

AM I HAPPY WITH MY BOSSES? A STUDY ON SATISFACTION OF ACADEMICS WITH THE ROLE OF SUPERVISION OF THEIR LEADERS IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

Khairunneezam Mohd Noor⁸, Adanan Mat Junoh⁹, Muhammad Hashim¹⁰, Mahazan Abdul Mutalib¹¹

Abstract

Supervision role is believed to have a significant impact on subordinates' job satisfaction. In this sense, the study is aimed to investigate the satisfaction of academics with the role of supervision of their leaders in the university. The research took the form of semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with seventeen interviewees comprised of sixteen academics from three public universities and a former Minister of Higher Education Ministry of Malaysia. The results indicated that there were mixed responses given by all the interview respondents in regards to their satisfaction with supervision. Some issues that instigated dissatisfaction such as fairness and consideration practised by management people, management strategy and leadership, and lack of consultation, freedom and authority were discussed. The implications of the findings for management- particularly those in public higher education institutions- are discussed.

Keywords: job satisfaction, supervision, leadership, higher education, academics

Abstrak

Peranan penyeliaan diyakini mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan dengan kepuasan kerja para pekerja. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kepuasan kerja ahli akademik terhadap penyeliaan ketua mereka di universiti. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah temubual separa-berstruktur dan kumpulan terfokus bersama enam belas ahli akademik dari tiga universiti awam di Malaysia dan seorang bekas Menteri Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia. Hasil kajian mendapati responden dalam temuduga memberikan respon yang pelbagai berkaitan kepuasan mereka terhadap penyeliaan ketua mereka. Beberapa isu telah menyerlahkan ketidakpuasan seperti keadilan dan timbang rasa oleh pihak pengurusan, kepimpinan dan strategi pengurusan, dan kurangnya konsultasi, kebebasan dan autoriti. Implikasi kajian untuk pihak pengurusan universiti sendiri turut dibincangkan dalam setiap temuduga.

Kata kunci: kepuasan bekerja, penyeliaan, kepimpinan, pengajian tinggi, ahli akademik.

INTRODUCTION

This study examined the current state of satisfaction of academics with supervision role of leaders in Malaysian higher education institutions. The research took the form of semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with seventeen interviewees comprised of

⁸ Senior Lecturer in Da'wah and Islamic Management Program, Faculty of Leadership and Management, Islamic Science University of Malaysia, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan

⁹ The late Dr. Adanan Mat Junoh was the Academic Director in Institut Professional Baitulmal, Kuala Lumpur until his death in 2013.

¹⁰ Lecturer in Da'wah and Islamic Management Program, Faculty of Leadership and Management, Islamic Science University of Malaysia, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan

¹¹ Senior Lecturer in Da'wah and Islamic Management Program, Faculty of Leadership and Management, Islamic Science University of Malaysia, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan

sixteen academics from three public universities and a former Minister of Higher Education Ministry of Malaysia. The results indicated that there were mixed responses given by all the interview respondents in regards to their satisfaction with supervision. Some issues that instigated dissatisfaction such as fairness and consideration practised by management people, management strategy and leadership, and lack of consultation, freedom and authority were discussed. The implications of the findings for management- particularly those in public higher education institutions- are discussed. The findings of this study will help in terms of understanding the state of academics satisfaction with supervisory role of their leaders in the higher educational institutions. It was hoped that the findings of this study extended the work of Spector (1999) in the realm of satisfaction with supervision, especially among academics in Malaysian higher education sector.

LITERATURE ON ACADEMICS JOB SATISFACTION

According to Spector (1997), research findings suggest that job satisfaction is not a static state but is subject to influence and modification from forces within and outside an individual; that is his or her own personal characteristics and the immediate working environment. Spector (1997:2) defines job satisfaction as 'the extent to which people like (satisfaction) or dislike (dissatisfaction) their jobs'. Furthermore, Okpara (2006) argues about the significance of understanding the job satisfaction of employees as: '...work is an important aspect of people's lives and most people spend a large part of their working lives at work, an understanding of the factors involved in job satisfaction is crucial to improving employees' performance and productivity' (p226).

