

Exploring the Role of Demographics in Shaping Performance Appraisal Systems in Open Distance Learning Institutions

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Abstract

Performance appraisal is an essential management instrument that assesses the strengths and weaknesses of employees, collecting data to acknowledge and cultivate their abilities based on performance, thus assisting organisations in attaining their objectives through the development of a fulfilled workforce. This study aims to assess employees' input towards performance appraisal exercises in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in Malaysia. The study examines demographic variables such as gender, job category, job group, level of education, and years of employment in the performance appraisal system of ODL institutions in Malaysia. The research employed a descriptive methodology and a purposive sampling technique to collect primary data through a structured questionnaire distributed to ODL employees. The study findings reveal that employees' gender held different views regarding the performance appraisal system utilised inside their organisations. Moreover, the study explains supplementary factors, including age, job category and group, level of education, and years of employment that present the findings of different perceptions of performance appraisal exercises in ODL institutions. The findings of the study could provide valuable information for management, especially for ODL institutions, in designing and enhancing performance appraisal systems that are consistent with the evolving challenges and developmental requirements of employees in a variety of higher education fields.

Keywords: Performance Appraisal, Demographic Factors, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Higher Education

Introduction

Performance appraisal is necessary, inevitable, and universal in any organisation, whether for-profit organisations, service-based, trading and manufacturing businesses, or non-profit organisations, where employees evaluate the work performance of others. The effectiveness of the appraisal system in higher education institutions, including ODL institutions, is also crucial and needs further study. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) refers to providing flexible educational opportunities in terms of access and multiple modes of knowledge acquisition (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015 – 2025). It is usually conducted online with mainly offers for working adult learners. The efficacy of the performance appraisal system is crucial in the distinct context of ODL institutions, where employees frequently operate under conditions that markedly diverge from conventional university environments. The performance appraisal is a performance management instrument that is frequently employed to assess the productivity of higher education, such as academic employees in a variety of settings (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2018) and organisations are progressively getting more diverse regarding the demographic features of their workforce (Rana & Singh, 2022). Therefore, the study of demographic factors could provide information for the management of ODL institutions in designing and improving the appraisal system. This study aims to fill the gap in knowledge regarding the influence of demographic factors on performance appraisal exercises in ODL institutions.

Research Objective

The objective of the study is as given below:

To examine the impact of demographic variables; gender, age, job category, job group, level of education, and years of employment on the performance appraisal system of ODL institutions in Malaysia.

Research Question

The research question for this research is below:

What is the impact of demographic variables; gender, age, job category, job group, level of education, and years of employment on the performance appraisal system of ODL institutions in Malaysia?

Literature Review

The definition of performance appraisal can differ depending on the context; however, it is generally a structured process that aims to assess and guide, thereby aligning their contributions with organisational objectives. Performance appraisal is a fundamental management tool that assesses employees' strengths and weaknesses, serving as the principal method for rewarding and training personnel based on their performance, thus playing a crucial role in attaining organizational objectives by fostering a satisfied workforce (Dasanayaka et al., 2021) and a systematic method utilised to assess an employee's job performance and effectiveness in achieving organisational objectives (Okolie & Orhero, 2020). The performance appraisal also is a regular and systematic process to evaluate employees' performance (Al-Jedaia & Mehrez, 2020), and a process that includes identifying an employee's strengths and areas for improvement, providing constructive feedback, and setting future performance targets to foster growth and development within the organisation

(Teeroovengadum et al., 2019) and a collaborative process between managers and staff members to create, carry out, and evaluate employee performance (Neher & Maley, 2020).

The studies also indicate the importance of performance appraisal in organisations. Effective performance appraisal results in precise evaluations and subsequent pay for individuals who have excelled and contributed to their organisation (Man & Yeen, 2021). Na-Nan et al. (2022) highlight the significance of performance appraisal in diagnosing issues within job functions and present a validated instrument to assess appraisal-related difficulties. Murphy et al. (2018) determined that assessment systems in higher education can facilitate the establishment of clear objectives and promote professional development, contingent upon their emphasis on constructive feedback and skill enhancement. Performance appraisal is a crucial human resource management strategy, as numerous significant decisions about employee performance are predominantly reliant on performance appraisal results, which influence various attitude-related consequences (Rana & Singh, 2022). Successful performance reviews are essential for aligning individual contributions with corporate goals because employees are the organisation's most important asset and their decisions, emotions, and intentions greatly impact its success (Khan et al., 2024). Therefore, in order to further improve the performance results, organisations must give top priority to developing assessment systems that are transparent, consistent, and responsive to employee feedback (Wong et al., 2024).

