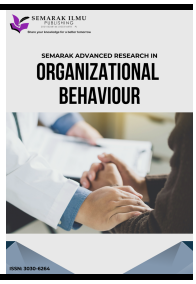
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Recentring Moral Leadership on the Heart Rather than Religiosity in Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The increasing significance of Moral Leadership in higher education due to rampant issues related to integrity, governance and social responsibility has created a unique opportunity to research and further develop this area of leadership scholarship. In Malaysia, there is a strong cultural norm and religious consciousness that causes religious affiliation and practice to be an inherent aspect of most leadership discussion. Therefore, it has been accepted that having a religious affiliation or practicing a religion translates into having a better understanding of "moral" leadership. Nevertheless, this paper challenges that presumption by suggesting that while religion may give an individual moral vs ethical awareness of leadership, it does not have to be a determining factor in defining "moral" leadership. In addition, this paper argues that morality will inherently come from within the "heart" as opposed to coming from outside (e.g., religion). Using the concepts of "Amanah" (trust), integrity and human conscience or principles, this paper uses a robust analysis of both religiosity and the Theory of Moral Leadership in Malaysia in regards to their commitment towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), not limited to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) to create an integrative conceptual framework. This integrative conceptual framework postures moral leadership as emerging from the dynamic interaction between inner moral consciousness, institutional ethical climate, and socio-religious pluralism, rather than from religiosity alone. By reframing "moral" leadership as a shared human responsibility rather than a leader-centric or religion-centric attribute, the paper offers a more inclusive and ethically robust perspective. The paper contributes conceptually by decentring religiosity as the sole or primary moral determinant and foregrounding integrity, "Amanah", and moral courage as universal ethical imperatives. Practically, it calls for higher education institutions to cultivate moral awareness across all members of the academic community, specifically the universities' leaders, thereby strengthening ethical governance and advancing Malaysia's related sustainable development agenda.

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1. Introduction

There is an increasing expectation that higher education institutions will not only be centres of knowledge production but that these institutions will be examples of moral leadership to all sectors of society. As Universities worldwide are under greater scrutiny due to numerous issues including (but not limited to) academic dishonesty [33], governance failure [9], abuse of power and decline of public trust [62], a number of bodies (e.g., MACC, MCW) are calling for universities to provide moral leadership; particularly, where there is a large role within nation-building and social cohesion (as with Malaysia) [10]. Malaysian Universities are holding both accounts for the development of human capital and the maintenance of ethical, civic values in pluralistic, rapidly changing societies [36].

Within the Malaysian Context, this subject is framed through a religious lens most of the time due to Malaysia's religious consciousness and cultural norms. The assumption is that any leader who demonstrates a religious affiliation or obedience has an unquestionable sense of moral judgment, socially and culturally reasonable [1-35]. However, historically, the assumption of religious affiliation does not necessarily constitute sound moral judgement what more “moral leadership” or “ethical governance”. Numerous scandals and disgraces involving both financial misappropriations and academic fraud, both public and private, have recently occurred that indicate that there is a difference between manifesting religion and moral leadership or ethical governance [4-66]. Moreover, according to AlHares [6] and Mansour *et al.*, [31], advocating and standing in a position of morality as well as demonstrating the ethical leadership required ones to provide a civilised societal environment too like supporting pro-social behaviours and environmental responsibility.

Moral leadership has been recentred on the "heart" that is deemed the source of conscience, principles, integrity, and moral bravery. Sense of moral possessed by universities’ leaders is all about the leaders’ principles and value instead of merely a display of strong religious belief or affiliation. It is undeniable that religion (irrespective Islam, Buddhism, Christianity etc.) can assist in forming morality, nonetheless, it is not only the source [8-23]. Genuine moral leadership is reported to naturally emerges from a pure heart, nurtured with integrity, love, courage and personal responsibility instead of the outwards or superficial religious identity or institutional roles [8]. Therefore, the authors believed it is time to reframe how everyone should understand the idea of moral leaders today to align it with Malaysia's diverse higher education system.

2. Research Background

Over the last 30 years, Malaysia's higher education system has changed very quickly and grown a lot. Along with that growth came a lot of new ways of providing access to education [38]. In addition to creating an abundance of choices for students, Malaysia's growth in higher education has also put a lot of pressure on the system to maintain its competitiveness globally, while continuing to meet regulatory requirements. The result has been increased attention on accountable and ethical leadership [34].

Many of the leaders in the Malaysian universities have been appointed based on their experience in administration, political appointments and/or how religious they appear to be [17-61]. In turn, a leadership culture has developed in which compliance with the rules, outward appearances and the ability to show how moral one takes precedence over making moral decisions. As a consequence, moral leadership is often viewed as being synonymous with being religiously compliant, rather than being evaluated based on how the leader acts, and taking responsibility for their actions, even under adverse conditions [7-43, 61].

