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Unpacking the drivers of affective organizational commitment and turnover intentions in Malaysian academic settings: An organizational support theory approach

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This study aims to test the structural model that explains the relationships between career development opportunities, POS, felt obligation, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention of academics working for one of the foreign offshore campuses of Australian universities in Malaysia. This study is driven theoretically by the social exchange theory and the organizational support theory. The structural equation modeling (SEM) method was used to test the fitness of the structural model and the hypothesized model represented a good fit to the data. This paper contributes to the limited body of knowledge about the psychological processes underlying the formation of organizational commitment through the perspectives of the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001).

Key words: Perceived organizational support, affective organizational commitment, turnover intention.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly organizations are interested to develop committed workforce to reduce employee turnover and absenteeism, while improving the employees' performance and job-related attitudes (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1997; Mowday et al., 1982). There is also growing evidence that employees' positive attitudes and discretionary behaviors are important factors affecting organizational performance (Podsakoff and Mackenzie, 1997). Hence, gaining a better understanding of the motivational basis for such work attitudes and behaviors is regarded as an important component of research agendas relating to management practice in the future especially in the context of professional employees (Aryee et al., 2002). Hence, this paper is written to emphasize the importance of adopting theories from the human resource management (HRM) and organizational behaviour (OB) disciplines to understand the process of developing a committed professional workforce in contemporary organizations.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that the exchange relationship between two parties often goes

beyond economic exchange and includes social exchange. Hence, organizational studies argue that employer and employee exchange not only impersonal resources such as money, but also socioemotional resources such as approval, respect, recognition and support (Eisenberger et al., 2001). In organizational researches, the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and the concept of perceived organizational support have been applied to describe the psychological process underlying the employee attitudes and behaviours (Setton et al., 1996; Wayne et al., 2002). The concept of perceived organizational support (POS) which refers to the extent to which the organization values their employees' contributions and cares about their well-being have been used to describe the social exchange relationship between the employer and the employee (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), employees who perceive high levels of POS are more likely to reciprocate the organization with positive attitudes such as higher levels of affective commitment

and favorable work behaviours such as commitment to organizational goals and lower intention to leave (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 1990; Eisenberger et al., 1997). The arguments above based on the social exchange theory, the concept of perceived organizational support (POS) which is the commitment of the organization to the employee and the norm of reciprocity is further developed into the organizational support theory (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

Since the seminal work on POS by Eisenberger and colleagues (Eisenberger, et al., 1986), many researchers have investigated the effects of POS on important work outcomes such as affective commitment and turnover intention (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 1990; Setton et al., 1996; Wayne et al., 1997). Meyer and Allen (1997) also indicated that a common theme linking antecedents to commitment is the extent to which the antecedents signal that the organization is supportive of the employee, consistent with the view that they operate via POS. In short, the underpinning social exchange theory predicts that the exchange of favorable treatment could be prolonged if the receipt of resources from another party is highly in need and valuable and the actions are discretionary (Blau, 1964; Eisenberger et al., 1997).

The higher education industry

In the context of the higher education industry, Malaysia aims to be an international hub for world class education in its bid to be a big player in the attractive regional education scene and targets about 100,000 foreign students by 2010. It has 18 public universities, four foreign branch campuses of foreign universities, 21 private universities and 500 private colleges (Uda Nagu, 2007). The private institutions of higher learning are playing an equally important role with the public universities to offer quality higher education and attract foreign students to Malaysia who contribute some RM50 million in direct earnings to Malaysia annually (Uda Nagu, 2007). This trend of globalization, liberalization and reforms to the educational system to improve the ranking of the universities brings many challenges on developing ways to improve staff commitment to universities. One primary criterion for world class universities is the ability to attract and retain excellent and experienced academics.

Academics can be considered the operational core of the universities and their performance determines, to a large extent, the quality of the student's higher education experience and thereby on the contribution that such institutions make to the society (Capellaras, 2005). Academic staffs who are well motivated and committed to their institution can build a national and international reputation for themselves and the institution and the universities can attract high caliber students, research funds and consultancy contracts (Rowley, 1996).

Over the past decades, local universities continue to

face the problem of academic staff turnover or "brain drain" (Khoo, 1981). To the best of knowledge, Malaysian universities may still face the problem of high academic staff turnover though no studies have examined the extent of academic staff turnover in Malaysia in recent years. This voluntary turnover of academic staffs particularly the desirable ones, will not only have a detrimental effect on the institution both in replacement costs and work disruption, but also jeopardize the nation's aim to produce quality human capital and workforce. It is obvious that the institutions cannot get a return from their investment on faculty members' promotion, training and sabbatical leave. Therefore, understanding the factors that precede organizational commitment can enhance better administrative decisions for the financial support program of faculty members and also the ability to attract and retain good academics.

Furthermore, creating a team of committed and high quality academic staff who are committed to improve teaching and learning methods, strengthening research and innovation, strengthening Malaysia's institutions of high learning to world class standards and enhancing internationalization to turn Malaysia into a leading education hub is an important step towards the creation of apex universities in Malaysia as outlined in National Higher Education Strategic Plan (Atan, 2007).

