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**المقالات العربية**

- 1 - أئزُّ التَّعايش السِّلْمِي في حِمايَةِ الوِطَنِ في السُّنَّةِ النَّبَوِيَّةِ: دِراسَةٌ تحلِيلِيَّةٌ في ضِوءِ الوَاقِعِ المِعاَصِرِ  
أردوان مصطفى إسماعيل، عارف علي عارف
- 40 - مِبْدَأُ العَدْلِ في أَصُولِ الفِقه  
عمار يحيى الضايغ، صالح قادر كريم الزنكي
- 70 - مِفهومُ المِسْؤُولِيَّةِ عَنِ التَّأمِينِ الصَّحِي للمِواطِنِ في مِناظِرةِ الاِقتِصادِ الإِسلامِي:  
دِراسَةٌ تحلِيلِيَّةٌ  
ربني آريانتى رملي، أكبر شريف، دكتورة نور العين بنت محمد
- 103 - التَّبَيُّنُ عِنْدَ مِسلمِي بانكوك: أَسبابُهُ وآثارُهُ وَكِيفِيَّةُ الوَاقِيَةِ مِنْهُ في ضِوءِ الفِقهِ الإِسلامِي  
نواوي عاراوان، غالية بوهدة، ميسزيري بن سيتيريس
- 138 - صِفاَتُ القِياَدَةِ الجِيدةِ وَدَوْرُها في تَطوِيرِ الإِدارَةِ في الفِكرِ الإِسلامِي: دِروسُ مِستِفاَدَةٍ مِنْ مِوَدِجِ عِبدِ المِلكِ بِنِ مِروانِ  
خلد علي بخيت البرعمي، عبد العزيز برغوث
- 168 - الفِقهُ الاِفتِراضي عِنْدَ المِمالِكِيَّةِ مِنْ كِتابِ المِدِوَنَةِ بَيانٌ وَتَحْقِيقٌ  
سيدي محمد فال
- 199 - التَّكْيِيفُ الفِقهِي لِحُرْمَةِ الاِبتِزازِ الإِلكِترَوْنِي وَالتَّأصِيلِ الفِقهِي للعِقُوبَاتِ الوارِدَةِ في الأَنْظِمةِ الخِليجِيَّةِ  
سلطان سابل العنزني، عبد الكريم بن علي، شاهيدرا بنت عبد الخليل
- 235 - تَوطِينُ العِلْمِ الاجْتِماعِيَّةِ في السِّياقِ الإِسلامِي: المِفهومُ وَالمِقياسُ  
د. نايف نحر الشمري

**English Articles**

- **The Role of CSOs in The Democratisation Process in Iraqi Kurdistan** 279  
Jamal Mohammed Ameen Hussein and Abdulwahed Jalal Nori
- **Integrating Gold-Backed Cryptocurrency for Blockchain Net Settlement to Achieve Future Economic Stability** 304  
Irma Naddiya Mushaddik, Ashurov Sharofiddin and Aznan Hassan
- **Sejahtera leadership: An Indigenous Malay Concept in Higher Education for Sustainable Development** 345  
Arbaiah Abdul Razak and Zainal Abidin Sanusi
- **Millennial Muslims and Use of Cyber-Islam: A Case Study of Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk on Twitter and their Impacts** 372  
Mariet Rosnaida Cabrera Cusi and Abdelaziz Berghout

# ***Sejahtera* leadership: An Indigenous Malay Concept in Higher Education for Sustainable Development**

## **Kepemimpinan Sejahtera: Konsep Asli Melayu di dalam Pendidikan Tinggi Untuk Pembangunan Lestari**

Arbaiah Abdul Razak\* and Zainal Abidin Sanusi\*\*

### **Abstract**

Leadership for sustainability in the education sector is nascent. Thus, this paper proposes an indigenous leadership style, yet dynamic and contemporary for higher education aligned with sustainable development called *sejahtera* leadership. The *sejahtera* leadership concept has been nurtured in a Malaysian public university context. The founding convener for *sejahtera* leadership advocates leaders at universities and beyond to adopt a *sejahtera* approach in education for sustainable development since early 2000s. This paper aims to explore how *sejahtera* leadership contributes to the education for sustainable development. The underlying question was investigated by examining the distinct features of *sejahtera* leadership style and its practices in higher education for sustainable development. The leadership style introduced in the context of this paper assures that while indigenous in nature, *sejahtera* leadership is well-corresponded with the education for sustainable development (ESD) agenda, the fourth sustainable development goals (SDGs) on quality education, and has a deeper meaning given the focus on inner self and outer elements of social, economic, and environment development.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Leadership, *Sejahtera*, Sustainable Development, Malaysia.

