

“This seems important”: A thematic analysis of reflections on a compulsory induction program for new Malaysian university teachers

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine information perceived as salient by new university academic staff attending a compulsory induction program at a Malaysian public university. Attending and successfully completing the induction program is a policy that is set and managed by universities across Malaysia. This study uses a qualitative approach, where reflections by the four authors of this study attending a ten-day induction program were collected and examined. By the end of the program, a total of 40 reflective pieces were written on an online shared document, which were then analyzed thematically. The reflections were examined through iterative reading and coding of their contents, which were then consolidated into salient themes. These themes were noteworthy information, affirmation and aspiration, and critical response. The findings indicated that the process of induction acted more than just a space for the dissemination of information, but there were instances where participants found acknowledgement through an alignment of beliefs, as well as developing criticality towards issues emergent from the topics covered during the induction program. Moreover, the compulsory induction program was in itself a gateway for new university teachers to become aware of other university policies that may affect their work in the Malaysian higher education context.

Keywords: Induction program, new teachers, reflections, thematic analysis

Introduction

It is common to find policies, at any educational institution, that require new academic staff to attend orientation activities or an induction program. Saniforth and Harland (2006) explain that the “induction [program] seeks to support an academic’s entry into their new organization and enable them to become a productive and longstanding member of their department and university” (p. 186). The induction program is also an important site to draw the attention of new academics to policies regarding their performance and productivity. With regards to being socialized into the university setting, research has usually focused on academics’ perceptions regarding notions and expectations for performance and productivity; nevertheless, there remains minimal information on the experience of new academic staff in a university setting. There is also a contextual gap in terms of research work regarding the orientation of new faculty members, with more research conducted in institutions located in the West (Cullen & Harris, 2008; Körkkö et al., 2016; Staniforth & Harland, 2006; Stirzaker, 2004; Vaill & Testori, 2012; Wilkins & Neri, 2019). To address these gaps, this study aims to examine the experiences of new academics at a Malaysian public university.

An induction program is a significant entry-point for new academics into a university. It is where a myriad of important information is presented to them. Some of the information may be administrative, where the nature of an academic’s employment or the policies of the institution may be divulged. There is also information related to civil engagement, which provide guidance on how academics should behave in public, beyond the parameters of the academic institution. The induction program will also provide academic information, which includes teaching and research responsibilities expected of the new academic. Furthermore, induction programs may touch upon interpersonal information, which lays out guidance or expectations for how academics should interact with colleagues or students in both academic and non-academic settings (Fenton-Smith & Torpey, 2013). An induction program could also feature information about resources or tools for teaching and research (Vaill & Testori, 2012); frameworks or key performance indices used to assess the progress and achievements of academics

(Ball, 2021); or the initiation of communities for new academics to find support as they navigate through a new work setting (Cullen & Harris, 2008). Given the various expectations, it is not surprising that a new academic may experience instability and vulnerability, leading to the enactment of a coping mechanism. According to Barkhuizen (2002), this may include strategies such as conforming to required or expected practices. Another strategy is generating, which refers to the acquisition of new skills or even attitudes to be able to function in the new academic setting. Educators may even resist, where they actively engage with an issue that the new academic opposes, with the intention of proposing alternative practices or change within the system. This is also echoed by Yuan et al. 2020, who discussed how important it is for new academics at the university to develop strategies to address the regime of performativity and publication that seems to be affecting many, especially those whose first language is not English (see also Loo et al., 2023).

One might think that an induction program is meant for academics who are new to teaching, without prior experience working as a university academic or faculty. However, even those with prior experiences are encouraged and are obliged to participate in an induction program. This may be due to differences of institutional policies and processes, and the induction program may offer them an opportunity to directly pose questions or raise concerns. More than this, starting at a new educational setting may render even the most seasoned academic vulnerable. In such situations, it is important for them to identify colleagues who may offer a supportive network, guiding them through the professional complexity of working in a higher education setting (Aprile et al., 2021). With continued support, the new academic may find a safe space where equitable, yet dynamic responses may be formulated to work with the shifting expectations of working in the higher education setting (Loo et al., 2023). Furthermore, navigating through a new academic terrain becomes more complicated when one finds him- or herself in a new country with different cultural beliefs and practices (Staniforth & Harland, 2006; Wilkins & Neri, 2019). When this happens, the new academic may feel 'de-skilled' for not being able to effectively manage teaching or research practices and processes assumed to be familiar. Thankfully, in most instances, the new academic would identify and put into action coping strategies to 're-establish' themselves in their new work environment (Stirzaker, 2004). These coping strategies are often personal (Loo et al., 2023) but researchers have indicated how important it is for academics – new or experienced – to have supportive colleagues who share similar experiences (see also Barkhuizen 2002; Cree-Green et al., 2020).

