

Student Empowerment Agenda Reimagined: Trailblazing Character Based Leadership Models.  
(*Agenda Pemerkasaan Mahasiswa Baharu: Meneroka Model Kepimpinan Berasaskan Karakter*)

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ABSTRACT

Integrity is fundamental to the student empowerment landscape, providing authenticity in leading by example. Leadership thrives on balancing respect, fostering partnership and fairness, and responsibility, encouraging self-initiative for the organization's benefit. Character-based leadership training emphasizes the development of personal values, ethical behavior, and integrity, which are crucial for effective organizational leadership. This study critically analyzes existing character leadership models, focusing on challenges in objectively measuring character traits and integrating them with traditional competency-based models. The main objective of this study is to investigate the impact of character-based leadership on student-led organizations and to provide actionable insights for enhancing leadership practices. This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative with quantitative surveys. Data were collected from 44 student representative councils across Universiti Utara Malaysia, analyzing both qualitative and quantitative findings through observations, literature reviews and interviews. Challenges identified include subjectivity in character trait evaluation and difficulties in translating these traits into actionable behaviors. Despite these challenges, the relevance of character-based leadership in the students' empowerment agenda remains significant, as the success of the students' empowerment agenda either in political freedoms, student union powers, financial autonomy, and robust self-led initiatives relies heavily on the ability of student leaders exhibiting high levels of integrity and empathy. Key recommendations include establishing clear standards for character traits, implementing robust ethics codes, and incorporating practical training programs with ethical decision-making simulations. Integrating character traits with competency models and utilizing 360-degree feedback, reflection, dialogue, and mentorship are crucial for improving leadership selection, evaluation, and promotion processes. By addressing these challenges and implementing the proposed solution strategies, student organizations can foster a leadership culture that values both competence and ethical behavior, and ultimately enhancing the students' empowerment movement's effectiveness and sustainability.

Keywords: Character-based leadership, ethical behavior, leadership training, student organizations, competency models.

ABSTRAK

*Integriti adalah asas landskap pemerkasaan mahasiswa terulung, menjamin ketelusan dalam pengamalan kepimpinan melalui teladan. Kepimpinan berkembang melalui keseimbangan rasa hormat, pemupukan budaya bekerjasama dan keadilan, serta semangat tanggungjawab yang menggalakkan pelaksanaan inisiatif secara kendiri demi manfaat organisasi. Latihan kepimpinan berdasarkan karakter menekankan pembangunan nilai peribadi, tingkah laku etika, dan integriti yang penting untuk kepimpinan organisasi yang berkesan. Kajian ini menganalisis dan menilai model kepimpinan berdasarkan karakter yang sedia ada secara kritikal, dengan fokus kepada halangan untuk mengukur karakter-karakter individu secara objektif dan mengintegrasikannya dengan model penilaian tradisional berdasarkan kecekapan. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk menyelidik kesan pembawaan kepimpinan berdasarkan karakter terhadap organisasi pimpinan pelajar dan mendapatkan kaedah pengimplementasian model kepimpinan berdasarkan karakter secara praktikal yang lebih berkesan. Kajian ini mengguna pakai pendekatan kaedah campuran (mixed method). Data dikumpulkan daripada 44 Majlis Perwakilan Pelajar Universiti Utara Malaysia melalui kajian pemerhatian, sastera dan wawancara bagi tinjauan kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Cabaran yang dikenal pasti termasuk subjektiviti dalam penilaian sifat-sifat karakter dan kesukaran menterjemahkan sifat-sifat ini kepada nilai prestasi yang boleh diukur. Walau bagaimanapun, kepimpinan berdasarkan karakter masih relevan dalam aspek pemerkasaan mahasiswa kerana*

*keterjaminan prestasi organisasi pelajar dalam memanfaatkan kebebasan berpolitik, bergerak sebagai kesatuan pelajar, autonomi kewangan dan pelbagai inisiatif kendiri bergantung kepada keupayaan pemimpin pelajar untuk menunjukkan tahap integriti dan empati yang tinggi. Cadangan utama penambahbaikan termasuk penetapan piawaian yang jelas untuk pembawaan karakter, pelaksanaan kod etika yang kukuh, dan penggabungan program latihan praktikal dengan simulasi pembuatan keputusan etika. Usaha menangani cabaran dan pelaksanaan strategi yang dicadangkan dapat memupuk budaya kepimpinan yang menghargai karakter terpuji kepimpinan badan pelajar, sekali gus meningkatkan keberkesanan dan kelestarian agenda pemerkasaan mahasiswa.*

*Kata kunci: Pemerkasaan mahasiswa, kepimpinan berdasarkan karakter, tingkah laku etika, latihan kepimpinan, organisasi pelajar, model kecekapan.*

## INTRODUCTION

The late 1960s saw an increase in student activism and movements, both locally and globally. The Malaysian government was concerned about the potential for such movements to influence or disrupt higher education institutions. The Universities and College Universities Act or AUKU 1971 aimed to curb these activities and ensure that universities remained focused on academic pursuits rather than political or social activism. AUKU was designed to centralize control over universities and colleges, ensuring that they operated in accordance with national policies and standards. The Act provided the government with substantial authority over the appointment of university officials, the management of university finances, and the regulation of academic and administrative matters.

In the context of student organizations, leadership is often characterized by short tenures, which necessitates the rapid development of leadership skills and competencies. However, traditional competency-based leadership models, which focus on technical skills and managerial acumen, often overlook the critical role of character traits in sustaining effective leadership. This oversight can lead to challenges in maintaining long-term organizational cohesion and fostering genuine collaboration among members.

Character-based leadership offers a more holistic approach by integrating personal values with leadership practices. Studies by Brown and Treviño (2006) and Northouse (2016) emphasize that ethical leadership leads to higher levels of organizational commitment and performance, particularly in environments where collaboration and mutual respect are key to success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For students' context, political, financial and students'

autonomy and freedom had seemed to be encroached upon and controlled through the enforcement of the Act. However, following seven amendments, the narrative of AUKU 1971 restricting the students now remains as a matter of the past. In March, in Kuala Lumpur, the Dewan Rakyat approved significant amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU) 1971, reflecting a progressive shift towards enhancing student freedom and involvement. Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Zambray Abdul Kadir highlighted that these changes are designed to empower students and improve the management of student organizations.

