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CHALLENGES IN NAVIGATING THE ACADEMIC WORLD: A PERSPECTIVE FROM EARLY-CAREER ACADEMICS

Ummu Athilia Kamal¹, Razlina Razali^{2*}, Muhammad Aiman Arifin³

¹ Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis Branch, Malaysia
Email: 2022214502@student.uitm.edu.my

² Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis Branch, Malaysia
Email: razlinarazali@uitm.edu.my

³ Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis Branch, Malaysia
Email: aimanarifin@uitm.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Higher education (HE) is a dynamic sector that is constantly experiencing changes due to the rapidly changing world. Today, academics are not just expected to deliver lectures, but they also need to contribute to other aspects of academia such as publishing scholarly works, securing grants, innovation and holding administrative positions. The multiple demands and responsibilities that an academic need to meet in their career can be overwhelming especially for those early-career academics (ECAs). Understanding the challenges they face in the early years of career is important to facilitate universities in devising effective strategies to develop this group of employees. Following a qualitative, case study method, we explored the challenges facing ECAs serving in two comprehensive public universities in Malaysia. Data were collected using individual, semi-structured interviews on six ECAs. Findings revealed that ECAs faced challenges in terms of support they received, workload, and networking opportunities. Looking at the future, universities need to think of ways to manage and support ECAs which can help with their successful integration into the academic world. Our study contributes to the growing global research on ECAs and talent management initiatives in higher education.

Keywords:

Academics, Early-Career, Higher Education, Qualitative Case Study, Talent

Introduction

The ever-changing career environment brings both challenges and opportunities for employees. In the Malaysian higher education context, statistic from the last three years shows that a positive number of lecturers have enrolled in public universities. In year 2019, 22, 502 lecturers were recorded, followed by a significant increase to 22, 578 lecturers in 2020, and further rising to 22, 722 lecturers in 2021 (Statistik Pendidikan Tinggi, 2019; Statistik Pendidikan Tinggi, 2020; Statistik Pendidikan Tinggi, 2021), which indicates that many academic talents decide to venture into the academic profession. According to the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (2014), the key professional responsibilities for academics include teaching, administration, research, consultancy, publication, and postgraduate supervision.

Indeed, the dynamic nature of work surroundings requires employees to be able to handle uncertainties and changes which can significantly impact their career paths (Rao & Virick, 2023). This is no exception for academics, in particular early-career academics (ECAs). ECAs typically encompass individuals who have obtained a terminal degree within the past five years (Brasier et al., 2020). Like their other counterparts, ECAs need to play multiple roles in academia such as teachers, researchers and administrators. Moreover, due to their lack of experience in academia, ECAs also need to learn to assimilate into their respective disciplinary and departmental cultures (Lucas & Turner, 2017). Considering their status, these many responsibilities may pose challenges to ECAs in navigating the academic world (Badiozaman, 2020).

The existing literature outlines several strategies for addressing the challenges encountered by ECAs. These strategies include offering comprehensive onboarding professional development programs, providing organizational and administrative assistance, streamlining progress reporting systems, implementing peer mentoring initiatives, and delivering training on effective time management to achieve a healthy work-life balance (Benge et al., 2015; Benge & Beattie, 2021; Cummings et al., 2015; Herdiana & Sary, 2023). Moreover, delivering essential training in program planning, evaluation, and reporting, as well as conflict resolution, fostering partnerships and collaborations, cultivating community relationships, managing volunteers, and enhancing interpersonal communication skills, can be seen as beneficial approaches to mitigating the early-career challenges (Benge et al., 2020; Harder & Wingenbach, 2008) including ECAs. Despite these efforts, the literature has shown that academia is a demanding climate given the increased competition between higher learning institutions globally (Badiozaman, 2020).

The majority of research focusing on early-career academics has occurred among Western countries. For instance, Benge and Beattie (2021) explored several themes of such challenges including building relationships, getting acquainted with the job without proper mentoring, understanding their role and nature of the job, leadership and supervision, personal pressure, plans of work and reporting, and volunteer management. In another study, balancing work and life was identified as one of the most critical challenges (Jayaratne et al., 2021) because of the heavy workload (Herdiana & Sary, 2023) experienced by ECAs. This is due to ECAs typically working over 50 hours per week, with some reporting 80 hours as the norm (Acker & Webber, 2017; Bosanquet et al., 2017; Kinman & Court, 2010). Moreover, ECAs also mentioned about the demands of teaching and administrative tasks that frequently restrict the time available for research. As a result, ECAs feel that engaging in research activities properly and producing high-quality research becomes challenging (McKay & Monk, 2017).

