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RECONFIGURING FACULTY PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL SYSTEM FOR SUSTAINABLE INSTITUTIONAL GROWTH AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

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Abstract: This study examines the evolving dynamics of faculty performance appraisals in higher education, with a focus on a Malaysian public university. While widely adopted, performance appraisal systems often face challenges such as political influences, lack of developmental orientation, rigid Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and inconsistent evaluation criteria. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research explores the perception of the university's academic staff, evaluators, and top management regarding a recently implemented appraisal system. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 22 participants, highlighting barriers in evaluation criteria, methods, and mechanisms. The findings reveal shared and group-specific challenges: Academic staff noted limited transparency, weak feedback mechanisms, and dissatisfaction with KPI settings; evaluators reported inefficiencies that impeded their tasks; and top management identified misunderstandings about the system's objectives. Across all groups, issues of change management, documentation, and professionalism emerged as persistent concerns. The study underscores the need for reform to ensure appraisal practices better align with institutional goals, support academic development, and promote a balanced view of academic roles. Framed by the Contingency Theory, the findings illustrate how contextual factors such as institutional purpose, governance, and resources shape appraisal practices. This research contributes to ongoing debates on enhancing performance appraisal systems to foster sustainable growth in higher education.

Keywords: Performance appraisal, performance management, university, academic staff, policies and practices.

Introduction

Performance management is a critical organisational tool that provides a structured approach to evaluating, monitoring and improving employee performance in alignment with strategic objectives (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Murphy, 2020). It is a holistic framework encompassing goal setting, performance appraisals, feedback mechanisms, professional development, and reward systems. A central component of performance management is the Performance Appraisal (PA), which systematically measures and evaluates employee performance against predefined standards (Rwothumio *et al*., 2021; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). PA helps assess workloads, productivity, and overall effectiveness while informing decisions on promotions, rewards, and training (Aguinis, 2013; Cappelli & Tavis, 2016). Unlike the continuous nature of performance management, PA is a formal, periodic evaluation (typically conducted every one to five years) that aligns individual contributions with organisational goals (Aguinis, 2013; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). By providing structured feedback, PA supports employee development and strategic decision-making (Sulkowski *et al*., 2020; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). Thus, while performance management represents an ongoing, cyclical process of development and alignment, PA serves as its formal evaluation component against predefined criteria.

In recent decades, the global university system has experienced significant transformations aimed at improving performance, quality, competitiveness, and sustainability. In Malaysia, these changes have been most noticeable as Higher-Education Institutions (HEIs) adapt to national policies like the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025, which emphasises performance-based funding and international competitiveness (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). These changes have prioritised accountability through mechanisms such as league tables, KPIs, and structured human resource strategies to address underperformance. A performance-oriented paradigm has emerged to enhance individual and institutional effectiveness, with performance management increasingly viewed as vital for fostering accountability, productivity, and sustainable growth in higher education (Graham, 2015; Gu & Levin, 2021).

As a result, PA systems are now widely used in universities, including in Malaysia, where institutions have adopted stricter faculty evaluations to meet national goals for research excellence and global rankings. These systems ensure staff contributions align with institutional goals, helping universities navigate a competitive academic landscape. Typically conducted annually, PA evaluates individual performance while promoting accountability, continuous improvement and alignment with institutional missions in education, research, and community engagement (Melo & Figueiredo, 2020; Dasanayaka *et al*., 2021).

Despite their widespread use in universities, PA systems face significant challenges that limit their effectiveness (Alach, 2017; Dasanayaka *et al*., 2021; Lohman, 2021). The first major issue concerns their underlying philosophy. Many view PAs as politically motivated, unclear, or punitive rather than developmental, creating distrust in the process (Cappelli & Travis, 2016; Dasanayaka *et al*., 2021). This disconnect prevents proper alignment with their intended purpose of fostering excellence. These philosophical concerns directly manifest in operational challenges, particularly regarding evaluation criteria. Unclear objectives often result in inconsistent metrics while rigid KPIs are seen as unreasonable constraints that increase workloads and restrict academic freedom (Adler *et al*., 2016; Kallio *et al*., 2017; Gu & Levin, 2021).

Quantitative evaluation methods have fostered an individualistic academic culture while qualitative approaches face criticism for subjectivity and favouritism (Alach, 2017). Close relationships between academics and evaluators often lead to biased ratings, creating perceptions of unfairness (Yazid *et al*., 2017; Dasanayaka *et al*., 2021). Evaluations are further compromised by bias related to gender, age, ethnicity, and religion (Melo & Figueiredo, 2020). Lack of transparency in scoring and unclear weighting of criteria erode trust in the system (Sulkoswi *et al*., 2020; Rwothumio *et al*., 2021) while inconsistent communication of results undermines PA objectives (Yazid *et al*., 2017; Nisio *et al*., 2018; Dasanayaka *et al*., 2021).

Comparative studies show Western universities grappling with unsystematic, time-consuming PA systems using biased instruments ill-suited to diverse disciplines (Herdlein *et al*., 2008; Sułkowski *et al*., 2020; Lohman, 2021). Many HEIs in the West lack comprehensive and holistic approaches to PA (Sułkowski *et al*., 2020). Developing countries face similar issues, with inflexible, subjective systems overemphasising quantitative metrics, and lack of systematic processes and effective management (Yazid *et al*., 2017; Gu & Levin, 2021).

In Malaysia, PA systems mirror these global challenges, but face additional complications due to tensions between fulfilling the Malaysia Research Assessment criteria (MyRA), meeting international ranking pressures and addressing local institutional missions. This has resulted in hybrid models that focus on quantitative KPIs (e.g., publication and research grant targets) alongside qualitative assessments of teaching

and service while persistent gaps remain between policy intentions and departmental implementation.

The above challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, collectively undermining the effectiveness of PA systems in HEIs. While discussions on these issues have increased, there is a noticeable paucity of empirical studies investigating the shortcomings of academic PA processes in Malaysia. Existing research has yet to comprehensively explore the specific barriers faced by Malaysian universities, particularly the interplay of policy, political, and cultural factors. Such challenges may vary across national contexts due to differences in governance, institutional priorities, and cultural norms.

Thus, this qualitative case study explores academic perceptions of the PA system in Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), a public university specialising in marine science and aquatic resources in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia (UMT, 2019). The study posits that improving the quality of universities and the performance of their academics requires a critical examination of existing PA practices.

Given that academics are the primary stakeholders in public universities and play a pivotal role in the success of the higher education system, it is imperative to address the challenges associated with PA systems that impact their work. The academics' perception of appraisal systems is particularly significant because notions of fairness and quality in evaluations may directly influence their attitude, behaviour, and overall job satisfaction. Although these systems are designed to motivate and improve productivity, they may also yield unintended consequences such as increased job pressure, unhealthy work habits, and ethical misconduct.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on faculty evaluations by providing qualitative insights into how academics perceive a newly implemented PA system at a Malaysian public university. By documenting the system's perceived value and its effects on the work environment, the study seeks to inform improvements in appraisal practices. Furthermore, it emphasises the need to transform the evaluation of academic activities to better align with institutional goals, academic development, and staff well-being.

Literature Review

The history of PA has been predominantly shaped by the necessity to evaluate employee performance (Murphy & DeNisi, 2023). Traditionally, PA is considered a fundamental component of human resource management due to the widespread belief that it can significantly contribute to organisational productivity and efficiency. Over time, PA systems have evolved, encompassing diverse instruments, tools, systems, and applications used across both private and public sectors. In Malaysian public universities, this evolution has accelerated since the 2010s, with PA systems increasingly tied to national higher education reforms and global competitiveness agendas. These developments reflect today's rapidly changing environment, which is driven by heightened competition. Modern PA approaches emphasise skills development, learning capabilities and the future growth of employees by aligning their performance with organisational objectives (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023).

Thus, modern appraisal systems are not limited to performance evaluation only, but also play a critical role in identifying training needs, determining appropriate interventions and providing constructive feedback. Such systems ensure that employee contributions align with organisational objectives. Additionally, they enable organisations to decide who requires training, the type of training needed, and the appropriate timing for appraisals, thereby establishing PA as an effective mechanism for fostering professional development and enhancing organisational adaptability (Cappelli & Travis, 2016).

