

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Performance Appraisal in Action in Jimma University: Does Administrative Culture Matter?**¹Ermyas Admasu²

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Abstract

Performance Appraisal (PA) nowadays is practiced in most organizations worldwide as an instrument of ensuring effectiveness. Culture has also become an important arena based on which effective practice of PA can be studied. The major aim of this study was to explore the influence of administrative culture on the effective practice of PA in Jimma University (JU), Ethiopia. The study employed a case study strategy with mixed method approach. It was informed by theoretical discussions of “culture is what organization is” and “culture is what organization has.” Hofstede’s cultural dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism/collectivism were applied to map administrative culture in JU. Multi stage simple random sampling technique was employed to select 78 respondents for the survey and 29 key informant interviewees’ were selected purposively. Hence, the impacts of each cultural dimension on the effective practice of PA system in JU were analyzed by triangulating the data obtained from each method of data collection. It was found out that, a relatively high power distance in JU has resulted in a centralized organization reducing participation from lower level units like departments. This has reduced academics’ participation in setting performance targets for evaluation. A somewhat high uncertainty avoidance culture on the other hand has led to more tendencies to seek for structures and rules. This has affected the initiative for innovation and readiness to change, making the introduction of new goals in to the evaluation system a challenging endeavor. JU’s academics culture is also found to be more collectivist than individualist. Interpersonal ties and interactions in line with conformity to groups are dominant. Hence, considerations to personal and group ties reduced trustworthiness of evaluation results and effective administration of the feedback system.

Key words: /Collectivism/ Culture/Individualism/Power distance/Uncertainty avoidance/

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Culture can be applied as an important explanatory factor to study phenomena in organizations and particularly in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It can be applied as an arena to explain events that take place in organizations (Tierney, 1988, p.2). In line with this, organizational culture in Higher Education management has been recognized as an important area of research by few authors (Massen, 1995 cited in Sporn, 1996, p.41). According to Sporn, the increasing interest to apply culture to the study of the management of HEIs derives from almost similar problem that business organizations are facing. These among others include the claim for more academic management, accountability and autonomy that led universities to face problems such as adaptation, coordination, communication, evaluation or effectiveness. As a result universities develop specific kind of organizational culture that could be studied (Dill & Sporn, 1995 cited in Sporn, 1996, p.44).

Tierney in his study on organizational culture in universities explains culture as “a new management approach” that could explain every event that occurs within an organization (1988, p.2). The influence of culture in universities can occur at department, institution, system and state level (ibid, p.5). This occurrence indicates that universities are affected by the socio economic and political environments that surround them affirming the importance of administrative culture to the study of HEIs. In addition to this, one can ask if public institutions like universities display a unique set of cultural values that affect the implementation of PA. Dwelling on such idea, Simmons (2001) raised key questions like; what form should PA take in knowledge based organizations? Can there be an appropriate accommodation between PA for control and PA for development?

The currently operating PA system in Ethiopia is introduced in 1996 with the implementation of the Civil Service Reform Program (CSRP) in the same period. PA is one of those work processes that take place in the Ethiopian public organizations in general and HEIs in Particular. HEIs have their own peculiar feature and nature compared to other forms of public organizations and actually operates with different mandate. The focus of this study is Jimma University (JU) which has been practicing PA since its establishment in 1999. Academic staff members in JU are evaluated based on three major areas of responsibilities they have in teaching, research and community service. Hence the study examines the influence of administrative culture in the university on the effective practices of PA among academic staff members. It therefore applies culture as an explanatory factor to study the effective practice of PA system in the university.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The main intent behind introducing PA system in Ethiopia is to create a performing culture and to achieve motivational and developmental objective through its effective operation. However, as argued by Adebabay, installing effective PA system might be a challenge for administrative reform in Ethiopia in a cultural and value system

where people avoid measurement and open evaluation in high power distance and closed system (2011, pp.15-19). Then it might be important to see if PA is operating to meet its intended goals in such specific cultural setting in HEIs.