Key amendments include Section 15A, which permits student bodies to organize and receive funds from various sources, and Section 16B, which transfers disciplinary authority from the vice-chancellor to a student disciplinary committee. Additional revisions to the First Schedule and Section 49(2) now extend similar facilities to student bodies as those available to student representative councils. These amendments follow a history of

AUKU reforms, including the 2018 removal of restrictions on student political activities, and have been shaped by extensive consultations with student groups since 2021. Thus, the amendments have provided solutions to the past dwellings of youth leaders. However, an important question shall be posed in regard to students' readiness for self-governance.

Recent reports highlight that the growing financial autonomy and empowerment of students make them increasingly vulnerable to money laundering schemes. Stevenson University News points out that as students gain more control over their financial transactions, they become prime targets for criminals seeking to exploit university financial systems for laundering illicit funds (Stevenson University, 2024). Similarly, research discussed by The Conversation indicates that universities' complex financial operations and international student programs make them attractive targets for money laundering activities. This

situation is exacerbated by the recent amendments to the Malaysian Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU) 1971, which, while intended to enhance student empowerment and financial independence, also increase the risk of students being inadvertently involved in illegal activities. These amendments underscore the need for universities to strengthen regulatory measures and safeguard mechanisms to prevent their financial systems from being misused (The Conversation, 2024).

The concept of character-based leadership has gained increasing attention in leadership studies, particularly in educational settings. Scholars such as Sinek (2009) and Kouzes & Posner (2012) highlight the importance of ethical leadership as a cornerstone for successful organizations. Their works suggest that leaders who exhibit strong character traits, such as integrity and empathy, are more likely to inspire trust and commitment among followers. The integration of the character-based leadership styles thus would mitigate the risk of students' involvement in crimes involving corruption or money laundering by staying true to their roots of ethical beliefs and principles.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Thus, this study aims to explore the readiness of student leaders at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) to embrace independent student movement agendas, particularly through the lens of character-based leadership. Key research questions include:

- i. How aware are UUM student leaders of their expanded rights and responsibilities under recent legislative changes to curate independent self-led movements?
- ii. To what extent are they equipped to leverage these legislative changes to enhance student participation in university governance and decision-making?
- iii. How would the character-based leadership models increase the effectiveness of student bodies to lead and advocate for their peers?

## HYPOTHESIS

The readiness of student leaders at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) to curate and lead independent student movement agendas is positively influenced by their level of awareness of post-AUKU legislative changes and their adoption of character-based leadership principles.

## RESEARCH PROPOSITION

This study proposes that student leaders who internalize character-based leadership values, particularly integrity, empathy, and resilience, are more likely to effectively utilize their expanded legal rights provided in the amendment of the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 to enhance student engagement in university governance.

## OPERATIONALIZATION OF CHARACTER BASED LEADERSHIP MODELS IN CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

The author operationalized these leadership theories by integrating them into the design of the research, data collection, and analysis. Each theory guided the formulation of research questions that explored specific leadership behaviors and outcomes, focusing on the values and actions of student leaders at UUM. This process ultimately helped to test the hypothesis and the proposition that character-based leadership principles, such as integrity, empathy, and resilience, are key factors in the success of student leaders in utilizing their expanded legal rights to enhance student engagement and governance.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

### Surveys and Questionnaires

Distributed via Google Forms to evaluate 44 SRC members' awareness and preparedness. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with results presented in tables, graphs, and charts. The questions are framed based on literature reviews, which suggest the line of questions significant to the discussion.

### Respondent Background

The respondents in this study are 44 members of the Student Representative Council (SRC) at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The SRC is structured into four primary clusters: Academic, Welfare, Student Empowerment, and Media Corporate. Within these clusters, the council comprises 13 executive members who oversee the specialized areas of their respective clusters.

In addition to the executive members, the SRC includes 11 high council members who support the core leadership team. This organization comprises four main

leadership positions: the President, Vice President, Secretary, and Honorary Treasurer. Each of these roles carries specific responsibilities crucial to the operation and effectiveness of the SRC. The focus of this study is particularly on the financial empowerment of student leadership, with specific emphasis on the role of the Honorary Treasurer.

The treasurer's job scope is pivotal in managing the financial resources of the SRC and ensuring that financial practices align with the new empowerment measures following recent amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU).

#### Scope Of Question

Each specific type of leadership theory is also narrowed down through the questionnaires and is related with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to foster understanding on the global strategy of effective student empowerment agenda. For example, the survey included questions on the relevance of direct student participation in policy-making, reflecting Transformational Leadership Theory and Situational Leadership Theory (Judge & Piccolo, 2020; Blanchard

& Hedges, 2019) and its relation to SDG 4 and SDG 16. Each specific type of leadership theory is also narrowed down through the responses of the questionnaires and is related with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to foster understanding on the global strategy of effective student empowerment agenda.

#### In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups

Conducted upon the relevant High Councils of SRC and the Financial Secretariats to gain insights into personal experiences, challenges, and leadership applications.

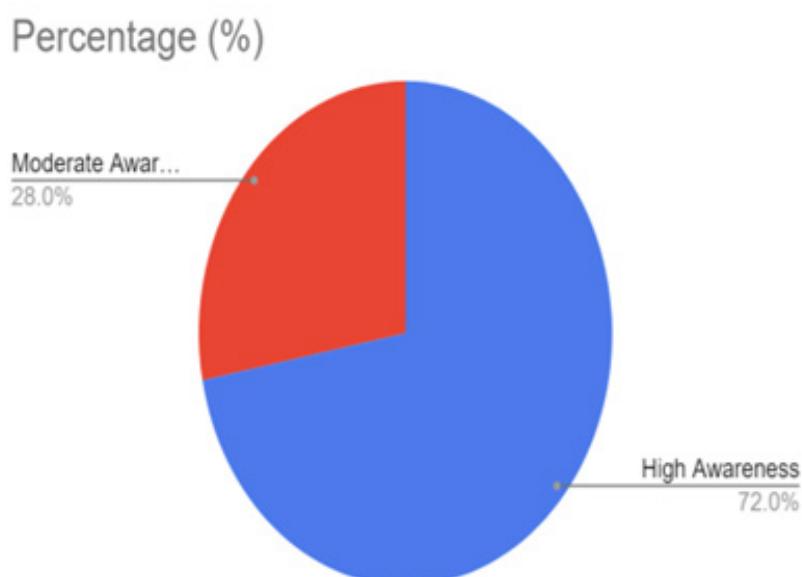
#### Case Studies

Reviewed successful student-led initiatives at UUM to identify best practices and areas for improvement, connecting with Charismatic and Developmental Leadership principles.

