Developing future leaders in Malaysian public universities: the factors influencing execution of succession planning

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Abstract
Purpose – Succession planning is an emerging area for research in higher education institutions worldwide; however, literature is scarce in the context of developing countries like Malaysia. The factors that have an influence on the execution of succession planning in public universities are the primary goal that has been set for achieving the study’s goal. Moreover, the development of leadership in institutions has been taken by adopting formal succession planning. This study aims to explore the factors that can contribute to the successful execution of the plan, particularly in higher education institutions in Malaysia.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed the qualitative approach. The registrars have been selected by using purposive sampling technique for face-to-face interviews from five public research universities of Malaysia. The in-depth data can be collected at research universities as they are old and comprehensive universities of Malaysia. The data were analysed through thematic analysis.

Findings – The number of factors that have been revealed through the findings are as follows: organisational culture, the support of top-level management, the strategic plan, the reward, the champion from top-level management and the budget. Further, the public universities of Malaysia required ensuring that all employees were aware of succession plan initiatives taken by institutions, although the system was challenged by not taking these factors into account.

Originality/value – The primary data have been collected to provide the insight regarding opportunities and challenges encountered in the implementation of succession planning in Malaysian public universities.

Keywords Succession planning, Organisational culture, Top management, Public universities

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
The competencies needed for academic leadership fifty years ago were considerably different from those needed by academic leaders today. In the 1960 and 1970s, the Malaysian public universities have been funded by government of Malaysia. All academic operations, from the construction of facilities to the administration of the schools, were started by the Malaysian Government through the Ministry of Education (Ghazali et al., 2021; Keerio et al., 2022). Vice chancellors need to have competencies that are just as extensive as those needed to prepare them for the C-suite to build the requisite abilities of the employee (Keerio et al., 2022; Keller, 2018). Although there are still some questions regarding the proper ingredient, procedure and
assessment because the majority of studies concentrated on businesses and western nations (Ghazali et al., 2021; Schepker et al., 2018).

Higher education systems lacked a methodical approach to selecting, developing and keeping potential leaders as succession planning has been widely practice in corporate sector however, the higher education institutions just commenced the consideration. Public institutions, however, do not fully take into account the grooming of leaders at middle level that is heads of department (HoDs); meanwhile the condition of demographics is concerning (Ahmad et al., 2020a; Coffie et al., 2022). Many studies have urged that universities properly prepare their future leaders to deal with the impending leadership crisis (Drammeh, 2022; Omar et al., 2022).

Academic leaders in public institutions typically enter their roles without formal leadership training or prior executive experience, without a clear understanding of their function and with no other means of recognition beyond academic achievement (LeCounte, 2022; Upadhyaya and Lele, 2022). Public institutions must choose a qualified candidate due to the lack of qualified leads. This serious leadership dilemma necessitates a methodical hiring process by the administration of public universities (Keerio et al., 2022). Because internal selection often results in successful leadership, internal grooming and selection of leaders should be prioritised.

The current study purposely investigates the barriers of the execution of succession planning in Malaysian public universities. Higher education institutions, according to the previous literature, possess some values that demonstrate their potential to conduct succession planning. Furthermore, there are underlying beliefs in higher education that it cannot be managed like a business organisation, which makes succession planning difficult to implement (Ahmad and Keerio, 2020; Keerio and Ahmad, 2019). The main issue is that organisations view succession planning as a massive undertaking and are unable to begin. As a result, the institution’s inability to put into effect a formal succession plan constitutes succession planning failure (Barton, 2019; Okwakpam, 2019; Torabi et al., 2019). The current study will contribute in organising succession planning initiatives, highlight the significance of the implementation of succession planning and ensure the capabilities of mid managers for their position. This paper will briefly review current academic awareness in public universities’ succession planning. Later on, it investigates the different factors contribute in the execution of succession planning in public institutions.

**Literature review**

**Succession planning**

In today’s more dynamic enterprises, the idea of succession planning is evolving. Numerous firms undergo frequent reorganisations, restructurings and changes in their business strategies. In 1916, Henri Fayol created succession planning because he thought that if it were disturbed, the organisation would not be able to make the necessary transition (Abdellah, 2021; Shukor and Hussain, 2019). In 1916, Henri released Administration Industrielle et Générale, a work that contained fourteen management tenets. The ideas suggested by Henri, those were bring out in the 20th century, although those are widely accepted in current situations, show that organisation is in charge of making sure that employees have “stable tenure.” Henri is convinced that important responsibilities will be filled by unqualified individuals if that need is not satisfied.