Academics in higher education of Malaysia are anticipated to uphold the nation's aspiration of achieving a world class education level and produce multi-skilled and competent individuals. On top of that, academics are an important player in nurturing the government's aims for the harmonisation and oneness of its people that will then carry the aspiration of the nation towards being a fully developed country by the year 2020. Their contribution in disseminating knowledge and cultivating the value of research and innovation has always been scrutinised by the government, the industry, university management and the society.

Global and national continuous development in education produces significant challenges for higher education and academics. Issues such as globalisation, internationalisation of education, societal and industrial demands, and government intervention policies are some of the variables that affect higher education and academics (Arshad, 2007; Mohamad, 2002). According to Khairunneezam (2011), the impacts of these key issues and drivers on academics need to be vigilantly managed by the government and the management of universities, as academics may view them as burdens rather than as challenges. In particular, higher education academics attitude of job satisfaction is important to the higher educational sector in Malaysia generally, and to the universities primarily. As reported in past research, it was consistently found that 'job satisfaction has significant impact on academics' excellent performance, high commitment, and low turnover' (Noordin & Jusoff, 2009: 125). On top of that, even though academics' job satisfaction contributes only a very small fraction towards achieving universities' and the higher educational sector's strategic goals, it may have a significant

impact on assisting the development and sustainability of the sector. Simply said, happy academics will in turn be highly performed and highly committed workers, and the universities and the higher education sector will benefit in terms of having quality academics.

Spector (1997:3) argues that there are nine focal organisational determinants of one's job satisfaction which include supervision role. Supervision role of leaders in the university has a significant impact on academics' job satisfaction. *Supervision is found to be correlated positively with job satisfaction (Brown, 1993; Spector, 1997; Ch'ng, Chong & Nakesvari, 2010). Wazkiewicz (1999) asserts that supervisory relations was among the factors found to be highly related to job satisfaction. Donnelly (2006) in his study found that satisfaction with supervision is high among academic advisers in higher education in the USA. Furthermore, Oshagbemi (1997) revealed that 70 per cent of the respondents among university academics in UK were satisfied with their supervisors.*

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted qualitatively via interview method. The research took the form of semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with seventeen interviewees comprised of sixteen academics from three public universities and a former Minister of Higher Education Ministry of Malaysia. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees are shown in Appendix 1. Purposeful self-sampling and snowball sampling techniques were implemented. It was necessary in order to find participants who are knowledgeable, are able to provide balanced perspectives, and will contribute to the theoretical framework of the study (DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Formal invitations were sent to several key-person and academic staff in several Malaysian universities to take part in the study.

Two types of interviews were conducted for this study- key-person interviews and focus-group interviews. Key-person interviews consisted of semi-structured interviews with eight key players of higher education who are also academics except one participant who is a former Minister of Higher Education. Before he was involved in politics and appointed as a minister, he was an academic with 17 years of lecturing experience. His participation in this qualitative study is essential since he had once been the forefront of the Malaysian higher educational sector. Besides the minister the other key people being interviewed were a Deputy Vice Chancellor, a Director of a university's branch, a Deputy Director of Academic Affairs of a university's branch, a Dean, a Director of Public Relation Department of a public university cum senior lecturer, and a Coordinator of Academic Program of a public university's branch. The key person sample was considered essential in respect of their knowledge of university and government policies, together with their overall role and knowledge in coordinating academic programs and academic staff's affairs. Focus-group interviews consisted of two semi-structured interviews with nine academics from two public universities. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted informally to ensure that information given by the interviewees is in a personal capacity and does not represent views of their organisation. Different sets of questions were delivered to both key person and focus group. Key persons were asked to give responses about their own job satisfaction and their opinions about their academic staff's satisfaction with each of the key factors, while focus group were only asked to

