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ACADEMIC CAREER IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE IDENTITIES OF MALAYSIAN PROFESSORS

Safiah Sidek¹, Mohd Taib Dora², Noor Azlin Bidin³, Norliah Kudus⁴, Mahadi Abu Hassan⁵, Sazelin Arif⁶, Shahrulanuar Mohamed⁷, Mohd Fadzil Mohd Idris⁸

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7} Centre for Languages and Human Development, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka, Malaysia

⁸ Higher Education Leadership Academy, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia

Corresponding author's email: safiahsidek@utem.edu.my

Abstract

This paper describes the identities of Malaysian professors contextualized within the agenda of Malaysian higher education to become the hub of higher education in the Asian Pacific region by 2020. In response to the challenges of global higher education, the Malaysian higher education has introduced a systematic strategic plan to develop a culture of academic excellence. However, little has been written about the changes in the academic career in response to this agenda. Further, there are claims that the academics' responsibilities are becoming more diversified and complex as the landscape of higher education changes its emphasis to massification, internationalization and accountability. Drawn from this context, this paper aims to explore the roles of academics, particularly the professors in the modern universities. Based on data collected from interviews with three distinguished professors and a critical analysis of the Malaysian Higher Education policy documents, this paper describes a profile of Malaysian professors. It also puts forth an argument that the identities of Malaysian professors are characterized by the local and global imperatives as they are shaped by not only the specific agenda of the country but also the global trend. Thus, this paper serves as awareness and guidance for young academics pursuing for professorship to strategize their career pathway in higher education sector.

Keywords: *Identities, Academic career, Professors, Malaysian Higher Education*

A. INTRODUCTION

Contextualized with the dynamism of globalization, transition to knowledge-based society and rapid development of technology, higher education sectors around the world are facing new challenges and they are becoming more complex. To be sustainable, they need to respond to the demands of the changing landscape of global higher education. Among the global challenges faced by this sector is the emphasis on massification and internationalization of higher education (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Enders, 2007), increase diversity of student population, changing emphasis towards student-centered learning, and increase utilization of online

technology in higher education. All these factors are affecting the work practices of academics that contribute to the development of human capital for the nation.

Within the era of globalization, the academics' work practice can no longer be considered as primarily teaching, researching and delivering services to the university and the society (Boyer, 1990). The academic work practices have become more heterogeneous, complex and fluid as they operating in modern universities. Many claims that academics workload has increased and become more myriad (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2012; Kwiek, 2003; MacFarlene, 2011). As study conducted among Australian academic career (Bexley, Arkoudis, & James, 2013) reveals that many academics are overwhelmed by their workloads and the range of responsibilities, and they are concerned that the opportunities for creativity, innovation and originality are being eroded. The new modes of academic work are often less autonomous; they are likely to be significant changes in that the non-traditional. As such in order to perform effectively and be relevant to the changes, academics need to respond to the changes.

The academic work practices are shaped by the socio-cultural context within which the academics are operating. The changes affected the academic work are not only limited to the global pressures, but they are also affected by the strategic planning of a respective government which they are located. In response to the challenges of global higher education, the Malaysian higher education has introduced a systematic strategic plan to develop a culture of academic excellence. However, little has been written about the changes in the academic career in response to this agenda.

The Malaysian higher education is framed within the national higher education policy that has three main agendas, which are establishing a world class university system in Malaysia; making

Malaysia a regional education hub; and transforming Malaysia into a knowledge-based economy (Regel et al., 2007, p. 26). These policy agendas can be viewed as responses from the government in meeting the challenges of the changing emphasis of global higher education. To achieve these agendas, a strategic plan to transform the national higher education has been initiated in 2006 and it is now in its second phase. While the first phase focuses on the setting up the framework, the second phase concentrates on enhancing and refining the initial framework. One of the critical agendas in the transformation plan involves the development of a culture of academic excellence. It is anticipated that this agenda can help to foster a world class higher education in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2011).

In this case, this paper reports a research project that aims to describe the changing work practices of academics operating within the Malaysian higher education system. Specifically, this paper presents the roles and responsibilities of three distinguished professors to identify the ways in which their work practices are shaped by not only the changes in the global higher education but also the agenda envisioned by a particular education system. As such, this paper aims to address the following questions:

- i. What are the expected performances of professors in the Malaysian higher education system?
- ii. What are the work practices of the three distinguished professors contextualized within the Malaysian higher education system?