This study aims to examine the reflections of new academics at a Malaysian public university attending a compulsory induction program. This study utilizes personal reflections to glean perceptions towards and experiences gained from attending the induction program. In terms of the research context, the current study is valuable as it may further divulge the experiences of being a university academic in an Asian setting. Findings from this study may also address the concerns regarding the disproportionate distribution of time and effort for different responsibilities expected of a university academic. This has been reported by Noor Ashikin Basarudin et al. (2016), where academics in the Malaysian higher education are expected to excel in every component required of them, even in areas that are irrelevant to their areas of specialization. This has resulted in the prevalence of illnesses and stress affecting Malaysian university educators, as reported through a systematic review by Tai et al. 2019.

Research objective

The broad research objective of this study was to determine the distinctive experiences of new academics attending an induction program. Specifically, it aimed to: (1) determine the kind of information new lecturers focus on as seen through their reflections; and (2) examine the impact of information on the participants' professional sense of self.

Methodology

Research design

This research study employed a qualitative research design. This was deemed appropriate as this study was interested to research a phenomenon that was contextually new and relatively unknown (Cilesiz & Greckhamer, 2020). Furthermore, since this study was situated within the realm of professional development among educators, reflections were determined to be suitable. For educators, reflecting promotes reflexivity, which is the process of recognizing personal subjectivities and questioning personal beliefs. This process is valuable as it highlights the internal thinking of an educator and reveals the challenges or contradictions that may shape how he or she navigates through an educational environment. As such, reflections may reveal the opinions and attitudes, and even the aspirations and frustrations of an educator (Loo & Ching, 2018; Loo & Sairattanain, 2023). In the context of this study, using this approach would be apt in addressing the research objective mentioned previously.

Respondents of the study

This study took place at a Malaysian public university in Sabah during an induction program for new lecturers. At this university, the induction program is compulsory for all new academics, regardless of their professional background or previous university work experience. This program, which ran for ten days, comprised various sessions covering a variety of topics, including teaching methodology, use of technology in teaching, course development and management, and postgraduate supervision. The sessions took place for about eight hours a day. The participants comprised lecturers who taught English, Mandarin as a foreign language, and philosophy. Details of the participants' academic history, in terms of where they studied and worked, are provided in the table below.

Table 1

Professional Background of the Participants

| Participant | Tertiary education history | Employment history | Years working in the university setting |
|-------------|---|---|---|
| Ruby | Studied in public universities in China | Worked as a Chinese teacher in a private high school and as a language teacher in a public university | 3 years |
| Nadiah | Studied in private and public universities in Malaysia | Worked as a researcher at a research agency focusing on research and education development. | 2 years |
| Farous | Studied at public universities in Malaysia | Worked as a lecturer in Malaysian higher education institutions | 2 years and ten months |
| Daron | Studied in private and public universities in Thailand and in Australia | Worked as a university lecturer in Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia | 14 years |

Data collection and analysis

Data for this study were collected from the reflections of all participants. Reflections were written every day of the program on a shared online platform. Since this study examined the experiences and perceptions towards a compulsory professional development program organized by the university, there were no restrictions in terms of length or topic. The participants could reflect upon what they personally deemed significant.

Similar to the study of Körkkö et al. (2016), data in this study were examined using thematic analysis. Possible themes that may emerge include how the participants viewed themselves in the new context or how they viewed others in the environment. The analysis process started with the coding of the reflections, which was done through iterative readings of all the reflections. The focus of this step was to identify codes that represented the experiences and perceptions considered important for professional development of university academic staff. After the codes were identified, the subsequent step saw the summarization of the reflections into themes. In this step, similar codes were brought together to form three themes, which were noteworthy information, affirmation and aspiration, and critical response. The themes were verified by the co-researchers of this study. Verification was done by looking at the confirmability of the themes' situated interpretation. This was aided by an audit trail that contained elaborations of the decisions made by the researchers in drawing up the codes and subsequently consolidating them into themes (Nowell et al., 2017). The themes and codes are presented and discussed in the next section.