answer each question that related to themselves. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix 3.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A question had been asked in each of interview sessions held with the entire interview respondents, about their general feelings of satisfaction with supervision. Table in Appendix 2 depicts this data. According to the findings in Appendix 2, six interview respondents (KP1, KP2, KP3, KP5, KP6 and FG2-1) mentioned that they are satisfied with the supervision aspect. Interestingly, five focus group respondents (FG1-3, FG1-4, FG1-6, FG2-2, and FG2-3) said that they were dissatisfied with supervision. Only three had stated that they were neither dissatisfied nor satisfied (KP7, FG1-1, and FG1-5), while the rest had conveyed an unclear or no response at all towards the question. The interviews findings show that satisfaction toward supervision came mostly from the academics in management position, while dissatisfaction came from the operational level academics. These findings also show that academics were apt to assess supervision as an important factor that contributed to their overall job satisfaction. Therefore, the qualitative study's finding supports Oshagbemi's (1997), Wazkiewicz (1999), and Donnelly (2006) outcomes that supervision is a pertinent factor that influence academics job satisfaction.

Satisfied Respondents

Management people's satisfactions were best represented by a University Branch's Provost (KP6) elaboration on why he was satisfied with the aspect of supervision:

I am very honoured and pleased to be given the opportunity to be at this position by the university's authorities. I work very close with them to ensure that they are aware with everything I do and I am able to deliver the best service to everybody. They (his superiors) provided great guidance and assistance for me.

There was only one respondent from the focus group interviews, which responded as being satisfied towards supervision. The tutor (FG2-1) asserted that:

As a young and inexperienced academic, I had been guided precisely by the dean and faculty's head department on how to do my work. They were very assertive not only towards my needs, but also towards other academic staff members.

Dissatisfied Respondents

Five focus group respondents (FG1-3, FG1-4, FG1-6, FG2-2, and FG2-3) stated that they were dissatisfied with the supervision factor. Some issues that instigated dissatisfaction among respondents were fairness and consideration practised by management people, management strategy and leadership, and lack of consultation, freedom and authority. These dissatisfactions were specifically elaborated in the next section.

Specific Issues of Satisfaction with Supervision

Fairness and Consideration

Based on interview respondents' feedback on the supervision factor, the issue of fairness and consideration practised by supervisor and management people was deemed as a source of dissatisfaction. Three respondents (FG1-4, FG1-6 and FG2-3) spoke of their dissatisfaction in this issue. Comments made by two tutors in Focus Groups (FG1-6 and FG2-3) best represent this issue:

I want them (management people in his faculty) to delegate any works to everybody fairly. The current practice is, they (dean and head of department) simply direct male academics to do everything rather than involving females too... or simply delegate academic tasks among juniors and tutors.... they allow senior lecturers too enjoy a lot of time for leisure. It is not fair... I am not happy.

For the university and faculty management people... they should understand the academic colleagues' situation... don't easily give instructions and force us to do this and that without knowing our problems, our hesitations. Mingle around with us, give good support, and guide us properly. Overall, the way my superiors supervise me lead to my dissatisfaction.

It is interesting to note from the qualitative study, that only those who work in the operational level initiated this issue and they seemed to be dissatisfied. No similar arguments were spoken of by those academics in management level.

Management Strategy and Leadership

A former Minister of Higher Education (KP4) believed that academics' satisfaction is derived from a proper management and leadership style in the university. This was clearly expressed by him:

In a university setting, leadership and supervision are really important in order to enhance academic staff's satisfaction. For instance, a leader who gives optimum recognition and trust to his or her academic staff in doing their job will increase their job satisfaction and at the same time construct a good relationship between both parties.