At the same time, with the renewed attention given to the Sustainable Development Goals by the government in Malaysia, the emphasis on ethical governance, inclusivity, and institutional integrity is growing [68]. Achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education), in particular, requires leadership that prioritises fairness, quality and moral responsibility beyond performative indicators [3]. This context necessitates a critical re-examination of how moral leadership is conceptualised, developed and assessed within Malaysian universities.

3. Problem Statement

Malaysian higher education institutions have engaged in an extensive discussion on the role of ethics and leadership in higher education, however, there is a clear disconnection between the ethics that have been discussed and the actual practices of ethical leadership, as seen with many continuing issues of governance failures and integrity within these institutions [10-36]. One of the major problems is that individuals identify or associate religiosity, uncritically, as synonymous with moral leadership, which may cover up ethical inadequacies and discourage an individual or institution from being accountable for their unethical behaviour [20-61]. When a moral leader's credibility is assumed solely based upon the individual's religious identity (superficial display), these individuals may have protection from being held accountable for unethical behaviour [20-61].

Another challenge is that within Malaysia, in which many ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic groups exist within similar national space (e.g., Multi-Culturalism), there is no common moral framework to go beyond religious boundaries [22-45]. Although individuals who work in higher education come from many different religious and cultural backgrounds, the models for moral or ethical leadership found in most institutions of higher education primarily focus on the dominance of religious narratives from only a few [59]. This may result in the marginalisation of groups that are not dominant and ultimately undermine the establishment of a climate of ethical behaviour with which all groups can be included, using the shared values of integral justice and compassion.

The bureaucratic-managerial model for instance conceptualises leadership in higher education primarily as a function of formal authority within the organisational hierarchy [24]. This model recognises the fact that leadership is based on status, and therefore, vice-chancellors, deans and other senior administrators have legitimacy through their position and the regulatory mandate they hold [24]. In addition to this, the bureaucratic-managerial model guides decision making by the rules and regulations associated with statutes, standard operating procedures, key performance indicators, and audit requirements [24]. Therefore, while mechanisms exist to ensure order and accountability within higher education through these methods, the use of these mechanisms is criticised to have frequently reduced the position of a leader to the enforcement of rules and compliance monitoring of the actions of others. Because of this reduction of leadership to rule enforcement and compliance monitoring, there is little to no opportunity for ethical deliberation, moral courage, or judgements driven by conscience (principles and integrity) [2-24].

Furthermore, the bureaucratic-managerial model is asserted as a mirror image of compliance-based governance, which is prevalent within many higher education systems that are highly regulated by means of accreditation frameworks, performance audits, and ranking metrics [24]. Leaders within compliance-based governance systems tend to focus on meeting external standards of compliance rather than promoting or developing ethical reflection and future moral issues [24]. In compliance-based governance systems, success is measured by the extent to which a leader has adhered to the criteria required for a successful audit and maintained appropriate documentation to prevent or avoid regulatory sanctions [24]. Therefore, in many cases, the authors opined that the ethical leadership of leaders in compliance-based governance systems becomes procedural rather

than principled. In compliance-based governance systems, the concept of "doing the right thing" is often equated to "following the rules," regardless of whether or not the rules are sufficient to address more complex moral dilemmas, such as academic dishonesty, equity, or misusing authority.

In addition to an Interpretative Model of higher education, New Public Management (NPM), has also been pivotal in the creation of an organisational model for higher education [52]. Since NPM sees the university as a corporation, it places emphasis on leadership as management personnel who should ensure that budgets are met, performance targets achieved, and risks are reduced. Furthermore, NPM measures leadership effectiveness using measurable metrics including enrolments, completion rates, and financial results. The use of these metrics has been purported does not allow institutions to consider the importance of moral development for their leaders [26]. Hence, while a leader's moral character such as integrity, empathy, conscience, and others may be important to the institution, it is of secondary importance in relation to the other components driving the institution's functionality and reputation.

By contrast to moral or values-based leadership models, these models consider that ethical behaviour is primarily achieved through the structural conditions and controls of an institution rather than through the moral development of leaders [2-16,28]. Consequently, they provide a framework for the understanding of why many institutions appear compliant but may still have significant levels of ethical failures. The argument presented in this paper illustrates precisely why regulatory reforms and religion are inadequate to achieve ethical behaviour in a complex and diverse higher education system. The regulations are intended to control external behaviour but do not directly contribute to the development of the internal moral compass which will guide ethical leadership within complex and diverse higher education systems.