Performance Appraisal in Higher Education

PA in higher education has evolved significantly in recent decades. Pre-1970s, universities typically employed a *laissez-faire* approach that relied on academic autonomy, though this lacked objective assessment standards (Gu & Levin, 2016). In the 1980s, neo-liberal influences introduced corporate-style PA systems to enhance efficiency and accountability (Cappelli & Travis, 2016; Gu & Levin, 2016). In this context, neo-liberalism reflects the transfer of market-driven principles such as competition, quantifiable outcomes, and managerial control into the governance of higher education. However, standardised corporate models proved incompatible with the academia's unique structures and disciplinary norms. Academics require flexible PA systems reflecting their autonomy, decision-making roles, and disciplinary ethics (Alach, 2017; Dasanayaka *et al*., 2021; Lohman, 2021). Customisable, adaptive PA approaches more effectively evaluate academic contributions and enhance sustainable outcomes, aligning with the need for context-specific systems.

PA implementation in higher education remains controversial, with persistent concerns about objectivity, fairness, and the unintended consequences of metric-driven assessments (Martin-Sardesai & Guthrie, 2018; Lohman, 2021). Critics argue that excessive reliance on quantitative indicators can distort academic behaviour, encouraging practices such as KPI gaming, predatory publishing or undervaluing contributions in teaching, mentorship, and community service. At the same time, the faculty often perceive appraisal processes as lacking transparency and sensitivity to disciplinary differences, further eroding trust in institutional systems. In response, many HEIs are actively refining evaluation procedures to address these challenges, recognising that effective systems must balance accountability with academia's distinctive professional characteristics and foster a culture of integrity, inclusivity, and continuous development (Lohman, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Multiple theories underpin the study and practice of PA, each addressing different dimensions of how performance is assessed, managed, and perceived. They include Goal-Setting Theory, Equity and Contingency Theory, along with Expectancy Theory and Behavioural Models like Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS), and Competency Models. More recent perspectives such as Institutional Theory highlight how organisational practices are shaped by external norms, regulations, and the need for legitimacy while Stakeholder Theory emphasises balancing the diverse expectations of internal and external actors. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive lens for understanding both the internal drivers and external influences on PA systems. In the context of higher education, six theories are particularly relevant for developing effective PA systems. As summarised in Table 1, these theories include:

(1) Motivational frameworks — *Goal-Setting Theory* and *Expectancy Theory*, which focus on clarifying objectives, enhancing engagement, and linking effort to valued outcomes;

(2) Fairness/justice perspectives — *Equity Theory*, which addresses perceptions of procedural and distributive fairness in evaluation; and

(3) Structural and contextual approaches — *Contingency Theory* and behavioural models (e.g., BARS, Competency Models), which emphasise alignment with organisational context; along with *Institutional Theory*, which considers the influence of sector norms and legitimacy; and *Stakeholder Theory*, which integrates the expectations of multiple internal and external actors.

In higher education, the Goal-Setting Theory underscores the value of establishing clear, measurable objectives to align academic staff performance with institutional priorities. The Equity Theory emphasises that perceptions of fairness in appraisal processes are critical for

Table 1: Summary of key performance assessment theories in higher education

Theory	Core Tenet	PA Application
Goal-Setting Locke & Latham (2002)	Specific, challenging, and attainable goals, coupled with feedback, lead to higher performance and motivation.	• Clearly articulate measurable objectives for academics. • Align individual research, teaching, and service goals with the institution's strategic priorities. • Incorporate regular feedback cycles to track progress.
Equity Adams (1965)	Individuals compare their input–output ratio to that of peers; perceptions of fairness influence motivation and satisfaction. Fairness perceptions drive engagement.	• Ensure transparent evaluation criteria. • Maintain consistency in ratings across departments. • Provide mechanisms for appeal to uphold trust in the PA process.
Contingency Fiedler (1967); Bess & Dee (2008); Levin Martin & Lopez-Damian (2020)	Context determines optimal structure. The effectiveness of management practices depends on alignment between organisational context and system design.	• Customise PA criteria and processes to fit disciplinary norms, institutional mission, and national policy frameworks. • Avoid one-size-fits-all evaluation models.
Expectancy Theory Vroom (1964)	Motivation is shaped by beliefs that effort will lead to performance, performance will lead to rewards and rewards are valued.	• Structure PA so that the criteria are achievable. • Link criteria to tangible career progression. • Align criteria with incentives valued by academics (e.g., promotion, recognition, research funding).
Institutional Theory DiMaggio (1988); DiMaggio & Powell (1991); Scott (1992)	Organisational practices are shaped by external norms, rules, and pressures for legitimacy.	• Align PA with accreditation requirements. • Ensure compliance with government regulations. • Consider rankings and sector-wide performance standards. • Maintain institutional legitimacy.
Stakeholder Theory Freeman (1984); Mitchell, Agle & Wood (1997)	Organisations must consider and balance the interests of multiple stakeholders to achieve long-term success.	• Consider the perspectives and priorities of diverse stakeholders (e.g., academics, students, employers, government bodies). • Ensure PA frameworks are relevant and gain stakeholder buy-in.

fostering trust and engagement. Similarly, the Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964) highlights that individuals are motivated when they believe effort will lead to desirable performance outcomes (expectancy), that these outcomes will be rewarded (instrumentality), and that the rewards are personally valuable (valence). In contrast, the Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967; Bess & Dee, 2008; Levin *et al*., 2020) stresses the importance of tailoring performance assessment systems to fit the institution's specific context, recognising that high-performing universities adapt appraisal structures to evolving environmental and organisational conditions.

The Institutional Theory (DiMaggio, 1988; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 1992) offers an additional lens, highlighting that performance appraisal systems are also shaped by external legitimacy pressures such as accreditation requirements and global ranking expectations.

Similarly, Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell *et al*., 1997) draws attention to the need for appraisal systems to address the diverse expectations of multiple constituencies, including faculty, students, governing bodies, and funders. Among these, the Contingency Theory provides the most comprehensive framework for this study, as it emphasises tailoring performance assessment systems to fit the institution's specific context and adapting them to evolving environmental and organisational conditions while the insights of other theories offer complementary considerations.

Rejecting a one-size-fits-all approach, the theory stresses PA system alignment with institutional goals, roles, and contexts (Bess & Dee, 2008), which is critical for ensuring evaluations remain effective amid evolving academic tasks and demands. Given that academics are trying to balance teaching, research, administration, and service with role priorities that vary by institutional mission (Gu & Levin, 2021; Lohman, 2021), effective PA systems may adapt to these role variations.

For instance, research-intensive universities may prioritise publications while teaching-focused institutions emphasise undergraduate teaching. Such contextual alignment is particularly important at UMT, where PA systems must simultaneously address: (1) Marine science research excellence and MyRA targets, (2) vocational training for marine and aquatic related industries (Ministry of Higher Education - MOHE mandates), and (3) interdisciplinary Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) contributions, all while maintaining equitable standards across faculties with divergent workloads (UMT, 2021). By advocating for customised evaluations that avoid rigid metrics, the Contingency Theory ensures fair assessment of discipline-specific and departmental differences. This flexibility ensures PA systems remain relevant and supportive of diverse academic contributions.

PA systems must also consider university outcomes relevant to stakeholders while preserving academic autonomy (Bana & Oliveira, 2012; Melo & Figueiredo, 2020). For instance, under Malaysia's Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025, when government policies emphasise research outputs, appraisal systems might incorporate metrics related to research grants (e.g., Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS), Transdisciplinary Research Grant Scheme (TRGS), international grants, publications (MyRA-approved-indexed journals), and contributions to industry (MOHE's KPIs for industrial engagement).

A balanced approach that considers both quantitative and qualitative aspects of performance ensures fair and holistic evaluations (Frost & Brockmann, 2014). This aligns with Malaysia's National Higher Education Action Plan's emphasis on "balanced excellence" across research, teaching, and service dimensions. By emphasising flexibility and situational alignment, Contingency theory ensures that appraisals are fair, relevant, and effective in motivating academic staff and supporting institutional success.