Problem statement

The higher education industry is very worthy for research as it is now an important sector playing a key role in improving productivity and occupational skills, engaging many academics and students and has numerous links with industrial and community activities as well as enhance the nation's ability to compete in a volatile global knowledge economy (Tight, 2003; Humphreys and Hoque, 2007).

While committed academics are the key towards the successful private universities in Malaysia (Humphreys and Hoque, 2007) and since academics have a high need for support and recognition, there is very little empirical studies thus far which have been conducted to examine the role of perceived organizational support (POS) to enhance the level of affective commitment of academics using the academics working with the private institutions of higher learning (Rowley, 1996; Capellaras, 2005; Joiner and Bakalis, 2006). Moreover, academics perceived that they have „lost their voice“ as the management of private universities had become increasingly reluctant to listen to them, had lost respect for their knowledge and expertise, had increased their teaching loads and the administrative burden had become, unmanageable (Humphreys and Hoque, 2007). Only one study by Fuller et al. (2006) has found that POS was strongly related to academics' affective commitment to the university.

This study aims to answer the call from recent studies

about the affective commitment level of academics such as Rowley (1996), Capelleras (2005) and Joiner and Bakalis (2006) for more studies to be conducted to examine the role of perceived organizational support (POS) towards enhancing the level of affective commitment for academics working outside the western countries.

The influence of HRM practices on organizational commitment

There is no consensus in the human resource (HR) literature on which human resource management (HRM) practices is considered appropriate (Mohd. Nasurdin et al., 2008). Despite this lack of consistency, the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and the Organizational Support Theory (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002) suggest that the influence of HRM practices on employees' attitudes and behaviors is significant. Hence, this study use the organizational support perspectives to examine the influence of career development opportunities on employees' perceived organizational support (POS), which in turn will influence the employees' organizational commitment and turnover intention.

A review of the literature suggests the potential effects of several HR practices on employee commitment and motivation. They include selective hiring, appraisal, compensation, training and development activities (Snell and Dean, 1992; Whitener, 2001; Youndt et al., 1996). However, past studies in the area of HRM have been almost exclusively undertaken in the Western world and very few were undertaken in Malaysia (Mohd. Nasurdin et al., 2008).

Providing career development opportunities via training and development of employees is increasingly recognized as an important aspect of best HRM practices. Employees have a desire to extend their potential and capabilities in the organizations, to satisfy their need for growth (Alderfer, 1972; Maslow, 1954). Hence, organizations need to provide employees with career development opportunities that would meet their need for personal growth in order to create employee beliefs in higher POS. Organizations that provide career development opportunities such as recognition, training and promotion indicates that the organizations are concerned for their employees and recognize their contributions to the organization, which contributes to POS (Eisenberger et al., 1999; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Further, these HR practices are often viewed as discretionary treatment by the organization as it goes beyond normal company policies or any labour laws of the country, which suggests organizational caring and support (Eisenberger et al., 1997).

Some researchers have suggested that HR practices such as extensive training would create a sense of organizational support (Koyas, 1991; Meyer and Allen,

1997; McElroy, 2001). In addition, past empirical research has also provided some evidence that career development opportunities offered by organizations may enhance POS (Meyer and Smith, 2001; Tan, 2008; Wayne et al., 1997). Besides, according to Tan (2008), career development practices explains 51.7% variance of POS, suggesting these practices could heighten employees' confidence with their employer and also the growth and self-esteem of the employees for them to utilize their skills and knowledge. Employees are more likely to view the existence of career development opportunities as indicators of future organizational support and these opportunities for career advancement help to motivate employees to fulfill their career aspirations in the future, which in turn, are bound to enhance the employees' POS (Mohd. Nasurdin et al., 2008). Consistent with previous studies, career development practices through organizational discretion that provides coaching, personal worth and perceived competence could meet the socio-emotional needs of employees and hence lead to a favorable behavioral outcome (Eisenberger et al., 1996, 1997; Meyer and Smith, 2001; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Rhoades et al, 2001; Wayne et al., 1997). Recent studies by Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel (2009) as well as Bambacas and Bordia (2009) have also found positive and significant relationship between career development opportunities practices and POS.

Meanwhile, De Vos et al. (2008) found out that employees who take more initiatives to manage their career expect more career support from their employer in terms of career management practices set up to support their career development, because these practices will allow them to increase their influence on reaching desired career outcomes. Further, based on the reciprocity principle (Blau, 1964), employees who take more responsibility for managing their career will expect the organization to reciprocate with assistance in their career development. A central theme in the Social Exchange Theory is that there is balance between what both parties provide to the relationship and what they receive from it (Blau, 1964). When the Social Exchange Theory is applied to career management, this implies a positive association between career self-management and expectations about career support provided by the organization. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that professional employees such as the academics who are generally proactive in managing their career would perceive their career self-management activities as their part of the employment deal, and that in return, they would expect an organizational contribution in terms of providing career development opportunities (De Vos et al., 2008). The arguments by the scholars indicate that universities that employ professional employees such as the academics need to provide career development opportunities because the academics would expect the universities to support their career progress.