### **Abstrak**

Kepemimpinan untuk kelestarian adalah suatu bidang baharu di dalam sektor pendidikan. Oleh itu, penulisan ini mengetengahkan konsep kepemimpinan sejahtera

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berdasarkan gaya kepemimpinan setempat, dinamik dan semasa bagi tujuan pendidikan tinggi selari dengan keperluan pembangunan lestari. Konsep kepemimpinan sejahtera telah terbentuk di dalam konteks universiti awam Malaysia. Pengasas utama kepada konsep kepemimpinan sejahtera menyarankan bahawa pemimpin-pemimpin universiti dan selainnya perlu menerapkan dan mengamalkan pendekatan sejahtera di dalam pendidikan bagi mencapai pembangunan lestari. Persoalan dasar ini dikaji dengan meneliti dan mengupas apakah ciri-ciri tersendiri kepemimpinan sejahtera dan implikasinya ke atas amalan bagi pendidikan untuk pembangunan lestari. Gaya dan bentuk kepemimpinan sejahtera yang diperkenalkan di dalam penulisan ini memperlihatkan bahawa ia bukan sahaja mempunyai sifat setempat malah selaras dengan agenda pendidikan untuk pembangunan lestari, matlamat pembangunan lestari yang ke empat iaitu pendidikan berkualiti. Kepemimpinan sejahtera juga mempunyai makna dan kesan yang mendalam kerana ia memberi fokus kepada sifat dalaman seseorang dan hubungkaitnya dengan elemen luaran dalam aspek sosial, ekonomi dan alam sekitar.

**Kata Kunci:** Pendidikan Tinggi, Kepemimpinan, Sejahtera, Matlamat Pembangunan Lestari, Malaysia.

### **Introduction**

Global issues like climate change, imbalance life on land and below water, extreme poverty and hunger, irresponsible consumption and production, poor health and water supply, and others create unsustainable present and future. Thus, there is an increasing need for effective and collaborative actions to increase awareness and understanding on sustainable development through education (Argento *et al.*, 2020; Manteaw, 2012; Satrianawati & Fu, 2019). Tertiary education institutions such as universities have traditional roles in providing higher learning, conducting research, and servicing communities aim at creating a knowledge society. The knowledge society, in turn, is expected to be more responsible and sustainable in its actions (Luetz *et al.*, 2019; Spangenberg, 2005). Central to these roles, the universities are involved directly in developing students to become knowledgeable members and future leaders of a society.

Like most nations of the world, Malaysia has responded to the calls for sustainable development, for instance, through the establishment of Local Agenda 21 that stresses the requirement of

education institutions to practice and implement education for sustainability (Joseph, 2013; Hanifah & Shaharudin, 2017; Reza, 2016). The critical role of universities in developing the students for sustainable development has been incorporated into the Malaysian education philosophy that emphasizes on 'balanced' and 'harmonious' individuals with soul when it says:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high levels of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large.

The Malaysian education philosophy stresses continuous efforts to develop many good attributes of individuals with a bottom line to achieve a high level of personal well-being. This educational philosophy is considered indigenous to Malaysia that was originally expressed in the native-cum-national language, i.e., Malay language. For the purpose of this paper, the literal equivalent of "*kesejahteraan*," i.e., "well-being" will be used throughout the paper. "*Kesejahteraan*" used in the national education philosophy is a derivative from the word "*sejahtera*," pronounced as "*se.jah.te.ra*", an indigenous term used in the Malay Archipelago (Zulkifly, 2021).

Based on the standard Malay language dictionary, "*sejahtera*" is defined as safe and prosperous, happy and peaceful, safe and protected from disaster such as distress and disturbance (Institute of Language and Literature, 2005). Holistic and wholesome features are incorporated in the term *sejahtera* itself. According to Magni (2017), by exploring indigenous knowledge in greater depth, a society can better understand and benefit from the sustainable development agenda. This philosophical stance mooted the idea of *sejahtera* leadership, a local

leadership concept that has been advocated by the leadership of International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) since its inception but has been extensively reinforced from 2019. It is noted that leadership is a common concept with many definitions that can be attributed to traits, characteristics, behaviors, roles, styles, and skills. But a fundamental definition for leadership is a process of motivating others to collaborate in pursuit of a common goal (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Thus, *sejahtera* leadership is a process of motivating others to collaborate and accomplish common goals in a *sejahtera* (i.e., safe, prosperous, happy, peaceful, safe, and protected from disaster) manner. According to the founder of *sejahtera* leadership concept, this leading process is not only about the others and the external goals, but also embracing the 'self' and the inner dimensions of the leaders including their spiritual consciousness (Dzulkifli, 2020).

