

# Towards a Sustainable Employment Relationship for Public Universities in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the workplace partnership practices in Malaysia through the Academic Staff Associations (AJCC) at a public universities in Malaysia. Extensive literature have argued that workplace partnership such as the JCC has the capacity to increase job satisfaction, reduce industrial disharmony, increase organizational commitment and improve employee relations in general. The study is focusing on two aspects; (i) the importance of workplace partnership mechanism in public universities in Malaysia; and (ii) the influence of the workplace partnership practice to the organizational decision making in public universities in Malaysia. This study employs qualitative case studies in which interviews were conducted at the respective universities. However, the study reveals that a loose partnership arrangement existed between the Academic JCCs-management and vice versa. This study has established that the desire to move forward is being felt but still concerned with who is the authority (power). As long as this power issue is the case, this research argues that the management will continue to make final decisions; thus will preserve its supremacy as the single authority in public universities in Malaysia. The result warrants some amendments toward the current policy with regards to the role and function of the Academic JCCs because it is important for the two parties to work in partnership instead of being treated as separate entities in organizations. This study recommends a new form of partnership in order for sustainable partnership arrangements for a better working environment.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights on the emerging issues of the workplace partnership (WP) at a public universities in Malaysia with special emphasis on JCC particularly the Academic Staff Association (Academic JCC). The objectives of this paper are (i) to analyse the importance of the workplace partnership mechanism in public universities in Malaysia; and (ii) to evaluate the influence of the workplace partnership practice to the organizational decision making in public universities, whilst addressing their limitation and subsequently to recommend a new form of a sustainable workplace partnership.

WP is not new because it has been placed in all twenty public universities in Malaysia in accordance with the Service Circular No. 2 Year 1992 respectively (Ab Rahman et al., 2015). However, the role and function of the Academic JCC has not been improved; thus was still being managed the

traditional manner (Gollan & Lewin, 2013). In the current business exposure, a stronger and bolder WP is urgently required in order to turn the Academic JCC into a valuable indirect participation mechanism for both management and the academic in public universities environment. Additionally, research on WP particularly the Academic JCCs in public universities is still lacking. Subsequently, is the need to benchmark the workplace partnership arrangements with the developed countries such as in the Western Europe (Ab Rahman, 2019). Lastly is to determine factors that hinder the Academic JCC to move forward to be relevant for a sustainable employer-employee relationship..

## 2 THEORETICAL

There are two model to be reviewed with regards to the study of JCC as the preferred workplace partnership. According to Marchington (1992) the

JCC Model consists of five specific elements namely objective, subject matter, consultation, power, and membership were often used to understand how the element interact and relates at the operational level (Ab Rahman, 2019). Subsequent to that, the ability of the Academic JCC to have a say in meetings can be seen through four models of consultation. Firstly, An Adjunct to Collective Bargaining (CB). Secondly, Marginal to CB. Thirdly, Competing to CB; Fourthly, An Adjunct to CB. The JCCs is rather a compliment rather than a threat to unions due to the common goals between both in organization.

### 3 METHOD

The methodology applied was qualitative case study design using in-depth interviews. The interviews were compiled in the thematic manner, triangulated and transcript into verbatim data. However, for the purpose of this paper, it is only presenting the views of the President and the Honorary Secretary as the key informants of the Academic JCC from a public university. For ethical reasons, the name of the public university will not be revealed.

### 4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings based on the research objectives.

#### 4.1. The Importance of workplace Partnership in UniA

The Academic JCC is a platform for information and communication in public universities environment. It is a formal communication system between management and the academics mainly to discuss on work and work methods. The platform enables the management to meet the academics on regular basis in order to exchange views and utilizes member's knowledge and expertise in dealing with common interest; however matters concerning policy, procedures and regulations are the subject not to be touched by the Academic JCC. In other words, the Academic JCC ultimate purpose is to serve the members; therefore it became important to the academics at large. "The AJCC is an avenue for the academics to meet, discuss and share of ideas with the management for the benefit of the members; to us, this avenue is important" President, 5 Sept 2016.

In sum, it can be analyzed that the Academic JCC was seen to be an important platform for the academics in UniA. Subsequently, further questions

related to the importance of the Academic JCC were asked and been arranged thematically as follows:

#### (a) *Academic JCC Leadership in UniA*

Leadership is one aspect that is important to determine a good and effective voice that able to influence the organizational culture. "The good relationship with the management is not new. The previous leadership has left us with a good foundation for us to move effectively" Honorary Secretary, 7 September 2016.

