Uniqueness of Career in Academia: Experience of High-Flying Women Academics

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ABSTRACT

Thriving towards a successful career is full of experiences. The experiences are dependent on the nature of the job, context and its interplay with life. The description on a career is further intensified when the issue of gender is incorporated. Especially among women who have been involved heavily as educators, there is a dearth of knowledge on what makes them excel in the field of higher education. Based on a career history research involving 31 high-flying women academics (HFWAs) from eight Malaysian institutions of higher learning, this paper describes their career development experiences right from their status of young academics to the present status of professors. Specifically, it points to the uniqueness of academic career as they perceived where within it they grew and developed their career.

INTRODUCTION

The academic career system has unique features, which made it dissimilar from other career systems. The uniqueness has led to the innovativeness of its paradigm as indicated by concepts such as protean career (Hall, 1976, 1986), boundaryless career (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) and intelligent career (Arthur, Claman & DeFillippi, 1995). All those features point to the fact that there is dynamism in theory and practice of career.

Succeeding in an academic career requires extra efforts from academics especially when it refers to women academics. Although academia is a fertile ground for women to develop their career, striving towards academic excellence is not a plain sailing. It is full of excitements, challenges and hurdles before they can reach the highest echelon in academia, i.e. the professoriate. Despite the small number of woman professors compared to men in the academia, there has been an increase in the percentage of woman professors during the last decade. The percentage of women professors in the Commonwealth countries increased to an average of 13.1 percent in 2000 (Singh, 2002) from 10 percent in 1997 (Lund, 1998). As for Malaysia, interestingly, there was an upward trend in the absolute number of woman professors at the 17 public universities: 28 (9.6 percent) in 1997 (Lund, 1998) and 77 (16.9 percent) in 2000 (Singh, 2002). A recent statistic of professors by gender in all public universities in Malaysia shows that women professors made up 22.1 percent of all professors in 2004, that gives a ratio of 3:1 men and women professors.

However, not much is known about the experiences of women academics’ especially those who have reached the professorial position at an earlier age compared to the rest. Therefore, this article reports a study the aim of which is to find answer to this research question, “What makes an academia a fertile ground for the high-flying women to develop their career?” In other words, “What makes an academia unique to women academics so as they are able to exercise responsibilities in an excellent manner?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand the intrinsic nature of the work in academe, Arthur, Claman and DeFillippi (1995) and Baruch (2004) have introduced the concept of intelligent career of academia. This new concept further enhances the uniqueness of academic role in the academia. It is based on three intrinsic nature of the work, namely knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom. Knowing why is the mental ability to explore, to be scientific, and to use innovative competencies. This is especially relevant to tasks in research. Knowing how is the competencies that involve emotional
intelligence and the ability to develop strategic procedures in conducting teaching and research especially towards long-term endurance. In order to make teaching lively and interesting, the academics should continuously update the teaching contents using latest knowledge and best practices. Knowing whom is associated with the ability to establish connection and networking. This professional relationship with the right person and time occurs locally such as within an organization or inter-organizations, or internationally. It essentially takes time to develop unless one has already made networking during their years of graduate education or post-graduate program abroad. In essence, the intelligent career refers to the fact that one knows how to work smart in academia and points to the significance of the three-fold functions in academia plus other developmental roles such as administration in higher education, academic governance and the establishment of university-industry partnership.

In any career development, career can be explained in terms of speed, that is, whether it is a fast-track or high-flying career, slow or stagnant career, or a situation in which one experiences ups and downs in his or her quest for greater achievement. Based on Johnson’s (1990) definition, this study operationalises HFWAs as young, upwardly mobile women lecturers who are often equipped with good track records on their way to top hierarchy in academia. Their ability to move fast and to seize opportunities in their career progression is a distinct quality of a high-flyer, hence suggesting that the concept of high-flyer is time related. Therefore age as an aspect of time is one of the measures of success for the high-flyers. Studies by Powell and Mainiero (1992) and Altman (1997) assert that one’s career is highly influenced by age. Due to the centrality of career and age, the phases of career are analysed practically within a process of incorporating job status and performance against time.

Super’s (1990) classical model of developmental stage of career which outlines the four career stages i.e. exploration (14–24 years), establishment (25–45 years), maintenance (46–56 years) and decline (above 56 years); and Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson and Mckee’s (1978) life span model of adult development which categorizes the four life stages namely childhood (below 20 years), early adulthood (20–40 years), middle adulthood (40–60 years) and late adulthood (over 60 years) were adopted in this study, for they capture a complete understanding of career development. When comparing between two models of career, the age category of 40–60 years resembles the stages of establishment and maintenance. A person is considered as a high-flyer if he or she is in the ‘establishment stage’ and about to enter into the ‘maintenance stage’ at a faster rate than an average person. In the academia, this is synonymous to one who reaches his or her professorship or the ‘establishment stage’ at an unusually earlier age, allowing the person to be in the ‘maintenance stage’ longer before approaching retirement or ‘decline stage’, that is before the age of 56 years in the Malaysian context.

