

# A Comparative Study of Leadership Competencies of Academic Librarians in Malaysia

Goh, Sok Boon\*, Kiran, K\*\*

## Abstract

This study aims at examining the perception of library leaders and librarians about leadership competencies for academic library leaders and identifying the degree of differences in their perception. The study takes on a quantitative approach, involving a survey of library leaders and librarians at a Malaysian university library. Two separate questionnaires were designed based on an adaptation of the MySkillsProfile@2012 and Gorman's Competence Inventory to examine what leadership competencies were considered to be most important among the two groups. The study found that academic librarians only possessed moderately developed leadership competencies and the frequency of leadership training courses, which are being conducted by an academic library in a year, is not adequate for them to acquire leadership competencies. The top five leadership attributes, as perceived by library leaders, showed little difference in the ranking of the competencies between the two groups. The adapted instrument developed from this study can be applied, tested and used to determine leadership training needs based on the perceived gap.

**Keywords:** Leadership Competencies, Academic Library, Library Leaders, Malaysia

## Introduction

Leadership is an important trait and it occupies a significant place in the context of management today. Leaders can build or destroy an organization. In the academic library world, leadership skills are important in order to achieve the library's goals. These issues continue to plague university libraries of the present day. Increased complexity of the university and the library that functions within that context had brought an increased emphasis on the qualifications, expectations and demands

on its leader. Therefore, the role of leadership in this regard acquires great importance. Academic library leadership in the digital era is critical to the success of the academic institution they serve. Dewey (2005) believes that the interface of a hugely diverse set of campus and academic cultures should be navigated by academic library leadership so that learning and scholarships could be approached in very different ways. This implies that the librarians had to expertly handle the interface of scholarly, professional and management roles. Partnering with various groups across campus would become crucial for the library to stay aligned with the university's strategic planning process and shifts in curriculum, so it could better serve its user population. Fitsimmons (2008) cautioned that while it was useful for the academic library leader to describe various leadership attributes or competencies needed to be successful or effective, it was important to hear the voices of stakeholders that were the library staff, including librarians and paraprofessionals working in the library. The debate pertaining to the fact that whether managers were born or made had been in place for quite some time now. Jordon (2012) stipulates that a set of research-based competencies was just a first step. Training programs could be shaped to help new and aspiring directors to develop leadership competencies. Phillips (2014) concluded that in the LIS literature, there is a lack of agreement as to what the core skills of library leaders should be. In addition, Sutton and Booth (2014) also concur that leadership skills and competencies are difficult to define. In 2015, the American Library Association (ALA) adopted leadership development as one of the three strategic directions (Fiels, 2015).

## Objectives of the Research

The purpose of this study is to examine the perception of library leaders and librarians about leadership comp-

\* Librarian, BLT Solutions, Malaysia. Email: bb-cassie@hotmail.com

\*\* Associate Professor, Department of Library & Information Science, University of Malaya, Jalan Pantai, Malaysia. Email: kiran@um.edu.my

encies for academic library leaders. It further attempts to compare the difference in the perception between library leaders and librarians, and the opportunities for junior librarians to acquire these competencies through training opportunities. The research questions addressed are:

- i. What is the difference in the perception of leadership competencies between library leaders and academic librarians?
- ii. What are the leadership training opportunities for academic librarians, and to what extent do they meet the needs?

## Review of the Literature

Leadership development is becoming an increasingly significant field of consideration for the academic library service. Weiner (2003) summarized the roles and responsibilities of academic library leaders were garnering financial resources, strategic planning, perceptions of leader and library effectiveness, functions and challenges of the leader, and knowledge of organizational culture. In 2009, Garrett conducted a study on the skills and qualities of 62 senior library director in a state-wide consortium. Based on library leaders, the five top-ranked competencies were budget management, decision making, allocating resources, managing change, and building teamwork.

Later, Jordon (2012) conducted a Delphi study regarding leadership competencies of librarians in public libraries. There were 34 leadership competencies identified as important to library leaders. The top five were integrity, customer service, accountability, credibility, and communication skills. In the same year, Jantti and Greenhalgh (2012) used the 67 leadership competencies from Career Architect® model as the foundation of establishing success profiles for University of Wollongong Library (UWL). The final top nine competencies that emerged were perspective, managing vision and mission, political savvy, strategic agility, business acumen, self-knowledge, developing others, comfort around top management, and negotiating. Hall (2013) conducted a nation-wide survey of library managers using 12 items in the category of skills and 18 items in the category of personal attributes. The results showed that evaluation/assessment, strategic planning and communication were the three top-ranked management skills and interpersonal,

integrity and vision were the three top-ranked personal traits.

