

Academic culture in Malaysia: sources of satisfaction and frustration

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Abstract This paper examines the sources of satisfaction and frustration among Malaysian academics across three types of higher education institutions (HEIs)—public research university, public comprehensive university and private non-profit university. Based on interview with 67 academics across six HEIs, there is a clear pattern and relationship between the sources of satisfaction and frustration and the types of institutions these academics were affiliated. The major sources of satisfaction are related to

the nature of academic work, which includes supervising, mentoring, teaching and interacting with students, as well as conducting research and disseminating knowledge through publication. However, the major sources of frustration are predominantly related to the governance of higher education, resulting from unrealistic expectations, lack of transparency of the promotion and reward system, and a strong bureaucratic culture. The understanding of satisfaction and frustration has helped us to understand issues of morale, retention and, possibly, productivity of academics across these HEIs, and in turn, the understanding of these issues about academics has implications in understanding the governing structure of HEIs. Although this study is limited only to HEIs in Malaysia, the findings have wider implications in contributing to the understanding of governance and academic culture in the broader context of higher education.

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Introduction

The academic profession in Malaysia has undergone significant changes in the past several decades. As Enders and de Weert (2009) described, the academic profession is shaped and altered by major structural developments in higher education. Traditionally, the primary tasks of academics were teaching and research, and these two tasks intertwined and formed the basis of academic scholarship. Scholars such as Perkin (1969) and Clark (1987) further argue that the academic profession can be considered as the ‘profession of the professions’ with a responsibility to shape other professions in society. Arguably, it is a

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stable and self-confident profession rooted in traditions of autonomy, governed by trust, and controlled internally within the community in an oligarchical manner.

However, the major structural developments of higher education globally as well as in Malaysia have changed the nature of the academic profession and its culture. Instead of maintaining high teaching standards by a handful of intellectual elites, academics have become teachers of the masses. The intertwining of teaching and research has been extended to include academics administering and managing universities, and contributing to the industry, the economy and society as consultants and public intellectuals. In addition, academics are increasingly expected to possess the spirit of entrepreneurship to raise funds for research, publish and disseminate the findings, and subsequently, commercialise and patent them into products.

In this context where higher education and the academic profession have undergone tremendous changes, this paper examines the sources of satisfaction and frustration of academics in Malaysia. Understanding satisfaction and frustration of academics is important to help understand the academic culture in terms of morale, retention and productivity of academics.

Overview of higher education in Malaysia

Higher education in Malaysia is a hybrid sector comprised of public and private higher education institutions (HEIs). There are twenty public universities, thirty public polytechnics and eighty community colleges under the purview of the Ministry of Education. Among the twenty public universities, they are further categorised into research universities (five), comprehensive universities (four) and focused universities in the field of technical, education, management and defence (eleven). The functions of the Ministry over these public HEIs include allocating public monies for operational and developmental purposes, and being directly involved in the governance of these institutions where the Minister appoints members of the board of directors, vice chancellors and senior leaders of universities. The Ministry also establishes audit exercises to ensure accountability. At the same time, the Ministry of Education assumes the role of regulator over fifty-three private universities, seven branch campuses of foreign universities, twenty-six university colleges and 351 private colleges.

In terms of legislation, public HEIs are classified as federal statutory bodies (FSB) and governed predominantly by the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) that was passed in Parliament and gazetted in 1971 (with several amendments over the last four decades). The UUCA has been the most important legislation in higher education as it puts all universities under the full control of the Ministry of

