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From Reform to Results: Competency-Based Talent Management in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

Malaysian public universities occupy a strategic role in advancing national development, yet they face persistent challenges linked to graduate employability, financial sustainability, and talent management. The introduction of the Public Service Remuneration System (SSPA) signaled a paradigm shift in the public sector by promoting meritocracy, performance-based rewards, and competency development through instruments such as *MyPerformance*, *MyKompetensi*, and *MyPotensi*. However, empirical evidence indicates a misalignment between macro-level policy intentions and the operational realities of universities, where performance indicators remain overly academic and training programs generic. This study adopts a qualitative design that integrates documentary analysis and researcher observation within a Malaysian public university to explore how SSPA principles can be effectively contextualized through competency-based talent management instruments. The findings reveal persistent gaps in linking remuneration, competency, and institutional outcomes. To address these gaps, a conceptual framework is proposed that integrates SSPA with four contextualized instruments: Competency-Based Talent Management (CBTM), Behavioral Event Self-Assessment (BESA), Competency-Based Interview (CBI), and Individual Development Plan (IDP). The framework serves as a bridge between policy aspirations and institutional practice, emphasizing data-driven competency mapping, merit-based selection, and personalized staff development. Theoretically, it contributes to leadership and talent management literature in higher education; practically, it provides actionable guidance for building transparent, performance-oriented, and resilient talent systems. Overall, the framework advances human capital reform and enhances the administrative effectiveness of Malaysian public universities in meeting global higher education challenges.

Keywords: Public universities, competency-based talent management, SSPA, meritocracy, human resource development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public universities in Malaysia function as central institutions in cultivating a knowledgeable workforce, contributing to innovation, and enhancing the nation's competitiveness at the global level. Since the



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post-independence era, public universities have not only served as centers of higher learning but also acted as drivers of socio-economic transformation through talent development, impactful research, and contributions to societal well-being. Malaysia has expanded access to higher education, with the gross enrolment ratio rising from 48 percent in 2012 to over 70 percent in the following decade, signaling the success of higher education massification policies (KPM, 2015). Nevertheless, this expansion has also brought major challenges regarding quality, efficiency, and institutional performance.

One of the key concerns is graduate employability. Despite increasing access, graduate unemployment rates remain at worrying levels, largely due to skill mismatches between graduates and labor market demands (Hamid, 2022). Critical questions arise regarding the success of universities in producing graduates who meet industry needs. At the same time, public universities face mounting global pressures through international rankings and audit cultures, which emphasize quantitative indicators such as publications and citations, often at the expense of the university's traditional roles as centers of knowledge creation and social agendas (Jaes et al., 2017). Talent and human resource development within universities also remain problematic. Research indicates that despite significant investments, public universities continue to face shortages of qualified academics, inconsistent research cultures, and the persistent issue of brain drain (Azman et al., 2016). Among support staff, training and competency development are often too generic and insufficiently tailored to institutional needs (Mahdzir et al., 2021). Furthermore, as statutory bodies, public universities are expected not only to function as academic institutions but also to implement government policies and support global development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2030), requiring a balance between administrative effectiveness, accountability, and social responsibility (Supaat & Aziz, 2025). Overall, public universities face a dual dilemma: they must expand educational access to fulfil their social mandate while maintaining quality and simultaneously competing in an increasingly complex global higher education ecosystem.

To address broader civil service challenges, the government introduced the Public Service Remuneration System (SSPA) in December 2024 to replace the previous Malaysian Remuneration System (SSM). The SSPA represents a significant reform, reinforcing principles of meritocracy, performance-based rewards, and competency-driven talent development (JPA, 2024a). Through instruments such as *MyPerformance*, *MyKompetensi*, and *MyPotensi*, the system introduces new approaches to assessing performance based on outcomes, behaviors, values, and employees' future potential (JPA, 2024b). These reforms are consistent with global trends emphasizing performance-based reward systems to strengthen public sector effectiveness (Gerson, 2020). Nonetheless, the implementation of SSPA in public universities raises critical questions. From a theoretical perspective, scholarly discourse on remuneration reform has tended to emphasize macro-level analyses of fiscal efficiency, national productivity, and governmental performance outcomes, but it has paid limited attention to the unique ecosystem of universities. Similarly, research on university leadership and management has primarily focused on academic leadership, with relatively little comprehensive analysis of university staff as an integrated human capital entity (Ismail et al., 2019; Mahdzir et al., 2022). This has resulted in the absence of a robust conceptual framework linking performance-based remuneration with competency, motivation, and institutional outcomes.