In America, Le (2015) conducted an open-ended question type survey for the librarians that held senior library leadership positions in American academic libraries. From the result, the top five most important leadership skills for academic library leaders were – vision, management skills, integrity, collaboration, and communication skills.

As evident from the aforementioned studies, the competencies identified were context specific, though integrity and communication were generic competencies, which emerged in each situation. Many of these researches did not specify the underlying theory that guided the competencies to be identified. However, from their results it is evident that the Behaviourist Theory guides the development of librarians' leadership qualities.

Training programs could be shaped to help new and aspiring directors to develop these competencies. Leadership qualities can be acquired through proper training. Badia (2015) states leadership skills could be acquired by “learn by doing.” Leadership potential could be developed through teamwork based projects if management support was presented and the librarians were encouraged to communicate with all stakeholders.

In 2015, Harris-Keith carried out a research on leadership skill development relevant to academic library directorship. He concluded that experience in directorship was the primary method for academic library directors to learn relevant leadership skills. According to Le (2015), the best ways to gain the leadership skills were through mentors, leadership development programs, experience leadership roles and self-awareness. Hall (2013) also found that the best ways to develop quality library managers was through conducting professional development opportunities such as workshops and seminars.

The review of the related literature has highlighted several issues in the development of Librarian Leadership studies. First, there is no single definition and measurement of leadership of librarians. However, judging by the constructs used, the Behaviourist Theory of leadership is more popularly used in library science research. Second, there exist many traits of leadership competencies; as such there is a need to identify the most important

competencies to be developed – within the specific context of the library. Finally, it is also clear that the concept and understanding of Leadership competency may differ from management to staff. Thus, it is necessary to study both the Library managers’ and librarians’ perception of the competencies they possess and consider vital for their jobs. This information will allow the alignment of future training with regards to leadership competencies.

## Methodology

This study takes a quantitative approach in investigating the difference in the perception between library leaders and librarians on the leadership competencies present in current librarians. Two separate surveys were utilized to collect data from Library leaders and librarians,

respectively. The leadership competencies inventory was based on MySkills@2012 and Gorman’s Competency Inventory. Since the study focused on leadership, it was deemed suitable to select respondents from libraries of excellent performing universities. The Rating System for Malaysia Higher Education Institute (SETARA) and QS University Ranking: Asia 2013 was referred to in selecting the five top-ranked public universities and five top-ranked private universities in Malaysia.

Two questionnaire-based surveys were used to gather data: (i) *Library Leader Survey*: for the Leadership Competencies of Librarians and Training Opportunities and (ii) *Librarian Survey*: for Leadership Competencies of Librarians and Training Opportunities. Table 1 lists the leadership competencies included in the survey measurement.

**Table 1: Leadership Competencies Items**

<i>Strategic and Creative Thinking</i>	<i>Leading and Deciding</i>	<i>Developing and Changing</i>
Resource management	Demonstrating leadership	Enthusiasm
Creativity	Delegation	Flexibility
Planning	Accountability	
Customer Service	Integrity	
Vision	Risk Taking	
Political understanding	Credibility	
Advocacy skills	Interpersonal skills	
	Communication skills	
	Maturity	
	Problem solving	

## Findings and Discussion

A total of 25 library manager questionnaires and 130 librarian questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 74% and 53%, respectively. Table 2 presents the demographic profile of both groups.

Based on data from 25 library leaders and 130 librarians, it was found that *Customer service* scored the highest average for both groups. On the other hand, the lowest average for both groups was *risk taking*. Table 3 gives a summary of the mean score for each competency based on the perception of the library leader as compared to the librarian.

**Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Library Leaders</i>		<i>Librarians</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender				
Male	9	36.0	35	26.9
Female	16	64.0	95	73.1

Characteristics	Library Leaders		Librarians	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Age (Years)				
20-29	0	0.0	30	23.1
30-39	3	12.0	58	44.6
40-49	10	40.0	40	30.8
50-59	12	48.0	2	1.5
60 and above	0	0.0	0	0.0
Education Level				
Bachelor's Degree	5	20.0	37	28.5
Master's Degree	18	72.0	93	71.5
PhD Degree	2	8.0	0	

