

## **Organizational Stressor of Responsibilities and Burden among Higher Education Deans: An Exploratory Multiple Case Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The phenomenon of human stress is now more rampant than ever, affecting industrialized countries and developing countries alike. Stress had only been seen as increasing especially in recent decades as the world of work now contributes to the increase of work related stress and its associated disorders (International Labour Organization, 2016). The vital higher education sector is also not spared from the phenomenon of stress. Universities were traditionally considered to be low-stress work environments but more recent research indicates staff, faculty, and administrators experience high levels of occupational stress (Biron, Brun, & Ivers, 2008). Therefore specific research is needed to explore the thoroughness of a dean's job and the difficulties faced (Alford, 2014). This study used a qualitative research design, employing the inquiring strategy of multiple case study methodologies. This current study also engages in a exploratory research techniques, in which the goal is in identification of phenomenon. 9 higher education deans of a Malaysian public university participated in this study. Thematic data analysis, using Atlas.ti, revealed 8 non-overlapping themes within the responsibilities and burden phenomenon of higher education. This study will thus serve to understand the unique phenomenon of organizational stress experienced by higher education deans.*

**Keywords:** *organizational stress, stressors, deans, qualitative, case study, exploratory*

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of human stress is now more rampant than ever, affecting industrialized countries and developing countries alike. Stress is now a widespread problem, a costly problem in modern societies particularly in the workplace, and has now become an increasing major public health issue as it had negative effects on both physiological and mental health (Lee, Joo, & Choi, 2012).

This phenomenon is also commonly associated with work. In this post millennia era, stress was not found to dwindle or be eradicated like diseases of the past such as the smallpox, which was declared to be globally eradicated on May 1980 at the thirty-third World Health Assemble (Jezek, Khodakevich, & Wickett, 1987). As an anecdote, smallpox is believed to have appeared at the time of the first agricultural settlements in northeastern Africa, around,10 000 BC (Hopkins, 1983), brought terror to the human species for 12,000 years (Perlin & Cohen, 2002), and was further brought to an end as one of the most spectacular achievements of humankind in the field of immunology and modern medicine (Smith, 2013). Stress, on the other hand, had only been seen as increasing especially in recent decades as the world of work now contributes to the increase of work related stress and its associated disorders (International Labour Organization, 2016). Stress, in this sense, did not enjoy the acclamation accorded to Smallpox and its successful eradication. Stress-related ailments such as sick leaves, work injuries, absenteeism and compensations have been reported to be on the rise in all industrial-developed nations of the world such as the United States of America,

United Kingdom, European countries and Australia, bringing with it much damage to institutions and organizations (Giga, Cooper, & Faragher, 2003)

The vital higher education sector is also not spared from the phenomenon of stress. Universities were traditionally considered to be low-stress work environments but more recent research indicates staff, faculty, and administrators experience high levels of occupational stress (Biron, Brun, & Ivers, 2008). An earlier account of Creswell and England (1994) had commented that the position of dean had received little scholarly attention. As similarly defined by Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, and Sarros (1999), the academic deanship is the least studied and most misunderstood position in the academy.

Deans are also the singular entity often caught in the conflict between university higher authorities and their respective faculties, effectively rendering them looking at two directions at the same time (Gmelch, 2003). Such leadership position, as illustrated by Gmelch (2003), has no parallel in any other business or industry. The vagueness of this position, and the exclusive difficulties only experienced by deans, makes it more of the urgency to understand comprehensively the full organizational stressors affecting higher education deans.

The world of higher education is inherently ever-changing, and underestimating the components of this field, such as the difficulties, may lead individual deans to fall behind in future developments and become marginalized in the power locus of the university (Alajoutsijarvi & Kettunen, 2016). Therefore specific research is needed to explore the thoroughness of a dean's job and the difficulties faced (Alford, 2014).

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, and Nies (2001) had earlier noted that higher education is already facing tremendous challenges from technological advances, diversity, new competition and cost containment, and these difficulties ultimately rest on the shoulders of deans. The authors also discovered several themes that deans noted as challenges in this post millennia environment such as fiscal constraints and accountability, demands for curricular relevance, legal issues, funding, technical advancements, educational delivery system, shifting demographics, and faculty-student-system incongruence.

