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Review Article

Leadership and change models for empowering gender equity in higher education

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Abstract

This article examines the role of leadership and change models in addressing inequality in access to higher education for female students from underprivileged groups in Cambodia. Despite efforts by the Cambodian government and development partners, significant barriers persist for these students. Utilising a review of existing documents and reports, this study highlights the importance of effective institutional leadership and evaluates various change models for their relevance to the Cambodian context. The study also discusses strategies for continuous improvement and accountability. By focusing on leadership, the article provides insights into enhancing inclusivity and equity for underprivileged female students in Cambodian higher education and offers practical recommendations for institutional development and policy implementation.

Keywords: Leadership; change models; higher education; social justice; female students

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Introduction

Female students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, face substantial equity barriers that hinder their access to higher education. These barriers include social standards, socio-economic challenges, and demographic areas (Tuy, 2019). Acknowledging the impact of higher education on underprivileged groups in terms of employment, social equality in accessing opportunities, and their potential for economic development (Heng, 2022; Ministry of Education Youth and Sport [MoEYS], 2018; Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2014), development partners, Cambodian governments, ministries, institutions, and non-government organisations (NGOs) have worked for decades to increase female enrolment in education. Initiatives such as the expansion of higher education institutions (HEIs), offering scholarships, and building dormitories have successfully increased the enrolment of female students in tertiary education (Chea, 2019). However, educational inequality remains a complex issue influenced by social, political, and economic factors. Despite these efforts, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) reported that 263 million children and teenagers aged 6–17, predominantly females, were still not in school (UNESCO, 2017). The evidence indicates that the accessibility to higher education is far from reaching equality for female students.

Although the issue is complex, it does not mean that the situation cannot be altered or improved. Many scholars reckon that the power of change is in the hands of leaders and the leadership approach they select to apply. According to UNESCO (2017), strong leadership and a shared understanding of inclusion are indispensable to implementing a national plan for inclusive education. Moreover, Adserias et al. (2016) noted that the leader plays a significant role in pushing the diversity agenda and fostering organisational culture reform. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD], 2019) concluded that good governance is crucial for enhancing and maintaining quality performance in early care and education programmes. Others stressed that ineffective leadership was the reason for the unsuccessful change. An incompetent leader, faculty hesitancy, financial pressures, public scrutiny, rival values, and a traditional institutional legacy often hinder improvement (Kang et al., 2020; Kezar, 2011). Given these challenges and the critical role of effective leadership, this article aims to critically assess the role of educational leaders

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and explore approaches that may be relevant for promoting inclusive education and mitigating educational disparity in the Cambodian context.

This article is structured as follows. It begins with a discussion of the chosen methodology, followed by a detailed critical analysis of the role of leadership, change models, and other approaches that contribute to effective leadership and promote equity in access to higher education. The article concludes by offering key insights and discussing the implications for fostering equity within HEIs.

Methodology

The aim of this article is to critically assess the role of educational leaders in addressing educational disparities and advancing gender equity within HEIs. To achieve this, the study employed a critical review approach, which is well-suited for synthesising and evaluating existing theories and practices. This methodology facilitates a comprehensive analysis of how various leadership models impact organisational transformation and cultural evolution in educational settings, as it is significant in seeking to identify conceptual contributions that embody existing or derive new theories (Grant & Booth, 2009). By focusing on the influence of leadership at the institutional level, this research integrates insights from a broad range of sources to provide a nuanced understanding of how leadership can drive effective change and foster equity. This approach ensures a thorough examination of the complexities involved in promoting social justice and achieving equitable educational outcomes. Furthermore, Monash Library and Google Scholar were the two main databases used for this review. Most of the selected sources were published from 1992 to 2021, as the review was conducted in 2022. The sources primarily focus on educational leadership, change models, and gender equity within higher education, particularly in the context of Cambodia and the broader context. Therefore, despite limitations, the findings may have the potential to be generalised across similar educational contexts.