Leadership for sustainability in the education sector is at infancy (Taşçı & Titrek, 2020) and consequently it faces many challenges and barriers (Foley, 2021; Malik, 2018). In the reviews of issues and trends in education for sustainable development, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) shifted the focus from Agenda 21 to the fourth Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on quality education with a set of ambitious and challenging targets (Leicht *et al.*, 2018). Inspired by this cue, the objective of this paper is to propose an indigenous leadership style, yet dynamic and contemporary that is universal in approach for sustainable development in higher education: the *sejahtera* leadership. Using a contextual setting of a Malaysian public university, the researchers explore a primary question on how *sejahtera* leadership contributes to the education for sustainable development. To answer this question, the study used qualitative content analysis on key literatures on *sejahtera* concept and its operationalizations in a Malaysian public university context and identified key features of the *sejahtera* leadership. Next, the features of *sejahtera* leadership were positioned in the education for sustainable development (ESD) framework. Finally, a comparison between *sejahtera* leadership and other leadership style was made to conclude the analysis.

### **Education for Sustainable Development**

UNESCO has emphasized the importance of education as the foundation for building peace and driving sustainable development through the ESD agenda (UNESCO, 2020). Although UNESCO's global education agenda has its time limit by 2030, it is expected that the education agenda would remain as top priority of all nations for a long time because it is a basic and natural human right to serve good purposes on earth through truthful learning. The philosophy of ESD movement is to empower learners to make informed decisions, undertake responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability, and create a just society for present and future generations (Jickling, 2005; Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2019; Rieckmann, 2018). The ESD promotes a holistic educational approach that addresses learning content and outcomes, innovative pedagogy and 'learning by doing', and community engagement in achieving sustainable change (UNESCO, 2020).

Sustainability agenda is not only meant for policy makers, but also leaders in organizations, and managers in industries. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure sustainability of the earth, and education must provide effective teachings that empower learners to contribute for sustainable development (Agbedahin, 2019). An integrated learning and teaching approach is important to ensure knowledge that is delivered cuts across multiple disciplines appropriate to address the complex sustainability issues (Caniglia *et al.*, 2018; Rieckmann, 2018). For example, although regular financial assistance can eliminate poverty at times, educational programs help alleviate poverty over time especially in the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Guo *et al.*, 2019). Studies have shown that educational activities can significantly contribute positive changes for individuals, societies, economies and viewed as a fundamental solution for all issues (Boak *et al.*, 2020; Brown & James, 2020)

The fourth SDG set by the United Nations (UN) is on education aiming to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. In addition, the education goal is targeted to ensure, among others, that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development including promotion of sustainable lifestyles, a culture of peace and non-violence,



global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity (SDG target 4.7) (UNESCO, 2020). All nations support these aims and scholars emphasize the indispensable role of education as a powerful tool for peaceful and sustainable development (Cars & West, 2015; Ferreira *et al.*, 2021). For example, Sweden is one of the countries that took proactive action in introducing ESD into their formal education system through its inclusion in the curriculum and innovative learning and teaching approaches (Cars & West, 2015).

### **The Concept of *Sejahtera* and Sustainability**

The word *sejahtera* is a multifaceted concept that construes a deeper meaning than any single English word can convey. *Sejahtera* has no equivalent in other languages neither can it be accurately translated into different languages because it is deeply rooted in the Malaysian society and cultural values (Dzulkifli, 2020).

Unless we are able to translate our words into a language that can reach the minds and hearts of people young and old, we shall not be able to undertake the extensive social changes needed to correct the course of development. - *Gro Harlem Brundtland. In: Our Common Future preface* (Gadotti, 2008, p. 21).

In Malaysian educational context, the underlying goals of the National Education Philosophy (NEP) that was formulated in 1988 are to develop balanced and harmonious individuals integrated with good elements of intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical, faith, knowledge, competency, moral, and responsibility (Al-Hudawi *et al.*, 2014). Equipped with these holistic elements, the NEP envisioned that the Malaysian citizens are capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being (or *sejahtera*) and able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, society, and the nation. According to Gadotti (2008, p. 29), sustainability is closely linked with well-being and a sustainable life is a lifestyle that promotes well-being for everyone in harmony (dynamic balance). Therefore, the Malaysian indigenous concept of *sejahtera* is well-fit with the notion of sustainability, and Malaysians who have achieved the *sejahtera* state would be in harmony and balanced to contribute for

sustainable development. The opening statement of the NEP is itself indicating a sustainable aspiration of the Malaysian education system to continuously develop the state of *sejahtera* at individual level (Azmi, 2000). According to Dzulkifli (2020), the Malaysia's National Education Philosophy (NEP) implies a personal development process towards an achievement of individual 'quality of life' that is both sustainable and balanced that is embodied in *sejahtera* as a way of life.