In order to preserve some stability in key roles and help a company meet its goals, succession planning is well-defined systematic procedure in which workers are harmonised to critical jobs with ongoing development and growth plans (Desarno et al., 2021; Moin et al., 2021; Montoya, 2019). The description of essential jobs in succession planning is also a topic of controversy, with some companies concentrating solely on top positions. Meanwhile, some
contend that succession planning need to be thorough part of long-term strategy for continuous leadership development, the attention of succession planning ought to include the establishment of middle management and supervisory level posts (Avalos, 2020; Garcia, 2021).

Preparing for succession is crucial for a number of additional reasons. Briefly put, succession planning assures the availability of candidates for important organisational roles, promotes diversity in the workplace and enhances job opportunities, staff growth plans and other human resource movement initiatives (Desarno et al., 2021; Geys et al., 2020; Owolabi and Adeosun, 2021). Regardless of the significance, succession planning initiatives have not yet saturated all businesses. According to researches on the frequency of succession planning, an average of 40%–65% of businesses uses formal succession planning procedures (Coffie et al., 2022; Upadhyaya and Lele, 2022). Meanwhile, academia and corporate sector still facing leadership crisis, however, in spite of benefits of succession planning, it is not the matter of attention yet.

**Theoretical consideration**

A study conducted by Giambatista et al. (2005), revealed the findings of critical review of previous literatures are enlightening mixed in nature. According to the review, some articles discussed a connection between antecedent factors and succession. In other instances, it was also mentioned that certain dependent variables were impacted by succession. The reviewers discovered that this field’s theory is, nonetheless, characterised by fragmentation. Additionally, the majority of the applied designs were archival field studies and qualitative approaches were hardly used to fill in any gaps. Additionally, not all internal validity threats were handled, and the components of internal and external validity were not always clearly described (Giambatista et al., 2005).

According to three “theories” called “common sense,” “vicious circle,” and “ritual scapegoating” in the early 1960s, succession planning was comprehended (Giambatista et al., 2005). The vicious-circle theory argued that succession may be prompted by decline, which in turn could disturb regular routines and lead to more succession and decline, contrary to common sense, which claimed that replacing a recognised failure with a wise successor could improve performance. According to some experts, succession planning is only a “ritual scapegoating process” since they doubt the potential of achieving post-succession organisational development (Giambatista et al., 2005).

The previous studies that examined business organisations have also provided support for the vicious-circle theory and the ritual scapegoating theory. However, few studies have shown support for the common-sense theory. We believe the logic underlying the vicious-circle theory (associated with within-season successions) and the ritual scapegoating theory (associated with between-season successions) needs extension longitudinally to the previous season to envelop the common-sense theory in an appropriate manner. Only one sports study found support for the common-sense theory. In contrast, a number of studies have supported ritual scapegoating theory.

The scope of succession planning studies widened and broadened by the 1970s as a result of several challenges and organisational needs. The entire implementation process was studied in addition to the succession plan’s history and organisational structure. The idea of succession planning has changed over the past two decades, moving from manpower-focussed succession planning to technology-based employment planning (Jackson and Dunn-Jensen, 2021; Parfitt, 2017). However, despite the fact that the emphasis on succession planning has shifted over time, the fundamental elements are still intact (Chia et al., 2021).

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Factors influencing implementation of succession planning

Depending on the country, there may be different cultural organisational impediments or challenges to the succession planning process. According to Fulmer and Conger (2004), fewer organisations invest time in succession planning. Many leaders are unaware of its importance, some delay it because they believe it’s unwise or immoral, and still others are simply too preoccupied with today’s business problems to think about the future (Al-Daihani et al., 2019; Okoro and Iheanacho, 2020). The first issue is that businesses have an incorrect understanding of the importance of succession planning (Etemadian et al., 2020; Jindal and Shaikh, 2020; Patel et al., 2019).