To the authors' best knowledge, to date, studies that are focused on ECAs in Malaysia's higher education context are still limited. For instance, a study by Badiozaman (2020) found that the multiple roles assumed by ECAs resulted in them having to negotiate their main academic identity as academics. In a more recent study, ECAs mentioned that research collaboration activities have impacted their research knowledge and skills significantly (Mydin et al., 2021). Therefore, further empirical exploration on how academia is experienced by this ECAs is needed to ensure adequate support is provided by their respective institutions (Hollywood et al., 2020). Contextualising the present study within Malaysia's higher education sector is significant as "situated studies could deepen understandings about ECAs and how the sector can support them" (Stratford et al., 2023).

Given these gaps in knowledge, the main objective of this study is to understand the challenges faced by Malaysian ECAs in navigating the academic world. To achieve this aim, perspectives of ECAs serving in two public universities were explored through semi-structured interviews. Such findings are crucial to facilitate universities to devise strategies to manage and support ECAs talent (Mydin et al., 2021). The paper is structured as follows: the subsequent section discusses cognate literature on ECAs and their challenges in academia. Next, the research methodology is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the findings. The discussion, conclusion and future research directions are presented in the final part of the paper.

Literature Review

Early Career Academics

The term ECAs refers to a group of academics who are starting a new career in an academic environment, holding individual career aspirations while simultaneously managing performance against targets (Hollywood et al., 2020). ECAs is typically defined in terms of research capability in the five years following PhD completion, with career progression from post-doctoral appointment to tenure, promotion and beyond (Bosanquet et al., 2017b). This group thus includes those who are simultaneously attempting to build their professional research profile, gain recognition, establish networks, obtain funding, and earn salary within a narrow time frame (Van Benthem et al., 2020). They are generally inexperienced academics who require a lot of guidance, support, mentorship and motivation especially to maintain a balance between teaching, research and administrative responsibilities (Salihu Shinkafi, 2020). In Malaysia, regardless their level of employment, academics are required to fulfil several responsibilities which includes teaching, administration, research, consultancy, publication, and postgraduate supervision (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2014). A summary of these responsibilities is available in Table 1.

When considering years of experience, ECAs, as defined by Brasier et al. (2020), are individuals engaged in academia for a duration not exceeding five years. On the other hand, in terms of age, Nicholas et al. (2021) categorize ECAs as academics or researchers typically below the age of 35. This classification includes individuals who have completed their doctorate and are presently in a research role or are concurrently pursuing a doctorate. However, the classification of ECAs based on age can be debated due to the varied paths individuals may take in their academic careers (Teixeira da Silva, 2021). For instance, some academics might commence their careers later in life, possibly after changing professions, taking time off for travel, work, or experiencing periods of unemployment post-graduation. Life events such as marriage or the birth of a child can also influence the timing of an academic

career. Thus, the notion of automatically associating ECAs with specific "young numbers" may be misleading. Consequently, the authors in the present study adopted the concept of ECAs as individuals in the early stages of development in their academic career and not tied to any specific age.

Table 1: Responsibilities of Academics in Malaysian Higher Education

Responsibility	Description
Teaching	Involves conveying knowledge and facilitating learning activities to students in a formal educational setting
Administration	Involves management and coordination of various administrative-related tasks like committee participation and administrative support
Research and publication	Conducting and producing articles to discover new knowledge or advance understanding in a expert field
Consultancy	Providing expert advice and guidance to individuals based on specialized knowledge
Postgraduate supervision	Guiding and mentoring students pursuing advanced degrees (such as master's or doctoral) through their research projects or theses.

Source: Malaysian Qualifications Agency (2014)

Challenges for Early Career Academics

The challenges faced by academics in the early years of their careers are well-reported in the literature. One of the challenges faced by this group is related to their assimilation and integration into their career. This issue is influenced by their unrealistic expectations of the nature of academic work (Hollywood et al., 2020). Workload is also one of the themes in studies related to ECAs (Mitra and McAlpine, 2017; O'Neill & Schroijsen, 2018). ECAs have reported that administrative work and other academic responsibilities such as securing funding and impactful publications have also contributed to their burden (Hollywood et al., 2020).