Education and represents an autocratic approach taken by the State to intervene in the operation of public universities in this country. Furthermore, as Article 132 (1) (h) of the Federal Constitution includes education service as one of the public services, and the General Circular issued on FSB has no mention about the staff of these bodies, this effectively considers all academics in public HEIs as civil servants. The status of civil servants, therefore, required all academics to fully subscribe to the regulations of the Public Service Department, and they are categorised under the University Lecturer Service Scheme in the general framework of civil service. This implies that all academics in public universities receive remuneration that is calculated in a similar framework based on their entry qualification, position and years of service. The only difference in this scheme from other civil service schemes is that there is no quota for promotion based on available positions. Instead the number of academics in a public university and its departments, schools or faculties has to be determined and approved by the Public Service Department, and is subject to the availability of resources under the operational budget allocated to the university. In addition, public HEIs as FSB have to directly report to the Ministry of Education and subject to Treasury regulations administered by the Ministry of Finance. However, although 12 public universities have been granted autonomy by the Ministry of Education between 2012 and 2014, some argue that the granting of autonomy without substantial reforms to the legislative and governance framework has not translated into major changes to the ways in which universities are governed externally by the State as well as internally within the institution (Wan and Abdul Razak 2015).

Although private HEIs may not have to subscribe to the bureaucracy to the same extent as public HEIs, private HEIs are governed by the Private Higher Education Institutions Act (PHEIA) (Act 555) that was passed in Parliament and gazetted in 1996. Act 555 stipulates that private HEIs have to be established as a company and therefore have to be read alongside the Companies Act. This stipulation also implies that private HEIs have the structure of a company comprised of the board of directors, a chief executive officer to oversee the commercial aspect of the company and a vice chancellor (or its equivalent) to manage academic affairs. Hence, all academics in private HEIs are considered employees of private organisations and generally subscribe to the Labour Law in Malaysia in addition to institutional human resources policies.

The academic profession in Malaysia

There are more than 33,000 academic staff across twenty public universities (MOE 2014a). Less than 9 % are non-Malaysians and 51 % are female academics. In addition,

37 % of the academics have a doctoral degree and 52 % have a master degree. Among the 33,000 academics, there are 2262 professors, 5268 associate professors, 21,384 lecturers (including senior lecturers), and the remainder are language tutors, assistant lecturers and tutors. In comparison in the private higher education sector, there are about 25,000 academic staff, of which close to 3300 have a doctoral degree, and about 10,000 and 8650 have a masters and bachelor degree, respectively (MOE 2014a).

Besides the demographical overview, there has been relatively little empirical evidence to illustrate what takes place within the academic profession. The limited and notable source of information that provides a glimpse of the academic profession is provided by the survey conducted by the cross-national study—*Changing Academic Profession*. The survey for Malaysia was conducted in 2007 and sampled from 1130 academics using a stratified random sampling comprised of public and private universities, four academic ranks (professor, associate professor, senior lecturer and lecturer) and gender (Norzaini et al. 2011). The survey provided quantitative insights on academic work, conditions of work, beliefs about decision-making, and the sense of affiliation and satisfaction.

In terms of academic work, almost 90 % of academics indicated their preferences for teaching and research, with a slightly bigger proportion preferring teaching as compared to research. Academics, on average, devote between 10 and 15 h per week on teaching responsibilities during term time, and between 4 and 8 h per week during semester break. For research activities, academics devote between 3 and 10 and 4 and 20 h during term time and semester break, respectively. Other responsibilities including service and administration typically ranged between 1 and 10 h per week. Interestingly, the survey reported that professors spent a lower proportion of their time in research and administration in comparison with the associate professors and senior lecturers, and devoted the same amount of time for teaching with the latter group.

In terms of conditions of work, supports given to academics were mainly ‘hard resources’ rather than ‘soft resources’. About 40–55 % of academics rated the ‘hard resources’ as good or excellent, which includes library facilities and services, classroom, technology for teaching, computer facilities, office space and telecommunications. However, for the soft resources, only 18 % of academics gave good or excellent ratings for research support staff, 21 % for secretarial support and 27 % for teaching support staff. The only exception to the poor evaluation was that over 73 % of academics in private institutions rated the teaching support staff in their institutions as good or excellent. Furthermore, facilities for research work, such as laboratories, research funding and research equipment, were also not highly rated with about a quarter of respondents rating these facilities as good or excellent.