It is also obvious that there has also been an unexplored link between the multiple forces governing one’s career context and the career mobility as well as development of woman academics. Furthermore, the academic literature suggested that there is a need for women academics to voice their experiences not only on their role expectations, issues related to gender accessibility to management and leadership, promotions and career mobility but also on questions of the influence of the context of academia to their promotion and career mobility. This is important as Morley and Walsh (1995) suggest, women academics should demonstrate how social and psychological development as well as the organizational climate of the academia occur simultaneously and do influence their dynamism in the academia. Hence, this paper is an attempt to put forward the issues.

THE CAREER-HISTORY STUDY

The data generated from this study were based on career-history method. Career history is essentially the description on career action resulting from an interplay between life and career activities. This study sample consists of women professors who are so called high-flying women academics (HFWAs), chosen based on a single criterion that they achieved their professorship at the age of 48 years old and below. These women professors come from seven established public universities and one private university in Malaysia, representing various fields of specialization in the fundamental and applied sciences, as well as social sciences. Forty eight years old was chosen as the cut-off point because this is the average age of population of men and women academics in Malaysia to get their professorship. Since
the focus of the study is on the women with established career, 48 years of age is reasonably taken as White (1995) hypothesizes that 40 to 50 years as the age of achievement and rebalancing.

The names of the respondents were obtained from the registrar office of the respective universities, and then categorized according to their age at the appointment of their professor position. A total of 78 respondents were selected and then contacted to invite them to participate. Thirty-one women professors were interviewed, as the data obtained were believed to reach the saturation point. A recorder-cum-transcriber was used to facilitate the interviews and the transcribing processes. A total of 42 hours of recorded interviews were later transcribed verbatim. Constant comparative analysis of data (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) was conducted to generate themes as they relate to respondents’ academic experience and its contribution to their career success. This method involved deriving themes from one part of the data and testing them on another by constant checking and comparison across different respondents. In the analysis, each respondent was numbered from Respondent 1(R1) to Respondent 31 (R31) according to the sequence of the interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the Respondents

The respondents’ average age is 49.6 years, with 41 as the youngest and 60 as the oldest. The average age at which they were promoted to the position of professor is 44.5 years with a mode of 45 years. All respondents are married with one respondent who is a single mother due to death of her husband and another respondent is separated. The average family size is 5.6, with 18 respondents (58.1 percent) having 1-3 children, 7 respondents (22.6 percent) having 4-5 children, and 6 respondents (19.4 percent) having 6-8 children. Twenty-four of the respondents are specialized in the fields of technical sciences such as food science (2), chemistry (3), molecular biology (1), medicine (6), solar energy (1), engineering (3), veterinary science (1), agriculture (1), biochemistry (2), taxonomy and ecology (1), environmental biology (1), pharmacy (1), and aquatic ecology (1). Only seven respondents are in social sciences such as education (2), Malay studies (1), social and town planning (1), management (1), psychology (1) and economy (1). The majority of the respondents studied in non-coed or girls-only schools during their primary or secondary education. All respondents are full-time staff of the universities.

This study generates themes based on the uniqueness of academic career as experienced by the HFWAs. The uniqueness means their strong belief in the specialty of academic career as they love it so much and would make it as a career for life. The themes and the discussion are as follows:

(1) Teaching is a noble duty

In academia, teaching seems to be first priority, followed by research. Related to this, Zimmerman (2006) believes that a strong commitment to the classroom will affect their chances for promotion. For the HFWAs, they appeared to accept teaching as a noble duty, in which they formed their own teaching philosophy. By doing so, it affects how they develop lessons and how they treat their students.

When I was a young lecturer, I had to teach about nine courses since at that time, everybody was doing their Ph.D. So I didn’t publish. However, I did supervise many students. I think I just did teaching for about six years. Actually it is not easy to describe about my teaching experience, but I think it is wonderful. Moreover, I have my own way of teaching students. To me, a good lecturer is someone who makes things simple. I think as a lecturer even as a school teacher, we must have the sense of responsibility to develop people. A good teacher also should be proud to have better students and at the end of the day, the students are better than him or her. But it is energy demanding. (R12, taxonomy and ecology).

An academic should not only concern with the understanding of the course material, but also with the variety of styles necessary to cater to such a diverse types of students. Realizing this, Tucker (2006) stresses that educators should not just teach the content of courses but they should teach students how to become effective learners and guide them in honing their critical-thinking skills. This is another task that seems to make the academic task is admirable.