In sum, it can be concluded that strong Academic JCC leadership of UniA was due to the support received from the previous leadership and continue receiving their support at present.

#### (b) *Benefit of Strong Academic JCC leadership that influenced the organisational culture of UniA*

Having strong Academic JCC leadership can be determine through the support received from the management. This can be seen through the good relationship with the management. "I have good support from the management and the VC. Whenever he calls me, it means he wants my support before making any decisions" President, 8 May 2015.

It can be analyzed that there are benefits that can be gained for being strong Academic JCC. In these case studies, the support for the Academic JCC in UniA was excellent.

Subsequently, a related question arising to the benefits of having a strong leadership among the Academic JCC. "If we need to go for leadership training, flight and accommodation, time-off is granted to us. On top of that, we are also eligible to claim for subsistence allowance" Honorary Secretary, 7 September 2016.

The Academic JCC in UniA receiving air ticket, accommodation, time-off from performing duties and also eligible to claim for subsistence allowance in which was due to the strong leadership. Therefore, leadership training for the Academic JCC in UniA was important.

When asked on whether the Academic JCCs was given support staff in assisting the daily operation and activities. "I have an assistant to manage the register of our Academic JCC. She is in our payroll. Among her duties was to ensure the governance aspect related to other government agencies are being adhered to" Honorary Secretary, 7 September 2016.

This reveals that the Academic JCC in UniA has support staffs that deals with daily operation and specific tasks. Another relevant questions asked were on having a complete office to perform daily routine activities. "The management has endowed us a building. We call it as the Red House for us to run our meetings and activities" President, 5 September 2016. It can be analyzed that the Academic JCC in UniA was granted a complete office for their daily operations and events.

Financial status has always been measured to determine a strong or weak organization. In relation to this, a question was asked about annual financial assistance received from the management. "We collect approximately a revenue of RM40,000 monthly from the Red House. We don't need financial assistance of RM10,000 from the management because of our self-reliance status" Honorary Secretary, 7 September 2016.

It can be analyzed that, the Academic JCC in UniA was in the situation of self-reliance due to their capability to collect RM40,000 revenue monthly and does not rely on management financial assistance.

In summary, as an indicator, it can be said that an effective leadership largely depends on the quality of the leader. A good leader will be able to influence the organisational culture respectively. In this respect, the Academic JCCs can be important as in UniA.

#### 4.2 The influence of the workplace partnership practice to the organizational decision making

It is important for an Academic JCC leader to possessed related qualification to enable them to perform their duties diligently. The required qualification is merit as leaders respectively. "I am a Criminologist by qualification; this is my area of specialization. As the President, my other specialization includes knowing the law. I am well-versed with the power the Senate and the Board. I also know the power of my Academic JCC. I have been re-elected as the President for three consecutive years" President, 5 Sept 2016.

The statement above reveals that having related qualification can give impact to the leadership quality. For example in UniA, the leader of the Academic JCC is a Criminologist in which he is well-versed in law. Subsequently, the analysis shows that strong leadership can be clearly transmitted through the practice of the five elements in the conventional JCC Model that is objective, subject matter, consultation, power and membership.

#### 4.2.1 Objective of the meeting between management-Academic JCCs in UniA

Following question on the objectives of the management-Academic JCC meetings in UniA, the informants has responded that "early notice were given to us stating the objectives of the meeting at least 2 weeks in advance" President, 5 September 2016.

It can be analyzed that the objectives of the Academic JCC in UniA was clearly transmitted. This has brought to a conclusion that the objectives of the Academic JCC were known to all; therefore early preparation could be done.

#### 4.2.2 Subject Matter of the Academic JCCs in UniA

The platform provided by the management should be optimized by the Academic JCC. As such the Academic JCC should use this platform wisely by bringing up matters of members interest as well as the university interest. The subject matters brought up to the management attention in UniA ranges from less important issues to strategic issues. "We often discuss on not enough parking space, food in the canteen and many other issues which may sound not important. But you know, not enough parking spaces can lead to high stress level among us. We are involved in the transformation plan" President, 5 September 2016.

It can be analyzed that the Academic JCC in UniA are involved in less important issues and to a more strategic important issues. This can be seen that the management has high regards to the Academic JCC.

#### 4.2.3 The Consultation Practices of Academic JCC in UniA

The consultation process refers to the management desire to consult the Academic JCC in UniA before making decisions in the universities. This reveals the level of the Academic JCC participation in the consultation process. "We don't have to punch in and out of the campus. The honesty is at the part of the academics. However, this privilege is only for the academics. It is not extended to the administrators and professionals" Honorary Secretary, 7 September 2016.