Case studies are made upon the resources from two main models, which are the financial structure from the Sheffield University's Student Union and Kesatuan Mahasiswa Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (KMUKM).

TABLE & PIE CHART 1. Awareness of New Rights and Responsibilities

1	How aware are you of the new rights and responsibilities granted to student representative councils?	A. Very aware B. Somewhat aware C. Not aware at all
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## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Surveys Questionnaires

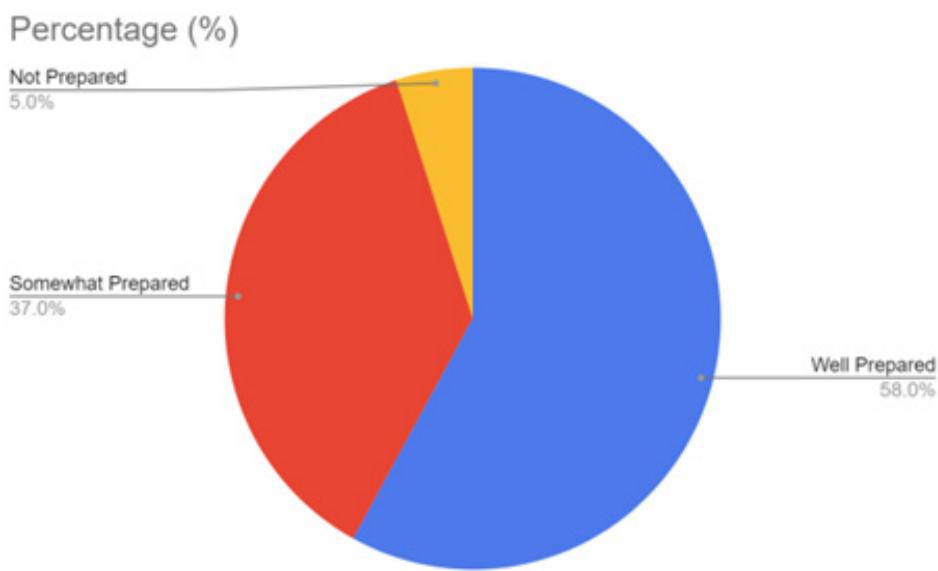
#### Questions, Responses and Reflections

The high level of awareness among Student Representative Council (SRC) members at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) regarding new empowerment opportunities reflects a robust internal communication system within the university. This observation is consistent with Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes the importance of leaders inspiring and motivating their followers through a clear

articulation of their vision and objectives (Judge & Piccolo, 2020). In the Malaysian context, particularly in light of the Malaysian Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (AUKU), effective communication of rights and responsibilities within the SRC supports Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education by improving educational governance and ensuring that students are well-informed about their roles and expectations. Additionally, it upholds SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by fostering transparency and informed leadership within the university, thereby reinforcing institutional control and governance.

TABLE & PIE CHART 2. Preparedness to Utilize Empowerment Opportunities

2	How prepared do you feel to utilize the new empowerment opportunities available to student representative councils?	A. Well prepared B. Somewhat prepared C. Not prepared
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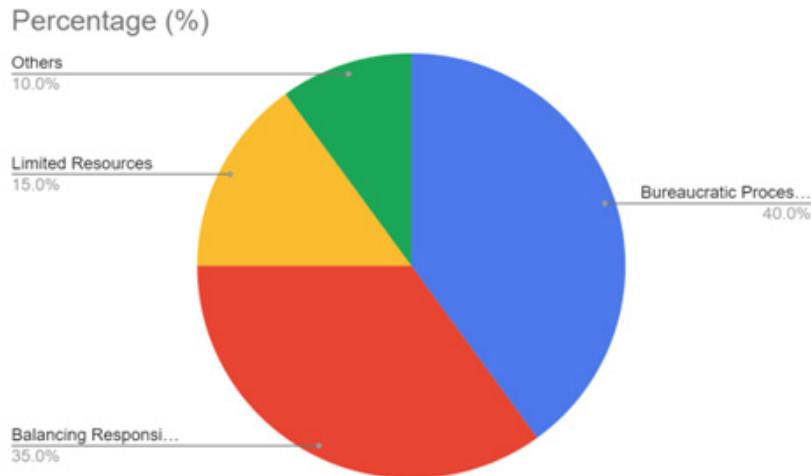


The varying levels of preparedness among SRC members to leverage new empowerment opportunities illustrate their ability to adapt and implement these changes effectively. This observation aligns with Situational Leadership Theory, which posits that leaders must tailor their approach based on the readiness and capabilities of their followers (Blanchard & Hedges, 2019). In the Malaysian university and UUM SRC context, adaptability is especially crucial for effectively navigating and utilizing new opportunities, given the constraints imposed by regulations such as internal procedures which are yet to be amended

pursuant to the AUKU 1971. Preparations need to be made to practice and emerge in the new empowerment processes, particularly in the financial procedures for student activities and student election. This adaptability and preparation efforts directly influence Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by promoting sustainable organizational practices and job creation. Furthermore, it supports SDG 4: Quality Education by ensuring that student leaders are well-equipped to enhance educational governance and effectively manage internal university dynamics.

TABLE &amp; PIE CHART 3. Challenges Faced in Leadership Roles

3 What are the main challenges you face in your leadership role within the student representative council? (Select all that apply)	A. Bureaucratic processes B. Balancing responsibilities C. Limited resources D. Other (please specify)
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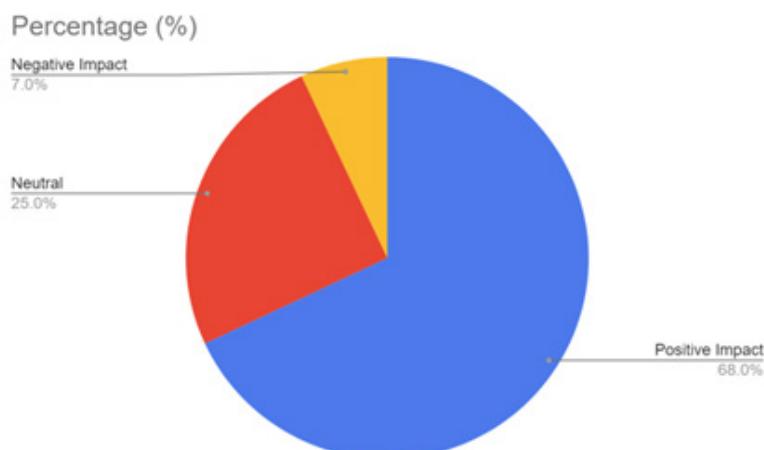


SRC members encounter challenges such as navigating bureaucratic processes and balancing multiple responsibilities. From the SRC perspective, bureaucracy remains the main obstacle in terms of the layer of approval process and differing departments involved in decision-making separately and distinctively, which creates a gap of mutual understanding and collaboration on a particular matter. These challenges align with Authentic Leadership Theory, which focuses on overcoming obstacles with integrity and transparency while remaining true to one's

values (Walumbwa et al., 2021). According to Authentic Leadership Theory, overcoming such burdens requires leaders to act with integrity and transparency, staying true to their values despite the pressure. Addressing these challenges effectively supports SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by promoting integrity and transparent leadership within institutional settings. It also contributes to SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by enhancing work environments and organizational effectiveness.

