

## A Cross-Cultural Comparison between United Kingdom and Malaysian Academics' Satisfaction with Academic Research

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### ABSTRAK

*Pada tahun-tahun kebelakangan ini banyak perubahan besar telah berlaku di universiti-universiti di Barat dan di negara-negara sedang membangun. Perubahan-perubahan besar dalam dasar kerajaan di United Kingdom telah mengakibatkan potongan besar sumber kewangan universiti dan seterusnya memberi tekanan ke atas ahli-ahli akademik di negara tersebut. Di negara membangun seperti Malaysia, pendidikan tinggi berkembang di mana ramai dari kakitangannya mendapat pendidikan peringkat ijazah lanjutan di barat. Kertas ini mencuba meninjau kesan-kesan dari faktor-faktor tersebut ke atas sikap ahli-ahli akademik di kedua-dua negara terhadap penyelidikan. Keputusan yang diperolehi menunjukkan bahawa di samping ahli-ahli akademik dari kedua-dua negara mempunyai sikap positif terhadap penglibatan dalam penyelidikan dan menunjukkan pola tindak balas yang sama kepada pengalaman penyelidikan, di dapati masih terdapat perbezaan-perbezaan utama di antara kedua-dua kumpulan akademik ini seperti tahap kepuasan dengan penerbitan dan alasan membuat penyelidikan.*

### ABSTRAK

*In recent years major changes have taken place in universities, both in the west and in developing countries. In the United Kingdom major changes in Government policy have resulted in major cuts in university resources, and subsequently these bring pressure on U.K. academics. In developing countries such as Malaysia, higher education has expanded in recent decades. Institution of higher learning employ most academic staff who have been educated at post graduate level in the west. This paper examines the attitudes of members of staff from Universities in United Kingdom and those from Malaysian universities towards academic research. The result from the study indicate that whilst both academic staff in United Kingdom and Malaysia have high positive attitudes to involvement in research, and they have similar patterns of response to the research experience, they differ such as in the level of satisfaction with regard to publications and reasons for undertaking research.*

## INTRODUCTION

The 1960's and early 1970's were the "golden days" of the British and the American universities. It was followed by the academic great 'depression' period of the 1970's (Riesman, 1971; Gibbons, 1981). The effects of the golden days on university teachers' job satisfaction had been studied by Halsey and Trow (1971) and Startup and Gruneberg (1976). Startup and Gruneberg (1976) examined the attitudes of university teachers to research. One of their main findings was that there is a considerable difference in satisfaction with the qualitative as opposed to quantitative aspects of research, namely publications. While 56.1% were satisfied with the quality of their research, only 27.6% were satisfied with the quantity of what they produced. However, Halsey and Trow (1971) found that about 75% of academics enjoyed positively their research work.

Before 1969 there was only one university in Malaysia which was established in 1949. Between 1969 and 1972 three more universities were established. Two more universities were set up in early 1980's. Thus the 1970's were probably the 'golden days' of the Malaysian universities. Similarly, Malaysia had just been through the economic recession which has its effects on many aspects of the local universities. An important one is the provision of research grants (Crawshaw 1985).

Since a majority of the Malaysian academics received their postgraduate level training in the west (Abdul Halim Othman and Abu Hasan Othman, 1981), two basic questions arise: first what are the attitudes of the Malaysian academics to research in comparison to their United Kingdom counterparts, and secondly, do the present academics in the university in both countries regard their research role as important and satisfactory?

## METHOD

### SUBJECTS

The subjects consist of 278 academics from a provincial university in the United Kingdom covering all faculties except Education and 208 academics from a provincial Malaysian university. The Malaysian samples were drawn from similar faculties to those of the United Kingdom groups. Table 1 gives the distribution of subjects for both countries by faculty, rank, sex and age. Among the Malaysian academics, 89.42% of the Malaysian academics have a Masters or Ph.D. qualification or both from western countries, and 95.2% of them are Malays and Muslims.

