High-flyer women academicians: factors contributing to success

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Abstract

Purpose – To investigate the career experiences of women professors in order to gain an in-depth understanding of factors contributing to their present status of profession.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were generated from career history method on 31 women professors who have been identified as high-flyers. They were selected based on a criterion that they achieved professorship at the age of 48 years and below. Each respondent was interviewed on questions addressing topics across the entire life stages. Constant comparative analysis of data was conducted to generate themes.

Findings – Reveals the factors associated with their fast performance in academia that were divided into two stages, i.e. career exploration, and career establishment and maintenance. Factors dictated at the career exploration stage are early exposure to learning, entrance to boarding schools, first degree experience and personal qualities, while factors that contribute during their establishment and maintenance stage are graduate study experience, career centrality, family support, uniqueness of academic role, health consciousness and sense of religiosity.

Research limitations/implications – It involved women professors only in order to understand the complexities of women academicians and their careers.

Practical implications – Provides evidence and information on the subjective interpretation of a career in academia, which should be taken into consideration in promotion and selection exercises, especially re women academicians. It also enhances women’s understanding of their own careers and the interplay of other aspects of life as well as organizational environments in their careers.

Originality/value – This paper offers practical information to inspired individuals, especially women academicians, in order to achieve professorship.

Keywords Gender, High flyers, Women, Higher education, Universities, Career development

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The participation of women in education as learners and as educators is not a new phenomenon. However, women as academicians, let alone as professors, are considered newcomers in the world of academia. Professor is the highest position in the career ladder of an academician and in that position the person is said to have established in his or her area of specialization. Singh (2002) reports that the percentage of women professors in developing and developed Commonwealth countries ranges from 10 to 20 percent, with an average of 13.1 percent. Malaysia (16.9 per cent), is above the average, found to be higher than the percentages in countries such as Canada (14.5 per cent),

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Studies on women academicians have focused on factors contributing to the shortage of women professors. Among the factors are the patriarchal and non-conducive organizational culture and management practices (Smith, 1997; Young, 2003), stereotype perceptions that based on male’s standards (Forster, 2001), work-family conflict (White, 1995), and other sexual discrimination practices that would very much influence performance evaluation (Davidson and Burke, 1994). Latest studies by Lund (1998) and Singh (2002) primarily focus on the profile of women academicians and administrators in public universities without analyzing their behavioural factors and experiences in managing the academic institutions.

Given the above scenario, it is important to understand in more details the career experience and behaviour of this small number of highly talented women academicians who have managed to stride to the top rank and positions in the universities. Furthermore in Malaysia, research on the career advancement of these women professionals who have made a pioneering role in higher education has not been well addressed. The focus of this study is on women’s progress towards reaching the top level profession in academia in which very few women compared to men can in any case expect to reach. These women also represent the successful ones who have managed to break through the so-called “glass ceiling” in the academia. Therefore, the purpose of the study is an attempt to embed the lives of a group of high-achieving women within a particular time-frame in their career, in which social and work-related changes were occurring, and to consider their influences on the women’s career success.

This study is guided by the following research questions: What are the significant events that have given impacts on their careers? What are the women professors’ priorities and values in their life? These two questions lead to the third question, what factors that propel the women professors in attaining their present position? Since this study intends to deeply explore and investigate the experiences of fast track women academicians, it would contribute to the understanding of identity building of this group of professional women. This study is also significant since it enlightens the complexities associated with the success of the women professors, enhances women understanding of their own careers, and gives insight on the interrelatedness of other aspects of life as well as the organizational environments to their career.

**Theorizing careers of high-flyer women academicians**

One of the ways to analyse the high-flyer career is when it is seen against the classical concept of career by Super (1957). Even though the four stages of career such as exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline are said not dictated by age, but many studies such as by Levinson *et al.* (1978), Larwood and Gutek (1987), Scase and Goffee (1989), Powell and Mainiero (1992) and Altman (1997) assert that one’s career is highly influenced by age. Due to the centrality of career and age, then the phases of career are analysed practically within a process of incorporating job status and performance against time. Following this, based on Levinson’s career model, he says that career development is a function of age and other family, organizational and environment factors. Levinson categorises four life stages: childhood (below 20 years), early adulthood (20-40 years), middle adulthood (40-60 years) and late adulthood (over
When comparing models of Levinson, Super and Havighurst, the age of 40-60 years resembles the stages of establishment and maintenance. Taking into consideration that if a person is in his or her “establishment stage” and about to enter into the “maintenance stage” at a faster rate than the average person could do, the person is reasonably considered as a high-flyer. In the academia, therefore, this is tantamount to one who reaches his or her professorship or the “establishment stage” at an unusually earlier age, allowing the person to be in the “maintenance stage” longer before touching retirement or the “decline stage”.