TABLE &amp; PIE CHART 4. Impact of Empowerment Measures on Council Operations

4 How would you describe the impact of the recent empowerment measures on the operations of your student representative council?	A. Positive impact B. Neutral impact C. Negative impact
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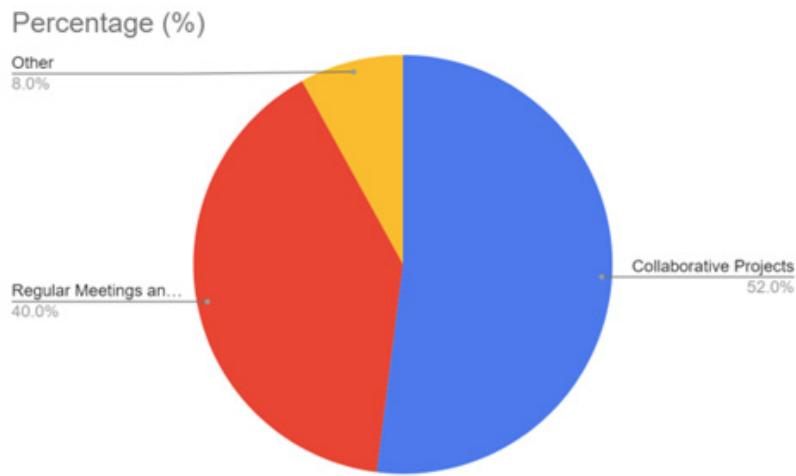


The positive impact of recent empowerment measures on SRC operations reflects the principles of Servant Leadership Theory, which emphasizes that leaders should focus on serving and supporting others to enhance their growth and effectiveness (Spears, 2018). However, the SRC is yet to see a concrete foundation set in facing the emerging empowerment opportunities. These opportunities come with responsibilities. Many doors will open, including the door of corruption and misuse of power risks and events. Thus, meticulous attention to details in ensuring a self-governance

approach is practiced correctly, emphasizing the need for a curation of personalized guidelines initiated by SRC themselves, especially in financial freedom and literacy. This approach contributes to SDG 4: Quality Education by improving educational environments and aligns with SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by fostering more effective and inclusive governance within the university. Regardless, the procedure of structuring a self-governance institution is tedious and time-constraining.

TABLE & PIE CHART 5. Best Practices from Successful Initiatives

5 What best practices have you observed in successful student-led initiatives at UUM? (Select all that apply)	A. Collaborative projects B. Regular training sessions C. Other (please specify)
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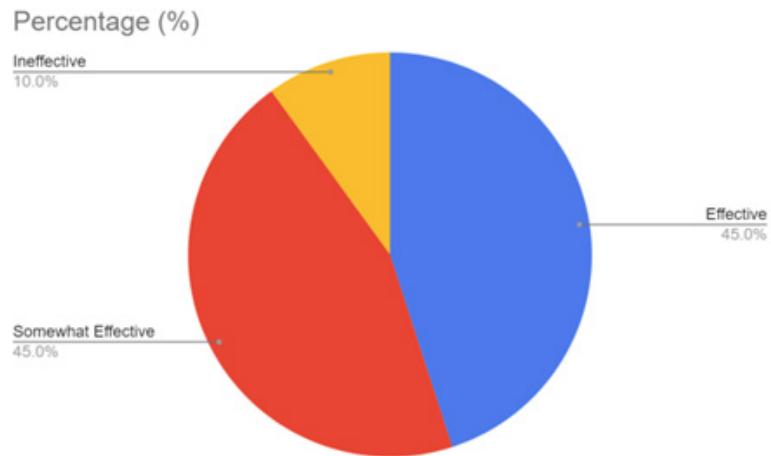


Successful student-led initiatives at UUM, such as collaborative projects and regular training sessions, reflect the principles of Participative Leadership Theory. This theory values involving team members in decision-making processes and fostering a collaborative environment (Greeley, 2019). SRC has been involved in many engagement processes, meetings and workshops in establishing and changing policies in UUM. Workshops and engagement sessions

or “*sesi libat urus*” are the most effective effort in including the students in the policy-making processes. In the effort to understand the procedures, whether internal procedures in UUM. These practices support SDG 4: Quality Education by enhancing educational governance through collaboration and align with SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure by encouraging innovative leadership and management strategies.

TABLE & PIE CHART 6: Effectiveness of Policies and Support Mechanisms

6 How effective do you find the current policies and support mechanisms for student representative councils?	A. Effective B. Somewhat effective C. Ineffective
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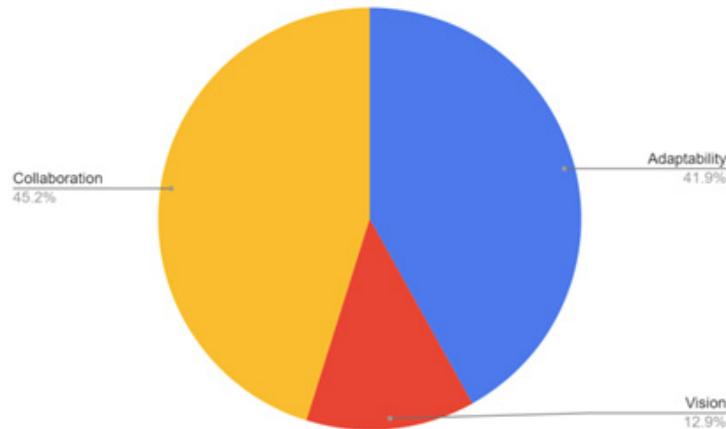


Mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness of current policies and support mechanisms for SRCs highlight the relevance of Strategic Leadership Theory. This theory focuses on how leaders manage and influence organizational direction to ensure effective support systems (Ireland & Hitt, 2021). This observation relates to SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and

Strong Institutions by emphasizing the importance of effective policies for robust institutional governance. It also supports SDG 4: Quality Education by showcasing how strategic leadership can improve educational outcomes and strengthen internal university controls and support mechanisms.