It’s crucial to have a thorough understanding of organisational culture before implementing succession planning. If the recruiting process did not comprehend the organisational culture, future employees could encounter difficulties at any point (Azar, 2021; Lu et al., 2022). Leaders hired from outside are usually faced reluctance in their employment in new organisation due to lack of familiarity and compatibility with organisational culture (Mehrabani and Mohamad, 2021; Turner, 2019). Therefore, the culture is most vital element for leaders from outside to stick with an organisation. Furthermore, the current situation of leadership crisis, the identification and selection process for leaders need to begin extremely early in an employee’s career (Bazneshini et al., 2020; Robynn Rixse, 2019; Wonnia, 2021).

The CEO of a company’s board of directors may not be very committed to organising and implementing succession planning, which could be a significant barrier in this respect (Campopiano et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2020; Dowe, 2021; Santora, 2020). There are a number of factors for the new CEOs’ narrow perspectives. Superior frontrunners are more focussed on efficiently running their business forward than they are on the optimal time to withdraw and the finest one to succeed them (Cragun et al., 2016; McConnell and Qi, 2022; Natrucha, 2022). The current CEOs, who have held their positions for a number of years, find it impossible to imagine being replaced. Instead, they concentrate on finishing their final days without dealing with developing organisational problems (Barton, 2019; Perrenoud, 2020; Round et al., 2022; Umans et al., 2020). Hence, existing CEOs who permit new temptations external to their firms run the risk of undermining their ability to serve as top leaders, which they won’t realise until a crisis occurs (McKee et al., 2019; Yawson, 2019). The candidates concentrate only their area of interest regardless of organisational need or succession need whilst development and implementation of succession planning (Bozhinovska and Eftimov, 2023; Salau and Nurudeen, 2022).

Implementing strategic aims and efforts through succession planning enables firms to flourish. Succession planning can increase organisational capacity and stability by preparing skilled workers to fill openings in critical positions, which enables businesses to thrive (Creta and Gross, 2020; Obianuju et al., 2021). Strategies do aid in the success of businesses and organisations, but if they are not carried out skillfully and consistently, they are of little use (Martin and O’Shea, 2021; Mbazor et al., 2023). Workers are in charge of carrying out plans and succession planning helps to make sure that they are equipped with the knowledge and abilities required for effective and successful strategy implementation. Effective succession plans show that a company can fill critical positions and carry out plans as needed by having the right person on hand (Dumont et al., 2019; Sholesi et al., 2022).

The greatness of rewards needs to entertain the basic human requirements of endurance and safety (Lawler, 2003; Najam ul Hassan and Siddiqui, 2020). Lawler (2003) also discussed that organisations must choose relevant rewards over which they have the potential capability to provide to their employees. The distribution of awards must be viewed as fair and equitable. Organisational leaders must take into account a connection or potential for a relationship concerning their work performance and the recompenses they obtain
Therefore, the members of an organisation must respect the incentives the group uses. Without these elements, the incentives programme will not serve as a long-term motivator and will discourage taking risks (Chang and Besel, 2021; Mfeka, 2022).

**Research methodology**

*Research design:* This study has been used qualitative methodology with reliance on semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are the qualitative data collection strategy in which a series of open-ended however predetermined questions have been asked. The literature review is scarce on the subject topic particularly in public universities (Barton, 2019; Keerio and Ahmad, 2019; Keerio et al., 2022). Therefore, a qualitative study has been conducted. Interviews are suitable to obtain attitudes and beliefs of respondents (Saldana, 2011). Further, face to face interviews provide the truthfulness and validity of respondent’s statements. The interviews were conducted from registrars of public research universities of Malaysia at their office.

*Sampling and sample size:* The purposive sampling was used to select the registrars for those universities. This sampling approach signifies that the qualitative researcher intends to identify and include those persons who are most able to yield significant data related to the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2013). In the context of this research study, registrars meet the criteria for inclusion based on the purpose of the study and the scope of the research questions. Registrars in Malaysian public universities have more involvement in every work process and almost all of the HR functions in the university (Ahmad and Keerio, 2020). Registrars have a very close relationship with the top management. They act as the information provider to the top management in making decisions related to the human resources of the university. Hence, it is considered that registrars are the best source for information about succession planning because they are often responsible for managing the succession process, identifying potential succession candidates, creating development plans and advising the board about succession and candidates (Schepker et al., 2018). The depth of the case-oriented analysis that is essential to this type of study is supported by the small sample sizes that are typical in qualitative research. Experts in qualitative research contend that there is no simple answer to the question “how many” and that sample size depends on a variety of philosophical, methodological and practical considerations. Sample sizes for qualitative research should be both large enough to foster the development of a “new and richly textured understanding” of the phenomenon being investigated and small enough to allow for a deep, case-oriented analysis of the qualitative data (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Data interpretation was accomplished by thematic interpretation.