From a practical standpoint, the implementation of SSPA in Malaysian public universities faces several challenges, including misaligned performance indicators, bureaucratic burdens, and insufficiently contextualized competency development programs. First, performance indicators in universities tend to emphasize academic outcomes such as publications and citations, which may not adequately capture the contributions of administrative and support staff. Second, the new reporting requirements under *MyPerformance* increase transparency but also add documentation burdens, potentially diverting focus from universities' strategic functions (Hamid, 2022). Third, training and

development modules remain generic, often failing to address the unique needs of universities (Mahdzir et al., 2021). As a response, competency-based talent development instruments are positioned as complementary strategies, specifically through Competency-Based Talent Management (CBTM), Behavioral Event Self-Assessment (BESA), Competency-Based Interview (CBI), and Individual Development Plan (IDP) (AKEPT, 2021). CBTM enables systematic competency mapping and the design of targeted development interventions (Collings et al., 2019). BESA allows staff to assess themselves based on past behaviors in real situations, thereby enhancing self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses (AKEPT, 2021). CBI ensures merit-based selection and promotion by evaluating evidence of past behaviors as predictors of future performance (Ogbu et al., 2019). IDPs function as individualized development plans that align career goals with the university's strategic objectives (Mahdzir et al., 2021).

These instruments not only align with SSPA's aspirations of creating a high-performance civil service but also address practical implementation gaps by making talent development more contextualized and targeted. Importantly, they offer potential as a conceptual bridge connecting macro-level policies such as SSPA with the micro-level realities of public universities. This paper therefore aims to: (i) evaluate current issues and challenges faced by Malaysian public universities in talent development, competency, and competitiveness; (ii) analyze theoretical and practical gaps in the implementation of SSPA within public universities; and (iii) propose a conceptual framework that integrates SSPA with competency-based talent development instruments as a strategy for strengthening human resource management and building the talent pool of Malaysian public universities.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how the Public Service Remuneration System (SSPA) is operationalized through competency-based talent management practices within Malaysian public universities. A qualitative approach was chosen to enable a deep and contextual understanding of complex administrative realities, aligning with Creswell and Poth (2018) and Braun and Clarke (2021) view that qualitative inquiry allows researchers to interpret meaning, culture, and institutional behavior within their natural settings. The research design combined a structured documentary review with researcher observation, allowing both textual and experiential data to converge toward a holistic interpretation of policy-to-practice dynamics.

The first data source comprised an extensive review of official documents, policy frameworks, and SCOPUS-indexed academic literature related to higher education management, civil service reform, and competency-based human resource development. This included the Public Service Department's circulars (JPA, 2022, 2024a), the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (KPM, 2015), and key scholarly contributions on talent management and competency frameworks (Azman et al., 2016; Collings et al., 2019; Mahdzir et al., 2021). Documents were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2020), guided by relevance to three thematic clusters: (i) competency and talent development in higher education; (ii) public service performance and remuneration systems; and (iii) organizational leadership and innovation in university administration. To ensure recency and methodological rigor, only sources published between 2016 and 2025 were considered. The second data source drew on the first author's non-participant observation as a mid-level administrator within a Malaysian public university. Over a three-year period (2022–2025), observation took place during performance appraisal sessions, and implementation of instruments such as the Behavioral Event Self-Assessment (BESA), and Competency-Based Interview (CBI), Individual Development Plan (IDP). Field notes were compiled immediately after each session and organized into analytic memos, capturing insights about

leadership practices, bureaucratic processes, and behavioral competencies observed '*in situ*' (Tracy, 2019). The insider position facilitated authentic access to organizational processes (Mercer, 2007) but required careful reflexivity to mitigate bias through self-reflection and peer debriefing.

Data Management and Ethical Considerations

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2021) thematic analysis. All documents and observation notes were first read repeatedly for familiarization, then coded inductively to identify patterns. Codes were clustered into broader categories that reflected recurrent issues across sources, including policy–practice alignment, contextualization of competency, bureaucratic constraints, and mechanisms for talent and leadership development. The coding and organization of materials were managed using ATLAS.ti 25 software to ensure transparency and replicability. Triangulation between literature and observational data enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the findings, while an audit trail recorded all analytic decisions to support methodological dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical integrity was central to this inquiry. All documents analyzed were publicly available, and observation activities were conducted in administrative contexts where informed awareness was obtained from participating colleagues. Identifiable institutional or personal information was anonymized prior to analysis, and data were securely stored in encrypted digital repositories accessible only to the researchers. Although formal ethics board approval was not required due to the non-invasive nature of the study, all procedures adhered to principles of voluntary transparency, confidentiality, and respect for organizational norms. Data will be retained securely for a minimum of five years to comply with institutional research standards.