TABLE & PIE CHART 7: Perception of Character-Based Leadership Attributes

7 How would you rate the application of the following leadership attributes in your role? (Rate each attribute)	Adaptability: [High / Moderate / Low]
	Vision: [High / Moderate / Low]
	Collaboration: [High / Moderate / Low]



The emphasis on attributes such as adaptability and collaboration among SRC members aligns with Charismatic Leadership Theory, which highlights the role of personal attributes in inspiring and engaging others (Conger & Kanungo, 2019). However, the score for vision is rather low. This would be due to the low sense of need of visionary goals set by each of the members themselves. Self-initiatives shall be number

one and prioritized rather than waiting for instructions to act immediately, especially in response to emergencies. If vision is low, financial empowerment and freedom for example, would not be useful for the SRC as low chance of return to the students will happen. Hence, the current SRC set the trademark of 'Agresif dan Progresif', which directly translates to Aggressive and Progressive, to ensure each of the members will be highly

responsive in catering peers' issues. The incorporation of these charismatic qualities enhances engagement and effectiveness within the SRC, supporting SDG 4: Quality Education by improving student engagement

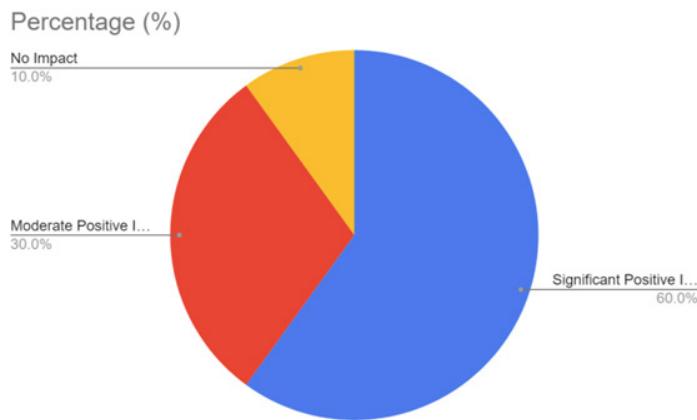
and educational outcomes, and SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by fostering a more responsive and effective institutional environment.

TABLE & PIE CHART 8: Impact of Leadership Training on Effectiveness

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8 What has been the impact of leadership training on your effectiveness as a student representative council member?	A. Significant positive impact
	B. Moderate positive impact
	C. No impact

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The positive impact of leadership training on the effectiveness of SRC members is consistent with Developmental Leadership Theory, which emphasizes nurturing leadership skills for personal and professional growth (Northouse, 2022). However, training models shall emphasize character-based leadership and hands-on experiences with the students and community in common areas and the technical procedures. This

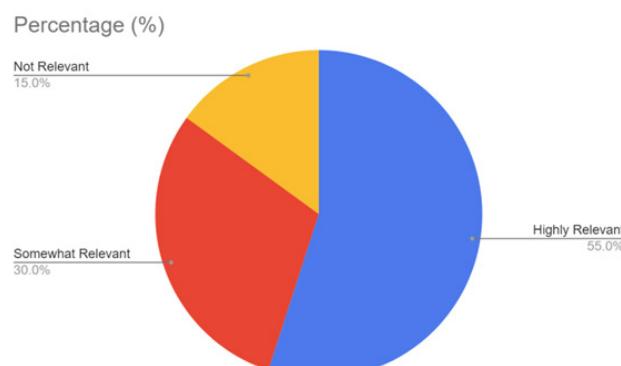
finding supports SDG 4: Quality Education by fostering the development of effective educational leaders and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by contributing to better organizational practices and career development opportunities. Leadership training helps student representatives enhance their skills, leading to improved management of internal university controls and more effective student governance.

TABLE & PIE CHART 9: Relevance of Direct Student Participation in Policy-Making

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9 How relevant do you believe direct student participation in policy-making is for improving student governance?	A. Highly relevant
	B. Somewhat relevant
	C. Not relevant

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The high relevance of direct student participation in policy-making reflects Participative Leadership Theory, which values involving team members in decision-making processes (Greeley, 2019). This active participation enhances governance and student engagement, supporting SDG 4: Quality Education by improving educational governance and SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by fostering more inclusive and effective institutional governance.

#### Overall Analysis on Questionnaires Results

The current landscape of student leadership at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), as demonstrated by the Student Representative Council (SRC), reveals a transitional phase marked by both promising growth and structural limitations. The push for empowerment has sparked a notable increase in awareness among SRC members. However, this awareness is not yet fully matched by a consistent level of preparedness or strategic readiness across all roles and functions.

A deeper look reveals that character-based leadership is not only needed but crucial to sustaining this empowerment. Leadership qualities grounded in accountability, integrity, empathy, and self-discipline remain the missing link in turning new responsibilities into impactful governance.

The SRC's functionality is not just a matter of authority; it is a matter of how that authority is exercised. Members must exhibit moral courage in navigating bureaucracy, humility in balancing responsibilities, and initiative in leading without waiting for instructions.

Moreover, while SRC members have shown commitment through engagement sessions and collaborative initiatives, the lack of vision-setting and continuity planning undermines long-term impact.

This vision gap leads to reactive governance, where student leaders are more responsive than strategic; solving issues as they arise instead of anticipating them.

#### In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups

Through interviews with key members of the high council of the SRC, including the President, Vice President, Honorary Treasurer, General Secretary, Deputy Vice Presidents, Executive Members, and Financial Unit representatives, the first step toward character-based leadership was identified as instilling values like integrity, accountability, and humility into governance.

The first three months of the SRC's tenure were challenging, with bureaucratic hurdles and resistance

to new initiatives. However, once character-based leadership was fully embraced, progress was made. The turning point occurred when the leadership team consciously decided to prioritize ethical decision-making and transparent communication, emphasizing values over simply managing tasks.

Below are key questions and answers from the interviews:

#### QUESTION 1: HOW DO YOU VIEW THE ROLE OF CHARACTER-BASED LEADERSHIP IN THE SRC'S GOVERNANCE, AND WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE IN THE FIRST FEW MONTHS?