*Data collection and analysis:* The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by researcher. The data was coded after it was collected, then after a gestation time of two weeks; the same data was coded once more to look for any variations. This study’s code recodes technique produced nearly comparable results, demonstrating the trustworthiness of the findings. Thematic analysis of the interview-based data was carried out (Vanover et al., 2021). Following the assignment of preliminary codes to the data in order to describe the content, various patterns or themes were then discovered. Following a review of these themes, prominent themes were named and the study’s findings were then reported (Saldana, 2014). We employed word-based approaches to identify patterns from the coded data, including word repeats and significant terms in context. With the help of these techniques, important terms were discovered and all occurrences of each identified word or phrase were then found by conducting a systematic search of the corpus of text (Miles and Huberman, 2018). We made a duplicate of each keyword and its immediate context each time one was discovered. The items were physically arranged into piles of similar meaning in order to identify themes.
Discussion and results
Researchers have studied the numerous components that play a role in succession planning for decades. Numerous ideas have examined how various organisational and top management elements affect organisational-level outcomes (Bazneshini et al., 2020; Salau and Nurudeen, 2022). Surprisingly, however, neither a widely accepted organising framework for nor a clear consensus on the success elements exist. We set out to provide definitive answers to the key concerns surrounding the fundamentals of strategic leadership, their primary responsibilities, the drivers of their behaviour and the processes through which they affect organisational outcomes. Critical success criteria ask queries about obstacles and elements that support the succession cycle. Top management factors and organisation system factors are the two main themes that emerged from the data. There are many sub-themes underneath those main topics (see Figure 1).

Theme I: top management factors
Participants discussed four concepts that will improve the succession planning process: top management commitment; top management champion; changing top management; and stakeholders. The responses of participants have been summarised in Table 1.

Sub-theme I: top management commitment
The findings of current study have been revealed that top management must establish succession planning priorities and objectives in order to carry out succession planning effectively. They are required to participate in the process actively as well. Moreover, succession planning can get the attention and focus through the involvement of top management. Most of the respondents have been repeatedly highlighted the significance of involvement of top

![Figure 1. Factors affecting succession planning](source(s): Author’s own work)
management. Similarly, Groves (2017) has been addressed that by enabling a seamless and orderly transfer, the succession management strategy’s implementation will reduce the disruption caused by leadership change (Groves, 2017; Grün et al., 2017). The top management required to ensure that team below them must have direction, required resource and delegated authorities needed for execution of the plan. Furthermore, human resources are accountable for developing and implementing strategy of succession planning, liaising with top management, identifying required competencies in future and checking progress. However, in the previous study by Al Suwaidi et al. (2020) management support is less important but it does not decrease the impact on the effectiveness of the succession planning. Meanwhile, majority of the literature supported the findings of the current study that support from top management make the process faster (Hamori and Koyuncu, 2015).

Sub-theme II: champion from top management
The process of succession planning requires the support of top management, but it will move more quickly if a human resource management (HRM) individual champion or specialist is involved. In reference to this participation, participant number three stated that: *The top management advocate for succession planning will therefore also help with succession planning implementation.*

According to participant three, it works best if one is an expert in top management in HR. This finding is unique to current study; however, there is lack of literature on this sub-theme.

Sub-theme III: changing top management
Succession planning is continuous process through which institutions can groom their talent pool with required leadership competencies, knowledge needed to perform critical job and experience. In the light of long-term perspective succession planning is not merely fill the vacant position; meanwhile it is a systematic and proactive approach to develop leaders for long-term success of organisation. The findings of the current study revealed that due to the lack of the continuity the process of execution of plan is slow. Regarding this participant three said that:

...continuity is not there ...