Borrowing Johnson’s (1990) definition of high-flyer, this study operationalises high-flyer academician as a young, upwardly mobile lecturer, often equipped with good track records on their way to top hierarchy in academia. The high-flyers are aptly named for their ability to move fast from an early stage of their career and eventually reach at the top of the job hierarchy. The concept of high-flyer is time related. Therefore, age, as an aspect of time is one of the measures of success for the high-flyers. Sadler (1993) simply outlines the most effective processes to develop high flyer executives, namely, challenging job assignments, mentoring, coaching and sponsorship by senior executives, learning by working with particular bosses (positive and negative role models), willingness to face challenges and hardships. Altman (1997) asserts that a high-flyer is quickly identified by an organization and the person becomes an organization-wide human resource, rather than belonging to a given division or a job category. The high-flyer is then expected to help in the management of the organization.

It has been argued that the traditional concept of “career” is more masculine oriented (Flanders, 1994). As such, literature has extremely discussed women’s career against that of men’s standards. This includes challenges in which the traditional male career model has remained as the standpoint for judging women’s career progress in organizations. It has been further discussed that society and organizations continue to force women to conform to the traditional model of male workers which in many ways fail to address experiences, values and goals, opportunities, accommodation to spouse’s career, definition of parental roles and workplace discriminatory constraints. Similarly, O’Leary (1997) and Powell and Mainiero (1992) argue that such traditional conceptions of achievement and success have a limited shelf-life when applied to women’s personal and professional lives. This argument is based on a range of measures of career achievement between women and men that differ significantly. White et al. (1992) and Simpson (1995) further clarify that men tend to use objective measures of career success such as salary, rank or promotion. Women, on the other hand, measure their success in both professional and personal arenas through subjective measures such as personal or professional satisfaction, ability to cope with conflicts and constraints, and perceived quality of career growth. Gallos’s (1989) discussion based on feminist critiques pointing to the fact that male career is characterised by a single-minded focus on work and desirability of independence, while female’s life is founded on the tension between family related and the need for accomplishment.

Mavin (2001) points out that while male career models remain and women step off the fast-track to meet family demands and responsibilities, women found to continue to be at a competitive advantage in career advancement. Indeed, women’s career development proceeds in a somewhat different manner from that of men. For instance
Rapoport and Rapoport (1980) introduce the triple helix model of career that incorporates women’s life experiences. Thus Mavin (2001) concludes that the understanding of women’s career requires the acknowledgement that women have fundamentally different experiences and women find themselves in different situations when developing their career compared with men. White (1995) and Hirsh and Jackson (1990) further support that careers should be accommodated around the reality of women’s lives, allowing them to make a meaningful investment in both occupational and family roles.

In addition, Scase and Goffee (1989) have proceeded to document the changing context of career. Individuals in a large-scale organization can no longer hope that they will have uninterrupted, life-long career paths due to the combined effect of organizational decentralization, delayering and increased risk of redundancy. Another interesting insight on women’s career development model was developed by Powell and Mainiero (1992) that conceptualises career as “cross-currents in the river of time”. Their conceptualization of career development encompasses a more expansive and holistic view, acknowledging the interplay between work and significant others whether at the workplace or at home. In line with this, two associated outcomes of success were proposed, i.e. success in career and success in relationship with others.

Such a conceptualization of careers is not uncommon in recent women’s career development model. Limerick (1995) further identifies career as life stages that also takes into consideration socio-historical contexts, geographical and economic factors, and organizational realities. Nevertheless, circumstances make women to choose between upward mobility or achievement oriented in career, family stability or having the combination of both.