The former Minister's view is shared by the dean of a faculty (KP1). She argued that:

A leader's behaviour has a great impact towards academics' job satisfaction. As a leader, we need to be transparent, share all information we have with our staff except on confidential things, and pull out any barriers between us and our staff. Be in their shoes to understand their needs and what they could contribute to us... When we are very open to them, they will be comfortable enough to talk and share their views, their problems with us.

In accordance to the views and suggestions of KP1 and KP4, showing good leadership values will get him the full respect and support of the staff. However, a bad leader will lead to dissatisfaction. Pertaining to this situation, a lecturer (FG1-2) asserted that she is dissatisfied with the management strategy and leadership when she stated:

The most dominant factor contribute to dissatisfaction is management people and their strategies. If the management people cannot administer and lead us efficiently, it will contribute to our dissatisfaction.

Her view was supported by the other lecturers (FG1-1 and FG1-3) in the same focus group interview. For instance FG1-3 argued:

I am dissatisfied with the lack of convenient spaces given by the management for academics to be involved in any decision making...this is not a good style of leadership.

A lecturer in other focus group interview (FG2-2) also expressed his dissatisfaction with improper management leadership. He added that:

Some people up there, when they manage others, they easily direct people to work and create a top to bottom communication. So, when a problem occurred, this person will not know any problems happening to his subordinates...and he will easily blame them.

However, a young tutor (FG2-1) conveyed his satisfaction with his management when he said:

To this extent, I am satisfied with my upper management people. This is because my responsibilities assigned by the university encompass only teaching and student activities. The university management never forced me to do any additional works without my consent. I am really comfortable.

Consultation and Freedom

This issue had been spoken of with different emotions evident between key person interview respondents and focus group respondents. Academics in the university management group asserted that they were satisfied with the freedom and authority they have. For instance, a university branch's Director (KP6) said that he is satisfied with the trust and freedom given by the university authorities to him to manage his university campus branch. This is clearly expressed by him:

As far as I am concerned, as a campus director I got a full authority to justify our campus' vision and mission, programs objectives and other aspects...I need to manage my lecturers, administrative staff, supportive staff, students and other associated people. I am really satisfied because I have freedom to manage the campus in my own way, using my own creativity.

A dean of a faculty (KP1) believed that freedom and authority are not only needed by the management people but also desired by all academic staff:

Freedom given by the university is other factor that contributes to academics' job satisfaction. For instance, lecturers desired the freedom of selecting places to lecture and the use of complete aids and tools to teach.

The dean's view that academics need freedom and authority to do their work is supported by a tutor (FG2-3). She clarified that:

As the academic staff we want to have freedom in doing our job... (for example) freedom for doing our research, enough time and space to do library research, flexible working hour, and the way we handle our lectures and tutorials.

Nevertheless, the dean (KP1) further argued that freedom for academic staff has a limit since the university must implement its rules and regulations to sustain a productive teaching and learning process. She condemned some lecturers who misused the freedom given by the university:

However, not all lecturers can discipline themselves...they can't control themselves. They misused the freedom (given by the university). Coming to work late, cancelling classes without appropriate reasons...an organisation has its own rules and regulations, and because of this some lecturers felt unhappy. They felt they don't have enough freedom. For example the university exercised the system of punch in-punch out in staff attendance, and academics thought that the university totally scrutinising them. They are wrong.

On the contrary, lecturers and tutors who do not hold management positions in the university were dissatisfied on this issue (FG1-3, FG1-4, FG1-6, FG2-2, and FG2-3). They believed that academic staff members have no say on any issues and management does not involve them in any of the university's decision making process. For instance, this view is clearly spoken out by a tutor (FG2-3):

Sometimes we don't know our rights. When a decision has made we didn't know whether we could ignore or need to follow that particular decision. Everything is ambiguous. We have no authority to say anything. Then, what we like to do and we want to do is not supported by the management, but we are urged to follow what others like to.

