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An Evaluation of Lecturers Perceptions Towards Research

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Abstract: Teaching and research are two main requirements in the job descriptions of university lecturers. Other requirements in the job descriptions include organizing seminars/conferences, presenting papers at national and international levels, publishing papers/articles in refereed journals, publishing books and other scholarly activities. Through research one could acquire knowledge and disseminate to students as well as peers, which finally contribute to building competitive advantage to the university concerned. The current study reports findings from a survey, which examined the perceptions of university lecturers towards research. The findings indicate that research is essential to professional development motivated by getting promotion and salary increment. They also, shed some light on the main barrier for not doing research among university lecturers-poor statistical and econometric skills. Implications and suggestions for future research are also, provided.

Key words: Teaching, research, perception, professional development, conferences, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The role and contribution of academic staffs in higher learning institutions in the research activities grew tremendously. This can be seen with the increase in the number of conferences and seminars being held worldwide. For example in inomics (conferences and seminars in quantitative economics) for 2007, there are 311 conferences worldwide. Conferences about business and related fields have 134 conferences call around the globe (www.conferencealerts.com/bus). In Malaysia, every faculty in every university is holding seminars and conferences. The increase in the number of journals and internet publications inviting more research work findings to be published. Universities are now competing to be classified as research universities and are ranked based on the research and funds attracted from various sources.

In the 9th Malaysia plan, 2006-2010, the government is also fully committed to produce more Researchers, Scientists and Engineers (RSE) and target 50 RSEs for every 10,000 members of the labor force by 2010 (9th Malaysia plan). To achieve first class mentality definitely needs various efforts from everybody in the society. One of those would be the academic staffs. Further, every university would like to be world class university and compete to be ranked as one. What is world class university? To quote Azmi (2006) on the qualities of a world class university:

> Academic staffs that are recognized worldwide as authorities in their fields. This is achieved through the publication of research findings in international forums; be they internationally subscribed refereed journals, books published by reputable publishers and international conferences.

In fact, academic staffs in higher learning institutions have always been encourage integrating teaching and research, presentation, publishing and other scholarly activities as part of their role.

According to Oshagbemi (1997), job satisfaction among university teachers in UK are based on research, teaching, administration and management, pay, promotion, co-workers behavior, head of department's behavior and facilities available in their institutions. Fien (2002) emphasized the importance of research for advancing sustainability in higher education.

What is research and teaching? Are they interrelated? According to Brown (2005):

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> Research and teaching form a continuum of academic activity. The extreme points are clear enough-research is an activity, which is concerned primarily with knowledge acquisition on the part of the researcher and secondarily with knowledge dissemination to academic peers and students and teaching is an activity, which is primarily concerned with knowledge dissemination on the part of the lecturer and with knowledge acquisition on the part of the student. These activities merge in the center of the continuum, where, for instance, the supervision of a postgraduate student could be defined as both teaching (because of knowledge dissemination aspects) and research (because of its knowledge acquisition aspects).

From his statements, we understand that both teaching and research are essential to university lecturers as a continuing learning process. Whether, research influences effective teaching or not has yet to be justified. Bearing in mind of the importance of research in the university, any research activities will be considered essential.

Indeed, one of the major challenges faced by academic staff in higher learning institutions is the ability to teach and do research. According to Murrey *et al.* (1994), faculty in American business schools are aware of and sensitive to the need of research and publications. In fact, they were evaluated for promotion, tenure and pay increases based on teaching, service and research and publications. Generally, promotion is based on certain merit outlined by the relevant universities. For example, Monash University's criteria for promotion to senior lecturer include list of research outputs; research funding; Assessment of competitive grants; research supervision of Higher Degree by Research (HDR) and honours students; other significant research achievements and summary of teaching evaluations (Monash University). Thus, research activities are given high priority in terms of promotion among academic staffs.