Furthermore, regional differences further shape PA designs depending on their cultural, economic, and regulatory contexts (Heidlein

et al., 2008; Melo & Figueiredo, 2020; Rwothumio *et al*., 2021). For example, Dutch and German universities tend to prioritise collaborative governance and stakeholder engagement whereas US, Russian, and Chinese HEIs often emphasise measurable outcomes. Such variations highlight the necessity of contextual adaptation to meet environmental and stakeholder demands effectively.

Components of Performance Appraisal

There are several key components that must be carefully considered in developing an effective PA system. These include the objectives, establishment of work targets, evaluation methods, approach of the evaluator, and scoring and decision-making processes. These critical components should encompass three main stages: (1) Setting work targets, (2) evaluating employees' actual performance against targets, and (3) providing meaningful feedback to employees. The feedback aims to either address performance constraints or encourage the continuation of high performance (Dessler, 2017; Murphy & DeNisi, 2023).

In the first stage, organisations must identify the tasks employees are expected to perform or define the desired outcomes, achieved through mutual agreement with employees. Work targets typically consist of three fundamental elements: Goals, task dimensions, and competencies or behaviours (Dessler, 2017). The second stage involves evaluators conducting the assessment, often through interviews or discussions. Finally, the third stage emphasises delivering constructive feedback, enabling employees to address performance gaps or maintain their achievements through appropriate actions. Figure 1 visually represents this process.

The current study focuses on examining the issues and challenges faced by the academic staff of UMT in those three primary stages. Specifically, it explores critical components such as the objectives, methods, criteria for evaluation and scoring processes within the context of PAs.

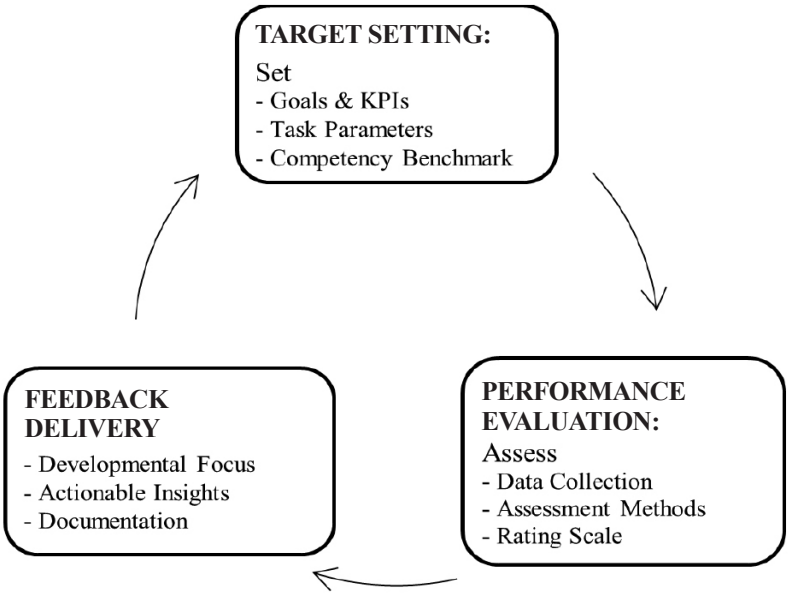

Figure 1: Performance appraisal cycle

Method

Given the limited information available on PA systems in the academic context, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate for exploring and enriching the existing body of knowledge (Creswell, 2014). While qualitative methods provide depth and contextual understanding, they are inherently limited by their non-generalisability and potential researcher bias during data interpretation. The present study employed a case study design to collect empirical data through semi-structured interviews with the limitations mitigated through triangulation (multiple stakeholder views), peer checking, and audit trail documentation (Denzin *et al*., 2023). The case study approach is considered suitable as it best addresses the "how" and "why" questions central to evaluating an implemented PA system. In addition, it allows examination of real-world contextual factors influencing PA effectiveness and provides actionable institutional insights beyond what purely theoretical approaches yield (Yin, 2018). The case study approach was preferred over ethnography (too time-consuming) and the grounded theory (overly theoretical) as it optimally balances depth with practical policy relevance.

UMT was selected as the case study due to its implementation of a new comprehensive PA reform in 2014. After five years of operation, an evaluation of the system was deemed essential to assess its effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. UMT's selection reflects its status as a Ministry-designated "niche university", making its PA system a critical test case for a specialised/focused university. As one of seven ministry-designated "niche/focused universities", UMT's specialised focus on marine and aquatic science creates a specialised environment to study how PA systems adapt to disciplinary uniqueness. Feedback from both academic and administrative staff was gathered and analysed to provide robust input for enhancing UMT's PA system. Findings will directly inform PA revisions at UMT while serving as a model for other niche institutions in the Malaysian higher education system.

The UMT Context

UMT, established as a full public university in 2007 is a Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) recognised niche HEI. With 1,752 academic staff across five faculties, four research institutes, and two foundation centres, its specialised structure creates unique PA requirements that differ significantly from other research or comprehensive universities in the country. Marine and aquatic science research demands flexible evaluation timelines while industry-aligned professional programs require community impact metrics beyond traditional academic outputs. Similarly, UMT's strong vocational focus on coastal industries requires PA metrics that value community impact and interdisciplinary collaborations such as training programmes for local fishing communities and mangrove conservation initiatives, alongside traditional academic outputs. These niche-driven expectations challenge standard PA frameworks, necessitating customised benchmarks that accommodate delayed research outcomes, interdisciplinary collaboration, and applied societal contributions. This specialised configuration directly shapes UMT's PA system, supporting strategic development in targeted domains through customised performance benchmarks that balance disciplinary uniqueness with national and global HEI standards.

In 2014, UMT restructured its performance management by transferring responsibilities from the registrar's office to the newly established Academic Talent Management Centre. This shift aligned with the university's aspirations in modern human resource practices, moving from traditional methods to academic talent management. Previous evaluations used the Public Service Officer Performance Evaluation System (SPPPAM) developed by the Malaysian government's Public Service Department (PSD), which is a general assessment for all civil servants. The 2014 reforms introduced the academic functionality concept, realigning academic roles with the university's talent management philosophy (UMT, 2014). The framework served as the foundation for the

development and enhancement of academic functionality supported by various talent development programmes. These programmes were also monitored periodically through an annual PA process (UMT, 2014).

The new PA system's philosophy focuses on two core objectives: Developing and empowering academic talent (UMT, 2014). It combines management-led (top-down) and faculty/academic-driven (bottom-up) approaches, wherein university management leadership plays a central role in setting institutional KPIs while academics contribute to customising their evaluation criteria. This dual approach uses both quantitative and qualitative measures for comprehensive assessment and aims to balance institutional needs with individual faculty aspirations, allowing for both management-driven goals and faculty input on how their performance is measured.

Such a collaborative strategy seeks to foster a sense of ownership and shared responsibility in the appraisal process. To meet the system's objectives, evaluators and academics engage in face-to-face evaluation sessions to identify strengths and weaknesses. Based on results, faculties and institutes are tasked with proposing intervention or development programs for underperforming staff while high achievers receive special pathways, incentives, and recognition. The system also includes awards to celebrate outstanding achievements, creating a comprehensive framework for talent development and performance enhancement.

Sample

This study employed stratified purposive sampling to select 22 UMT participants based on three key criteria: (1) Active involvement in the PA process (as either appraisees or appraisers), (2) representation across all academic ranks, and (3) gender diversity. The sample included: 12 academics (two professors, four associate professors, six senior lecturers/ lecturers) selected to ensure equal representation from Science and Technology (ST) and Social Science (SS) disciplines, seven evaluators (deans/directors who are involved in PA administration), and three senior administrators (Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic and Internationalisation, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation and the Registrar) who are involved in PA policy development. This multi-level representation enabled comprehensive identification of systemic challenges and development of stakeholder-specific solutions, ensuring a holistic evaluation for evidence-based PA system improvements.

Instrumentation and Data Analysis

The study employed semi-structured interviews conducted in person (18 sessions) and virtually (four sessions) between March and April 2021, with each session lasting 45 to 75 minutes. Participants received information letters and consent forms detailing the study's purpose, with guaranteed anonymity throughout the research. Interviews followed a standardised protocol and explored issues and challenges with UMT's new PA system, including implementation problems, appraisal criteria, KPIs, evaluation methods, and assessment approaches. Questions posed to university management focused on the broader impact of the new performance evaluation system such as: "How have academics responded to the new performance evaluation system?"

