

EXPLORING ACADEMICS' UNDERSTANDING ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE TO UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: Transformation of university college to full-university status is one of many efforts by Ministry of Education to transform the quality of tertiary education in Malaysia. In transforming this type of higher education institution, it is imperative to not overlook at the significance of academics' understanding towards the transformation process in order to obtain their commitment and elevate their motivation in implementing the strategies to achieve the transformational goal. Therefore, this study explores the academics' understanding pertaining to the transformation of university college to university and the recommendations on enhancing understanding. A qualitative approach was utilized to gauge on the academics' understanding whereby twelve academics were interviewed for data collection. Nine elements of the academics' understanding were identified. Then, recommendations on improving academics' understanding were proposed.

Keywords: Transformation of Higher Education, Higher Education Institutions, Understanding, University College, University

Introduction

Transformation of higher education providers (HEPs) is a world-wide phenomenon. Nevertheless, issues arise from the process differ according to contextual realities of a particular country (Shariffuddin, Razali, Ghani, Shaaidi & Ibrahim, 2016). In Malaysia, one of Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE)'s many efforts to transform HEPs towards achieving the national aim of providing quality tertiary education is by transforming university college to university (Ministry of Education, 2015). The process requires understanding and full commitment from the stakeholders in particular the academics to carry out the strategies required in materializing the action plan to transform UC to university (Shariffuddin, Razali & Hashim, 2017). The academics are the backbone for the transformation process as their

principal academic activities are the core business of HEPs (Enders, 2006). Accomplishing their annual key performance indicators of their academic activities including teaching, supervision, research, publication and consultancy contribute to achieving the institutional goal in transforming UC to universities (Shariffuddin, Razali, Ibrahim & Mutalib, 2017). Full- university status is significant because it specifies the type of operation tertiary education providers operate and determines suitable changes that can be implemented to achieve the aim (Shariffuddin & Razali, 2017). Hence, the objectives of this study is to explore academics' understanding pertaining to the transformation of UC to university and to recommend suitable approaches to enhance their understanding with regard the transformation process.

Literature Review

In higher education the term transformation is often associated with “change in higher education which reflects the policies, actions and strategies promulgated by the government” (Fisher, 2006; Mitter, 2003). The change normally involves organizational alteration of the higher learning institutions due to internal (e.g. academic development) and external (e.g. government policy) influences. Meanwhile, university college is a type of Malaysian private higher academic provider established under Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996 [Act 555] or Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 [Act 30] including foreign branch campus or professional body (local or international). The establishment, programs and qualifications of university college are accredited and monitored by Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) under Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007 to ensure the standards and criteria are fulfilled according to international practice and quality. University college usually is “a small higher education provider with 100% of home grown courses from foundation to postgraduate programs, which focuses more on degree-awarding programs with around 10,000 (or less) student enrolments; apart from has fulfilled other requirements set by MOHE,” (Choon, 2011; Ministry of Higher Education, 2011; Tham & Kam, 2008).

On the other hand, university can be described as “a higher education provider, involving public higher academic institutions, which roles and functions are distributing knowledge via teaching, producing and expanding knowledge via research, promoting and distributing knowledge via teaching and service, building the nation and competing to be listed in world university rankings as mapped in Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025; as well as the private higher academic institutions, which roles and functions are providing access to higher education to the mass and accomplishing its economic prospective” (Chang, Sirat & Razak., 2015). Public universities are established, maintained and governed by Malaysian government under the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) under the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 [Act 30] and National Council on Higher Education Act (1996, p.6). Meanwhile, private HEIs are established and regulated under Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996 [Act 555]. Even though, generally, the establishment, programs and qualifications most of the universities are accredited and monitored by MQA, sixteen universities are self-accredited including Universiti Malaya, Universiti Tenaga National and International Medical University to name a few (MQA, 2017).

In the transformation process, academics' understanding plays an important part in delivering the intended outcome. Their understanding is required as it facilitates the process and determines their contribution and commitment in implementing the content of the transformation such as strategy, system, work practice etcetera (Anderson & Anderson,

2001a, p.26; Kezar, 2001, p.74). They need to embrace the idea of transformation before they can believe that they are responsible for generating tangible transformation (Anderson & Anderson, 2001a, p.27). Shared understanding among academics for the transformation purpose needs to be developed so that they can carry out the transformational strategies planned to achieve any meaningful results (Alase, 2017; Chin & Benne, 1989; Krysinski & Reed, 1994). Hence, constant, accurate and direct communication between the management and academics needs to be regularly conducted to exchange information and discuss about long and short term institutional goals for accomplishing the transformation objectives.