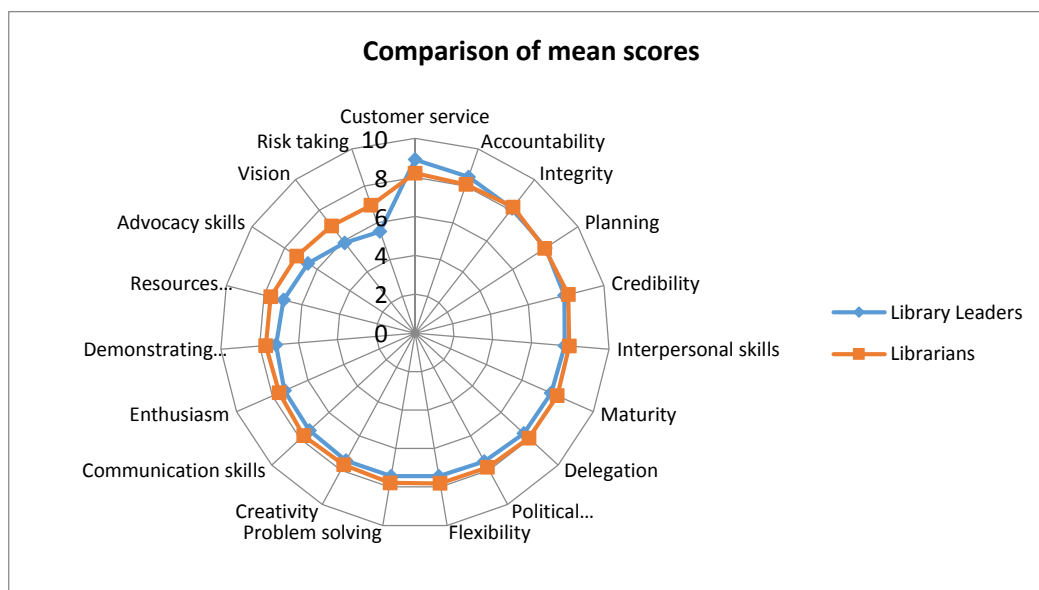
**Table 3: Comparison of Mean Scores and Rankings Between Groups**

Ranking		Competencies	Mean		
Library Leaders	Librarians		Library Leaders (a)	Librarians (b)	Differences (a-b)
1	1	Customer service	8.92	8.22	0.70
2	4	Accountability	8.48	8.08	0.40
3	2	Integrity	8.12	8.21	-0.09
4	6	Planning	8.00	7.96	0.04
5	3	Credibility	7.92	8.12	-0.20
6	7	Interpersonal skills	7.72	7.95	-0.23
7	5	Maturity	7.64	7.98	-0.34
8	7	Delegation	7.60	7.95	-0.35
9	9	Political understanding	7.48	7.83	-0.35
10	10	Flexibility	7.44	7.81	-0.37
10	11	Problem solving	7.44	7.79	-0.35
10	14	Creativity	7.44	7.68	-0.24
13	12	Communication skills	7.36	7.77	-0.41
14	16	Enthusiasm	7.32	7.61	-0.29
15	13	Demonstrating leadership	7.16	7.69	-0.53
16	15	Resources Management	6.96	7.64	-0.68
17	17	Advocacy skills	6.56	7.25	-0.69
18	18	Vision	5.88	6.98	-1.10
19	19	Risk taking	5.52	6.95	-1.43

As shown in Table 2, most of the average scores from the Librarian Survey were higher than the Library Leader Survey, indicating librarians perceived their leadership competencies to be higher than what their superiors perceive. Fig. 1 depicts this difference in a graphical radar.

First, it is evident that there is not much difference in the perception of top-ranked leadership competencies between

the two groups. Library leaders perceive librarians to have *customer service*, *accountability*, *integrity*, *planning*, and *credibility* as core competencies; whereas, librarians perceive themselves to have *customer services*, *integrity*, *credibility*, *accountability*, and *maturity* as core leadership competencies.



**Fig. 1: Comparison of Mean Scores in Both Surveys**

It is notable that there were three competencies that scored slightly higher in the library leader survey – *customer service*, *accountability*, and *planning*. Though both groups perceive these competencies to be valuable, it is evident that library leaders perceive their staff to have higher level of competencies relating to customer service, accountability, and planning. Librarians scored lower in planning because they probably are not involved in the planning process and do not relate to this competency as top-ranked. However, librarians do feel they have higher *maturity* competencies than perceived by their leaders. Maturity is important in dealing with users on a day-to-day basis and in handling co-workers.

Surprisingly, *resource management* was a competency that was ranked in the bottom five by both groups. This

is a serious matter as it is a core skill for a librarian. Fig. 1 clearly indicates lower level of ranking for *advocacy skills*, *resource management*, *vision*, and *risk-taking competencies* by both groups – even lower mean by library leaders. These are skills that relate more directly to Leaders – skills which the librarians may not yet have had the opportunity to improve upon – but clearly an indication for library leaders to plan for improvement – either on-the-job training or specific professional development training to address these skill and turn them into well-developed competencies.

