

ACADEMIC WORKLOAD vs INTENTION TO PERFORM UNETHICAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG LECTURERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Unethical behaviour among lecturers in higher education institutions has become an increasingly pressing concern, particularly as academic roles grow more complex and demanding. This conceptual paper examines the relationship between academic workload and lecturers' intention to perform unethical behaviour, drawing on empirical findings from prior research conducted in higher education institutions. Existing studies indicate that lecturers often face escalating pressures related to teaching, research, supervision, consultation and administrative duties, which may heighten stress and influence decision-making. Evidence from studies involving individual lecturers as respondents, this paper highlights how excessive workload can act as a significant antecedent to unethical behavioural intentions. Practical implications are offered for university administrators, emphasising the need for balanced workload allocation and supportive institutional cultures. Strengthening these areas is essential for reducing the risk of unethical conduct and promoting integrity within higher education environments.

Keywords: academic workload, intention, unethical behaviour, higher education institutions

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INTRODUCTION

Unethical behaviour among academics has become a growing concern in higher education systems worldwide, including Malaysia. Issues such as academic dishonesty, data fabrication, favouritism, plagiarism, and breaches of assessment integrity have been increasingly documented in local institutions, raising questions about the structural pressures that shape lecturers' ethical decision-making. Studies in the Malaysian context highlight that unethical academic conduct is not isolated but reflects broader organisational and cultural challenges within universities (Ahmad et al., 2020; Alias & Ismail, 2015). As higher education institutions expand their performance indicators and intensify competition, the risk of ethical lapses becomes more pronounced.

One factor frequently associated with unethical behaviour is academic workload. Malaysian lecturers are expected to manage a wide range of responsibilities, including teaching, research, supervision, administrative duties, community engagement, and continuous professional development. Excessive workload has been shown to contribute to stress, burnout, and reduced ethical vigilance, potentially increasing the likelihood of misconduct (Noor & Ismail, 2016). When academic expectations exceed available time and resources, lecturers may feel pressured to cut corners or engage in behaviour that compromises professional standards. Research suggests that workload-related strain can influence moral judgement and heighten the intention to engage in unethical behaviour (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010).

Given these concerns, examining the relationship between academic workload and lecturers' intention to perform unethical behaviour is crucial for safeguarding the integrity of Malaysian higher education. This study aims to explore how workload pressures influence the intention of lecturers to perform unethical behaviour and to provide insights that can inform institutional policies, workload management strategies, and ethical governance frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intention to Perform Unethical Behaviour

The intention of a person to act in a certain way is the most direct and significant predictor of that behaviour. The basic assumption is that people would act in accordance with their intentions and refrain from acting contrary to their intentions.

Intention explains behaviour in that individuals are seen as actors who have desires and who attempt to achieve what they want that are directed by their beliefs (Cherry, 2006a). Behavioural intention to engage in any kind of unethical behaviour is a complex situation and relates to individual justification on their acts and risk perception (Julián & Bonavia, 2021). According to Kish-Gephart et al. (2010), individual, ethical issues and the environment in the organization are the three main antecedents for unethical behaviour to happen. Individual refers to the individual differences or characteristics of that person and how these differences influence unethical intent at work. The ethical issues refer to particular ethical problems that occur within organizations and are experienced by the employees.

A recent study by Xin et al. (2022) posits that debt pressure has a high correlation with the urge to engage in unethical behaviour. From the studies conducted, it was found that when people either in group or as an individual are having pressures relating to their debts, as the pressure increased, the intention to unethical behaviour is also increased.

With regards to higher education, studies on unethical behaviour intention mostly covers on the perspective of students; unethical practices ((Devonish et al., 2009), plagiarism (Farooq & Sultana, 2022), moral intensity and subject gender (Santalla-Banderali & Malavé, 2022), awareness of ethical issues and intention to act ethically (Tomlin et al., 2021). However, very few studies done on lecturers as suggested by previous research (Julián & Bonavia, 2021, Denisova-Schmidt, 2018).

Academic Workload

In a university setting, the academic staff or faculty are among the main important individuals other than the management group. University academic staff do complex work in a demanding environment. The work life of the academic nowadays becomes more challenging, as they are expected to do more than teaching and supervising students. The academic teaching load has increased as a result of changes and improvements done in higher education system; at the same time lecturers are also entrusted with other responsibilities such as research and publication, supervision, administrative work, consultation and community services (Basarudin et al., 2016). This indicates that lecturers' responsibilities gradually extend beyond the classroom; and the degree of the role increase are different according to the type of universities they worked for.