Academics demonstrated the beliefs that major decision-making activities were centralised at the institutional level, and some of the decisions were devolved to the faculty and departmental levels. About 50 % of academics believed institutional managers such as vice chancellor and deputy vice chancellors make decisions on promotion and tenure and selecting key administrators, as well as approving new academic programmes. Academics also reported that government and external stakeholders had a strong influence on establishing new programmes. In decisions related to evaluation of teaching and research, setting budget and research priorities, and determining overall teaching load of academics, academic staff believed that unit managers (such as deans and heads of department) were influential in making these decisions. Academic staff tend not to consider faculty and individual committees as influential in the decision-making process. Furthermore, more than 50 % of academics perceived that they are not at all influential at the institutional level; about 40 % perceived they are a little influential at the faculty level and departmental levels, respectively.

In terms of affiliation, academics consider themselves more strongly affiliated to their academic discipline, followed by their institution and their department. This trend is similar between public and private institutions, except for academics in private institutions having a lower sense of affiliation to their institution. More specifically, a lower percentage of associate professors, senior lecturers and lecturers in private institutions perceive their institutional affiliation as important or very important than their colleagues in public institutions. Yet, this difference was not observed among professors in both types of institutions. This particular trend to some extent highlighted the role of tenure¹ as prescribed by the civil service in public institutions where academics are considered civil servants. The survey also found that only a small proportion of about 10 % of academics regretted their choice of career, and 64 % of academics were satisfied with their current job. Notably, academics in private institutions were more satisfied than their colleagues in public institutions.

As a follow-up to the CAP survey, the Malaysian Academic Profession Survey was conducted in 2012. This survey provided further insights into understanding roles and responsibilities of academics, academic freedom, training and continuous professional development, resources, curriculum implementation and review, and mentoring (Pang 2014).

The annual statistics published by the Ministry of Education and the surveys conducted in 2007 and 2012 provide

¹ Tenure in the Malaysian context refers to the job security as a civil servant, unlike tenure in the American context which is a contractual right that guarantees academic freedom.

a basic understanding of the academic profession in Malaysia. However, these insights are mainly demographical information and quantitative responses gained from a self-reported survey with academics. This paper aims to provide qualitative understanding of the satisfaction and frustration of academics, which complements the existing empirical evidence in framing a more holistic understanding of this profession.

Methodology

The literature on job satisfaction offers differing views on how satisfaction and dissatisfaction should be understood and measured. A prominent strand of research portrays satisfaction–dissatisfaction as being on a continuous scale, as one went up the other went down. This is often a tacit operating assumption behind efforts to measure satisfaction using surveys in which responses are collected on Likert-type scales. An alternative view of satisfaction, pioneered by Herzberg et al. (1959), developed further by Herzberg (1964, 2003) and championed by Sergiovanni (1966), posits that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not opposite ends of a continuous scale, but operate as separate dimensions. Herzberg's 'motivation-hygiene theory' suggests that there are certain factors in the workplace that promote job satisfaction, while a separate set of factors contribute to dissatisfaction. Hence, removing a source of dissatisfaction does not necessarily result in higher satisfaction. The present study was informed by Herzberg (1964) dual-factor theory. The use of a qualitative methodology in data collection facilitated the identification and separate treatment of satisfier and dis-satisfiers in the lives of university academic staff. Furthermore, to highlight the separate treatment of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, this study uses the term frustration instead of dissatisfaction.

The sampling framework of this study began by identifying the types of universities: public research university (RU), public comprehensive university (CU) and private non-profit university (PU). Other types of universities, such as public focused university and private for-profit university, were excluded due to the strong influence of the discipline and focus area of the former, and a distinctive mission and governance structure of the latter. Within each type of universities, the two top-ranked² universities were selected with one proviso that only one university in each

category could be located in the greater Kuala Lumpur area. The rationale for this proviso was that the work environment of universities farther away from the capital of the country may be meaningfully different.