Generally, career development practices reflect basic organizational philosophy in prolonging the mutually beneficial employment relationship and signals

organizational care and support in developing the capabilities and skills of the employees. Career development practices may be the most explicit support from the organization to foster employees' career path. The often changing business environment and employment relationship has caused the employees to recognize the importance of lifelong learning opportunities for personal growth throughout their career. HRM practices that enhance personal growth and motivation would secure a durable employer-employee relationship via social exchange process, which brings a win-win situation that benefits both parties in the long run.

The role of POS on the HRM-organizational commitment link

Besides, little research has examined the antecedents of perceived organizational support (POS) from the HR perspective. The aspects of HR practices studied include growth opportunities (Allen et al., 2003), development opportunities (Wayne et al., 1997) and inclusion in decision making (Allen et al., 2003; Wayne et al., 2002). This study contributes further to knowledge about the antecedents of POS from the HR perspective by examining the influence of career development opportunities on POS. Further, those studies that investigated the relationship between HR practice and POS are often not guided by any motivational theory. On the other hand, although, the behavioral perspective of the HR literature argue that the purpose of various HR practices is to influence employee attitudes and behaviors, HR literature has focused only on the relationship between HR practices and firm performance (Delery and Doty, 1996; Huselid, 1995), and has rarely examined the effects of the implementation of supportive HR practices on employee attitudes and behaviors.

Following the view by Wright et al. (1994) that HR practices do not directly lead to firm performance, this study attempts to provide more empirical research examining the mediating mechanisms through which the HR practices- organizational performance relationship works (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Wright and Kehoe, 2008). Nevertheless, in line with the work of other prior researchers (Armeli et al., 1998; Delery and Doty, 1996; Pfeffer, 1998; Mohamad et al., 2006; Whitener, 2001; Youndt et al., 1996), and in the interest of parsimony, only career development opportunities were considered in this study as the potential antecedent of POS.

The developmental aspect of HRM is normally referred to as human resource development (HRD). HRD consists of three broad and multidimensional subjects, namely training and development, organizational development and career development (Hatcher and Guerdat, 2008).

HRD's purpose is to improve organizational performance through increased productivity, efficient work processes and individual contributions. On the other

hand, employee development, behavioral change and organizational performance can be influenced by the employees' organizational commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Fornes et al. (2008) reported that there is little research and understanding of how HRD scholars can develop employees to be more committed to the organization. Thus, there is a gap between the need to foster organizational commitment approaches and the knowledge of HRD scholars to effectively influence commitment. In response, this study answered the call by Fornes et al. (2008) that HRD scholars need to adopt the inter-disciplinary approach in future studies by integrating HRD areas of study and related disciplines such as management or OB. In particular, this study investigated the influence of one particular HRD practices which is, career development opportunities on POS, which in turn, will influence the employees' organizational commitment and turnover intention.

There are multiple mechanisms that the organization can employ to create employee beliefs that the organization value their contributions and cares about their well-being (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). HRM practices might serve as one means by organizations to show their care and support or commitment to the employees and in turn, foster affective commitment and reciprocal attachment by employees. Specifically, employees may refer the supportive HRM practices as discretionary behaviour of the organizational agents to determine how greatly the organization values them (Eisenberger et al., 1986). In addition, HR practices serve as signals to employees about the extent to which the organization values and cares about them as individuals (Wayne et al., 1997). This finding suggests that HRM practices might only contribute to employees' affective commitment if they are viewed by employees as evidence of the organization's commitment to them. Further, Pare and Tremblay (2007) suggest that non-monetary and competency development practices significantly and positively related to affective commitment because such practices make the professionals feel important, responsible and free to optimally channel their creativity and competencies, besides signaling that the organization is supportive of the employees and is willing to establish or maintain a social exchange relationship with them (Allen et al., 2003; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Meyer and Smith, 2001). Meanwhile, POS reflects an individual's perception of the organization's commitment to the employees (Setton et al., 1996). Thus, the relationship between HRM and POS is implied and suggested by these studies. In short, bundles of HR practices play a positive role in the development of an employee's attachment to the organization (Gould-Williams, 2003; Meyer and Smith, 2001) because HR practices are likely to be perceived as a concrete signal of a company's support, trust and commitment towards its employees (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Eisenberger et al. (1986) also suggested that POS would be influenced by various aspects of treatment by the

organization and its managers, including praise and approval, pay, rank, job enrichment and organizational policies. Further, this judgment is made through the process of "personification" described by Levinson (1965). Thus, this study focuses on the employees' perceptions of a set of important HR practices as major antecedents of POS.

Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 1997; Mohamed et al., 2006; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002) also suggests two types of HR practices that are related to POS. First, discretionary practices which the organization is not obligated to offer that imply organizational caring and commitment towards the well being of the employees but not made compulsory by company policy, union contract or laws of the country (for example, career development opportunities and work/family support) and second, organizational recognition for the employee's contribution (for example, pay satisfaction). Supportive HRM practices that represent discretionary treatment by the organization that is likely to benefit the employees, would serve as indicators that the organization cares about its employees' well being and therefore could be counted on for subsequent rewards and as a result, such positive valuation would enhance the employees' judgment about organizational support to them. Further, if these favorable work experiences reflect voluntary and positive valuation of the employees' contributions, POS would be strengthened (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Past studies (Meyer and Smith, 2001; Wayne et al., 1997) have found associations between selected HRM practices (opportunities for promotion and development as well as benefits and career development) and POS.