President's Answer:

*"Character-based leadership is essential for fostering integrity and accountability. However, the first few months were slow due to bureaucratic delays. Once we focus on leading by example and making ethical decisions, we overcome these challenges."*

Vice President's Answer:

*"The first three months were challenging. But once we prioritized ethical leadership, progress was faster. Leading by example helped break resistance, allowing us to implement our vision more effectively."*

#### QUESTION 2: WHAT STEPS HAVE BEEN TAKEN TO ENSURE THAT THESE VALUES ARE INCORPORATED INTO SRC ACTIVITIES?

Honorary Treasurer's Answer:

*"In March 2024, we held the Kursus Pengurusan Organisasi MPP UUM training, which focused on financial management, ethics, and student welfare. These sessions emphasized ethical leadership and transparency."*

General Secretary's Answer:

*"We ensure every activity aligns with principles of fairness and ethics, integrating integrity-focused content into our communications and training."*

#### QUESTION 3: HOW DO INTERNAL SOPS CONTRIBUTE TO STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE, ESPECIALLY AFTER THE EARLY CHALLENGES?

Deputy Vice President's Answer:

*"The Prosedur Tempahan Bilik Badan Pelajar has been an ongoing issue for years. Under the 23/24 governance, we took responsibility to solve this by implementing a self-initiated system. We held the keys to the rooms and created an easy online booking system, making it much more efficient and transparent. This was a clear example of how character-based leadership, through accountability and responsibility, led to tangible improvements."*

Executive Member's Answer:

*"Creating and refining SOPs helped streamline processes and improve transparency, addressing initial delays and creating clearer, more efficient operations."*

**QUESTION 4: WHAT ROLE DOES MENTORSHIP PLAY IN THIS SHIFT TOWARD CHARACTER-BASED LEADERSHIP?**

Vice President's Answer:

*"The Pencarian Sekretariat initiative has been key. Senior students guide new members, teaching them not only technical skills but values like responsibility and humility."*

President's Answer:

*"Mentorship shapes the future leadership of the SRC by preparing the next generation to lead with integrity, humility, and responsibility."*

**QUESTION 5: HOW IS FEEDBACK INCORPORATED INTO GOVERNANCE TO ENSURE CONTINUED GROWTH?**

Deputy Vice President's Answer:

*"Our Libat Urus Pindaan Garis Panduan session allowed us to gather feedback and refine policies. This openness to feedback is critical for growth."*

Executive Member's Answer:

*"We encourage feedback from students to align our actions with the values we promote, helping us reflect and improve as leaders."*

**QUESTION 6: WHAT INITIATIVES HAS THE FINANCIAL UNIT UNDERTAKEN TO STRENGTHEN SRC GOVERNANCE?**

Financial Unit Representative's Answer:

*"We held workshops on financial management and are drafting the Buku Panduan Kewangan Mahasiswa to guide students. We're also drafting the MPP's Constitutions for clearer financial accountability and governance."*

Additional Initiative by the Welfare Deputy Vice President:

*"We took it upon ourselves to personally check the prices of goods sold on campus to ensure students weren't overcharged. This was a proactive measure to avoid financial strain on students and reflected our commitment to ethical leadership. Additionally, we focused on meeting with administrators before issues arose, ensuring smooth communication and preventing problems from escalating."*

#### Overall Analysis on Interviews Results

The turning point for the SRC came when they consciously decided to adopt a character-based leadership approach, with a focus on ethical decision-making, transparency, and mentorship. This shift was pivotal in overcoming bureaucratic challenges and fostering a culture of responsibility and accountability.

By the time initiatives like the self-initiated room booking system and proactive financial checks were implemented, the leadership had fully embraced character-based leadership, setting a strong foundation for future governance. This approach not only addressed long-standing issues but also ensured that the SRC would continue to prioritize ethical leadership and student welfare in the long run.

These interviews revealed the influence of Authentic and Servant Leadership attributes in overcoming challenges (Walumbwa et al., 2021; Spears, 2018). The outcomes provided valuable insights into the substantial burdens faced by these leaders as they navigate the complexities of student empowerment.

These challenges are compounded by the need to meet heightened expectations from both their peers and university administration. The interviews again highlighted how the application of Authentic and Servant Leadership attributes plays a crucial role in addressing these difficulties. This dual approach of leading with authenticity and a service-oriented mindset is essential for navigating the demanding landscape of student representation, ultimately contributing to a more effective and resilient leadership structure within

the university.

## CASE STUDIES

The case studies conducted on successful student-led initiatives at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) highlighted several effective practices and key areas for improvement in student governance. Notably, the SRC's self-initiated workshops emerged as a significant achievement. These workshops and town hall sessions, organized by the SRC members themselves, aimed to enhance students' understanding of internal university procedures and the new self-governance protocols.

### The Authors' Own Experiences:

The Honorary Treasurer, who leads the Financial Secretariat comprising three members, highlighted the weight of responsibility in managing student funds. She shared that while the SRC has been granted more autonomy in financial matters, there are still no clear student-adapted guidelines or governance protocols to support that autonomy. *"We've been given the responsibility, but not the map,"* she reflected. She emphasized that while her team tries their best to uphold transparency, the absence of detailed financial SOPs, standard procurement processes, and internal checks creates uncertainty and risk.

During a forum where she participated as a student panelist, she recalled being frequently asked, *"How do you ensure that misappropriation doesn't occur under your watch?"* Her answer was honest and sobering: *"That's a major responsibility, even for adults. For students, it's overwhelming if there's no system or values to guide you. I constantly worry about doing something wrong unintentionally."* This underlines the immense burden placed on student leaders without proper frameworks or character-based training.

Meanwhile, the Vice President, who oversees three core SRC divisions: Student Empowerment, Welfare, and Academic Affairs, expressed concern over the lack of integration across these divisions. *"Each division has passionate team members, but we often operate in silos,"* he explained. Without unified communication structures, regular reporting systems, or shared value-based leadership models, his role becomes reactive rather than strategic. He noted that it's easy to get caught up in daily tasks without stepping back to assess progress or long-term impact. The absence of division-specific guidelines or cross-division SOPs leads to duplication, inefficiencies, and inconsistent student engagement.

Both leaders highlighted that the SRC motto "Agresif dan Progresif" sets a strong tone of action, but that tone must be grounded in internal values, clarity of roles, and a common operational language.

Without that foundation, there is a risk that empowerment will be underutilized, misapplied, or lead to burnout, particularly when students are placed in high-pressure situations such as financial decision-making, crisis response, or public accountability. Ultimately, the findings highlight that empowerment without preparation leads to inconsistency, and preparation without character leads to fragility.