I like teaching and being a lecturer, I really enjoy it. May be because I was used to be on-stage speaker during my schooling days. I also get along with the students very well. I made a point that students could come and see me at any
time. I don’t have certain time for them. If they want to call me even at 10 o’clock at night, they may do so. I always encouraged my students to write as what I have experienced before during my student’s days. (R21, chemistry).

(2) High value of research and publication

The theme on high value of research and publication has three sub-themes. First, is the active involvement in research and publication and; Second, research is for improvement in teaching, and; Third, research impact to society at large.

(a) Active involvement in research and publication

Poole and Bornholt (1998) and Shaw (2004) suggest that research and publications are highly valued in assisting academic career advancement in comparison to other community services. Data also show that their outstanding performance in research and publication has brought impact to their career development.

Whatever the outputs are in research or writing... not everybody has the same skills. Nowadays we require visible outputs, which can be in any form, it may be books or research articles or any form of outcome. Administrative positions alone are not enough any more and, as I said, my promotion was mainly due to my books. (R3, management).

Above all, the respondents found their profession in the academia enjoyable and challenging. According to Nauta, Epperson and Kahn (1998), ability and self-efficacy have very much influenced the higher levels of career aspirations of these HFWAs. They garner competitive funding, publish refereed articles in the top-tier journals in their fields, and develop national reputations for their disciplinary research. Indeed, funding that comes into the universities is linked to their performance in research.

So far, I think I had involved in at least ten research projects. At the moment I have two IRPA projects. The National Unity Department keeps asking me to take on some projects for them in which I have to come out with a proposal. Then I was in the population base study on men’s health which I just completed. It covered a big population. (R14, psychology).

(b) Research for improvement in teaching

The respondents repeatedly mentioned the challenge of integrating quality teaching and research inputs into their curricula and they perceived it as their continuing professional development. In order to improve teaching quality, they give strong emphasis on active research input in order to be up-to-date with the current changes in their field. According to Peter and Giorgio (2005), the extent of teaching quality can influence the variations in the employability of taught graduates.

I was the first in Malaysia to do quantitative day-lighting. Architects were more to design where as mine was actually to measuring. I did the field work, computer simulation and lots of other things. At the same time, I was involved in writing a book for the students. In three years, I managed to get two books. The fact that I cannot detach myself from education had made me work with my colleagues. As such, we presented many papers on science education. Currently, I have a research grant and I still do teaching for four hours per week. I enjoyed teaching and I felt that there is no point I did research if I didn’t pass the new knowledge to my own students. Besides that, I am supervising postgraduate students, too. It is easy to get them because I have projects. (R5, solar energy).

(c) Research impact to society at large

The academic setting has a unique and expanding niche in the area of investigation through various research works. The research are maneuvered towards development and to some extent it will lead to another scientific discovery. All research findings are meant to bring positive societal impact. The respondents make sure that they go beyond the line of expectations in terms of doing their tasks. It is such a special quality that makes them different from others.

I made the discovery which was a contribution to sciences, until today. This scientific discovery was on the way to diagnose a very serious disease which killed many children. So we need a faster method to diagnose it. I learnt about the technology transformation to make the test faster and we came up with a diagnostic kit. Then we patented it and the kit is now in the market and it is making lots of money. It has been sold to more than twelve countries around the world and the impact was very good. (R22, molecular medicine).
(3) Academic-cum-administrator

The theme on academic-cum-administrator is divided into two sub-themes. First, opportunity to exercise leadership; and second, and encouraging image of women academics.

(a) Opportunity to exercise leadership

Involvement in administrative function takes quality leadership to guide and direct a group of professionals to move forward in goal attainment. According to Scott (2005), leadership quality and balance is also reflected by vigour and rigour. Respondents unanimously admitted that the high performing academics are in their best position to exercise leadership in their respective universities.

When he (the former director) was leaving, he called me up and said, “I think it is time for you to be a director...”. I accepted the post but I told him that there will be some changes. I am not the person who likes to follow what other people did. He conceded that I can be creative as long as it is good. So I took the challenge. (R21, chemistry).

Besides teaching and doing research, the academic duty is unique in the sense that they should do administrative role at the department or faculty or even university. Being an academic-cum-administrator, they have to juggle their time wisely because the respondents realized that at the end of the day, their scholarship performance that matters. This is also an advantage for women academic, as they always juggle their time with multiple tasks in both work and non-work spheres.

When I came back from my doctoral study, I had to be the head of department because in those days there were not many lecturers with Ph.D. So I had to start everything from scratch... I have to set up the laboratory. I did write papers and most of the papers were written from my Ph.D. work as well as my previous work which I didn’t have time to write. I found out later that in terms of career it paid off. (R17, aquatic ecology).