Sustainability may not exist explicitly in the Malaysian NEP, but the word 'on-going' in the education's philosophy is directly linked with a general definition of sustainability. Terminologically, sustainability refers to something that is capable of being continued at a certain level. By adding the word 'development' to sustainability, the resulting word sustainable development (SD) defines a long-term effort to continuously being at a certain level. The United Nations (UN) formulated a specific definition for SD as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Bergman *et al.*, 2018, p. 3). Based on the UN Brundtland Report, for SD to be achieved, it is crucial to harmonize the elements of social, economy, and environment which are then crucial for the well-being of individuals and societies. Again, the word 'well-being' in this SD statement fits with the concept of *sejahtera* as discussed in the introductory section above.

Taken together, *sejahtera* is (a process to achieve) a state that keeps every decision and action in harmony and balanced between a set of elements (Dzulkifli, 2020). In the case of *sejahtera* in a Malaysian context, there are ten elements (summed up by the acronym SPICES) that make up this indigenous concept holistic and universal in approach that encompasses: (1) spiritual, (2) intellectual, (3) emotional, (4) physio-psychological, (5) ethical, (6) cognitive, (7) cultural, (8) societal, (9) ecological, and (10) economic. The SPICES of *sejahtera* focuses inward (i.e., spirituality) as the primary thrust that is vital for maintaining a harmonious balance within the other elements and larger societal framework. A state that keeps each element balanced denotes *sejahtera* as illustrated in Figure 1.

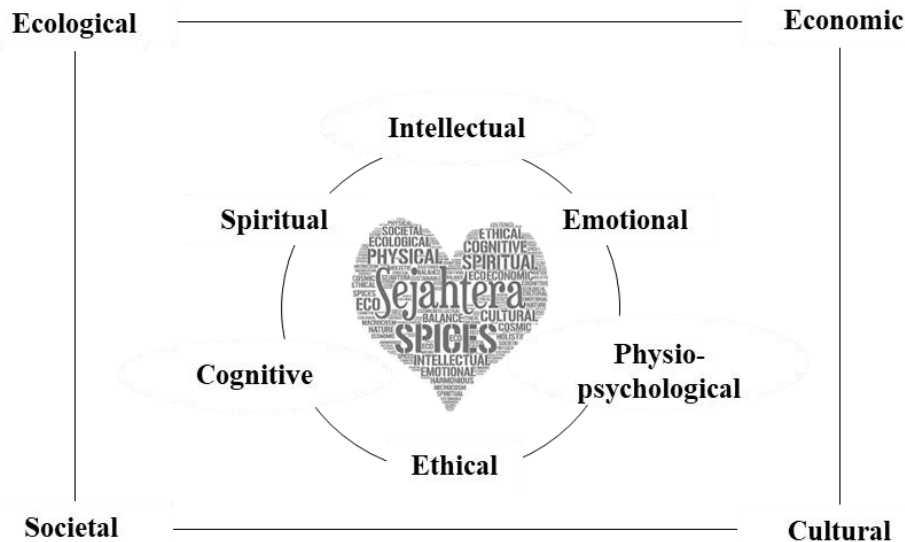


Figure 1. The ten elements (SPICES) of *sejahtera*.  
Source: Adopted from Dzulkipli (2020) for this study.

As observed, central to the *sejahtera* concept is the ‘heart’ that represents each human being's inner self which is interconnected with the outer six elements that circle an individual. A person is considered being in *sejahtera* when he or she can keep the six inner elements balanced and in harmony with each other. A *sejahtera* person then will have the capability to keep the outermost four elements in balance and harmony guided by the self-*sejahtera* state particularly in decision making and interaction process.

### **Sejahtera Leadership Complements ESD**

As Jackson (2017) highlighted several gaps related to lack of educational research or philosophy on ESD framework, this paper is expected to fill the gaps by contributing insights on educational philosophy and practices in ESD framework from the Malaysian context. In so doing, the *sejahtera* leadership definition is reinstated as a process of motivating others to collaborate and accomplish common goals in a *sejahtera* (i.e., keeping a balanced, safe, prosperous, happy, peaceful, safe, and protected from disaster) manner combining the SPICES elements. This orientation concurs with the third International Day of

Education on 24 January 2021 under the theme 'Recover and Revitalize Education for the COVID-19 Generation', that says that it is timely for leaders in educational institutions at all levels to review their education policy and system (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Bearing this educational theme, the *sejahtera* leaders at higher education institutions have an important role to keep a balanced motivation (for self and others) at the center of the recovery process. More importantly, the *sejahtera* leaders need to revitalize the existing higher education system to be more flexible so that no one would be excluded from the new mode of remote learning (Sirat *et al.*, 2020). A sudden shift of the learning and teaching environment in Malaysian context that is conducted predominantly through face-to-face in a physical setting at the university (classically known as ivory tower for the elitist) had been transformed to a more flexible and open place of education.