It is important to note that this review relies on secondary sources, which may not capture current trends or first-hand perspectives. Additionally, the focus on studies published between 1992 and 2021 may exclude more recent developments in educational leadership and gender equity.

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Findings of the review

The findings of this critical literature review are presented in a format aligned with the research aim of exploring the role of leadership, change models, and other approaches for effective leadership. In each section, a detailed critical analysis of the findings is provided, integrating the results with the broader context of the discussion.

Leaders and leadership levels

First and foremost, it is vital to identify leaders who can help to address this inequity in accessing higher education for Cambodian female students at a national scale, as some stakeholders have an immense influence on the issue. These stakeholders include international partners or donors, the Cambodian government, the concerned ministries, HEIs, and NGOs (see Heng, 2020; Sam & Dales, 2017). Since they can influence national goals, formulate policies, manage resource distributions, and select and build team capacity to address the issues, they are the most influential players in dealing with the issues (Sam & Dales, 2017). However, at the institutional level that this article focuses on, leaders who have significant influence in making decisions, drafting plans, and implementing change are the president, vice presidents, governing board members, deans, and heads of departments. Therefore, it is vital to examine their roles.

Many universities in Cambodia, both public and private, are under the supervision of MoEYS, which monitors the progress and collects development reports from HEIs annually (Sam & Dales, 2017). Cambodia's Educational Strategic Plan 2018-2023 has two policies: "Policy 1: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all" and "Policy 2: Ensure effective leadership and management of education officials at all levels" (MoEYS, 2019, p. 1). Hence, to some extent, each institution should align its institutional vision, mission, and strategic plan to these national objectives that have been set to ensure equity in the education system. Senior executives, such as the president, vice presidents, deans, and department heads, exert tremendous authority inside the organisation to engage and make decisions to meet organisational goals. Maxam and Henderson (2013) pointed out that the president must commit to revolutionary change and integrate diversity into the institution's vision, values, planning, resource allocation, and

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accountability; with this system-level support, evolution for educational diversity can happen. Further evidence indicated that leaders can influence teaching and learning through their subordinates and staff. For instance, indirectly and most significantly, school leaders influence teaching and learning via their impact on staff motivation, dedication, and job quality (Leithwood et al., 2008). As the evidence suggests, those leaders in the institutions play a vital role in making changes in the organisational culture at the system level in both academic and administrative aspects, which significantly impact staff, students' achievements, and long-term institutional goals.

Despite the essential roles of leaders in integrating diverse agendas in tertiary education, many researchers stressed the importance of collaboration of stakeholders at all levels (Morrison, 2002). The leader draws on diffused knowledge, which infers that the leader alone cannot effect change to the complex issue; they need the assistance of stakeholders and their teams. It is unwise for leaders to think that they know everything (Morrison, 2002). The example from the United Nations report stated that dealing with social justice in education requires strong collaboration (United Nations, 2006), and as the president is not the primary source of leadership, faculty members and employees are vital unsung leaders to keep the organisation operating smoothly behind the scenes (Aderias et al., 2016). Similarly, Fullan's (2010) work highlighted that those outstanding change agents are not loners and that the whole system, from the classroom to the school to the district to the state, should be unified and collectively competent. Therefore, engaging, listening, and empowering stakeholders in the change process is imperative to transform educational organisations.

Personal leadership attributes

The personal leadership approach is a tool to enhance leadership. However, Cambodian educators who were supposed to be role models for the next generation were mostly killed during the Khmer Rouge regime. Since then, Cambodian universities have been growing from scratch since 1979 (Mam et al., 2017). Leaders require particular personal leadership traits to influence the diversity agenda and teach students about a global economy and diverse workforce (Williams, 2013). A study by Evans (2019) indicated that the growth of the higher education sector needs a comprehensive strategy, which the

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Cambodian government cannot provide on its own due to a lack of financial resources, expertise, and personnel. Another study shows that higher education suffers a shortfall of educational leaders, planners, and managers to replace retiring senior educators (Chet, 2009). Additionally, Kim et al. (2010) and Maxwell et al. (2015) argued that local leadership is necessary for national policies to impact the institutional level. This evidence suggests that leaders are crucial to Cambodian higher education development and are in scarcity. However, what are a leader's fundamental characteristics and skills, or qualifications should he or she possess? These questions are critical in addressing social justice in education.