Moreover, in today's competitive academic environment where there are more job seekers than available positions, ECAs feel the need to connect with senior researchers at conferences and meetings to enhance their prospects (Brasier et al., 2020). Additionally, the absence of mentorship adds to the challenges faced by ECAs, and the difficulties they encounter today may differ from those experienced by their mentors in the past (Pitt & Mewburn, 2016). Concerning funding opportunities, there is a significant imbalance between the number of ECAs and available research grants, leading to intense competition among researchers for funding (Anderson et al., 2007). Since many grant applications are tailored for ECAs, they find themselves in constant competition with their peers. This competitive environment may hinder collaborations and have a negative impact on working relationships (Maestre, 2019).

Furthermore, in the realm of publication, researchers are primarily assessed based on their publications, particularly in high-impact journals and the number of citations they receive (Chapman et al., 2019). This leads to increasing pressure on researchers, including ECAs, to publish across various research disciplines. This can be exacerbated by their institution's emphasis for publications in international journals or journals with specific impact factors

(Brabet et al., 2021). While many ECAs may have publications from their PhD studies, they may not yet have established themselves enough to be invited to co-author manuscripts (Elmassry, 2020). Consequently, this lack of established reputation may discourage them from participating in large-scale research initiatives, as they may be perceived as less valuable or of lower priority (Brasier et al., 2020).

Furthermore, policies related to quality assurance and accreditation may also require ECAs to fast adapt teaching and assessment methods to meet new standards (Ooi & Din Eak, 2019). Lastly, the increasing emphasis on international collaborations and standards may require ECAs to engage in more global networking (Dusdal & Powell, 2021).

Methodology

Research Design

The objective of this study was to explore the challenges encountered by ECAs within their respective universities. Therefore, a qualitative, instrumental case study was deemed appropriate to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. According to Cresswell (2013), an instrumental case study concentrates on a specific problem rather than the case itself therefore aligns with the aim of this study which was to investigate the challenges faced by ECAs in higher education.

The Informants

Six informants which consisted of early-career academics from two comprehensive public universities in Malaysia were selected through purposive sampling. These informants were selected based on their working experience in academia which was one to five years. The informants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and each was required to sign a participant consent form. Field work for this study was conducted from July to December 2023. Prior to the field work, ethics approval was sought and approved by the ethics committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA.

Data Collection

Data were collected using individual, semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was developed using themes obtained from cognate literature. The questions were open-ended as these allowed informants to answer in their own terms and allowed the researchers to delve into areas in which we had limited knowledge (Bryman, 2012). Each interview session was conducted between forty-five minutes to one hour. One of the challenges faced in the data collection process was related to the interview sessions. Initially, the researchers planned to conduct all interviews face-to-face. However, as some of the informants were not available for a physical meeting, they agreed to have the interview session through Google Meet. With permission from the informants, each interview was audio-recorded. Each audio was then transcribed verbatim. This allowed the researchers to read and gain a thorough understanding of the challenges experienced by the ECAs.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed inductively and deductively following the six-phase thematic analysis suggested by Braun & Clarke (2017). An inductive approach allowed the researchers to let possible insights related to challenges faced by ECAs emerge from the informant's experiences (Patton, 2014). On the other hand, a deductive approach which involved the

researchers applying codes from cognate literature enabled the researchers to be more focused in making sense of the data.

Data were coded using the ATLAS.ti software. The researcher used ATLAS.ti software to group similar topics together. This process involved creating themes and sub-themes to organize the recurring ideas. By employing thematic analysis, the researcher ensured a thorough examination of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2017), contributing to a detailed understanding of the challenges experienced by ECAs.