In addition to these trends, many existing models of leadership within higher education (as underscored earlier) focus primarily on positional authority and compliance strategies rather than on developing the inner moral character or inner light of the leader. For example, the bureaucratic-managerial model of leadership is the predominant style used in many of modern higher education systems. By not considering the internal moral conscience or personal principles of the leader and the ethical atmosphere within which they lead, changes that emphasise either regulation or religion only exist on the surroundings of institutional governance and integrity (superficially).

4. Literature Review

The concept of moral leadership has, for a long time, shaped the understanding of the virtues of moral courage, honesty, fairness, and responsibility, based on leadership ethics as well as moral philosophy and moral psychology [70]. In developing strong leaders within higher education, these virtues are linked to ethical governance, academic integrity, and social responsibility, particularly in ways that recognise the role of higher education in preparing future citizens and fostering knowledge economies [19]. According to empirical research, the consistent demonstration of moral judgment by leaders who make principled choices about how to act leads to greater organisational trust, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability [14]. Nevertheless, moral leadership scholars [63,64] caution against considering moral leadership as simply a characteristic of an individual's personality but instead argue that ethical behaviour is both dependent on a person's internal moral awareness and the effects of their surrounding context.

In both Malaysia and other Muslim-majority countries, it is common to consider moral leadership from an Islamic and religious/spiritual perspective, with emphasis placed on models of Islamic leadership based on concepts of justice, accountability, and Amanah (moral trust) [30]. Such models give strong normative ethical grounding and are prevalent within the cultural context of a given place

and time. More and more empirical evidence (e.g., 41-46,56] is challenging the notion that merely having knowledge of, belonging to or following religious traditions equates with ethical behaviour. For example, there have been numerous documented studies and examples of misconduct committed by individuals within religiously framed organisations like higher education institutions demonstrating that religiosity does not directly equate to ethical behaviour [46]. As such, many scholars warn against equating moral symbols to moral substance, warning that many people cannot lead morally simply because of their religious identity.

Therefore, in the contemporary leadership literature, two distinct orientations are becoming increasingly apparent namely “moral awareness” and “moral action”. Most of the time, moral awareness is founded on the ethical values of one’s religion, whereas moral action is derived from one’s internalised principles and character [7]. Moral Identity Theory provides the underlying framework, positing that individuals are likely to behave ethically when moral traits are a “fundamental part” of their self-concept, rather than something that they merely acknowledge [65]. According to this new perspective, the "heart" or inner moral consciousness serves as the point of reference for making ethical judgements, having a moral conscience and acting with moral courage. In the field of education, this view is in line with ongoing calls for values-based leadership which considers ethical deliberation, inclusiveness and the contribution to society versus conforming to empty moral displays [27].

The Ethical Climate Theory [60] helps to expand the authors’ understanding of moral leadership through organisational context. Specifically, it helps individuals to see how shared norms, authority structures and institutional practice can influence what constitutes 'ethical behaviour' [37]. For example, research demonstrates that leaders who have strong moral values may not behave ethically in environments characterised by fear, over-structure, or the performance imperative that rewards compliance rather than integrity [47]. In the context of higher education, where many of the governance structures are bureaucratic in nature and there are high levels of social pressure on institutions to maintain their reputations, the ethical climate of the institution will play a key role in either enabling or restricting the practice of moral leadership [5]. Subsequently, in examining moral leadership, it will be useful to consider moral leadership as not just an individual responsibility, but as a reflection of the interaction between the conscience of the individual and the context of the organisation.

Finally, socio-religious pluralism has emerged as a significant driver of the development of moral leadership in the modern world, especially in countries such as Malaysia, which are characterised by their cultural diversity [21]. In this way, universities are operating within a plurality of moral frameworks and leaders will need to be able to traverse multiple belief systems, ethical standards, and the many cultural norms associated with each of the belief systems and ethical standards. By only anchoring themselves to one religious narrative, leaders can run the risk of being excluded and suffering from moral complacency [55]. The broader interpretation of “Amanah” shows that it serves as a linking ethical framework moving beyond ritual-based religiosity in effectively describing the role of leaders as accountable to society, organisations, and future generations [32]. This wider view of “Amanah” advocates for moral leadership as a communal obligation that brings into view the alignment of ethical governance in tertiary education to Sustainable Development Goals that deal with Quality Education, Just Institutions and Collaborative Partnerships [25].

4.1 Contemporary Issues in Malaysian Higher Education

As Malaysian higher education institutions increasingly resemble those of the world, it can be witnessed that many of the same problems associated with the 'opening up' of the higher education

market, the measuring of higher education's performance based on measures of success, and the competing reputations between higher education institutions. As a result of this increased focus on demonstrating effectiveness through various ranking systems, graduate employability indicators, and the results of audits, higher education institutions face increasing pressure to be able to demonstrate efficiency. In doing so, efficiency and results-based measures are often prioritised ahead of ethical considerations and moral judgements [12-42]. In this regard, the way that higher education institutions are defining their respective successes through performance metrics instead of by virtue of the institution's moral responsibilities has afforded higher education institutions the opportunity to develop shortcuts to managerial decision-making, superficial adherence to regulations, and an increase in ethically questionable behaviours [13].

