



A Study on Development of Educational Leadership Program using Equine Assisted Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to evaluate the impact of emotional awareness, confidence, distress tolerance, and adaptability on the leadership development of employees in educational institutions in Malaysia. **Methodology / Data Collection:** A sample of 269 employees who participated in equine-assisted experiential learning was surveyed using a Likert scale questionnaire. Cross-sectional data were analysed using the statistical software JASP, version 0.19.0.0. The findings indicate that emotional awareness, confidence, distress tolerance, and adaptability are significant predictors of leadership development.

Contribution: This research makes a notable contribution to the literature by demonstrating that these emotional and psychological factors, facilitated through equine-based experiential learning, play a crucial role in leadership development. **Policy Implication:** The study recommends that policymakers consider these findings to enhance leadership development initiatives in Malaysia.

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Introduction

Employee performance has consistently posed a significant challenge for top leadership (Raza & Khan, 2022), closely linked to the performance of the departments in which they operate. To enhance employee performance, the quality of work and management practices

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must be advanced continually (Park et al., 2022). In the context of rapid economic growth, supporting institutions play a pivotal role, with employees in educational institutions being crucial contributors to overall economic development (Amrutha & Geetha, 2021). These employees are responsible for formulating policies and refining procedures within educational institutions, which is essential for effective functioning. However, challenges persist in the performance of education sector employees, which adversely affect their overall productivity (Jehanzeb, 2020). It is, therefore, imperative that employees in the education sector focus on enhancing their training to improve performance (Abuelhassan & Elsayed, 2020). Similarly, management should implement policies aimed at performance improvement.

Educational institutions in Malaysia are encountering similar performance-related challenges (Zhang et al., 2019), which are closely associated with employee performance. Comparatively, the performance of employees in Malaysian educational institutions is lower than that of their counterparts in Western countries (Guan & Frenkel, 2019). Various factors contribute to this reduced performance, with emotional instability, lack of confidence, poor distress tolerance, and limited adaptability identified as significant contributors (Hossen, Chan, & Mohd Hasan, 2020). These challenges have a detrimental effect on overall employee performance. Scholars have emphasized the need for immediate attention to these issues, highlighting their potential impact on Malaysia's economic development and cultural prosperity through the enhancement of educational institutions (Abdullahi, Raman, & Solarin, 2021). Addressing these challenges promptly could significantly improve employee performance in Malaysia, serving as a pathway to strategic advancement.

The literature indicates that employee performance can be enhanced through targeted training, which equips them with new knowledge and skills to address various challenges (Suliman et al., 2023). Sarfraz et al. (2023) argue that training is crucial for every employee, as it enhances their passion for work by significantly improving their skill sets. Hensellek, Kleine-Stegemann and Kollmann (2023) suggest that external motivation is essential for boosting employee performance, indicating a forward path for performance enhancement. Similarly, Obeidat, Abdalla and Al Bakri (2023) emphasizes the role of top management involvement in enhancing employee performance and productivity. Focusing specifically on employees in educational institutions, Purwanto (2022) proposes that substantial training coupled with bonuses is necessary to improve their performance. While these studies address critical aspects of employee performance, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the impact of emotional awareness and mental ability on performance improvement.

This study aims to assess the impact of emotional awareness, confidence, distress tolerance, and adaptability on leadership development among employees in Malaysian educational institutions. A sample of 269 employees who participated in equine-assisted experiential learning was surveyed using a Likert scale questionnaire. Data analysis using JASP (version 0.19.0.0) revealed that these factors significantly influence leadership development. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of these traits in leadership growth. Policymakers are encouraged to apply these findings to enhance leadership development in Malaysia. The study is organized into literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, implications, and future directions.

Review of Literature

Emotional awareness refers to the recognition of both deep and surface emotions (Suliman et al., 2023). In the workplace, employees are expected to exhibit emotional awareness, which is crucial for their professional development. This awareness significantly contributes to their effective functioning (Alam & Singh, 2021). While employees should express their surface emotions, they are often required to conceal deeper emotions to maintain a productive work environment. Emotional and psychological stability is essential for employees, as it fosters a conscious approach to their performance (Amjad et al., 2021). Moreover, leadership development skills are closely linked to employee performance (Al-Swidi, Gelaidan, & Saleh, 2021). Enhanced skills lead to a deeper understanding and a more reliable approach to work. Higher levels of employee involvement result in greater work consciousness (Agastya, Triana, & Haribowo, 2022; Belim et al., 2024; Heslina & Syahrini, 2021). Emotional stability further enhances decision-making, enabling employees to address challenges more effectively (Alenezi & Mugaddam, 2023; Rani, Rahman, & Yusak, 2021). Therefore, emotional stability is pivotal for the successful development of employees, contributing to improved performance through strategic decision-making and emotional regulation.