Hence, employees view a particular HR practice as indicating positive evaluations of themselves by the organization and benefits available to all employees regardless of performance (for example, retirement benefits) would not be associated to POS. A review of the literature (Allen et al., 2003; Arthur, 1994; Delery and Doty, 1996; Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1998) indicates that certain HRM practices reflect an organization's concern for their employees' well-being (including realistic job previews, orientation program, compensation systems, and job security) whereas others (such as performance appraisals, training and development, and career advancement) focus on the developmental initiatives of the employees and reflect organizational recognition for the employee's contribution.

In other words, Organizational Support Theory posits that discretionary actions on the part of the employer that result in more favorable job conditions should be viewed more positively by employees than required actions.

Research suggests that employees interpret organizational actions such as HR practices (Ogilvie, 1986; Setton et al., 1996; Wayne et al., 1997) as indicative of the personified organization's support and commitment to them by the organization's high level of caring and concern. In

return, employees will reciprocate this kind deed by increasing their own commitment to the organization by being highly involved in the organization and showing their willingness to work hard to accomplish the organization's goals. This stream of thought is in line with the research findings of other researchers (Agarwala, 2003; Whitener, 2001) who argued that how employees interpret and make sense of their employer's HR practices will affect their psychological contract with their employer which in turn, affects their commitment to that employer. In sum, the proposed model is shown in Figure 1.

Research objective

This study aims to test the structural model that explains the relationships between career development opportunities, POS, felt obligation, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention of academics working for one of the foreign offshore campuses of Australian universities in Malaysia.

Significance of the study

This study has the potential to contribute to the literature in at least the following aspects.

First, this study provides further empirical evidence and validates the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the organizational support theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002) and specifically in the aspect of the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) in the employer-employee relationship, by investigating the possible mediating role of felt obligation in the POS- work outcomes relationship.

Tansky and Cohen (2001) have identified perceived organizational support to build organizational commitment among employees. In addition, the empirical findings of Meyer and Smith (2001) identified perceived organizational support as a factor that partially mediates the relationships between HRM practices and organizational commitment. Other studies that have link POS and turnover intentions include Rhoades et al. (2001) and Eisenberger et al. (2002) which linked POS with actual turnover using rewards, procedural justice and supervisory support while Allen et al. (2003) suggests that POS mediates supportive HR on turnover via organizational commitment.

Hence, following the findings of Tansky and Cohen (2001), Meyer and Smith (2001), Rhoades et al. (2001) and Eisenberger et al. (2002) and Allen et al. (2003), this study extends knowledge regarding the mediating process through which POS influences employee attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, this study answers the call by Tan (2008) for more studies to address the gap on the influence of POS between organizational actions and

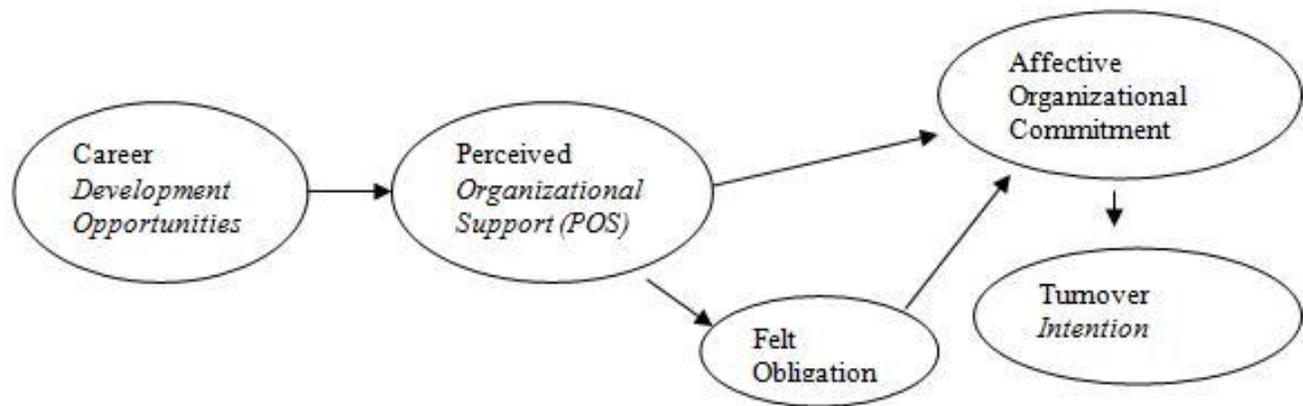


Figure 1. The Hypothesized Model.

turnover intention for knowledge workers in Malaysia.

This study attempts to provide further empirical evidence to address the gap that supportive HR practices may not only signal the extent to which organizations value and care for employees and signal the managers' desire to engage in social exchange relationships with employees (Eisenberger et al. 1996; Allen et al., 2003) but also lead to desirable organizational outcomes such as affective commitment to the organization and reduced turnover intention (Eisenberger et al., 1986, 1990; Wayne et al., 1997).