Based on the two arguments, first is that women’s careers are compared against the standards of men’s careers which is based on objective or achievement oriented career concept, and, second is on the group of theories focusing on the interplay between achievement and life experiences or the subjective career concept. The third concept considered is the centrality of career to one’s age as is manifested in the image of a high-flyer. Therefore, this study incorporates the three career conceptualizations on women academicians.

**Methodology**

This study aims to investigate the career experiences of women professors in order to gain an in depth understanding on factors contributing to their present status of profession. The data generated from the study is based on career-history method. Career history is in principle the description on career action resulting from an interplay between life and career activities. The strengths of career-history method are numerous. The method makes use of autobiographical accounts using in-depth interviews, combined with personal documents such as curricular vitae, and achievement records or certificates. Career-history is particularly appropriate for the study of subjective career as has been conceptualised by Evetts (1996) and Poole and Langan-Fox (1997). It is different from objective career in which the latter involves extrinsic measures such as occupational structure, job tasks and pay; while the former emphasises intrinsic measures such as satisfaction in the job, coping with conflicts and relationship with co-workers and significant others. Subjective career is important but seems to be neglected in career research. Beynon (1985) further claims that
career-history could fill in the gaps in understanding of career, professional and personal life. Career history also examines the goals, values and orientations that are important precursors to career success. The advantages are at three levels: subjective, contextual and evaluation. The subjective level, again supporting the subjective-career, refers to the ability of the data to illumine career reality because it emphasises the interpretations of respondents’ everyday experience as explanation of behaviours. Contextually, career-history grounded the individual career in both the context of lived experience as well as the broader social and economic system in which they lived. The evaluative advantage of career-history is its centrality on focusing lived experience of individuals rather than on mass phenomena of group that may lead to simplification.

Career-history or life-history, is however, without its weaknesses. Researching lives is always a delicate affair, often highly intrusive. According to Cole and Knowles (2001), career and life-history method is complex, time consuming, elusive, even tiring and tedious.

The study sample consists of women professors who are so called “high-flyer”, chosen based on a single criterion that they achieved their professorship at the age of 48 years old and below. These women professors come from all established public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, representing various fields of specialization in the fundamental and applied sciences, as well as social sciences. The names of the respondents were obtained from several sources such as the registrar offices of the respective universities, a graduate study on women academicians by Amri (2003), and the websites of the universities. This list of names was then categorised according to their age at the appointment of their professor position. The age of 48 years old was chosen as the cut-off point because this is the average age of men and women academician population to obtain their professoriate. Since the focus of the study is on the established career of women, 48 years of age is reasonably taken, as White (1995) hypothesises that 40-50 years as the age of achievement and rebalancing. The age of 48 is also a point where an appropriate and manageable sample was taken from. Based on that, the number qualified to be selected as respondents were 78. The selected names were then contacted by mails, e-mails and telephones, inviting them to participate in the study. The responses were rather encouraging, as those responded expressed that they were honoured to be chosen as the study sample. Appointments were made for interviews, and most of the interviews were conducted at the respondents' workplaces, except two were at transit places in Kuala Lumpur when they had their outstation duties.

Respondents’ curriculum vitae were also collected upon their willingness to share it in the research, and field notes during the interviews were taken to support the interpretation of their responses. Based on the above procedures, 31 women professors were interviewed, as the data obtained from them believed to reach the saturation point. A recorder-cum-transcriber was used to facilitate the interviews and the transcribing processes. Each interview lasted between one to two hours, and was steered by an interview guide questions addressing topics across the entire life stages in order to acquire an extensive understanding of their strive and thrive to the higher rank of academia. Topics covered in the interviews were childhood life, parental involvement in early education, educational experiences including that of primary, secondary and tertiary levels, appointment as an academician, job promotions, administrative positions, mentoring system, networking and collaboration, family and
domestic issues, and significant events or turning point that had made impact on their career. A total of 42 hours of recorded interviews were later transcribed verbatim. Constant comparative analysis of data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was conducted to generate themes as they relate to factors contributing to their career success. Respondents are indicated by their number (according to the sequence of the interview) and field of specialization in the result and discussion section.