Within each university, an effort was made to randomly select interviewees along three criteria. First, faculty members were categorised as working in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) or non-STEM fields. Within each of these two categories, faculty members were further categorised as junior or senior in their careers, based on their academic rank. Lectures and senior lectures were grouped as junior faculty; associate and full professors were considered senior. Within each of these groupings, faculty members were randomly selected to be invited to participate in an interview. If a faculty member declined, the invitation was extended to the next randomly selected person within the grouping. Full implementation of this approach proved unfeasible, given the culture and norms of Malaysia universities. When random selection was not feasible, additional faculty members within the target academic departments were recruited through person contacts. Overall, a total of sixty-seven academics participated in this study. While the final sample is best described as a convenience sample, the research team was able to achieve a distribution of interviewees across field, rank and gender, as illustrated in Table 1.

All participants were provided with the interview protocol developed by the researchers, and were informed that their participation was voluntary and results would be confidential. The interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken by researcher(s). All notes were checked by another researcher to ensure accuracy of what the participants have shared, and analysed inductively involving data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles and Huberman 1994; Punch 2005).

Characteristics of universities and their 'striving' aspirations

Each of the three types of universities—RUs, CUs and PUs—has its distinctive characteristics. There are five RUs (two of which were involved in this study), and these institutions are also the oldest universities in Malaysia. On 11 October 2006, the Cabinet made a decision which determined that the institution with the status of Research University would be designated as the leading research and educational hubs (DHE 2011). The results of granting the RU status to these public universities include increasing: (1) research, development and commercialisation activities; (2) intakes of postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows; (3) the number of academic staff with PhD qualifications; and (4) intakes of foreign students, leading to the ultimate

² Selection was based on a meta-ranking of the QS Top University Rankings, QS Top University Rankings—Asia, Times Higher Education Rankings—Asia, Shanghai Jiao Tong University Academic Rankings of World Universities and the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities. As to ensure anonymity, the meta-ranking was not revealed and selected universities were given pseudonyms.

Table 1 Selected characteristics of the interview sample

University	Gender		Academic rank ^a		Discipline		Total
	Male	Female	Senior	Junior	STEM	Non-STEM	
CU1	11	2	7	6	7	6	13
CU2	1	8	7	2	3	6	9
PU1	8	3	3	8	5	6	11
PU2	4	4	3	5	5	3	8
RU1	7	5	6	6	4	8	12
RU2	9	5	9	5	8	6	14
Total	40	27	35	32	32	35	67

^a Senior referred to professors and associate professors; junior included senior lecturers, lecturers and assistant professors

aim for these universities to become competitive internationally.

The status of Research University can also be considered the pinnacle which other public universities strive to reach. As Altbach (2013) articulated, research universities can be defined as:

... academic institutions committed to the creation and dissemination of knowledge, in a range of disciplines and fields, and featuring the appropriate laboratories, libraries and other infrastructures that permit teaching and research at the highest possible level (Altbach 2013, p. 316)

The status not only comes with prestige, but more importantly funding. Since the inception of the RU status in 2007, the five public universities have received a total of MYR 1.863 billion (MOE 2014b). Furthermore, as the Government began to grant autonomy to public universities, all the five RUs received the autonomy in the first round of the exercise in 2012.

While the status of RU has been the goal which other public universities in Malaysia strived to reach, the RUs have been striving to emulate and model themselves after the prestigious and highly ranked universities globally. At the same time, private universities, like the RUs, are also striving to emulate world-renowned universities and to develop a global brand name.