Establishment of a new university as a result of upgrading from a college offers a great challenge to its academic staff especially, the previous college was perceived as a teaching institution rather than a research or teaching and research institution. It is not surprising that academic staffs during those times were promoted based solely on seniority.

What are the reasons behind this situation? To enable us to understand this scenario, we first have to examine the perceptions of academic staffs towards research. The next step is to provide recommendations to the relevant unit (for example, research management center) as to how to change the scenario; from a teaching institution to a teaching and research university.

Although, much research has been done to explore the perceptions and attitudes towards research for example, Sterner (1999) and Tang and Chamberlain (1997) less emphasis is seen on the specific nature of the problem. MacKinnon (2003), however, focused on the perceptions and attitudes toward teaching and faculty development. This motivates us to undertake this study.

The main purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of academic staff towards research. In addition, the study will also identify the incentives/ motivations that encourage them to do research and to identify barriers to their involvement in research activities.

Literature review: Research in attitudes towards research have extensively done in the Western Universities particularly in the United States, for example, Sterner (1999), Tang and Chamberlain (1997) and Murrey *et al.* (1994). In Malaysia, research into this area is still lacking. If there was Bowman and Anthonysamy (2006), examine Malaysian and American students' perceptions on research ethics. The present study therefore, is a modest attempt to examine the perceptions of academic staff towards research.

Murrey *et al.* (1994) explored the risk and insurance faculty attitudes towards research and publishing in 36 universities in the states. One hundred and thirty two respondents were involved in the study where 48% were professors, 21% assistant professors, 21% associate professors, 6% instructors and 4% making up others. The study found that majority of the respondents were actively involved in research and publishing. Only 18% of the respondents had no refereed journal articles published during the last 5 years and only 12% had not presented research papers at professional meetings during that time period. The study also, found that 91% of the faculty members believed that they were expected to publish in order to advance in their career. Of the most important reasons for doing research was to make a scholarly contribution to the body of knowledge.

Jenkins (1995) argued that there should be a reappraisal of the impact of RAF (Research Assessment Exercise), on UK higher education as it prioritizes research at the expense of teaching. Rowley (1996) on the other hand, explores strategies, which can be adopted to support the development of a research ethos in a teaching institution. To enable academic staff to research under a tighter resource climate, Rowley (1996) suggests the following strategies:

- Writing textbooks, publishable action learning materials and other publishable learning materials

- Generating publications based on students major undergraduate or postgraduate projects
- Encouraging research students to publish their research as part of their experience
- Experimenting with and evaluating different teaching and learning approaches
- Integrating data collection or elements of data analysis for a more major project into students learning assessment activities

In another study by Tang and Chamberlain (1997), found that faculty members believed research interfered with their teaching and that they should be required to do either teaching or research, but not both. Oshagbemi (1997) investigated job satisfaction characteristics among UK academic staff. He concluded that teaching and research functions cannot occur in isolation without the appropriate environment to carry them out. Therefore, this requires good administration and management.

According to Sterner (1999), at large research institutions, teaching loads are generally lower and academic staffs must engage in research and other scholarly activities to receive tenure and promotion. Her research focused on attitudes of the faculty members towards involvement in grant-related activities; she found that members placed high priority on teaching than research. They also, believed that engaging in research was essential to their professional development. Some of the barriers faced by faculty members were heavy teaching and advising loads as well as too many administrative assignments. Sterner (1999) concludes:

> Data collected from interviews and writing comments reveal that faculty feels a great frustration and even some hostility in regard to the relative value placed on teaching and research in tenure and promotion decisions.

A case study by Thomas and Harris (2000) concluded that staff not only develops skills and knowledge as a result of engaging in research, but also gain intrinsic rewards and enthusiasm. They argued that encouraging and enabling research among academic staff not only enhances job satisfaction but also improve the educational experience of their students. In a study by MacKinnon (2003) on Administrators and Dean Perceptions towards Faculty Development in Academic Pharmacy in United States, found few involved in research and most agreed that research findings were useful in their management of patients. The study found that top motivating factors for pursuing faculty development programs were to improve teaching, research skills and quality of work.