Remote learning is not a norm in Malaysia. Although the national Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025) has promoted remote learning including online learning, open and distance education, and massive open online courses (MOOC), the take-up rate at higher education institutions was rather slow. A slower usage of remote learning is more apparent to the disadvantaged and marginalized groups because they often lack access to educational technology and internet coverage (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Sirat *et al.*, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic – a blessing in disguise – creates opportunity for leaders and educators at the higher education institutions to revitalize the learning and teaching system without leaving anyone behind and expedite the remote learning initiatives (Kalantzis & Cope, 2020; Kato *et al.*, 2020; Peters *et al.*, 2020). These initiatives are consistent with the fourth SDGs on education aiming to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Amid COVID-19 pandemic, there is also opportunity for *sejahtera* leadership to position its philosophy and complement the ESD agenda by advocating the balanced way of life concept among the SPICES elements (Dzulkifli, 2020). Changes – regardless in a good or bad form – always trigger resistance among individuals. Thus, *sejahtera* leaders need to motivate and keep the inner state of every individual at balance and in harmony so that they are capable to decide and act in a *sejahtera* way

towards others and their environment. This paper will discuss a case at one of the Malaysian public universities to illustrate the application of *sejahtera* leadership initiatives that complement the ESD.

### **The Case of International Islamic University Malaysia<sup>1</sup>**

The idea of *sejahtera* in education was first introduced in early 2000s at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) by the then Vice Chancellor, Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abdul Razak to promote transformational mindset changes that adopt the concept of balanced and sustainable development through education (Dzul kifli *et al.*, 2018). Since then, various discourses and initiatives on *sejahtera* being conducted locally and internationally involving academics, practitioners, students, stakeholders, and communities including support from the UN Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE). In the case of International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), sustainable development is explicitly specified in the university's second mission statement as follows:

To produce better quality intellectuals, professionals, and scholars by integrating quality of faith (*iman*), knowledge (*'ilm*), and good character (*akhlak*) to serve as agents of comprehensive and balanced progress as well as sustainable development in Malaysia and in the Muslim world.

In addition, the seventh mission statement aims:

To develop an environment which instills commitment for lifelong learning and a deep sense of social responsibility among staff and students.

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<sup>1</sup> IIUM is the sixth public university in Malaysia (out of total 20 public universities). The university was established in 1983 to integrate Islamic values, world views, and global orientations into its humanities, scientific, and technical curriculum. As of 2018, the IIUM has 14 faculties, five centres of excellence, and about 2,000 academics with an enrollment of 26,000 students coming from 117 countries. To date, the IIUM has more than 90,000 alumni. Source: Accessed from <https://www.iium.edu.my/v2/about-iium-2/> on 24 May 2021.

These two mission statements indicate the relationship between *sejahtera* concept and ESD that is being translated into a balanced progress and sustainability-led initiatives in IIUM. Overall, the IIUM missions are positioned in line with the fourth SDG on quality education and actualizing in its educational goals as listed below:

- Nurture graduates who are balanced and harmonious (*insan sejahtera*) as stipulated in the National Education Philosophy, crafted on values-based holistic and integrated education for sustainable development (Education 2030).
- Provide conducive shared learning (culture of *iqra'*) ecosystem geared towards the convergence of knowledge founded on the *Tawhid* (affirmation of the absolute Oneness of Allah swt) in realizing comprehensive excellence.
- Engage in research and innovation that are relevant to *maqasid al-shariah*<sup>2</sup> and sustainable development goals (SDGs) aimed at mercy for all the world (*rahmatan lil-alamin*).
- Nurture *insan sejahtera* (a balance and harmonious person), equipped with useful knowledge and specialized skills, and committed to Islamic values and practices imbued with integrity, *amanah*, *iman*, *akhlaq*, and *taqwa*<sup>3</sup> towards the realization of virtuous civilization.

The appointment of Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abdul Razak – the initiator of *sejahtera* concept for sustainable development through education – as the sixth Rector (equivalent position to Vice Chancellor in British Commonwealth countries) at the IIUM in August 2018 was timely to revitalize the whole-institution system. Following the ESD five priority action areas for 2030 implementation framework (UNESCO, 2020), the next sections methodically discussed the most recent *sejahtera* leadership initiatives at the IIUM that complement the ESD agenda.

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<sup>2</sup> *Maqasid al-shariah* means intent, objective, and purpose with a desire to create harmony with others according to the Islamic way.

<sup>3</sup> English translation of values include: *amanah* (trust), *iman* (faith), *akhlaq* (morality), and *taqwa* (piety).