Recognition of the effectiveness of organisational performance appraisal systems has become increasingly important in both practice and research, especially regarding employee motivation, commitment, and career progression (Iqbal et al., 2019). The evaluation of employee performance which is performance appraisal, has captivated both researchers and practitioners for literally hundreds of years (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). The previous studies clearly show that understanding employee input or feedback is critical for properly designing and integrating employee-oriented styles within organisations (Avinash & Romala, 2020). Problems and challenges concerning performance appraisals influence behaviours at the personal, group and corporate levels (Na-Nan et al., 2022).

Moreover, understanding the influence of demographic characteristics on performance appraisal systems is essential for firms seeking to improve employee satisfaction and productivity. Demographic factors are elements that contextualize a firm and its employees based on their classification (Godson, 2021). Demographics are critical aspects considered in human resource and management choices, as they affect employee behaviour and productivity (Marcus & Gopinath, 2017). There are eight trends of substantive areas in performance appraisal: (1) scale formats, (2) criteria for evaluating ratings, (3) training, (4) reactions to appraisal, (5) purpose of rating, (6) rating sources, (7) demographic differences in ratings, and (8) cognitive processes (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017).

This study focuses on one of the substantive areas of performance appraisal: the demographic factors, such as gender, job category, job group, level of education, and years of employment, in the performance appraisal system of ODL institutions in Malaysia. The literature review analyses the impact of gender, age, job category and group, levels of education, and years of employment on performance appraisals, referencing numerous studies that highlight those associations.

Gender

Studies demonstrate that gender substantially affects perceptions of performance appraisal systems. A survey among employees at multinational corporations revealed that men and women possess divergent perceptions concerning the efficacy and equity of performance appraisals (Avinash & Romala, 2020). This gap indicates that firms should adopt gender-specific strategies for performance reviews to guarantee employee fairness and satisfaction. Another study also emphasised how gender disparities impact employee engagement levels, which are directly related to the results of appraisals (Marcus & Gopinath, 2017). Meanwhile, gender equality in human resource management practice is essential and is positively associated with job performance (Taamneh et al., 2024).

Age

Age has been found to be an ordering factor in the workplace that affects career stages, workplace hierarchies, and transitions (Fineman, 2014). The construction of age as a social category during workplace interactions between managers and employees at the micro level is a largely unexplored subject (Previtali & Spedale, 2021).

Job Category and Group

The job category and job group significantly influence employee experiences with performance appraisals. Employees across several job categories may possess differing expectations and beliefs concerning appraisal criteria relative to their roles. Managerial positions typically prioritise leadership attributes, whereas technical roles tend to concentrate on certain skill sets and deliverables (Godson, 2021). Furthermore, demographic research indicates that employees in elevated job categories are more likely to view assessment systems as advantageous compared to their counterparts in lower job categories. This view might be attributed to the enhanced visibility and acknowledgment granted to senior personnel during evaluations (Tukiman Hendrawijaya, 2019).

Level of Education

The level of education is a significant demographic factor influencing performance evaluations. Employees possessing advanced educational levels frequently hold distinct expectations concerning feedback and developmental possibilities. Studies indicate that educated personnel are more inclined to pursue constructive feedback and perceive performance evaluations as instruments for professional development rather than simply a bureaucratic procedure (Avinash & Romala, 2020). In contrast, those with lower educational backgrounds may view appraisals as less relevant or advantageous, which could result in disengagement from the process (Godson, 2021). Higher education employees want precise, constructive feedback that matches their advanced skills and expertise, and lower-educated people may be happy with more generic input, leading them to believe the appraisal method does not meet their developmental needs (Stoffberg et al., 2023). This highlights the necessity for firms to customize their appraisal methods to suit diverse educational backgrounds.

Years of Employment

The duration of work obviously affects employees' perceptions of assessment of performance. Years of employment refers to the number years of service that employees have attained at their organisations. Tenured employees frequently possess established rapport with superiors, resulting in more profound and individualised input during

evaluations. Research suggests that these employees are likely more at ease discussing their performance and career objectives than their less experienced counterparts (Avinash & Romala, 2020; Tukiman Hendrawijaya, 2019).