Wild, Ebbers, Shelly, & Gmelch (2003) continued the progression of research into stress on university level deans, and through their research, it was confirmed that deans are experiencing stress from unexpected issues of accountability, scarce resources, and increased challenges with relationships between faculty and administration. Relationships between colleagues were also reported strained when a new dean assumes the top position. The authors continually identified 9 areas that existed as organizational stressor for deans which were in managing human interactions, intrinsic job demands, managing professional/personal life, role strain, balancing leadership and scholarship, fiscal responsibilities, external constituency demands, administrative identity, and professional maturity. Numerous areas that could contribute to deans' stress level were also uncovered by Mirvis, Graney, Ingram, & Tang (2006). These authors relayed that stress and burnout levels are increasing at the deans due to the ambiguity of the job, increasing numbers of objectives and the increasing external stakeholder pressures for more accountability.

Walters and Keim (2003) also produced a list of organizational stressors obtained from 201 deans across 41 states of U.S. The highest percentage of the deans outlined the high cost of operation and system maintenance as the biggest obstacle. This was followed by excessive time requirements to complete an adequate plan, lack of coordination between planning and budgeting decisions, inadequate financial or staff support, lack of planning experience and expertise, and lack of cooperation and acceptance by faculty and staff. In terms of the most critical challenges faced, the deans identified money and resources,

followed by technology use in the curriculum, future needs and trends , facilities updating and replacement, and classroom space/distance learning.

Another study of Watba and Farmer (2006) also analyzed the organizational stressors facing U.S. deans. Areas of challenges and difficulties were discovered to encompass rapid changes in technology, changing workforce skills, the anticipated tremendous turnover of upper level administrators, and financial shortfall due to the severe economic downturn were all areas of concern. In terms of the magnitude of the organizational stressors, these U.S. deans ranked the difficulties accordingly, beginning with financial resources as the greatest obstacle, collaboration with business and industry, funding for new services, updating facilities and equipment, changing technology, recruitment and retention of faculty, staff, and students, program promotions and marketing, increased accountability, salary disparities, and lastly ending with leadership development difficulties (Watba & Farmer, 2006).

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN**

Qualitative data usually exists in the form of words rather than numbers and have always been the components of some fields in social sciences, more notably, anthropology, history, and political science (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Starting in 1980s, Miles and Huberman (1994) noted how more researches in basic disciplines and applied fields in psychology, sociology, linguistics, public administration, organizational studies, business studies, health care, urban planning, educational research, family studies program evaluations, and policy analysis have shifted to a more qualitative paradigm. Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2008) similarly noted how qualitative research methods originally existed as a contested methodology on the margins of mainstream psychology but have now developed into numerous processes of adoption. The authors relayed how In United Kingdom (U.K.), qualitative approaches to psychological research are now being integrated mainstream with the British Psychological Society ruling that for a degree programme to be accredited, qualitative methods must be taught. UK funding bodies such as the Economic and Social Research Council have now started to favour research proposal that has qualitative methodologies and U.K. government sponsored associations such as the National Institute for Health and Clinical Practice are opening up to making their reviews on qualitative methodologies in areas such as health psychology (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Given the robustness and the adaptation of qualitative into important institutions, this study will employ the stance of qualitative methodologies.

In qualitative studies, Creswell (2009) identified five strategies of inquiry. There are the narrative research, phenomenology, ethnographies, grounded theory studies and case study. This current research will employ the method of case study to investigate the interweaving nature and experiences of the responsibilities and burden stressor phenomenon among higher education deans.

Creswell (2007) explained that the case study approach is familiar to social scientist because of its popularity in psychology (Freud), medicine (case analysis of a problem), law (case law), and political science (case reports). Another prominent case study scholar, Robert K. Yin (2009) explains that case study can be used in many situations, to contribute to the knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political and related phenomenon. Case study has been a common research method in areas of psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, social work, business, education, nursing, and community planning. Case studies has two basic form of research questioning that is to investigate the how and why of an event. Yin (2009) proposed that one uses a case study methodology approach to research when attempting to explore a phenomenon in-depth within a real life context. In this

current study, such methodology was employed in the in-depth exploration of organizational stressors within a real life organizational context.

### **3.2 EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY**

A research process initiates with a question that needs an answer or a problem that must be solved. Before framing the goals and objectives of a particular research, it is important to identify the purpose of the research. As such, social research projects can be classified into three categories of exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory research (Sue, & Ritter, 2012). The nature of the current study will warrant a exploratory research in lieu of a descriptive research and explanatory research. A descriptive research generally require a use of a probability sampling technique and are normally limited to frequency distribution and summary statistics such as average. This current study does not seek to provide knowledge and information in these areas. Explanatory research, on the other hand, have its primary purpose in explaining why phenomena occur and to predict future occurrences. The current study does not use research hypotheses characteristics and there is no direction of any relationship between or among variables being studied.