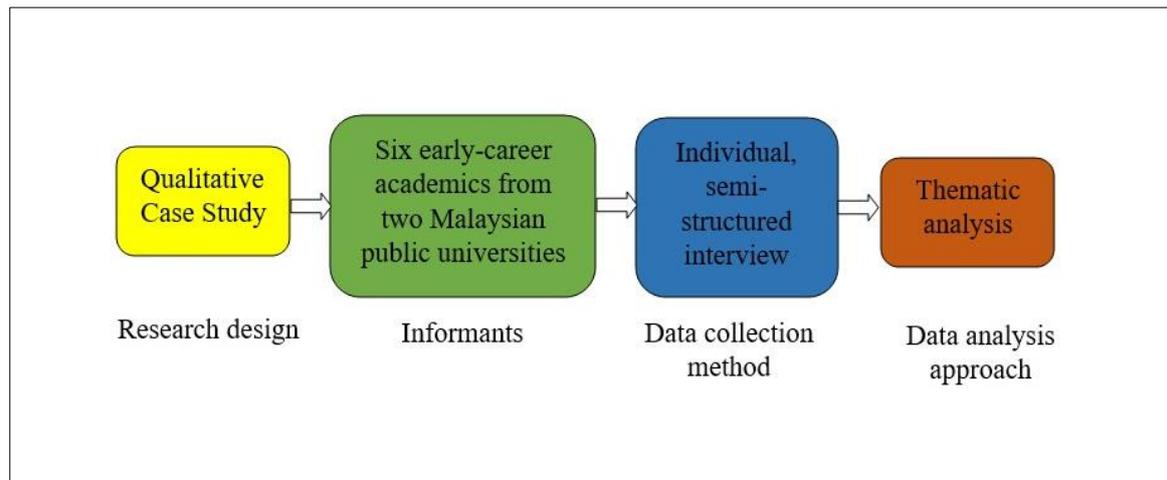


Figure 1: Flowchart Of Research Procedures

Establishing the Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness of the present study was established through peer debriefing and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Debriefing sessions with the research team members were conducted frequently. This allowed each team member to discuss and debate on themes generated from the analysis. This step is important to ensure there was no bias in the development of themes and subthemes. Transferability for the present study relied on the researchers' thick descriptions of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). This was achieved through the inclusion of informants' voices in the findings section. This will allow readers to decide whether the findings are transferable to their own settings.

Results and Discussions

Our data analysis revealed that the challenges faced by ECAs can be grouped into three main themes which are lack of a strong support system, workload and lack of networking opportunities. The summary of findings for the present study is presented in Table 2.

Lack of Support

The motivation of employees depends on the support they receive. In this context, robust support from the university can play a pivotal role in significantly enhancing the motivation levels of ECAs and fostering a positive environment for them to carry out their tasks. Consequently, the university stands to gain substantial benefits, as motivated ECAs contribute not only to the immediate success but also to the long-term sustainability of the institution (Camilleri et al., 2023). ECAs in our study noted the lack of support they received at their respective institutions, namely, administrative and mentorship support.

Table 2: Challenges for Early-Career Academics

Theme	Sub-theme	Description
Lack of support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative • Mentorship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative support is lacking, which makes it challenging for ECAs to find clear guidelines, particularly regarding administrative tasks such as handling programs. • Peer mentorship is insufficient, leaving ECAs uncertain, especially in the realm of research. • ECAs believed that they need to demonstrate their achievements to gain entry into established research groups.
Workload		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECAs are burdened with numerous management-related tasks, diverting their attention from their core responsibilities.
Networking		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of experience and opportunities prevent ECAs from establishing networks within and outside the university.

Administrative Support

As in any organisation, the administration or non-academic staff is one of the support systems to help academics in terms of administration work. As new members of the university, ECAs often need help understanding how things work behind the scenes. They might not know all the rules and procedures for getting things done. By guiding on administrative matters, administration staff can help ECAs adjust to their new environment smoothly and start contributing effectively to the university community. According to the interviews, most ECAs mentioned that they did not receive sufficient support from administrative staff, especially during their initial days of work. Additionally, ECAs expressed their feeling that administrative staff assumed they had the knowledge and capability to handle all matters independently, simply because they joined the university as lecturers. This perception contributed to a sense of insufficient support for ECAs in their early stages, making it challenging for them to understand administrative procedures and tasks.

“Sometimes, we are stunned to find things like procedures to handle a program, where to refer to certain circulars (labour act), etc. The documents are there, I cannot deny them. But what we need is someone who can guide us and a person to be referred to. The issue of not getting detailed guidelines from the administration. Maybe, they believe that people who join the university as a lecturer are smart enough and capable of knowing everything which we can find by ourselves”. (ECA 1)

“There are no guidelines as they expect us to ask about everything by ourselves. Okay, we admit. They are ones who willingly guide us but sometimes are not friendly.” (ECA 4)

An ECA mentioned that the administrative staff recognized the issue and attempted to make changes, but she believed it was too late. In addition, the ECAs mentioned that there was not much help or guidance from the administrative staff, creating a gap between them. This lack of support made it harder for ECAs to deal with administrative tasks efficiently. Bridging this gap through better support could create a more collaborative and supportive work atmosphere for ECAs in the university.