In contrast, the interview protocol for evaluators sought to explore their practical experience, specifically the challenges encountered in aligning KPIs with the university's strategic vision. An exemplary question for this group was: "Were there any challenges in setting the KPI for your faculty?" For academics, the interviews delved into their direct experience with the new PA system, with questions designed to uncover points of contention such as: "Considering the PA transformation and its implementation, what were your primary points of disagreement?"

The interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic content analysis. Following Creswell's (2014) approach, a structured five-step inductive coding process was implemented: (1) Initial

familiarisation through complete transcript reading; (2) systematic identification of text segments relevant to PA system challenges; (3) development of preliminary codes through segment labelling; (4) refinement through category consolidation and overlap reduction; and (5) creation of a hierarchical tree diagram model to visually organise and present the emergent themes and their relationships.

The rigorous data collection process ensured comprehensive identification of PA system challenges, with data saturation confirmed after the 18th interview, when no new codes emerged across consecutive analyses. To ensure the reliability of coding and thematic analysis, an expert checking process was undertaken. Three interview transcripts were independently reviewed by an experienced qualitative researcher familiar with the study context. Using the preliminary codebook, the expert assessed whether the identified themes accurately represented the data. Any points of divergence were discussed, leading to refinements in the definitions and scope of several themes. The revised codebook was subsequently applied to the full dataset.

Findings

The findings are presented based on different groups of participants, with several overlapping and interrelated themes and sub-themes emerging from the data.

Challenges Faced by Academics

The challenges encountered by the academics during the implementation of the new PA system can be categorised into four primary themes: (i) Challenges related to change management, (ii) deficiencies in documentation and procedures, (iii) issues with target or KPI setting, and (iv) lack of transparency and feedback.

(i) Change management challenges

Performance evaluation system reforms are crucial for improving staff effectiveness (Sulkowski *et al*., 2020; Dasanayaka *et al*., 2021). When questioned about the transformation process, academics highlighted significant challenges in adapting to changes, particularly resistance to UMT's new top-down, quantitative PA system. Despite incorporating new elements, the faculty reported unclear transformation objectives, creating confusion between the PA system's goals and other institutional priorities like MyRA. The shift from the previous system to one emphasising management-set KPIs generated substantial pushback as academics struggled to understand how the changes aligned with broader university objectives while maintaining fair evaluation standards. Structural gaps in the change process included a lack of phased rollout (e.g., pilot testing with selected departments before full implementation), insufficient training programmes tailored to different disciplinary needs (marine & aquatic sciences vs. social sciences), and an absence of a transition period between old and new systems.

Furthermore, staff noted that the transformation process was unstable and insufficiently prepared before implementation. One respondent (a senior in mathematical sciences with more than 20 years of experience) described the abruptness of the changes:

> "...if the change is something really good, we welcome it. But sometimes we do things suddenly, like there's no pilot test, no time for stabilisation, it's like we just want to implement [the new performance evaluation]. At least give some time to mature before we implement."
>
> (Academic Staff, DS52, S&T-ATL3)

This feedback highlighted that performance evaluation transformations should be implemented over a medium-term period (i.e., through gradual planned phases), incorporating stakeholder input and readiness, and only after conducting a comprehensive study to assess the suitability of the proposed changes. Implementing such significant change requires careful planning over a medium-term period, which includes phased rollouts, stakeholder

engagement to ensure buy-in, and a thorough preliminary study to confirm the proposed changes are a good fit.

(ii) Deficiencies in documentation and procedures

Beyond transformation resistance, respondents highlighted documentation flaws in evaluation materials, particularly unclear assessment instruments and incomplete glossary terms for sub-criteria. These shortcomings contrasted sharply with documentation best practices at peer institutions globally, which employed standardised rubrics containing detailed behavioural descriptors for each performance level, supported by interactive digital platforms that replaced complex Excel-based systems and by video tutorials that explained each evaluation component (Aguinis, 2019). The complex system, involving multiple interconnected Excel sheets for targets, scores, and calculations had created confusion in recording achievements, as one respondent noted:

> "At the time [of the transformation], we were not entirely familiar with the process, and in the Excel [evaluation instruments], the glossary information was not comprehensive. This made it difficult to guide us in filling out the targets and achievements accurately. At that time, we were quite lost."
>
> (Academic Staff, DS52, S&T-ATL2)

In summary, the respondents perceived the overall procedure for the transformation as poorly planned and documented, citing missing frameworks for goals, criteria, KPIs, evaluation methods, and outcomes. This inadequate preparation significantly increased implementation challenges for academic staff during the new system's rollout.

(iii) Dissatisfaction with the target or KPIs setting process

A significant issue raised by the academic staff was dissatisfaction with the process of setting targets stemming from three main issues: Unclear KPI direction, procedural delays in the target-setting process, and perceived unfair target allocation. These sub-themes collectively formed their discontent with the Key Performance Target (SKT) establishment process.

Although the university was responsible for achieving multiple KPIs, the transformation of the evaluation system focused disproportionately on a single KPI-MyRA.

> "...if we look at how key performance targets were previously determined, they followed a bottom-up approach, but this has changed to a top-down approach. I see target setting is too heavily influenced by MyRA."
>
> (Academic Staff, DS45, SS-ASL1)

Respondents expressed concern that this singular focus had neglected other important areas such as teaching, which they argued should also receive adequate emphasis in performance evaluations.

> "Generally, we see that the individual academic KPIs can be achieved, but when we look at faculty-level KPIs, I see that they are not being met. Do you see the issue here? If the faculty KPIs are not achieved, it automatically means the university's KPIs will not be achieved either. Perhaps, there needs to be better alignment between individual KPIs and faculty KPIs."
>
> (Academic Staff, DS52, S&T-ATH2)

The issue of fairness in KPIs allocation was another major concern. Respondents criticised KPI allocation based solely on academic grades, ignoring seniority, service length, and departmental contexts. Respondents noted that this approach failed to recognise the unique circumstances and contributions of individual academic staff. Mid-year target-setting delays also compounded issues, preventing stipulated KPI reviews that allow adjustments for changing circumstances.

(iv) Lack of transparency in evaluation and feedback

Three transparency issues emerged: Unfair personal quality assessments, missing performance feedback, and undisclosed final scores. The analysis revealed that most respondents reported being unaware of the scores assigned for Component B (personal qualities). Evaluators' failure to disclose personal quality scores or provide clear feedback created the perception among academic staff that their personal qualities were exemplary. However, this lack of transparency can potentially damage peer relationships. For instance, evaluators may be aware of interpersonal issues among academic staff but fail to communicate this feedback during face-to-face evaluation sessions. This lack of communication not only hinders opportunities for improvement, but also creates frustration among staff, as illustrated by the comments of one respondent:

> "...I don't know whether the process is really transparent. I just hope that if the evaluator evaluates us [academic staff], they are fair. Let's say if we have personal issues or problems with colleagues, the evaluator should tell us directly at the end of the evaluation. In normal circumstances, they just keep silent. When they stay silent, we don't even know what our issues are. We think we are good. But it turns out that the evaluator knows that other people [colleagues] have problems with us, but we were never told about it."
>
> (Academic Staff, DS54, S&T-ATH2)

The feedback deficiency is compounded by inconsistent face-to-face evaluation implementation. Respondents reported evaluators frequently omitting these sessions or approaching them unseriously, typically only convening meetings when evidential issues arose. A contributing factor to this problem is the absence of clear university-level procedures mandating regular face-to-face evaluation sessions across all faculties and institutes.

The final transparency deficit involves nondisclosure of comprehensive evaluation scores. Academics receive only qualitative ratings (Excellent-Poor) without precise numerical scores and indication of professional development guidance. Despite published scoring bands, academics demand exact results, perceiving this opacity as undermining procedural fairness. One young respondent from the economics field summarised this concern:

> "...I've never been shown the final evaluation score. Throughout my service, I never knew the final score. I only found out when the results were out, whether I got Excellent, Good, or Very Good."
>
> (Academic Staff, DS45, SS-ASL1)

This lack of transparency in evaluation procedures has fostered dissatisfaction and eroded trust in the PA system, as summarised in Figure 2.