Striving, as defined by O'Meara and Bloomgarden (2011) as the 'institutional pursuit of prestige within the academic hierarchy' (p. 40), has significant influence on the organisational behaviour of universities and subsequently on the academic profession within these universities. Previous research on the academic profession has demonstrated that, on the one hand, the striving culture has been able to encourage academics to become more cosmopolitan. Given the right incentive, it has led to the availability of more resources, lower teaching and supervision loads, and better quality student, which collectively has contributed to higher levels of satisfaction among

academics (Fairweather 1993; Hagedorn 2000; Volkwein and Sweitzer 2006).

On the other hand, the striving culture has intensified the need and pressure for academics to juggle multiple roles and functions and, to some extent, shaped the academic profession into a 'stereotype' career trajectory of upward mobility towards the mission of intended institutions they strive to become. The upward mobility has been at the expense of the larger population of academics, for example, less flexibility to balance work and family for junior academics with young families, as well as less support for career advancements among women and minorities (Gardner 2013; Wolf-Wendel and Ward 2005, 2006). The striving culture has also been at the expense of the initial organisational culture and identity in the process of striving to emulate other institutions. In the case of Malaysia, public universities driven by the pressure of globalisation have embarked on the mission of 'status-building' and gaining global prominence and competitiveness in rankings, while having to also juggle 'nation-building' objectives and fulfil its educational, economic and societal responsibilities (Morshidi et al. 2012). Therefore, the culture of striving has played a significant role in altering the organisational behaviour of universities and has had important implications for the nature of academic work in the university. Although the organisational behaviour of universities as understood by the 'striving' concept is relevant to faculty satisfaction, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine institutional characteristics and organisational behaviour. Rather the concept is used here to frame the context for this paper to examine the satisfaction and frustration of academics more purposefully.

Source of satisfaction and frustration

Across the six universities, there are clear patterns in the sources of satisfaction and frustration among academics. Some of these patterns are consistent across all the six

universities, while some other patterns are peculiar to a particular type of university or a specific university. Briefly, there are three major sources of satisfaction: (1) students and the function of teaching; (2) research, publication and contribution of knowledge; and (3) the flexible nature of academic work. The five major sources of frustration were: (1) policies and bureaucracy; (2) promotion and reward; (3) administrative duties; (4) unrealistic expectations; and (5) lack of resources.

Students and the function of teaching

Teaching and faculty interaction with students are by far the most frequently mentioned source of satisfaction among academics across all the six universities. The satisfaction of seeing their students learn and develop, interacting with them, getting positive feedback on teaching and supervision, as well as seeing their students become successful in life have been the greatest source of satisfaction for more than half of academics who participated in this study. Interestingly, the satisfaction gained from students and teaching activities have been most dominant among academics in the RUs, and followed by the CUs and PUs. Almost 70 % of academics from RUs reported this to be their greatest source of satisfactions, while about 60 and 30 % from CUs and PUs, respectively, indicated the same. This is surprising given the fact that teaching is expected to be the major activity in CUs and PUs, but academics in these universities have not been as forthcoming as their colleagues in RUs in articulating their satisfaction from interacting with, teaching and mentoring students.

Research, publication and contribution to knowledge

Research-related activities are the second most frequently mentioned source of satisfaction, but with the highest frequency from academics in the two RUs and one of the CUs as compared to the other three universities. Academics shared their satisfaction from contributing to knowledge and society via their work in research, getting research grants and having their articles accepted for publications in top-tier journals. The greatest source of satisfaction of a junior academic in RU2 since joining academia 4 years ago was being able to set up a laboratory from scratch with relatively limited resources.

Although it is expected that the satisfaction of academics in RUs would be related to research, publication and being able to contribute to knowledge and society, CU1 also has four of its thirteen respondents citing their satisfaction in research and publication. These academics in a public comprehensive university expressed their satisfaction from getting published in reputable journals and

having the freedom to carry out research in their area of interest. One plausible reason contributing to CU1 having more of its academics enjoying their research may be due to the lack of pressure for academics to conduct research and publish compared to the other five universities. Therefore, with less explicit pressure, these academics have more freedom to pursue their interests. This freedom and passion may have also encouraged them to produce work of better quality.