Bensimon *et al.* (2004) examined an alternative methodology for conducting research to bring about institutional change. They classified research into the traditional model and the practitioner-as-researcher model. In the traditional model, the individual controls the production of knowledge whereas, the practitioner-researcher model stakeholders produce knowledge within a local context in order to identify problems and take actions to remedy the problems.

Brown (2005) viewed the study on the relationship between teaching and research and suggested the following:

- There is a link between research and teaching though the strength of the link is problematic
- The link is not only a matter of intellectual or disciplinary import, but is complicated by political and vested interests
- The two extremes of research and teaching can be bridged by scholarship or learning, or both together
- It is unnecessary and counter-productive to demand of academics that they should be simultaneously good researchers and good teachers
- This requirement is unlikely to be realized in practiced
- There is no obligation whatever for academics to overtly link their own personal research to their teaching in order to be considered good teachers

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data was collected during the transitional period of upgrading one college into a full public university. A total of 200 self-administered questionnaires were distributed to members of the academic staff through individual departments/schools. Respondents were asked to hand in the completed questionnaire to the general office of each department. As expected, the response was very poor. We had to remind the staff through email and telephone calls. Finally, 57 useable questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of about 29%.

The items on perceptions towards research were adopted from the work of Sterner (1999) and Tang and Chamberlain (1997). However, the original items were modified to suit with the current study. There are three part; first was related to the staffs' demographic data. This part relates to demographic profiles of respondents. Information asked include highest degree earned, normal hours of teaching load, years of full-time teaching and questions related to research background for example, grant application, number of publication and number of conferences attended. Second examined their perceptions towards research. This study comprises four main steps as follows:

- Research orientation
- Motivation
- Mission of the university
- Barriers

The third is an open ended question requiring the respondents to answer freely on their comments and suggestions.

Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) will be used to analyze the data. Frequency distribution will be used to describe the sample and Cronbach's alpha will be established to determine the reliability of the statements used in the perceptions towards research. The mean and standard deviations of the perceptions towards research will also be computed. Finally, paired sample t-test will be used to examine whether there are any significant mean differences between groups (researchers and non-researcher) under study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents: This study provides information relating to the demographic profiles of respondents. The questions asked include school, gender, age, status, position, rank, highest degree earned, year of completion of highest degree, highest degree earned from university, normal hours of teaching load per week and years of full-time teaching. The results are shown in Table 1.

Of the respondents, who answered the survey, 54% were women and 46% were men. Almost half of the respondents were in the age group of 30-39 with 68% were full time staff. Majority of the respondents possessed Masters degree, 5.3% with Ph.Ds and the remainder 19% possessed 1st degree. About 78.9% had their qualifications from overseas and 21% from local universities. The semester teaching load is relatively low (68% under 14 h week^{-1}). Finally, it is interesting to note that half of the respondents have worked for >10 years.

The results in Table 2 show, the research background of the respondents. The majority of the respondents (68%) had never applied for research grant. Of the 32% who applied for research grant, 25% had successfully obtained the grant. Surprisingly, nearly 60% of the respondents did not submit any proposal for research grant even though, 56% did discuss their research proposal with their colleagues. About 89.5% of the respondents had however, attended research methodologies course either in the past and present. The findings also reveal that 77% had never acted as a principal researcher and 70% had never recruited members into the research project.