Challenges Faced by Evaluators

For the group of evaluators, three main themes and eight sub-themes were identified, highlighting the issues and challenges encountered during the implementation of the new PA system (Figure 3). These themes are as follows:

(i) Difficulty in accepting transformation

Evaluators, like academic staff found challenges with the PA system due to systemic, organisational, and individual factors, compounded by their dual evaluator-academic roles. They cited abrupt implementation, inadequate preparation, lack of pilot testing, and increased administrative burden as key challenges impacting both themselves and their supervisees. To them, transformations in appraisal systems often introduce additional administrative tasks such as learning new processes, conducting evaluations, and managing documentation.

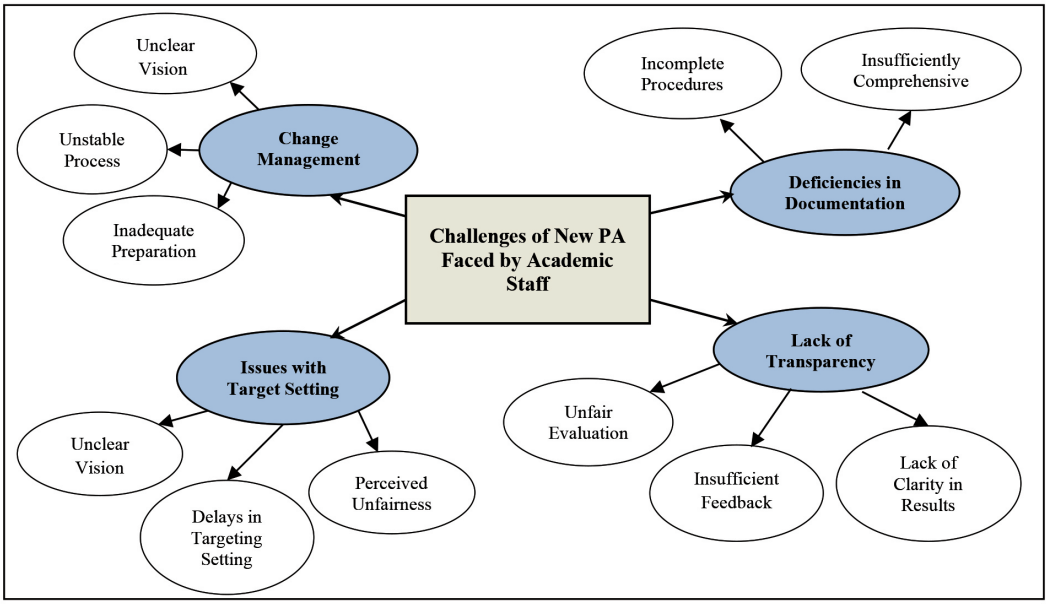

Figure 2: Themes and sub-themes of challenges faced by academics

> "...problems arise when sudden changes occur and no grace period is provided to understand the new system. Many are still unfamiliar with evaluating using the new system. I believe this approach is unsuitable. You have to give a period for testing."
>
> (Evaluator, Deputy Dean (Talent & Research), SS-BS3)

Inadequate training has left evaluators unprepared for the new system. Digital tools prone to technical issues created additional burdens while heightened expectations and accountability increased stress. These abrupt changes impeded evaluators' adaptation capacity, significantly complicating evaluation processes within their domains of responsibility. Due to insufficient training and unreliable digital tools, evaluators faced additional burdens, stress, and increased expectations, which severely hampered their ability to adapt to the new system and effectively manage evaluation processes.

(ii) Integrity and professionalism in quantitative evaluation

Evaluators raised concerns about quantitative methods compromising professional integrity, noting they incentivise unethical practices like achievement fabrication to meet quantitative targets. As highlighted by a Deputy Dean, the system lacks mechanisms to address such misconduct, undermining evaluation credibility, and encouraging target manipulation rather than genuine performance:

> "The issue of ethics and integrity arises. We are so focused on chasing MYRA that we set mandatory requirements. If someone does not achieve two publications, they cannot be considered Excellent. But what about those who publish 10 papers but are unethical? What is the punishment for them? In the new system, we aim to penalise those who do not meet the quantity. We lack a mechanism to regulate those who are unethical. I hope that the university

management will focus more on this matter so that we do not send the wrong signal to lecturers."

(Evaluator, Deputy Dean (Talent & Research), S&T- BT2)

The growing emphasis on quantitative KPIs focusing primarily on teaching and research outputs has resulted in the neglect of other essential academic responsibilities like academic development and community service. The faculty management faces implementation challenges as academics increasingly prioritise only measurable KPI-linked tasks, with non-quantifiable duties being systematically de-prioritised or neglected. This sentiment is clearly articulated by a respondent:

"...staff are selective in accepting tasks. If the task cannot be claimed as a KPI, they will avoid it. If the task carries minimal credit, they are unwilling to take it on. If they have already achieved the minimum target, they consider it sufficient. There is no need to do anything extra. However, the additional tasks are actually part of their responsibilities as academics."

(Evaluator, Deputy Dean (Talent & Research), S&T-BT3)

(iii) Inefficiency in the PA system

Evaluators identified systemic inefficiencies in the ePerformance and eProfile systems as a major challenge. Frequent technical disruptions and year end data entry bottlenecks created verification backlogs, requiring excessive evaluator effort to validate achievements. These operational deficiencies delayed evaluations and unnecessarily complicated assessment processes, significantly increasing administrative burden.

"The e-Profile system is very slow when it comes to obtaining verification from the PIC [data verifier in the e-Profile system]. There are too many layers in the publication module and technical issues frequently arise during the process. We feel extremely burdened."

(Evaluator, Deputy Dean (Talent & Research), SS-BS3)

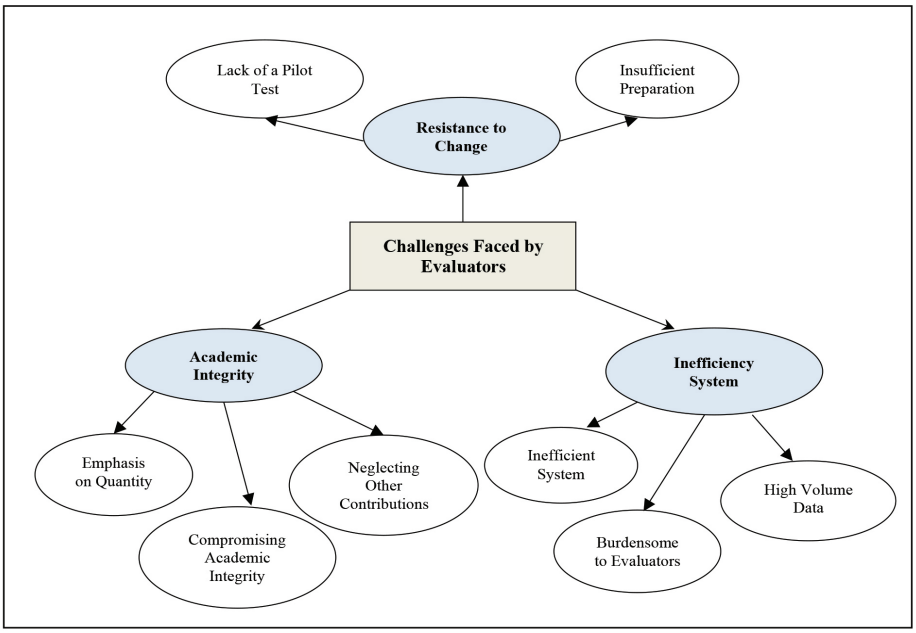

Figure 3: Challenges faced by evaluators

Challenges Faced by University Top Management

The interview analysis with university management revealed two primary implementation challenges: (a) comprehending the PA system's fundamental purpose and (b) maintaining integrity and professionalism standards. These core themes demonstrate the leadership difficulties in executing the new PA system, as visually presented in Figure 4.

(i) Understanding the purpose of PA

At the university, the PA system serves dual purposes, benefiting both the academics and the institution. Academic performance is a key indicator of the university's overall excellence and is used as a tool for various talent management operations, including promotions, annual salary increments, and awards. Management noted the academics' excessive focus on achieving "Excellent" ratings (90%-100%) for career advancement, reflecting a fundamental misunderstanding of the PA's developmental purpose and distorting its core improvement-focused values.