Findings and discussion

In total, there were 40 reflective pieces, with a combined word count of 6111. The reflections were thematically analyzed, which yielded three themes: noteworthy information, affirmation and aspiration, and critical response. The theme of noteworthy information refers to details shared at the sessions, which the participants felt was important. Such information was varied, ranging from those related to the personal professional development of the participant, to the national goal for universities in Malaysia, which included policies regarding university teachers' expected performance. The next theme is affirmation and aspiration, which saw participants' agreement towards issues shared at the session. This theme also illustrated moments when the participants felt inspired, with hopes for certain actions or changes for the future. The third theme is the critical response, where reflections showed alternate and sometimes contrasting assumptions or observations. In the next section, these themes are discussed with accompanying excerpts from the reflections. References were also made to relevant literature to establish the resonance of the interpretation (see Morse et al., 2002). Names (other than the authors of this paper) that were mentioned in the reflections were changed to pseudonyms.

Noteworthy information

In this theme, the notion of 'information' was considered salient. There were reflections on information regarding the use of technology, as an expectation for university teaching and at one of the induction sessions.

The afternoon session was an overview of Malaysia's higher education plans for the future. There are lots going on, but what really stood out for me is the expansion of the roles of academic staff. Not only are we to teach, conduct research, and supervise, but we are also expected to contribute to the commodification of education, through things like MOOCs (massive open online courses) and micro-credentials. (Daron, Day 1)

While some of the information affected the broader community of higher education in Malaysia, they had a clear implication on the academic staff, such as the multiple roles and responsibilities that an academic needs to hold (Daron, Day 1). Such an occurrence is considered normal, especially in today's neoliberal climate that has affected university academic staff globally. Today, it is common for them to be involved in teaching and doing research, as well as thinking of ways to generate revenue (Dugas et al., 2020). These have resulted in a sense of restlessness experienced by university academics, where there is the urgency to be competitive to remain not only relevant, but also to retain one's job (Nordbäck et al., 2021).

Today, Dr. Debbie will deliver on work-based learning and assessment concepts and principles. The session was connected with a talk by Prof. Mizal. As the session starter, Prof. Mizal used the menti.com approach as ice breaking. I feel this method is very interesting and can be used as an example of an approach to generate students' interest besides using the Kahoot approach. In this session, in overall, I learned how to construct questions according to different levels of difficulty and target groups. (Nadiah, Day 6)

Another noteworthy information was the tools and applications that the new academic can adopt in his or her classroom. This reflects the possibilities of learning that an induction program can have. Not only are the new academics informed of matters pertinent to their professional development and the institution, but they may also use this opportunity to consider the most suitable teaching and learning approaches for their own classrooms (Nadiah, Day 6).

Another salient information was the curriculum framework and the relevant quality mechanisms, which are important for Malaysia's quest as a global educational hub (Richards, 2019). Farous (Day 2) mentioned accreditation, documentation of a course learning objectives and planning (referred to in Malaysia as 'Table 4'), and outcome-based education (OBE) (Daron, Day 5; Ruby, Day 8). Nadiah (Day 7) also mentioned about other teaching practices such as innovation and *SULAM* – or Service Learning Malaysia (see Norhafezah Yusof et al., 2020).

In the first session, we learned how to get accredited. Accreditation helps to promote the qualifications in Public Service Depts. or Professional Bodies. The OBE sessions clarify the definition and purpose of Outcome-Based Education as they give students the tools/skills to accomplish their goals (find the job/career that lines up with their education) Ultimately, the purpose of education is to create skilled and learned individuals that contribute to specific and broader industries. This in turn rewards the students with benefits and monetary gain. Moreover, the roles of teachers in terms of OBE have been clearly defined. (Farous, Day 2)

What really resonated with me was the difficulty in putting together a learning program that is driven by outcomes, yet at the same time flexible to the learning needs of the students. This will be a constant challenge, given that there isn't necessarily an alignment between what is being expected and what is done in the classroom. (Daron, Day 5)