As a result of this environment, increasing numbers of high-profile incidents involving academic misconduct [44], procurement irregularities [67], and abuse of authority [62] have raised tremendous ethical concerns regarding the effectiveness of existing ethical frameworks. Most of the investigations and sustained media attention related to these issues have indicated that while formal ethical codes, institutional policies, and even religious rhetoric do exist, they tend to fail in preventing academic misconduct due to leaders lacking the necessary moral courage or due to the lack of a culture of transparency and a culture that supports whistleblowing [48]. It appears that the larger problem of ethical failure in higher education institutions is less about a lack of regulations, but rather about weak moral agency and compromised ethical climates in which higher education institutions operate [44].

Further evidence from Malaysia demonstrates the limits of relying on religion or perceived ethical authority as a basis for assessing ethical behaviour. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has reported arrests made under the MACC involving both private and public Institutions of Higher Learning (IHLs), as well as both academic and management ranks of employees for various corrupt practices [40]. Over the period 2017 to 2025, a total of fifty-nine university employees were arrested and forty-nine were subsequently charged with crimes such as bribery, abuse of authority, and filing false claims pertaining to research funding [48]. Collectively these cases involved approximately RM1.32 million in improper payments and included accusations that one of the directors at a public IHL received a luxury car as a bribe to manipulate a significant tender process, as well as the arrest of a professor for submitting forged research claims [48]. Notably, the events took place in institutions that have publicly claimed to espouse ethical values and moral obligations and have been viewed to protect against the performance of unethical acts based on either the status and/or position of the offenders.

Malaysia’s leading institutions are increasingly experiencing ethical governance concerns. For example, at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), integrity issues were raised so publicly that other universities across the country were encouraged to view the situation as an opportunity to learn from the mistakes they made concerning integrity. That a prominent national research university could experience integrity issues reminds individuals that ethical failures are not limited to struggling institutions and that there is more to ethical failure than the individual's shortcomings, they reflect wider systemic weaknesses in governance, leadership accountability, and an ethical culture [39].

The civil society and academic advocacy organisations have raised similar concerns regarding the normalisation of academic fraud and unethical behaviour in research [18]. For example, Pergerakan Tenaga Akademik Malaysia (GERAK) has continuously highlighted issues such as substandard research, suspicious publication practices, and a performance-based culture where rankings and output quantity are valued over quality and academic integrity. Even after receiving repeated assurances, moral encouragement from higher education institutions, and repeated attempts at

improving these practices, the issues persist [18]. This indirectly indicates that ethics and religious identity alone have failed to address institutional defects related to ethical culture.

In conclusion, the evidence indicates that there is no automatic assurance that an academic position will ensure ethical behaviour, nor will prestige of institution, nor will outwardly displaying a religious affiliation guarantee ethical behaviour or moral leadership. Rather, they reinforce the central claim of this paper that meaningful improvements in governance and institutional integrity require moral leadership anchored in internal conscience ("heart") and sustained by robust, transparent ethical climates. Without cultivating these foundations, reforms centred solely on regulation, compliance or religious symbolism are unlikely to produce enduring ethical transformation within Malaysian higher education.

4.2 Proposed Conceptual Framework

This paper constructs a framework for moral leadership that directs attention away from seeing moral leadership as a "static" personal attribute, and toward conceptualising moral leadership as a dynamic, ongoing process for the transformation of ethical intention into higher education governance outcomes. The framework specifically outlines the relationship between three main components, which are the inner moral consciousness, ethical climate of the organisation, and the socio-religious pluralism of the community. The framework posits that these three components serve as independent variables that, through the mediating process of moral leadership praxis, will yield ethical governance outcomes. In addition to the antecedent variables of moral leadership and ethical governance outcomes, the framework recognises that the portrayal of ethical behaviours, while part of the moral leadership process, is only one part of the ethical governance equation. The underlying moral capacities of a leader, as well as the context in which they work, also influence ethical governance outcomes.

Inner Moral Consciousness is defined as the moral qualities that exist within an individual, which are more related to the way one's heart responds to moral issues, rather than formal rules, positional authority, or religious affiliation [57]. Leaders who possess strong inner moral consciousness will be better equipped to perceive ethical dilemmas, counteract unethical forces, and act in accordance with their ethical beliefs, even in uncertain or potentially risky situations. Within the proposed framework of moral leadership, the inner moral consciousness of the leader is assumed to have a direct impact on ethical governance outcomes through shaping a leader's ability to make moral judgments, and to hold themselves accountable for their actions. Simultaneously, its influence is channelled through moral leadership praxis, whereby internal moral convictions are enacted through concrete leadership behaviours, decisions and governance practices.