Based on Cambodian educational needs, personal leadership should obtain the following attributes for some reasons. First, leaders should be self-aware of their roles and the inclusion organisation. The study of Ros et al. (2019) on academic identities and roles in Cambodia indicated that faculty members view their roles in three forms: teaching, research, and services and leadership. Nevertheless, the other two, aside from teaching, seem absent. Understanding how the university operates is one of the high-ranking capacities a leader has to comprehend to lead the institution (Scott et al., 2010). If they recognise and utilise the function properly, it will be beneficial for students, employees, organisations, and society. Another personal approach derived from the five components of the leadership of Fullan (2003) is the moral purpose. This trait indicates that leaders have an unwavering commitment to making a difference for the betterment of the students, staff, organisation, and society. As leaders who commit to change to improve other lives, they are essential to the long-term success of all firms (Fullan, 2003). Moreover, the literature on educational leadership reveals a high stance on the capacity to develop trust as a strong personal approach, leading to success in uncertain times. Jameson (2012) stated that the significance of leadership principles in fostering trust, sustainability, and enhanced organisational cultures is vital for the survival of universities and colleges in the current economic climate. Handford and Leithwood (2013) also supported the idea that leadership behaviour that teachers see as signs of competency, consistency, dependability, openness, respect, and honesty most affects teachers' confidence in principals. For socially just schools and student accomplishment, a trustworthy leader is of paramount importance (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Thus, self-awareness of their role, moral purpose, and

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trustworthiness are the three personal attributes that are essential to bringing social justice to female students in Cambodia.

Despite the significance of the three personal approaches, there are more leadership skills that leaders should master. For instance, continual capacity-building, awareness-raising, and the involvement of women and girls, ethnic groups, and individuals with disabilities in decision-making processes and other activities for reaching excluded learners are also crucial to success (UNESCO, 2017). Additionally, others view that student care and social justice are not enough. All students need experienced and informed leaders who can withstand education management challenges, stay the course, and help create inclusive, caring, high-performing, and outstanding schools (DeMatthews, 2015). Therefore, leaders must incline to lifelong learning, and system-level changes are necessary for sustained growth, considering the rapid transformation of society.

Organisational leadership attributes

Organisational leadership involves executives establishing set strategic objectives and inspiring employees to attain them (Tokar, 2020). Therefore, an organisational leader is a change agent; this refers to a person who understands the broad picture and the procedures or actions involved in bringing about change. However, even a charismatic leader who has the ambition to drive change toward an egalitarian society or support education equality, the transformation may not be successful without the knowledge and skills in leadership and how to transform those aspects into a system that can self-check and balance itself.

Below are some leadership attributes viewed as suitable in the Cambodian context based on the current situation and challenges the educator faces in dealing with inequity. They include having a shared vision and setting direction, supporting social relations, creating a culturally responsive and inclusive curriculum, and empowering members.

First, having a shared vision and plan significantly impacts the organisation and ensures that organisational goals are achieved. An example in Kang et al.'s (2020) study states that communicating the vision to faculty helps them comprehend the novel method and provides more useful and timely input.

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Hallinger and Heck (2002) stated that creating a common goal, encouraging buy-in for team objectives, and setting a standard of excellence are essential. This showed that having a clear vision with the team can motivate and help them understand the direction of the organisation, and they are on board to contribute to the organisational change process.

Second, a leadership approach supports social relations between stakeholders, including employees, students, and the community (MacDonald, 2019). This feature also promotes a culture of caring that fosters teachers' professional risk-taking (Furman, 2012; Hayes et al., 2004) and creates trust in low-surveillance settings where school administration supports teachers in their work (Smyth, 2012). Ultimately, such practice not only enhances collaboration but also contributes to a positive, supportive environment that is conducive to both teacher growth and student success.