TABLE 1. Distribution of subjects of both groups by academic faculty, age category, rank and sex (%)

Country	Faculty			
	Applied Science	Science	Arts	Econ & Soc Studies
United Kingdom (N=278)	29.9	24.1	25.2	20.9
Malaysia (N=208)	40.4	15.9	12.0	31.7
	Age category			
	Below 36	36 - 45	46 - 55	Above 55
United Kingdom (N=278)	16.5	42.4	32.4	8.6
Malaysia (N=208)	49.9	46.6	3.8	0.0
	Rank			
	Lecturers	Sn. Lec/ Asoc Prof	Professors	
United Kingdom (N=278)	62.2	26.3	11.5	
Malaysia (N=208)	78.8	17.8	3.4	
	Sex			
	Male	Female		
United Kingdom (N=278)	92.8	7.2		
Malaysia (N=208)	72.6	27.4		

## DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

A questionnaire which is divided into five sections, dealing with different aspects of the staff's attitudes to work, including research, teaching and administration was administered. The questions are designed to elicit information on the degree of importance of each aspect of the attitude of the staff in relation to the overall job satisfaction and the degree of satisfaction with each aspect. Information on the demographic background such as age, sex, and the academic faculty and rank of the individual staff were also collected. As a cross-cultural study, the questionnaire was back translated before use in Malaysia as proposed by Brislin (1970).

The questionnaire was distributed to each sample by the first author at which point the samples were briefed on the first author's academic background and his reasons for carrying out the research. A future meeting

was arranged at this time in order to collect the completed questionnaires and to illicit further details from the respondents. The procedure elicited a response rate of 90.85% for the United Kingdom academics, compared to the 52% response rate obtained by Startup and Gruneberg (1976) in their study of job satisfaction of academics in the same United Kingdom institution, using an internal postal questionnaire. In the present study differences between United Kingdom and the Malaysian academics with respect to their attitudes to research, especially on the importance of satisfaction with research involvement, with the quality and quantity of publications, and the reasons for undertaking research were analysed.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The majority of both the United Kingdom and Malaysian academics regard research involvement as important to their overall job satisfaction [ $t(480) = 0.69, p > 0.05$ ; see Table 2] This is true for all ranks and faculties, with the more senior in rank placing greater importance on research involvement [ $F(2,272) = 11.28, p < 0.001$ ]. It is thus shown whatever the underlying cultural differences between the United Kingdom and the Malaysian, academic staff place research involvement as important

TABLE 2. Importance of research involvement by country (%)

Importance of research involvement	UK (N = 275)	Malaysia (N = 207)
Very unimportant	1.8	0.5
Unimportant	3.6	3.9
Neither	16.0	11.6
Important	34.5	42.5
Very important	44.0	41.5
Mean on 5-point-scale	4.15	4.21

Historical reasons partly explain the pattern. Having been a former United Kingdom colony, the Malaysian higher education system, to some extent, has been set up by the British on the United Kingdom lines (Selvaratnam, 1985). One would expect that some similarities in the views of the Malaysian academic to the United Kingdom academics. Apart from that, the responses could be a reflection of the fact that majority of Malaysian academics are educated in the West (Abdul Halim Othman and Abu Hasan Othman, 1981). In the present study, 89.42% of the Malaysian

subjects received their postgraduate training in Western universities. Thus Malaysian universities find themselves in a position of dependency towards industrialized nations (Abdul Halim Othman & Abu Hasan Othman 1981).

The similarity in values towards research involvement of both groups of academics is consistent with the "traditionalism or modernity" value structure proposed by Barrett and Bass (1976). According to the value structure, the greater the degree of western education, the more likely are individuals from the developing world to take on western values. The traditionalism or modernity value structure is supported by Orphen (1978) who had shown that Western-oriented black employees accept the major tenets of the Protestant Ethic to a greater extent than those of the tribal-oriented group. However, more detailed analysis on their reasons for involving themselves in research, shows that there are major differences and similarities in relation to the research experience of United Kingdom and Malaysian academics.

