Exploring The Role Of Academic Heads In Maintaining The Quality Of Teaching And Learning Within Their Departments: A Case Study Of A Private University

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ABSTRACT
Higher education institutions are generally concerned with the quality of their graduates. Many institutions put in a lot effort in ensuring quality teaching and learning experience to their students because this is a reflection on the quality of the institutions themselves. This paper reports the findings of a qualitative case study at a Malaysian private university. It explores the meaning of quality teaching and learning, form the perspectives of academics and their heads of departments. It also reviews the roles of the heads of departments in maintaining the quality of teaching and learning within their departments. Data was derived from focused group interviews with academics and individual interviews with heads of departments. Findings indicate that heads of departments play a very important role in three areas: 1. assessing the quality of teaching and learning 2. identifying academic staff development needs; 3. supporting continuous professional development activities within the departments. In addition, in efforts to improve the quality of their teaching, academics were found to be more satisfied with professional development activities at department level than activities carried out at institutional level. The paper concludes with suggestions on strategies for enhancing professional development opportunities for improving teaching and learning within the departments and the institution itself.

Keywords: CPD, quality teaching and learning, higher education

INTRODUCTION
Both public and private higher education providers in Malaysia are hard-pressed to prove that they can be held accountable to their stakeholders. Although there is a differing view of what quality and what quality teaching means to different stakeholders, there is a general consensus that quality teaching is one that results in student learning (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005). Especially in the case of private higher education providers, students' learning is often translated into their ability to apply their learning into real world application and employability. As stated by Henard (2010, p.4), higher education providers see the need to be responsive to students' "demand for valuable teaching" which leads to employment and equip them with relevant skills needed not only for the present but also the future.

One of the early public perceptions of private higher education institutions is that the education provided is substandard in quality of delivery and that they are not partial towards improving their quality (Wilkinson & Yussof, 2005). The reason could be because private higher education institutions are profit driven and quality assurance and

quality enhancement efforts are costly and can cut into the profit they earn. However, in addressing these concerns, many Malaysian private institutions have strived towards complying with the various quality assurance requirements and also subject themselves to further review of quality by other universities that they partner with. For example, Sunway University, not only ensures that it complies with requirements set by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), but further subjects itself to assurance processes by Lancaster University, UK for many of its programmes and Le Cordon Bleu for its hospitality-related programmes, just to name two. For Taylor's University, articulation pathways to various reputable international institutions meant that it had to meet quality requirements set by these institutions, in addition to those set by MQA (Taylor's University, 2016).

MQA itself has set specific recruitment and staff development requirements to ensure quality teaching is possible. It has established guidelines for recruitment and identified specific criteria that applicants had to fulfill in order to be appointed as academics or senior academics (MQA, 2014a, p.4). Criteria for academic staff appointment are described in the Programme Standards for each programme of study. One example is the criteria for academic staff appointment for the Accounting programme (MQA, 2013, p.27). Academic staff must have academic qualifications that are at least one level higher than the level to be taught (MQA 2013, p.27). Professional qualifications and industry experience are also considered important. The variations to acceptable combination between academic and professional qualifications and industry experience are described further in the programme standard (MQA, 2013, pp. 27-29). In addition, MQA has set its expectations of academic staff development and provided guidelines on how institutions should support and develop their academic staff (MQA, 2014a, pp. 30-39). However, the onus is still on the institutions to ensure that only knowledgeable academics who can teach effectively are appointed and that professional development opportunities are sufficiently made available to them later, in accordance to the need of their field (MQA, 2014b).