Methodology

The researchers employed qualitative method with interview as the instrument to collect data for the study. A UC in the East Coast of Malaysia which was undergoing a transformation to become a full status university was selected as the research site. The UC offers various programs from foundation to postgraduate level with 168 faculty members of which 89 are permanent and 79 are contract staff, teaching over four different faculties. In addition, the UC has various supporting departments with over 100 supporting staff.

Meanwhile, subjects of the study comprise of academicians from three different categories. Those include managing academicians (including managers, deans, heads, coordinators etc.) who held management positions in the UC; and teaching academicians who were on permanent or contract basis employment at the time of the study. Four academicians from each group were selected from four different faculties at the UC. The researchers believed the aforementioned criteria represent academicians' perspectives on the phenomenon occurred at the UC. In total, twelve academicians were selected as participants in the study. The number is sufficient as recommended by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) who discovered that data saturation occurred at twelve interviews in studying the subjects' common perspectives and experiences on a certain phenomenon. In fact, Latham (2013) also discovered similar findings in his research Creswell (2014) then suggested that when data reaches its saturated point, researcher/s should discontinue collecting and analysing more data as no new themes can emerge from data collected.

The participants were the subject's experts as they possessed the knowledge and experience of working with the UC that was undergoing the transformation to become a full status university. To ensure quality of the data gathered and the research as a whole, this study concentrated on discovering the meaning of experience from the perspective of academicians, not as presumed by the researcher nor as found in previous researches as suggested by (Creswell, 2014, p.186). The participants were interviewed at the comfort of their offices and a library discussion room. Interview protocol and semi-structured interview questions were used as guidelines to gain data for the study.

Semi-structured interview questions were employed to gauge on the participants' understanding about the transformation process. The questions were grouped into two sections: demographic details (six items) and understanding about the transformation of university college to university (four items). Sample of the questions can be observed in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Item	Demographic Details
1	Gender
2	Highest Qualification
3	Working Duration with the UC
4	Employment Status
5	Current Position
6	Previous Position
	Understanding
7	What do you think about your institution being upgraded to a university?
8	What are the functions of a university that you understand?
9	Is there any difference of your institution being a university college and a university? In what terms?
10	What does your institution mean to you as an academician once it is upgraded to university?

The interviews were conducted in English language. However, Bahasa Malaysia was occasionally used in their responses whenever the participants preferred. The sessions lasted between 20 to 45 minutes. Then, the interviews were recorded and transcribed to prepare for data analysis. Atlas.ti V.8 was utilized to alleviate the process. Data obtained were re-examined, segmented, labeled and coded according to themes emerged. Reports were produced based on these themes which later reviewed to provide evidence and attain the objectives of the study.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Details of the Participants

Minimum background information was attained for the purpose of convincing the participants that their identity would not be revealed in any part of the study so that they remain anonymous. Based on participants' responses to demographic questions, this section reveals background details of the participants. Six of the participants were male and another six were female. Their highest qualification can be categorized as in the following: two were PhD holders, eight were Master holders and two were degree holders. Majority of the participants had been working with the UC between 16-20 years (five participants), followed by those between 6-10 years and 1-5 years (three participants each). Only one participant had worked between 11-15 years with the UC. Whilst, seven of them were on permanent employment status; five served as contract staff renewed annually.