Second, using a sample of academics working for a private university in Malaysia as the context of study offers interesting insights on the management of knowledge workers. This context warrants urgent investigation as private institutions of higher learning (PHEIs) are playing important role to support Malaysia's mission to be the important educational hub. Moreover, knowledge workers are the key source of competitive advantage for the knowledge economy (Drucker, 1999) and most importantly, committed academics will assist the Malaysian Government to develop the quality human capital required by Malaysia. Hence, highly skilled professionals should not be managed as disposable productive resources but rather should be considered as human beings with specific needs and interests (Pare and Tremblay, 2007). Managers need to bolster their sense of self-worth by treating them as intellectual assets, not as operating costs, and by trusting them, supporting their career experiences and fulfill their needs in order to gain sustainable competitive advantage by keeping their employees' skills and experience within the organization rather than outside it (Tan, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

Procedures

At least 200 survey forms were distributed to the academic staffs of the private university in Malaysia which have approved this study.

Participation was entirely voluntary and the completed questionnaires were forwarded to the HR manager via the internal mail system to maintain anonymity. The researcher collected the completed questionnaires a month after distribution. In total, 134 employees responded, generating an overall response rate of about 67%.

Participants

The participants were full-time and permanent employees. About 62.7% of the academics were below 41 years old, their gender were about equal, about 70% are Malaysians and about 55% and 35% were masters and PhD holders, respectively. Most of them (47%) were lecturers while 21% were senior lecturers and 15% were associate professors and above. While about 69% of them have more than 5 years of experience as academicians, about 61% of them have less than 5 years tenure at their current university. About 50% of them have less than 10 hours of teaching hours and about 47% of them published less than 5 papers for the past 5 years. Meanwhile, about 60% of them earned less than RM6, 001 per month.

Measures

Through extensive literature review, the variables of this study were measured based on established instruments which have been used by seminal and key past studies as discussed below. All the variables will be measured by the subjects' responses based on the 5-point Likert-type scales (1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree).

Career development opportunities

To measure employees' perceptions of opportunities they have for career development, a thirteen item scale was developed in this study. These items were developed based on what academics perceived as the various ways universities should support their career development during their tenure with the universities as suggested by Capelleras (2005) and Rowley (1996) as well as discussions with five academics from UNIMAS and Curtin Sarawak. A sample item is "My University is supportive of my long-term career development." Other items include the university facilitates the achievement of career goals, ensures career potential is maximized, provides opportunities to achieve career goals, the

university provides support to enhance skills in teaching, research activities, consultancy works, opportunities to pursue higher degrees, attend conferences, management skills and also community service. The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.89.

Perceived organizational support

Perceived organizational support was measured via a twelve high-loading items from the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). The validity and uni-dimensionality of this scale has been substantiated by previous research such as Eisenberger et al. (1990) and Shore and Wayne (1993). A sample item is "My organization really cares about my well-being." The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.87.

Felt obligation

This was measured by seven items from the scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (2001) which measures employees' felt obligation to care about the organization and to help the organization reach its goals. A sample item is "I feel a personal obligation to do whatever I can to help my company achieve its goals." The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.90.

Affective organizational commitment

Affective organizational commitment was measured by six items developed by Meyer et al. (1993) and Meyer and Allen (1997). A sample item is "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this university". The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.90.

Turnover intention

Turnover intention was measured by six items which were adapted from Tuma and Grimes (1981), Landau and Hammer (1986) and Wayne et al. (1997). A sample item is "I am actively looking for a job outside my university." The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.89.

Data analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) can be used to conduct a simultaneous test of the entire system of variables in the hypothesized model to examine the extent to which it is consistent with the data (Byrne, 2001). The structural equation modeling (SEM) is chosen to analyze the data because it is a popular statistical technique used by empirical journal articles in the social sciences to test the relationships of independent and dependent variables, is powerful to "redesign" the proposed relationships in the hypothesized model to form several nested models and is more effective in finding the "best fitting" model to the data as suggested by the modification indexes (Cheng, 2001; Kline, 2005; Shore et al., 2006; Tan, 2008). The SEM is particularly effective to test the hypothesized model in this study that consists of multiple paths to be analyzed with mediating variables, and contain latent constructs such as POS, felt obligation, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention that are being measured with multiple indicators (Luna-Arocas and Camps, 2008). The SEM has been used in many organizational studies such as Eisenberger et al. (2001); Eisenberger et al. (2002); Shore et al., (2006); Lee and Peccei (2007); Maertz et al. (2007); Pare and Tremblay (2007) and Tan (2008). Moreover, the SEM also excels beyond multiple regression, which is a popular statistical technique to test the relationships of independent and dependent variables, in expanding

the explanatory ability and statistical efficiency for parsimonious model testing with a single comprehensive method (Cheng, 2001).

RESULTS

Statistical procedures were conducted to develop the best fitting structural model using confirmatory factor analysis and the best fitting structural model for the hypothesized model is represented in Figure 2. In sum, the standardized factor loadings for all the indicators of the constructs were above 0.67 and the average variance explained (AVE) for all the constructs was at least 0.63. In this model, F2 refers to career development opportunities, F4 refers to POS, F6 refers to felt obligation, F8 refers to affective commitment and F9 refers to turnover intention.

