ACADEMICS' PERCEPTION ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGES TO UNIVERSITIES: A PILOT STUDY IN A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

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Abstract: *The main objective of this pilot study was to obtain preliminary data for the main study. In the paper, the perception of the academics at a Malaysian university college on the transformation of the university college towards university was examined using a questionnaire developed for the purpose of the study. The questionnaire items were utilized to examine the perception of the academics on the problems in eight main areas including performance management and promotion; role overload, role conflict or both; financial remuneration; research and teaching; work uncertainty; training and development; equipment and working conditions and leadership and governance. Other sections of the questionnaire also investigate the effects of the problems to the academics and supports provided. The results revealed that majority of the academics faced problems in five main areas related to their work scope as teachers and researchers. They also agreed that the problems affect them in achieving personal and university institutional KPI, their teaching and research workload, motivation and job satisfaction. In fact, supports were provided by the management to the academics for the development of six elements. However, the results prove that there were room for improvements on the supports provided by the management of the university college so that the academics are able to perform and achieve more their personal and institutional key performance indicators.*

Keywords: university college transformation, higher education, academics, perception, pilot study

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Introduction

Transformation of university colleges to universities is significant as an effort to realize Malaysia's National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) 2007 – 2020 in improving our tertiary institutions. This transformation is eminent particularly in widening the excess, improving the quality, strengthening the equity, embracing the unity and maximizing the efficiency of our education system (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 –2025). Among the main issues discovered by Shariffuddin et al., (2017) in their review on higher education institutions (HEIs) transformation in Malaysia were involving the governance of the HEIs, academic career and academic activities. However, academic identity should not be neglected as the change of tertiary institutions affects the academics' professional identity as teachers, researchers, administrators and/or entrepreneurs (Delanty, 2008) in carrying out their everyday tasks. All of these affect the academics; the actors who play essential role in ensuring the objectives of the transformation are achieved. Therefore, it is imperative that the implications of the transformation of university colleges to universities on the academics are

examined (Shariffuddin and Razali, 2016) so that the most necessary supports can be made available in assisting the academics to perform better.

The research objectives of this pilot study were to obtain preliminary data for the main study, to determine if the sampling frame and technique are affective in collecting data for the main study and to test the instrument for its reliability as suggested by Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) for the importance of conducting pilot study. This paper represents the initial development of the instrument and will not address validity issues as it requires larger samples for item analysis; of which the total population of academics at the research site was quite small with less than 200.

Methodology

Sample and Research Procedure

This paper presents the results of a pilot study from a questionnaire developed to examine the problems faced by the academics at a university college in its transformation to become a university. The questionnaire is a part of the aforementioned main study which employ in-depth interviews and questionnaire as instruments to collect data. The data collected from the questionnaire will be utilized to support data obtained from the interview and vice-versa.

The questionnaire was administered via invitation e-mails to the respondents to participate in the pilot study. The e-mails were randomly sent to a total of 40 academics from four different faculties at a university college in the East Coast Malaysia. By the end of one month period, only 21 (52.5%) responded to the questionnaire link attached via the e-mails. The total number of the respondents were deemed sufficient because a sample of 20-25 is adequate to demonstrate the suitability of the instrumentation for small size population as the sample size should be at least 10% of the actual size of the population (Creswell, 2012). Since the population of the academics at the university college is small with less than 200, the researchers opt for the minimal sample size for the pilot study. The respondents were academics with various academic positions on contract or permanent employment.

Instruments

The questionnaire was adapted from Pienaar and Bester (2006) who studied career dilemmas of the academics in the transformation of South African academic university colleges and Ishak et al. (2009) who conducted study on academics favorability towards certain key performance indicators. The final version of the questionnaire for the pilot study comprised of four (4) sections with 32 items: 5 items (demographic) and 27 (questions). These sections include: (1) demographic information of the respondents; (2) problems faced by the academics in the transformation from a university college to a university; (3) effects of the problems to the academics; and (4) supports provided to the academics.

Whilst, the respondents were instructed to answer questions in section one (1) in accordance to the options provided; for section two (2) until four (4) they were asked to select their preferred answer based on Likert scale of one (1) until five (5), with one (1) indicating strongly disagree and five (5) indicating strongly agree.

After the one-month period, the collected answers for all sections were analyzed using descriptive analysis. Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS version 24) was used to

obtain statistical results to measure the reliability of the instrument. It was discovered from the statistical analysis of the items in the questionnaire that the Cronbach Alpha value for reliability is 0.765. The value with r=0.7 or greater is considered sufficiently reliable (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) for the instrument to be administered to collect data of the main study.

Results and Discussions

Demographic Information

The results of the descriptive analysis (frequencies and percentages) for section one (1) pertaining to the demographic information of the respondents are summarized in Table 1. A total of five (5) items were asked about the background of the respondents. The results on the responses show that majority of the respondents were female (71.4%), possessed Master qualification (85.7%), had worked with the university college between 0-5 years (47.6%), were on contract employment (57.1%) and were in lecturer position (57.1%).

