]

Sub-theme 2: Adaptability

Several participants claimed adaptability as a crucial trait for effective leadership. They emphasised that future leaders must be quick and efficient learners, capable of navigating unfamiliar situations and addressing issues even when immediate answers are unavailable.

You must become a good and fast learner. Although you are very new to the position, you must learn very fast in order actually to handle a lot of things. [P5]

When the head lacks experience, it becomes a bit of a problem ... you need to adapt quickly to learn the ropes. [P6]

Adaptability is crucial in leadership. There will be many times when you might not have all the answers. [P8]

Sub-theme 3: Selflessness and effective communication skills

Participants mentioned the importance of effective communication in leadership. One noted that selflessness is essential, advocating for leaders to prioritise the needs of others over personal interests. Beyond communication, participants highlighted the need for leaders to guide and inspire their teams, fostering shared values and collective goals.

Communication is essential for effective leadership. [P3]

A leader must extend some forms of communication with other disciplines or departments and be nice to others so that others can help us as well. [P5]

The most important thing is to have qualities that put others before yourself. You shouldn't focus solely on your own interests ... leadership means being able to guide people from point A to point B effectively. [P8]

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored leadership succession planning in a Malaysian public dental school, highlighting key challenges, strategies, impacts, and desired qualities of future leaders. The findings expand on existing literature regarding educational leadership and faculty development, offering practical insights for higher education. A key challenge identified was the absence of clear role descriptions. This is particularly significant during the transition phase, as new leaders frequently feel uncertain about organisational structures, roles, and procedures, as they are not aware of the tasks they are expected to perform (17). Poor organisational support has been linked to employee disengagement, ultimately affecting performance and job satisfaction (17, 18). Moreover, inconsistent documentation led to ad hoc practices, leaving successors unprepared for the demands of leadership (19). These findings echoed prior research on the detrimental effect of inadequate planning on organisational continuity (20). Without structured documentation and standardised templates for job descriptions, new leaders would rely on informal consultations, increasing the risk of errors (21).

The absence of leadership training programmes emerged as a critical barrier to effective succession planning. Participants described steep learning curves, often resorting to trial and error. This mirrors findings in the United Kingdom (UK) and Sweden, where insufficient leadership preparation impeded faculty progress (22, 23). A lack of formal leadership frameworks left new appointees feeling underqualified, potentially compromising the faculty operations (24). The current study aligns with findings where 66% of faculty reported no formal leadership development (25). Institutions lacking structured leadership pathways risk fostering environments where staff avoid leadership roles due to inadequate preparation (26). Conversely, a survey from the United States (US) found leadership training highly

beneficial, with 92% of dental deans stating it supported their development, 88% finding it relevant to their roles, and 97% agreeing it enhances leadership and administrative skills (27). Thus, leadership training and mentorship initiatives should be introduced to equip staff with essential skills and foster a leadership-ready culture. Mentoring was identified as a key strategy for grooming future leaders in the present study. Mentorship fosters confidence and competence, easing leadership transitions and enhancing managerial readiness (28). By fostering mentorship programmes, institutions can develop leadership pipelines, ensuring future leaders are well-equipped for complex academic environments.

Staffing shortages and workload constraints were reported as obstacles to succession planning in the present study. Senior dental faculty, including deans and deputy deans, often spend the majority of their time on administrative tasks (29), leaving little opportunity to mentor successors, and exacerbating leadership gaps (30). This aligns with findings that staffing shortages limit the leadership pipeline (31). Dental academicians juggle multiple responsibilities, including training undergraduate and postgraduate students, conducting research, publishing findings, and providing clinical services (5). High academic workloads have been found to negatively affect morale, job satisfaction, and mentoring quality (32). Therefore, dental schools must prioritise workforce expansion and equitable task distribution to foster leadership pipelines for sustainable succession planning. Faculty reluctance to assume leadership roles was another key challenge. Participants cited fear of increased responsibilities and a lack of confidence, mirroring findings among Czech teachers, in which administrative burdens deter academic staff from pursuing leadership pathways (33). Some participants attributed this reluctance to entrenched comfort zones, in which staff avoided leadership roles due to perceived job security or a lack of incentives. Cultivating a leadership-supportive culture through incentives and recognition is essential to overcoming these barriers.

High faculty leader turnover contributed to instability and hindered organisational progress. Participants reported that frequent leadership changes disrupted continuity, affecting strategic plans and operational efficacy. Frequent leadership changes can undermine organisational cohesion, with shifting priorities causing misalignment with institutional goals. Dental schools should consider extending leadership terms and establishing structured succession frameworks to ensure stability and continuity. For instance, a survey of 60 American dental deans reported an average tenure of 5 years and 7 months, with a median of 4 years (29). Nonetheless, early identification and nurturing of leadership talent were emphasised as crucial for sustainable succession planning. This echoes a previous study recommending internal talent identification to mitigate leadership gaps (13). Establishing structured talent development initiatives can help institutions proactively shape future leaders, reducing uncertainty during transitions.