“...last semester if I’m not mistaken Department A realized that they needed to give a proper explanation to the staff [how to use a new system]. But it’s too late because we already know and discover that system. Why not earlier?” (ECA 2)

“...when newcomers join with senior lecturers they are labelled as “senior-junior”. So, sometimes seniors are reluctant to hear from the juniors’ point of view. There is that “culture”. Not only between lecturers but also between non-academic staff. So, there will be a gap between us” (ECA 3).

Mentorship Support

In addition to the absence of administrative support, mentorship among academic staff was also identified as one of the challenges faced by ECAs. Mentoring relationships are widely acknowledged by both academics and practitioners as a valuable and critical resource for employees within organizations (Richard et al., 2009). For instance, when compared with non-mentored individuals, employees who have mentors demonstrate higher levels of both objective and subjective positive outcomes. These outcomes include career development, job satisfaction, socialization, organizational commitment, and career advancements (Eby et al., 2008). Newly joined ECAs found mentorship crucial, especially for guidance in research. They collectively mentioned that the lack of a well-organized mentor-mentee program during their initial period of service posed a considerable challenge to their career development. Yet, 3 out of 6 informants noted that the previous group of ECAs had some form of mentor-mentee program in place. However, when their turn arrived, the university did not enhance or sustain the program.

“From my experience since I came in, I do not have any mentors. But I’ve been told by a senior lecturer that previously new lecturers will have mentors. However, maybe this practice has been discontinued.” (ECA 1)

“No, we need to learn the skills by ourselves. There are guides from our head of learning centre but they are just general guidance. Everyone has their struggles, especially the new lectures are given with many tasks. So, we need to carry the burden ourselves. Need to handle it by myself. The university does not occupy us for example with mentor-mentee.” (ECA 2)

“During my early years, there was no mentor, only my HOD [Head of Department] was giving me instruction and all but I had no mentor. I had no mentor in research, which is the most critical issue. Because of that, I am totally lost. Everyone is doing research but I don’t know what is going on. We don’t have a research team, in University B, you have to do it alone. As juniors, we need to build up our credibility

in order to enter the seniors team. I can say mentorship is very lacking in my faculty.” (ECA 4)

Moreover, in terms of research, the absence of mentors has left ECAs to navigate the challenges independently. To join an established research group, they must demonstrate their capabilities, such as securing grants or publishing in high-impact journals. This could be demanding, especially when competing with well-established and experienced researchers who were already part of the group. From the interviews, half of the ECAs shared that proving their capabilities was challenging in their early years. They expressed the need for mentors to guide them, emphasizing the importance of learning from experienced researchers during their junior phase.

“When it comes to publication and our researchers. Honestly, for me the support is not really there. Support from senior lecturers is quite low until they see that we have potential in research then they can actually invite you. In terms of publication, if we want to publish in a high-index journal, we need an author from a professor as well in order to support our publication to be published in a prominent journal. It is very difficult to grow as a young lecturer if we don't have their support.” (ECA 4)

“In University B, those who want to join the established research team need to prove that they have the ability to join. I think this is not a very good environment. Culture wise is not good I can say. Basically, they need to prove... for example, whether or not they are able to secure a grant... whether or not they are able to publish in a good journal by themselves. After that, they are seen as capable to join the team. You know when they have some sort of that capability. At the junior level, they expect more from us when it comes to research.” (ECA 5)

Managing Workload

Workload is another issue faced by the ECAs. In this study, the focus is on the overwhelming management tasks assigned to ECAs. Managing workload efficiently was one of the struggles for ECAs. This finding resonated with others (e.g., Badiozaman, 2020) that ECAs have to play different responsibilities even at their level. The specific concern addressed by the ECAs in our study was the voluminous number of management-related responsibilities that interfered with their core responsibilities. ECAs in our study expressed that a huge amount of management tasks took away their focus from real duties such as teaching their students effectively and producing quality research publications.