In this respect, academic heads play a crucial role as they are the ones responsible for implementing institutional quality assurance processes. At the same time, they are the ones closest to the academics they supervise and therefore, should have a better understanding of the challenges that academics face in delivery quality teaching. Being in that position, they have the responsibility to identify what are the developmental needs of the academics to be fulfilled to achieve the shared goal of quality teaching and learning.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Enhancement of quality teaching and learning for any higher learning institution can only be achieved when there is a clear picture of what is the current level of quality for that institution, whether there are systems in place to assess that quality and whether there are clear concentrated efforts by the institution to enhance that quality through specific and systematic methods. The role of academic heads is important as they could provide a 360-degree view of how well institutional systems are designed and implemented in pursuit of that goal. Despite this importance, there is limited information on it, especially information which is derived from the Malaysian private higher education scene. Currently, there is significant literature on quality enhancement of teaching and learning (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Crockett, 2003; Biggs, 2001) but the U.S, U.K. and Australia are the leading sources of information. Availability of more information will enable an institution to learn from its own practices in supporting professional development and quality enhancement processes. Other institutions will also be able to learn from the best practices of others.

PURPOSE

The main purpose of this study was to explore the roles undertaken by academic heads of a private university in implementing institutional measures to assess the quality of teaching and learning. It was also intended to explore the academics' perception of the accuracy and relevance of these measures in determining teaching and learning quality. In addition, the study intended to explore the approaches undertaken by academic heads to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in their respective departments.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study relied on two theories. The first theory is the systems theory from the field of management. Based on systems theory, an organisation is viewed as made up of interdependent parts. Effective management can be achieved through understanding of internal as well as external factors which impact them. Essentially, an organisation needs to be viewed as a system "to design meaningful interventions" to potential problems which may prevent it from achieving its goals (Porter & Cordoba, 2009, p. 226) This theory is applicable to the case study as

the study focused on the roles that academic heads play in 'connecting the dots' between academics and their specific needs, institutional aim and policies, students' expectations and satisfaction, other servicing departments in the university which form part of the cluster enabled effective teaching and learning to take place. Examples include facilities and maintenance; another is administration involved in class scheduling.

Another relevant theory is a learning theory – social constructivist theory. Various literature point out that the professional development activities are effective when can be directly linked to instructional practices, students' learning experience and feedback (Smith, 2008; Trowler, 2005). This makes the theory is particularly relevant. Social constructivism in teacher development involves a culture of participant engagement and meaningful learning process that to a large extent, connects ideas with real life situations (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 2).

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative case study; it was located within the boundary of one place (Merriam, 1998). The case study was conducted at a private Malaysian University. The main data collection method was through interviews with respondents selected through purposive sampling. The adoption of purposive sampling enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the focal point of the study. There were 10 participants who came from two faculties within the institution (to be referred to as Faculty A and Faculty B). Triangulation of information gathered from the interview was achieved through documentary analysis of institutional documents.

All the 10 participants had a minimum of 6 years teaching experience. The longest teaching experience stated was 34 years. Nine of the participants had been employed by the institution between 4 to 10 years. One had been with the institution for 2 years. At the time of the interview, the academics had a varying teaching load from 9 to 19.5 hours and were teaching at pre-diploma, diploma and degree levels. Two academic heads had a teaching load of 6 hours per week. The third did not take on a teaching role but would substitute for a number of academic staff under his supervision who were away from the university. However, this was limited to "a few hours a week" and did not happen every week. Of the 10 respondents, two were PhD holders, 3 were pursuing their PhDs and 4 were masters' degree holders.

As recommended by Creswell (2013), qualitative reliability was obtained through maintaining consistency in interview procedures including the briefing and debriefing process. Interviewees were informed of the purpose of the study, how the interviews were to be conducted and assured of the maintenance of their anonymity. Permission was sought and granted to audio-record the interview sessions.Semi-structured, focused group interviews were conducted with the academics. There was one focused group interview with academics from Faculty A and another focused group interview with those from Faculty. The semi-structured interviews with the academic heads were conducted individually. The transcribing of the interview adopted adopted a naturalised approach in order to focus on the informational contents of the sessions. "Idiosyncratic" elements such as pauses, stutters, nonverbal cues and involuntary vocalisations were removed as befitting the approach (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005).