Apart from that, four participants held managerial positions; hence, labeled as MD1, MD2, MD3 and MD4. Another four participants with permanent employment status were labeled as P1, P2, P3 and P4. Four more who were with contract employment status were labeled as C1, C2, C3 and C4. Out of twelve participants, eight were lecturers, two were senior lecturer, one was a tutor and one was an instructor. Self-selecting the participants according to these criteria enable the researchers to acquire specific knowledge possessed (Burgess, 1985) in obtaining reliable and valid data pertaining to the transformation of university college to university. The participants' demographic details are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Demographic Details

Demographic	frequency
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	6
Male	6
<i>Type of qualification</i>	
PhD	2
Master	8
Degree	2
<i>Years of service with the UC</i>	
1-5 years	3
6-10 years	3
11-15 years	1
16-20 years	5
<i>Employment Status</i>	
Contract	5
Permanent	7
<i>Current Position</i>	
Instructor	1
Tutor	1
Lecturer	8
Senior Lecturer	2
<i>Current Managerial Position</i>	
HOP/HOD	2
Dean	1
Manager	1

Understanding about the Transformation of University College to University

Overall, the participants understood about the transformation process of university college to be university based on ten elements. These elements were derived from the themes emerged in participants' responses to interviews conducted in the study. The first element identified was the academicians' acceptance towards the transformation process by acknowledging that it was a good transformation for the UC and staff in particular. Followed by the second element which was their comprehension pertaining to the type of university that the UC attempted to become. Even though a number of participants mentioned about the UC's objective to become a technical or comprehensive university, the majority did not make any comments with regard the matter which suggests that a large number of academicians may not be aware of the UC's main objective for the transformation. Their lack of information on the UC's master plan to achieve the objective may need to be addressed and reinforced. These acts are significant so that the academicians understand the importance of their contribution to the transformation efforts.

The third element involves their understanding about the reasons for the transformation to be carried out. The participants highlighted eight reasons for the transformation including to be at par with other higher education institutions (HEPs), to attract students including foreign students, to compete with other HEPs, to secure more funding, to market university status for

the HEI's benefit, to attain better future career advancement, to perform relevant academic activities and to enhance academicians' motivation as well as their performance. These reasons may be the drive which the participants' need to participate in performing the tasks relating to the transformation process. Then, the fourth element revealed was the perception about the UC as the second class higher education provider. Although, the UC and university have slight differences, the UC is sometimes considered less influential than a university. This should be a motivating factor for the academicians to participate and continuously engage in executing the transformation strategies. In fact, they should be more motivated to be university academicians for its influence and recognition. Furthermore, it should be something to look forward to by the academicians in becoming university staff particularly for its reputation on their professional well-beings.

The fifth element was about fulfilling requirements in order to be conferred with university status as established by MOHE. The participants understood that the UC should satisfy the requirements before can be upgraded to a university status. Six categories of the requirements were highlighted by the participants including sufficient facilities, quality of teaching and academic activities, faculty's professional development and career advancement, finance, student enrolment and clear vision, mission and rational to become university. Apart from that, the sixth element concentrates on the UC's lacking in certain requirements such as faculty, student enrolment, facility, curriculum, vision and mission as well as rational for the UC to be transformed to university. The participants also realized about the functions of a university and the differences between a university college and a university as established by MOHE. The transformation was meaningful to participants because it offered better benefits, career development and better individual KPI to be achieved.

Meanwhile, the seventh and eight elements were linked to the transformation process in regards to the perception on functions of university. The participants perceived those functions in accordance to its traditional role as university and its responsibility to fulfill MOHE requirement. Some of the participants associated the functions with its traditional roles including enhancing knowledge and skills, fulfilling the needs of industry and community, providing services to the community, and improving the institution's reputation with university status awarded as well as being funded by the government. On the other hand, some other participants associated university's functions with requirements established by MOHE. Those included fulfilling compulsory requirements in finance, curriculum, faculty, research and development as well as students. Secondary requirements such as vision, mission and rational and quality of the faculty were also pointed out.

The participants also were able to differentiate the criteria between UC and university. This ninth element also contributed to participants' comprehension about the transformation process. They understood that university presented more prestigious status, academic environment and security to the public, academicians and students alike compared to university college. These differences were resulted from the criteria of requirements that must be attained by the UC in order to be conferred with university status. Certain levels of accomplishment and provision in the following criteria are compulsory such as finance, curriculum, quality, faculty, governance, research and development, infrastructure and students to ensure the university is able to provide quality higher education to the mass.