For this research, focus will be on the four main responsibilities of lecturer's workload such as (i) teaching (ii) supervision (iii) research and publication and (iv) consultation. This is in line with the study done by Yaacob (2017) and Emilina et al., (2019) which mentioned the four responsibilities above as the core academic workload.

Teaching

Teaching is the major workload for academic staff; referring to subjects or number of hours assigned based on semester which is determined by the dean of the faculty. A large portion of the teaching load, according to the present practices and procedures at Malaysia's higher education institutions, refers to the amount of assigned teaching hours, preparation for teaching, consultation with students, and assessing and checking students' assignments and homework (Ujir et al. 2020).

The main focus of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) includes the enrolment of international students. As a result of these enrolment increases, there are more students than faculty members; and the ratio is not equal. This inconsistency increased lecturers' teaching workload. There are large classes to manage as well as massive responsibilities to ensure that students graduate as high-calibre graduates who are talented and have a high potential for employment. Even though those lecturers have other additional task; but still their teaching assignment is the same and it might be higher. Allocation of teaching loads might be different according to universities; mostly teaching hours ranging up to equivalent to two to three subjects per semester (Basarudin et al., 2016). Each normal lecturer is given an average of 12 to 24 hours of teaching per week, where they had to spend a lot of time balancing their academic responsibilities and other obligations. For lecturers who are holding administrative position, their teaching load are slightly lower with one or two subjects (depends on the university).

In terms of percentage, the general principles apply; for normal lecturer 50% allocated for teaching, 30% research and 20% services (administrative / consultation / community service), for senior lecturer 40% teaching, 40% research and 20% services and for professor the percentage is slightly higher for research that is 30% teaching, 50% research and 20% services. This is in similar to points mentioned in the study of Miller (2019) that many universities for example research universities, divide their academic workloads along the lines of teaching and research, both carry 40% each and the remaining 20% is allocated for administration and service work. However, the finding of the study showed that

40% teaching, 25% research, and 35% administration would be more reasonable workload model, with adjustments made for the expected volume of high-quality research outputs.

Teaching is one of the factor which relates to occupational stress as mentioned by (Noor Hassim Ismail, 2016). Daily activities that come with teaching are finishing the content, preparing teaching materials and related assessment, setting and marking final examination questions and papers (Emilina et al., 2019, Noor Hassim Ismail, 2016). Research finding by author also points towards the same problem which include additional task that lecturers have to handle; managing subjects which includes students who have problems and those who need to repeat the courses. Universities are strongly striving and battling to keep their university status or title; and part of the burden have to be faced by lecturers. The instructions and requirements to be fulfilled are overwhelmed, which can cause those lecturers to find easy ways to achieve and unintendedly involved in misconduct. The longer the service of a particular lecturer, more academic workloads will be given to him/her (Emilina et al., 2019); and according to Kyvik (2013) the older the staff, they will spent more time on work compared to their young colleague.

Pressure tends to have an effect on the perceptions of unethical behaviour among academia (Parlangeli et al., 2017). Meanwhile, study by Erat et al., (2017) on workload and responsibility load, there is a significant effect of both on work stress and intention for academicians works in state university in Turkey. When there is conflict at the workplace, absences together with excessive workload will put academic staff under stress; and can lead to intention to perform unethical behaviour. Similarly, the study of Lawson et al. (2022) found out that police officer who are facing occupational stress are more likely to involve in misconduct.

According to Noor Hassim Ismail (2016) in a study on one research university in Malaysia, found out that 22.1% of academic staff of the university were under stress. Among the factor that causes stress are in terms of career development. Career development refers to the university's requirements for promotion which includes mainly research and publication. These requirements were the main source of stress. Other contributing factors to stress includes heavier allocation on workloads, issues with obtaining funds for research, lack of resources, lack of tolerance among colleagues, and unreasonable management expectations. Aderia Putri Prasanti et al. (2018) also mentioned that there is a need to measure the workload of employees in order to avoid excessive work pressure. The result of the study shows that the pressure that comes through work affects the intention to behave; the higher the pressure, the higher the intention of the employees to misbehave. Similarly, Roxana (2013) found that the effect of work pressure will influence the employee's misbehaviour.

Supervision

Supervision refers to the process whereby lecturers have the responsibilities to guide and supervise students, namely undergraduate and post-graduate students. The undergraduate students will need somebody to monitor their projects or assignments and finally the final-year project; while for post-graduate students means supervising the masters and PhD students.