Researcher reflexivity was integral throughout the study. As an insider-researcher, the first author maintained a reflexive journal to record evolving assumptions, positionality, and interpretive challenges. Peer administrators were periodically consulted to validate preliminary interpretations, ensuring analytic resonance and reducing the influence of subjectivity (Tracy, 2019). The prolonged engagement within the research setting and the triangulation of multiple data sources strengthened the study's credibility, while thick contextual description enhanced transferability. Dependability and confirmability were assured through systematic documentation of analytic procedures and transparent coding frameworks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Overall, this methodological approach combined systematic documentary analysis with reflexive organizational observation to construct an empirically informed conceptual understanding of SSPA implementation in Malaysian public universities. By integrating macro-policy analysis with micro-level experiential data, the study offers both theoretical insight and practical implications for strengthening competency-based talent management in the public higher-education context.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of competency has long been recognized as a foundational element of organizational effectiveness, particularly in the public sector. Competency encompasses not only technical skills but also leadership attributes, values, knowledge, and behaviors that enable individuals to perform tasks effectively (Collings et al., 2019). Within the Malaysian public service, the Human Resource Development Policy (PPSM) 2022 and the Public Service Talent Development Policy 2024 explicitly emphasize competency development as a critical success factor in supporting the SSPA (JPA, 2024a).

The PPSM outlines two major categories of competencies: generic and functional. Generic competencies include leadership, communication, critical thinking, and integrity, which are expected of all civil servants regardless of service schemes. Functional competencies, in contrast, are specific

technical skills and knowledge tied to job descriptions (JPA, 2022). In the context of public universities, this means that an administrator in the Academic Affairs Division requires competencies in curriculum management, while an administrator in the Finance Division must possess expertise in university financial regulations. A key approach to competency development in the civil service is the 3P Model (Education, Exposure, and Experience). 'Education' refers to formal learning, such as courses, seminars, or academic programs. Exposure encompasses informal learning methods such as mentoring, targeted coaching, or peer learning systems that build soft skills. Experience emphasizes workplace learning through job rotations, special assignments, or international exposure (JPA, 2022, 2024a). This model ensures that competency development is not random but strategically structured. In public universities, the 3P Model can be applied by offering administrators cross-functional exposure, for example, assigning a Student Affairs administrator to the Industry Engagement Division to strengthen institutional governance and cultural understanding.

Despite well-structured policies, the literature indicates that competency development in public universities continues to face significant challenges. First, training modules are overly generic. Mahdzir et al. (2021) found that university staff development programs often focus on general topics such as management or work ethics, while neglecting contextual skills such as digital transformation management, industry collaboration, or global ranking strategies. Second, limited financial resources constrain access to high-quality training. Budget reductions force universities to prioritize academic programs over staff development, leaving support staff with fewer opportunities for structured training (Azman et al., 2016). As a result, administrators often rely on informal learning without systematic guidance, potentially weakening career progression. Third, rigid organizational cultures frequently stifle innovation in competency development. Administrators attempting to adopt new approaches are often restricted by bureaucracy, regulatory constraints, and hierarchical structures (Jaes et al., 2017). This creates a paradox although national policies emphasize transformation and flexibility, institutional work cultures remain anchored in traditional compliance-orientated practices.

Generic and functional competencies directly influence the effectiveness of public universities. Generic competencies such as leadership, effective communication, and strategic thinking are critical for administrators who must manage teams, interact with academics, and implement new policies. Without them, administrators may struggle to influence academic staff or build trust with students. Functional competencies, on the other hand, are technically orientated. Administrators must master grant management processes, research ethics, and innovation commercialization systems. Weaknesses in functional competencies can hinder universities from achieving key performance indicators (KPIs), such as publication outputs or research-generated income. Therefore, the development of both generic and functional competencies must proceed in tandem to prepare administrators for contemporary challenges.