As Startup and Gruneberg (1976) point out, one of the major areas of satisfaction with research is the publication process. Here, differences between Malaysian and United Kingdom academics emerge as shown in Table 3 [ $t(477) = 3.88, p < 0.001$ ]. Not surprisingly, United Kingdom academics publish significantly more than Malaysian academics [ $t(451) = 6.26, p < 0.001$ ; see Table 4] and such differences are not related to age ( $p > 0.05$ ). In other words, at each age group, significant differences between United Kingdom and Malaysian academics are evident in terms of amount published. With the United Kingdom group, however, the publication rate is related to faculty [ $F(3,251) = 13.46, p < 0.001$ ] and rank [ $F(2,252) = 70.37, p < 0.001$ ], with the science faculty publishing significantly more than other faculties. For the Malaysian group, such differences are present only for rank [ $F(2,195) = 46.71, p < 0.001$ ].

TABLE 3. Satisfaction with publications by country (%)

Satisfaction with publications	UK (N = 275)	Malaysia (N = 204)
Very dissatisfied	3.6	6.4
Dissatisfied	13.1	25.0
Neither	40.0	37.7
Satisfied	36.4	27.5
Very satisfied	6.9	3.4
Mean on 5-point-scale	3.30	2.96

TABLE 4. Publications output by country (%)

No. of articles	K (N = 255)	Malaysia (N = 198)
Less than 6	20.0	55.1
6 – 11	17.6	15.7
12 – 20	18.4	17.2
More than 20	43.9	12.1
Mean of articles	28.8	11.3

These findings on the United Kingdom group are consistent with those of Startup and Gruneberg (1976) and Halsey and Trow (1971). It is reasonable to suppose that national differences in the rate of publication reflect language problems and the lack of access of Malaysian academics to major western journals, editors and colleagues in the west, a factor likely to be true of all faculties. Generally, Malaysian journals are published once a year and are unlikely therefore to allow large scale publication of Malaysian output. Possibly too, differing criteria and procedures for promotion with less emphasis placed on publication for promotion in Malaysia (Mohd Taib Osman 1985: 1986) may be responsible for less emphasis on publications in the Malaysian group.

The difference between the Malaysian and United Kingdom rates of publication is possibly reflected in the answer to these questions:

1. How satisfied are you with the quality of your publications? and
2. How satisfied are you with the quantity of your publications?

As can be seen in Tables 5 and 6, there are major differences between the United Kingdom and Malaysian academics with respect to the answers to both questions. As far as satisfaction with quality is concerned, differences between United Kingdom and the Malaysian academics exist in all faculties and all ranks with United Kingdom academics reporting significantly higher satisfaction to this aspect ( $p < 0.001$ ). Again overall, United Kingdom academics are significantly more satisfied with the quantity of their output than their Malaysian counterparts [ $t(480) = 4.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. This is not surprising in view of their significantly greater output as shown earlier.

However, the differences between United Kingdom and Malaysian academics, whilst substantial, are not so marked with respect to satisfaction with quantity, with little difference between the faculties or between ranks. In absolute terms, the differences between responses to

TABLE 5. Satisfaction with the quality publications by country (%)

Satisfaction with publications	UK (N = 275)	Malaysia (N = 201)
Very dissatisfied	1.1	7.5
Dissatisfied	6.2	15.4
Neither	30.5	44.3
Satisfied	45.8	27.4
Very satisfied	16.4	5.5
Mean on 5-point-scale	3.70	3.08

TABLE 6. Satisfaction with the quantity of publications by country (%)

Satisfaction with publications	UK (N = 277)	Malaysia (N = 205)
Very dissatisfied	8.3	15.1
Dissatisfied	24.2	34.6
Neither	33.6	29.8
Satisfied	26.0	18.5
Very satisfied	7.9	2.0
Mean on 5-point-scale	3.00	2.58

quality and quantity of publication is strikingly similar for both groups. For both groups of lecturers, satisfaction with quality, for example, is roughly twice that of satisfaction with quantity, with only 13.0% of Malaysian and 22.1% of United Kingdom lecturers actually satisfied with the quantity of their output, compared to 28.0% of Malaysian and 51.2% of United Kingdom lecturers actually satisfied with the quality of their output.

