Academic Promotion in Malaysian Public Universities: 
Amidst Changing Priorities and Multiple Reward Systems

Ibrahim Che Omar, Aida Suraya Md. Yunus, Norzaini Azman & Ahmad Nurulazam Mohd Zain
26 - 28 November 2014
Education Research Institutes Network in the Asia Pacific (ERI-Net) Expert Meeting
Hangzhou, China
Introduction

Academics’ are academic staff working in universities and other higher education institutions in different ranks, with different contracts and at different stages of their career.

In the Malaysian context and in this report, ‘academic’ refers to full-time academic staff members with different academic ranks in Malaysian universities.

In principle, academic promotion in universities is awarded based on a standard triad of activities: teaching, research and to a lesser extent service.

IPPTN had conducted a study on the Academic Promotion Process at Public Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia (Noornina et al., 2010). This research provided inputs in the formulation of the *Garis Panduan Perlantikan dan Kenaikan Pangkat ke Jawatan Profesor di Institusi Pengajian Tinggi di Malaysia (Edisi ke-2)* (Translation: Guideline on Appointment and Promotion to the Professor Position of Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia) by the Department of Higher Education (2012).
1960s: Academic promotion in most universities emphasized on the importance of teaching.

1990s: With technological and innovation advancement, emphasized on research. Research capacity and performance became central to the ranking criteria to determine university status and performance.

Academic environment can be crucial for academic promotion; psychological and social make-up of the faculty members in an academic department influences the promotion process.

Improving the quality and excellence of university requires quality faculty. Sequentially, the recruitment and promotion of excellent faculty becomes a key to an academic institution’s excellence.

Few studies conducted regarding the academic promotion system in Malaysia - considerable gaps in the system and impact of the current academic promotion policies.
Despite having one remuneration scheme with a common grade and salary system, Malaysian public universities have different academic promotion policies and practices.

Individuals from established universities who have achieved a reasonable standard in research and teaching but yet to be promoted to a higher rank, while individuals in less established universities who have neither published nor researched much are promoted early in their academic career.

Research universities have made modifications to the promotion system either to enhance academic quality by recognizing various kinds of contributions or to fulfil the indicators set by the world ranking systems.

The academic rank system in Malaysia is generally composed of four career ladders: Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Professor.

Each university is allowed to establish its own criteria, so long as these were consistent with national guidelines.
| Each university designs and implements a promotion process which is aimed at encouraging, developing and maintaining quality academics as well as attracting the ‘best brains’ |
| The academic career structure is in line with the general structure of the Malaysian civil service. It is also a permanent post which ends with retirement |
| Job security in the public university sector is higher than in the private sector. |
| Nevertheless, the national policy about evaluating and promoting academics in universities has not developed much. |
In Malaysia, the promotion criteria may vary significantly from public and private institutions; and surprisingly, may also vary from one public institution to another.

Thus, academic promotion in Malaysian institutions is highly debatable, and the promotion criteria form the biggest issue and the strong source of dissatisfactions among academics.

Variations are observed in one or more of the followings: Variations may be observed in terms of the quantity and quality of the contributions by the academics particularly in teaching and learning, research, publications and other academic activities and services.

- Variation in criteria/requirement for promotion.
- Changes in the mechanisms or procedures
- Compromised degree of transparency of the process.
Criteria set for academic promotion must encompass the following expectations of an academic.

- Continuous contribution in the field of specialization mainly through sharing and dissemination of knowledge, creation of knowledge and innovation and respected, referred and relevant in his/her field of expertise.

- Display scholarship through significant contribution with impact to the community which demonstrate the strong relevancy in societal transformation. This is normally possible through strong consultancy work and high impact research based on the needs of the country.

- Demonstrate intellectualism through strategic thinking and actions in order to reflect the wisdom of an academic.

- An academic will always advocate and embrace the culture of scholarship through the activities related to the love for knowledge and seeker of the truth. Thus, when an academic is promoted, it is an indication of the increment in the knowledge, skills, wisdom, relevancy and expectations.