A major limitation in public sector competency development is the “one-size-fits-all” approach. Competency modules designed centrally are often applied uniformly across government agencies, including public universities, despite their distinct mandates, organizational cultures, and strategic needs. For example, ministry administrators may focus on public policy, while university administrators must balance academic, student, and societal requirements. Moreover, effective competency development should be based on dynamic and contextual competency gap analyses (Collings et al., 2019). However, such analyses are often conducted at a general level without reflecting the specific realities of universities (Hamid, 2022). Consequently, a misalignment persists between competencies developed and the actual challenges faced by university administrators.

To address these issues, integrating competency development with talent management instruments such as CBTM, BESA, CBI, and IDP is critical. CBTM allows universities to systematically map competencies; BESA enhances self-awareness; CBI ensures that staff selection aligns with job-related competencies; and IDPs provide individualized development plans tailored to career needs. These

instruments can make competency development more contextual, targeted, and impactful. Competency development is central to supporting the effectiveness of SSPA in public universities. Although policies provide a strong foundation, practical challenges such as generic modules, limited resources, and rigid institutional cultures necessitate more contextualized approaches. Integration with targeted talent development instruments such as CBTM, BESA, CBI, and IDP has the potential to make competency development in public universities more relevant, effective, and aligned with global higher education demands.

The Need for Talent Development Instruments in the Context of Public Universities

The implementation of the SSPA, with its emphasis on meritocracy, competency, and performance, requires instruments that can be effectively operationalized at the micro level of organizations, particularly public universities. While central policies provide macro frameworks such as *MyPerformance*, *MyKompetensi*, and *MyPotensi* (JPA, 2024a, 2024b), the real challenge lies in how universities adapt these instruments to develop administrators who play critical roles in policy implementation. The literature stresses that the absence of contextualized instruments risks sustaining the gap between policy aspirations and operational realities (Mahdzir et al., 2022). Competency-based talent development instruments such as CBTM, BESA, CBI and IDP thus emerge as essential complements. These instruments not only clarify what must be achieved but also provide mechanisms for assessment, gap mapping, and more focused development planning (AKEPT, 2021).

CBTM refers to a talent management approach centered on competencies such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for excellent performance. In public universities, CBTM enables the mapping of competency gaps among administrators based on actual job descriptions rather than merely job grades. For example, an administrator in the Academic Affairs Division may require competencies in curriculum design and accreditation management, while one in the Research Division may need expertise in grant management, research ethics, and intellectual property. Without CBTM, training modules tend to remain generic and fail to address functional needs (Mahdzir et al., 2021). Moreover, CBTM can connect individual development with institutional strategic objectives, consistent with the PPSM 2024's principle of competency gap analysis and data-driven planning (JPA, 2024a). Critically, CBTM provides a scientific foundation for decisions regarding training, placement, and promotion, reducing subjectivity and bias that were common under previous remuneration systems (Gerson, 2020).

BESA is a self-assessment instrument that employs the behavioral event method, requiring individuals to evaluate themselves based on their real experiences managing workplace situations. It emphasizes reflection on past behaviors as predictors of future competency (AKEPT, 2021). In public universities, BESA can help administrators evaluate their ability to handle complex issues such as student conflicts, crisis management, or the implementation of new digital systems. By analyzing how they responded to past events, administrators can identify strengths and weaknesses in their competencies. The strength of BESA lies in its evidence-based and introspective nature, focusing on behavioral proof rather than generalized perceptions or subjective supervisor reports. This aligns with the SSPA's aspiration to reinforce value-based, integrity-driven, and behaviorally measurable performance cultures (JPA, 2024b). However, practical challenges include administrators' willingness to self-assess honestly and institutions' capacity to use BESA results as a foundation for genuine development rather than a mere reporting tool.

CBI is a structured interview method that assesses candidate suitability based on competencies by posing questions about past behaviors in specific work situations. International studies demonstrate that CBI is more valid in predicting job performance than traditional interviews (Ogbu et al., 2019). Within public universities, CBI can be applied not only in recruitment but also in internal placements and promotions. For example, a candidate for a Deputy Registrar position may be asked, "Describe an

experience where you managed resistance to a new university policy. How did you handle the situation, and what was the outcome?” Such questions reveal competencies in leadership, communication, and conflict management. CBI resonates with the SSPA’s emphasis on meritocracy and transparency in staff selection. However, a critical challenge is ensuring that interview panels are adequately trained in CBI techniques to prevent the process from reverting to subjective practices.