H1: *Emotional awareness has influence on leadership development.*

Work-related confidence plays a crucial role in employee performance (Idris et al., 2022). Confident employees are more motivated and productive, while a lack of confidence can increase challenges at work (Obeidat et al., 2023). Confidence not only enhances individual productivity but also fosters teamwork and support among colleagues (Ahmad et al., 2022; Al Doghan & Zakariya, 2022). It is essential for employees to work confidently, as this boosts performance and contributes to their strategic development (Sharma et al., 2021). Confident employees are more likely to make positive decisions, supported by a constructive mindset (Sarfraz et al., 2023). Additionally, confidence contributes to the development of leadership skills and personal growth, aiding in the achievement of strategic goals. Therefore, employees should be trained to work with confidence to enhance their overall performance (Chunxi et al., 2022; Raza & Khan, 2022).

H2: *Confidence has influence on leadership development.*

Employee tolerance levels significantly enhance overall workplace performance (Alawaqleh, 2021). A mentally resilient approach fosters tolerance, which in turn supports colleagues in various conditions (Hensellek et al., 2023). Employees lacking motivation may require substantial support, potentially hindering their performance. Leadership qualities, however, necessitate a certain level of tolerance to boost overall effectiveness (Bestari & Sinaga, 2022; Park et al., 2022). A positive attitude toward colleagues fosters mutual understanding, aiding in work-related matters and the acceptance of mistakes, which are crucial for developing tolerance (Purwanto, 2022). Employees with low tolerance may struggle in team settings, as they may lack supportiveness and creativity. Therefore, targeted training is essential to cultivate tolerance, thereby enhancing performance (Rao, Aleem, & ullah, 2022). Regular external training on this aspect is also recommended to further improve workplace dynamics (Chunxi et al., 2022; Ullah et al., 2022). Building a tolerance-focused mindset is vital for employees aspiring to leadership roles.

H3: *Distress tolerance has influence on leadership development.*

Adaptability is a crucial factor in enhancing employee performance (Chang, Sun, & Wu, 2022). Employees are encouraged to develop a higher level of understanding to effectively adapt to changes. Shifts in job roles often require adjustments in responsibilities, making adaptability vital in navigating these transitions (Khan & Ghayas, 2022). Moreover, adaptability aids in implementing new policies, fostering tolerance for changes within the work environment. Training that emphasizes adaptability can significantly enhance overall performance (Sarfraz et al., 2022). A lack of adaptability can hinder performance, presenting a substantial challenge. Therefore, employees are advised to cultivate a positive attitude toward change to improve their effectiveness (Khan & Ghayas, 2022). Adaptability to new policies and working conditions is crucial to employee performance (Abbas & Madi, 2023; Mancebo Roca, 2022; Msuya & Kumar, 2022). Additionally, adaptability is a key trait of top management, influencing overall development (He, Morrison, & Zhang, 2021). Emphasizing adaptability can therefore foster leadership qualities among employees.

H4: *Adaptability has influence on leadership development.*

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative design, collecting numerical data from respondents through a self-administered questionnaire featuring Likert scale items. A five-point Likert scale, consistent with previous research, was utilized to gauge participant responses. The questionnaire instruments, adapted from existing studies, were modified for context and language to ensure relevance. These instruments were chosen due to their established validity and reliability in prior research. The study targeted employees from educational institutions in Malaysia, specifically those who had undergone equine training, which was deemed essential before data collection. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed using a purposive sampling method, a technique previously validated in similar studies. Of these, 288 responses were returned, but preliminary analysis identified 269 responses as suitable for further analysis, having met criteria for unbiased and consistent responses. The study utilized cross-sectional data and analysed it using JASP statistical software, version 0.19.0.0, aligning with recommended methodologies from prior research (Murad, Othman, & Imran Bin Kamarudin, 2024).