Startup and Gruneberg (1976) found similar findings in their study of United Kingdom academics in the same institution, with only 27.6% satisfied with quantity and 56.1% satisfied with the quality of their publications. These results suggest that whatever else, the pressures of recent changes in universities on this aspect of the research experience has remained relatively stable.

As Startup and Gruneberg (1976) noted, it is likely that when it comes to making an assessment of research, the individual is likely to see a greater association between personal capabilities and quality of work. Quantity, it can be suggested, is much more likely to be seen to be affected by factors outside the individual's control, such as pressure of teaching and other work. To this extent, therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that individuals report greater satisfaction with quality of research, reflecting their own personal capabilities.

Given that Malaysian academics are less satisfied with the publication experience, it is not clear why Malaysian academics should regard publications in general, as more important to their overall job satisfaction than United Kingdom academics [ $t(475) = 4.23, p < .001$ ; Table 7]. Perhaps the grass on the other side of the fence is greener, the United Kingdom academics having achieved a higher rate of publication realise that other performance measures of research are now considered of greater significance by university authorities e.g. research funding. On the other hand, it may reflect the differing attitudes of United Kingdom and Malaysian academics towards research. Their reasons for undertaking research would indicate their attitudes towards research.

TABLE 7. Importance of publications by country (%)

Importance of publications	UK (N= 274)	Malaysia (N= 203)
Very unimportant	4.7	0.5
Unimportant	7.7	4.9
Neither	24.8	13.3
Important	35.8	44.8
Very important	27.0	36.5
Mean on 5-point-scale	3.73	4.12

It can be seen from Table 8 that there are significant differences in respect of the importance of reasons for undertaking research. These differences suggest underlying cultural differences. In particular, the largest difference between the two groups is in terms of "obligation" ( $p < 0.001$ ). It is not unreasonable to suggest that this difference reflects the emphasis in Malay/Muslim culture on service and obligation and the lesser emphasis on enjoyment, given as the prime reason for undertaking research by UK academics. According to Mahathir Mohamad (1970), the Malays regard it as luxurious and wastage. Moreover, he describes the Malay values on pleasure and duty, as follows:



Hedonism as such has no place in the Malay code of ethics. Pleasure, whether physical or mental is considered base. Nothing is done for the sake of pleasure alone. To serve one's fellowman may give satisfaction and pleasure, but that is why a Malay should be of service to others. It is only duty and propriety which move him. The moving force is to appear right in the eyes of God and man. In other words, a deed is done because it is proper and not because it is pleasant or because it gives one the pleasure of achievement. Physical pleasure is regarded as lowly and must be suppressed or at least hidden. (p. 157)

However, it would be a mistake to assume that the Malaysian academics do not find enjoyment for doing research. In absolute terms the enjoyment reason is still important to them as shown in Table 8. The table shows that the mean score for the enjoyment reason of the Malaysian subjects on a five-point-scale is 4 where one stands for very unimportant and 5 for very important. Also, for faculties and ranks, the reason is not significantly different between the United Kingdom and Malaysian groups. Interestingly enough, enjoyment was the prime reason given by the United Kingdom group reported by Startup and Gruneberg on a study in the same institution in 1976. Despite all the pressures in the intervening years, at least this positive reason for undertaking research does not appear to have changed.

TABLE 8. Test of significant differences in research reasons of Malaysian and UK academics

Research reasons	UK			Malaysia			t
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
Knowledge advancement	276	4.2	1.0	208	4.5	0.9	- 3.29***
Financial reward	275	1.9	1.1	207	2.7	1.2	- 8.21***
Prestige	276	3.4	1.1	207	3.7	1.1	- 3.13**
Promotion	274	3.3	1.2	208	3.7	1.0	- 3.62***
Obligation	275	2.8	1.4	206	4.1	0.9	- 11.35***
Enjoyment	276	4.4	0.8	208	4.0	1.0	5.00***

Note: N = Number of subjects; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation

\*\* p < .01 ; \*\*\* p < .001

It would in fact be very surprising if no major differences between the United Kingdom and Malaysian groups emerged. Even allowing for the fact that many Malaysian academics are educated in the west, not only are there cultural differences in the context of research, there are structural differences which are likely to affect attitudes to research. Thus the United Kingdom group spends significantly more time on research (on average 12.5 hours for United Kingdom compared to 6 hours for the Malaysian

group,  $p < 0.001$ ). On the other hand there appear to be no significant difference on the number of hours spent on teaching and administration. Thus United Kingdom academics spend relatively more time on research relative to teaching than their Malaysian counterparts. Again there is greater emphasis in Malaysia on administrative criteria for promotion (Mohd Taib Osman 1985; 1986). This might in fact be changing as the Malaysian Minister of Education has recently requested Malaysian universities to base promotion on publications (Editorial 1987).