A study of PA in the Ethiopian public organizations indicated that the PA system is less geared towards improving past performances for future better performance, and the result of the performance assessment is kept secret unless staffs performed far below average. In addition managers do not usually inform their staffs the level of performance expected from them in terms of quality, quantity, cost and time. Moreover, systematic recording of weakness and accomplishments of staffs has not been the trend. "They just fill performance forms twice a year, quite often after some delay, and in a highly impressionistic manner, unrelated to work performance, undocumented and consequentially difficult to justify" (Getachew,1997, p.222). In addition, a study conducted on the PA system of academic staff members at Bahirdar University also indicated limitations of the evaluation criteria lacking clarity, feasibility and less relevance to the goal of education enormously compromising the effectiveness of the PA system in ensuring the required level of performance by academics (Kemal, 2015, p.20). Such findings are quiet similar to the personal observation of the investigator in HEIs.

Jimma University has been practicing PA to ensure better performance of its academic staff with regard to quality of education research and community services. It has also been utilized as one of the vital inputs for the promotion of academic staff members. However, it is quite important to examine the actual practice of PA in JU in light of the vital components of PA such as setting performance indicators, objective rating of staff performance, implanting an appropriate feedback system, improve performance and establish incentive systems. A keen observer of the PA system at JU may notice gaps in terms of actually practicing such vital requirements that could hinder it from achieving the intended goals. One can even question if PA is seriously practiced to identify performance gaps and carry out corrective measures. Posing such queries is timely because PA is at least tacitly recognized as a tool to ensure quality of education and as a requirement for academic promotion.

Hence, studying the constraints and challenges of practicing PA is crucial and culture is an important variable to study the effectiveness of PA. Vallance argued that PA as a management practice is a western notion rooted in the values of individual performance and achievement, which makes it vulnerable to cultural relativity. Therefore, studying its applicability and efficiency across cultures might indicate ways to improve its practice (1999, p.79). The fact that universities and academics working in them have peculiar culture as compared to other forms of public organizations makes it interesting to study if such a peculiar culture influences PA in universities and in turn attainment of their organizational goal. Moreover, studies of PA systems in the Ethiopian public HEIs and specifically in relation to culture are scarcely available.

1.3 Major Objective of the Study

The major objective of the study is to examine the status of PA in Jimma University in view of the prevailing administrative culture.

1.4 Specific Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are

- i. To assess the influence of power distance on the effective practice of PA in Jimma University
- ii. To examine the ways in which uncertainty avoidance affects the successful operation of PA in Jimma University
- iii. To identify as to how a culture of collectivism matter for the effective practice of PA in Jimma University

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Meaning and Functions of PA in Higher Education Institutions

Scholars in the field forward more or less similar meaning of PA. Tyler for instance, defined it briefly as “an evaluation of employees past and current performance, as well as future prospects, in an organization” (1998, p.119). On the other hand, Bransfield described it as “a process of systematically evaluating performance and providing feedback on which performance adjustment can be made” (2000, p.71). He further elaborated it as a process that enables to account the difference between desired and actual performance that leads to identifying the need for action.

In line with the above definitions, scholars agree that overall organizational performance is the function of the performance by employees working in it. Improving productivity and performance at organizational level among others should focus on evaluating job related employees’ behavior. Similarly, performance evaluation of teachers in universities is an important tool for academic staff management. It enables universities to utilize their teaching work force efficiently and effectively. That in turn enables teachers to achieve their personal and institutional goals (Wossenu, 2008, p.487). PA, therefore can be considered instrumental in helping HEIs and their members to achieve their goals.

The meaning of PA in HEIs does not deviate from the wider theoretical definition applied to all other forms of organizations or neither its purposes are entirely different. Dilts et al. (1994, pp. 4-5) understood PA in universities as “Faculty Performance Appraisal generally identified as a system of activities with specific individual and often organizational goals, identified reward and sometimes punishment, substantive criteria up on which to determine whether goals have been attained and, procedures whereby evidence is gathered to which criteria will be applied to reach specific decisions.” PA according to the same author serves three functions within the university. Primarily it identifies and evaluates the performance of individual faculty members and also helps to provide incentive to faculty members. Furthermore, it is an important management tool to monitor the progress of the institution toward attaining its goals and objectives.