Following Creswell's (2009) recommendations, qualitative validity was achieved by checking and rechecking the accuracy of transcription followed by a review of the transcription drafts by the participants before the final agreed versions were validated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The academic heads who participated in the interviews are labelled as HOD1, HOD2 and HOD3. The academics are labelled as A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6 and A7. Six participants were from Faculty A: HOD1, HOD2, A1, A2, A3 and 4.Four participants were from Faculty B: HOD 3, A5, A6 and A7.

The meaning of quality teaching and learning in higher education is stake-holder dependent (Harvey, Burrows & Green, 1992). What one perceives to be high quality teaching and learning may differ from another due to differences such as subjects, programme and students. It was important to gain an insight into what the interview respondents perceived to be quality teaching and learning within the context of their field and their teaching environment. Only when this concept had been clarified, a consensus achieved, at least among academics and academic heads within the institutions, could there be an agreement on whether there was indeed quality teaching and learning. What measures to be taken to enhance the quality of teaching and learning could then be ascertained.

1.   The meaning of quality teaching and learning

Based on the two focused group interviews, all the respondents agreed that quality teaching needed to be viewed from students' perspective and student learning. and that learning itself was incomplete if it was not accompanied by the ability to apply the learning to a real situation. As stated by A1, *"if [they] learn something but they [are] unable to apply it in the real life scenario, they [are]... learning nothing."*

In a quality teaching and learning situation, the teacher was passionate, facilitated students' learning, built a supportive classroom environment. Teaching was not confined to the classroom, was research-informed and established a connection with the real world. Learners in such a class were viewed to be engaged in the learning activities, demonstrated achievement of learning outcomes and were able to demonstrate ability to apply what they learned to real situations. These perceptions of the meaning of quality teaching and learning were similar to those found in current literature on quality teaching and learning (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010; D' Andrea, 2007; Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005).

A4 added that his perception of quality teaching had "evolved over time". He said:

> *Back in those days,... quality teaching meant that I must finish teaching everything that [was] required in the syllabus and to expect the highest performance from my students... Over the years, I discovered that may not be true, or that [it] is a little bit too idealistic."*

2.   The role of academic heads as implementer of institutional teaching and learning quality assurance measures

The participants reported several quality assurance measures used to assess the quality of teaching and learning. The three mentioned were students' evaluation of subject and teaching that was conducted each semester, teaching observation and evaluation by the academic heads, and the overall Student Experience Survey conducted by the institution. Responses indicated that all interviewees were positive about student course evaluation and the student experience survey as a source of information on their teaching.   However, there were contrasting views about the usefulness of teaching observation and evaluation as a source for assessing and improving the quality of teaching and learning. All participants from Faculty A were unreceptive towards it. On the other hand, participants from Faculty B found that it was helpful but had differences of opinions over the extent of the usefulness of teaching observation by their HOD to improve teaching and learning.

HOD 1 and HOD 2 from Faculty A stated that academics in their faculty had objected to the evaluation of their teaching. As stated by HOD 1,

> *As the faculty grew, there was greater resistance to it.... The view of the teaching staff was that you should have confidence in what happens, unless in exceptional situations where students are very vocal about it and complain about a particular teacher. Only then would there be a need for that [teaching observation and evaluation] to happen.... It was considered to be extremely intrusive and it wasn't looked upon favourably because it was observation by your superior, reporting person, head of school.*

HOD 2 attributed the problem to one head of department within the faculty who had raised the objection to being observed by other academic heads. The head of department mentioned was also responsible for observing and evaluating the teaching of academic staff in her department. However, in response to her own teaching being observed and evaluated by other heads of department, HOD 2 stated that she had questioned their credibility and whether they would be able to correctly assess her teaching. As this was raised in a meeting, it set off a *"chain reaction".* HOD 2 added, *"Subsequently, many felt relieved, that's the word to use, that somebody disagreed with the idea"* of formal evaluation of teaching.