Findings

The findings of this research were analysed using the JASP 0.19.0.0 statistical software, which is known for its user-friendly interface and ability to elucidate empirical relationships between variables. Initially, data were entered into JASP to compute descriptive statistics. All responses were valid, with no missing values. The mean values were within the range of -3 to +3, indicating a suitable distribution. To assess data normality, kurtosis and skewness were examined; results revealed that the data were normally distributed, as skewness and kurtosis values fell within the -3 to +3 range (Royston, 1992). Additionally, the study noted that responses on the Likert scale ranged from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	EA	CD	DT	AD	LD
Valid	269	269	269	269	269
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mode	3.000 ^a	3.000 ^a	2.000 ^a	2.000 ^a	2.000 ^a
Median	3.000	3.000	3.000	4.000	3.000
Mean	3.323	3.301	3.342	3.375	3.346
95% CI Mean Upper	3.460	3.441	3.485	3.520	3.488
95% CI Mean Lower	3.186	3.161	3.199	3.231	3.203
Std. Deviation	1.141	1.163	1.195	1.202	1.189
Coefficient of Variation	0.343	0.352	0.357	0.356	0.355
Skewness	-0.037	-0.062	-0.078	-0.081	-0.052
Std. Error of Skewness	0.149	0.149	0.149	0.149	0.149
Kurtosis	-0.994	-0.977	-1.195	-1.270	-1.202
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.296	0.296	0.296	0.296	0.296
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Maximum	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000
25th Percentile	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000
50th Percentile	3.000	3.000	3.000	4.000	3.000
75th Percentile	4.000	4.000	4.000	4.000	4.000

^a The mode is computed assuming that variables are discreet.

EA = Emotional Awareness, CD = Confidence, DT = Distress Tolerance, AD = Adaptability and LD = Leadership Development

In the second stage of analysis, binomial tests were employed to evaluate responses on the five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." For emotional awareness, the distribution of responses was as follows: 10 respondents selected "strongly disagree," 64 chose "disagree," 75 were "neutral," 69 selected "agree," and 51 chose "strongly agree." For confidence, responses were: 13 "strongly disagree," 63 "disagree," 74 "neutral," 68 "agree," and 51 "strongly agree." Regarding distress tolerance, the distribution was: 10 "strongly disagree," 75 "disagree," 53 "neutral," 75 "agree," and 56 "strongly agree." For adaptability, responses were: 8 "strongly disagree," 78 "disagree," 48 "neutral," 75 "agree," and 60 "strongly agree." Finally, for leadership development, the responses were: 9 "strongly disagree," 75 "disagree," 56 "neutral," 72 "agree," and 57 "strongly agree." These findings are detailed in Table 2. Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to assess the direction and strength of relationships between the variables. The results, with a p-value less than 0.05 (Benesty et al., 2009), indicated that all variables in this study are significantly and positively correlated with one another, as detailed in Table 3. No negative or insignificant correlations were observed. Consequently, the data were deemed suitable for further analysis.

Table 2

Binomial Test

Variable	Level	Counts	Total	Proportion	p
EA	1	10	269	0.037	< .001
	2	64	269	0.238	< .001
	3	75	269	0.279	< .001
	4	69	269	0.257	< .001
	5	51	269	0.190	< .001
CD	1	13	269	0.048	< .001
	2	63	269	0.234	< .001
	3	74	269	0.275	< .001
	4	68	269	0.253	< .001
	5	51	269	0.190	< .001
DT	1	10	269	0.037	< .001
	2	75	269	0.279	< .001
	3	53	269	0.197	< .001
	4	75	269	0.279	< .001
	5	56	269	0.208	< .001
AD	1	8	269	0.030	< .001
	2	78	269	0.290	< .001
	3	48	269	0.178	< .001
	4	75	269	0.279	< .001
	5	60	269	0.223	< .001
LD	1	9	269	0.033	< .001
	2	75	269	0.279	< .001
	3	56	269	0.208	< .001
	4	72	269	0.268	< .001
	5	57	269	0.212	< .001

Note: Proportions Tested against Value: 0.5.

The model summary findings were assessed to evaluate the overall strength of the model and its characteristics. The R value was calculated, with a value exceeding 0.40 being acceptable. Similarly, an R square value above 0.50 is considered indicative of a significant model. According to Table 4, the R value was 0.734, and the R square value was 0.538, confirming the model's significance. Additionally, the adjusted R square value was compared to the R square value to ensure minimal discrepancy. The study observed a minimal difference between these values, as shown in Table 4, indicating that the data were appropriate for further analysis.