(ii) Issues of academic integrity and professionalism

The new PA system uncovered integrity violations, with some academics exploiting personal networks to artificially fulfil KPIs. Respondents reported instances of leveraging connections to obtain appointment letters or role invitations, demonstrating systemic vulnerabilities to unethical manipulation that undermine evaluation fairness and professional standards. One respondent explained this phenomenon:

> "Sometimes, people manipulate the system through 'mathematics'. In mathematics, you can input certain values and the resulting figures will yield the desired output. But how does this value reflect the individual's actual qualifications? For example, under a particular criterion this year, I need to be a speaker. To achieve this, I might write a letter or contact certain associations to invite me to give a lecture. By right, the person selected as a speaker should be chosen based on their excellence, expertise, and credibility, not by strategising to generate an appointment letter."
>
> (Top Management, DVC, C2)

A further integrity issue arises when academics fulfil publication KPIs via predatory journals, disregarding quality, and credibility. This prioritisation of quantitative targets over

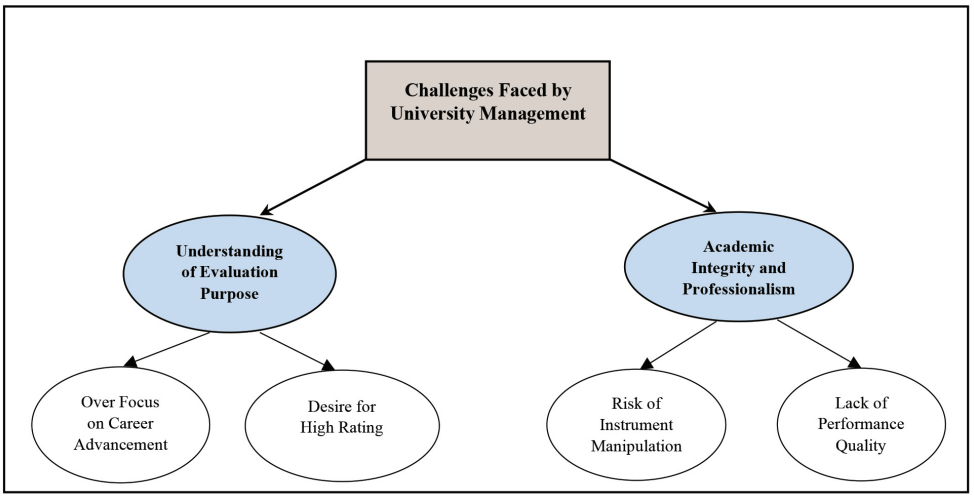

Figure 4: Challenges faced by the university top management

scholarly rigor exposes systemic flaws in promoting genuine excellence, challenging management to reconcile measurable outcomes with ethical standards in upholding academic integrity.

Discussion

The findings from the academic staff, evaluators, and university management revealed overlapping as well as group-specific challenges in implementing the new PA system. Staff and evaluators reported particular difficulties adapting due to abrupt implementation, inadequate preparation, and missing pilot tests, highlighting the need for transparent processes, sufficient transition time, and stakeholder engagement to reduce resistance.

Together, these issues showed the urgent need for more transparency, step-by-step transition timelines, and genuine stakeholder involvement. These elements were strongly emphasised in Kotter's (2012) change management framework. At UMT, the implementation gaps reflected three main failures in the change process: Not creating a sense of urgency (by clearly explaining problems with the old system), not forming a strong guiding group (through cross-rank implementation committees), and not producing early successes (through pilot projects that showed results).

Key administrative challenges hindered the new PA system's implementation for academic staff. Primary concerns included dissatisfaction with the top-down setting of KPIs, perceptions of unfairness and an excessive focus on MyRA at the expense of broader academic contributions. This focus had pushed teaching and service activities to the sidelines. Respondents gave examples such as cancelling student consultations to meet publication targets and community engagement projects receiving very low scoring weight. This highlighted the need for a holistic KPI framework integrating individual, faculty and institutional objectives that valued teaching innovation and societal impact alongside MyRA outputs.

As Dessler (2017) noted, effective PA required a cyclical process: Target-setting, mid-year review, and year-end evaluation, all supported by clear staff-supervisor communication. In this case, inadequate communication during evaluations prevented constructive feedback, mutual agreement on objectives, and collaborative development planning, particularly regarding how non-MyRA contributions would be assessed, which ultimately undermined the appraisal's effectiveness and staff engagement.

The above findings also suggested that UMT's challenges reflected both common problems in change management and unique tensions within the institution. The latter could have arose from the demands of niche research and the national benchmarking system, where MyRA's standardised metrics were not well-suited to measure the applied, field-based aspects of marine and aquatic science research.

The lack of comprehensive documentation further hindered academic staff and evaluators' understanding of the objectives, criteria, and procedures of the evaluation process. This contrasted sharply with best practices at some leading global HEIs, which had developed interactive digital portals housing all evaluation guidelines, video tutorials explaining each assessment component, and standardised rubrics with behavioural anchors for every performance level (Aguinis, 2019).

The absence of a communication platform to disseminate information about PA, a concern raised by Nisio *et al*. (2018) further exacerbated these challenges. Transparent documentation and communication mechanisms were essential to bridge these gaps. Moreover, academic staff reported a lack of transparency in the evaluation process, including inadequate feedback during face-to-face sessions and the non-disclosure of final scores.

Transparency in evaluation, particularly regarding assessments of character or personal qualities is a sensitive issue that directly affects trust in the system (Trost, 2017). Issues

regarding the lack of a systematic PA process have also been identified by Ahmad and Bujang (2013), Baqutayan *et al*. (2014), Dessler (2017), Yazid *et al*. (2017), Nisio *et al*. (2018), and Murphy and DeNisi (2023). In particular, the absence of feedback loops and disclosure of evaluation details as noted by Alach (2017) and Yazid *et al*. (2017) were found to diminish trust and opportunities for professional growth. Regular face-to-face evaluations and transparent scoring systems were therefore essential to rebuilding confidence and fostering professional development.

Evaluators also faced significant challenges in managing the performance appraisal system, particularly due to technical inefficiencies in digital platforms like e-Performance and e-Profile, where delayed submissions and system limitations created operational bottlenecks and increased workloads. This finding was consistent with Yazid *et al*. (2017) and Nisio *et al*. (2018) regarding how technical flaws in PA systems could generate dissatisfaction and conflict between stakeholders. These systemic inefficiencies not only hampered evaluators' effectiveness but also eroded institutional trust in the appraisal process, highlighting the need for more streamlined digital solutions.

Notably, university leadership identified a fundamental misalignment in understanding PA's purpose, with academic staff disproportionately focused on achieving "Excellent" ratings rather than embracing the system's developmental objectives. This aligned with Sulkowski *et al*. (2020) and Murphy (2020), who noted such misunderstandings often permeated institutional hierarchies; when middle management, including deans lacked clear comprehension of PA goals and the confusion inevitably trickled down to academic staff. This dual failure of both technical and conceptual fundamentally would undermine the PA system's capacity to foster genuine professional growth or meaningful organisational improvement.

Integrity concerns emerged as a critical concern for both evaluators and university leadership. Leadership raised alarms about systemic manipulation of KPIs and its broader consequences for institutional credibility while assessors criticised how the current system's emphasis on quantitative metrics was fostering unethical behaviour. Academic staff members were observed prioritising publication volume over scholarly integrity, resorting to questionable practices like publishing their work in predatory journals and leveraging personal connections to meet performance targets. These findings echoed research by Agyemang and Broadbent (2015), Kalio *et al*. (2017) and Martin-Sardesai and Guthrie (2018), who demonstrated how integrity breach frequently accompanied modifications to PA systems. The prevailing output-focused culture not only incentivised misconduct, but also ultimately compromised academia's fundamental mission of producing and disseminating rigorous knowledge (Martin-Sardesai & Guthrie, 2018; Harvey, 2020).