Statements by A1, A2, A3 and A4 corroborated HOD1 and HOD2's statements. They criticised the evaluation of teaching and rejected its value, either in providing accurate assessment of the quality of teaching and learning or in providing feedback to enable teaching quality to be enhanced.   They gave their reasons:

"You just come in **once** into [my] lecture, evaluate, and then give me marks." (A1) [emphasis added]

"And you get penalised for the entire year because your marker doesn't work" (Laughs) (A4)

"I failed, you know! My mark [was] so poor." (Laughs) (A1)

A1-A4 all cited the person who observed and evaluated their teaching as the reason for their rejection. The HOD they were referring to was the same HOD who questioned the credibility of her observers, as mentioned by HOD 1 and HOD 2. In response to the objections raised, the practice had been discontinued for almost two years prior to the interview. A1-A4 were appreciative of their immediate superiors who had listened to their opinions and feelings and then discontinued the practice.

In sum, this faculty stopped implementing one institutional measure of identifying the quality of teaching and learning as it was rejected by faculty members. The faculty then moved towards utilising other means to assess the quality of teaching and used these means in a complementary manner with each other. De Boer, Goedegebuure, and Meek (2010) viewed this to be a form of effective academic leadership. They emphasised that academic managers are more effective when their management style matched "the existing organisational unit culture."

There were several reasons why A1, A2, A3 and A4 strongly objected to the practice. The first was the link of teaching observation to their year-end appraisal and to a certain extent, their salary increment and bonus calculation. The manner in which the process was done was extremely important to ensure objectivity, fairness validity and reliability of the score attached to the teaching observed. A1, A3 and A4 reported that their strong objection stemmed from negative past experience with the same faculty. Ironically, A1, 3 and 4 pointed out that it was the academic head who objected to the observation of her teaching who was herself perceived to be judgmental, unfair and insensitive when she observed the teaching of others. A1 also pointed out that with one observation a year, the academic head came into the class, evaluated their teaching and gave them marks as if one observation could give an accurate picture of the academics' entire year of teaching.

Another reason was that the practice was open to subjectivity from one implementer to another. A4 added that she had two academic heads observing one lesson yet the scores given by the two observers were markedly different, with one score being *"very good"* but the other *"very poor"*. She added, *"We are left at the mercy of the people who come into our class who do not necessarily have complete understanding of the dynamics of the students in the class"*.

A5, A6 and A7 reported that evaluation of teaching was still a practice in their faculty. Unlike their colleagues in Faculty A, A5, A6 and A7 reported no major issues with the teaching observation and to a certain extent, understood that it had to be done because the institution needed to ensure and be able to prove that it took specific measures to maintain quality. However, both A5 and A6 added that while they understood the need, they did not necessarily believe that evaluation of teaching through yearly classroom observation linked to monetary rewards was the best way to fulfill that need. In addition, unlike their colleagues, A5, A6 and A7 found value in the feedback given by their academic heads after each observation process. A7 stated, *"You know, [you] can sit and chat with the boss and he can really explain to you and go through the whole lesson and how you fared. And that's really helpful."* This could be linked to the strategy that H3 used. H3 stated that *"observation that is linked to a kind of summative observation of teachers which is linked to other reward systems can be dangerous"*. Because of this, it had to be approached in a sensitive manner and balanced with feedback. H3 added:

> *My feedback is always on specific, changeable behaviours... It has to be behaviours that are changeable. And you usually can't present everything all at once if there are a number of issues in terms of being an effective teacher.*

A5, A6 and A7's only contention was that because of the infrequency of classroom observations, whether the yearly evaluation of teaching or observation for developmental purposes, that form of feedback was infrequent as well. This constraint was acknowledged by H3 who attributed it to the number of academic staff under his supervision and other administrative and academic concerns that needed attention.