The above statement provides the information that through consultation process between the management and the Academic JCC, the academics in UniA do not have to punch in and out of the

campus. This reveals that consultation was important in UniA.

#### 4.2.4 Powers of the Academic JCCs in UniA

The ability to influence the organizational decision making is essential to determine the power of the Academic JCCs in UniA respectively. This aspect determines the power of the Academic JCCs. “At one time a lady lecturer was dismissed unfairly by the management. What we did was to bring this matter to court. It takes about two years to solve the case. We won the case and the lecturer were reinstated will full compensation” President, 5 September 2016.

The above information clearly shows that the Academic JCC in UniA has the capability to bring cases to court and has won the case. As for that, the management is mindful of the power of the Academic JCCs in UniA. Therefore the power of the Academic JCC in UniA was bold.

#### 4.2.5 Membership Composition in Meetings between Management and the Academic JCC in UniA

Usually, the membership composition in meetings is at the ratio of 50:50 among the related parties involved. In this case the 50% members represent the management and another 50% represented by the Academic JCC executive councils. This aspect displays that the commitments from both parties during meetings. “The VC, the Registrar and the Bursar are the permanent members, while at our part the President, Honorary Secretary and Treasurer are the permanent members” Honorary Secretary, 2 August 2016.

The above statement shows that there are balance representatives in meetings between the management and the Academic JCCs in UniA. The management team are among the academics as well; therefore this scenario was observed on their own perspectives. The Academic JCC in UniA does not see situation of conflict arise; instead felt that it is a leverage to them.

Due to its complexity in handling the issue of multi-ethnicity, multi-racial and multi-cultural the five element of the conventional JCC Model was not sufficient in the Malaysian context. In this study, it was identified that the ‘culture’ element is referred to ‘partnership’. Figure 1 display a better view on the additional element to add into the conventional JCC Model.

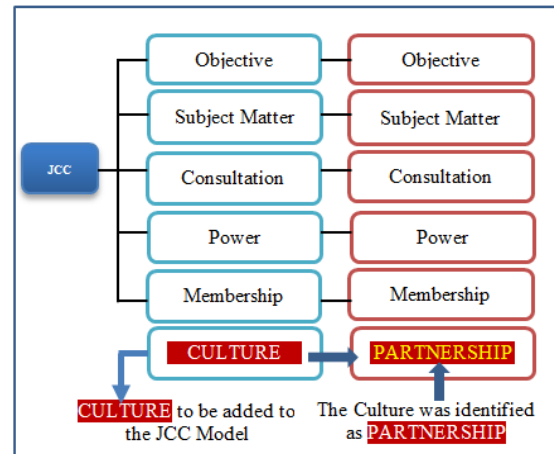


Figure 1: Transformation of the JCC Model for UniA, UniB, and UniC

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is important to acknowledge that the final decision is in the hand of the management. This can be explained by the work of Hofstede (1991) that expressed management intention has direct impact on the level of WP in organization. In this case, the management is responsible to the authority in decision making in which the power to decide is in the hand of a few at the top; thus delegation is avoided. Therefore, it is crucial in creating balance between the management and the Academic JCC; the new form of partnership namely the BAR Model of Partnership is necessity for both parties to work together in a complementing manner.

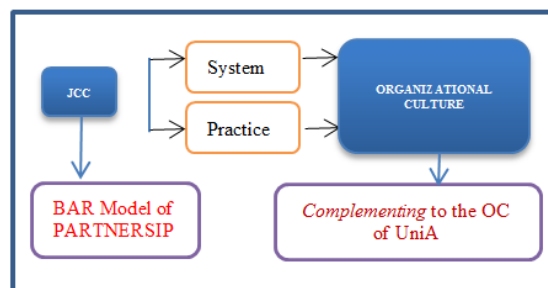


Figure 2: BAR Model of Partnership for a Sustainable Employer-Employee Relationship for UniA

Based on the above findings, it can be analysed that the management has the full authority to make decision. Therefore, it can be concluded that the partnership arrangement for effective consultation between management and the Academic JCCs both

on less important issues to strategic issues of the universities can still be argued.

However, the research has established that the desire to move forward is being felt; but at the same time concern about who is the authority. Hence, the implication of this study reflected that the Academic JCCs has to become efficient strategist in dealing with the management and be partners instead of having conflicting objectives; thus change in organizational culture mind-set is a challenging endeavour.

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