IDP is a jointly developed plan between staff and supervisors, setting short- and long-term development goals along with interventions required to achieve them. In public universities, IDPs can serve as bridges between institutional strategies and the specific development needs of administrators. For instance, a candidate for a Finance Division director role may set a three-year goal of enhancing strategic financial analysis competencies, supported by relevant training, project assignments, and international exposure. Integrating IDPs into university competency management increases motivation, work engagement, and administrator performance (Mahdzir et al., 2021). The strength of IDPs lies in their individualized nature while remaining aligned with organizational objectives. This is consistent with the PPSM’s emphasis on development plans based on competency gap analysis and the 3P model (JPA, 2024a). However, practical concerns remain regarding supervisors’ commitment to monitoring IDPs, which may otherwise become perfunctory documents rather than dynamic development tools.

Taken together, CBTM, BESA, CBI, and IDP serve as complementary instruments that contextualize the SSPA within public universities. CBTM establishes a foundation for competency mapping, BESA fosters self-reflection, CBI ensures merit-based selection, and IDP aligns individual growth with organizational strategies. However, the literature emphasizes that the effectiveness of these instruments is highly contingent on organizational culture. If public universities retain bureaucratic, hierarchical, and compliance-orientated cultures, such instruments risk becoming symbolic exercises. Therefore, successful adoption of these talent development instruments requires leadership commitment, resource investment, and the institutionalization of meritocratic and integrity-driven values.

Theoretical and Practical Gaps

Although scholarship on Malaysian public universities has expanded, significant theoretical gaps remain. First, research has disproportionately emphasized academic leadership while underexploring non-academic administration. Much of the literature focuses on the roles of vice-chancellors, deans, and professors in university governance (Azman et al., 2016), while overlooking the contributions of administrators such as assistant registrars, financial officers, and student affairs officers. Mahdzir et al. (2022) stress that these administrators are often perceived as a “leadership gap,” despite being critical intermediaries between ministerial policies and universities’ day-to-day operations. This omission creates a void in theoretical understanding of how administrators contribute to university effectiveness.

Second, research on civil service reform remains largely macro in orientation, emphasizing outcomes such as national productivity, fiscal efficiency, and government-wide governance reforms (Gerson, 2020), without addressing their implications for the distinctive dynamics of public universities. Within the SSPA, attention has primarily been given to performance-based rewards and competency development, but theoretical linkages to innovative work behavior, work engagement, or administrators’ intrinsic motivation remain underdeveloped (Hamid, 2022). Third, there is a scarcity of conceptual models that integrate remuneration systems, competency development, and talent development instruments into a holistic framework. While international scholarship in talent management (Collings et al., 2019) and competency-based human resource management (Ogbu et al., 2019) is well established, direct applications to Malaysia’s higher education sector remain limited. As a result, scholars lack a clear understanding of how instruments such as CBTM, BESA, CBI, and IDP function as mechanisms linking SSPA’s macro-level aspirations with the operational realities of universities. From a leadership

theory perspective, gaps also persist in explaining how administrators' functional competencies such as managing global rankings, industry engagement, or digital transformation affect universities' strategic outcomes.

In addition to theoretical gaps, practical challenges in implementing human resource policies at public universities are also evident. There is a misalignment of performance indicators. The *MyPerformance* instrument requires evaluations based on KPIs, competencies, and values (JPA, 2024b). However, universities' KPIs are predominantly academic (e.g., publications, citations, and ranking positions), whereas administrators primarily engage in operational and support functions. This raises concerns about whether the system fairly assesses administrators' contributions or simply transfers academic metrics onto administrative staff. Bureaucratic burdens and compliance fatigue persist. The transition from LNPT to *MyPerformance* has improved transparency but added layers of reporting and documentation. Administrators are spending more time preparing performance evidence than focusing on strategic tasks (Hamid, 2022). These risks generating "compliance fatigue", reducing overall productivity. Third, competency development modules remain overly generic. The PPSM 2022 and PPSM 2024 emphasize generic and functional competencies through the 3P model (JPA, 2022, 2024a). Yet in practice, university training often fails to align with real needs. For instance, administrators tasked with managing digital transformation may not receive advanced IT training but only attend general courses such as effective communication. Mahdzir et al. (2021) found that the absence of contextualized training undermines the effectiveness of competency development in universities.

