I. Introduction

In the preliminaries to this study, I was conscious of several partially conflicting ideas. First, universities should have an important role as independent critics in society, and academics should have considerable freedom in pursuing their research goals. At the same time, universities should contribute to society’s objectives and the performances of academics should be evaluated to see if they meet reasonable targets. Second, Malaysian universities are young, and are staffed largely by young, relatively inexperienced personnel. At the same time, most are at least into their second decade, and the period of development has ended for many departments and faculties. The time has now come to set specific objectives and to strive to meet them, a task also apparent in much older Western universities (Finn, 1984).

There are several reasons for being concerned with university research output, and to seek ways to encourage its quantity and quality. First, the rates of return to research are very high, although it should be admitted that empirical evidence is largely confined, for methodological reasons, to the applied sciences. Second, given that resources are being applied to research, it is important to estimate the extent to which these allocations approach an optimal level and to consider how a more optimal allocation could be achieved. Economists, in particular, are concerned that resources be employed in those activities and in these quantities which maximize the net effectiveness of their use. How, then, may the 3600 odd highly-trained academics in Malaysian universities be utilised to best effect? What is the optimal allocation between universities, faculties and subjects? What is an optimal teaching allocation — by subject, hours, and type of class — between the members of a department? What is an optimal allocation of time for an individual between teaching, research, administration and other activities? Third, it is likely that within the next decade, many basic subjects will be taught by a mixture of audio-visual techniques and interactive computer programmes. Lecturing skill will therefore become a less important attribute of academics. What might be expected, provided student numbers do not expand greatly, is that teaching loads will decrease and more staff will be devoted to research. Thus any factors which impede research at present should be identified and, if possible, dealt with.

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It should be noted that whilst some resource allocation decisions lie in the hands of government, others are made by university administrators, some by faculties and departments and some by individual lecturers. The aim of this article is to identify those factors which appear to be constraining research, i.e., which are hindering the attainment of a maximum rate of return to the resources devoted to research in Malaysian universities. Hopefully, it will be of use to university administrators at these various levels and to relevant government departments.

The organization of this article is as follows: research methods are discussed in Part II; in Part III the results of the sample survey are presented and discussed; in Part IV, consideration is given to the non-researchers; Part V discusses the benefits and costs of the considerable amount of commissioned research, as opposed to independent research, being carried out; finally, Part VI considers various policy options open to the different levels of university administrators.

II. Research Methods

The research methods adopted in the course of this study were varied. A formal sample survey was carried out amongst academics at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM), and this provides a set of core data. This was supplemented by interviews with a number of new staff, informal interviews with several deans and departmental heads and many conversations with academics at three Malaysian universities, both as individuals and in groups. There may be concern amongst some readers concerning the justifiability of using the results of interviews and conversations. In my defence, I would cite the experience of Polly Hill, an economic anthropologist, who found that the restrictiveness and inaccuracy of the questionnaire approach in interviewing West African rural producers, and its failure often to uncover the crucial elements, outweighed its benefits.

If ... the investigator is an economist, he should usually discard his traditional procedure of collecting most of his material through field assistants using questionnaires, in favour of a method, learned from anthropologists, which mainly relies on questioning and observing individuals while they are at work.... The procedure should be semi-statistical, in the sense that similar, even identical, questions should be put to many informants independently, with a view to comparing, or even totalling, their replies.

(Hill 1966. 16)

I found the questionnaire approach useful; however, many important pieces of data only came out in interviews and discussions, or from observation.

III. A Survey of Academics at UPM

This section reports the results of a study using the questionnaire approach carried out amongst academics at University Pertanian Malaysia in March, 1984. The 1983–1984 UPM Calendar listing of academic staff was used as the sample frame. From an adjusted total of 518 staff of the rank of lecturer and above, a sample of 207 (40 per cent) was chosen by random methods, stratified by rank and faculty.