Results and discussion
The profile of the respondents shows that their average age is 49.6 years, with the youngest of 41 and oldest of 60 years. The average age at which they obtained the professoriate is 44.5 years. All respondents are married with one respondent who is a single mother due to death of her husband and another respondent is separated. The family size is 5.6, with 18 respondents (58.1 per cent) having one to three children, and six respondents (19.4 per cent) having six to eight children.

Of the respondents, 24 are with fields of specialization in science such as food science (two), chemistry (three), molecular biology (one), medicine (six), solar energy (one), engineering (three), veterinary science (one), agriculture (one), biochemistry (two), taxonomy and ecology (one), environmental biology (one), pharmacy (one) and aquatic ecology (one). Only seven respondents are in social sciences such as education (two), Malay studies (one), town planning (one), management (one), psychology (one) and economy (one). The majority of the respondents studied in non-coed or girls-only schools during their secondary education.

The results on factors contributing to respondents’ success in their career is explained based on themes derived from the data covering the three out of four stages of career development as conceptualised by Super (1957) and Levinson et al. (1978), namely, exploration, establishment and maintenance.

Exploration
Exploration is operationalised in this study as the stage of formative career. It includes the schooling stage spanning from the primary, secondary and tertiary education specifically the first degree. Four themes emerged during the exploration stage that could explain what made this group of women respondents excelled in their education. The themes are early exposure to learning, entrance to boarding school, first degree experiences and personal qualities.

Early exposure to learning
Nine respondents mentioned that they were exposed to basic learning as early as the age of four to six years. Two reasons were cited for this early exposure to formal schooling. First, either of their parents, mostly father, worked in salaried occupations such as teachers and public services personnel. The respondents also revealed that they were made to be earlier in primary classes as a result of strong motivation by either mother or father. Respondents have the following to say:

My father was a teacher then . . . I must be about three or four years and I used to follow him to school . . . I learnt how to read and write. So my playground was a school. There was a time when at school, a teacher said, “she can read”, . . . so within a month I moved to standard two (R4, medicine).
My teacher-father then became a school principal. So, most of the time, we stayed in the school compound... At the age of four or five years old, I used to follow him to school and then mixed with the pupils... And then my father likes to buy me books and I love to read books. Every month, he will buy me several books... I think reading was one of my passions during that time” (R8, veterinary science).

Similarly, another respondent said:

We stayed near the school where my father was teaching... Such that I was one of those rare cases who went to school a year before the actual school going age... I took exams... At that time my father was the deputy principal... The following year I moved to standard two... (R11, Malay studies).

Respondents’ early exposure to reading and writing, built in to their character of liking books, hence the sense of wanting to know more of new things through studying. This caused them to excel in learning throughout their primary education from year one to year six.

Entrance to boarding school

Due to their superb performance in primary education, the majority of the respondents (24) reported that they went to full residential or boarding schools. The concept of boarding school is implemented in Malaysia specially catered for the top selected students from all over the country. Beginning in 1960s, there were only two such girls-only schools, one was for girls from the elite families and another for girls from the rural areas. But at present, there is no such a differentiation, there are even every state in the country with more than one boarding school.

Being in the non-coeducation schools, the respondents expressed that girls-only schools give them advantage since there was no competition with boys as otherwise in the mixed schools. Respondents also revealed that most of them were very active in extra-curricular activities besides being outstanding in academic performance especially in sciences. A respondent reported her experience:

I was in number one all the way... became head girl... before that prefect, class monitor... you name it. Being a prefect is natural for me... It sharpened me in theatre, dancing, games and debate... I found out my actual talent was debating (R22, molecular medicine).

Another respondent shared her experience of being active in extra curricular:

When I was in school even from primary... I was very active... On stage I like acting, singing, in fact in primary school, I won Quran reciting competition in one of the states... I was very active in other school activities, rather than academic... In secondary school, I was a debater, then I played music for the school, and we were the Malaysian champion in the choir... So I was juggling my time in all these with studying... (R21, chemistry).