The Institutional Ethical Climate represents a set of institutional norms, values, and practises that define the boundaries of an acceptable ethical climate at a university [54]. An ethical climate that is supportive enables transparency, accountability, equity, and open dialogue that permits organizational ethical decision-making [54]. Within the framework of this study, Institutional Ethical Climate presumably directly impact upon ethical governance, and an indirect impact through the practice of Moral Leadership Praxis. In the presence of strong individual morals, a weak ethical climate can demotivate individuals from performing good moral acts, rewarding behaviour that reflects compliance with policy instead of dissent. On the other hand, a strong ethical climate enhances the practice of Moral Leadership Praxis by legitimising ethical conduct and creating a shared responsibility for the integrity of the organisation.

The concept of Socio-Religious Pluralism reflects the many different moral, cultural, and religious backgrounds within universities in Malaysia [37-54]. The framework acknowledges the importance

of religion as a source of moral awareness and explains that Moral Leadership Praxis must always be developed within a framework of the common values of justice, trust, and compassion, regardless of faith traditions. Socio-Religious Pluralism will therefore influence ethical governance both directly and indirectly, through the practice of Moral Leadership Praxis. Moral Leaders are those that enact ethical leadership that is fair, transparent and accountable across the diversity of the organisation, and therefore, demonstrate greater moral maturity and contribute more to the institutions' integrity [37-54].

The authors have the opinion that the Moral Leadership Praxis is the main guiding principle in the framework of defining ethical governance outcomes. The function of Moral Leadership Praxis as a mediator, connects independent moral and contextual factors, culminating in Ethical Governance Outcomes. The term Moral Leadership Praxis is defined as an individual's actual experience of morality while they lead and make decisions [69]. This include having the courage to challenge others when they are acting unethically, ensuring fairness in governance, and having concern for the effect that their decisions have on society over the long term [69]. After defining Moral Leadership Praxis as a mediator, the framework defines how an individual's personal morals and contextual factors are then transformed into Ethical Governance Outcomes.

Additionally, the proposed conceptual framework also describes Moral Identity Salience as a moderator connecting independent variables with Moral Leadership Praxis on Ethical Governance Outcomes. Moral Identity Salience is defined as how important an individual's morals are to how they perceive their own identity as a leader [51]. Individuals whose moral identity is highly salient will be more likely to consistently act with their morals, regardless of whether there are a weak ethical culture present or institutional pressures [7]. Individuals whose moral identity is not strongly salient will conform to unethical norms even though they are aware of their morals and have received ethics training, as well as religious knowledge [51]. By including moral identity salience as a moderator, the framework accounts for variation in ethical behaviour among leaders operating within similar organisational and socio-religious contexts.

This conceptual framework utilises a systems approach that integrates contextual factors as well as ethical governance at each level within higher education systems in Malaysia. Ethical Governance Outcomes are produced by the relationship of internal moral consciousness, external moral climate, and socio-religious pluralism, and they are also influenced by how moral leadership practices occur. Consequently, ethical governance outcomes can be described as interactions between multiple variables, with no one single factor being responsible for producing ethical governance outcomes, thus rather than being limited to the variables that are commonly used to define ethical governance (e.g. regulation, religion), this framework is a multidimensional approach to the understanding of ethical governance within higher education systems in Malaysia and is therefore deemed more ethically sound for the field of leadership.