In Figure 2, all paths estimates between the respective constructs were significant at the 0.001 level. All the standardized factor loadings of the indicators were at least 0.67 and significant at the 0.001 level. The skewness and kurtosis values for all the indicators were also less than 3.0 and 10.0, respectively, indicating that the data did not demonstrate significant departure from normality.

In SEM research, the nature and significance of the relations between the independent variables is a common concern and a formal method to detect the presence of multicollinearity among the independent variables is the variance inflation factors (VIF) test (Pare and Tremblay, 2007). VIF measures the inflation of variances of the estimated regression coefficients when the independent variables are linearly related (Pare and Tremblay, 2007). In the present study, the independent variables for the best fitting structural model C can be assumed to be career development opportunities, POS, felt obligation and affective commitment while the dependent variable is turnover intention. From the outputs from the regression analysis, the VIF values for the independent variables in the best fitting structural model C were 1.589 for career development opportunities, 2.023 for POS; 1.346 for felt obligation and 1.944 for affective commitment, which is highly satisfactory given that a maximum VIF value in excess of 10 is often taken as an indication that multi-collinearity may be unduly influencing the least square estimates of the model (Pare and Tremblay, 2007). The independent variables of career development opportunities, POS, felt obligation and affective commitment explained about 37% of the variance of turnover intention.

The model fit indexes for the best fitting structural model are $\chi^2/df = 1.431$; GFI = 0.834, AGFI= 0.796, CFI= 0.953 and the RMSEA = 0.057. Hence, the $\chi^2/df = 1.431$ has met the recommended cutoff point of less than 3.0; the CFI has met the recommended cutoff point of more than 0.9 and RMSEA has met the recommended cutoff point of less than 0.08. Hence, the structural model represents a better and more parsimonious model fit. The model fit

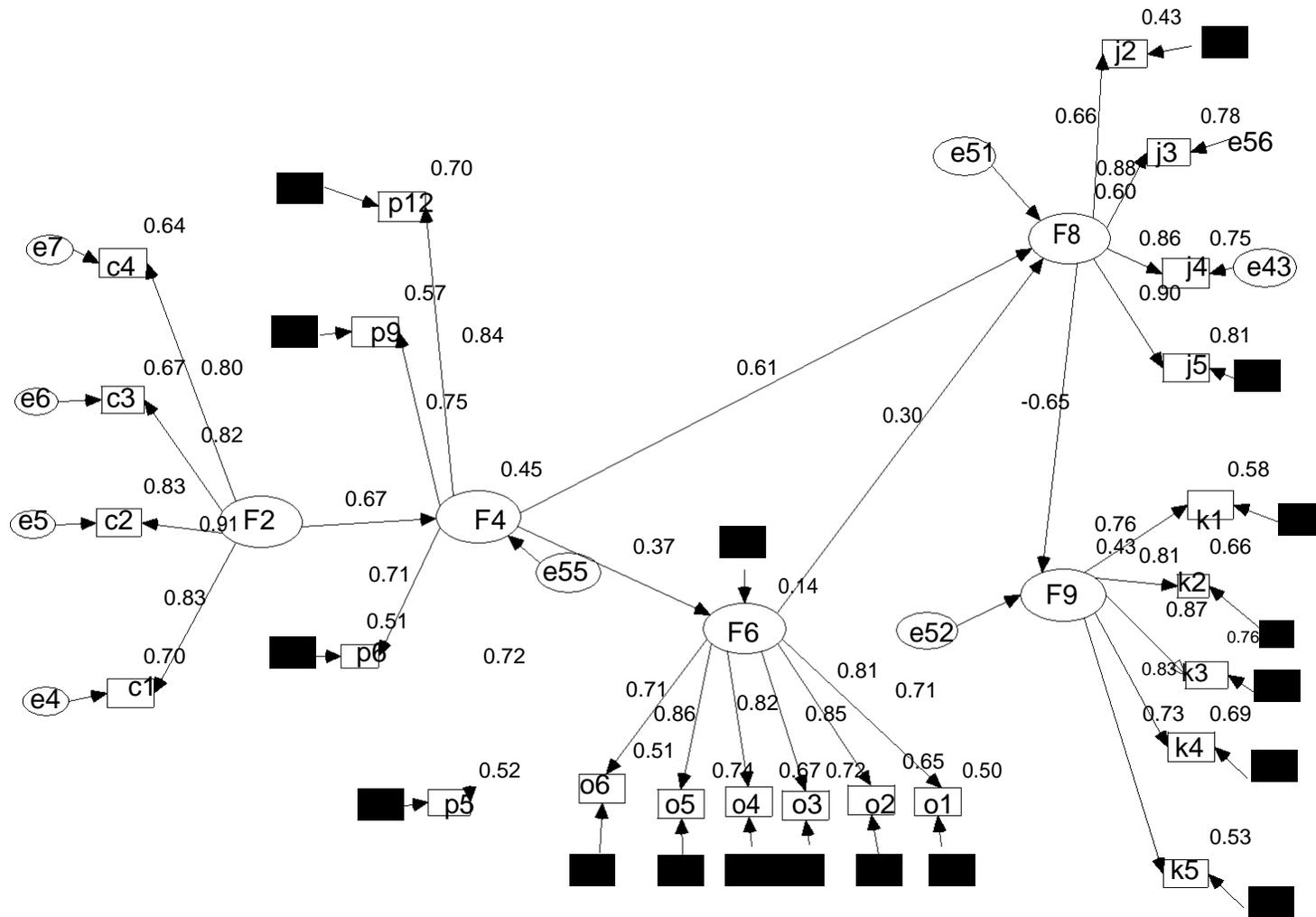


Figure 2. The best fitting structural model for the hypothesized model.

indexes for the measurement model for the structural model are $\chi^2/df = 1.706$; GFI = 0.805, AGFI = 0.761, CFI = 0.923 and the RMSEA = 0.073.