Implication to Theory and Practice

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforced the importance of contextualising performance management theories, particularly the Contingency Theory, within the specific contexts of HEIs, where one-size-fits-all models often failed. While Institutional Theory could explain the pressures for PA standardisation across HEIs, Stakeholder Theory highlight the conflicting expectations between policymakers and faculty, these perspectives did not fully address the need to align evaluation systems with local conditions. The Contingency Theory was therefore most relevant to this study, as it directly supported examining how the particular needs of niche universities and disciplinary differences required customised evaluation frameworks.

The findings strongly supported this theoretical position, showing that factors such as environment, strategy, culture, organisational structure, technology, and ownership structure significantly influenced the PA system. These results underscored the necessity of adapting PA practices to align with the specific needs and

cultural contexts of HEIs. By identifying the challenges faced by PA systems, the study had provided insights into the heterogeneous nature of the higher education sector.

Additionally, it offered policymakers valuable evidence on areas that required prioritisation when developing and implementing PA reforms, particularly through institutionalising mandatory feedback sessions and exploring digital dashboards for real-time score transparency. This research also contributed to the existing literature by emphasising the promotion of ethical conduct, continuous improvement, and a balanced recognition of academics' multifaceted roles in performance measures.

This study had advanced beyond previous Malaysian PA research (e.g., Ahmad & Bujang, 2013; Yazid *et al*., 2017) by examining niche or focused universities where disciplinary specificity challenged national standardisation. It particularly highlighted the unique tensions in marine and aquatic science between demands of field-based research and the rigid national research assessment metrics of MyRA. As shown in the framework in Figure 5, PA components are systematically mapped to three needs, which comprised institutional, disciplinary, and individual levels, illustrating how macro-level policy requirements (such as MyRA) dynamically interacted with meso-level institutional missions (e.g., UMT's marine and aquatic science focus) and micro-level academic roles (research, teaching, and service). This tri-level analysis offered a new perspective on the PA implementation challenges faced by specialised HEIs.

This study revealed several practical implications for improving PA systems in higher education, particularly within the context of the UMT. First, transitioning to a new appraisal system required careful change management through transparent processes, sufficient preparation time, and meaningful stakeholder engagement. It was important to note that UMT had previously undertaken PA system reform; however, that effort was not fully realised due to limited stakeholder engagement, inadequate preparation, and insufficient follow-through.

A renewed change management plan was therefore essential. Guided by Lewin's Change Model (Burnes, 2020), the unfreeze stage should openly revisit the shortcomings of the earlier attempt, rebuilding awareness and urgency for change. The change stage must prioritise genuine co-creation of appraisal criteria, targeted training, phased implementation, and pilot projects to test and refine the framework. The refreeze stage should embed the new system through policy integration, continuous monitoring and formal recognition of desired behaviours to ensure lasting improvement. Lessons from other HEIs such as the University of Melbourne's iterative redevelopment of its academic performance framework and the University of Edinburgh's successful integration of a teaching, research and service triad, highlighted the importance of transparency, continuous feedback and visible leadership commitment in restoring trust, ensuring adoption, and supporting sustainable implementation.

Secondly, addressing academic staff's concerns about unfairness required maintaining the current top-down KPI approach necessary for meeting MyRA requirements and protecting the university's national standing, as well as also integrating stronger bottom-up input to ensure broader academic contributions were valued. This meant reducing the overreliance on quantitative MyRA metrics and adopting a more holistic framework that recognised teaching quality, research impact, mentorship, collaboration, and ethical contributions alongside research output.

A proposed KPI matrix could allocate balanced weightings across the three core academic domains of Teaching & Learning (e.g., student feedback, innovative pedagogy, curriculum contributions), Research & Innovation (e.g., quality publications, grant success, societal impact), and Service & Leadership (e.g., mentoring, community engagement, institutional service), with flexibility for individual role specialisations. Feedback from

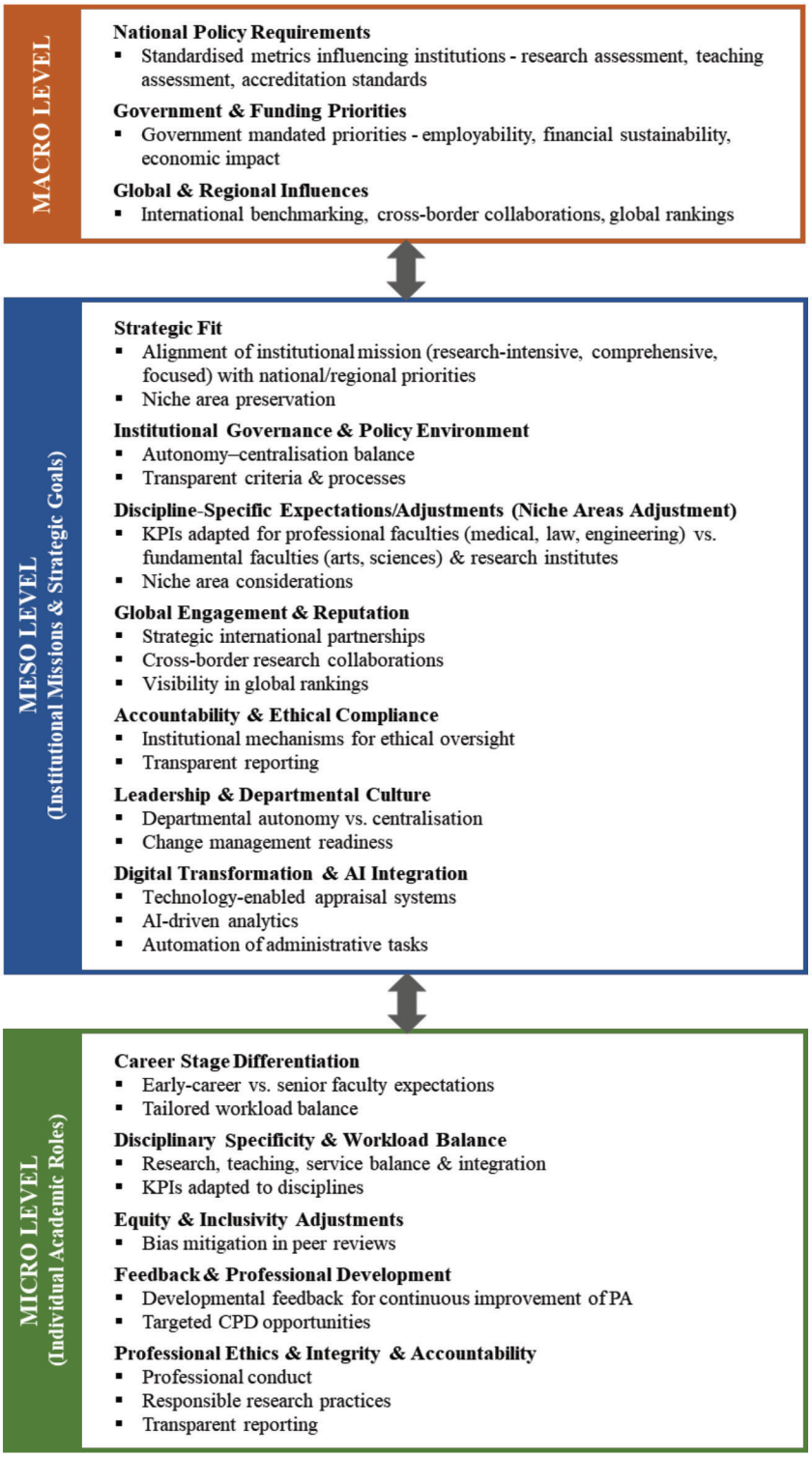

Figure 5: A multi-level framework for effective PA implementation in universities

academic staff during stakeholder consultations consistently highlighted the need for greater recognition of teaching quality, interdisciplinary collaboration and mentorship—areas they felt were undervalued under the current metrics.

Thirdly, the PA system required structural reforms, including clear documentation, robust communication channels for consistent information sharing, and collaborative KPI development that aligned individual, faculty, and institutional objectives. A key improvement would be the creation of a centralised PA portal or dashboard that brought together appraisal criteria, performance records, progress tracking, and feedback in one accessible platform. Such a system would improve transparency and consistency while enabling academic staff to track their achievements in real time, identify areas for development, and align their contributions more closely with institutional goals.