A comment from the other focus group interview respondent (FG1-3) supports FG2-3's view: *...especially for young lecturers or tutors where their ideas and opinions always being rejected or in some condition they will be blamed because of their so called poor opinion.*

Likewise, another tutor (FG1-6) emotionally elaborated on this issue:

... Well, they (management people) always asked us to do things that we do not really like to do. It is not that we do not want to do those work... but to force people to come to the office in the weekend...huh! It is not right! They need to discuss with us first...get our responses. We are human, not robots. They can direct robots to do this and that, but not us.

A lecturer (FG2-2) in the other focus group interview also mentioned his dissatisfaction with lack of authority and freedom when he elaborated:

I really hope that university will not control us or treat us like kids. Do not restrict us with any obstacles that are not supposed to be there... All in all, I think that insufficient authority and freedom are among the major contributors towards my job dissatisfaction.

Hence, in these universities the lack of freedom seems to be leading to many instances of job dissatisfaction among academics in the operational level.

From the findings of the interviews with key persons and also with academics in focus groups, it was clear that supervision role was generally perceived as an influential factor with significant implications on academics' job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Apart from the general satisfactions and dissatisfaction findings, the study also showed that there were three different issues being spoken of by respondents which were perceived as important measures on academics' satisfaction with supervision. These issues were fairness and consideration, management strategy and leadership, and consultation, freedom and authority.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has provided findings related to the satisfaction of academics in Malaysian public higher education institutions with the supervisory role of their university leaders. In light of the findings in the study, according to Deery (2008) it is worth considering that at the organisational level, there are a number of actions that can be adopted by the university management to increase and maintain the satisfaction of academics with supervision. The following implications for the university and policy makers have been identified.

University managers, as far as is reasonably possible, need to give academics sufficient control over the way in which they perform their duties (Villanueva & Djurkovic, 2009), which may require that particular attention be paid to job design approaches, such as skill utilization (Khairunneezam, 2004). Furthermore, university managers should attempt to ensure that their employees do not feel isolated or undervalued, and that they have the opportunity to attain an appropriate success in their career (Villanueva & Djurkovic, 2009), as compared to any other academics in the same university or from other universities.

From a managerial perspective, encouraging a high level of job satisfaction is an essential part of retaining academic staff (Khairunneezam, 2004; Oshagbemi, 1997). As a means to alleviate turnover intentions, university managers may improve aspects of the academics' jobs. The extent to which employees feel that their job is pleasant and enjoyable is important, and for this, management must attempt to create a working environment that is conducive to job satisfaction (Villanueva & Djurkovic, 2009). For instance, Noordin and Jusof (2009) argue that it can be very difficult for university management to communicate with the majority of their academic staff. Conversations regarding an academic staff's work environment can fall to the wayside, and in some instances, never take place (Noordin & Jusof, 2009). Hence, organisational climate surveys that occur on a scheduled basis (e.g., annually, biannually, etc.) can be a more efficient way for the management to gather important information (Khairunneezam, 2004; Noordin & Jusof, 2009).

Another example is, as a reference to the concept of satisfaction in Herzberg's Hygiene-Motivator theory, university management may consider critical changes as a means of an elucidation such as job enrichment. Job enrichment provides more challenges with a greater sense of achievement and it ensures that interesting jobs are created (Villanueva & Djurkovic,

2009). In the common perspectives of university academics, this study found that good relationships with co-workers and superiors are also essential to academics. Hence, as Villanueva and Djurkovic (2009) argue university managers should look to facilitate the development of a harmonious and supportive culture at the university. In particular this can be done by focusing on improving the operating conditions of academics. Evidenced by the findings in the current study, the university should at their best set up a good quality and sufficient quantity of facilities such as lecture halls, teaching aids, internet connection, photocopy machines, and so on. Furthermore, comfortable working conditions, and optimum work responsibilities also should be carefully administered by the university in order to sustain satisfaction among academics.