### *1. Advancing policy*

Top leaders at higher education institutions have a critical responsibility to bring about changes needed to engender ESD agenda (Arbuthnott, 2009). At IIUM, the Rector who is the initiator of *sejahtera* leadership concept and a strong advocate for sustainable development together with the university's Senate Members reviewed the Malaysian National Education Philosophy, the IIUM vision and missions, and charted a roadmap for sustainable change at the whole university. In doing so, the terms *sejahtera* (quoted from the national education philosophy) and sustainable development (quoted from the university's mission) are further emphasized in the university's educational goals, academic framework, programs, and course learning outcomes including extracurricular activities and administrative support systems.

In terms of education quality assurance, the Office of Knowledge for Change and Advancement (KCA) is responsible to ensure that the *sejahtera* and sustainable development agenda are monitored and assessed for every program of study at the university, especially during formal education and learning process. The university also encourages project-based and hands-on learning activities in the community embedded with *sejahtera* and sustainability themes (Dzulkifli & Lihanna, 2019). In April 2020, IIUM was officially recognized as a Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) on ESD by the United Nations University and joined the other 179 RCEs worldwide.

### *2. Transforming learning environments*

Learning environment at the university needs to be aligned with the ESD principles covering both hard and soft infrastructures (Leicht *et al.*, 2018). At the IIUM, a solid time bound plan for whole-institution transformation and implementation of *sejahtera* and ESD is evidenced, and the planning document is available online on the university's website for everyone's reference. A regular meet up between the Rector, as the champion in *sejahtera* leadership and sustainable development and staff is not only restricted to administrative purposes but also actively involved in advocating, motivating, and cultivating a balanced and sustainable culture.

The *Sejahtera* Academic Framework (SAF) document, for example, was officially launched in January 2021 outlines the future of academic direction at IIUM with the theme of humanizing education for *rahmatan lil-'alamin* (a mercy for all creation) post COVID-19 disruption. Translating the SAF into action, the whole learning environment and system at IIUM are focusing on empowerment, flexibility, innovation and accountability in every decision and action through community co-learning beyond the classroom (formal and informal), academic course offerings (e.g., Sustainable Development: Issues, Principles and Practices for undergraduate course and *Sejahtera* Leadership for postgraduate course), innovative teaching and assessment methods, and responsible research. The SAF document also provides strategies for a whole institution transformation, including the enabling university services that could enrich the students' learning experience and life (Lihanna *et al.*, 2021).

### 3. Building capacities of educators

The educators remain key actors in facilitating learners' transformation by helping and motivating them to change themselves and society (Rieckmann, 2012). At IIUM, a systematic and comprehensive *sejahtera* and ESD capacities development is advancing progressively. The Rector initiated a series of workshops on the Future Scenario Building: A Virtual Journey to IIUM 2040 among leaders, academics, and administrative executives at all levels. The primary aim of the workshop was to map the road ahead for IIUM beyond the ESD 2030. Secondary to that, it was a deep reflection session and participants of the workshop were asked to connect to their inner selves and have meaningful communications with each other about where, why, when, what, and how about the university before charting the way forward.

The future building workshop was a professional development program that gives the opportunity for staff to envision the future of IIUM by using the existing *sejahtera* academic framework and sustainable development principles. At the same time, workshop participants had the opportunities to further develop the understanding on ESD and *sejahtera* through knowledge sharing, peer-to-peer learning, and experts coaching as well as transformative and innovative pedagogical approaches that can bring out the best hearts and minds of



those who are concerned with the *sejahtera* and sustainable future of the university (IIUM, 2021).

#### *4. Empowering and mobilizing youth*

The young people are a central part of ESD implementation because it is their present and future that become the concern of all agendas (Pauw *et al.*, 2015). At IIUM, the ultimate educational goal is to nurture *insan sejahtera* (a balanced and harmonious person), equipped with useful knowledge, skills, values, and practices towards the realization of virtuous civilization. The unsustainable development consequences will be left to them should there be no attainment of personal well-being and movement on ESD initiatives. The university leverages heavily on the roles of knowledge to develop the students' full potentials from both physical and spiritual aspects. Thus, the knowledge imparted at the IIUM is total, complete, and inclusive of the ten elements of *sejahtera* (i.e., the SPICES) complemented with the Islamic values and sustainable development goals.

To facilitate this action, the university creates opportunities for the students to acquire real life experience, empower each other and develop social network through project-based learning and extracurricular activities that emphasize on sustainable issues or agendas within and outside of the classroom and campus. In 2020, IIUM won eight RCE award for innovative projects on ESD. Two outstanding flagship projects were on whole-community transformation through 'feed to educate' and change the world that proved that IIUM students could act as facilitators and future leaders for enhancing the *sejahtera* and sustainable capacities of others among the non-government organizations, school children and community members (IIUM, 2019).