(b) An encouraging image for women academics

A highly visible female administrator would provide encouragement and support for other women academics who made it to management ranks. It would also signal that the university is serious about improving gender equity. Kloot (2004) points out the expected cascade effect i.e. as the organization provides support and encouragement to women academics who attain administrative position, so those women administrators would provide role models, goals and encouragement for other women academics.

My target was to uplift the status of the department, so that it is reputable as others or better than other faculties. So I worked very hard in that sense. They called me iron lady but I couldn’t care less. I have my aspiration of what I want to do with my department. So much of brushing shoulders with the men. In research, I was also writing and presenting papers like any other academics who were not in the administrative positions. (R24, education).

(4) International networking

Richardson and McKenna (2003) view strongly that international experiences are becoming more valuable in building and sustaining a reputation through networking, writing and research. They further assert that internationalization of academic function brings benefit in terms of new skills and goal practices, better research networks and enhanced communication skills. Almost all respondents did mention that international networking was a crucial effort in consolidating their career.

You need to project yourself internationally. There is no point in you being known here, but not known outside. For me, I’m more known outside as well in the field of social culture, not a theatre person per say. Here, it is more on theatre... Because my projection overseas is more on cultural elements surrounding theatre and theatrical arts. So I project a lot of the country’s image. Last year I was in Russia presenting a paper. I also went to Hungary and New Zealand. As for the international organization, I am the secretary general for Asia-Eastern region. I am also involved in non-government organizations. (R11, Malay studies).

(5) Sabbatical leave

One of the most attractive provisions in academic line savoured by these women academics is their sabbatical leave. Baruch and Hall (2004) refer to sabbatical leave as one of the specific characteristics of academia. They add that sabbatical leave adds to the notion of intelligent career in the academia. Sabbatical leave is usually offered by universities to their academic staff after they have completed a certain tenure. It allows them to take a break away from
teaching and administrative routines in any semester and to engage on any teaching or research project in order to strengthen one’s scholarship. The HFWAs regard it as a period of self and career renewal in the journey of career development.

I had three sabbaticals. The first time I spent six months on breast surgery overseas. The second one, I went to Edinburgh to look at their breast clinic, how it was set up and run. The third one, I went to Australia because I thought that I have enough experience in the UK, I might as well go to the other side of the world. (R6, medicine).

(6) Involvement in professional training and consultancy

Academic work has also allowed respondents to be involved in training services. In a way, doing such services have many advantages, such as a mechanism for the respondents to get relevant inputs to be used in the lecture and, thus, to become more visible among the practitioners and university management.

I did a lot of training services. It is an area that requires energy; despite that, it also helps my teaching. It is the only way of contacting people out there. When the training participants told me their stories, I will adapt and use them in my lecture. It helps the students to have a realistic picture and I found that this element was lacking in many lecturers. (R3, management).

(7) Received multiple awards (teaching, research and services)

It has also been observed that many respondents received awards during their establishment and maintenance stages of their career. This is a testimony to their outstanding performance. It is further convinced that the academia is a field where multiple options of recognition could be found such as in teaching, research and publication, as well as in services. The respondents in this study are noted for their string of awards they received during their tenure as academics.

Now, I am the role model in the university… So far, I have received 35 awards at national and international levels. They are many types of awards including the national inventor and best woman inventor awards. Until today, I have 25 patents but it doesn’t stop there. So most people said that I am a tough example to follow. (R22, molecular medicine).

CONCLUSION

The academic role that was perceived as unique and special to this group of HFWAs requires initiative, strategy, stamina and strong determination from each woman academic. The academics have the knowledge and skills how to get along with their peers, to balance research, teaching and services, and to know skills in time management. They experienced that the academia is not only a place for them to exercise role in teaching, research and publication, but also to show the ability as a leader or an administrator. The HFWAs were able to capitalize on the provisions provided by the universities for professional development purposes such as the sabbatical leave, involvement in international engagements such as participation at conferences and workshops in order to strengthen networking, and involvement in professional training and consultancies. Their career aspiration towards moving to a greater height in their career has guided them throughout their career development. They consciously acknowledged there is a uniqueness of academic role in which they enjoyed the three-in-one functions of teaching, research and services.

From the gender perspective, the group of HFWAs have challenged the traditional organizational structure characterized by the domination of men at the higher organizational rank. The article also concludes that the HFWAs have, to certain extent, rejected the typical pattern of women’s career of being flexible, transitory and temporary in nature. This group of HFWAs have to certain extent, improved the image of working women that they, too, are able to perform like the men. It could be implied that to be a high-flyer in the academia, the women have to work like what men could do without giving up their feminine characteristics because they are still perceived to exercise their normal duties as mothers, wives, and professionals.
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