Further similar works need to be initiated in the broader area of Malaysian higher educational sector with focusing on private universities. It is anticipated that through the outcome of the current study, future research will explore the association of satisfaction with supervision with the consequences attitudinal variables such as work stress, organizational citizenship behaviors, perceived organizational support, and intent to leave the organization.

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Appendix 1: Demographic Characteristics of The Interviewees

| Interview | Respondent Code | Gender | Age | Academic Level | University | Lecturing Experience (years) | Position In University/ Government |
|---------------|-----------------|--------|-----|----------------|------------|------------------------------|---|
| Key Person | KP1 | Female | 57 | PHD | A | 27 | Dean Of A Faculty cum Professor |
| Key Person | KP2 | Male | 52 | PHD | A | 25 | Deputy Vice Chancellor cum Professor |
| Key Person | KP3 | Female | 46 | PHD | A | 10 | Department Director cum Senior Lecturer |
| Key Person | KP4 | Male | 58 | PHD | - | 17 | Former Minister Of Higher Education |
| Key Person | KP5 | Male | 28 | Bachelor | C | 2 | Lecturer cum Head of Department |
| Key Person | KP6 | Male | 49 | PHD | B | 23 | University Branch's Provost cum Assoc. Professor |
| Key Person | KP7 | Male | 52 | Master | B | 20 | University Branch's Deputy Provost cum Assoc. Professor |
| Key Person | KP8 | Female | 47 | Master | B | 21 | Program Coordinator cum Assoc. Professor |
| Focus Group 1 | FG1-1 | Male | 34 | Master | A | 3 | Lecturer |
| Focus Group 1 | FG1-2 | Female | 32 | Master | A | 5 | Lecturer |
| Focus Group 1 | FG1-3 | Male | 33 | Master | A | 3 | Lecturer |
| Focus Group 1 | FG1-4 | Male | 28 | Bachelor | A | 1 | Tutor |
| Focus Group 1 | FG1-5 | Female | 34 | Master | A | 6 | Lecturer |
| Focus Group 1 | FG1-6 | Male | 27 | Bachelor | A | 3 | Tutor |
| Focus Group 2 | FG2-1 | Male | 26 | Master | C | 1 | Tutor |
| Focus Group 2 | FG2-2 | Male | 29 | Bachelor | C | 3 | Lecturer |
| Focus Group 2 | FG2-3 | Female | 32 | Master | C | 1 | Tutor |

Appendix 2: Interview Respondents' General Satisfaction with Supervision

| Interview Respondents | | Responses |
|-----------------------|-------|------------------------------------|
| Key Person | KP1 | Satisfied |
| | KP2 | Satisfied |
| | KP3 | Satisfied |
| | KP4 | - |
| | KP5 | Satisfied |
| | KP6 | Satisfied |
| | KP7 | Neither Dissatisfied nor Satisfied |
| | KP8 | Unclear/no response |
| Focus Group 1 | FG1-1 | Neither Dissatisfied nor Satisfied |
| | FG1-2 | Unclear/no response |
| | FG1-3 | Dissatisfied |
| | FG1-4 | Dissatisfied |
| | FG1-5 | Neither Dissatisfied nor Satisfied |
| | FG1-6 | Dissatisfied |
| Focus Group 2 | FG2-1 | Satisfied |
| | FG2-2 | Dissatisfied |
| | FG2-3 | Dissatisfied |

Appendix 3 : Interview Questions

Based on the current situation in Malaysia there have been many economic and political developments in the university sector over the past few years, such as increasing government financial support to cultivate research and development (R&D) activities in universities, development of more active collaborations between the government, industry and universities, the added numbers of students quota in each university, and government and private sector's efforts on building the world class higher education.

All these development is assumed to have significant and substantial impacts toward universities and its academic staffs.

In regards to the mentioned development in higher educational sector, do you think that your immediate supervisor or leader is generally a substantial factor on your job satisfaction as an academic?

If Yes, why and if No, why?