Table 1: Summary of the responses from section one of the questionnaire

Demographic	f	%
Gender		
Female	15	71.4
Male	6	28.6
Type of qualification		
PhD	1	4.8
Master	18	85.7
Degree	2	9.5
Working duration with the university college		
0-5 years	10	47.6
6-10 years	4	19
11-15 years	4	19
16-20 years	3	14.3
21 years and over	0	0
Employment Status		
Contract	12	57.1
Permanent	9	42.9
Current Position		
Instructor	1	4.8
Tutor	5	23.8
Lecturer	12	57.1
Senior Lecturer	3	14.3
HOP/HOD	0	0
Dean	0	0
Manager	0	0

Therefore, the results show that the backgrounds of the respondents were different in terms of their gender, type of qualification, working duration with the university college, employment

status and their current position at the university college. However, there was no response obtained for the options in the current position item pertaining to their managerial position at the university college. Eventually, it was decided that a new item, current managerial position should be added to separate current academic and managerial positions so that perception from managing academics on the problems faced in the transformation from a university college to a university were also obtained in the data collection process. Thus, the method of randomly select the respondents via sending invitation e-mails to all of the academics from four different faculties was deemed suitable to obtain data for the main study.

Problems Faced by the Academics

The results of the analysis on the respondents' responses on section two (2) with regards the problems faced by the academics in the transformation from university college to a university are tabulated in Table 2. Whilst, the majority agreed (33.3%) there are clear guidelines, transparency and reasonable rules regarding academic staff promotion at the university college; many of the respondents were neutral on the perception that there are ample opportunities or possibilities for academic staff promotion. This variability shows the differences of the academics' perception on the problem they have with performance management and promotion. The results further indicate that majority disagreed (33.3%) that there is less/no pressure to conduct research and get involved in community service, while teaching-differentiated focus area and they agreed (38.1%) that they do not have enough time to devote to research and/ or other tasks due to high workload. The academics recognized the problem of role overload, role conflict or both faced in the transformation towards becoming a university college. It was also discovered from the results that majority agreed (47.6%) that adequate financial remuneration is provided to the academics and many stayed neutral (42.9%) on the financial remuneration awarded for accomplishments. Hence, financial remuneration is not considered as a problem faced by the academics.

Table 2: Summary of the responses from section two of the questionnaire

Problems faced by the academics Item	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Performance management and promotion										
Currently, there are clear guidelines, transparency and reasonable rules regarding academics' promotion.	5	23.8	2	9.5	6	28.6	7	33.3	1	4.8
There are ample opportunities or possibilities for academics' promotion.	5	23.8	4	19	6	28.6	5	23.8	1	4.8
Role overload, role conflict or both										
There is less/no pressure to conduct research and get involved in community service, while teaching differentiated focus area.	4	19	7	33.3	5	23.8	5	23.8	0	0
I do not have enough time to	0	0	2	9.5	5	23.8	8	38.1	6	28.6

devote to research and/ or other tasks due to high workload.

Financial remuneration										
Adequate financial remuneration is provided (e.g. salary, bonus etc).	3	14.3	3	14.3	4	19	10	47.6	1	4.8
Financial remuneration is awarded for accomplishments.	5	23.8	1	4.8	9	42.9	6	28.6	0	0
Research and teaching										
Great emphasis is made on research but little provision is provided.	0	0	0	0	5	23.8	11	52.4	5	23.8
Sufficient provision is made on innovation.	3	14.3	2	9.5	9	42.9	7	33.3	0	0
I possess the skills to publish articles.	0	0	2	9.5	2	9.5	13	61.9	4	19
Adequate trainings on teaching skills are provided.	0	0	0	0	5	23.8	8	38.1	8	38.1
I possess the necessary teaching skills.	0	0	4	19	4	19	13	61.9	0	0
Work uncertainty										
Contract staff are uncertain of their future with the university college.	0	0	0	0	4	19	3	14.3	14	66.7
Due to job uncertainty, contract staff work harder than the permanent staff.	0	0	1	9.1	1	9.1	3	27.3	6	54.5
Training and development										
Ample opportunities for growth and funds are made available to extend my subject knowledge via training.	3	14.3	3	14.3	5	23.8	9	42.9	1	4.8
There is adequate policy implementation for staff development at the university college.	4	19	3	14.3	5	23.8	9	42.9	0	0
Equipment and working conditions										
Inadequate infrastructure, e.g. old computers etc., limits staff performance of their duties.	0	0	2	9.5	2	9.5	8	38.1	9	42.9
Inadequate infrastructure, e.g. old computers affects the university college's reputation.	0	0	0	0	2	18.2	3	27.3	6	54.5
Leadership and governance										
The management are providing competent leadership.	6	28.6	1	4.8	5	23.8	8	38.1	1	4.8
State should pose more authority in the university college's governance.	4	19	1	4.8	4	19	5	23.8	7	33.3

Apart from that, the results from Table 2 also illustrate that the academics agreed (52.4%) great emphasis is made on research but little provision is provided and strongly agreed (66.7%) they possess the skills to publish articles. However, they remained neutral (42.9%) on the opinion about sufficient provision is made on innovation. Meanwhile, the majority agree (38.1%) and strongly agree (38.1%) that adequate trainings on teaching skills are provided to the academics and many agree (61.9%) that they possess the necessary teaching skills. Hence, the results show that they admitted there is certain problem in conducting research. The results also demonstrate that work uncertainty was a major problem for the academics with 66.7% strongly agreed that contract staff are uncertain of their future with the university college; and because of that many strongly agreed (54.5%) that contract staff work harder than the permanent staff.