Moreover, the leaders from the outside implement strategic change and boost short-term success, leaders from the inside improve institutions’ long-term performance. Whilst an external leader has a detrimental impact on both long- and short-term performance, it has no
direct impact on total performance. In correspondence to this, findings suggest that succession does not appear to result in long-term performance increases; hence, it is typically unsuccessful in supporting the adapting shift. The participant four revealed that:

... VC keeps shifting ... VC from external or which is not in talent pool ... They might bring out something else ...

Furthermore, we discover that internal successors can improve long-term performance by making a limited number of strategic adjustments; as a result, the adaption viewpoint connecting strategy change with improvements in long-term performance is not supported by the data. The results imply that additional strategy change can result in disruptive costs rather than adaptive advantages. In conclusion, inconsistent top management changes may act as a roadblock in the succession planning process.

A change in the top management can disrupt the continuity as external leaders bring about strategic change. Whilst choosing university leaders can improve long-term performance, the implementation of succession planning may be hampered by changes in top leadership.

**Sub-theme VI: stakeholders**

In the blueprint (2015–2025) for the strategic initiatives in Malaysia, described to develop the leadership talent pool in higher education institutions and the responsibilities of higher education leadership academy in managing the leadership pool in public universities. Moreover, the Ministry made the recommendation for vice chancellor (VC). Although the ministry has a different opinion and a VC has been selected from outside of the pool, however, the application for the VC position has been established and approved by institutions. In this regard, the results indicated that stakeholders are also posing a challenge to the implementation of succession planning. Participant one said that:

Challenges arise from the stakeholders ... Let’s say if the university already recognizes vice-chancellor or deputy VC ... but the problem is selection is not from the panel.

The Ministry selects the VC for universities and universities frequently accept candidates for leadership positions over the ministry’s opposition; hence, it is inappropriate to allocate a VC based on what universities accept. This can demotivate applicants who are being groomed in universities’ leadership pool. As a result, it prevents the execution of succession planning.

**Theme II: the organisation system factors**

Four issues raised by the participants – culture, budget, promotion, and strategic plan – hinder the succession planning process. Further, Table 2 summarised the responses of all participants.

**Sub-theme I: organisational culture**

When picking future leaders with great potential, consideration is given to organisational culture. Leaders fixed and produce culture if culture selects and chooses leaders. A good fit would exist between an organization’s culture and its high-potential employees. Whilst leader of organizations create its culture, if they are not completely aware of it, they may also be liable for destroying it. An organizational leadership culture that values transparency, balance, continuity, contact and feedback will help with succession planning. The findings of current study also revealed that culture as a substantial obstacle to the adoption of succession planning. It is difficult to change the culture at research universities because they are older institutions. It was argued by participant three that academics should change university culture.

... main obstacle the reception of the culture that is problematic to adjustment and you require an academician to transform academicians ...
Sub-theme II: budget
The creation and expansion of the successor, budget is a crucial element. Budget restrictions prevent organisations from sending workers to leadership programs. The findings of the current study revealed that the budget for leadership development was stressed by every participant. The funding will support the implementation of succession planning, all participants agreed. Other participants countered that hiring an outsider is not as simple as hiring a foreign evaluator. Similarly, Hossain (2019) investigated public and private sectors, the findings revealed that succession planning was investigated more in private organisations. She discovered that many informal programs identified and chose people to get particular posts lacking in a competent capabilities (Atwood, 2020; Dowe, 2021). Regarding this participant five stated that:

... we require a budget particularly on to training of employees to acquire persons from outside.

The fact that training is optional is often believed by organisational executives to be due to the fact that it is seen more as an expense than an investment. Knowing that many firms do not base training and development on obtaining a specific business result makes this very reasonable (Frost, 2016). As a consequence, managers frequently refer staff members to training sessions that give the impression and promising without fully disclosing the expected outcomes. However, without verifiable outcomes, planning is scarcely anything more than a cost (Atwood, 2007; Mehrabani and Mohamad, 2021).

Sub-theme III: promotion
The findings of the current study revealed that the existing Malaysian reward system discourages academicians from taking on leadership roles. Since research and education are given more weight, possessing a leadership role does not help one get promoted. In this regard participant stated that:

I consider for the reason that a change to the raise has affected the individuals...