This current study engages in a exploratory research techniques, in which the goal is in clarification of concepts. Exploration studies can take the form of case studies in which a phenomena is studied from various sources of evidence and in its availability. Exploratory research also conveys its similarities with the current study is it absence of attempts to examine a random sample of population, rather, exploratory researchers conducts exploratory research in seeking individuals who are knowledgeable about a topic of a process such as higher education deans and their circumstances on top of the organization chart. Data from exploratory also tends to be qualitative as explained by the authors with similar examples with the current study such as having interview session with experts, which in this case are leaders of departments in a institution

### **3.3 INTERVIEW TYPE**

There are three basic approaches to collecting qualitative data through open-ended interviews which are the informal conversational interviews, general interview guide approach, and the standardized open ended interview (Patton, 2002). Formulated by the author, who is at the forefront of interview strategies and techniques, each interview approach has its purpose catered to specific studies. The third form of interviewing, the standardized open ended interview will be selected as the form required for the current study.

Patton (2002), summarized the four major reasons for using a standardized open ended interview. Firstly the exact instrument used in the evaluation is available for inspection by those who will use the findings of the study secondly, variations among interviewers, if any, can be greatly minimized where a number of different must be used, thirdly this type of interview is highly focused so that interviewee time is used efficiently, and lastly, analysis for this form of data is facilities efficiently by making responses easy to find and compare.

### **3.4 PARTICIPANTS AND SITE OF STUDY**

To examine organizational stressors faced by higher education deans, all of the 13 faculty and center deans of a Malaysian public university were approached. They were selected to encompass a thorough study of organizational stressors of the institution. 9 deans resided at the main campus and another 3 deans resided at two different off campus location. They were selected as a purposive sample to explore wholesomely the organizational stressors faced by all deans in the institution. However, only 10 deans gave definitive consent to participant. One dean emailed on not being interested to participate and another dean seemingly gave contradicting answers to the researcher's main supervisor and towards the

dean's secretary. The agreed 10 deans was thus selected as the final participants for the current multiple case study.

### **3.5 DATA COLLECTION**

This qualitative multiple case study conducted two phases of data collection. The first was the pilot interview with a candidate with a deputy dean, as a candidate with similar characteristics (Yin, 2009), status to gauge the feasibility and effectiveness of the questions. The second phase of data collection was the main interview which incorporated adjustments and restructuring learnt from the pilot interview. The main interview was conducted on 10 higher education deans in one institution.

### **3.6 PILOT STUDY**

Yin (2009) provided a more comprehensive take on why a pilot phase should be undertaken in case studies. The author posited that a pilot phase will help researchers to develop a more effective collection plans with respect to both the content of the data and the procedures to be followed. The pilot phase is more informative, and will be able assist the researcher to develop relevant lines of questioning and possibly even providing some conceptual clarification for the research design (Yin, 2009). The author added that the one difference between the pilot reports and the actual case study reports is that the pilot reports should be explicit about the lessons learned for both the research design and field procedures.

Several submitted doctoral dissertations discovered the advantages of running a pilot phase. All pilot studies aim to achieve the result of Ocean (2015) whom pilot study from the submitted doctoral dissertation at the Boston University needed no adjustment. The author's pilot study confirmed the feasibility of the dissertation methodology, suggesting it would result in valuable and rich data.

### **3.7 DATA ANALYSIS**

The Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software was used throughout the data analysis stages of the current study. Atlas.ti is a powerful workbench for the qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual, graphical, audio, and video data, and offers a variety of tools for accomplishing the tasks associated with any systematic approach to unstructured data, i. e., data that cannot be meaningfully analyzed by formal, statistical approaches (Friese, 2013). Through the Atlas.ti User Guide and Reference Manual, Friese (2013) explained how Atlas.ti can help qualitative researcher to explore the complex phenomena hidden in qualitative data.

This current study also employed the use of Mendeley Reference Software Package in organizing metadata from textbooks, research articles, doctoral dissertations, and reports. The bibliographies referencing and in-text citation Microsoft Word plugin function were also used throughout the construct of the current doctoral dissertation. The researchers created an account with Mendeley in [www.mendeley.com](http://www.mendeley.com) and subsequently downloaded Version 1.16.3 which contained the latest improvements and Microsoft Word Plugin Bug Fixes.

### **3.8 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Creswell (2014) recommended that the raw transcript was not delivered back to the respondents, but rather parts of the current study reports, such as the themes and case analysis. A follow up interview was conducted with the participants of the study to provide an opportunity for them to comment on the findings.

