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Introduction

Higher education is increasingly important within a modern economy, providing skills and expertise, and forming a centre for knowledge creation and for human resource development. Higher education is the engine that drives the economy and offers some immunisation against the worst effects of globalization (Creech, 2000; Brodjonegoro, 2009). In this context, developing and retaining a highly skilled workforce within universities are significant challenges facing the higher education sector. Insufficient highly qualified employees and skills shortages have led to the analysis of workforce planning from a range of positions (Clark & Ma, 2005). Bearing in mind the changing nature of academic work, with new expectations from students, university leaders and colleagues, more research is needed on the conditions necessary to assist early career academics to navigate their career environments. Some researchers have investigated their support needs and career development (Hardwick, 2005; Main, 1993; Whicker, Kronenfeld and Strickland, 1993; Zuber-Skerrit, 1992), but this work is located in well-developed higher education systems of Europe and North America. To date, no research has considered the career development for early career academics in developing countries. Yet, it is often in such countries where higher education is expanding most rapidly and where higher education is playing a leading role in the transformation of economies and societies; and where, accordingly, the need to nurture talented academic staff is most urgent.

This paper aims to help fill this gap by considering the early career development of academic staff in three Malaysian universities. Today, the number of Malaysians pursuing tertiary education is expanding. Therefore, an extensive higher education plan has been developed so that the growth and development of higher education will be in accordance with the aims of the Eleventh Malaysian Plan (2016 to 2020) and the New Economic Model (NEM) that underpins the objective of the country to become a high-income nation by the year 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia). Against this background, Malaysian universities need to rethink their strategic plans; one priority area is the career development of their

human capital, including academic staff. Baruch and Hall (2004) have described the academic profession as central to creation of a successful higher education system in the twenty-first century.

Some researchers have commented on growing disappointment within the academic community, especially for early career academics, regarding falling ethics, declining professionalism and a loss of a collegial academic culture. Weimer and Lenze (1998) commented that these concerns stem from two underlying problems: (1) limited or no practical experience, which leads to low teaching quality, and (2) the absence of a long-term career horizon which makes it more difficult to influence them to take part in instructional development. The struggle of the early career academic has turned into a topic of discussion and research in recent years (Biggs, 2003). However, to date, much of this debate has taken place in the context of higher education in the developed world. This paper looks at whether similar or different issues arise in developing countries.

Tierney (1997) discovered clear indicators showing that understanding and awareness of institutional organisation was absent and this absence created a degree of unclear and confusing circumstances for early career academics as they attempted to meet expectations set by their department or faculty and by the university as a whole. Not surprisingly, early career academics frequently experienced stress during their first years employed in a university position (Olsen, 1993). Thus, it is vital for Malaysian higher education Institutions to ensure the maintenance of a high quality workforce if the country is to achieve the vision of 2020 with a number of world class Malaysian universities. Current research on Malaysian HEIs has a tendency to focus on issues concerning the problems and practices subsequent from implementation of total quality management initiatives in different higher education institutions (Ayob & Yaakub, 1999; Ali, Zairi, & Mahat, 2008). However, very little empirical research has been undertaken to investigate the experiences of early career academics in any country and none of this research has referred to Malaysia.

Aims/Objectives/Methodology

This paper examines the early career development of academic staff in Malaysian universities across a range of academic disciplines and different universities. Two primary research questions were addressed:

1. How do the perceptions and experiences of early career academic staff in Malaysia vary by institution and discipline?
2. What institutional support is offered to early career academics in Malaysian universities?

To answer these questions, a mixed methods study was used. The first stage involved a survey of over 300 academic staff; following up some of the issues raised by the survey results, the second stage involved a series of detailed interviews with 20 individual members of staff. This study defined “early career academics” as academics who had been employed in Malaysian universities within the first five years of their academic appointment (Bazeley 2003).

The paper aims to offer ideas for improving the training and support for early career academic staff in Malaysian universities, helping to strengthen retention and quality and to enhance job satisfaction. More generally, the paper contributes to a wider understanding of issues facing higher education in developing countries and of academic staff development in general.

Findings

The paper covers a wide range of issues, including interactions with senior colleagues; initial training and support; and work-life balance. Different perceptions are discussed, between different types of university, different disciplines and between genders. In particular, the paper shows that, while many staff are unhappy with their experiences and would like to see improvements, most are very reluctant to express their feelings within their universities. Points are therefore raised about the impact of local culture on the career development of academic staff. This may be an issue facing early career staff in many institutions, but may also be a particular concern within developing countries. Finally, the paper discusses important differences in the support and encouragement given to new staff in the development of teaching and research skills.

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