In the same line of experience another respondent quoted:

... I just liked school, and I liked two things... to read and to play sports. I played all games and I excelled in many games... I was the school track champion, I ran 100 metres, 200 metres, 400 metres and I even played long jump... I am just good at running. I think if you live in the village... and have to walk very far to school... so it gives me good exercise. I am not only good at track events... good in ball games, I played hockey, I played netball. Then, later on at university I took up squash, I took up tennis, I took up badminton... I just play any game... (R18, medicine).
It is believed that active involvement in extra-curricular activities has paramount impact on building strong characters among students in schools, in terms of future leadership qualities, attitudes towards survival and success, self-motivation and independence.

First degree experience

Of the respondents, 19 received their first degree abroad mostly in the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand and one each in Egypt, Canada and Indonesia. This was due to the fact that beginning the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the best students from the Malaysian high schools were given opportunities to study abroad under various sources of scholarship after taking the Malaysian Certificate of Examination (MCE). All respondents, whether they studied abroad or locally, revealed that they began to develop their specialised area of interest during their first degree program. It is found that this initial interest was actually the field that they are now specializing in, even though with a slight deviation due to specificity and the depth of their research areas. Early identification of interest or specialised area is found to be common in the careers of high-flyers (Bates, 1994). The data show that area of specialization was explored early by respondents i.e. during the first degree education or just before they embarked on their first employment. The respondents said:

...I want to do something with life science ... So, in the end I choose a topic about laser using technology ... ionization physics ... I enjoyed it because I choose the topics for my first degree thesis. Interaction with tissue ... hence, on medical application ... I thought this can be used in the hospital ... (R25, engineering).

I graduated with high distinction in Biology. It was there my interest in microbiology developed ... And I had a professor who taught about microbiology and all that ... And I said ... oh, maybe that is the area that I need to go into ... (R22, molecular medicine).

I took four years honours for my first degree and specialised in algae because ... rumours spread that the algae's professor is going to retire ... so I was asked to do algae ... contemplating to replace the professor ... When I did my masters in Canada, I stuck to algae as my specialization ... (R13, environmental biology).

Personal qualities

Personal qualities are the integral form of characteristic of a high-flyer. Performance is the outer facet of the high-flyer individual while motivation, commitment, determination and hard work are the inner face. Through the experiences it shows that most respondents have shown strong qualities early in their life in terms of tendency to excel in academia. The above three themes indeed became the underlying explanation towards helping them in building their personal qualities that are so important in their early stage of career. The personal qualities are hardworking, self-motivation, independence and possession of locus of control in study.

About personal qualities, a respondent confessed:

I think it is my personality ... that is my characters that make me what I do ... From the beginning, I am not afraid of anybody ... I am brave, confident ... I have this great confidence in myself that I am going to be successful in pathology ... (R18, pathology).
Establishment and maintenance
These two phases of career are discussed together because all respondents are within these career stages of which both are not easy to demarcate. Based on career conceptualisation of Super (1957), Havighurst (1972) and Levinson et al. (1978), the age of 40-60 is the stage of establishment and maintenance where all respondents are presently within the age bracket. Six themes are generated from the data to explain the career picture of the respondents that specifically drive them to grow in the academia. The themes are: graduate study experience; career centrality; family support; uniqueness of academic role; health consciousness; and sense of religiosity.

Graduate study experience
All respondents received post-graduate degrees of masters and doctorate. In fact both are requirements for a post of an academician in any public university. All respondents strongly admitted that their post-graduate experiences gave them strong initial impact on the need of establishing area of specialization. This made them clear in accomplishing their teaching and research roles. Especially the latter, the majority of respondents said it repeatedly that their doctoral experience made them realised the importance of producing good research and publication. Respondents have these to say:

...I apply to do masters... that was the turning point... Instead of doing physics education, they offer me a real physics programme... I have no choice... I do physics and the next best area was solar energy... and I finally found my niche area that I can contribute which is the bridge between the physicists and architects... Again I found myself useful... I can contribute in a field that not many people are... when you have found your niche area, you excel there... (R5, solar energy).

During my PhD programme, I learned a lot about publication... I produced 11 articles from my PhD... I think my supervisor is a very good idol... so I learnt a lot about writing when I was with him... When I came back, I said that I have to continue... So I wrote books, articles and papers without difficulties... I tried everything... (R21, chemistry).