For the purpose of this paper, the discussion of the work practices of the academics in Malaysian higher education focuses on the profile or identities of Malaysian professors working in Malaysian higher education system. The paper is presented in four parts. While this section

provides the introduction, the second part of this paper presents the context of the subject of the study, namely the Malaysian higher education system. This is followed by the description of the research method, results and discussion and finally the conclusion.

B. MALAYSIAN PROFESSORS AND THE MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Several policies have been introduced to enhance the national higher education towards achieving Malaysia as the education hub for the Asia Pacific by 2020 as well as preparing Malaysia to become a high income and developed nation. One of the important agendas in the transformation process of the national higher education is the academia, which is the focus of this paper. In this respect, to become an education hub in the Asia Pacific that offers a world class education, it is believed that the cultivation of the culture of academic excellence is crucial for the enhancement of a quality higher education. Further, the Malaysian institution of higher education has been categorised into three main categories: the Research, Comprehensive and Focused Universities. The research universities are the established universities which have the more opportunities for research, while the comprehensive universities offer wide range of programs and the focused universities concentrate on delivering focused programs.

It is important to note that the ways in which academics perform the three core responsibilities are also shaped by the critical agendas imposed by the Malaysian higher education policies, thus this contributes to the uniqueness of the identities of Malaysian academics. One of the critical agenda of the National Higher Education Action Plan 2011-2015 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2011) is to cultivate a culture of academic excellence leading to the achievement of a world class higher education. In relation to this, a systematic approach to enhance the quality of

academics has been developed (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2011). As shown in Figure 1, this framework consists of three interrelated layers which start within the inner circle that is enhancing the academic personality, and then it goes outward to the second layer that is the academic profession and finally the outer layer which relates to the environment which is the academic ecosystem.

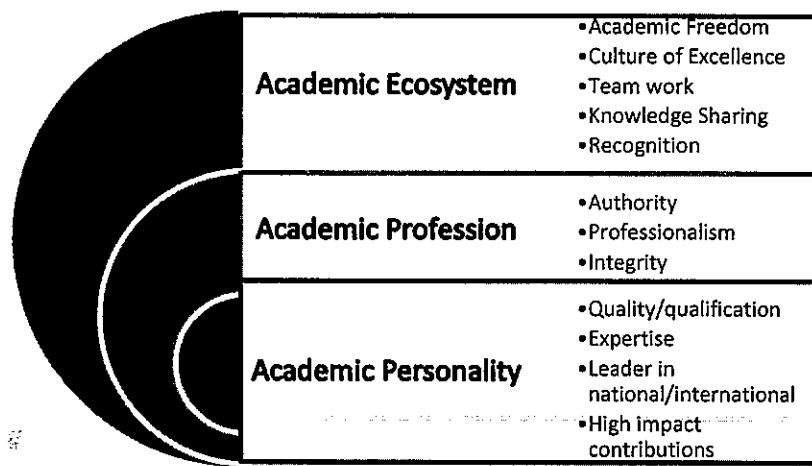


Figure 1: The Three Interrelated Layers for Developing Academic Excellence

As shown in Figure 1, each layer has its own emphasis. Specifically, the inner layer focuses on the empowerment of academic personality that considers four aspects which are the staff academic's quality and qualification, expertise, leadership in both national and international contexts, and ability to offer high impact contributions. At the same time the profession of the academic should also be highly valued in terms of its professionalism, integrity and authority. The third layer focuses on cultivating a conducive academic ecosystem that eventually produces high quality and world standard higher education system. This can be achieved by emphasizing on the staff academic's freedom, the culture of excellence, teamwork and knowledge sharing as well as recognition for their achievements.

In Malaysia, the academic career encompasses of six levels ranging from the tutor, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, professor and the most recently introduced is the

distinguished professor, which is considered as the apex of the academic career. The professors are further categorized into three levels that are from the Professor Grade C, Grade B and Grade A. Although the three core responsibilities of the staff academics are providing teaching, research and service, the involvement of staff academics in these three aspects varies depending on many factors, such as the types of the universities, academic leadership appointment, seniority, and academic specialization (Maimunah & Roziah, 2008).