This morning, Dr. Aisyah patiently demonstrated how to incorporate PLO (program learning outcome) and CLO (course learning outcome) into the OBE system to us. She also provided us with a step-by-step manual on how to use the system, input student scores, and complete the CQI (continuous quality improvement). The activities and exercises in this session are insufficient for beginners. Many parts are still not fully explained and understood. The fundamental issue is that the majority of new lecturers don't have student test scores and haven't actually used the OBE system. (Ruby, Day 8)

The afternoon session should have been continued with Prof. Mizal but his session was replaced by a session with Encik Amri on Excellence and Innovation in Teaching. There are several innovations that can be done to improve the level of teaching excellence, one of which is through *SULAM* (Service Learning Malaysia University for Society). This has made me thought about what initiatives could be done, especially in the subject of philosophy and current issues. (Nadiah, Day 7)

It is interesting to note that Bloom's Taxonomy was mentioned at the induction program, especially since it is considered a common approach to guide teachers in the development of teaching and learning syllabus and activities. That it was mentioned at this program indirectly indicated that there may be those who were unfamiliar with this concept (Farous – Day 2). This struggle is actually rather common in the higher education setting,

especially for those who are new to teaching at the university level (Sun & Simon-Roberts, 2020), or those who had come into academia from the industry or corporate world (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006).

Affirmation and aspiration

The next theme, affirmation and aspiration, reflected the participants' agreement and/or plans for the future. This is an extension of the previous theme, where there is an additional emotional response towards what had been shared. This stems from the alignment between the participants' pedagogical practices and beliefs with the institution's expectations. For instance, Farous (Day 3) agreed that classrooms need to make use of digital technology as part of the teaching and learning strategies. In fact, there have been concerted efforts by the relevant government agencies in Malaysia to integrate information and communications technology into all levels of learning (Ghavifekr & Wong, 2022).

Using digital skills and technology such as IT, the Internet, software and digital devices for educational purposes is a must nowadays. They may help students to acquire digital soft skills that they can use to secure a job. In the 21st century, it is imperative that we are digital and technology literate. I feel that this talk highlights the importance of digital and technology literacy in the modern era as we must adapt in this ever-changing world. People who can't keep up are left in the dust. (Farous, Day 3)

While aspiration may be directed towards future plans, it may also prompt participants to reflect on past practices. Reflection is an important facet of an induction program, as it acknowledges that new academic staff with the relevant experiences. Otherwise, they would not have been hired by the university. Hence, it is pivotal for these experiences to be addressed. This would make the induction more relevant while encouraging new staff to reflect on how they may be further developed or improved (Fenton-Smith & Torpey, 2013).

Today's session is quite fascinating, focusing on educational technologies. Undoubtedly, in today's social and cultural environment, educational technology is a hot topic. Most classrooms and lecture halls at schools, colleges, universities, and other academic institutions across the world are equipped with significant technology. It aids in the transformation of previous teaching approaches while also improving the learning process for both students and educators. With the help of technology, all three modes of learning are now available. Some people may learn more effectively using visual, aural, or kinesthetic learning approaches. That's how I see the inclusion in educational technologies. I also believe that technology may make teaching easier. It has the potential to increase students' grasp of the topic, free them from the limits of physical location, and widen their perspectives. (Ruby, Day 9)

As seen in the reflection of Ruby (Day 9), technology was reiterated throughout the induction program. This is aligned with the broader goals of the nation's higher education. Nonetheless, for technology integration, there needs to be a degree of willingness to accept it among university faculty. A study by Yadegaridehkordi et al. (2019) reported that in the Malaysian higher education setting, some variables that were found to affect the decision to use technology were mobility, personalization, opportunities for collaboration, ease of use, and usefulness. Ruby (Day 9) also pointed out another advantage of technology integration, which is the promotion of inclusivity. The effort to make education accessible is pivotal, especially in the Malaysian context where students are diverse (Yusmarhaini Yusof et al., 2020).

Critical response

The third theme is critical response. Though infrequent, it provided insights into issues unpacked from the topics. For instance, on Day 6, Daron brought up the challenge that he may possibly face in developing alternative assessments, in line with the relevance of his course with the students' main area of study, or major. This may be viewed as a form of implicit institutional resistance, where the greater ecology of courses may not necessarily coincide in terms of transferability of skills, or even the mutual and practical use of knowledge (see James, 2014).