Flexible nature of academic work

The third major source of satisfaction among academics relates to the flexible nature of academic work. This includes letting academics decide on their working hours and choose which tasks they undertake; especially for academics who have working experience in industry, the flexible working hours and being able to do research on topics that are of their interest have been a major sources of satisfaction. It is also important to note that to many academics, the flexible schedule and freedom to determine the research topic that they wish to pursue as long as they have the funding are their idea of academic freedom. Although this source of satisfaction is cited far less frequently than the earlier two sources, the views of academics on the flexible nature of academic work as a source of satisfaction and associating this with academic freedom are almost universal across all three types of universities. The only exception is in RU2 where slightly more of its academics articulate this as their source of satisfaction.

Policies and bureaucracy

Inconsistent policies and a highly bureaucratic management and administration within universities, particularly in public universities, are indicated as the greatest source of frustration for academics. Academics highlighted their frustration with regard to political interference in determining the overall policies of higher education in the country and institutional policies within public universities. Furthermore, as institutional policies were mainly determined by institutional leaders, changes in top leadership have always been followed by instant changes in policy. This situation therefore has resulted in confusion and unclear direction for academics. For example, in RU2, an academic commented that it was hard to know the direction of the university, where at times, the university aspired to be highly ranked, while at other times, the aspiration was deemed less important. Another colleague in the same university also acknowledged not being well informed about the overall direction for development of the university.

Besides citing unclear and changing policies, academics also commented about the lack of consultation and

involvement in influencing and participating in the change of policies. As an example, despite the fact that CU2 has been articulating an emphasis on changing from a teaching-oriented to a research-intensive institution, CU2 has remained a comprehensive university. Academics have not been consulted nor provided with any opportunity to present their views. The lack of opportunity and participation of academics on institutional policies has also shaped a sense of frustration among the academics.

Malaysian higher education system has been identified by the World Bank (2013) as one of the most top-down systems in the world. In addition, as public universities are considered State entities and academics in these universities are civil servants, the higher education ministry and these universities have embedded a strong bureaucratic culture in management and administration. Institutional governance has been regulated by Circulars and Treasury Regulations issued by the Public Service Department and Ministry of Finance, respectively. The strong bureaucratic culture is manifested in additional processes and paperwork and, in turn, resulted in delays and additional work for the academics (MOHE 2006). Hence, it has been regarded as the greatest source of frustration to many academics.

Promotion and reward

Before understanding the frustration of academics about promotion and reward, it is important to note that the remuneration package across all four public universities is similarly structured based on to the civil service framework. PU1 has a standard remuneration package and academics negotiate the entrance salary individually, while for PU2, the yearly increment of academics is based on their performance. In this study, most of the frustration with the promotion and reward system was reported by with academics in public universities.

More than half of the academics who participated in this study from CU1 have voiced their frustration with the promotion and reward system. The sentiment among academics concerns the lack of transparency in the promotion process, where academics felt that some promotions appear to not be based on merit, and in cases of unsuccessful promotion, the applicant was not informed of the reasons. It was also believed that 'connections with administrators' played a big part in the promotion exercise, which further questioned the transparency of promotion. Academics in CU1 also considered promotion as a form of reward for good work, and the lack of transparency in the promotion exercise has therefore created a sense of frustration. This sense of frustration also relates to the sentiment of feeling a lack of recognition by the university.

The lack of transparency in the promotion exercise was also commented on by academics in RU1 and RU2, but academics in these universities do not considered promotion as a form of reward. Nonetheless, the lack of transparency and allegation of cronyism in the recruitment exercise leading to hiring of incapable academics in their departments and faculties have become a sense of frustration, where it was argued that mediocrity is being rewarded as the expense of meritocracy.