Resource constraints and limited career mobility undermine motivation. Public universities are heavily dependent on government allocations, which are often reduced due to fiscal pressures (Azman et al., 2016). This restricts opportunities for training and promotion. While the SSPA emphasizes meritocracy, administrators remain trapped in narrow career structures with limited upward mobility. Prolonged stagnation in the same positions without clear development pathways risks eroding motivation and long-term engagement. A fundamental paradox in competency development within public universities: while policies consistently highlight transformation, innovation, and flexibility, actual practices are often constrained by structural, financial, and cultural rigidities. A paradox arises when two seemingly contradictory, yet interdependent elements coexist and persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In higher education, this means that although reform agendas encourage agility and forward-looking skillsets, institutional routines and governance structures continue to prioritize compliance, stability, and control (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

The policy practice tensions create an environment where competency frameworks and development plans are rhetorically progressive but operationally conservative. National blueprints, such as higher education transformation policies, stress the need for dynamic capabilities and global competitiveness. Yet, staff development modules remain anchored in generic, one-size-fits-all training such as communication or time management, neglecting specialized competencies in areas like digitalization or global benchmarking (Mahdzir et al., 2021). This represents a paradox of uniformity versus differentiation: policies demand context-sensitive skills, but institutional mechanisms reproduce generic content. The resource paradoxes manifest in the tension between the ambition for world-class excellence and the reality of budgetary constraints. Public universities are mandated to enhance both academic and administrative competencies, but limited financial resources often result in prioritization of academic programs over administrator development (Azman et al., 2016). Consequently, administrators rely heavily on informal, ad hoc learning, which may strengthen adaptability but simultaneously undermines systematic career progression pathways. This reflects the paradox of investment versus austerity, where universities must balance the long-term benefits of capacity building with short-term financial survival (Hamid, 2022).

The cultural paradox persists in the clash between innovation and compliance. Institutional cultures within public universities are frequently described as bureaucratic and hierarchical, where administrative experimentation is often curtailed by rigid regulations and top-down decision-making (Jaes et al., 2017). Such environments cultivate paradoxical dynamics where policies encourage creativity and transformation, yet organizational cultures reinforce conformity and risk avoidance. This aligns with the paradox of stability versus change, where institutions must simultaneously preserve organizational order while adapting to external pressures for transformation (Ciuk & McCabe, 2025). These paradoxes are not merely obstacles but can also be sources of dynamic learning. Paradox theory suggests that sustained organizational effectiveness requires embracing rather than eliminating these tensions, leveraging them as opportunities for innovation (Smith & Lewis, 2011). For public universities, recognizing the paradoxes in competency development could encourage more adaptive strategies—such as blended learning approaches, competency-based frameworks tailored to institutional contexts, and innovative financing models that reconcile the dual demands of transformation and tradition.

Both theoretical and practical gaps reflect a fundamental misalignment between macro-level policies (SSPA, PPSM, and government aspirations) and the micro-level realities of public universities. Policies aim to enhance meritocracy, competency, and performance throughout the civil service at the macro level. However, bureaucratic culture, resource shortages, and misalignments in performance indicators constrain implementation at the micro level. This underscores the importance of instruments such as CBTM, BESA, CBI, and IDP, which can operationalize macro policies within universities. CBTM ensures systematic competency mapping, BESA fosters self-awareness, CBI reinforces merit-based selection, and IDPs align personal aspirations with organizational goals. Without such instruments, the macro–micro gap risks widening further. Thus, while the SSPA and PPSM have provided a comprehensive reform framework, their successful implementation in public universities cannot be taken for granted. Theoretically, administrators require a new conceptual framework that positions them as integral to leadership and institutional outcomes. Practically, contextualized talent development instruments must be introduced to close the gap between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities. This article therefore proposes integrating CBTM, BESA, CBI, and IDP as mechanisms to render the SSPA more relevant and effective in the university context. The proposed approach contributes theoretically by enriching leadership and talent management literature in higher education and practically by enhancing policies to enhance administrative effectiveness.

The transformation of higher education in Malaysia, particularly within public universities, necessitates a more strategic, integrated, and competency-based approach to human resource management. The literature highlights a dual dilemma: expanding access to higher education to increase enrolment while simultaneously confronting issues of quality, graduate employability, and financial constraints (Azman et al., 2016). Added pressures from globalization, international rankings, and digital transformation compel universities to compete in an increasingly competitive global landscape. Human resources have thus become central to institutional success, not only in academic functions but also in operations, administration, and leadership.