Hence, the $\chi^2/df = 1.706$ has met the recommended cutoff point of less than 3.0; the CFI has met the recommended cutoff point of more than

0.9 and RMSEA has met the recommended cutoff point of less than 0.08. A one-factor structural model was also developed whereby all the

indicators of the best fitting model structural model were loaded onto a single factor. According to Podsakoff and Organ (1986), this type of test is called the Harman's one-factor test whereby the model fit of this one-factor structural model has to be compared to the measurement model of the best fitting structural model to test whether the common method variance concern, arising from gathering the data from a single source, such as from questionnaires is serious or not. Compared to the one factor model or the Harman's 1 factor model whereby all the indicators of the best fitting structural model C were loaded in a single factor ($\chi^2/df= 5.154$; CFI= 0.538; RMSEA= 0.177); the measurement model was a significant improvement, indicating that there were significant relationships among the latent constructs in the structural model. In the measurement model, none of the indicators cross-loaded on other factors and all the indicators loaded significantly ($p<0.001$) onto their respective latent factors. As a result, the concern of common method error was minimized. Thus, the 5-factor measurement model is confirmed and the examination of the best fitting structural model is valid and justified (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

DISCUSSION

This study supported a best fitting structural model which included the interrelationships between five constructs, namely career development opportunities, POS, felt obligation, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention.

Consistent with the results of a few previous studies (Allen et al., 2003; Meyer and Smith, 2001; Wayne et al., 1997), in this study, perception of career development opportunities was found to have a significant positive impact on POS. The magnitude was also strong with $\beta=0.67$. This finding suggests that organizations that provide employees with opportunities to extend their potential and build up their capabilities, which help meet the employees' needs for personal growth, are likely to be perceived as supportive and caring about the employees' well-being.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that individuals who receive favorable treatments from others are likely to return the other party's favour based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) further proposes that in the employee-employer exchange relationship, employees who believe that they have received high levels of support from the organization tend to reciprocate with positive work attitudes and behaviors that benefit the organization. This study suggests that POS has not only a direct influence on organizational commitment, but also an indirect impact via felt obligation. However, the influence of POS on turnover intention is only through the indirect effect via affective organizational commitment.

POS was found to have both a direct impact on affective organizational commitment ($\beta=0.61$), and an indirect impact mediated by felt obligation. As Eisenberger et al. (1986) pointed out, POS represents employees' beliefs in the organization's commitment to them, and thus, employees with higher POS would repay the organization with stronger commitment to the organization. In addition, higher levels of POS create a sense of felt obligation to reciprocate the organization's support by caring about the organization's well being and helping achieve its objectives (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Thus, affective organizational commitment which refers to an individual's identification with and involvement in the employing organization (Porter et al., 1974) may also stem from such a sense of felt obligation. While this mediating process plays a partial role, test of alternative models suggests that felt obligation did not fully mediate the effect of POS on affective organizational commitment. Rather, POS, which represents employees' belief in the organization's commitment to them, has a direct positive impact on the employees' organizational commitment.

Contrary to the prediction, POS has an insignificant direct effect on employees' turnover intention at the 0.05 level. The magnitude of the negative relationship was very weak at -0.17. Thus, the findings of this study is inconsistent with the findings of previous research such as Wayne et al. (1997) and Eisenberger et al. (2001) which had proven the negative relationship between POS and turnover intention.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) suggest that employees who perceive high levels of support from their organization are inclined to repay the organization. This study suggests that the academics will repay the organizations who supported them with stronger commitment to the organization and developing a sense of felt obligation to reciprocate the organization's support by caring about the organization's well being and helping achieve its objectives (Eisenberger et al., 2001). However, the academics will not repay the organizations by maintaining membership in the organization, which means they may still have desire to leave the organization though the organization has supported them.

Consistent with previous research, this study supported the relationship that lower commitment to the organization may lead to increased intention to quit (for example, Mowday et al., 1982; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Chughtai and Zafar, 2006, Mohamed et al., 2006) with a $\beta=-0.65$. Further, affective organizational commitment fully mediated the relationship between POS and turnover intention. In other words, the influence of POS on turnover intention is only through the indirect effect via affective organizational commitment, which is consistent with the findings of Mohamed et al. (2006).