Administrative duties

Of the 67 participants in this study, 31 have at least one administrative duty. Interestingly, for the participants who have administrative duties many have more than one. The most extreme case is an academic having eight administrative positions, and five academics (two from PU2 and three from RU2) are in such situation. Although administrative duties may be accompanied by a small reduction in the teaching load of the academic, the additional administrative responsibilities are extremely time-consuming and energy sapping. Hence, many academics have been frustrated when they are being assigned with administrative duties which they do not feel free to decline to take on. The need to assume multiple roles and juggle their time at the expense of other academic responsibilities and their families has led to a sense of frustration. In some cases, the administrative duties would require the academic to be present at the university during office hours between nine in the morning and five in the evening, but this person may also have to teach evening classes especially at the post-graduate level which typically begin at seven and end at ten in the evening. Therefore, the academic may have to spend the entire day of more than 12 h in the campus. While the flexible nature of academic work may be a source of satisfaction to some academics, being required to work long and rigid hours is required of those with administrative duties and hence became a source of frustration.

Yet, administrative duties, although potentially provide substantial power and authority for the academic to manage his or her fellow colleagues, the additional responsibilities only make a minor contribution to decisions in the promotion and yearly appraisal exercises. Furthermore, academics who have been entrusted with administrative duties have also voiced out their frustration having to deal with fellow colleagues, and in a top-down institution, this also involve having to be the buffer between the leadership and management of the universities and academics and students. This therefore suggests the need of some management skills. The lack of such skills, especially in dealing with people, and the lack of preparation and training for academics for administrative duties have therefore also contributed to the sense of frustration. Moreover, it was

mentioned that turning down administrative duties and appointments may have negative consequences. As a whole, the source of frustration due to administrative duties is common across the six universities.

Unrealistic expectations

In the two RUs and in CU2, which is a university aspiring to become a research university, unrealistic expectations on the academics have become a major source of frustration. In RUs, as a way to maintain their status as a research university and to emulate highly ranked research universities globally, unrealistic expectations have been put on academics. They are required to be very 'productive', particularly in producing articles for publication in journals. A similar pressure is also present in CU2, as the university strives to become a research university.

However, unrealistic expectations such as requiring academics to publish certain numbers of articles in ISI- or SCOPUS-indexed journals annually have become a form of frustration for academics. This expectation, as some academics commented, is unrealistic because to publish one article in a top-notch journal may take more than a year merely in the process of submission, review and revision. This is in addition to the time needed to conduct the research and write the paper. Furthermore, some academics have also asserted that these unrealistic expectations contribute to academic malpractices, where academics 'piggyback' on the work of their colleagues and/or students have their names on the publications of their colleagues not even not in their field, as well as other forms of 'short-cuts' to publish their work including paying publishers to guarantee the publication of their materials. Due to unrealistic expectations that forced some academics to compromise their integrity, those who choose not to take these short cuts report a sense of frustration of not meeting these unrealistic expectations but also seeing others using 'short-cuts' and unprincipled ways to meet these expectations and receive rewards.

Lack of resources

The lack of resources has also been identified as one of the sources of frustration to academics. However, if one is to make a guess about the types of universities where their academics are mostly likely to feel frustrated by the lack of resources, the private non-profit universities which relied on students fees as its major revenue would have been the choice. Interestingly, none of the academics across the PUs highlighted this frustration, but instead, academics across the four public universities expressed problems of lack of resources which hindered their academic work as a source of frustration.

The major resource deficiency that was found lacking across the four public universities was financial resources. Academics raised their concerns about the lack of research grants and inadequate infrastructure as a major frustration that has become a disadvantage for them to conduct research activities. This concern was more acute in the two CUs as compared to the two RUs, and this difference is not surprising given that RUs received additional allocations for research purposes. However, what is most interesting and puzzling is that the lack of resources is cited by academics in public universities that have been supported massively by the Government through various research grants and significant amount of developmental allocation. On the other hand, the lack of resources was not highlighted by academics in PU1 and PU2 as a source of frustration despite PUs having limited resources to acquire expensive equipment, and not receiving financial support from the Government. Furthermore, it was only relatively recent that academics in private universities have been allowed to compete with their colleagues from public universities in applying for research grants provided by the Government.