One interesting structural difference is in terms of sex ratio, with only 7.4% of the United Kingdom sample being female, compared to 28.8% of the Malaysians. This difference in ratio however does not account for differences in patterns of results as between the United Kingdom and Malaysian groups overall. As revealed by t-test results, there are no significant difference between males and females academics of both groups in all aspects of research studied. Again age patterns are different as between the United Kingdom and Malaysian groups with the United Kingdom group being significantly older ( $p < 0.001$ , Table 1). Again, however as for the sex differences, age differences *per se* do not account for differences in patterns of results overall as between the United Kingdom and Malaysian academics. Apart from a significant increase in the number of publications with age for both United Kingdom and Malaysian academics, there are no significant differences for the United Kingdom or Malaysian group on attitudes to research related to age.

Perhaps the most worrying feature of the present study is that both groups are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their research involvement in relation to overall job satisfaction (Table 9) despite, as noted earlier, both groups regard research involvement as being important to their overall job satisfaction. Presumably satisfaction with research involvement reflects satisfaction with research progress, which in turn reflects satisfaction with progress on the fruits of research publication.

TABLE 9. Satisfaction with research involvement by country (%)

Satisfaction with research involvement	UK (N = 277)	Malaysia (N = 205)
Very dissatisfied	2.9	2.9
Dissatisfied	17.7	19.0
Neither	32.1	42.0
Satisfied	33.6	29.3
Very satisfied	13.7	6.8
Mean on 5-point-scale	3.37	3.18

Obviously suggesting reasons for this lack of satisfaction with research involvement is somewhat speculative, but it is at least possible that pressures to publish and perceived failure to publish in sufficient quantity lead to feelings of frustration. This failure might be due to a number of factors, including in the United Kingdom, staff cuts causing greater teaching loads, and in the Malaysian context, a greater institutional emphasis on teaching and administration (Mohd Taib Osman 1985; 1986).

The results of this study point to two major conclusions as far as attitudes of United Kingdom and Malaysian academics are concerned. In the first place, a comparison of UK academic attitude to research in 1972 and now shows a remarkable consistency, despite enormous changes in resources and political and other pressures. Whilst the present study was conducted before the University Grants Committee's public assessment of research in the United Kingdom which appears to have had a major affect on lowering job satisfaction (Arifin Zainal & M.M. Gruneberg 1987), changes between 1972 and the present study were nevertheless considerable in terms of reduced resources. The results therefore support the view that the academic community is resilient to all but the most dramatic pressure for change, as far as attitudes to research are concerned.

The second conclusion to be drawn is that despite major cultural differences between United Kingdom and Malaysian academics, and despite completely different university structures and reward systems, the similarities between the two groups are much more striking with respect to attitudes to research than are the differences. Both groups are, on the whole, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their research involvement, both regard research involvement as important, both are dissatisfied with the quantity of their research publications and both are significantly more satisfied with the quality of their output.

Whilst the absolute levels of satisfaction differ between the two groups, this can probably be accounted for by their differing publication rate. Of course there are differences (notably in the perceived importance of obligation as a reason for undertaking research), and the perceived importance of publications to overall job satisfaction, but these are perhaps less salient than the similarities in patterns of response. It seems reasonable to conclude that the western influence on attitudes to research has to a large extent taken root in the Malaysian university culture. It seems likely, however, that the greater difficulties that Malaysian academics face in relation to the publication process results in greater frustration and job dissatisfaction with the research process for whatever reason, as evidenced by their lower satisfaction with both quality and quantity of research output.

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