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Exploring Malaysian Polytechnic Lecturers' Perceptions towards Research: An Institutional Case Study

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Abstract

Research and publications are two main requirements in the job duties of academicians at higher learning institutions. In line with the polytechnic transformational plan, Malaysian polytechnic lecturers are now required to do research, presentations, publishing and other scholarly activities as part of their job duties. This poses challenges to lecturers as their role has traditionally been teaching oriented. Furthermore, performance in research activities has been set as one of the new criteria evaluated for promotion unlike previous promotion system which based solely on seniority. The current study aims to survey the perceptions of lecturers in a Malaysian polytechnic towards research. The findings reported that the main motivation of these lecturers' to do research is for promotion and salary increment. Besides that, heavy teaching loads, poor writing and statistical skills are the main barriers expressed by the lecturers. The findings suggested several implications for institutional administrators to enhance polytechnic lecturers' research abilities.

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Keywords: Perceptions; Research orientation; Motivation; Barriers

1. Introduction

Malaysian polytechnics are undergoing rapid transformation in order to develop a marketable human capital across the country to meet the demand of a developed nation by 2020. This will eventually produce new strength and image to the polytechnics. The transformation outline was deliberately discussed in the 10th Malaysian Plan. This transformation plan is based on polytechnic empowerment through development of new programs in specific thrusts (niche areas), feedbacks from the industries, collaborations with other local and international higher learning

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institutions and producing knowledgeable and competent lecturers together with an excellent working culture.

In addition, as part of the transformation plan, three polytechnics were upgraded to premier polytechnic status and there are plans to upgrade others further to university level by 2015. The upgrading of Malaysian polytechnics offers a great challenge to the lecturers as they are required to improve the quality of teaching and do innovations in teaching, research, presentations, publications and other scholarly activities as part of their role. Consequently, research activities and outputs has been set as one of the criteria evaluated for promotion beginning 1st January 2008.

According to Azmi (2006), academic staffs are recognized worldwide as authorities in their fields and this can be achieved through publication of research findings. However, one of the major challenges faced by academic staff in higher learning institutions is the ability to teach and do research (Izah Mohd Tahir and Nor Mazlina Abu Bakar, 2009). Polytechnic lecturers are now obliged to engage in research activities and this posed a great challenge as previously lecturers were promoted based mainly on seniority. Therefore, the perceptions, readiness and professional development efforts of the academic staffs pertaining to research activities should be aimed at especially when new reforms are made in the institutions.

Research in the area of academic staffs' perceptions towards research is still lacking in Malaysian higher learning institutions especially in the context of Malaysian polytechnics. Thus, the present study is timely and is a modest attempt to explore the perceptions of lecturers' from a Malaysian polytechnic towards research. The study specifically aims to examine the research orientation and motivation factors that influence the lecturers of doing research. In addition, the barriers faced by these lecturers' in conducting research activities were identified.

2. Review of related literature

There is a plethora of studies that focused on academicians perceptions towards research. Sterner (1999) investigated the attitudes of the faculty members towards grant-related activities. Data collected from interviews and written feedbacks reflected that faculty members gave higher importance to teaching than research although they believed that engaging in research was important for professional development. Besides that, heavy teaching loads and administrative duties were some of the barriers reported by the faculty members.

A qualitative case study was conducted by Li Bai and Millwater (2011) to examine the Chinese TEFL academics' perceptions about research in a Chinese research university. Face to face interviews were carried out with six TEFL academics and it was conducted in Chinese, audio-taped and transcribed. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts. The findings indicated that the Chinese TEFL academics' had positive views about the teaching-research nexus and their research efforts was based on both external and internal needs. The respondents recognised research as having a multi-dimensional and significant value however various concerns were raised about institutional research requirements.

Pham HoaHiep (2006) investigated the research culture of English professionals at the university level in Vietnam. Document reviews and interview sessions with seven English Language educators was conducted for data collection purpose. The results signify that Vietnamese English language educators supports the need to conduct research however, several factors, specifically researchers' dissatisfaction with current evaluation regulations, lack of time, materials and opportunities to disseminate results and unsuitable trainings tend to dissuade educators to do research.

Another related study was conducted by Rufo Mendoza (2008) to determine the level of research competencies and identify the research interests of accounting educators in the Philippines. A total of 132 respondents from three geographical areas; National Capital Region (NCR), Luzon and Visayas took part in the national survey. It was found that the accounting educators in general possess a "practitioner" level of competency where they have an average knowledge and are capable to use their research competency. However, the study revealed that the accounting educators lack the speed and flexibility of the proficient researcher and are less adept in the application of statistical tools in research. In addition, the survey exposed the five areas which recorded the highest interests among the accounting educators; accounting education (3.93), assurance and attestation (3.93), ethics and corporate

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