The academics further agreed (42.9%) that ample opportunities for growth and funds are made available to extend my subject knowledge via training and they also agreed (42.9%) there is adequate policy implementation for staff development at the university college. This shows that the academics found training and development were not an issue for them. Nevertheless, majority strongly agreed (42.9%) that inadequate infrastructure, e.g. old computers etc., limits staff performance of their duties and they also strongly agreed (54.5%) that inadequate infrastructure, e.g. old computers affects the university college's reputation. This proves that the academics found that inadequate equipment and working conditions at the university college were indeed a problem for them in carrying out their duties. Last but not least, they agreed (38.1%) that the management are providing competent leadership but still strongly agreed (33.3%) that state should pose more authority in the university college's governance. As shown by the results, leadership and governance were not a problem to the academics at the university college.

Generally, the results from Table 2 demonstrate that the academics experienced problems in the areas such as performance management and promotion; role overload, role conflict or both; research; work uncertainty especially for those who were on contract employment and inadequate equipment as well as working conditions. Nevertheless, as shown in the results, the academics did not face problems in terms of financial remuneration, teaching, training and development and leadership and governance of the university college.

Effects of the Problems to the Academics

The pilot study also examines the effects of the problems experienced by the academics in carrying out their daily tasks and obligations in section three (3) of the questionnaire. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Summary of the responses from section three of the questionnaire

Effects of the problems to the academics	Response - Option									
Item	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
The problems affect me in achieving personal and	0	0	1	4.8	4	19	10	47.6	6	28.6

	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
institutional KPI.										
The problems affect my teaching and research workload.	0	0	1	4.8	2	9.5	13	61.9	5	23.8
The problems affect my motivation in performing the assigned work.	0	0	2	9.5	5	23.8	9	42.9	5	23.8
The problems affect my satisfaction in performing the assigned work.	0	0	2	9.5	3	14.3	10	47.6	6	28.6

The results reveal that the academics agreed the problems affect them in achieving personal and university institutional KPI (47.6%), their teaching and research workload (61.9%), their motivation in performing the assigned work (42.9%) and their satisfaction in performing the assigned work (47.6%). Therefore, the results obtained from section three of the questionnaire shows that relevant supports should be given to the academics so that they can improve their performance in achieving the objectives of becoming a university.

Supports Provided to the Academics

The final section of the questionnaire examines current supports received by the academics in handling the problems they faced in completing their duties and responsibilities. The results are summarized in Table 4. The results analyzed from the responses obtained in section four (4) indicate that they agreed (47.6%) supports are provided for the development of subject knowledge, teaching and supervisory skills. Furthermore, they agreed (47.6%) that supports are given for the development of their research activities, publication and innovation; but majority decided to stay neutral (42.9%) on the supports for the development of consultation involvement and collaboration as well as for community services and contribution to the university college.

Table 4: Summary of the responses from section four of the questionnaire

Supports provided to the academics Item	Response - Option									
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Supports are given for the development of my subject knowledge, teaching and supervisory skills.	4	19	2	9.5	4	19	10	47.6	1	4.8
Supports are given for the development of my research activities, publication and innovation.	3	14.3	4	19	4	19	10	47.6	0	0
Supports are given for the development of my consultation involvement and collaboration.	3	14.3	3	14.3	9	42.9	6	28.6	0	0
Supports are given for the development of my community	3	14.3	2	9.5	8	38.1	7	33.3	1	4.8

services and contribution to the
university college.

These results show that supports were provided to the academics by the management of the university college. However, those were inadequate as the academics were neither agree or disagree that the supports were given in all areas. Hence, this proves that there are room for improvements on certain support provided so that they continue to excel in their teaching and conducting research.

Conclusions and Implications

The results gained from the pilot study strengthens the notion that in transforming university colleges to universities, the academics are affected in many different areas. The findings of the study have shown that they faced certain problems in performing their everyday tasks and responsibilities as academics. Even though supports were provided, they were insufficient in certain areas. Hence, improvements should be provided so that the academics continue to be motivated and have job satisfaction towards achieving the objectives of transforming the university colleges to full status universities.

This study has important implications for higher education researchers and policy makers in understanding the needs of the academics and deciding on the best approach towards improving the supports provided. Although, the findings have revealed a number of variables that affect the academics' responses on their problems, the pilot study only touches the surface of the problems. Thus, further in-depth study should be conducted to investigate the root of their problems and the solutions that are most relevant to be provided from the point of views of the academics.

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