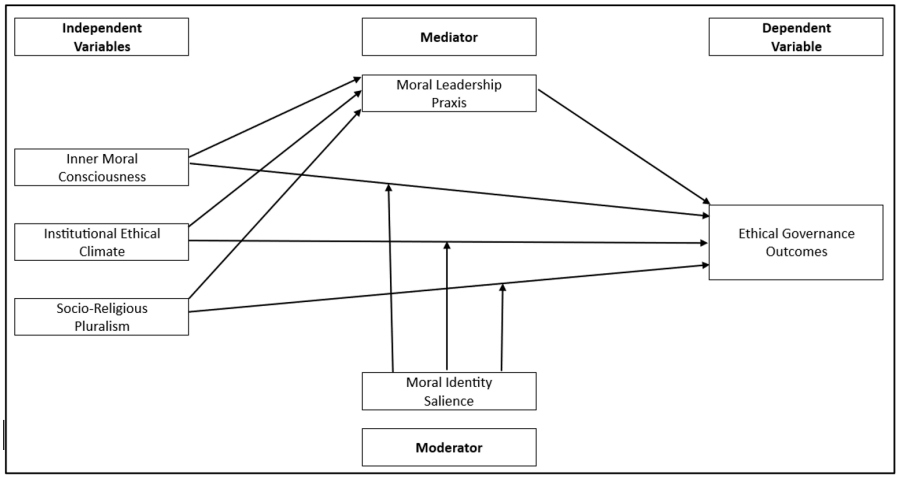


Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual framework

Source: Authors' Own Work

4.3 Underpinning Theoretical Perspectives

4.3.1 Inner moral consciousness, institutional climate & socio-religious pluralism → ethical governance outcomes

The relationship between individual moral capacity and the wider social and institutional environment in which a leader operates has a significant impact on ethical governance outcomes in higher education settings [37-54]. Thus, in this context, inner moral consciousness, institutional ethical climate, and socio-religious pluralism represent foundational antecedents to ethical governance. Moral Identity Theory by Aquino and Reed [11] suggests that leaders who have developed a strong, internalised moral self-concept experience greater moral commitment and act from an ethical judgement perspective than do other leaders who do not have an advanced moral framework. Therefore, the moral consciousness of leaders is instrumental in identifying ethical dilemmas and in prioritising principled action. Both elements ultimately impact ethical governance outcomes such as transparency, fairness, and institutional trust.

At the organisational level, Ethical Climate Theory [60] indicates that shared norms and expectations throughout an organisation shape the ethical behaviour of employees by demonstrating what constitutes acceptable behaviour within an organisation. In addition, a supportive ethical climate creates a foundation for ethical governance by institutionalising accountability, motivating ethical conversations and allowing for the legitimisation of moral dissent [5]. At the same time, weak ethical climates not only create an environment in which unethical behaviour becomes normalised ultimately, they also create an environment that diminishes the quality of governance regardless of the moral intentions of the individual leader or manager.

In a pluralised higher education environment, socio-religious pluralism dictates how ethical governance is practised because it requires inclusive types of leadership, which are based on shared morality, rather than on a single moral narrative. Based on these conceptual foundations, individual moral capacity and the social/institutional context of ethical governance must be examined when evaluating ethical governance practices in higher education settings. When leaders acknowledge plural moral perspectives while upholding universal ethical principles, governance outcomes are perceived as more legitimate, just and trustworthy [49-54]. Together, these three factors exert both independent and reinforcing influences on ethical governance outcomes.

4.3.2 Moral leadership praxis → ethical governance outcomes

Moral Leadership Praxis is the practical application of moral consciousness and contextual influences to specific ways in which leaders exercise, make decisions and govern [19]. In contrast to moral leadership definitions that focus only on one set of behaviours [19], moral leadership praxis highlights the ongoing and continuous act of enacting ethical behaviour through the live/realised application of moral awareness [69]. Therefore, although leadership ethics literature identifies several different ethical governance outcomes such as institutional integrity, procedural fairness, and public trust, these outcomes will not be achieved simply through moral awareness or following policies; rather, ethical leadership is a process through which the ethical leaders enact the ethical dimension of their decisions. Ethical leaders also demonstrate transparency, challenge improper conduct, focus on long-term impact on the community and, therefore, directly improve ethical governance [53].

Furthermore, this relationship is grounded by the idea of "Amanah", which describes leadership as a trust of institutions, society, and future generations [50]. When moral leadership is enacted as praxis (value), the ethical dimension of governance is not only a function of management, but it becomes a responsibility of the institutions to be ethical in their actions as well. Therefore, moral leadership serves as an essential mechanism through which an institution can achieve the ethical intent of its governance.

4.3.3 Moral leadership praxis as mediator

Moral Leadership Praxis mediates the relationship among the inner moral consciousness of the leader, the ethical climate of the institution in which they work, and the socio-religious plurality of the community in which they operate, thereby explaining how these antecedent factors produce ethical governance outcomes. Although these antecedent factors can directly impact governance, the extent to which leaders put moral leadership into practice significantly affects the impact of these antecedent factors on governance outcomes.

Moral Identity Theory that was coined by Aquino and Reed [11] indicates that moral values exert the greatest influence on behaviour when they are internalised by the individual and expressed behaviourally, while Ethical Climate Theory that was invented by Victor and Cullen [60] indicates that the context of an organisation (or set of organisations) will determine whether moral intentions are enacted or suppressed. The framework does not assume that the presence of moral awareness, or ethical context, results in ethical governance; by placing moral leadership praxis as the mediating variable, it provides a rationale for how different regulatory frameworks can exist within different organisations that produce different ethical governance outcomes. Rather than being understood solely as the presence of moral ideals, ethical governance is understood as the result of moral actions over time. Hence, there must be both morally grounded leaders and an environment that supports moral leadership to consistently realise ethical governance.