The final element that influenced the participants' understanding about the transformation process was the meaning of being university staff to the participants in terms of benefits, career development and individual KPI. The transformation offered benefits to academicians in terms

of salary increment and job security. Meanwhile, working with a university opened up opportunities for developing their career as renowned academicians as well as provided them paths for promotion, professorship and positions. They had personal aims for promotion and professorship and strived to self-improve in terms of qualification to meet requirements as university academicians. Additionally, they anticipated with the university status, academicians were able to achieve better performance in teaching, research, publication, consultation and supervision particularly in supervising postgraduate students. They were also aware that teaching and research workload would increase as a result of the growing number of students and programs. Therefore, they had higher chance of fulfilling their individual KPI.

Despite the participants' understanding about the transformation process, one participant highlighted the academicians were complacent with their performance and achievement which affected the transformation efforts. C4 commented *"Feel comfortable, comfort zone. Hmm... we are not driven. Just we feel... oo... we here teaching only. Teach to give student A (is enough)."* Another participant believed some other academicians had negative mindset towards the changes implemented in moving forward to become a university. MD3 commented *"Staff with negative thinking. Too negative. Any changes made by the management were considered not good etc."* Additionally, MD3 further suggested certain measures should be taken in communicating the objectives and strategies towards implementing changes in the transformation process as he uttered *"... so how can we aa... to explain to this people. aa... to me that's important. Important because he. thought. changes made were negative. all negative."* Thus, academicians' understanding about the transformation of UC to university is essential so that they are mentally and which requires members of an organization including the academicians to participate, support, commit and mobilize the transformation process. However, their understanding needs to be properly developed by the organization particularly by the management so that the academicians have the intended mindset, behavior and ability to perform the necessary practices towards achieving the objective of the transformation. Table 3 tabulates the themes emerged from the participants' responses attained from the interview.

Table 3: Themes Emerged from Participants' Understanding the Transformation of University College to University

Emerging Theme	Participant											
	MD1	MD2	MD3	MD4	P1	P2	P3	P4	C1	C2	C3	C4
Good transformation	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Type of university	●		●			●	●					
Reasons for the transformation	●			●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
UC as second class higher education provider	●											
Fulfil MOHE requirement		●	●	●			●				●	
Lack of requirement						●			●			
University's traditional role		●	●	●		●	●		●	●		●
MOHE requirements associated with university's function	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Differences between UC and U		●	●		●	●		●	●	●	●	●
Benefits, career development & KPI	●		●	●		●		●	●	●	●	●

Recommendations on Improving Academicians' Understanding about the Transformation Process

Developing academicians' understanding towards supporting and committing in the transformation process is the responsibilities of the UC's management. It requires effective communication and constant efforts from the management in order to build the right mindset among the academicians so that they stay committed in the endeavors to attain the transformation goals. Anderson and Anderson (2001) suggested several approaches in Phase II of their model of change process to develop understanding, commitment, momentum and capability throughout the organization towards supporting and participating in the transformation process. Similarly, those approaches can be adopted in developing academicians' understanding and commitment for the transformation of UC to university which requires the management to:

- Acquire involvement from all academicians throughout the UC by building a case for change and elaborating on the vision for the future;
- Utilize effective communication approaches that deepen understanding and generate excitement for the change;
- Strategically arrange activities, experiences and/or trainings which will influence academicians' mindsets on moving away from old to new practices;
- Obtain academicians' feedbacks on crucial change issues which evidently will impact management's views; and
- Assign responsibility of high-leverage actions to key players among the academicians throughout all levels (p.129-130).

Adopting private sector's management business concept such as Anderson and Anderson's (2001) change process model in the operation of higher education institution is constantly done nowadays. This assimilation is known as New Public Management (NPM) whereby business concepts, techniques and values are assimilated in HEPs management as efficiency and cost-effectiveness become the main focus (Amaral, Tavares & Santos, 2012). NPM was found effective at managing HEPs without neglecting the issues relating to the business core of HEPs which are teaching, research and recently commercialization (Bikse, Lusena-ezera, Rivza & Volkova, 2016; Muller, 1999).

Conclusion

Deepening academicians' understanding for the goals and strategies in the transformation of UC to university is crucial at the initial stage of the process. In fact, it needs to be constantly strengthened throughout the process. This is to ensure high commitment among the academicians which is eventually depicted in their performance of the transformation strategies. Thus, the management needs to implement necessary measures to develop appropriate understanding among academicians pertaining to the transformation of UC to university.

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