Recently, to ensure a transparent, fair and consistent appointment and promotion procedure, the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia issued a guideline for the promotion and appointment of the professors and distinguished professors in Malaysia. The guidelines outline five criteria that the staff academics are expected to perform in order to be promoted or appointed as professors and it is anticipated that this criteria will eventually shape the profile of the Malaysian Professors. The five criteria of Malaysian Professor, namely teaching and supervision, research and publication, academic recognition and academic leadership, services to the university and society as well as consultation and industrial or clinical collaboration are shown in Figure 2 below. Among the five criteria, the teaching and supervision as well as research and publication are considered as more important than the other three as they carry more weight. It is argued that these five aspects have direct influence in shaping the identities of the Malaysian professors.

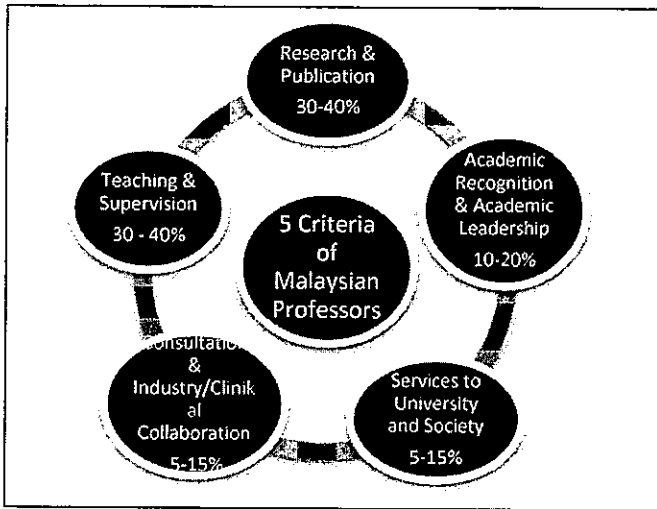


Figure 2: The Five Criteria for the Appointment of and Promotion to a Professor

Further, the weightage for each category ranges from 10 to 40 percent and it varies on the level of promotion applied. Normally, the promotion for a senior lecturer requires more weightage on teaching and supervision, whilst the promotion for a professor requires more weightage on research and publication as well as consultation. This shows that teaching and supervision is becoming less important as one moves towards a higher position in the academic career though it is considered as the significant aspect in the promotion exercise (Safiah, Mohd Taib, Norliah, & Mahadi, 2012).

The descriptors of the five aspects that the academic staff are expected to fulfil for a promotion of a full professor are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Descriptors for the Five Criteria for Malaysia Professors

Criteria	Descriptors
Teaching & Supervision	Involves in teaching university's course (108 credits) Supervises 7 Masters and 7 PhD students (main supervisor) Achieves good evaluation for teaching
Research & Publications	Leads at least 10 research projects Receives at least RM600,000 worth of research projects Publishes in ISI indexed journal (50) Total citations as determined by the respective university
Academic Recognition & Academic Leadership	Keynote speaker for 4 national and 2 international conference; or Editor for ISI indexed journal; or Evaluator for journal articles (10) or book manuscript (6) or Panel evaluator of academic promotion
Services to the University and Society	Chairman at national (2) and international level (2)
Consultation and Networking with Industry	Provides consultations and expert reference (9)

The identities of Malaysian professors are expected to be shaped by the guidelines for appointment and promotion that outlines five criteria in which each criterion has different emphasis. Specifically, Malaysian professors are expected to demonstrate scholarship in teaching and expert in their field of expertise. They should also be actively involved in research and produce high impact publications that are recognized worldwide. Besides, they should be able to demonstrate academic leadership as keynote speaker, editor of indexed journal or evaluator of journal articles. Additionally, Malaysian professors should provide service to the university as well as to the society. Finally, they are becoming entrepreneurs as they should be able to generate income to the university and build collaboration with the industry. These criteria serve to ensure that Malaysian professors have the relevant competencies to deliver a world class higher education, while at the same time their identities are shaped by the demands of the industry in a knowledge-based economy and the changing landscape of global higher education.

This article aims to discuss the work practices of three professors working in Malaysian higher education in relation to the expectations of the Malaysian higher education stipulated by the

criteria set by the guidelines. The following section describes the research method used to investigate the work practices of the three professors.