Table 1: Demographic profiles of respondents

Categories	Items	Frequency	%
School	School of management	12	21.1
	School of Islamic studies	20	35.1
	Language center	4	7.0
	School of engineering	9	15.8
	Information and technology center	5	8.8
	School of general studies	7	12.3
Gender	Male	26	45.6
	Female	31	54.4
Age (year)	Under 30	7	12.3
	30-39	28	49.1
	40-49	13	22.8
	50 and over	9	15.8
Status	Full time	39	68.4
	Contract/temporary	18	31.6
Position	Lecturer	47	82.5
	Lecturer/head	8	14.0
	Others	2	3.5
Rank	DG54	1	1.8
	DG48	9	15.8
	DG44	4	7.0
	DG41	42	73.7
	Others	1	1.8
Highest degree earned	Bachelor	11	19.3
	Master	40	70.2
	Ph.D	3	5.3
	Others	3	5.3
Year of completion of higher degree	Before 1970	2	3.5
	1980-1989	8	14.0
	1990-1999	22	38.6
	Since, 2000	25	43.9
Highest degree earned from university/learning institutions	Local	45	78.9
	Overseas	12	21.1
Normal hours of teaching load (per week)	05-09	13	22.8
	10-14	26	45.6
	15-19	16	28.1
	20 and above	1	1.8
	Missing value	1	1.8
Years of full-time teaching	1-4	10	17.5
	5-9	18	31.6
	10-14	9	15.8
	15-19	5	8.8
	20 and above	15	26.3

As far as conferences are concerned, 17.5% of the respondents had submitted research papers and were accepted at international conferences at least one and 15.8% were accepted at national conferences. At least, 12% of the respondents had presented at international conferences and 21% at national conferences. In terms of publications, 8.8% had published their work in the journals, 22.9% in the conference proceedings and 10.5% had published their research in the form of books or monographs.

Finally in terms of attending in conferences as participants, 70% of the respondents had never attended international conferences. This is perhaps because of the policy of the university where one is allowed to attend international conferences as presenters not as participants. About 26.3% of academic staffs had never attended national conferences. This clearly shows that

Table 2: Research background

Statements	Categories			
Have you applied for research grant	Yes	No		
	31.6	68.4		
Have you been awarded a grant?	Yes	No		
	24.6	75.4		
Submitted a proposal for funding from	University	Others	None	
	36.8	3.5	59.6	
Did you discuss your proposal with your colleagues?	Yes	No		
	56.1	43.9		
Attended research methodologies course	Never	In the past only	Currently only	Both in the past and currently
	8.8	47.4	12.3	29.8
Acted as a principal researcher	Never	In the past only	Currently only	Both in the past and currently
	77.2	10.5	8.8	3.5
Recruited members into research project	Never	In the past only	Currently only	Both in the past and currently
	70.2	8.8	12.3	8.8
	>5	1-5	None	-
No. of research accepted				
International conferences	3.5	14.0	82.5	
National conferences	1.8	14.0	84.2	
Others	0.0	7.0	93.0	
	>5	1-5	None	
No. of publication				
Journals	1.8	10.5	87.7	
Proceedings	1.8	19.3	78.9	
Others	0.0	12.3	87.7	
	>5	1-5	None	
No. of presentation				
International conferences	0.0	8.8	91.2	
National conferences	1.8	21.1	77.2	
Others	0.0	10.5	89.5	
	>5	1-5	None	
No. of conferences attended				
International conferences	1.8	28.1	70.2	
National conferences	8.8	64.9	26.3	
Others	3.5	49.1	47.4	

Figures are in percentages

participation in national conferences are still considered unsatisfactory even though, the management fully sponsored those who presented papers at national levels. Academic staffs should attend conferences to enable them to have networks with others and engage in future research collaboration.

Perceptions towards research: An examination on the lecturer's perceptions towards research was made using a set of questionnaires adopted from the research of Sterner (1999) and Tang and Chamberlain (1997). A 5-point scale:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Uncertain
- Agree
- Strongly disagree was used

The 32 items are categorized under four components; research orientation; motivation; mission of the university and barriers. The internal consistency reliability of the perceptions towards research was determined to be 0.80 using Cronbach's alpha for each of the 32 items used. Thus, the internal consistency reliability of the measures used in this study is considered good (Sekaran, 2000).