“Yes... when a lot of tasks are given to us at the same time. We cannot concentrate on one work thus, cannot produce quality work”. (ECA 2)

“...the workload needs to be equally distributed. Because when the workload is fair, we can do our task with a good quality. So, when there is so much workload without a proper guideline, eventually it will affect our job quality”. (ECA 3)

“... one trend that has happened to new lecturers is that the new lecturers will be given so many management tasks. For example, committee members industry or alumni, hm... what else, to handle conferences, innovation. So many things that we need to do”. (ECA 1)

Networking Opportunities

ECAs in our study emphasized that they had limited networking opportunities, hindering their ability to enhance personal growth. ECAs in our study also perceived that the lack of professional networking also posed challenges to their career advancement. Three ECAs expressed that effective networking could increase their visibility to high-level management or within the industry. Unfortunately, they felt that their networking efforts remained relatively unknown, making it difficult to stand out and progress in their careers.

“...you know when we have a strong network, we can be visible in the faculty and the industry, but with a little network, I think it is hard for us to be visible to them”. (ECA 4)

“I cannot deny that as a new lecturer...in terms of networking, we face some difficulty because we are new and I believe it takes some times to build a strong network... and I believe if we as a new young lecturer having a good peer group...it can help us to build a network with experience academics not only in University A, but in other universities”. (ECA 3)

Networking is crucial for ECAs as they need to engage with various individuals to collaborate on research papers, attend conferences, and acquire teaching materials. However, building and maintaining effective networks can pose a challenge for ECAs, especially given that they are early academics who have recently joined the university (Brasier et al., 2020). This lack of prior experience and established connections makes it more challenging for ECAs to expand their networks, hindering their ability to collaborate and access valuable resources. Even when opportunities arise for ECAs to participate in collaborative networks, which can aid in career development and provide peer support, their engagement may be limited by challenging work conditions. Factors such as a shortage of time, high workloads, and isolation can constrain ECAs from actively participating in these beneficial networks. The demanding nature of their work may also impede their ability to fully capitalize on networking opportunities, potentially affecting their career growth and support systems (Hollywood et al., 2020; Price et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Overall, the present study achieved its overarching objective which was to highlight the different challenges faced by ECAs within the Malaysian academic environment – a research area which is limited so far. Our study revealed that ECAs faced challenges in terms of the lack of a strong support system in terms of administrative support and limited mentorship, an overwhelming workload, and inadequate networking prospects. ECAs often find themselves overwhelmed with management-related tasks that detract from their primary duties, leading to difficulties in producing high-quality research outcomes. Moreover, the absence of structured mentorship programs leaves ECAs feeling uncertain and ill-prepared, particularly in navigating academic research. Additionally, the lack of networking opportunities further adds to their isolation within the academic community, hindering their potential for collaboration and career advancement. Although our study was small-scale thus limiting its generalizability of findings, it has shed some light on the challenges faced by ECAs in Malaysia from the points of view of ECAs themselves.

It can be concluded that despite entering their academic career with a terminal degree, in order to navigate the academic world successfully, ECAs still need to be supported through an

academic system that encompasses the administrative and academic staff i.e., mentors. Such support system can facilitate ECAs in familiarizing themselves with the work culture of their respective institutions (Mydin et al., 2021). As outlined by Hollywood et al., (2020), the university management need to have proper and clear guidelines for ECAs during their probationary periods, meanwhile, senior academics need to mentor ECAs to achieve their targets and balance their priorities at work.

Indeed, addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from higher education institutions to provide comprehensive support systems, including mentorship programs, workload management strategies, and networking platforms tailored to the needs of ECAs. By acknowledging and mitigating these challenges, universities can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment conducive to the professional development of ECAs (Badiozaman, 2020).

In final analysis, findings from the present study have contributed to the growing body of knowledge on an important topic which is on how ECAs experience their early professional years in higher education. These findings are significant for the management of universities so they can devise efforts that can help ECAs integrate successfully into the university system (Hollywood et al., 2020). Such efforts may include talent management initiatives, mentorship, research and networking opportunities, and induction programmes. With the rapidly changing climate of higher education globally, it becomes vital to support this group of professionals so ensure the sustainability of the sector.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study has offered valuable insights from the perspective of ECAs within Malaysian public universities on the challenges they face. However, future research endeavours should aim to incorporate additional viewpoints, such as those of senior academics and university management. By gathering data from multiple stakeholders, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by ECAs and the underlying dynamics within academic institutions. Moreover, conducting quantitative studies to validate the findings of this qualitative research could enhance the robustness and generalizability of the results. More robust studies in this area would assist universities in identifying the best management practices to enhance academic talent which are crucial for the sustainability of higher education.

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