Each public university has a different total number of supervisions. There are universities that allocate 10 students for each lecturer; and the number can be up to 30 or 40 students. There is also university that allocate student based on types of supervision e.g. 5 PhD students, 10 master students and 20 undergraduate students. Some lecturers are unable to supervise students because they do not yet hold a

PhD (Yaacob, 2017). The type of supervision can be either (i) single supervision (ii) co-supervision (iii) group supervision or (iv) supervision by committee. Public universities have different way of exercising the type of supervision; which is mostly based on single supervision or with co-supervision. However, for example, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) are also using supervisory committee.

In order to be good and quality supervisor, lecturers must have the ability to handle the responsibility; especially in terms of time management. Better supervision also means the students or supervisee can graduate on time. When this can be achieved, the lecturer is less stressful and can be more focused in their job.

The supervision process is an ideal time for students to build ethical research habits and skills (Furtak, 2022). Through the process, the students will be able to improve their ethically responsible research behaviour. The interaction between postgraduate research students and their supervisor can better be improved using blended learning. There are combination of classroom or face-to-face consultation, virtual classroom and self-paced online courses. In a way, the learning process can help supervisors to better manage their students, reduce their workload and at the same time can ensure the success and quality of the students' research output.

Research and Publication

Research and publication refers to the effort and amount of research produced by lecturers as well as number of related publications (Emilina et al., 2019). The excellent performance of academician will not only measure on their teaching quality, but also on research that they can produce in terms of number of research and its quality. Research has been made compulsory for all universities, but more efforts must be put in conducting research and increase the number of publications as to help the university achieving their ranking especially in the research university category.

Researchers are expected to demonstrate not only high publication efficiency but also unwavering honesty in their work (Veldkamp et al., 2017). The research conducted must be original, which is synonymous with a high level of integrity. Research workload varies between universities as well as the faculties. The faculties have the power to allocate the required load on research; as it is difficult to use the same KPI for all lecturers. The number of research and grant also cannot be determined as some faculty can easily get grant while the others not. Lecturers have to play their part in getting grants or funding from relevant sources. On average, each lecturer in most faculties/universities might have one to two grants of research. However, there are also universities that follow the position of the lecturer in identifying the amount of grants; the higher the position, the higher the number and amount should be. Normally, there are five categories of grants namely university grant, national grant, international grant, industry grant and self-funding grant.

According to DuBois et al., (2013) even though there are cases on research misconduct and the researcher finds the accuse to be guilty, the literature found that most such cases receive scant attention. Usually cases related to research misconduct being settled privately at the university level (Mohd Zain et al., 2021) to safeguard the good name of the university. Several surveys on research misconduct found that lecturers reported that they had not involved in research misconduct, some admitted to

fabricating and falsifying data and committed misconduct and observing cases done by colleagues (Fanelli, 2009, DuBois et al., 2013, Paruzel-Czachura et al., 2021)

Lecturers who are conducting research must ensure that the obtained result can add new empirical result and insights to the body of knowledge (To & Yu, 2020). Much time and effort have to be given to research in order to produce positive results. The major stress sources to lecturers while doing research were at the initial stage when to conceptualize the research problems, to create relation with other professional in research discipline and access to relevant literature (Noor Hassim Ismail, 2016).

Plagiarism and authorship disputes are the most common research misconducts currently occurring in Malaysian universities (Olesen et al., 2017). In medical research, additional misconduct (other than stated above) can be in the form of intentional misconduct as well as falsification and fabrication of data (Elsayed, 2020) and plagiarism (Stern et al., 2014).

The issue of academic research misconduct is frequently discussed in the context of the ongoing constraints that full-time lecturers face, such as the need to publish in the top journals in their respective fields of study (Holtfreter et al., 2019). Lecturers are expected to publish papers in well-reputed journals or journals that have good impact factor for performance appraisal; for them to be promoted and achieve higher academic rank in their respective faculties/universities.

Research misconduct can occur at all stages of the research process, including proposal development, methodology, data collecting, data analysis, data reporting, and presentation of the research results. It can also occur during the publishing of the research by pursuing duplicate publication and/or granting gift authorship and excluding scholars who ought to be included (Amin et al., 2012).

A publish or perish environment has evolved, putting more pressure on faculty and competition among lecturers to produce and publish their research. There is currently more demand on the lecturers to conduct research and publish. The obligation to conduct more research in some way conflicted with lecturers' work and led to problems with the need to meet other people's expectations. Putting names to the work of other lecturers or by suggesting that student work is the lecturer's own, it will further compromise academic integrity (Wan et al., 2017). The current urge now for the researcher to face publish and be ethical in their research work.