Reward programs are frequently used in businesses to support various successions. Being inclusive of minorities and women in their departments contributes to 25% of executive salary, therefore senior management firms have a significant incentive to do so (Brathwaite, 2002). Diversity goals make up 15% of compensation at Hyatt, where women make up 52% of the company’s management (Jama, 2022; Prince, 2005). Top managers lose money if Colgate-retention Palmolive’s rate for high potential goes below 90%. Many businesses are committed to enhancing positive behaviours like teamwork and skill development, yet promote opposing behaviours like individual success and technical advancements, according to
research on employee motivation and incentive systems (Cho et al., 2022; Greer and Virick, 2008). The participation of managers of all levels in the development of leadership in organisation can encourages such initiatives through the process of management performance evaluation and reward.

Sub-theme VI: strategic plan
The findings suggested that a strategic plan should be in line with succession planning. Universities should take into account the skills required for their future when developing their strategic plans. The replacement must then develop in accordance with those skills. Participant five added that:

The most vital is the strategic plan that being prepared by the university so with a clear vision and mission I think need to the successor in the succession planning you need to prepare it appropriately . . .”

The usefulness of succession planning in advancing academic institutions can be increased by utilising talent and enthusiasm. Institutions must act now to meet the evolving requirements of stakeholders. Key post vacancies can cause institutions to lose momentum and create obstacles as they continuously look to the future (Mehreen and Ali, 2022; Mfeka, 2022). Organisations and groups can navigate potential obstacles with the help of succession planning whilst maintaining their forward pace. Participant five added that if the successor is not being groomed in accordance with university requirements, there will be a discrepancy between the tasks that must be completed and the abilities needed to complete them. According to the findings, succession planning implementation will be improved if it is coordinated with the organisation’s strategic plan. Establishing future leaders in accordance with institutional norms is necessary (LeCounte, 2022; Pounds-Adams, 2022).

Conclusion
The study looked into what made succession planning in Malaysia’s public research institutions successful. The findings of the qualitative interviews showed that the institution’s strategy for personnel development and training can be influenced by the budget. As hiring experts for grooming the leaders required money. Meanwhile result revealed that there is no strategy continuity, thus selecting outside leader, for instance, will alter previous accomplishments, therefore and the university’s ethos must be to select its leaders from within. Evidence obtained through interviews showed senior management team, board, high-ranking managers, faculty deans, department directors and public sector higher management all take part in the process of succession planning. The university council could have taken a more active role by putting a policy into place that supports the programme by encouraging succession planning (Rothwell, 2010).

Further, the findings suggested that there must be a champion/expert in the senior management for ultimate support the program’s successful implementation. To become a strategic precedence and have a completely incorporated succession planning programme, champion support is crucial. The people who can eventually apply management the most successfully are the biggest advocates of it. Senior executives and important human resources staff will be directed by the organisation’s mission and values but, more importantly, create an approach that involves effective configuration of specific guidelines or procedures that respect the culture.

Overall findings indicate that the two main factors that might help or hinder the implementation of succession planning are funding and culture. A top management leader, an incentive programme, their encouragement, configuration with the strategic strategy and enhancement in upper management are some of the additional factors that participants have discussed.
Implications

The findings suggest that succession plan must adhere to the strategic plan, which embodies the university’s aims and guiding principles. Planning for succession should adhere to an institution’s strategy plan and the Atwood-recommended strategic priorities (2020). The organisation’s strategic plan will place special emphasis on uprightness and leadership development, which are strategic urgencies and seem crucial to the organisation. In the body of knowledge succession planning has been investigated with combining many factors however the literature main focus is corporate sector. Current study explored the factors from scratch as it is a qualitative study, mainly discussed about higher education institutions particularly public sector. Meanwhile, current study explore the factor “champions from top management” has been unique to this study, which is contribution in the body of the knowledge. The future studies, can explore the relationship of champions from top management in the implementation of succession planning in higher education institutions. Moreover, the findings of present study will be useful for policy makers in considering the factors that can creates restriction to the implementation of succession planning, during the developing the policies for the institutions. The study also explores the factors that can foster the process of implementation of succession planning. Furthermore, results of the study will contribute in the body of literature related to the implementation of the succession planning particularly in higher education institutions.

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Further reading


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