This current case study employed this qualitative validity tactic of member checking. Transcribed verbatim and its emerging themes were carefully documented and presented in an easy to understand format. All 10 investigated deans and their verbatim and member checking reports were prepared. However, at the time of the member checking process, which

is 6 months after the interview session, 7 out of the 10 investigated deans had been replaced and no longer hold the original deanship position. The 7 investigated deans whom were interviewed and whom were later relieved of deanship duty were not considered as applicable for member checking. This is due to the recommendations of Cohen and Crabtree (2006) that reported how some members may tell these stories during an interview that they later regret or see differently due to new circumstances. The researcher eventually showed the three deans their verbatim and how they were analytically clustered to form subthemes and main themes. The three deans agreed on the interpretation and the newly organized structure of themes derived from their organizational stressor reports. The three deans did not add any data and themes to the analysis.

This current research further employed the reliability check of regularly meeting and sharing analysis with the two senior colleagues. From the initial onset of the research, both experienced senior colleagues questioned all feasibilities in carrying out the original research. From these inquiries and assessments, the research had realized upon the mishap of conjoining two separate quantitative and qualitative. Further regular meet throughout the regular meet analysis process had seen the narrowing of the initial overly broad research angle to a more refine qualitative case study methodology by the two senior colleagues.

### **3.9 HUMAN PROTECTION**

As part of the protection, the researcher is responsible and accountable to conduct the case study with special care and sensitivity (Yin, 2009). Case studies, as posited by the author, presents a more challenging situation than when using other researcher because this methodology involves interactions with specific human subjects through direct contacts such as interviews and potential use of personal records. In light of these confidentiality protections, the participant's identity would be kept confidential, and names would not be collected throughout the research. Hence, all participants were assigned a pseudonym in the form of numerals and were not asked of any demographic items.

### **4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

All 10 investigated deans in the institution of Universiti Malaysia Sabah reported experiences of organizational stressor elements arising from the work scope of their deanship. 2 areas of deanship positional task were discovered to constitute as the phenomenon of organizational stressor uniquely experienced by deans. These areas are in dean's responsibilities/burden, and heavy workload. 7 of the total investigated deans similarly reported staff's organizational stressor in the areas responsibilities and burden. A further 3 deans disclosed two identical characteristics of heavy workload which generated elements of organizational stressor.

The highest comparable acknowledgement of excessive workload of deans centered around the factor of time, which was produced by 3 investigated deans. Across the 3 deans, DEAN 20160421 made mention of the time factor with having to do a lot of things at the same time. DEAN 20160322 made similar reference to the notion of time by revealing there isn't enough time at hand for all the tasks. DEAN 20160316 was the third and final dean to comment on the time factor by disclosing there is never enough time to do anything outside of office matters. All these deans and their organizational stress of not having enough time was similarly reported by Freeman and Coll (2009). The authors revealed similar organizational stressors faced by U.S. deans where they were operating at way beyond the normal 40-hours work week.

4 investigated deans fell in the notion of feeling worried over whether or not they can achieve the faculty/center's targets. Highlighting themselves as the deans responsible is more akin to the literature report of U.S. deans placing themselves and their deanship on the line over the attainment of certain targets (Fee et al., 2005). 4 deans, consisting of DEAN 20160421,

DEAN 20160405, DEAN 20160329 and DEAN 20160322, reported this feeling of worry in trying to achieve the vision and mission goals for their respective faculty/center. This finding is consistent with an earlier study of Krampien (1995) where the studied U.S. deans listed 'carrying out the academic vision' as one of the challenges of their deanship. A further 4 deans provided singular natured anguish over the vision and mission targets. These 4 deans echoed the similar strives of U.S. deans in trying to realize the overall mission of the university (Montez, Wolverton, & Gmelch, 2002).

The highest recorded ambiguity disclosed the unavailability of any kind of written list as guide for deans when taking over. This organizational stressor was recorded across all the 5 deans whom reported on this ambiguity. One dean reported not receiving any written list of dean's task 2 times as the dean reassumed the deanship for a second time. This is consistent with the literature reports of U.S. deans whom faced the ambiguity difficulty of no universal accepted definition for the dean's position (Robillard, 2000). The second most ambiguous nature of the deanship was in the manner of having no term of references on what has to be done, what to do, where to go and what not to do. These directionless uncertainties were reported by DEAN 20160329 and DEAN 20160316 during the time of assuming the deanship position. These two same deans made identical remark on asking the faculty/center's staff on what has not been achieved yet, what should be done, what not to do and where to improve on. Both deans emulated U.S. deans in their consultation with staffs on what to do and how to do the many things required of a dean (Alford, 2014).