To build a resilient and trusted SRC, the council must invest in cultivating leadership from the inside out; starting with character, then followed by competence. Clear documentation, mentorship, structured training, and embedded values in all operational aspects will help form a leadership culture that is not only capable but also credible.

By focusing on Charismatic and Developmental Leadership principles, these initiatives demonstrated how leadership attributes can drive positive change and improve organizational processes. Charismatic Leadership Theory emphasizes the role of personal attributes in inspiring and engaging others (Conger & Kanungo, 2019). The SRC's workshops and the making of the guide Kewangan Mahasiswa book by the Treasury Unit reflected this by harnessing charismatic elements to motivate and educate students, thereby fostering greater engagement and understanding of governance structures.

Furthermore, Developmental Leadership Theory underscores the importance of nurturing leadership skills and providing opportunities for growth (Northouse, 2022). The establishment of a comprehensive manual guide and new procedures exemplifies this approach, offering structured support and clear guidelines to help students navigate the complexities of internal processes and self-governance. This initiative not only supports the development of effective student leaders but also enhances overall governance by making procedures more accessible and transparent. These outcomes underscore the effectiveness of applying leadership theories in practical settings, demonstrating how well-designed initiatives can contribute to improved student empowerment and governance.

The examination of UUM's Constitution highlighted the formal framework governing SRC operations and decision-making processes. This foundational document underscores the importance of clear guidelines and structured support, which aligns with Strategic Leadership Theories focus on managing

and influencing organizational direction to ensure effective governance (Ireland & Hitt, 2021).

Financial autonomy, exemplified through the *Buku Panduan Kewangan Mahasiswa*, directly impacts the operationalization of character-based leadership theories like ethical leadership and servant leadership. By giving student leaders control over finances, it reinforces integrity, transparency, and accountability, as they must make ethical decisions to maintain trust within the student body. This aligns with ethical leadership principles, ensuring responsible management of resources.

The *Buku Panduan Kewangan Mahasiswa* also reflects servant leadership by providing a clear financial framework that helps student leaders prioritize the welfare of their peers, guiding them toward effective use of funds for student benefit. Additionally, it fosters transformational leadership by encouraging a shift in governance practices, motivating leaders to adopt responsible, forward-thinking approaches. This initiative helps create a more sustainable and values-driven student leadership model. The guide from the University of Sheffield provides essential advice for society treasurers on managing finances. It covers the basics of handling a society's budget, including how to create and monitor a financial plan, the importance of maintaining accurate records, and the procedures for making transactions and claims. It also emphasizes the need for transparency and accountability, detailing steps for financial reporting and compliance with university policies. Additionally, the guide offers tips on seeking financial support and fundraising strategies.

Comparative analysis with KMUKM's SRC, and Treasures' Guide, known for its innovative self-governance financial system, offered additional perspectives on effective practices. KMUKM's approach to financial autonomy and self-management provides a model for UUM's SRC to explore in enhancing its own governance and financial practices. KMUKM has been a solid stone for students to rely on financially. SRC UUM aims to provide a precedent for our student bodies, giving them both the freedom and assistance in moving forward from the beginning to the end process, whether in the management of internal or external funds. Thus, to ensure that the student bodies are also ready for empowerment, SRC UUM shall be the best model in embracing the new empowerment opportunities. These comparisons highlight how strategic leadership can guide the development of robust support mechanisms and policies, ultimately contributing to more effective and responsive SRC operations at UUM.

## SUGGESTIONS

To elevate the effectiveness and resilience of the Student Representative Council (SRC) at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) in the context of leadership development, it is crucial to integrate character-based leadership models and strategically apply relevant leadership theories. A pivotal recommendation is to implement a bottom-up peer assessment approach specifically designed for leadership evaluation.

This approach should prioritize self-initiated workshops, high-quality documentation, and comprehensive guides as main key performance indicators for SRC members and student bodies. By focusing on these elements, the SRC can foster a leadership environment that values authenticity, transparency, and continuous growth. Self-initiated workshops will facilitate proactive learning and skill enhancement, while meticulous documentation and detailed guides will support effective governance and decision-making. Incorporating regular peer assessments will ensure that leadership practices are consistently evaluated and refined, but will also set a positive precedent for other student bodies.

To effectively adopt the financial management model outlined in the guide from the University of Sheffield, SRC UUM (Student Representative Council, Universiti Utara Malaysia) can integrate principles from situational, adaptational, and charismatic leadership models to enhance their approach.

- i. **Situational Leadership:** SRC UUM leaders should adjust their financial strategies based on the current context and specific challenges faced by the society. This means adapting their management style and decision-making processes according to the immediate needs and financial conditions of the society, ensuring that their approach is flexible and responsive to varying situations.
- ii. **Adaptational Leadership:** This model encourages leaders to be proactive and innovative in managing finances. SRC UUM should be open to changing their financial practices and strategies as circumstances evolve, such as by embracing new fundraising methods or adapting to changes in university policies. This flexibility can help in effectively addressing emerging financial issues and opportunities.
- iii. **Charismatic Leadership:** Charismatic leaders inspire and motivate others through their vision and enthusiasm. SRC UUM leaders can use charisma to foster a strong commitment

to financial transparency and accountability among members. By demonstrating passion and confidence in their financial management practices, they can build trust and encourage active participation from the society's members in financial matters.

## CHALLENGES AND PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

The recent amendments to AUKU 1971, which expand student freedoms in areas such as political participation and financial management, aim to cultivate holistic, responsible individuals in line with the National Education Philosophy (Prof. Madya Dr. Mohd Izani Mohd Zain, 2023). While character-based leadership offers strong ethical grounding and long-term benefits for student governance, there are several potential limitations (Berita Awani, 2023) in its application, particularly within the context of student leadership at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM).

However, this empowerment comes with the expectation of integrity, accountability, and wise decision-making; values that not all student leaders may consistently uphold due to varying levels of personal maturity and leadership experience. As most student leaders are still in the process of forming their identities, the practice of character-based leadership, anchored in empathy, resilience, and ethical judgment, can falter, especially when faced with conflict, peer pressure, or personal ambition. Thus, while AUKU reforms offer students greater autonomy, they also underscore the urgent need for nurturing principled leadership to ensure that newfound freedoms are exercised with responsibility and purpose.

Another limitation lies in the lack of structured leadership development programs that focus on character formation. While some training may be provided, it often emphasizes technical or procedural aspects of leadership rather than moral development. Without deliberate and ongoing efforts to nurture character, the adoption of character-based leadership may remain superficial and not deeply internalized by student leaders.