This study, along with Eisenberger et al. (2001), provides empirical support for organizational support theory's (Eisenberger et al., 1986) contention that POS

induces positive work attitudes and behaviors based on the norm of reciprocity. However, results of this study suggested that felt obligation mediates the effects of POS on variables such as affective organizational commitment, but not other variables such as turnover intention. It is possible that the sense of felt obligation may be very important in influencing employees' organizational behaviour during their continued membership or tenure in the organization. The employees' decisions as to whether to stay in the organization may be more influenced by their affective attitudes towards to the organization, which is their level of affective commitment to the organization and alternative employment opportunities available. It is important for future studies to focus more on this concept of felt obligation in studying social exchange relationships, and further determine for which outcome variables felt obligation may play an important role such as employee's performance and organizational citizenship behaviours.

Contributions of the study

This study has contributed significantly to the research literature in the following ways. First, by investigating the role of HR practices as antecedents of POS, which in return, enhances the level of affective organizational commitment, it may contribute to both the HR literature, POS literature and commitment literature. An important objective of HR research is to understand how HR practices can influence employee attitudes and behaviors in order to help achieve organizational goals (Schuler and Jackson, 1987). While the strategic HR literature suggests that the adoption of progressive HR practices aimed at influencing employee motivation and skills create strategic advantage for the firm and improves firm performance (for example, Arthur, 1994; Huselid, 1995; Snell and Dean, 1992), it is believed that HR practices do not directly lead to firm performance (Wright et al., 1994). Moreover, HR plays an indirect role in enhancing affective commitment (Meyer and Smith, 2001; Whitener, 2001) and these relationships are not necessarily direct or unconditional and POS is an important mediator (Meyer and Smith, 2001).

The findings of this study suggest that career development opportunities have the strongest relationship with POS followed by work-family support and pay level satisfaction. In other words, this study has provided empirical evidence to address the gap that supportive HR practices may signal the extent to which organizations value and care for employees and signal the managers' desire to engage in social exchange relationships with employees (Allen et al., 2003; Eisenberger et al., 1986), but also lead to desirable organizational outcomes such as affective commitment to the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986, 1990; Wayne et al., 1997). The best fitting structural model of this study suggests that organizations

that take an active role in helping employees to prepare themselves for advancement in the organization, and do so in a way that creates a perception of support, might foster a stronger bond to the organization among employees than those that do not (Meyer and Smith, 2001). The findings of this study which are consistent with the predictions of the Organization Support Theory, which suggest that HRM practices such as career development opportunities might only contribute to the employees' affective commitment if they are viewed by the employees as evidence of the organization's commitment to them. Thus, this study suggests that career development opportunities relate to actions that are designed to prepare employees for a future in the organization and organizations that are willing to make a long-term investment in their employees are likely to be judged as caring about their welfare and regard them as long term assets. Such favorable valuation would enhance employees' level of POS. In return, beliefs of POS would create an obligation for the employees to "repay" their organization by taking care of its well-being through greater effort, involvement and identification, all of which reflect their level of greater affective commitment. Hence, at the theoretical level, this study has enriched the commitment literature. Specifically, this study has provided evidence for the relationships between HRM practices, POS and affective organizational commitment.

The findings of this study may help to understand the "black box" between HR practices and firm performance and answers the call by Delery (1998), Mohamed et al. (2006) and Pare and Tremblay (2007) for more studies to uncover the mechanisms underlying the HR practices-firm performance relationship.

This study has provided further empirical evidence and validates the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the organizational support theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002) and specifically in the aspect of the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) in the employer-employee relationship, by investigating the possible mediating role of felt obligation in the POS- work outcomes relationship. Examination of the mediating role of felt obligation helps to understand the process through which POS influences employee attitudes and behaviours.

This study suggests that POS has not only a direct influence on organizational commitment, but also an indirect impact via felt obligation. This finding confirms the predictions of the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) that the academicians will repay the universities which supported them with stronger commitment to the organization and developing a sense of felt obligation to reciprocate the organization's support by caring about the organization's well being and helping achieve its objectives (Eisenberger et al., 2001).

It was found that the academics who were more committed to the universities may have less intention to leave

which is consistent with the findings of past research such as Mowday et al., 1982; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Chughtai and Zafar, 2006, Mohamed et al., 2006). Further, affective organizational commitment fully mediated the relationship between POS and turnover intention. In other words, the academics who perceive that the universities were supportive of them would be committed to the universities and as a result, would be less likely to leave the universities.

Conclusion

This study, along with Eisenberger et al. (2001), provide empirical support for organizational support theory's (Eisenberger et al., 1986) contention that discretionary HRM practices such as career development opportunities which signal the organization's commitment to the employees influence the employees' perceptions of organizational support (POS) which in turn, induce positive work attitudes and behaviors based on the norm of reciprocity. However, results of this study suggested that felt obligation mediates the effects of POS on variables such as affective organizational commitment, but not other variables such as turnover intention. It is possible that the sense of felt obligation may be very important in influencing employees' organizational behaviour during their continued membership or tenure in the organization. The employees' decisions as to whether to stay in the organization may be more influenced by their affective attitudes towards to the organization, which is their level of affective commitment to the organization and alternative employment opportunities available. It is important for future studies to focus more on this concept of felt obligation in studying social exchange relationships, and further determine for which outcome variables felt obligation may play an important role such as employee's performance and organizational citizenship behaviours.

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