The introduction of the SSPA in 2024 marked a major move by the government to strengthen meritocracy, performance-based rewards, and competency development in the public sector (JPA, 2024a, 2024b). Although this reform aligns in principle with international best practices (Gerson, 2020), its implementation in universities still faces theoretical and practical gaps. Theoretically, the majority of research concentrates on high-profile academic leadership, with a dearth of studies examining the broader human resource base of universities (Mahdzir et al., 2022). Practically, misalignments between institutional performance indicators and the new evaluation system, excessive bureaucratic reporting, and generic competency modules hinder effective outcomes (Hamid, 2022; Mahdzir et al., 2021). In response, this paper proposes a conceptual framework integrating three interconnected layers.

First, at the macro-policy level, SSPA and PPSM provide the structural foundation for competency development and performance management. Second, at the organizational level, competency development must be designed around the 3P model (education, exposure, and experience), integrating both generic and functional competencies (JPA, 2022). Third, at the micro level, contextualized talent development instruments (CBTM, BESA, CBI, and IDP) should be deployed to close the gap between policy aspirations and universities' operational needs (AKEPT, 2021; Mahdzir et al., 2021; Ogbu et al., 2019). Competency frameworks provide systematic structures linking core components of competency to organizational performance outcomes (Takey & Carvalho, 2015). This approach emphasizes actual performance capacity, focusing on individuals' ability to consistently deliver high-quality outcomes (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Competency is not only about what individuals know or do but also about how tasks are executed with quality and consistency. Table 1 presents the description of competency development (adapted from Ghazali, 2024).

Table 1. Development of competency description.

Competency Process		Description
Competency Modelling		Needs analysis and alignment
		Competency architecture
		Competency development approach
		Competency category
		Competency cluster
		Competency model
Competency Profiling	Competency Mapping	Analyze the position structure
		Determine a list of key tasks based on the job description
		Competency mapping/matching
		Determining the level of competency competence
		Challenge session
	Competency Dictionary	Validation session
		Competency dictionary development process
		Method of developing a competency dictionary
		Competency dictionary structure
		Writing a competency dictionary
	Competency Matrix	Validation of competency dictionary
		Reading the competency dictionary
		Develop a competency matrix – the intersection of competency types and job types
Competency Assessment		Assessment approach
		Evaluation method
		Assessment instrument
		Assessment matrix
		Assessment validation
		Evaluation management cycle
Competency Analysis		Organization
		Position
		Matching people–position:
		- Person-job fit
		- Person-organization fit

- Gaps competency analysis	
Competency	Talent planning
Integration	Selection and recruitment of talent
	Performance management
	Development and training
	Succession plan
	Career advancement

Figure 1 outlines the competency management framework (adapted from Ghazali, 2024). The competency management framework assumes that university human resource management should not be limited to staffing or training functions but should be viewed as a strategic mechanism for achieving greater institutional impact. The expected outcome is stronger alignment between macro-level policies and micro-level practices, resulting in more transparent, structured, and performance-orientated human resource systems. Ultimately, this leads to the formation of a resilient and dynamic university talent pool capable of supporting national and global higher education agendas.

To operationalize this framework, several strategic actions are proposed. First, universities should conduct comprehensive competency audits to identify gaps between current capacities and strategic institutional needs. The results can inform the design of systematic CBTM-based development programs. Second, implementing BESA would allow staff to evaluate themselves against past behavioral events, fostering self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses while cultivating reflective and accountable organizational cultures. Third, institutionalizing CBI as the standard approach for recruitment and promotion would ensure decisions are based on merit and performance evidence rather than seniority (Ogbu et al., 2019). Fourth, every staff member should have a clearly defined IDP co-developed with supervisors and reviewed regularly. IDPs would not only serve as personal development roadmaps but also ensure that individual aspirations align with strategic objectives, such as graduate employability, internationalization, and digital transformation. If consistently implemented, these actions would enhance transparency in human resource management, minimize bias in selection and development, and foster innovative, productive, and high-performance organizational cultures. The expected outcome is the establishment of a stronger university talent pool, capable of supporting both daily operations and broader national agendas such as knowledge-based economic growth, digital transformation, and internationalization of higher education.