#### *5. Accelerating local level actions*

Impacts from education for sustainable development are most likely to be meaningful within the community. Unlike a well-regulated environment at the university, it is the people's lives at the community level that all sustainability issues take place and interrelate with social, environment, and economic systems (Sinakou *et al.*, 2019). Local level actions always remain as one of the priority areas for university and this is in line with the third mission for every higher education institution,

that is, to serve the community and become an active changing agent. At IIUM, the recognition as one of the UN Regional Centres of Expertise (RCE) for Greater Gombak has intensified the role of IIUM for whole community transformation at the locality. The IIUM main campus is located in Gombak, a district located in the state of Selangor, Malaysia and geographically situated within the Klang Valley (also known as Kuala Lumpur). Gombak has about a total area of 650km<sup>2</sup> with a total population of 630,000 and it is also a home to an indigenous *Orang Asli* settlement.

The RCE Greater Gombak aims to transform and empower the community with spirituality and sustainability values in creating a balanced and harmonious living through the *sejahtera* leadership and ESD movements. As sustainable issues are borderless, the IIUM RCE Greater Gombak's functions are more widespread and cover other areas and states. The RCE Greater Gombak adopts a real-world laboratory approach to education and facilitates multidisciplinary interventions towards *sejahtera* and sustainable development. This approach allows the RCE Greater Gombak to connect academics and students from the university with various actors from public authorities, non-government organizations, private companies, media, educational stakeholders, local leaders, and all people in the community for a more realistic engagement and collaboration (Wan Zahidah *et al.*, 2021).

### **Summary of the IIUM Case**

*Sejahtera* leadership concept at IIUM complements the ESD very well and it promotes quality education in the whole university and society with special attention to both individual and societal transformation. Taken together, all the university level activities complied with the UNESCO framework for ESD 2030. Slowly at first, but the university increasingly gets involvement and commitment from all university leaders, educators, learners, and communities, and the initiatives are taking a steady momentum although hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the *sejahtera* concept is not new to the Malaysian education sector, its operational implementation is less acknowledged, and its rich meaning has become diluted and lost in the modern days (Dzulkifli, 2020). Thus, *sejahtera* leadership initiatives

rejuvenate the indigenous value of *sejahtera* and offer a significant balanced leadership style for everybody in support of the sustainable development goals.

### **Comparing *Sejahtera* Leadership with Sustainable Leadership**

This paper recognizes other leadership styles that also advocate virtuous values in the process of motivating others towards collaborative actions to achieve common goals. However, it is worth highlighting the distinctive features of *sejahtera* leadership compared to other leadership styles, specifically the sustainable leadership style and give further insight of the *sejahtera* leadership unique values. A case study of ESD implementation at schools in Latvia found that there is no universal formula to define sustainability and the actions conducted by the heads of the school were simply categorized as sustainable leadership initiatives (Ilisko & Badyanova, 2014). According to McCann and Holt (2010, p. 209), the term of sustainable leadership is originated in the business practice for sustainability, and a definition of sustainable leadership in business is simplified as a “concerned with creating current and future profits for an organization while improving the lives of all concerned.” In the context of education, sustainable leadership takes a different meaning and is defined as “sustainable educational leadership and improvement preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future” (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 224). Sustainable leadership definition developed by Hargreaves (2007) is further elaborated in parallel with the *sejahtera* leadership concept discussed in this paper.

Both sustainable and *sejahtera* leadership styles aim to create continuous positive outcomes for others. If *sejahtera* leadership has its ten elements of SPICES for sustainable development through education, then sustainable leadership has seven principles of sustainability in education: (1) matters, (2) lasts, (3) spreads, (4) does no harm to and actively improves the surrounding environment, (5) promotes cohesive diversity, (6) develops and does not deplete material and human resources, and (7) honors and learns from the best of the past to create

an even better future (Hargreaves, 2007). In this regard, both leadership styles have contradicting themes. But it can be viewed as complementing each other because sustainable leadership focuses on the criteria of leadership for sustainability and *sejahtera* leadership focusing on the leader's dimension for sustainability.

According to Taşçı and Titrek (2020), sustainable leadership should start at individual level and self-awareness is important to become a sustainable leader. The sustainable leaders need to understand the multifaceted sustainability issues and have interdisciplinary visions for the future. Therefore, leadership for sustainability progresses and transcends the transformational leadership style and has strong values on facilitation and teamwork. On this note, *sejahtera* leadership supports the sustainable leadership style because central to the *sejahtera* concept is the 'heart' that represents each human being's inner self which is interconnected with six internal elements of the individual as illustrated in Figure 1 (Dzulkifli, 2020). It is argued that a *sejahtera* individual will have the capability to keep the social, cultural, economic, and ecological elements in balance and harmony guided by the self-*sejahtera* state particularly at decisions making and interactions process.