C. RESEARCH METHODS

The paper reports on a study that investigates the factors that influence staff academics to achieve the distinguished professors in the Malaysian public universities. This study adopted a qualitative collective case study, comprises of three individual case study (Stake, 2005). In principle, this study adopted a biographical research approach as it involves collection and interpretation of the lives others as part of human understanding (Roberts, 2002). Each case was represented by a professor who has been recently appointed as the distinguished professor, the apex of the academic career ladder in Malaysia. The three professors are identified as Prof. A, B and C in order to respect their true identities. The basis for the selection of the three professors was to benchmark their high performance and achievements working in Malaysian higher education institutions. The three professors were from different field of specializations and worked in different institution of higher education. Two of them (Prof. A and C) were attached in a research university, while the other (Prof. B) was attached with a comprehensive university. Further, they were from different field of specialization; Professor A specialized in Social Science, Professor B in Islamic Studies and Professor C in the field of Medicine. The professors also have a long tenure which is approximately 35 years of experience working in the Malaysian institutions of higher education; hence, they have had experienced the changes in their work practices resulting from the demands of the global higher education as well as the transformation process of the Malaysian higher education.

The data generated for the study were based on multiple data source. The face-to-face interviews were considered as the primary data source and supported by biography questionnaires and printed and electronic documents provided by the respondents. To understand and describe the work practices of the professors, the focus of the data collected were mostly qualitative data based on their experiences and reflections of their daily work practices, the achievements and recognitions they received resulting from their tenure as academicians as well as their perceptions regarding the professionalism of academics (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The interview were conducted at the time and place agreed by the respondents. Each interview lasted about one hour and 30 minutes. The interview sessions were recorded using a digital recorder and later transcribed for interpretation and analysis. Data were then coded according to the five criteria of a Malaysia professor (Refer Figure 2) and further analyzed and interpreted to derive relevant themes that emerged from the data (Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section describes the work practices of the three professors to profile the identities of Malaysian professors contextualised within the agenda of the Malaysian higher education system. The description of their work practices will be organised according to the five criteria mentioned above.

i. Teaching and Supervision

Teaching and supervision is considered as the core responsibilities of staff academics regardless of within which context they are working. It was found that all the three professors were actively involved in teaching the subjects of their expertise. They also supervised PhD and Masters Students. In fact, all the three professors have experienced examining PhD students from universities abroad such as universities in Brunei, Australia and the USA. This shows that their

expertise has been recognised internationally. Another interesting finding is the importance of integration or linkages between research, practical work and teaching. As mentioned by Prof. C,

[It has been] just a wonderful opportunity because it was a mixture of teaching, research and I still get to do patient care work which I like, and we do all three. There is no such thing as I only do research. I only teach and I only treat patients. We do all three ... and that was a great set up.

(Prof. C)

This implies that the core responsibilities of teaching, research and practical work (especially in the field of medicine) are no longer viewed as independent; rather they are interrelated to each other. Further, the engagement in practical work and research keeps the staff academic up to date with the dynamism of knowledge as well as enhancing the quality of teaching.

ii. Research and Publication

Data from the study showed that the three professors are involved in research as well as writing. They have had the opportunity to become principal researchers and received research grants amounted to more than RM1 million. It was also found that while Prof. A and C were very active in conducting research both locally and internationally, Prof. B tend to have lesser involvement in research as he was heavily involved in steering the development of a university. All the three Professors had published in peer-reviewed academic journals. Prof A and B tend to have more publication in magazines, monographs and book chapters, while Prof C has extensive publications in scientific journals.

With respect to language, Prof. A who has been writing extensively in Malay language expressed his disappointment regarding the use of ISI indexed journal as the benchmark for the criteria of publication. According to him,

I've written a lot in Malay language, we cannot depend on the Western index publication alone. To be fair, we should use varieties of index. I highlighted issues related to the use of Malay language because we have been ignoring the potential of Malay language and we did not use it as a means to measure our performance and achievements. Sometimes, I feel that we are bound to the criteria that we cannot fulfil and we disregard our own language...