- He/she will be the “role model” for the university
Promotion Criteria - I

• **Seniority (experiences)**: More experiences and wiser but not necessarily excellent. Seniority has been used for consideration of faculties who in the early part of their career has devoted themselves in the establishment of centers, faculties or even the university.

• **Teaching and learning**: Number of courses taught, number of credits for the courses, number of students per course, academic advisory, other academic workloads, undergraduate student supervisory and curriculum, teaching and learning and innovation in delivery systems.

• **Research and innovation**: the number of research grants (national or international grants), magnitude and scale of the research projects, involvement as lead investigator or co-researcher, source of funding, research impact, patents, IPs, technology transfer and commercialization

• **Post graduate supervision**: number of students supervised, numbers graduated, roles of supervisor (either as the main supervisor, as co-supervisor or member in supervisory panel)
Promotion Criteria - II

• **Publication and writing**: Publication includes articles in reputable journals, monographs, chapter in books, books and proceedings. Reputable and quality refer to indexed journal, ISI, SCOPUS and journals with high Impact Factor (IF).

• **Academic recognition**: degree or the level of respect received by an academic from his/her academic fraternity, examiners of theses, evaluation panels for research grants application, reviewer of manuscripts, journal articles and papers, promotion exercise, plenary, invited or keynote presentations at conferences, external examiners, awards (teaching and research awards, and other awards based on academic and research excellent), visiting professor, editors of index journals and books, academic committees, and advisory panels/committee members for government/non-government agencies and industries related to his/her expertise.

• **Community services and nation building**: Voluntary services, community development programs and community transformation activities. Academic participation in the government bodies as think tanks and committee members at the ministerial level for national interest will be considered as part of the contribution in nation building.
Promotion Criteria - III

- **Consultancy and industrial linkages**
  - Consultancy can be in many forms, with or without monetary rewards which is provided to the government and non-government agencies or industries. Evaluated based on the quality of the consultancy work and the financial implication involved in the work.
  - Industrial linkages created with the industries may also involved the consultancy work which include contract research, contract services or advisory and expert panel either at the national or international level. Industrial linkages will cover the scope of industrial attachment, advisory panel, research collaborators, technology transfer and commercialization through joint venture for the establishment of companies.

- **Administrative roles/contributions to university**
  - Contribution to the university refers to the involvement and participation in developing the university and responsible to bringing the institution to the next level, measured based on the posts held or as the team member in the university leadership and management such as Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Director, Dean, Head of Department or Head of Program.
  - Nevertheless, promotion will also consider through excellent academic involvement and research.
## Weightage of contribution for Academic Promotion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promotion &amp; Roles</th>
<th>DS45 to DS51/DS52</th>
<th>DS52 to DS53/54</th>
<th>DS53/54 to VK7</th>
<th>VK7 to VK6</th>
<th>VK6 to VK5</th>
<th>Continuous quality improvement and the making of an academic leader.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching &amp; learning</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research &amp; innovation and supervision</td>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University and Community Services</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>5-15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic recognition and academic leadership</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>10-20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultancy and industrial linkages</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>5-15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other criteria include:

- A minimum marks of 80% must be obtained before submission of application for promotion.
- Minimum marks for teaching & learning and Research & Innovation and supervision may be decided by the universities.
- For promotion to VK6 and VK5, only achievement after VK7 and VK6, respectively will be considered. In most cases, the application for VK6 and VK5 can only be made upon invitation.
- The criteria used for the promotion to VK6 and VK5 will focus on identifying a renown professor who is able to create impact and recognised by the academic fraternity and the community.
- Many universities are moving towards creating more flexible procedures in the process of application.
Distinguished professors are academics who go beyond as researchers, scientist, academician or teachers, but who are able to make differences to the community and the country based on his/her expertise and globally renowned.

The criteria for the appointment of distinguished professor are as follow:

- The minimum H-index of the professors will have to be between 8 – 12 with extraordinary academic achievements in his/her area of expertise.