Despite the informative nature of feedback received by A5, A6 and A7, there was a consensus among all the academics that evaluation of teaching held limited value in its ability to accurately assess whether the academics taught to the best of their ability consistently. Additionally, if there was inability to achieve this, they were concerned whether the findings from the observation could be correctly used for developmental purposes. As A6 mentioned:

> *I feel that ... we are on our best behaviour when we know that the boss is around and possibly, I mean this is speaking the truth, possibly people will gear up. You know, [the] boss is coming [into the class].*

All the academics felt that there was a tendency for some to put up *"a show"* for the observation and that show was not representative of what happened in class for the rest of the year. HOD3 agreed with this. He mentioned that because the procedure was to inform the academics to be observed, he realised that to a certain extent, he would get a *"show and tell"* session. He mitigated this effect by providing a time frame for when he would go into the classes and conduct his observation but would not identify a specific time. Even then, he admitted that he would still get some *"show and tell"* sessions. He stated, *"You know you're getting the best show on earth"* but that he had to implement it because *"it's part of the system."*

The situation with evaluation of teaching in both faculties was a reflection of the problems which occur with the evaluation of teaching in higher education. Henard (2010, p. 7), in his summary of 29 higher education institutions across 20 countries stressed that *"even if accepted in principle, the evaluation of quality teaching is often challenged in reality"* and added that institutions continue to struggle to come up with an instrument that could measure quality teaching and learning in a reliable way.

3. *Other measures to determine the quality of teaching*

For the faculty where HOD1, HOD2, A1, A2, A3 and A4 came from, the discontinuation of the evaluation of teaching as a source of information to determine the quality of teaching and learning meant they had to rely on other sources of information. All the respondents from the faculty identified the following methods as the source of information: feedback gained from exam paper moderators, both the internal moderators and external moderators; feedback from second-markers for students' coursework and final exam scripts; student course evaluation using the institutionally-provided template; monthly student-staff committee meeting when issues about teaching and learning were raised; individual including anonymous feedback given by students.

For Faculty B where HOD3, A5, A6 and A7 came from, evaluation of teaching was still practised. However, for HOD3, because of the limitations of the process in holistically identifying whether or not quality teaching and learning occurred beyond the observation period, it was important for him to look into other means of assessment.

Like the other faculty, student course evaluation was used as one source of information. However, adjustment had been made to the course evaluation that was distributed to students enrolled in the English proficiency programme. As students from this programme were limited in their language proficiency, HOD3 felt that using the existing template would not produce a reliable finding as the students were liable to misunderstand or perhaps unable to comprehend the items in the evaluation sheet. The revised course evaluation was one that was agreed on by academics teaching that programme. How the course evaluation was conducted for this programme was also adapted. The usual practice was to distribute the course evaluation sheet, give the students general instructions and ask the students to complete the evaluation sheet on their own before returning the evaluation sheet to the administrator. In this instance, the course lecturer would go through the items one by one to ensure that students understood the items.

In addition to the student evaluation, HOD3, in collaboration with the academics teaching the English proficiency programme, put in place a "mid-term feedback session". HOD3 stated that students at Level 3 and 4 of the four-level programme were required to complete a self-evaluation feedback. Their lecturer would then put his or her own feedback on the students' skill set. This process also pushed the lecturers *"to reflect on what they've been teaching or have not been teaching"* while at the same time provided HOD3 more information about the nature of teaching and learning that had taken place. A5, A6 and A7 agreed with this. A6 mentioned that through the feedback exchange, she gained a better understanding of how students' perceived the quality of her teaching. She explained,

"Usually, I will ask them. So how [can] this class or this lesson be improved? Or this course? So that's where [when] they will say it. So you have to be bold enough to listen."

4.   What do the academic heads do to support their academics' professional development efforts to enhance their teaching