Similar experience during doctoral program is as follows:

So in terms of my PhD experience in UK... it is very good... I have made up my mind just to finish my PhD... My supervisor helped me a lot, and I worked very hard... In terms of writing papers, he did mostly... and I just filled in the data for him... I produced six papers during my PhD... (R19, chemistry).

Another important impact of post-graduate experience is the establishment of networking locally and internationally. Networking develops through the connection of members in the supervisory committee, and affiliation to any professional body outside the university. It is further strengthened through periodic meetings with peer researchers in various engagements and activities of collaborative projects, professional meetings, and conferences. Respondents stressed the importance of networking:

International linkages start with personal, then institutional... The institutional matters materialised when both institutes see that what we are doing is worth going up to the next level of institution... My supervisor is there, the taxonomist... so we just link... Then I feel that link is important... (R12, taxonomy and ecology).
... Because I spent a long time in Australia for my first and specialised degrees. I have been able to maintain collaboration, international networking ... I probably have a higher profile in terms of international collaboration because I already had one foot there ... and that really helps, rather than if you were trained here, even though you are doing fantastic work ... You know what it is like when doing networking ... Because of that I have been on several international research and consultancy steering committees ... (R15, medicine).

I think I am known more outside the university than inside university. Being a professor of course you have to be known at the field what you do ... So, one way to get into this networking is by attending all these conferences and professional meetings ... I never failed to go to the international conferences, every two years I must go ... Because there are the times when you meet all the people working in your environment ... And then keeping up with your publication ... When you publish a lot, your name will be there ... And people know that you are doing your job in the field ... (R21, chemistry).

Career centrality
Studies among successful professional unfailingly stressed the significance of having career centrality. It is no exception to this group of women high-flyers. Components that characterise career centrality shown by the data are working towards career fulfilment, understanding on the job requirements for an academician, hardworking and determination, and having career target. These components govern the psychology of career in which they influence the cognitive, emotional and attitudinal dimensions, hence one's behaviour towards achieving career goals.

White (1995) emphasises career centrality as an important quality of any successful men and women professionals. Career centrality is defined as the extent to which an individual sees involvement in a career as central to their adult life. In relation to this, a respondent reported:

I do everything when I am asked to do ... Go for meeting ... if anybody wants to do research with me ... I don't say no, regardless of big or small research ... I didn't say no to the task of supervision of undergraduate. I never say no to anyone who gives me any formal task in the university ... (R1, engineering).

Another respondent emphasised her point:

For any reason I have to make a point ... that I still have to go to the lab ... I still have to do research ... to publish ... There is no excuse ... and I think that becomes a good training for me ... What ever you do, you must try to publish ... Another thing is don't say no to any job which is given to you ... (R8, veterinary science).

Similarly, a respondent stressed the impact that every academician should achieved:

I have always done work which has an impact to society ... I think when we come back as scientists, we need to bring the ivory tower to society ... That has been my thinking ... When you think like that, you will bring impact ... Therefore I will acquire what ever it takes, current technologies that can now do two things, one, provides the impact to society, second, provides the impact to the global market ... (R22, molecular medicine).

Family support
The importance of family support to career success is a factor that usually differentiates the results of studies on men and women's career. The most important
form of family support is spousal support, followed by paid domestic helper, and assistance from extended family members such as sisters, mother and parents-in-law. A respondent revealed in terms of her husband support:

Actually what my husband contributes is not ideas about . . . it is not really because he knows my field, it is just coincidental . . . I think what we derive from each other is the intellectual sparing partner . . . you see . . . he is my intellectual sparing partner . . . (R1, engineering).

With regards to domestic helper, two expressions are as follows:

. . . I have been very lucky, I have a maid who has been with me for seven years and whom I have my trust. Last week I was in Melbourne, tonight I am going to Prague, so you know . . . usually in a situation like this . . . one of us must be around. My husband also travels often . . . I am lucky that I know they (husband and two children) are at home with someone I can trust besides my parents . . . But of course, it is not the same as having me around . . . (R15, medicine).

. . . Looking back as a whole, I have always had good helps . . . They are not perfect and nobody is perfect . . . But without them, I wouldn't be able to do my work . . . They are real maids from village . . . I had several of course, and then in the old days, two at a time . . . one to look after the babies and one to look after the house . . . When I went to US, I brought my maid along . . . That is why I said I am very lucky . . . Since then she was with me for 12 years . . . (R2, education).