A quick analysis on the sustainable leadership principles developed by Hargreaves and Fink (2012) indicates that it generally enriches the *sejahtera* leadership concept in terms of strategies or initiatives for the ESD. Although specific strategies for each leadership style appear to be distinct, both *sejahtera* leadership and sustainable leadership had the same strategic focus. Guided by the UNESCO priority action areas for ESD 2030 implementation framework, key educational strategies identified for the *sejahtera* leadership and sustainable leadership are summarized in Table 1. Based on Table 1, both leadership styles aimed to: (1) advance the educational policy, (2) transform the learning environments, (3) build capacities of the educators, (4) empower and mobilize the youth, and (5) accelerate the local level actions.

Table 1. Leadership strategies for the ESD priority action areas

Area	<i>Sejahtera</i> Leadership	Sustainable Leadership
Advancing policy	Revitalizes the existing policy and promotes a balanced cohesion of educational philosophies	Promotes cohesive diversity and avoids aligned standardization of policy
Transforming learning environments	Plans for whole institution transformation	Improves the surrounding educational environment
Building capacities of educators	Facilitates leadership roles among staff in charting the future of institution	Restructure education institution's leadership team
Empowering and mobilizing youth	Develops students' potentials in physical and spiritual aspects	Increases student voice through learning to learn
Accelerating local level actions	Intensifies whole community transformation at the locality	Creates local capacity that include parents and other community constituencies

**Conclusion**

The leadership style introduced in the context of this paper assures that while indigenous in nature, *sejahtera* leadership is well-corresponded with the ESD agenda, the fourth SDG on quality education, and has a deeper meaning given the focus on inner self and outer elements of social, economic, and environment development. In particular, the case study of *sejahtera* leadership initiatives for ESD in the IIUM confirms that leaders at the Malaysian higher education institutions and beyond should fundamentally revitalize a *sejahtera* (i.e., balanced and harmonious) consciousness of self and others. Maintaining a state of *sejahtera* corresponds with sustainable development principles that is to harmonize the elements of social, economy, and

environment which are crucial for the well-being of individuals and societies (UNESCO, 2020).

*Sejahtera* leadership is distinct in that it emphasizes on the inner elements of individual leaders as well as the outer elements of surrounding environment during the process of motivating others to collaborate for a sustainable future through education. Specifically, *sejahtera* leadership uses the ten elements of SPICES as a guiding principle in the leading process and aims to achieve a state of *sejahtera* in every aspect (Dzulkifli, 2020). *Sejahtera* leadership emphasizes the need for *sejahtera* educational transformation as the key enabler for sustainable development. Educational leaders and leaders in the future need to prioritize their actions in the institutions or organizations so that they can develop *sejahtera* and sustainability capabilities in others especially among the youth and communities.

#### **Implications and Direction for Future Research**

Although the onset of *sejahtera* leadership concept was in higher education setting, the conceptual operation of its leadership style is somewhat universal in approach. Leaders at other levels of educational institutions – preschool, primary and secondary in particular – are encouraged to adopt the *sejahtera* leadership style and adapt the strategies and initiatives implemented by the IIUM in developing balanced young generation and future leaders. Other organizations like business entities, non-profit agencies including community associations are welcomed to practice the *sejahtera* concept and find the balance and harmony between the ten elements of SPICES for every decision and action. The indigenous and yet dynamic ideas of *sejahtera* leadership towards sustainability are expected to benefit other leadership styles including sustainable leadership in business by enriching and balancing the sustainable strategies of profitable organizations. For instance, a study conducted by Selvarajah *et al.* (2020) among 1,140 managers in Sri Lankan organizations emphasized that the foundation for sustainable leadership capacity building lies on “finding the balance between complex interlinked living systems” (2020, p. 16).

The *sejahtera* leadership initiative is concerned with revitalizing the indigenous Malay concept of *sejahtera* and its implementations in educational and lifelong learning contexts. Scholars have suggested that to develop sustainability competencies, education for sustainable development should not start from pedagogies. Instead begin with worldviews and then link education with the cultural and traditional views of learners (Demssie *et al.*, 2020). In line with this suggestion, the key feature of *sejahtera* leadership concept lies in its continuous efforts to develop individuals – through education and training – that are balanced (*sejahtera*) by incorporating the SPICES elements that contributes for sustainable quality of all creations. More research will be needed to verify this *sejahtera* leadership concept in other contextual settings such as in business, sciences or technological fields, and describe actual strategies or initiatives for each element of the SPICES in more detail. Future research is also suggested to explore and share the best ways for leaders to achieve balance between the ten elements of SPICES, for example, from the Gross National Happiness framework (Zulkifly, 2021).

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