Research orientation: The respondents were asked to express the extent of their agreement with a set of statements that may explain their research orientation. A summary of their answers are shown in Table 3.

According to Table 3, 96.5% of the lecturers agreed or strongly agreed that research is essential to professional development, while 94.7% agreed or strongly agreed that both involvements in research enhances quality of teaching and viewed their role in higher institutions as an integration of both teaching and research. This is followed by 93% agreed or strongly agreed that university management encouraged efforts of doing research.

A total of 85.9% of the respondents mentioned the role in higher institutions as an integration of both teaching and research followed by 68.5% who mentioned that university environment provide appropriate balance between teaching and research. About 66.7% agreed or strongly agreed that university should recruit and retain only those who exhibit strength in both teaching and research while, 64.0% who mentioned that they viewed

Table 3: Research orientation

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Rank
Lecturers view themselves primarily as researchers	0.0	19.3	17.5	28.1	35.1	9
Lecturers view their role in higher institutions as an integration of both teaching and research	0.0	1.8	3.5	49.1	45.6	3
Lecturers view their role in higher institutions as an integration of both teaching and research	0.0	7.0	7.0	29.8	56.1	5
Lecturers view themselves primarily as lecturers	3.5	28.1	3.5	49.1	15.8	8
Research is essential to professional development	0.0	0.0	1.8	31.6	64.9	1
University environment provide appropriate balance between teaching and research	5.3	15.8	10.5	40.4	28.1	6
Involvement in research enhances quality of teaching	1.8	3.5	0.0	42.1	52.6	2
University should recruit and retain only those lecturers who exhibit strength in both teaching and research	1.8	15.8	15.8	40.4	26.3	7
University management encouraged efforts of doing research	0.0	1.8	5.3	43.9	49.1	4
Adequate resources available at UDM	17.5	26.3	26.3	24.6	5.3	10

Table 4: Motivation factors

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Rank
Rewards are the most effective means of influencing academic performance	0.0	15.8	5.3	45.6	33.3	2
Lecturers must be productive researchers or lose their jobs	12.3	47.4	17.5	12.3	10.5	7
If they are not promoted, they would devote less time to research activity	7.0	21.1	12.3	36.8	19.3	4
The reward structure influences lecturers to devote their time and effort to research	1.8	15.8	7.0	50.9	24.6	3
Colleague opinion is more important than rewards from the university	3.5	24.6	47.4	22.8	1.8	6
Gain respect from others	7.0	15.8	59.6	15.8	1.8	8
Get promoted/salary increases	3.5	7.0	7.0	57.9	22.8	7
Obtain a better job elsewhere	7.0	24.6	35.1	28.1	3.5	5

Rank is based on the total percentage of agree and strongly agree

themselves primarily as lecturers. Only 63.2% mentioned that they viewed themselves primarily as researchers. Interestingly, 43.8% of the respondents agreed or strongly disagreed that adequate resources are available at the university while, 26.3% mentioned that were uncertain about it.

Motivation: The respondents were asked to express their opinions regarding motivational factors that influence them of doing research. The findings are reported in Table 4. A vast majority of respondents (80.7%) mentioned that they were motivated if they get promoted or salary increases. Furthermore, 78.9% of the academic staffs agreed or strongly agreed that rewards are the most effective means of influencing academic performance while, 75.5% agreed or strongly agreed that the reward structure influences them to devote time and effort to research. About 56.1% of the lecturers mentioned that if they are not promoted, they would spend less time to research activity.

Factors like gain respect from others (17.6%), must be productive researchers or lose their jobs (22.8%), colleague opinion is more important than rewards from the university (24.6%) and obtain a better job elsewhere (31.6%) did not appear to influence their motivations in doing research.

Mission of the university: In this study, we also explore the perceptions of academic staffs towards research in terms of mission of the university. A summary of their agreement is shown in Table 5. A vast majority of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that research and teaching are mutually supportive activities and that research activity is essential to the mission of the university. This finding contradicts to the findings of Tang and Chamberlain (1997), who found that faculty members were less inclined to agree with the mission of the university that both teaching and research are essential parts of their job.

