

The pursuit of excellence in Malaysian higher education: Consequences for the academic workplace

David Chapman

University of Minnesota

Sigrid Hutcheson

Independent Consultant

Chang Da Wan

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Molly Lee

Independent Consultant

Ann Austin

Michigan State University

Ahmad Nurulazam Md. Zain

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Bulgarian Comparative Education Society (BCES)

Sofia, Bulgaria, 14 - 17 June 2016

Context

Massive investment in public higher education

- ▶ To attract business and industry
- ▶ To gain international prestige

Context

How will the world know about excellence?

Increase in university rankings

Context

- ▶ Fastest way to increase rankings?
- ▶ Increase research and publication!

Context

Academic staff face a dilemma

- ▶ Love teaching
- ▶ Publications to get promoted

This study:

How are changing external pressures for greater research productivity affecting the work lives and professional relationships of Malaysian academic staff?

Conceptual Framework

Job Characteristics Theory

Gappa, Austin, and Trice's (2007) framework of the “essential elements” in academic work

Gappa, Austin and Trice framework:

- ▶ Academic freedom and autonomy
- ▶ Flexibility
- ▶ Professional growth opportunities
- ▶ Collegiality
- ▶ Employment equity
- ▶ [Respect]

Methodology

67 interviews with faculty members

- 2 public research universities
- 2 public regional universities
- 2 private universities

Findings

Most faculty members felt that they had:

- ▶ Adequate *academic freedom and autonomy*
- ▶ Sufficient *flexibility* in their work setting

Findings

Most faculty members felt that they had:

- ▶ Readily available *professional growth* opportunities
- ▶ Generally high levels of *collegiality* (but differences across university types)

Greatest discontent

Employment equity

Performance expectations were clear and well understood

But

Academic staff questioned:

- equity in workload
- fairness in compensation
- fairness in the promotion process

Findings

Why?

Increasing workload did not lead to any greater rewards. Harder work does not yield greater financial payoff. Personal performance disconnected from rewards.

Findings

Compensation:

Faculty members at the same rank, hired in the same year, receive the same salary and same annual salary increase, regardless of performance.

Salary increases did not recognize different levels of performance.

Findings

- ▶ *Promotion in rank:*
- ▶ In the promotion process, 10-20% of annual score is reserved for a subjective assessment of the Head of Department (HOD) and Dean.
- ▶ Ratings on the subjective dimension are not always clear.
- ▶ Lacked transparency. Seen as 'not fair'

Overall....

- ▶ Faculty members at these six Malaysian universities are adapting well to the new pressures for productivity
- ▶ Widespread belief that the increasing external pressures on academic staff are reshaping the nature of their work lives in ways that are not widely welcomed.

In summary

Increased demand for research and publication is viewed by government and university managers as the pathway to excellence.

Many faculty members think it is disconnected from a meaningful or equitable reward structure.

Wider implications

Many countries aggressively seeking to raise the international rankings of their universities

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of green, ranging from light lime to dark forest green. These shapes are primarily located on the right side of the frame, creating a modern, layered effect. The rest of the background is plain white.

▶ Thank you.