Additionally, institutional culture and external influences can sometimes hinder the effectiveness of character-based leadership. For example, if the broader university environment lacks transparency or if students face bureaucratic resistance, even leaders who want to act ethically may become demotivated or choose more pragmatic, less principled paths to achieve results. This

tension between ideal values and real-world limitations can affect the consistency of character-based decision-making.

Time constraints and the short tenure of student leaders also present challenges. Student leaders usually serve for one academic year, which limits the time they have to implement long-term, value-driven initiatives or see the results of their character-based strategies. This short timeline can lead to a focus on quick wins rather than deeper, sustainable changes rooted in values.

Leadership failures in Malaysian universities—seen in neglected student welfare, tolerated corruption, and dismissed ethical breaches—reveal a deep crisis of integrity (Awani International, 2024). These issues highlight the urgent need for ethical reform, especially as the AUKU 1971 amendments empower student leaders. With great rights comes greater responsibility; student leaders must now rise to challenge flawed systems, champion accountability, and lead with integrity to restore trust and purpose in higher education.

Lastly, the pressure to meet expectations—whether from peers, university staff, or the public—may sometimes push student leaders to compromise their values for popularity or visibility. Balancing personal principles with group expectations requires a level of self-awareness and confidence that not all young leaders may yet possess.

### Practical Implications

The practical implications of this research for student governance, especially in light of the recent legislative changes to the *Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (AUKU)*, are significant. These changes have expanded the rights and autonomy of student leaders, creating new opportunities for more independent and empowered student movements. Based on the findings of the study, several key implications can be drawn:

#### Need for Leadership Training Rooted in Character Values

With more freedom comes more responsibility. Student leaders must be equipped not only with technical skills but with strong character traits like integrity, empathy, and accountability. This study shows that student leaders who adopt character-based leadership are more likely to use their autonomy ethically and effectively. Institutions should, therefore, prioritize leadership development programs that focus on personal values and ethics.

## Strengthening Student Participation in University Governance

The research indicates that student leaders who understand their roles under the amended AUKU are better positioned to engage meaningfully in university-level decision-making. Universities should involve student leaders in policy discussions, board meetings, and strategic planning to enhance participatory governance and ensure student voices are heard in shaping campus life.

### Creating Clear SOPs and Governance Structures

The transition to student-led processes, like *Pilihan Raya Kampus* led by the student secretariat *JPRK* (Mohd Dino et al., 2019) at UUM, alongside insights from the *Peraturan Kewangan UUM*, highlights the growing need for clear SOPs and character-based leadership. While students now shoulder greater responsibilities with minimal supervision, financial protocols reveal both constraints and opportunities for improvement. This underscores the importance of transparent systems; such as budgeting and room booking systems, aligned with AUKU reforms that promote student autonomy. The emphasis on strategic oversight and resource management reflects the need for universities to support and integrate student-developed SOPs into formal governance, ensuring ethical, accountable, and sustainable student leadership.

### Encouraging Ethical Advocacy and Activism

The post-AUKU environment allows student leaders to champion causes more freely. With character-based leadership, students are likely to pursue advocacy that is responsible, inclusive, and grounded in student welfare. This sets the stage for a more mature, constructive form of student activism that works *with* university management rather than against it.

### Institutionalizing Feedback and Mentorship Systems

Mentorship and feedback were found to be central in nurturing ethical leadership. With greater autonomy, student bodies must establish systems to mentor incoming leaders and gather student feedback systematically. Universities should help institutionalize these practices, ensuring leadership continuity and improvement over time.

## Proactive Collaboration Between Students and Administration

Finally, the research shows that when student leaders take the initiative to communicate with administration early and regularly, problems are prevented. This implies a shift from reactive to proactive student governance. Institutions can support this by creating more open and frequent dialogue platforms between student leaders and university officials.

### Cross-Institutional Research

This research knowingly lacks cross-institutional comparison, as it focuses solely on the internal dynamics of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Future research could benefit from cross-institutional comparisons to explore how character-based leadership operates across universities with different governance structures, legislative environments, student body sizes, and cultural contexts.

A possible research direction could focus on exploring how emotional intelligence and leadership behavior impact organizational commitment and readiness for change in Malaysian higher learning institutions (Norsidah, 2008). Specifically, the study could examine how leaders with high emotional intelligence foster a positive work environment, which enhances staff commitment to organizational goals and their willingness to engage in change initiatives. Additionally, it could assess how different leadership styles influence an institution's ability to embrace and implement change, contributing to a more adaptable and forward-thinking organizational culture in the context of higher education.

By examining institutions with centralized versus decentralized governance, varying student body sizes, and diverse cultural settings, researchers can better understand how these factors influence the application of character-based leadership. This comparative approach would provide insights into how leadership models are adapted in different contexts, offering valuable lessons on optimizing student leadership to foster greater engagement, advocacy, and positive institutional change.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from the study reveal a complex and evolving landscape of student leadership and empowerment at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM),

influenced significantly by recent legislative changes and character-based leadership principles. The surveys and questionnaires distributed among SRC members indicated a high level of awareness regarding new rights and responsibilities. The study also highlighted varying levels of preparedness among SRC members to leverage these new opportunities. While some members felt well-prepared, others demonstrated the need for further adaptation, particularly in navigating internal procedures and financial management. This disparity emphasizes the importance of adaptability and preparation in enhancing leadership effectiveness. The challenges faced by SRC members, such as bureaucratic processes and balancing multiple responsibilities, coupled with increased duties, require leaders to act with integrity and a service-oriented mindset to effectively represent their peers and contribute to institutional governance.

The SRC's self-initiated workshops and the development of a comprehensive manual guide, though still pending formal adoption, reflect Charismatic and Developmental Leadership principles. These initiatives have enhanced student understanding of governance structures and internal procedures, contributing to better organizational practices and more effective student representation.

In conclusion, the integration of character-based leadership models and the strategic application of leadership theories are crucial for the effective empowerment of student leaders at UUM. As the university continues to navigate the evolving legislative landscape, these findings offer a foundation for enhancing student leadership practices and supporting a more effective and resilient student governance system.

The findings of this study are hoped to contribute to wider discussions on student empowerment and governance by demonstrating the critical role of character-based leadership in improving the effectiveness of student leadership. It shows that student leaders who embrace values like integrity, empathy, and resilience are more capable of leveraging their expanded rights under the revised AUKU to advocate for their peers and enhance transparency in university governance.

These insights underscore the significance of character-driven leadership in enabling student leaders to actively engage in decision-making, fostering a more inclusive and efficient governance system.

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