Third, teaching and learning are the first priority in education; an inclusive and culturally responsive curriculum should be an approach of leadership to address the social justice issue in education. Thus, inclusive schooling approaches may enhance justice for marginalised learners by connecting the histories, cultures, contributions, and viewpoints of non-dominant groups into the curriculum (Keddie, 2012). This infers that if the school's goal is to address inequity in education, an inclusive and culturally responsive curriculum is a necessary step towards leadership.

Last but not least, the critical aspect of leadership is that leaders need an effective team to develop, implement, and monitor the plan; these tasks are impossible if they stand alone. Hence, team forming and empowering team capacity are of utmost importance, and the team is not only in the organisation but also includes students, parents, partners, and society. Engaging these external stakeholders is important because it ensures broader support for change being implemented and fosters a collective sense of ownership of the outcome. For example, according to research in three Hong Kong secondary schools, middle-level leaders are able to lead beyond their administration as a result of leadership training that focuses on schools' missions as well as their leadership roles (Bryant, 2018). Therefore, building the team capacity is vital to overcome their resistance and empower them to influence beyond their organisations.

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Although the above leadership skills are vital, another notion worth noting is that many educational practitioners praise data-driven organisational leadership. According to Fullan's (2010) view of the elements of successful reform, mobilising data as a strategic improvement is significant for integrating it as part of a powerful system. Furthermore, Kezar (2008) argued that utilising data as proof is an efficient strategy for overcoming faculty members' objections to diversity agendas and for holding academic leaders responsible. Thus, leaders need to be flexible and collect feedback using a complex methodology to ensure sustainable development in the educational organisation.

Organisational change models

Reforming the educational system, which has been rooted in the sector and is interwoven with social, cultural, political, and economic factors, using just one organisational change model to solve the wicked problem seems unfeasible (Kezar, 2001; Quan et al., 2019). Therefore, context is vital before selecting any model. According to some prominent research in the field of education, some famous and considered adequate models can lead to positive changes in the organisation (Burnes, 2004; Fullan, 2010). The following change models will be discussed, such as Kotter's (1996) teleological model and Lewin's (1951) model, followed by the justification of which model is better in the Cambodian context.

A top-down teleological approach is attractive because it is simple and easy to grasp for non-change management professionals who are in the position (Wentworth et al., 2018). However, faculty members have considerable autonomy, so top-down techniques may not be successful (Buller, 2014). Another change model added by Wentworth et al. (2018) is Kotter's paradigm of change, which is among the most well-known approaches to leading organisational transformation. Due to its reputation as a fundamental and uncomplicated structure, many practitioners continue to use it. Kotter's change model consists of eight steps, with forming a vision as the primary step, and has proved effective in tertiary education, primarily for administrative and technical changes (Kang et al., 2020). However, this model succeeds only in the presence of strong team members and capable leaders (Collins et al., 2016). These two models should be taken into consideration.

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Another model is Lewin's change model, developed by Kurt Lewin, which may be significant for the Cambodian context. This change model has three phases: Unfreezing, Moving, and Refreezing (Burnes, 2004). Those stages include:

1. Unfreezing: Confrontation or re-education process, achieved through team building,
2. Moving: Developing new behaviours, values, and attitudes,
3. Refreezing: Stabilisation at a new balanced state to ensure safety." (Tran & Gandolfi, 2020, p. 202)

A study in Vietnam's higher education indicated that after applying Lewin's three-phase model, implementing change in the working environment in the institutions saw significant improvement (Tran & Gandolfi, 2020). Moreover, the reason that Lewin's model was selected was because the work of Lewin was appropriate for the context of a developing country, which allowed the leader to reflect on the intended outcome, gave employees time to adapt to the new concept, and helped generate the momentum necessary to change and gain acceptance (Tran & Gandolfi, 2020). According to Ros et al. (2019), the Cambodian education system is disjointed at all levels, so unfreezing and building a team for change may be a necessary step. Importantly, Lewin believes that only through enhancing democratic involvement in all parts of society and resolving social problems can autocracy, authoritarianism, and racism be overcome (Burnes, 2004). Thus, Lewin's model is highly recommended in Cambodia, as both countries have similar challenges. Although this is an impressive model, some criticised this approach. According to Hatch (1997), Lewin's neglect of power, politics, and organisational conflict is criticised. However, Bargal et al. (1992) supported Lewin's model and stated that Lewin's approach to transformation demands consideration of all parties in the systems and power structures. Overall, this model is ideal and effective in modern educational settings.