Demographic factors like gender, age, job category and group, education level, and years of employment significantly impact performance rating systems. Organisations must acknowledge these factors when developing and enhancing their appraisal processes to guarantee that they accommodate the diverse requirements of their workforce.

Research Methodology

The study utilised a quantitative approach to collect data by administering questionnaires to a specific demographic of employees at ODL institutions: gender (male, female), age (range between 25 and above 55 years), job category (non-academic, academic), job group (from non-executive, executive, management, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor and professor), education level (from SPM and below until PhD level) and employment years (range from 2 until more than 10 years). Performance appraisal is measured via 7 items with four-point Likert scale, encompassing responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree, was utilized to assess components within each construct (De Cannière et al., 2009). The survey questions were subsequently emailed to chosen participants, employing purposive sampling when a complete population list was unavailable. Out of the 350 surveys distributed, 266 were retrieved, yielding a response rate of 76%, deemed adequate for the application of SPSS in data analysis.

Data Analysis and Findings

Table 1

Respondents Profile

Item	Category	Number of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	107	44.4
	Female	134	55.6
Age Group	25 to 35 years of age	36	14.9
	36 to 45 years of age	113	46.9
	46 to 55 years of age	68	28.2
	Above 55 years of age	24	10.0
Job Category	Non-Academic	188	78.0
	Academic	53	22.0
Job Group	Non-Executive	59	24.5
	Executive	106	44.0
	Management	25	10.4
	Lecturer	16	6.6
	Senior Lecturer	27	11.2
	Associate Professor & Professor	8	3.3
Education Level	SPM and below	2	0.8
	Certificate	25	10.4
	Diploma	37	15.4
	Advanced Diploma	1	0.4

	Bachelor Degree	94	39.0
	Master Degree	61	25.3
	PhD	21	8.7
Employment Year	2 - 5 years	25	10.4
	Less than 2 years	12	5.0
	6 - 10 years	51	21.2
	More than 10 years	153	63.5
	Total	241	100.0

Table 1 presents the profile of ODL respondents who participated in this study, including (i) gender; (ii) Age group; (iii) Job Category; (iv) Job Group; (v) Level of education; and (vi) Years of Employment. The total number of respondents who responded to this study was 241.

Regarding gender, male respondents comprise 44.4% of the sample, while female respondents represent 55.6%, indicating a slightly higher participation from women. Most respondents (46.9%) fall within the 36 to 45 age group. A significant portion of 28.2% are aged 46 to 55 years, showing a concentration of middle-aged professionals, 14.9% of respondents are in the 25 to 35 years range, representing younger participants, and the smallest group of 10.0% is those above 55. This indicates that most respondents are mid-career professionals, with fewer younger and older individuals. Meanwhile, the job category shows that non-academic professionals dominate the sample, making up 78.0% of respondents, while only 22.0% are in academic roles. In terms of job group, a large portion that is 44.0% of the respondents hold executive roles, followed by non-executives 24.5%, management positions account for 10.4%, lecturers represent 6.6%, senior lecturers 11.2% and associate professors and professors 3.3%. This distribution indicates a workforce with a significant proportion of executives and management, with relatively fewer academic roles, especially at senior academic levels. For the level of education, the highest proportion of respondents hold a Bachelor's degree (39.0%), followed by Master's degree holders (25.3%), Diplomas make up 15.4%, and Certificate holders represent 10.4%. A small percentage (8.7%) have obtained a PhD, and minimal respondents have only SPM and below (0.8%), and an Advanced Diploma (0.4%). This suggests that most respondents have higher education qualifications (Bachelor's or higher), indicating a well-educated sample. In addition, years of employment showed that the majority of respondents (63.5%) have been employed for more than 10 years, reflecting a workforce with significant experience, 6 to 10 years of employment accounts for 21.2% of respondents, indicating a sizable group of mid-level professionals, and only 10.4% have 2 to 5 years of employment, and even fewer (5.0%) have less than 2 years of experience. This demonstrates that most respondents are seasoned professionals with substantial work experience, with fewer early-career employees.