- Research and contributions based on the concept of academic based public advocacy with significance and high impact for global prosperity (policy or establishment of institution or centre of excellence).

- Recognition in the form of prestigious awards at national and international levels from learned organisations.

- Research and publication with high impact as an indication of a quantum leap from VK5 to distinguished professor; from an expert to a scholar. Based on his expertise a distinguished professor must be able to participate in strategic arena or in the formation of policy related to his/her expertise for nation building.
The five (5) criteria used for promotion exercise are:

- Implementation of main job specification as agreed between the universities and the agencies the staff are seconded. The measurement will be based solely on the outcomes of the job with the marks ranging from 30-50%.

- Innovation and creativity in undertaking the job form 20-30% of the evaluation. Innovation may refer to the number of products; add value to existing products or improvement of process, while creativity will be how the innovation is made available.

- During the duration of the secondment, the staffs are expected to continuously generate new knowledge, disseminate and share knowledge and skills. (20%)

- Staff who are seconded to the government agencies and industries are also expected to do consultancy work and contribute academically based on their expertise (5-15%)

- Besides, the presence of the academic staff, services to the institution where they are seconded will also be considered (5%).
Promotion Exercise for staff from industries at universities

Based on the intensity of the inclination of the staff towards the academic functions. The criteria for new appointment or the promotion of the existing staff are similar to that of the academic staff that are seconded to the industries. However, the staff from the industries will now focus on the academic roles.

**The criteria are:**

- Implementation of main job specification (outcomes of job, 10-40%)
- Innovation and creativity (20-30%)
- Knowledge generation and skills (30-40%)
- Consultancy and expertise (5-15%)
- Services to the institution where the staff are seconded (5%).
## Processes in Applying for Academic Promotion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparing for application</strong></td>
<td>1. Completing the forms and filling up the online application.</td>
<td>Applicant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Attaching all evidences and supporting documents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Filling up the scoring sheet based on the criteria set by the institution. The cut off points for eligibility to apply is 80%.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sending in the documents</strong></td>
<td>1. Sending the application to the Registrar through the Dean.</td>
<td>Applicant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Submitting all required documents (forms, scoring sheets, curriculum vitae, publications, and other supporting documents such as appointments, list of graduating students, etc) to the Assistant Registrar of the faculty.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Applicant gets their referees to provide a report on their professional standing which will be sent straight to the Registrar’s office.</td>
<td>Assistant Registrar of the faculty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Assessment by the Faculty Promotion Committee.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Submit to Registrar’s office all required documents and list of assessors. List of assessors must be approved by senate prior to submission of application.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Processing of application</strong></td>
<td>1. Registrar office sends out appointment of assessors after getting their approval.</td>
<td>Registrar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Once agreed, the documents will be sent out. Most documents are still in hard copy forms.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Compile reports from dean, head of department, referees and assessors. Most universities require at least 3 evaluations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Checking adequacy of documents. If everything is complete, set interview date.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview by the Promotion Committee</strong></td>
<td>1. Interview by the Promotion Committee. Application for professor position is chaired by the Vice Chancellor, whilst application for Associate Professor position is chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academics).</td>
<td>Promotion Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Endorsement by the University Board</strong></td>
<td>1. Names of successful applicants will be tabled in the University Board meeting for endorsement.</td>
<td>University Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Results of Application</strong></td>
<td>1. Letter will be sent out once the minute of the University Board meeting has been approved.</td>
<td>Registrar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(Application is made through the Head of Department and Dean).

Applicant submits application letter/forms and documentations/evidences. Some universities require internal assessor’s report and scoring sheet.

Review is done either at the faculty and/or university level by the Screening Committee, Selection Committee, and/or Jawatankuasa Kesepakaran or a combination of these committees.

If successful, the applicant may/or not be asked to attend an interview.

The university’s governing body (top management committee or university board) endorses the results.