Continuous improvement and accountability approach

Higher education plays a crucial role in advancing society towards sustainable development (Noaman et al., 2017); consequently, it receives a great deal of attention from the public, leaders, and academics regarding the high quality of students' learning outcomes of their learning programmes (Murray, 2009). On the one hand, educational development is achieved through the collaboration

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of stakeholders, and those changes are not a one-day process. Therefore, monitoring and evaluation procedures need to be integrated into the institutional system to maintain improvement in the long run. As Walser (2015) noted, accountability and continuous improvement are best served when an institution has a culture of assessment, which means that assessment and implementation are an integral part of the daily routine in the institution. According to the World Bank (2018), in addition to enhancing access to equality in education, the Cambodian government has taken further measures to improve educational quality by intending to make national evaluations a yearly event as part of its broader goal. Through this commitment to ensure the quality of higher education, nine minimum quality standards (Accreditation Committee of Cambodia [ACC], 2020) have been established for the accreditation process to ensure that they meet the national strategic goals, which in turn ensures equity and quality education for the public. These standards, combined with the monitoring process, can be essential to ensure the continued improvement of higher education in Cambodia. The nine minimum quality standards offer a practical approach to maintaining quality and accountability in higher education in Cambodia since they encompass many important aspects.

The minimum standards developed by ACC provided institutional leaders with principles for ensuring quality and promoting sustainable growth. These standards are crucial for the context of Cambodia. Those nine standards are (1) Vision, Mission, and Goals; (2) Governance and Management; (3) Academic Staff; (4) Academic Programme; (5) Student Services; (6) Learning Resources; (7) Physical Resources; (8) Financial Resources; and (9) Internal Quality Assurance (ACC, 2020). HEIs and leaders are accountable to the public, academics, and students for delivering relevant learning outcomes (Walser, 2015). Therefore, monitoring and assessing institutions annually against these requirements provides holistic feedback on the changes made by educational institutions and areas for improvement that can be employed for improvement. Furthermore, each of these nine standards required input from various stakeholders and used data-driven methods as a means for reform, which is essential evidence in avoiding faculty resistance. As a result, these nine standards are prominent in ensuring that aspects of tertiary education are fulfilled.

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As evidenced in Un and Sok's (2018) work, the decree requires HEIs to create their internal quality assurance units to perform frequent internal self-assessments and enhance their education quality. Thus, a continuous quality improvement approach is required. A widely adopted and well-known approach is Deming's PDSA cycle, which includes Plan, Do, Study, and Act (Fernandes, 2019). It was stressed that combining these two activities, self-assessment tasks and continuous improvement tasks, operating interdependently and sequentially in a continuous improvement system, results in a quality-improved educational institution (Fernandes, 2013). As a result, the minimum quality standards and the PDSA cycle are substantial methods for creating sustainable development and institutional accountability in tertiary education.

Despite the benefits of the two aspects, it is worth noting that leaders need to construct and enact an equity vision to benefit marginal students, as the vision is based mainly on the leadership's ideas (Education Northwest, 2015). Therefore, it is paramount that leaders should integrate equity into their vision, or else the change in direction may not be affiliated with the social problem.