Table 2
Chi Square Test

Factors	Category	Total	Performance Appraisal		χ^2	P
			Disagree n (%)	Agree n (%)		
Gender	Male	107	33 (30.8)	74 (69.2)	0.66	0.416
	Female	134	48 (35.8)	86 (64.2)		
Age Group	25 to 35 years of age	36	5 (13.9)	31 (86.1)	8.57	0.036*
	36 to 45 years of age	113	43 (38.1)	70 (61.9)		
	46 to 55 years of age	68	25 (36.8)	43 (63.2)		
	Above 55 years of age	24	8 (33.3)	16 (66.7)		
Job Category	Non-Academic	188	54 (28.7)	134 (71.3)	9.15	0.002*
	Academic	53	27 (50.9)	26 (49.1)		
Job Group	Non-Executive	59	10 (16.9)	49 (83.1)	15.93	0.007*
	Executive	106	37 (34.9)	69 (65.1)		
	Management	25	8 (32)	17 (68)		
	Lecturer	16	9 (56.3)	7 (43.8)		
	Senior Lecturer	27	12 (44.4)	15 (55.6)		
	Associate Professor & Professor	8	5 (62.5)	3 (37.5)		
Education Level	SPM and below	2	1 (100)	1 (100)	17.84	0.013*
	Certificate	25	3 (12)	22 (88)		
	Diploma	37	9 (24.3)	28 (75.7)		
	Advanced Diploma	1	0 (0)	1 (100)		
	Bachelor Degree	94	31 (33)	63 (67)		
	Master Degree	61	30 (49.2)	31 (50.8)		
	PhD	21	7 (33.3)	14 (66.7)		
Employment Year	2 - 5 years	25	4 (16)	21 (84)	10.44	0.015*
	Less than 2 years	12	1 (8.3)	11 (91.7)		
	6 - 10 years	51	22 (43.1)	29 (56.9)		
	More than 10 years	153	54 (35.3)	99 (64.7)		

Table 2 presents the statistical analysis of multiple aspects influencing respondents' agreement regarding performance appraisal systems. The association of each element with performance appraisal agreement is evaluated using chi-square (χ^2) values, with p-values denoting the significance threshold. When $p < 0.05$, the factor is statistically significant, indicating a substantial association between the factor and respondents' concurrence or dissent regarding performance ratings.

The findings of the impact of demographic variables on the performance appraisal system of ODL institutions in Malaysia, as stated in the research objective, are presented here.

The findings of gender show the agree feedback is a slightly higher proportion of male respondents (69.2%) agreed with the performance appraisal system compared to female respondents (64.2%), meanwhile, disagree feedback shows more females (35.8%) disagreed compared to males (30.8%). However, the p-value of 0.416 indicates a weak correlation

between gender and perspectives on performance reviews. Both genders exhibit comparable degrees of consensus.

The age group displays that younger respondents agree with the performance appraisal system, specifically the 25-35 age group, which showed the highest agreement rate (86.1%) with the performance appraisal system. Agreement decreases with age, particularly within the 36-45 (61.9%) and 46-55 (63.2%) age groups. The disagreement was higher in the 36-45 (38.1%) and 46-55 (36.8%) age groups. Younger respondents are more receptive to the performance appraisal system than older respondents, with the age factor being statistically significant ($p = 0.036$).

The job category for non-academic staff shows higher agreement (71.3%) compared to academic staff (49.1%). The academic staff have a high level of disagreement (50.9%). The non-academic staff tend to agree more with the performance appraisal system than academic staff, a statistically significant finding ($p = 0.002$).

The job group for non-executive staff has the highest agreement level (83.1%), followed by management (68%), and executive staff (65.1%). Lecturers (43.8%) and senior lecturers (55.6%) showed moderate agreement, while associate professors and professors had the lowest agreement (37.5%). The non-executive and management staff show stronger agreement with performance appraisals, while academic staff at higher levels express more disagreement, a significant trend ($p = 0.007$).

The level of education findings shows that the respondents with lower education levels, for example, certificate (88%) and Diploma (75.7%), tend to agree more with performance appraisals, while those with a Master's degree (50.8%) show comparatively lower agreement. The disagreement increases with higher education levels, particularly among those with a Master's degree (49.2%). Respondents with lower education levels are generally more satisfied with the performance appraisal system, with a significant association ($p = 0.013$).

The years of employment present the respondents with less than 2 years (91.7%) and 2-5 years (84%) experience show high agreement with performance appraisals. Agreement decreases with longer tenure, particularly in the 6-10 years group (56.9%). The disagreement is higher among respondents with longer employment, particularly those with more than 10 years (35.3%). Newer employees are more likely to agree with performance appraisals, while longer-tenured employees show more reservations, and this factor is statistically significant ($p = 0.015$).