Nonetheless, several limiting factors must be acknowledged. First, the framework remains conceptual and requires empirical validation to assess its suitability in the Malaysian public university context. Second, successful implementation depends heavily on leadership commitment and fiscal stability; policy discontinuities could disrupt reform momentum. Third, the diversity of universities, whether research, technical, or comprehensive institutions implies that the framework may require contextual adaptation. Fourth, the success of instruments such as BESA and IDP depends largely on organizational culture. If bureaucratic and compliance-orientated norms persist, these instruments risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Recognizing these limiting factors does not diminish the value of the proposal; rather, it highlights the need for further empirical research and adaptive strategies to align the framework with the operational realities of Malaysian public universities.

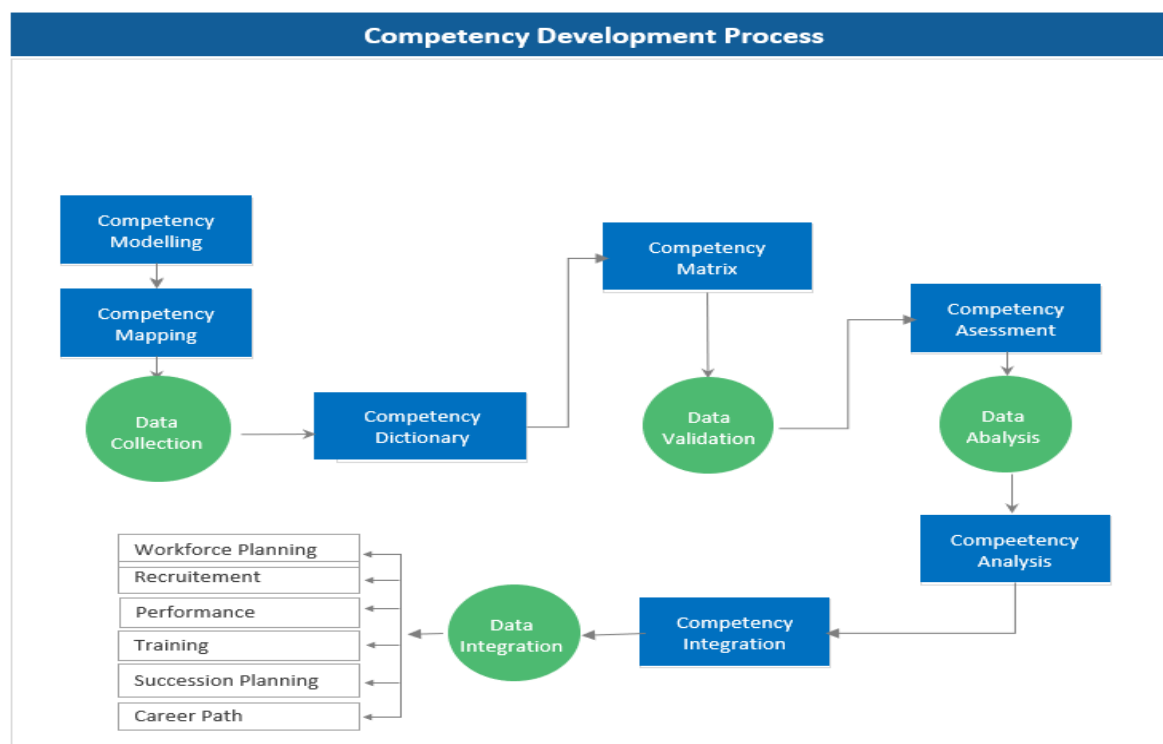


Figure 1. The competency management framework.

4. CONCLUSION

This article proposes a conceptual framework that integrates macro-level policies, competency development, and talent development instruments (CBTM, BESA, CBI, and IDP). Theoretically, this framework addresses gaps in literature by linking remuneration systems, competencies, and university outcomes. Practically, it offers concrete guidance for university management to design more targeted, transparent, and performance-orientated staff development plans. The expected outcomes of applying this framework include greater transparency and effectiveness in university human resource management, fostering an organizational culture that is innovative and high performing. The ultimate impact of this approach is the creation of a dynamic and resilient talent pool within Malaysian public universities. Such a pool will address immediate institutional needs and position universities to support Malaysia's broader higher education transformation agenda toward a more inclusive, efficient, and globally competitive system.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no financial, commercial, or personal relationships that could be interpreted as potentially compromising objectivity, integrity, or academic independence in the preparation and publication of this article.

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