Conclusion and implications

The identification of the three sources of satisfaction and five sources of frustration provides important insights that help to understand the academic culture in Malaysian higher education. Although the academics in this study are from institutions that have different 'striving' characteristics, their sources of satisfaction and frustration tend to be much more homogenous among academics across institutions.

On the one hand, the three sources of satisfaction are related to the nature of academic work. Academics gained satisfaction from supervising, mentoring and interacting with students, teaching, conducting research, and disseminating knowledge through publication, as well as the flexibility for them to take charge of their work. These findings also reaffirmed the earlier survey conducted in Malaysia, where about 90 % of academics did not regret their choice of career, as academics gained satisfaction from the fundamental roles of academic work.

On the other hand, the five sources of frustration are related to institutional governance. Policies are the overarching agenda that guide institutional governance, while the strong bureaucratic culture within the managerial and administrative system illustrates the nature of a delivery system set up to carry out these institutional policies. Unrealistic expectations, as well as the lack of transparency of the promotion and reward system, and constraints on resources, collectively, point towards the inadequacy of the

institutional governance system within universities. Furthermore, the frustration with administrative duties, which have strong top-down element, has also changed the nature of the academic community by putting pressure on academics to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities.

From examining the sources of satisfaction and frustration, we can conclude that academics are satisfied with the fundamental roles of teaching and research, and frustration has mainly been associated with the governance structure put in place within these universities on the pretext of governing, managing and administrating higher education. Conceptually, although the findings illustrated dual sets of factors that influenced satisfaction and frustration, these two sets of factors are inter-related and may not be as independent as posited by Herzberg and colleagues. Understanding this inter-relatedness of satisfaction and frustration can help inform the design of policies and programmes aimed at improving the morale, retention and productivity of academic staff.

First, as a way to enhance morale, increase retention and improve productivity, efforts need to be taken to enhance the sources of satisfaction and at the same time reduce the sources of frustration. There is therefore a need to improve the transparency and enhance credibility of the promotion system. By making the promotion system transparent, promotion can then be a form of recognition given to academics to encourage and motivate them to be more productive in what they enjoy doing. Yet, not only should the promotion system be made transparent, the criteria and emphasis of components in the promotion system, such as teaching, supervision, research, services and publication, should also be flexible to accommodate the different responsibilities and roles of individual academics. Furthermore, dissemination of knowledge to other avenues apart from academic journals should also be encouraged and recognised in the promotion system.

Second, another aspect to improve productivity of academics is by putting in place a more strategic reward system. Although public universities have to comply with the regulations of the civil service, the granting of autonomy to 12 public universities should have provided some rooms for public universities to experiment in providing different forms of incentive. Despite the fact that all six universities in this study have provided some forms of monetary incentive for publication in research and publication, these incentives should be spread out to accommodate and take into account the multiple roles and responsibilities of academics. For example, academics who are able to teach creatively should also be rewarded. Academics who hold administrative positions should also be exempted from teaching or research responsibilities, which therefore would allow the academic to be more focused and productive.

Third, in a striving institution that aspires to become a national research university or a highly ranked institution globally, the focus has almost exclusively centred on tangible outcomes. This has led to unrealistic expectations placed on academics which became a major source of frustration. However, universities in Malaysia might consider broadening the thinking of what makes a truly world-class university and not remain focused primarily on getting highly ranked in the ranking exercises. As some of the academics shared, the impact of a university cannot be measured by merely the number of research grants or publications in top-tier journals. The real impact is reflected in the quality of graduates produced who then leave the university and make an impact in society.

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