The current overemphasis on measurable outputs had contributed to integrity issues such as KPI manipulation and predatory publishing, problems well-documented by Martin-Sardesai and Guthrie (2018). UMT must therefore calibrate its PA system to achieve an equitable balance between productivity and principles, ensuring equal recognition for both quantitative achievements and qualitative contributions such as ethical conduct and institutional service. This comprehensive approach, which combined inclusive design, transparent implementation, and balanced evaluation criteria would help restore trust in the appraisal process while maintaining rigorous academic standards and supporting the university's educational mission. It was also important to acknowledge potential biases in participant responses, as hierarchical dynamics and institutional culture within HEIs might have influenced how openly academics articulated their views on PA systems.

Implementing an intuitive and rigorously tested digital PA system was essential for sustainable performance management, as it reduced administrative burdens while enhancing transparency and trust. Before full implementation, such systems should be pilot tested with representative user groups to collect feedback on functionality, usability, and perceived fairness, ensuring that improvements were made prior to institution-wide adoption. Institutions must clearly communicate the PA's developmental purpose to staff members, fostering a culture prioritising genuine growth over metrics. This required establishing robust feedback mechanisms, including structured face-to-face evaluations and transparent score disclosure to reinforce confidence and support continuous improvement. At the policy level, universities needed to develop clear guidelines that ensured fairness and accountability across all evaluation processes, complemented by systematic monitoring of PA outcomes.

Given the prevalent ethical concerns particularly regarding quantitative metric manipulation, there was a strong case to form a dedicated ethics oversight committee to integrate ethics training into the PA process. These measures would help safeguard against misconduct or unethical practices while promoting shared understanding of academic integrity. By integrating these technological, cultural, and policy dimensions, universities could establish PA systems that accurately assess performance, foster meaningful professional development, and uphold academic integrity.

Multi-level Framework for Enhancing Performance Appraisal Systems

This study proposes a multi-level framework to address persistent challenges in PA systems within HEIs. Grounded in established theories on organisational adaptation (contingency theory) and practical approaches to organisational change (change management and stakeholder engagement), the framework would operate across three interdependent levels: Macro (national policy), meso (institutional practice), and micro (individual engagement) to facilitate comprehensive PA reforms. By harmonising structural adaptability with contextual adjustment, the framework could advance three core objectives: (1)

Enhancing transparency through standardised yet flexible processes, (2) ensuring fairness via multidimensional assessment criteria, and (3) optimising effectiveness through evidence-based implementation strategies.

At the macro level, national policy requirements could shape or influence institutional behaviours through standardised metrics such as research assessment frameworks, teaching quality evaluations, and accreditation standards, which often prioritised quantifiable outputs. Government-mandated priorities, including employability, financial sustainability, and internationalisation further shaped institutional behaviours, compelling HEIs to balance global ranking imperatives with local relevance. This tension necessitated an appraisal system that accommodated both compliance with national directives and institutional autonomy, ensuring that metrics remained meaningful across diverse contexts.

The meso-level centred on institutional missions and strategic goals, where HEIs must reconcile competing demands between research-intensive, comprehensive, and teaching-focused models. Strategic fit with mission and niche focus must be balanced with alignment to national and regional priorities. Discipline-specific expectations would introduce additional complexity, as appraisal criteria must adapt to niche areas where traditional metrics might not capture the full scope of academic contributions.

Global engagement and reputation-building at the institutional level required careful calibration to avoid overshadowing local priorities. Within the institutional governance and policy environment, autonomy–centralisation balance, transparent criteria and processes, and clear alignment with promotion and tenure systems were critical. Accountability and ethical compliance mechanisms, which covered responsible conduct, fairness in peer evaluation, and transparent dispute resolution would reinforce trust in the system. Leadership and departmental culture played a pivotal role, particularly in navigating tensions between centralisation and departmental autonomy, as well as overcoming resistance to change management.

The integration of digital transformation and Artificial Intelligence-driven analytics offers opportunities to enhance transparency and efficiency through technology-enabled appraisal systems, automation of administrative tasks and predictive analytics for workforce planning. These tools must be implemented with safeguards to protect academic integrity, ensure ethical use of AI, and prevent exacerbation of existing inequities.

At the micro level, the framework emphasised more tailored approaches that account for career stage differentiation, disciplinary specificity, and the balance between research, teaching and service demands in the integration of the academic roles. Early-career academics might require emphasis on research productivity while senior faculty might be evaluated on leadership and mentorship and broader impact. Equity and inclusivity adjustments such as bias mitigation in peer reviews and workload accommodations (KPIs) were critical in ensuring fair and representative assessments.

Professional ethics and integrity at the individual level could reinforce credibility and accountability, particularly in the self-reporting of achievements and engagement in peer review. Finally, robust feedback mechanisms and professional development opportunities must be embedded within appraisal systems to foster continuous growth in order to transform evaluations from compliance exercises into developmental tools.

In essence, the framework advocated for policy reforms that strengthened accountability while mitigating metric manipulation risks. These included mandating digital infrastructures to enable institutional benchmarking and introducing safeguards against research integrity violations (e.g., low-quality or predatory publishing, citation gaming).

For institutional implementation, the framework emphasises tailored digital solutions such as automated activity tracking systems with embedded quality-control algorithms, real-time performance analytics dashboards, and secure performance repositories. These technological solutions enable HEIs like UMT to reconcile national compliance requirements with university or discipline-specific evaluation needs. The integrated PA platform should be able to improve usability through personalised user interfaces, provide automatic warnings about unusual results, and implement regular updates based on user suggestions.

This advocated framework could shift performance appraisal from a rule-compliance exercise to a process that actively supported staff development. In other words, it served as a developmental tool by addressing two critical gaps in current PA systems: (1) The tensions between national standards and local needs, i.e., balancing standardisation and institutional and disciplinary relevance and (2) the balance between proper oversight, accountability, and staff trust. It safeguards against metric distortion while recognising the diversity of academic missions, hence, making it particularly valuable for public HEIs that must navigate competing governance demands. The framework's theoretical contribution lay in its integration of contingency-based design with participatory change management while its practical value stemmed from providing actionable, technology-enabled implementation pathways tailored to heterogeneous HEI contexts.

Conclusions

This study examined the challenges in implementing a new PA system at UMT through a qualitative case study involving academic staff, evaluators, and university management. Guided by the Contingency Theory, the analysis showed that effective PA systems required a contextually appropriate design that was adapted to institutional structures, resources, and culture, rather than relying on uniform models. The findings revealed systemic issues such as transparency gaps, communication breakdowns, technical inefficiencies, and integrity concerns that were not unique to a single institution.

Instead, they reflected structural and procedural patterns common across Malaysia's public universities due to their standardised governance and management systems. Although the study focused on a single case, the results could carry transferable implications for other HEIs operating under similar governance frameworks. As such, drawing from these findings, a practical roadmap for PA reform in similar public university contexts would include co-designed appraisal criteria, balanced KPI matrices, digital dashboards to enhance transparency, structured change management, and ethics oversight mechanisms. Together, these measures were essential for sustaining meaningful appraisal systems that promote professional growth while ensuring accountability.

While the research provided valuable insights based on rich qualitative data, its scope was limited to one institution with a relatively small sample size. Future research could expand coverage through multi-site comparative studies across Malaysian and regional HEIs, employ longitudinal designs to track reform outcomes, and integrate mixed methods to strengthen validity. There is also scope to explore how Institutional Theory's isomorphism, i.e., the process by which HEIs in similar environments adopt similar structures, practices, or strategies and Stakeholder Theory's conflict-resolution dynamics i.e., approaches to balancing and addressing competing interests among different stakeholder groups, could interact with the Contingency Theory's adaptive principles in PA systems. For example, stakeholder theory could be applied more explicitly to analyse power dynamics in PA system design while Institutional Theory could examine how assessment systems like MyRA influenced appraisal standardisation in Malaysian public universities.

Further research could also investigate the long-term impact of PA reforms on academic motivation, retention, and institutional

performance. Such studies would deepen understanding of their effectiveness of PA systems in meeting both academic and organisational objectives. By pursuing these lines of inquiry and implementing the proposed strategies, universities could recalibrate faculty performance appraisal systems in ways that measure performance accurately, foster development, strengthen trust, and ultimately support sustainable institutional growth and academic excellence.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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