Similarities, variations and differences in dean's accountability were found across the investigated deans. DEAN 20160421 and DEAN 20160322 both made an identical remark on the many things that a dean needs to do and look after, and how ultimately, every little thing is under the responsibility of the dean. DEAN 20160421 and DEAN 20160322 both conveyed the worrisome of being accountable for so many things in the faculty/center. Both deans' worries echoed similar experiences of U.S. deans where they felt being held accountable for the entirety of the faculty and yet still having little control over many things (Hyun, 2009). DEAN 20160405 and DEAN 20160323A on the other hand conveyed different elements of responsibility stressor. Areas of the faculty that caused worrisome for DEAN 20160405 were in areas that are not functioning properly, receiving poor assessment, faculty not on part with the rest of the faculties, faculty poor networking, having lesser number of programs and causing auditing failures. DEAN 20160323A, on the other hand, explained the organizational stressor element of being accountable if the faculty/center should fail the accreditation procedures, and ultimately taking responsibility in the great consequences towards the students. Both dean's faculty performances worries are identical to U.S. deans' increasing level of stress over external stakeholder pressures for more accountability on every aspect of the faculty (Mirvis et al., 2006).

The stressor element of expertise sacrifice was reported 3 times across the investigated deans. DEAN 20160504 first made notion of this time constrain, expressing there is just no time at all to carry work in the area of specialization. DEAN 20160329 additionally commented there is very less time to visit the labs to carry out experimentation, leading DEAN 20160329 to be self-label as a table scientist. DEAN 20160322 made the final on the time factor, lamenting there is no time at all to pursue the original interest of reading, teaching and writing. All 3 deans whom spoke of time constrain attributed the difficulty to the workload of helming the deanship position. These timing difficulties to carry out dean's area of specialization are consistent with the an earlier findings of Gmelch and Burns (1994) whom discovered that having insufficient time to remain in deans' discipline causes great stress for deans.

3 deans which consisted of DEAN 20160504, DEAN 20160329 and DEAN 20160322. The single highest similarities between the 3 deans were in the report of having too many meetings to attend and too many meetings are taking place each day during the mornings and

afternoons. Each of the 3 deans made notion of this organizational stressor, whereby too many meetings were taking place in the institution which required the attendance of each dean. These 3 deans emulated a vast study result of almost 2,000 U.S. and Australian Deans whom listed too many meetings at their number one organizational stressor element above all other stresses (Gmelch, 2003).

In the final area of responsibility and burden, DEAN 20160321 and DEAN 20160421 both made identical remark on the difficulty of generating revenue. These commentaries traced their expertise away from the business field of procuring income through their faculty/center respectively. Piazza (2008) made an identical discovery amongst the study's U.S. deans where they expressed reluctance toward the role of generating funds on the fact that they lacked expertise in the subject since they perceived themselves as academic specialists and researchers. DEAN 20160421 and DEAN 20160321 both similarly lamented their field is in stark contrast to the field of business and income generation and acknowledged the anxiety faced from this organizational stressor element of generating revenue. This is directly in line with the revelation that today's dean need to operate more like a Fortune 500 Chief Executive Officer which is akin to building a profitable business empire (Bickerstaffe, 2006; Wolverton et al., 2001).

### CONCLUSION

The result of this multiple case study draws a significant picture on the existence of excessive responsibilities and burden as an organizational stressor faced by higher education deans. Taking these deanship stressors into account, a staggering reality exists: the subjugation and exposure of this institution's deans will subject them to occurrences of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and feelings of low personal accomplishments (Gmelch & Wilke, 1991).

The literature reviews and the results of the study led the researchers to make recommendations of providing briefings specially designed for higher education deans in the institution. Higher education's deans must be made aware on the existence of organizational stressors and how dangerous this element would have upon a dean's psychological and physiological well being. Higher education deans must also be made aware how stress can jeopardize and strain relationship between colleagues, family, friends and communities in general. It is known that unrelenting stress may lead to health problems and burnout, which leaves the organization without productive, proactive administrators (Cloud, 1991). These briefings may also contain latest findings in the literature studies of deanships so that the institution's dean may be kept abreast to the experiences and solutions of deans from around the world. Gaining knowledge about the deans and their perceptions of stress is important in order to keep dynamic, creative leadership available to community colleges (Wild, 2002).

Future research may embark on a more intimate data collection, if agreed by the Institutional Review Board or the participants themselves, researcher may retrieve data regarding health (sick days taken, number of doctor or hospital visits, etc.). This will provide a more concrete information on their health status. In relation to the organizational stressors experienced, gauging the record before, during or after the position of the deanship may provide additional important knowledge on the effects of organizational stressors among academic deans. This study will thus serve to understand the unique phenomenon of organizational stress experienced by higher education deans.

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Article received 2017-01-10