Table 3

Pearson's Correlations

Variable		EA	CD	DT	AD	LD			
1. EA	n	—							
	Pearson's r	—							
	p-value	—							
	Lower 95% CI	—							
	Upper 95% CI	—							
2. CD	n	269	—						
	Pearson's r	0.632	***	—					
	p-value	< .001	—						
	Lower 95% CI	0.554	—						
	Upper 95% CI	0.699	—						
3. DT	n	269	269	—					
	Pearson's r	0.622	***	0.608	***	—			
	p-value	< .001	< .001	—					
	Lower 95% CI	0.543	0.526	—					
	Upper 95% CI	0.690	0.678	—					
4. AD	n	269	269	269	—				
	Pearson's r	0.632	***	0.581	***	0.638	***		
	p-value	< .001	< .001	< .001	—				
	Lower 95% CI	0.555	0.496	0.561	—				
	Upper 95% CI	0.699	0.655	0.704	—				
5. LD	n	269	269	269	269	—			
	Pearson's r	0.621	***	0.588	***	0.652	***	0.609	***
	p-value	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	—		
	Lower 95% CI	0.542	0.504	0.577	0.527	—			
	Upper 95% CI	0.690	0.661	0.716	0.679	—			

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 4

Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	RMSE
M ₀	0.000	0.000	0.000	1.189
M ₁	0.734	0.538	0.531	0.814

Note: M₁ includes EA, CD, DT, AD

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to evaluate the model's strength. A significance level of 95% is used, with a p-value below 0.05 indicating statistical significance. The results presented in Table 5 reveal that the p-value for ANOVA is less

than 0.05, confirming the model's significance. Additionally, an F square value greater than 0 is deemed significant for supporting the model's strength. The F value reported in Table 5 is 76.929, which exceeds 0, thereby validating the model's suitability for further analysis. The final analysis of path coefficients, with a significance level of < 0.05 (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011), revealed the following: H1 showed that emotional awareness significantly influences leadership development ($p < .001$), H2 indicated that confidence has a positive impact ($p = .007$), H3 found that distress tolerance significantly affects leadership development ($p < .001$), and H4 demonstrated a significant effect of adaptability ($p = .002$). All hypotheses were supported, as reported in Table 6. Additionally, collinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors ($VIF < 3.3$), and Table 6 shows that all VIF values were below 3.3, indicating no collinearity in the paths.

Table 5

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
M ₁	Regression	203.908	4	50.977	76.929	< .001
	Residual	174.939	264	0.663		
	Total	378.848	268			

Note: M₁ includes EA, CD, DT, AD

Note: The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

Table 6

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p	Collinearity Statistics	
							Tolerance	VIF
M ₀	(Intercept)	3.346	0.072		46.153	< .001		
M ₁	(Intercept)	0.433	0.174		2.484	0.014		
	EA	0.222	0.064	0.213	3.474	< .001	0.464	2.154
	CD	0.165	0.060	0.161	2.741	0.007	0.507	1.971
	DT	0.300	0.060	0.302	4.982	< .001	0.477	2.096
	AD	0.186	0.059	0.188	3.131	0.002	0.485	2.061

Discussion and Conclusion

The study conducted statistical analyses to validate its findings, which were grounded in empirical data. The results indicate that emotional awareness significantly and positively influences leadership development. This finding aligns with previous research. Raza and Khan (2022) define emotional awareness as understanding both deep and surface emotions, which employees need to demonstrate for their professional growth. Alam and Singh (2021) argue that emotional awareness is crucial for job performance. While employees should conceal their deepest emotions while working (Rani et al., 2021), they must express surface emotions appropriately in the workplace. Amjad et al. (2021) highlight that maintaining emotional stability and psychological resilience is vital for job

success. Consistent work environments, as discussed by [Ahmad et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Alawaqleh \(2021\)](#), help employees stay aware of their performance. [Heslina and Syahrani \(2021\)](#) connect employees' performance with their leadership development skills. [He et al. \(2021\)](#) emphasize that enhanced understanding from significant expertise provides a reliable work approach. [Msuya and Kumar \(2022\)](#) note that increased work involvement heightens employees' work awareness. Effective decision-making is facilitated by emotional equilibrium, allowing employees to tackle challenges more productively ([Park et al., 2022](#); [Sharma et al., 2021](#)). Thus, strategic decision-making and emotion management are essential for improving overall employee performance ([Rao et al., 2022](#)).