4.3.4 Role of the moderator: Moral identity salience

The introduction of Moral Identity Salience in this framework highlights its role as an important moderator of moral leadership portrayal because it captures the varying degrees to which the inner moral qualities of leaders and the moral institutional context influence how leaders express those moral qualities through their leadership behaviours. As defined here, Moral Identity Salience is how much of a leader's self-concept includes moral values, such as honesty, fairness, and personal

responsibility [51]. For a leader who internalises their moral values and feels they are part of their identity, moral behaviour is automatic (internally regulated) rather than independent of external controls (institutional, supervisory, or religious). This framework shows how Moral Identity Salience moderates the moderating relationship between Inner Moral Consciousness and Moral Leadership Praxis.

Leaders with a high level of Moral Identity Salience will typically maintain ethical behaviour even if they are in a situation where an ethical climate is weak, or the regulatory context is unclear, or the political context is controversial. Morally motivated leaders operate with a high degree of self-agency, driving their moral actions based on their internalised sense of personal responsibility and personal accountability; thus, their moral behaviour does not require institutional support or reputation-based incentives. Conversely, many leaders who possess low Moral Identity Salience will likely possess some level of formal religious understanding, be formally designated as being in an ethical leadership position, and be part of what appears to be an ethical organisation; however, they will often conform to unethical norms when their personal interests, organisations' pressures, or hierarchical expectations outweigh their moral conviction. On the contrary, leaders who have little moral identity salience may hold knowledge of the religion, occupy morally-framed positions, and/or work within institutions explicitly claiming to be ethical, but at the same time succumb to unethical norms when personal self-interest, organizational pressure, or situational hierarchy dominates their decision-making processes. This mode of operation can clarify why numerous ethical failures occur in institutions that profess a commitment to moral or religious values, but where the leaders within those organizations have not developed an internal, firmly fixed moral foundation.

Including moral identity salience as an influential or moderating variable in a conceptual model is incredibly important because it indicates that environments which appear similar can yield disparate ethical results based on moral identity salience. Moral identity salience provides an understanding of the reasons behind the difference between leaders who resist unethical systems, and those who comply; the failure of moral internalisation to prevent unethical behaviour by an otherwise religious leader; and why the development of leaders through the use of development programs dedicated to improving either symbolic ethics or religious representation are inadequate to produce ethical leaders. By recognising moral identity salience as the primary variable in the framework, it redirects attention away from performative morality to a focus on moral formation and the significance of leaders developing a positive ethical view of themselves internally, rather than having an externally-imposed ethical mandate.

4. Research Significance: Conceptual Strength and Originality of the Framework

The significant of this paper lies in its proposed conceptual framework with its ability to push the boundaries of moral leadership research forward rather than be restricted by existing models based on narrowly defined, or 'static', interpretations of moral leadership. In much of the literature regarding leadership, moral leadership is commonly viewed as being a fixed attribute of an individual, or as resulting solely from their religious beliefs, assuming that someone who holds certain religious beliefs automatically possesses the necessary ethical traits to lead others morally.

Alternatively, this framework proposes to view moral leadership as a lively process, or praxis, that evolves from the individual's internal moral consciousness and continues to be shaped by their institution and other ethical environments around them (e.g., through their lived experience). The authors believed the evolving model of moral leadership accurately describes how ethical leadership within higher education is often multi-faceted and cannot be resolved simply by “following the rules”. One of the most unique aspects of this model is its focus on how to move beyond religious contexts

while continuing to respect and honour people's beliefs, including their faith-based belief systems. For instance, this framework provides a way to link the concept of "Amanah" (or the concept of a moral trust) with ethical leadership in a way that reflects the importance of being accountable to society and future generations while also allowing for the inclusion of Muslim and non-Muslim principles and practices. Therefore, this framework provides an avenue for bridging both the religious and universal ethical principles in a way that is both inclusive and contextualised for the various pluralities present within the Malaysian higher education system. This concurrently allows moral leadership to be understood as a shared human responsibility rather than a religion-bound attribute.

In addition to discussing how moral leadership is aligned with establishing trust and representing integrity on behalf of institutions and/or communities, the framework also emphasises the extent to which moral leaders can demonstrate a positive long-term impact on society. Rather than categorising an ethical leader's success as measured by their achievement of compliance, it frames the ethical leader's success as an inherent moral obligation on their part thus, providing quality education, equitable institutions, and sustained partnerships through ethical means, ultimately providing the theoretical and practical basis for future research and governmental reform regarding the quality of ethical leadership and governance in Malaysian higher education. Eventually, it creates a comprehensive framework for ethically successful Malaysian higher education.