In addition, participants acknowledged the far-reaching impact of leadership succession planning on faculty sustainability and growth. Without structured plans, organisations risk instability and inconsistent progress. This observation is consistent with Henri Fayol's management principles, which underscore the importance of succession planning for maintaining organisational stability (34). Effective succession planning fosters job security, improves employee retention, and enhances institutional trust. Conversely, fragmented transitions disrupt organisational cohesion, hindering long-term goals (35). By prioritising succession planning, organisations ensure resilience and sustained progress, positioning themselves to navigate future challenges with confidence.

Credibility was highlighted as a critical leadership quality that fosters trust and respect among faculty. This aligns with Kouzes and Posner's leadership framework (36), where leaders who demonstrate integrity and competence set positive examples, motivating their teams and enhancing performance. Adaptability was also identified as essential for navigating dynamic academic environments. Participants highlighted the need for leaders to be flexible and responsive to evolving challenges. Similarly, it has been reported that adaptive leadership positively impacts organisational effectiveness by fostering experiential learning and resilience (37). Selflessness and communication skills emerged as foundational to successful leadership. This is in line with a previous study highlighting that communication skills were rated as the highest level of importance among faculty leaders (29). Dental leaders, for instance, should actively engage with colleagues, students, patients, and external stakeholders. They could support faculty members in balancing clinical education and high-quality research in a competitive academic environment (5). Effective communication bridges organisational silos, fostering trust and enhancing operational efficiency. Leaders who communicate empathetically and transparently promote positive organisational cultures, reinforcing institutional resilience (38).

The current study highlighted key implications for leadership succession planning, particularly regarding faculty instability stemming from poorly structured succession processes. By identifying challenges and strategies, the study offers a practical framework for dental schools to enhance leadership continuity and sustainability. It highlighted the importance of organising training programmes and mentoring to develop academic leaders, providing a blueprint for dental schools seeking to strengthen their leadership pipelines. Additionally, the study filled an existing gap in educational leadership and management literature, contributing valuable insights into a relatively underexplored topic. Beyond dental education, the findings presented transferable knowledge to help higher education policymakers develop comprehensive succession planning policies, ensuring smooth leadership transitions across institutions. These findings also imply the need for institutional policies that incorporate leadership competency frameworks, the establishment of succession-planning committees, and structured mentorship programmes to ensure continuity and preparedness for leadership roles (39).

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The small sample size of eight participants from a single Malaysian public dental school restricts generalisability. Future research should include a broader range of leaders from diverse dental schools to capture the range of organisational structures and work cultures. The study's focus on a public institution may overlook unique challenges faced by private dental schools. Response bias and limited participant perspectives, confined to top-level faculty and heads of departments or units, further narrow the scope of findings. Expanding future studies to include junior lecturers, administrative staff, and students could provide a more holistic understanding. In addition, there is a possibility of social desirability bias influencing participants' responses, particularly given the hierarchical nature of academic institutions. Faculty members may have moderated their opinions or withheld criticisms due to perceived power dynamics or concerns about professional repercussions. Longitudinal research could explore the long-term impact of succession strategies. In addition, gender disparities in leadership succession remain unexplored, presenting an important avenue for further study.

CONCLUSION

There is a critical need for dental schools to establish structured leadership succession planning to promote long-term growth and resilience. Key challenges to this include clarity of role descriptions, access to leadership training, staff resourcing, faculty engagement, and leadership turnover. Without succession planning, leadership frameworks may become fragmented, compromising academic excellence and organisational stability. Effective strategies include clear documentation and guidelines, and talent identification and mentoring. Leadership succession planning directly impacts faculty continuity, sustainability, and organisational culture. Essential leadership qualities identified include credibility, leading by example, adaptability, selflessness, and effective communication. These insights provided valuable guidance for dental schools and senior management to strengthen and enhance their leadership succession pathways. A well-executed succession plan not only bridges existing gaps but also ensures leadership continuity, faculty stability, and long-term institutional resilience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research received no funding.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Malaya-Wales, and subsequently approved by the Research Sterling Committee, University Kulliyah of Dentistry, International Islamic University Malaysia, in October 2024 (reference code: IIUM/314/G/14/11/2). Written and verbal informed consent were obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly upheld throughout the study, with no obligations or dependencies between participants and the research team. All data, including audio recordings and transcriptions, were stored in encrypted folders accessible only to authorised research team members. Backup copies were maintained on password-protected external storage devices to prevent data loss. Upon completion of the analysis, audio recordings will be securely erased after 5 years to uphold participant confidentiality.

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