The session in the morning got me to think about how it might be possible for alternative forms of assessments to be conducted. It would actually be of added value if an extent of authenticity can be included. This isn't always that easy, especially for courses that aim to help students develop language proficiency and academic skills. The issue depends on the relevance of the work provided to them in my course, and the opportunity and applications of these work in their other university courses and beyond. Daron (Day 6)

Another issue was brought up by Daron on Day 7 regarding the responsibility of a lecturer. He noted that the way the new academics, or lecturers, were described seem to imply that they are fully responsible for the progress of their students. This may not be surprising in the current global climate of higher education, where students have been perceived as consumers whose preferences need to be satisfied (Nixon et al., 2018). Furthermore, this may be reflective of the discourse of performance – and more specific within the cultural context of Malaysia – a glimpse of a paternalistic view of education. The latter refers to the potentially debilitating

approach in teaching, where students are closely guided through the process of learning, so much so that students' self-regulation and independence may not be honed (see discussion by Kranzfelder et al., 2020).

The afternoon session on innovative teaching was interesting, in terms of the presentation. It is intriguing that throughout the session, the emphasis was placed upon the lecturers having the sole responsibility over the students' progress. I don't mind the idea that we are to guide the students -- but to what extent do we do this? When the responsibility for education is placed only upon the lecturers, then what are the students supposed to do? Are lecturers constantly expected to be innovative -- wouldn't this lead to burn out and a higher turnover rate? What is being done to get the students to recognize that they, too, play a role in the higher education sector? (Daron, Day 7)

Conclusions and recommendations

This study aimed to determine salient information emergent from four new academics' reflections illustrating their experiences and perceptions about working in the Malaysian higher education setting. It should be noted that through the induction program, new university teachers may find spaces or circles from where they may seek support. This would serve as an important avenue for new university lecturers to familiarize themselves with sufficient pedagogical, research, and administrative practices, especially those that would fit with their departmental culture (Boyd, 2010; Kálmán et al., 2020). Furthermore, while this study may be unique to the Malaysian setting, it sheds light on matters crucial for new academics, in particular, noteworthy information regarding teaching and research. This may not come as a surprise, given that Majid Ghasemy et al. (2018) had reported how meeting the key performance indices and standards set by relevant government agencies were top priorities for Malaysian universities. It is necessary to contribute to these expectations in order to create a supportive and collegial environment. This study was actually an outcome of that, where the process of reflecting together and subsequent writing of this paper offered a platform for new academics to support each other through the acknowledgement of experiences gained from participating in this induction program. This may further encourage them to enact agentic actions to manoeuvre different institutional expectations as well as personal professional expectations (Loo et al., 2023).

From the experiences and perspectives of the new university lecturers, this study would like to offer the following suggestions, to be considered in the planning of induction programs:

1. Ensure the rigour and relevance of an induction program, where new university lecturers are provided with a comprehensive overview of what is required of them; yet they are also offered opportunities to interact with one another, so as to network and to share experiences.
2. Organize induction programs that support continuous professional development, where new university lecturers are able to take stock of their progress from time to time. This may also be helpful to university administrators in keeping track of the experiences of their university staff. This may also foster staff retention (King et al., 2018).
3. Involve stakeholders of the university, especially those who might be involved in university academics' career trajectory. Stakeholders may dialogue with university lecturers to become familiar with the work that is being done at the grassroots level (Johnson & Orr, 2020).

Based on the findings and discussion in this study, future researchers may consider other qualitative elements in the examination of new academics' experience at the university. Other aspects, such as the affective factors, should be accounted for. Moreover, other sources of qualitative data may be included to gain a deeper understanding about the themes derived from the reflections. These may be observation data of new academics' teaching, or a discourse study of their interaction with colleagues and their students. It may also be valuable to conduct a longitudinal study to trace and compare initial perceptions captured during the induction program, and how these may change along with the academics' professional growth over time.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

Author Contribution

Daron Benjamin.: Conceptualization, methodology, analysis, write-up, revision and editing.

Farous Izwan.: Methodology, analysis and write-up.

Nadiah Rus Liyana: Methodology, analysis and write-up.

Yong: Methodology, analysis and write-up.

Data Availability Statement

Data is available upon request.

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