4. Expected Contributions

The paper makes a significant contribution to scholarship around moral leadership by challenging the conventional assumption (e.g., [15-29-58]) that having religious beliefs is sufficient or the most important aspect in being an ethical leader. In addition to discussing inner moral consciousness (e.g., the "heart"), the degree to which the individual is moral will affect the way they lead, this paper offers a more complex and all-encompassing perspective of moral leadership through an emphasis on morality, genuineness, and moral actions. The authors propose a platform through which the integration of previous theories of leadership puts forward the concept of moral leadership as a dimension of integration between individual moral identity, the institution's ethical climate, and the evolving nature of socio-religious plurality. The framework proposed by the authors will address the gap in the literature on Malaysian higher education with respect to how moral behaviour in a plurality and bureaucracy works, since much of the literature on Malaysian higher education places a significant emphasis on religious narratives without an appropriate theoretical basis for how moral actions are performed within plural bureaucracies.

This framework is also practical, with the potential to provide universities with insight on leadership development and governance reform by moving universities away from focusing primarily on symbols, ethics and authority to also focus on the development of moral foundations of leadership and the establishment of an ethical climate. This enables universities to rethink leadership development, a succession plan and performance appraisals. It also encourages universities to create an environment in which they support ethical deliberation, moral courage, and accountability at all levels of leadership as opposed to relying solely on mechanisms for "compliance" or "moral rhetoric/narrative" (maintaining the status quo. E.g., doing the right things by adhering to the norm). Institutions that employ this fashionable strategy are likely to increase the strength of their institutional integrity, build greater trust in their stakeholders, and create credibility in their governance.

In the nutshell, this paper provides insights at the policy level to support further development of national and international initiatives that seek to combine moral leadership with broad based governance and sustainability agendas. The proposed framework has implications for many areas of

sustainable development, notably in terms of Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education), 16 (Promoting Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and 17 (Strengthening Global Partnerships). The framework aligns well with the goals of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 which values ethical behaviour, integrity, leadership excellence and holistic human development. Besides, the framework informs efforts to promote moral leadership models in order to establish institutional governance, build trust in the institutions, and to enable higher education to fulfil its dual role as an ethical and intellectual foundation for national development.

4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although the current study contributes understanding of the conceptually based frameworks presented here, it has limitations too. One limitation is that, as a conceptual paper, the authors did not empirically test the proposed framework or evaluate how strong the relationship between the inner moral consciousness, ethical climate, socio-religious pluralism, and governance outcomes is. While the authors have grounded the framework in established theories and context-specific evidence, it would benefit from being validated empirically across a wide range of institutional types and leadership levels in Malaysian higher education.

Another limitation of the current study is the limited scope of the discussion, which is restricted to individuals occupying formal leadership positions in universities, such as vice-chancellors, deans, and senior administrators. Future researchers could expand the proposed framework to incorporate the informal and distributed leadership roles of academic leaders, mid-level administrators, and support staff, all of whom contribute to shaping the ethical climate of their institutions. Moreover, undertaking comparative studies between public and private higher education institutions or between Malaysian universities and those located within other plural societies would aid in providing a clearer understanding as to the effect of contextual factors on moral leadership praxis.

In addition to the above, future researchers are encouraged to develop operational definitions for the individual components of the constructs (i.e., inner moral consciousness and moral identity salience) since the definitions proposed in this study are conceptually rich but methodologically difficult to operationalise. Mixed-methods approaches, incorporating qualitative narratives of ethical decision-making alongside quantitative measures, may be particularly valuable in capturing the lived realities of moral leadership. Longitudinal studies could further explore how moral identity and ethical climates evolve over time, especially in response to policy reforms, leadership transitions or institutional crises.

4. Conclusion

Recentring moral leadership on the heart significantly than religiosity extends a timely and vital redirection for Malaysian higher education. Although religious beliefs are an important source of moral insight/ethical awareness, the authors contend in this paper that the foundation of ethical leadership lies in personal conscience, integrity and moral courage, and is fostered by supportive institutional settings, rather than through relying solely on religion as a marker of one's morals. By depending on religion as a substitute for ethical/moral legitimacy, the impact of ethical scrutiny may be lessened, thereby diminish accountability ultimately leads to continued incidences of poor or inadequate governance disguised as morally legitimate due to the influence of religiousness.

The authors propose a positive, comprehensive conceptual model of ethical leadership by combining elements from various disciplines to provide a sound conceptual framework for ethical leadership and governance for Malaysian universities. The moral leadership framework articulated

in this paper reflects the lived experience of moral leadership as informed by and enacted through one's inner moral awareness, the ethical contexts that support ethical leadership and socio-religious pluralism.

The authors present a comprehensive perspective on understanding the fragmentation of moral leadership in higher education and methods of creating ethical leaders as a shared responsibility among all who are engaged in the academic community, thereby allowing universities and other higher education institutions to retain and build upon their original mandates to ensure an ethical society and a continued commitment to the developmental needs of society. In an era marked by complexity, competition and moral uncertainty, "leadership" genuinely or purely deep rooted in the heart provides a sustainable foundation for ethical governance, academic integrity and the advancement of education as a public good in Malaysia and beyond.

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