In relation to their extended family support, a respondent reported:

. . . I am staying with my in-laws in their house. So I don't have any worries . . . The food is cooked, the clothes are washed, the house is clean and my mother in-law will look after my two children . . . In this regard, I am considered lucky . . . (R6, medicine).

Uniqueness of academic role

It is without doubt that the respondents are fairly satisfied with their present career status, even though several mentioned that they should have been promoted to professorship very much earlier. They consciously acknowledged there is a uniqueness of academic role in which they enjoyed the three-in-one functions of teaching, research and services. Teaching is common to everyone in terms of workload and performance. What differentiates them from other academicians is their relatively more outstanding performance in research and publication. A respondent confessed:

You must produce some visible outputs depending on your skill, which ever the outputs are research or writing . . . not everybody have the same skills . . . There must be something that is beyond your teaching outputs . . . I think this is the factor in the promotion of female academicians. Nowadays we require visible outputs, which can be in any form . . . it maybe books or research articles or any form of outcome . . . but there must be some visible outputs before we are granting promotions . . . Administrative positions are not enough any more and as I said that part of my promotion was due to my books . . . so the management was convinced that I ought to be promoted . . . (R3, management).

In agreement to the above, another respondent mentioned:

. . . My husband went off to private, and I was still crawling up here . . . but he said it is okay, you just publish and publish . . . and you just aim to be a professor . . . because professor
cannot be achieved overnight ... you have to produce quality papers ... and I just concentrate on that ... (R28, food science).

In fact, it is widely known that the number of research conducted and hence the outputs such as publications, patents, impact on policy and society become major criteria for promotion exercises in the public institutions of higher learning. The data from the respondents show that these objective criteria of career assessment were made known to them, and the respondents worked consciously towards what it needed to be successful as it was strongly related to the aspect of career centrality as alluded to earlier.

Another attractive provision in academic line is sabbatical leave. Respondents revealed that sabbatical leave is very helpful to them. It allows them to take a break away from teaching and administrative routines in any semester, while doing a research. Taking sabbatical leave has been one of the important events in the career development of most respondents. They reiterated:

I had three sabbaticals. The first time I spent six months overseas on breast surgery ... The second one, I went to Edinburgh to look at their breast clinic, how it was set up and run ... The third one I went to Australia because I thought that I have enough experience in UK, I might as well go to the other side of the world ... (R6, medicine).

At the moment, I am on sabbatical ... If you have not taken your sabbatical, you better take now ... I am telling all my colleagues to take it because sabbatical leave is a privilege to an academician ... Even if you don’t do anything, it is a break from work ... I needed that break so badly because I have been working so hard ... (R26, biochemistry).

I think sabbatical leave is very important, but a lot of people used sabbatical in a very different way ... To some people, sabbatical is just like holiday ... I think sabbatical is the time that you need to improve yourself, you attend courses, do attachment in an institution somewhere else, and is the time for you to reorganise, reassess or start on new project ...” (R14, psychology).

Another uniqueness of academic function is the possibility of an academician to become an administrator. Most respondents mentioned that they have held at least one an administrative position before promoted to a professor such as program coordinator or leader, head of department, or deputy dean. They said to be in administration is equally important to make one is visible in the faculty and the university. But administration alone does not guarantee the person to go higher in academic hierarchy because intellectual development is a function of one’s scholarly enhancement necessitating his or her involvement in knowledge creation through research. It has been observed that once an academician is identified as a high achiever in a department, the person will be quickly picked up by the faculty or university to become an important management asset of the institution. The same goes to some of the respondents in this study:

Of course by being in that administrative position, you become more visible ... and have a lot of things to do ... You have to deal with people outside your place ... and you have to prove yourself that you can do the dealings ... When being in the administration, there is something good that you have done more than anybody else in the faculty or university ... (R8, veterinary science).
Our vice chancellor called and talked through the phone... The first thing he said to me was that I need your help... You have to lead the faculty (I am leading now)... Even the staff members at the departments and faculty have submitted my name... So the decision for my appointment is also from here... from the former dean and head of departments... However, at the moment I was heading one of the new institutes... and I liked the institute more... because the work was much more interesting... the feeling, the challenges were different... (R23, economy).