Re-grouping these competencies to three categories: least developed, moderately developed, and well developed, Table 4 depicts the competencies that need attention during future training development and planning.

**Table 4: Categorization of Competencies by Groups**

Category	Competency item	
	Library Leader Survey	Librarian Survey
Under developed	-	-
Moderate developed	Resources Management	Resources Management
	Creativity	Creativity
	Vision	Planning
	Political understanding	Vision
	Advocacy skills	Political understanding
	Demonstrating leadership	Advocacy skills

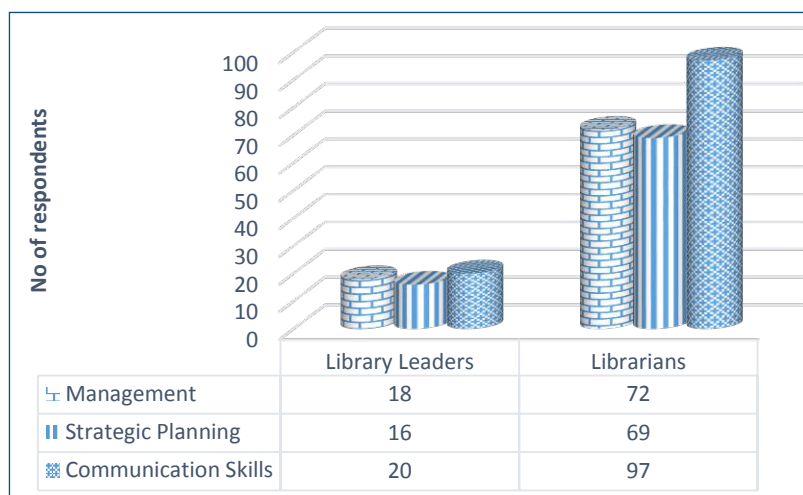
Category	Competency item	
	Library Leader Survey	Librarian Survey
	Delegation	Demonstrating leadership
	Risk taking	Delegation
	Credibility	Risk taking
	Interpersonal skills	Interpersonal skills
	Communication skills	Communication skills
	Maturity	Maturity
	Problem solving	Problem solving
	Enthusiasm	Enthusiasm
	Flexibility	Flexibility
Well developed	Planning	Customer service
	Customer service	Accountability
	Accountability	Integrity
	Integrity	Credibility

There is slight difference in the categories between the two groups. Library leaders need to decide which competencies should be the focus in upcoming training for librarians. Though librarians perceive credibility is a well-developed competency, the Leader seem to think otherwise. On the other hand, Leaders are quite certain Planning is a well-developed skill, but librarians perceive otherwise. The good news for Malaysian Academic librarians is that there is no competency perceived as

under developed.

#### *Leadership Training Opportunities for Academic Librarians*

Training opportunities for librarians were assessed based on three main categories – *management*, *strategic planning*, and *communication skills*. Fig. 2 depicts the difference between the types of training attended by library leaders and librarians.



**Fig. 2: Comparison of the Types of Leadership Training Attended by Groups**

The most popular type of training for both groups is on *Communication skills*, followed by *Management* related training and *Strategic planning*. Implications from previous results indicate that there should be an increase in librarians training in management and strategic planning

as librarians feel these competencies can be further enhanced. Library leaders may have perceived planning competency as higher because training has been provided in terms of Management and Strategic planning, but there may be a need to review these training as librarians still

perceive their competency level to be lower than expected by the Leaders.

When asked if these trainings were effective, librarians who answered Yes (82%) believed that these trainings enabled them to gain knowledge, refresh and update their skills, and gain basic knowledge on how to become a leader. Whereas, several librarians (6%) believed that these trainings were a waste of time because the contents were rarely updated. Another 12% had no opinion.

Majority (70%) of the library leaders found the trainings to be effective as these trainings allowed them to create awareness, gain knowledge, improve their performances, and be better leaders. On the other hand, 30% of the Leaders responded “neutral” as they did not want to say the trainings were not effective, but rather believed that “leadership needs to be put into practice and training does not provide this.”

Though Wong (2017) is of the opinion that a coherent comprehension of leadership among the library profession has not been formed. These results reveal some mutual leadership competencies between the library leaders and librarians.