The applicants will be notified by letters (successful or otherwise).
Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor and Associate Professor to Professor

• Application is made through the Head of Department and Dean.
• Applicant provides names of two referees or internal assessors.
• Appointment of external assessors is made once it is approved by the University Senate or Vice-Chancellor.
• Applicant submits application letter/forms and documentations/evidences. For this position, most universities require internal assessor’s report and scoring sheet.
• All required documents are sent out to assessors once they have notified willingness to evaluate.
• Upon receipt of at least two assessors’ report, review is conducted at the faculty and/or university level either by the Screening Committee, Selection Committee, and/or Jawatankuasa Kesepakaran or a combination of these committees.
• Successful applicants attend the interview session.
• The university’s governing body (top management committee or university board) endorses the results.
• The applicants are notified by letter (successful or otherwise).
Issues and Challenges in Academic Promotion - I

- **Different Promotion System within One Salary Structure**
  - Generally, universities in Malaysia have different academic promotion practices and systems. Newly established universities have lower target numbers in the setting of numeric standards. The competition for promotion at research universities is higher than those in other type of universities.
  - As a result, academic mobility benefit the individual academic in terms of rank and salary, it also creates status and credibility distinctions within the public university system.

- **Research vs Teaching**
  - Academics are faced with other conflicting demands: the university’s expectation for commercially viable output, the industry’s need for quality graduates, and the academic’s personal motivation for promotion via extensive research and publication.

- **Globalization and Ranking Phenomena**
  - A way threaten their ‘academic freedom’ whereby academics need to be responsive to market forces, to partake in entrepreneurial activities and to engage in ongoing quality assurance via self-assessment and regulation
  - Performance targets became more important than academic autonomy and dignity
• **Quality vs Quantity**

Issue of quality is critical in universities, faces a crisis of quality. Quantity of teaching, of research grant, supervisions and publications is more important than quality.

• **Lack of Transparency in the Promotion Process**

The process of academic promotion is neither transparent nor very democratic; the critical importance of objective, transparent, defendable, and justifiable criteria for promotion cannot be overemphasized.

• **Academic Corruption**

The reality of “publish or perish; misconduct of academic activities; the pressure to publish may have caused this unethical behavior,”

• **Defining and Evaluating Excellence**

it is time that public universities in Malaysia consider how excellence in promotion criteria is defined, how consistent those definitions are across universities and disciplines and what messages university performance standards send to the candidates for promotion.
• Quality of Institution
Quality of the academic staff in the universities reflect the quality of the universities.

• Balancing the roles of the academics
Academics should be excellence in all areas of their roles as academic. Universities therefore need to reward and promote academics’ creativity, commitment and critical analysis in all these areas.

• Work culture of academics
The university today is no longer an institution that preserves knowledge, but is one that generates it. Academics’ perceptions on promotion criteria, their work is focusing more on what counts for their promotion.

• Change in teacher-student relationship
Malaysian academics tend to believe that excellence in teaching would not help one’s promotion; students would be left on their own with little assistance from the academics.
Leadership and mentoring roles of professors

Current scenario of academic promotion, this arrangement of having professors as mentors should be in place to ensure that the university will be able to retain the academics and prepare them for their career as academic in universities.

Talents as investment

Academics promotion must be part of the institution’s strategic planning for talent management programme; academic promotion mechanisms seem not to be able to stop academics from leaving to private sectors.

Brain drain among academics

This phenomenon seems inevitable because the public universities have several stages to follow to reward their faculty and the process of promotion for academics may even take more than a year before the results are known.
Conclusions

Academic promotion has changed tremendously over the years based on the needs to strengthen the institutions.

Significant improvements on the philosophy of the promotion exercise, the criteria, and the mechanisms lifted to the next level in a highly competitive global higher education ecosystem.

The entire process for application and approval has been more transparent. Academics are now able to tell whether they are due for any promotion and thus strategize well for their promotion applications.

In any systems, there are bound to have its own strength and weaknesses and the institutions and the Ministry of Education are handling the issues and challenges.

Staff are promoted to professor position at much younger age than before since there has never been quota set for promotion.