Discussion

Gender affects performance reviews through self-evaluation and management prejudice, according to research. According to Bohnet et al. (2021), women rate their success lower than men, which can affect how managers rate them. Women frequently report feeling less acknowledged during appraisal processes than their male colleagues, which might lower motivation and engagement (Marcus & Gopinath, 2017). This study aligns that disagree feedback shows more females (35.8%) disagreed compared to males (30.8%). The p-value of 0.416 shows that there is only a weak link between gender and how people feel about performance appraisals. The level of agreement between men and women is about the same.

Tukiman Hendrawijaya (2019) discovered that gender disparities in performance reviews do not necessarily affect ratings. Employees feel valued and are more driven to perform well when promotions are granted based on merit rather than gender (Taamneh et al., 2024).

Performance appraisal perceptions are additionally affected by age, which is a demographic variable. The research conducted by Marcus and Gopinath (2017) suggests that senior employees frequently have distinct expectations regarding feedback and recognition in comparison to their younger colleagues. Dissatisfaction may result if these requirements are not met, as older employees may prioritise constructive feedback and acknowledgment of their experience during appraisals. Furthermore, younger employees may demonstrate a more pronounced desire for rapid career advancement, which may influence their assessment of the efficacy and relevance of performance evaluations (Avinash & Romala, 2020). The previous findings parallel this study, which found that employees aged 25 to 35 demonstrated more remarkable agreement (86.1%) with the performance appraisal exercises than their older counterparts.

The influence of job category and job group on performance appraisals is significant as well. Employees in managerial positions often perceive appraisal systems as more beneficial compared to those in lower-level positions. A study conducted among multinational corporations revealed that employees in higher job categories tend to receive more favourable evaluations due to greater visibility and recognition from supervisors (Avinash & Romala, 2020). Conversely, those in lower job groups may feel overlooked, leading to negative perceptions of the appraisal process. The findings of the study show the job group for non-executive staff has the highest agreement level (83.1%), followed by management (68%), and executive staff (65.1%). In terms of job category, the non-academic staff shows higher agreement (71.3%) compared to academic staff (49.1%).

The study findings present that lower-educated respondents, such as Certificate (88%) and Diploma (75.7%), agree more with performance reviews than those with Master's degrees (50.8%). This outcome corresponds with the previous research. Employees who have earned advanced degrees frequently anticipate more comprehensive feedback during appraisals and may experience feelings of dissatisfaction if their contributions are not adequately acknowledged. Furthermore, employees' perspectives regarding the appraisal process may be influenced by their educational background; those with higher levels of education may perceive it as more pertinent and advantageous for their professional advancement than those with lower qualifications (Tukiman Hendrawijaya, 2019).

The study also presents that respondents with less than 2 years (91.7%) and 2-5 years (84%) experience agree strongly with performance reviews, and longer tenure reduces agreement, especially among those with 6-10 years of experience (56.9). This aligns with Tukiman Hendrawijaya (2019), who found that longer-serving employees generally expect recognition for their loyalty and contributions, which can shape their perceptions of fairness in the appraisal process. This may lead to the belief that the longer tenure employees' assessment process is more pertinent and advantageous for their professional growth than for newer employees, who might receive more generalised criticism.

Contribution of the Study

The study contributes theoretically by enhancing the understanding of how demographic factors such as gender, age, education, job roles, and tenure influence employee perceptions of performance appraisals. Practically, it offers valuable insights for the ODL institutions and other organisations to design fair and comprehensive appraisal systems that address diverse employee needs, foster motivation, and align individual contributions with organisational objectives.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant influence of age, job category, job group, level of education, and years of employment on individuals' perceptions of performance appraisal systems, with gender showing a comparatively weak effect in the ODL context. By understanding these demographic factors, the ODL institutions or organisations can enhance the effectiveness and fairness of their appraisal systems, promoting a more inclusive and responsive performance review process. This study also supports the stakeholder approach as a strategic framework, emphasizing the value of incorporating the interests of knowledge-based employees who are essential to organizational success. This approach advocates for appraisal systems that are resilient and equitable, accommodating the diverse perspectives and contributions of employees and reinforcing commitment across stakeholder groups. Future research could explore how these appraisal systems impact long-term employee motivation, engagement, and satisfaction, particularly across varied higher educational environments.

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