## Conclusion

After the in-depth analysis of the findings of this study, it can be concluded that academic librarians perceive that they possess moderately developed leadership competencies. Only four out of 19 leadership competencies are considered well developed and the others are moderately developed. Fortunately, there is no leadership competency that falls in the least developed category. Academic librarians only possess moderately developed leadership competencies because of the frequency of leadership training courses that are conducted by academic libraries in a year is not adequate for them to acquire those competencies.

Library leaders and academic librarians have different views regarding the leadership competency of *planning*. *Planning* is well-developed leadership competency based on the view of library leaders, but is moderate developed leadership competency based on the opinions of academic librarians. It is because academic librarians think that *planning* is the responsibility of library leaders; thus, they might not be confident in this competency. On the

other hand, they believe *credibility* as a well-developed competency. Normally, we can't see clearly about our own limitations. The academic librarians think that they are consistent in speech and actions, but their leaders, who are always observing their work, will be clearer about their actions. In addition, normally the complaints about staffs are directed to their leaders, so their leaders will be clearer about their problems. As expected, most of the average scores by the librarians were higher than the library leaders'. This shows that academic librarians were confident in themselves. Besides, academic librarians might be too generous on self-assessment while library leaders might be too sceptical.

Overall, this study has shown that a comparison matrix between library leaders and librarians can reveal differences in perception on competency development among librarians. It is necessary to view these differences as training opportunities and further enhance the leadership competencies among librarians. This is an important step towards succession planning in academic libraries.

Future studies of leadership of academic librarians maybe considered to use qualitative approach, via interview, observations or focus groups to understand how these competencies are developed in the day-to-day job of the librarian, especially the experience and motivating factors which shape librarians' leadership competencies.

## References

- Badia, G. (2015). Calling all academic librarians to lead!: Developing and using inside talent to stay ahead. *Library Leadership & Management*, 30(1), 1-9.
- Dewey, B. I. (2005). Leadership and university libraries: Building to scale at the interface of cultures. *Journal of Library Administration*, 42(1), 41-50.
- Fiels, K. M. (2015). The new ALA strategic directions: Advocacy, information policy, and professional and leadership development. *American Libraries*, 46(11/12), 6-7.
- Fitsimmons, G. N. (2008). Academic library directors in the eyes of hiring administrators: A comparison of the attributes, qualifications, and competencies desired by chief academic officers with those recommended by academic library directors. In E. D. Garten, D. E. Williams, J. M. Nyce, & J. Golden (Eds.), *Advances in Library Administration and*

- Organization (pp. 265-315). Bradford, EN: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Garrett, W. A. (2009). *Evaluation of the Skills and Qualities for a Senior Library Director* (Doctoral dissertation). Available at ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3401928).
- Hall, R. A. (2013). Traits and training: Attributes and skills of Pennsylvania academic library managers. *Pennsylvania Libraries: Research and Practice*, 1(1), 10-23. doi: 10.5195/palrap.2013.12.
- Harris-Keith, C. S. (2015). The relationship between academic library department experience and perceptions of leadership skill development relevant to academic library directorship. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 41(3), 246-263.
- Jantti, M., & Greenhalgh, N. (2012). Leadership competencies: A reference point for development and evaluation. *Library Management*, 33(6/7), 421-428.
- Jordan, M. W. (2012). Developing leadership competencies in librarians. *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*, 38(1), 37-46. doi: 10.1177/0340035211435074.
- Le, B. P. (2015). Academic library leadership in the digital age. *Library Management*, 36(4/5), 300-314. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LM-07-2014-0083>.
- Malaysian Qualification Agency. (2011). *2011 Rating system for Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (SETARA'11)*. Retrieved from <http://www.mqa.gov.my/portalMQA/SETARA11/SETARA%20'11%20ADVERTORIAL%20BI.pdf>.
- My Skills Profile. (2012). *Management and leadership questionnaire: Leadership assessment and development*. Retrieved from <http://www.myskillsprofile.com/Guides/2012%20Management%20and%20Leadership%20Questionnaire.pptx>.
- Phillips, A. L. (2014). What do we mean by library leadership?, *Journal of Education in Library and Information Sciences*, 55(4), 336-344.
- Sutton, A., & Booth, A. (2014). The librarian as a leader: Development of leadership in the library and information profession. *Journal of the European Association for Health and Libraries*, 10(40), 15-17.
- Weiner, S. G. (2003). Leadership of academic libraries: A literature review. *Education Libraries*, 26(2), 5-18.
- Wong, G. K. W. (2017). Leadership and leadership development in academic libraries: A review. *Library Management*, 38(2/3), 153-166. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1108/LM-09-2016-0075>.