All three academic heads agreed that soliciting feedback from their subordinates in reference to areas of needs for developmental programmes was important. This enabled them to determine how crucial the needs were and what were the best strategy to fulfill those needs. All three used the monthly staff meeting to solicit this feedback, but additionally, HOD3 also relied on what he had observed in classes to form an assessment of what developmental work was needed. Where internal expertise was available, they facilitated the organisation of professional development sessions for academics in their led by these internal experts. Where places were available, these sessions would also be opened up to academics in other faculty. HOD3 for example, mentioned that during his observations, he discovered particularly effective teaching strategies or techniques and would then organise the academic staff involved to showcase their strategies to the rest of the team. Where the expertise was unavailable, they would then look outside the institution. All three academic heads agreed that they were not dependent on both the university's Teaching and Learning Unit to meet their needs or the Human Resource Department which also organised training and workshops for the university. HOD2 felt that the faculty was happy with this approach although he did acknowledge that there faculty members wanted an increase in the activities organised. In addition, HOD3 also ensured increased opportunity in peer collaboration through team-teaching by incorporating it into the time-table but admitted that constraints of number of staff and the number of students to be taught did set a limit to how far he could organise this in one semester.

All the academics agreed that the professional development programmes organised especially for their faculty were very helpful in helping them enhance their teaching skills. In relation to enhancing the quality of their teaching, the academics found these programmes to be more helpful than those organised by external providers. As Birman, Desimone, Porter and Garet (2000) pointed out, effective professional development programmes for teaching professionals are, among others, clear in the form they take, involve collective participation of colleagues within the same setting, focus on content area, involve active learning, and are coherent with the lecturers' overall experience as well as institutional policies. Knight, Tait and York (2006) added that the reason why externally organised programmes often fail is due to lack of application to the academics' own teaching context. The situation is a reflection of social constructivism at work. Palinscar (1998, p. 345) stressed that according to social constructivism, there is an interdependence of "social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge."

5.   What else needs to be done?

HOD1 and HOD2 felt that observation of teaching could be very valuable in providing academics with feedback on teaching. They acknowledged that observation of teaching for evaluation purposes had stigmatised other forms of observation because of what had happened previously. They agreed that there was a need to resell the idea of observation for development purposes, either by peers or by senior academics. HOD2 specifically felt that it was an appropriate time to do so because the senior academic who raised the objection and who was herself the reason why many objections had been raised by other academics was no longer with the faculty

HOD1 also mentioned that there were still some basic issues with teaching which had consistently been raised in Students' Experience Survey. These included voice projection, monotonous voice and boring lesson. He added that issue with command of English language was also raised though significantly at a lesser degree and that the faculty was still working on what was the best approach to deal with the situation. The dilemma, as he put it: *"I mean, what do you do? Do you tell the staff to go and attend English classes and this person may actually be a PhD candidate? So it doesn't gel with that."*

HOD3 mentioned that it was crucial for many academics to improve their technological skills and he needed to facilitate this. He also pointed out that whether an academic was IT-savvy had nothing to do with age. The concern was that although a minority of students were *"digitally-out-to-lunch"*, many others were *"whizz kids"*. Some

academics were willing to *"engage with new technology"* and incorporate it into their teaching but *"others…are reticent to do it."*

Institutionally, all the academic heads agreed that there were several things which required attention. The Teaching and Learning Unit was viewed to have increased the activities that it organised but at that point, most of the unit's offering catered more for the novice academics newly embarking on their teaching careers. The academic heads acknowledged that it was difficult for the unit to organise programmes which would meet the needs of all academics but were positive that given time, the unit would be able to offer a wide range of programmes which met different needs.

There was also consensus among the academic head that institutional policy regarding professional development needed to be adapted, changed or refined to fit with the institution's current status as a university and what it expects of its academics in terms of professional growth and enhancement of teaching quality. The university wass viewed as being caught in a complex situation where it had inherited the structures set up for a college and that even as changes to these structures were being made, more changes were occurring within the institution. As HOD3 commented, in relation to professional development, "We are still evolving the policy and how it is operationalised." Although the institution had been on the frontline of the private higher education industry for over two decades, it was a young university. HOD3 mentioned:

> Some of the criteria that come in for supporting staff in terms of their outcomes, from international conferences need to recognise that many of the people are young researchers, young academic writers…in terms of experience…. And need support to go through that process. So, we have a university structure. Yes we all want SCOPUS journals….ISI journals that are highly ranked and so on. Well, we need to sort of walk before we can run.