(Prof. A)

In this context, publication in English language journals has become a concern among staff academics that prefer to write in their native language as their writings and publications in the native language is not recognised in the promotion and appointment procedure.

iii. Academic Recognition and Academic Leadership

This study found that all the three professors have received national and international recognition. They have been invited as key note speakers in national as well as international conferences and seminars and as Visiting Professor at universities abroad. They also have been appointed as editors for national and international journals. In fact, Prof. C has been a chief editor in an indexed internationally recognised journal. Further, they have been appointed as evaluators for articles to be published in journals, and book manuscripts. Prof. A and C have been appointed as evaluators for research grants proposals at the university as well as the national levels an item which was not included in these criteria.

iv. Services for the University and Society

The research data showed that all the three professors have contributed their expertise in developing the university within which they are working and their contributions tend to extend internationally. All the three professors have had spent from 3-8 years helming a department of a faculty at their respective universities. In fact, Prof. B has had the experience of steering the development of a particular university in Malaysia. They also have been appointed as the chair of

several committees at the university, national and international contexts. Prof. C specifically, has become the President of an international organisation which has a network of 60 other organisations all over the world.

v. Consultation and Partnership with the Industry

Data from the research showed that all the three professors have been actively involved in giving their expert advice to not only the industry but also with the government bodies. For example, Prof. A and B had given his expert advice to the Ministry of Education and Prof. C had given her advice to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. In particular, Prof. A has helped to develop a teaching module for a compulsory university subject in the public university and played significant role in promoting social science research in scientific research. Prof. B has helped to review the Malaysian education system and Prof. C has helped to develop a standard ISO document for a particular field in medicine. Prof. C has also been the advisors for several medical centres around the world.

Another important feature of the profile of Malaysian professor is the values of performing their work practice. Among the values that have emerged in the data are academic excellence, accountability and integrity. Referring this value as intellectual integrity, Prof. C expressed her concern by saying that

As a medical professor, I was in a unique position to not only mould the values of many future generations of doctors, scientists and researchers, but also influence the quality of medical practice and knowledge enrichment in the community. ... I had developed a philosophy that 'excellence and ethical conduct should be the way of life in medical practice and research'. ... Intellectual integrity is expected of academic individually and in university at large.

(Prof. C)

As emphasised by Prof. C, academic excellence and ethical conduct should be the way of life in every academic staff. This is important as the role of staff academics is to develop and educate

future generations with high moral values for the nations. These values are reflected in her work practice.

Overall, all the three professors have performed in all the five aspects with some degrees of variations. It can be said that their work practice has become increasingly heterogeneous as the work practices in these five aspects are interrelated and they are contributing to the enhancement of each other. Further, their participations in each of the five aspects vary depending on their ways of performing their work practice and the context within which they are working. Specifically, the work practice of Prof. B show more emphasis on providing services to the university (steering the development of a university) and less emphasis on conducting research. Both Prof. A and C were actively involved in research and publication. While Prof. A was not satisfied with the expectations of publishing in ISI index journal due to the requirements of English language, Prof. C did not show any problems in this matter as almost all of her writing are in English language.

The work practices of Malaysian professors are is not just limited to the university that they are working, but rather has expanded internationally. This is clearly evident in all the five aspects of their work practices. Hence, this indicates that Malaysian higher education is progressing towards delivering world class higher education. Further, the work of academic has become more significant as their work practice and responsibilities have widened. It is not just limited to contributing to the academic world, but also to the welfare of the nation and society at large.

E. CONCLUSION

It is clear that the work practices of the Malaysian professors to a certain extent, have met the five criteria of Malaysian professor as stipulated in the guidelines of promotion and appointment

of Malaysian Professors. This means that the identities of Malaysian professor is largely influenced and shaped by the policy agenda of the Malaysian higher education system that aims at achieving the world class higher education system. The identities of the Malaysian Professors show that their work practises are become increasingly heterogeneous and broad. It is also concluded that work practises have become internationalised and English language has become an important particularly in the area of publications. Another significant attributes of the Malaysian professor is the values of academic excellence, integrity and accountability, which are considered important in building a good moral and responsible human capital for the nation. Thus, it is hoped that the findings reported in this paper could help staff academics to strategically plan their career path towards achieving the highest position in the academic career that is the distinguished professors.

It is important to note that the data of this study is generated primarily from three professors who have been appointed as distinguished professor, indicating that they have performed outstandingly in all the five criteria of Malaysian professor set by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. Research that focuses on the struggles faced by staff academics to achieve the five criteria would be valuable.

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