Health consciousness
Health consciousness refers to high-flyer women academician's beliefs and values that in order to be high-performing they have to put high priority in taking care and achieving good health. A number of respondents repeatedly mentioned that they are so grateful for being in good health, stamina and stable peace of mind throughout their career journey. The respondents seemed to show that their health consciousness is significant, could be explained through the triple helix model of successful women's career (White, 1995), in which they are able to balance between occupational, family and leisure activities. The most common leisure activities conducted by the respondents were aerobic exercise, jogging and participation in outdoor games. Here are some of their experiences:

I do aerobic twice a week... So, I have been doing aerobic for the last ten years... because aerobic exercise is a mixture of dance and physical workouts... It reminds me of my school days, dancing... so, it keeps me alive in that sense... That is part of my leisure practice every week that I strongly feel helps me going with these hectic tasks... (R21, chemistry).

Now, I really don’t like stress... So I find that if I go jogging everyday, and I can rest for two days, then I feel I am a nicer person... I am not so stress... and I jog about five kilometers each time... I do a lot... (R16, pharmacy).

Sense of religiosity
The data undeniably show that putting balance between spiritual and material values is important in developing the career of the respondents. Their expression on the significance of spiritual strength in their life span implies that they have reached their highest self-actualization need by being in their present job position. The following expressions explain:

A characteristic in Islam is to excel in whatever you do... But whether you will get it or not, leave it to God... As indicated in the verse... Let Allah and the Prophet be and others be the witnesses upon your work... Not because you really want that thing. However, there is a danger, if you target... you work to get that, and if it doesn’t materialise, you will be frustrated... I didn’t put it that way... I do the best in whatever I choose... But I realise by doing the best, you’ll get the best outcome... (R24, education).

When I do my revision, I pray to God... God, please help me... now that I have made up my decision to be a doctor... I am always crazy about studying... and thanks God that I did well in my studies... despite all the hardship... The other concept in life is barakah... we must pray... The best thing people can give you is a prayer... (R7, medicine).
Conclusion and recommendation

The career-history data produce a rich set of data focusing on the influence of life stages and events to the incremental nature of career development. The results suggested that the high-flyer women academicians passed through specific life stages. However, the nature and the chronological order of the career developmental stages appeared to be predictable because they are in the same profession of academia. The similarities that emerged are also due to the context of time they were in, which could be seen through their age range of minimum 41 years and maximum 60 years, with mean of 48 years; and range of getting promoted to professoriate from 39 to 48 years, with mode of 45 years.

The study results among high-flyer women academicians validate the framework that women’s career success is the function of a diverse range of factors and events during early socialization; primary, secondary and tertiary education; and more importantly the life after the first degree. It is felt by the academicians that the post-graduate experience of masters and doctoral programmes are the most important events in creating their niche area in research and research function is indispensable in the promotion to professorship. Early identification of niche research area was found to be associated with the early preparation towards fulfilling the criteria of productive researcher academicians.

The respondents’ achievements in research were also made possible due to the provisions available in the universities such as collaborative research with partners locally and internationally, sabbatical leave and the possibility of they being picked up to assume administrative functions in the institution. These factors differentiate the explanation on what makes women academicians to be in the fast-track career compared to other non-academic women. However, career centrality seems to be a universal factor to any individual’s success in career. This is because nothing can substitute the power of hard work, determination, persistence and having career focus and target. Last but not least, the study indicates the two additional explanation on the pertinent influence of non-professional factors to this group of high-flyer women academicians, namely, health consciousness and sense of religiosity that have indeed led towards their career stability.

These findings should be taken into consideration when assessing academicians especially women for promotion and selection exercises. It is essential that human resource management look into the subjective interpretation of career rather than focusing totally on the objective measure of career development. Further studies are suggested on the quantitative association between themes in the exploration career stage and those in the establishment and maintenance stages, among women as well as men high-flyers. Also recommended that a longitudinal research methodology may be useful to validate the framework of high-flyers in academia.

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No. 6, pp. 20-4.

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