HOD2 also pointed out that the manner in which the policy was implemented also needed consistency. For example, he cited the case of one staff who submitted an application for training organised in another state within Malaysia, which met the stipulations of the policy and which he had approved. However, he stated that the Human Resource person in-charge of training and development suggested that the academic should go to a training somewhere closer for non-academic reasons. Although this problem was eventually sorted out and the academic staff obtained the final approval needed, these were examples of implementation gap that needed attention.

To add to the mix, the institution was also part of a larger, non-education-based, corporate structure. While the uniqueness of the institution had been taken into consideration, many of the management practices adopted were those which were implemented across the larger organisation which, according to the participants, did not fit well with the institution's "nature of business".

Finally, all the interview respondents agreed that there needed to be a better understanding of what it takes to deliver quality teaching. H1 summed this up clearly by saying:

> I think that there is a need for… stakeholders to understand the needs of the teaching profession. Stakeholders here not just limited to HR but would include ITS [IT Services], [and] also include Facilities and Maintenance. So for example, even in terms of the space that a teacher has. Or the allocation of time-tabling and scheduling. These are things that should not be taken lightly…. So everybody needs to get into it because I think there is a misconception by many stakeholders involved in this process that teaching is an easy thing to do.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reinforced the important role that academic heads, as those in the middle, played in implementing institutional policies and regulations to assure the quality of teaching and learning in the institution and implement strategies that could assist in further enhancement. In that capacity, it was found that the academic heads played a crucial role in exercising their own judgment as to what institutional measures worked and what did not work with their own faculty. It was found that all the academic heads practised a soft systems approach to assessing, maintaining and improving the quality of teaching. In the case of HOD1 and HOD2, because of the

strong objections by their faculty members, discontinuing the practise and exploring other means of obtaining information about the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom was seen as the best solution. In the case of HOD3, anticipation of problems if teaching observation and evaluation was not conducted with objectivity and sensitivity resulted in the procedure being accepted by the academic staff under his supervision. Despite this, all respondents agreed that the procedure could not accurately inform the academic heads on what academics actually do in class for the rest of the year.

All respondents agreed that multiple-source of information should be utilised in order to form a holistic evaluation on the actual quality of teaching and learning that took place. In relation to the systems theory, this scenario is one which Checkland (1994, p.80) would recognise as moving away from "hard systems thinking" in which an organisation is recognised as a set of systems which can be "systematically engineered" to achieve objectives. The movement was towards "soft systems thinking" in which an organisation is viewed to be problematic but the process of inquiry into the problematic situations... can be organised as a system."

All the respondents concurred that academics should continuously develop themselves in order achieve or maintain high quality. While they agreed that attending or presenting at conferences, seminars and workshops were valuable to their learning and helped enhance their knowledge, they felt that departmentally-organised programmes were the most effective in helping them increase the quality of their teaching as these programmes addressed specific needs and the knowledge and skills learned from such programmes could be immediately applied to their own teaching situation. All participants were highly satisfied with the departmentally-driven programmes available for them. The academics felt that this occurred because their academic heads were responsive to their needs and took the initiative to find out what specific challenges they had in their teaching and organised developmental programmes accordingly.

Although institutionally, most respondents were aware of the professional development programmes organised by the Teaching and Learning Unit, all agreed that that more concentrated effort was needed to make the unit highly functioning. All respondents agreed that as the institution was caught up in the process of change, in transforming to become a university that could be comparable to other international universities recognised for their achievement, the situation was a highly complex one. Institutional policies, regulations and implementation had to be revised and such changes were only possible with time and concentrated effort by all stakeholders to provide sufficient input into the process. This situation could be familiar to other Malaysian private universities as they may be going through similar changes. As such, future research could explore how the institution is strategising its institutional policy changes in relation to professional development and who, among the academics are involved in the process. Additionally, future research could explore strategic approaches in streamlining professional development programmes for academics within the institution to tap into what the academics had already identified as the most effective source of input to enhance their teaching.

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