Strategies for leadership capacity-building

Capacity development has been cited in several leadership studies as an efficient approach to strengthening leadership (Cheng & Zhu, 2021; Fan & Liu, 2020; Mansfield, 2014; Vong et al., 2019), yet Cambodian academics' capacity is limited (Mam et al., 2017). Notably, this viewpoint is among the two national strategies in higher education (MoEYS, 2018). Even though some people are natural leaders, others can develop their leadership abilities with practice. Therefore, charismatic leaders can be developed. Even though personal and organisational leadership attributes discussed in the previous section are essential, these capacities are just some valuable leadership skills for leaders; yet they are insufficient to meet leadership requirements in every setting. Thus, leaders may acquire new talents and remain lifelong learners in leadership, pedagogy, society, politics, and economy, as these can influence their institution's development.

Understanding strategies for building capacity as a leader is vital for personal and professional development and the whole organisation. Gmelch and Builler (2015) offered a process for building intellectual capacity with three steps:

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design, establish, and maintain; meanwhile, they complained about one-off leadership training as ineffective. Their book emphasised that leadership training should be developed based on goal-oriented and task-oriented approaches. It is wise to avoid replacing administrators' present knowledge with a universal key to organisational success, and it is better to build on what they already know and who they already are (Gmelch & Buller, 2015). Based on a review of previous work (Mak et al., 2019; Kang et al., 2020; Sam & Dahles, 2017), several strategies have been proposed to address issues in higher education. These include increasing the national budget for higher education (Kang et al., 2020), implementing higher education system reforms (Mak et al., 2019), and fostering collaboration strategies (Sam & Dahles, 2017). In short, this underscores the importance of developing data-driven organisational needs based on vision, goals, and stakeholder requirements, which are particularly useful during the design stage, as described by Gmelch and Bullier (2015). Thus, establishing a capacity-building programme and maintaining it regularly are crucial steps. These strategies are relevant to the Cambodian context and support leadership efforts. However, ensuring leaders' commitment to allocating necessary resources is a significant challenge. As noted by Mak et al. (2019), a major issue at the institutional level in Cambodian higher education is the lack of key personnel and resources needed for effective collaboration and long-term strategy. Addressing these challenges is essential when proposing measures to enhance leadership capacity for educators at all educational levels.

Connection's diagram

This section presents a connection diagram, which visually summarises the key concepts and relationships discussed in the previous sections (Figure 1). The diagram illustrates how various elements, such as leadership roles, stakeholder approaches, and change processes, are interconnected and contribute to achieving organisational transformation. This diagram helps to better understand the complex dynamics at play and how different factors work together to promote equity and development within the educational setting.