The findings of Hypothesis 2 reveal that confidence positively and significantly impacts leadership development, a conclusion supported by existing research. [He et al. \(2021\)](#) highlights that employee confidence in their work is a key determinant of job performance. Confident employees are more motivated to enhance their performance ([Alam & Singh, 2021](#)), while a lack of confidence can exacerbate job challenges and make them harder to manage ([Kundi et al., 2021](#)). [Rani et al. \(2021\)](#) also emphasize that leadership skills and job performance are closely linked to confidence. According to [Alawaqleh \(2021\)](#), working with confidence boosts productivity and facilitates support for colleagues. [Sarfraz et al. \(2022\)](#) stress that confidence is vital for teamwork, driving employees to perform at their best. [Abdullahi et al. \(2021\)](#) note that confidence is crucial for strategic performance improvement and decision-making. Additionally, [Amjad et al. \(2021\)](#) argue that confidence fosters positive psychology, enhancing decision-making capabilities. [Al-Swidi et al. \(2021\)](#) further assert that confidence contributes to the development of leadership skills and personal growth, which helps achieve strategic goals. Therefore, employee training aimed at boosting confidence is essential for enhancing performance.

The results of Hypothesis 3 indicate that distress tolerance positively and significantly impacts leadership development. Previous research supports this finding, with [Hossen et al. \(2020\)](#) linking tolerance to overall performance. [Sarfraz et al. \(2023\)](#) note that mental resilience enhances tolerance, enabling employees to support colleagues effectively. [Idris et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasize that less motivated employees may need additional support, which could affect their workload. [He et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Sarfraz et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that tolerance is crucial for leadership and handling work-related challenges. [Sharma et al. \(2021\)](#) caution that low tolerance impairs teamwork and problem-solving. [Hensellek et al. \(2023\)](#) recommend external training to build tolerance, which is essential for leadership roles ([Heslina & Syahrani, 2021](#); [Kundi et al., 2021](#)).

The findings from Hypothesis 4 reveal that adaptability positively and significantly influences leadership development, a conclusion supported by existing literature. [Suliman et al. \(2023\)](#) highlight that adaptability is crucial for improving personnel performance. [Obeidat et al. \(2023\)](#) further suggests that increasing staff members' understanding of new changes enhances their adaptability. [Park et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasizes that shifts in job responsibilities necessitate adaptability, which is essential for managing such changes effectively. [Sharma et al. \(2021\)](#) asserts that adaptability aids in adhering to new policies and coping with changes in the work environment. [Purwanto \(2022\)](#) notes that training focused on flexibility is pivotal in enhancing employees' overall performance. Conversely,

Raza and Khan (2022) and Heslina and Syahrani (2021) argue that limited adaptability negatively impacts performance across organizations. Al-Swidi et al. (2021) suggest fostering a positive attitude towards the work environment to improve adaptability. Furthermore, Amjad et al. (2021) and Khan and Ghayas (2022) discuss the significance of adaptability in top management, which contributes to organizational development. In summary, emphasizing adaptability can significantly enhance leadership development among employees.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this research make significant contributions to the existing literature. The study reveals that emotional awareness, confidence, distress tolerance, and adaptability—when examined through equine-assisted experiential learning—substantially impact leadership development. These relationships offer new insights, as previous studies presented mixed or limited findings. This research fills gaps in the literature by providing robust empirical evidence and statistical support for these connections, thereby enhancing our understanding of these dynamics in leadership development. Aligned with the theoretical contributions, the practical implications of this research are also significant. The study highlights the necessity of incorporating equine-assisted experiential learning into educational leadership development in Malaysia. Such programs are shown to enhance emotional awareness, confidence, distress tolerance, and adaptability—key factors for comprehensive personal growth. The findings suggest that equine-based training can strengthen leadership capabilities, which is crucial for effective policymaking and operational efficiency. This research underscores the importance of continuous leadership development, emphasizing that emotional stability improves leadership effectiveness. Therefore, it is recommended to implement equine-assisted experiential learning gradually to enhance leadership performance in Malaysian educational institutions. By focusing on these skills, the study advocates for improvements in leadership personality and performance.

Limitations and Future Directions

Consistent with other research, this study acknowledges several limitations. Firstly, while quantitative data was appropriate for this research, it provides a limited perspective compared to qualitative data. Future studies should consider incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews, to offer a more comprehensive and subjective analysis, thereby contributing further to the literature. Secondly, the data was exclusively collected from educational institutions, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other sectors. Future research should include data from various industries to enhance the breadth of the study's applicability. Thirdly, the research was conducted within Malaysia, which may not fully represent the context in less affluent countries. Future studies should explore data from developing economies to provide insights from a broader perspective. Addressing these recommendations could significantly improve employee performance and leadership development across different sectors and economic contexts.

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