Barriers: The results regarding perceived barriers are shown in the Table 6. Surprisingly, the main barrier to lecturers involvement in research is poor statistical/ econometric techniques (75.4%). This is followed by heavy teaching load (73.7%) and poor writing skill (70.2%). Survey results also indicate that 66.7% of the respondents mentioned too much work and bother while, 61.4% mentioned little assistance in preparing proposals. A total of 59.7% of lecturers mentioned poor rewards followed by 57.9% who mentioned too many committee/administrative assignments, while 52.7% of the respondents mentioned heavy mentoring loads. Sterner (1999) reported that the top three barriers were related to time; heavy teaching; heavy advising loads and too many committee assignments.

Reasons like poor funding sources (47.4%); poor support from the university management (43.9%); poor support from colleagues (42.1%) and teaching interferes with research (40.4%) did not appear to be major barriers in their involvement in research.

Table 5: Mission of the university

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Rank
Research activity is essential to the mission of my university	1.8	1.8	0.0	52.6	42.1	2
Research and teaching are mutually supportive activities	0.0	1.8	0.0	50.9	47.4	1

Table 6: The results regarding perceived barriers

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Rank
Teaching interferes with research	15.8	31.6	12.3	38.6	1.8	12
Heavy teaching load	1.8	10.5	12.3	52.6	21.1	2
Heavy mentoring load	1.8	21.1	22.8	43.9	8.8	8
Too many committee/administrative assignments	1.8	17.5	21.1	38.6	19.3	7
Poor funding sources	5.3	21.1	24.6	35.1	12.3	9
Poor rewards	3.5	12.3	22.8	50.9	8.8	6
Little assistance in preparing proposals	0.0	22.8	12.3	50.9	10.5	5
Poor writing skill	5.3	14.0	7.0	63.2	7.0	3
Poor statistical/econometric techniques	1.8	15.8	5.3	57.9	17.5	1
Poor support from the university management	8.8	28.1	17.5	38.6	5.3	10
Poor support from colleagues	0.0	31.6	24.6	36.8	5.3	11
Too much work and bother	0.0	14.0	17.5	47.4	19.3	4

The results clearly show that lecturers need assistance in statistical techniques, writing skills, preparing proposals, some forms of rewards and allocation of appropriate time for them to do research.

CONCLUSION

The study examines, the perceptions of lecturers towards research. The findings clearly show that involvement in research activities among academic staffs in previous college was still unsatisfactory. It is without doubt that many of the academic staffs place little emphasis on research activities as these did not promise any rewards in terms of promotion or salary increase. This had been going for the past 25 years. If promotion is purely based on seniority, the attitudes of the academic staffs will not change.

The study also, reveal that the main motivations for lecturers to do research are getting promoted or salary increases, rewards are the most effective means of influencing academic performance and that the reward structure influences them to devote time and effort to research. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents perceived that if they are not promoted, they would spend less time to research activity. This implies some sort of intimidation or threat from the academic staffs, which we believe that is unethical and unacceptable.

An examination of the barriers uncovers various issues. The main barriers to lecturers' involvement in research are poor statistical/econometric techniques, heavy teaching load and poor writing skill. Apart from that the findings reveal that issues relating to time and burden for example, too much work and bother, too many committee/administrative assignments and heavy mentoring loads. Looking for excuses especially on heavy teaching load as one of the main barrier, still there are group of people who get involved in research activities regardless of the barriers mentioned. We agree to what was mentioned by Murrey *et al.* (1994) that the most important reason for doing research was to make a scholarly contribution to the body of knowledge.

Surprisingly, many academic staffs need assistance in preparing proposals. The relevant unit has however, plan various activities relating to preparing and writing proposals. Academic staffs should take this opportunity to attend the workshop and submit proposals for research grant.

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