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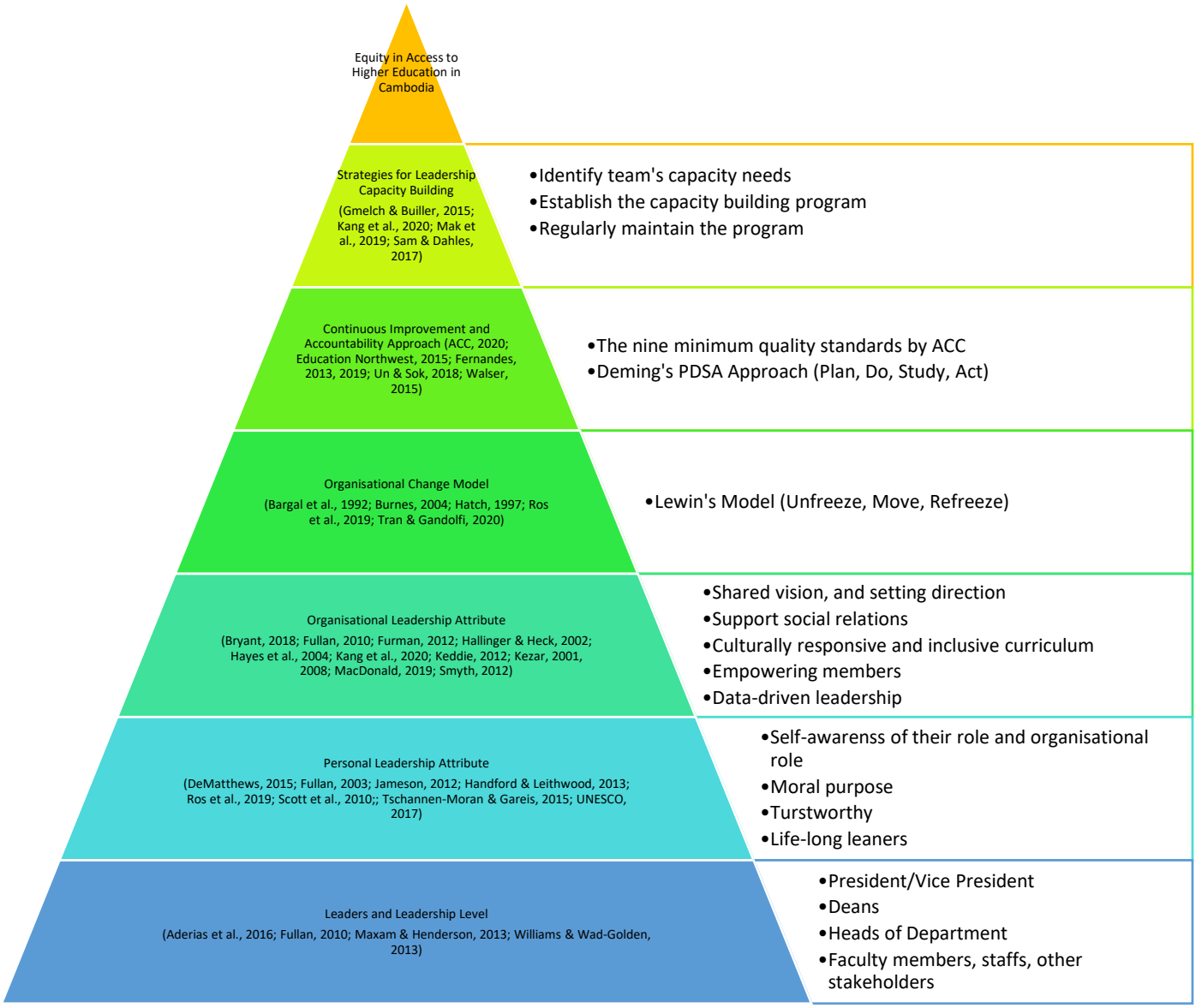


Figure 1. Connection's diagram

Conclusion

Leaders have a tremendous impact on transforming educational organisations for the benefit of female students and societal inequality. Education leaders, their leadership styles, change models, sustainability approaches, and capacity building are entangled to form a leader who can shape culturally inclusive education and contribute to a more equitable society. As the analysis suggests, leaders such as the president, vice presidents, deans, and department heads play a crucial role in establishing an organisational culture at the system level since they can make decisions, establish goals, and devise strategies for the betterment of the organisation. Nonetheless, faculty members, employees, and

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other stakeholders who play a vital role behind the scenes in the change process should be empowered via their voices. Moreover, the best personal leadership traits are self-awareness of their role and organisation, a willingness to make a difference in others' lives, trustworthiness, and an openness to further knowledge, as these approaches benefit students, other stakeholders, and the organisation's success. Also, organisational talents include having a common vision, supporting social interactions, understanding inclusive curriculum development, empowering members, and using data as evidence for modification.

However, personal and organisational leadership qualities are insufficient for leading change in difficult times; thus, leaders should comprehend change processes. Due to its success in other developing countries with similar issues, Lewin's change model suits the current Cambodian context. Furthermore, the research shows that change must be maintained with leadership accountability. Therefore, the nine minimum quality standards used by the Cambodian government to ensure the quality of tertiary education and Deming's PDSA approach are considered ideal for sustainable development in higher education. Ultimately, competent leaders and teams were required to carry out the intricate reform. Hence, growing their capabilities is essential, and the capacity development programme may be accomplished via basic phases of creating, establishing, and maintaining, depending on the organisation's inputs and requirements. Last but not least, this article's implications may substantially impact the formation of leaders who will facilitate the growth of equality in Cambodia's educational environment to benefit female students.

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