On average, each academic staff at universities required to publish 1-3 publications every year. However, there are also universities that varies the publication burden based on position of the lecturers; the higher the rank, the bigger the required number of publications. Field also plays a role; for sciences and related field, publication must be in the ISI journals and as for other fields; there are choices such SCOPUS, WOS or ISI journals.

Consultation

Consultation is also another workload that academics must fulfil in their daily routine. A consultation is the act of two or more parties discussing a specific issue; and in this study it refers to the discussion among lecturers/academicians and other parties such as industry or other organization outside the university. According to Rezaee et al. (2014) academic consultation is a relationship-based process in

which academic consultants use their professional ability to guide their clients. It is with the guide from the consultants the need of the clients can be achieved.

Some universities also require academic staff to always maintain a consultation project. There are grant provided for consultation and it can be in the form of grant from the university, grant from the ministry and many others (Yaacob, 2017) such as government grant, private grant and international grant. However, it depends on that university whether to put this consultation as part of the academic KPI or not. It has been part of the responsibility of lecturers to secure grant for their consultation projects. As such, this activity also placed much burden for the lecturers.

Looking at the responsibilities or workload that lecturers have to fulfil, there is much evidence that many of them are facing overwork. In a study conducted by Nur Amirul Arbae, Muhammad. Othman, Nur. Mahamad, S. Bakri (2019), lecturers of higher institutions in Malaysia were experiencing stress because of demand from surrounding, professionalism and role or position in their workplace. Further, Parlange et al. (2017) in their study, has identified that stress situations and unethical behaviour in educational settings are actually related. Lack of adequate support from managers and peers, as well as lack of clear description of job duties, are among the difficult factors, especially for senior lecturers. On the other hand, a recent study by Buulolo & Ratnasari (2020) on supervision; mentioned that supervisor support and heavy workload had a significant impact on intention of hotel employees to leave their job.

Today, most of lecturers are more likely to give attention to research, publication and consultancy rather than teaching responsibilities, as such workloads will give them more benefits in terms of marks for their KPI. On the other hand, the marks that lecturers received can also help to ease the promotion exercises. In a way, as less attention paid to teaching, it will inevitably have an impact on its quality and the quality of graduate produced.

METHODOLOGY

Overall, the methodology involves review of existing literature to provide an overview on the research topic. The purpose of this study is to look at the relationship of academic workload and intention of lecturers to perform unethical behaviour. Several keyword combinations, such as “academic workload”, “higher education”, “teaching”, “supervision”, “research and publication”, “consultation”, were used to gather papers for this review in google scholar. Google scholar has broader coverage including books, theses, conference papers and preprints, alongside journal articles. Eventually, relevant articles were identified and selected to be reviewed.

DISCUSSION

This study is conducted to examine the relationship between academic workload and lecturers’ intention to perform unethical behaviour, addressing gaps in the literature that has largely focused on student misconduct rather than academic staff. Findings from previous research in Malaysian higher education suggest that academic workload is a significant antecedent to lecturers’ intention to engage in unethical behaviour. Studies involving individual lecturers consistently show that excessive teaching

hours, administrative burdens, and pressure to meet research performance indicators contribute to heightened stress and ethical fatigue (Noor & Ismail, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2020). When interpreted through the Hunt and Vitell General Theory of Marketing Ethics, these patterns become clearer. The theory posits that ethical decision-making is shaped by both deontological evaluations (judging actions based on rules and duties) and teleological evaluations (judging actions based on expected consequences). Under heavy workload strain, lecturers may experience weakened deontological commitment such as adherence to academic integrity policies while simultaneously perceiving teleological benefits in cutting corners, such as meeting deadlines or reducing workload pressure. As workload intensifies, the balance between these evaluations may shift, making unethical actions appear more justifiable or necessary. This theoretical interpretation aligns with empirical observations that lecturers under strain may manipulate assessment processes, lower academic standards, or bypass institutional procedures to cope with overwhelming demands.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper highlights the critical influence of academic workload on lecturers' intention to engage in unethical behaviour within higher education institutions. By reviewing prior research and applying the Hunt and Vitell General Theory of Marketing Ethics, the discussion demonstrates how academic workload pressure can influence lecturers to have the intention to perform unethical behaviour. It is hoped that the findings of the study can assist institutions of higher learning to make efforts to evaluate the amount of workload given to lecturers. Ultimately, it will be a great help to control the lecturer's intention to behave unethically and fostering a healthier and more sustainable academic environment.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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