2.2 Meaning of Culture, Organizational Culture and Administrative Culture

Meaning of culture. Most scholars in the field expressed culture as one of the most contested and difficult concept to frame an agreed up on straight forward meaning. Schein defined it as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions, that was learned by a group as it solved its problem of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, is to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to close problems” (2004, p.17). Hofstede, in his study on culture and organizations expressed culture as “a collective phenomenon” shared by people lived in the same environment and operationalized it as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.5). On the other hand, Dwivedi defined culture as “a way of life of a group of people or a society through which it views the world around it, attributes meanings, attaches significance to it, and organizes itself to accomplish, preserve, and eventually pass on its legacy to future generations” (2005, pp.21-22).

As indicated by the definitions in the previous parts, culture implies the prescription of “human behavior by a collectively created and sustained way of life.” Similarly organizations provide the milieu for people to interact regularly that leads to a set of shared understandings distinctive to some groups. Organizational culture evolves since people in the same organizational setting face similar set of problems, communicate to each other and adopt common set of understanding to enact consensually approved behavior (Schein, 1990, p.109).

Meaning of organizational culture. Many scholars in the field of organizational culture argued that the concept of culture has been mainly utilized to study private organizations. Studying organizational culture in the public sector however requires going beyond the study and analysis of interpersonal relationships within the context of a particular organization. As noted by Jamil, that is what organizational culture theories mostly emphasized in analyzing cultural aspects of business related organizations (2009, p.195). Studies of organizational culture in the private sector give due emphasis to elements of culture internal to organizations like organizational structure, work related attitudes and management systems. The insufficiency of such an approach to the study of public organizations, where politics and interactions with the wider community plays significant role, led to framing the issue into broader spectrum encompassing politics (Jamil,2002, p.94), hence administrative culture.

Administrative culture. Henderson situated administrative culture as a mean between individual agencies and political culture. He has clearly stated “Administrative culture will be thought as a midpoint between orientation analysis of personnel in individual agencies (organizations), which can be studied as organizational culture, and the broader political science concern with the entire polity and its features, which has been labeled political culture” (2005, pp.39-40). In light of this, Henderson defined it as “a general characteristics of public officials (i.e shared values, attitudes and beliefs).” He further described it as “a set of commonly held values, attitudes and beliefs to which public servants (appointed not elected “public officials” or “bureaucrats”) subscribe and are expected to follow and which provide an “ideal type” of actual and official behavior (*Ibid*, p. 40).

2.3 Organizational Culture Conceptualized

2.3.1 *Culture as what organization has Vs Culture as what organization is*

This first perspective pictures culture as a variable internal to organizations labeling organizations as “culture producing phenomena.” Organizations in this regard are social instruments that produce distinctive cultural artifacts such as rituals, legends and ceremonies. This approach basically treats culture in organizations as a dependent variable and organizational property subject to managerial control (Ogbonna & Harris, 1998, p.273). Leaders or managers can usually be involved in creating, embedding and manipulating culture (*Ibid*, p.274).

On the other hand, the underlying assumption of “culture as what organization is” that, organizational culture and its structure are socially created and imbedded in social interaction produced and reproduced overtime. It is not as such a form of control created and manipulated by leaders but formed within the broader spectrum of societal culture surrounding organizations (Meek, 1988, pp.462-63).

This study dwelled on Hofstede’s study of cross national culture located in the paradigms of “culture as what organization is” and the major elements of national culture as identified by him. Hofstede’s cross national studies on culture identified four major dimensions of culture that includes power distance, uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism dimensions of culture (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp.29-31). The same variables are used in this study.

2.4 The Dimensions of Culture in the Context of Organizations

Power distance. Power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (*ibid*, p.61). In organizations of high power distance national culture, there is high dependence of subordinates over superiors, with high emotional distance between them and less preference for consultation. They basically consider each other as unequal, and hierarchical systems are implanted based on such conception of inequality. Organizations usually centralize power in the hand of the few at the center and structure a long hierarchy of supervisory personnel for reporting. Wider gaps in terms of salary and educational level could also be manifested between top and bottom in the structure of organizations. The relationship between bosses and subordinates can be expressed as less participatory, less consultative and communication for the most part is initiated by superiors (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp.61-73). On the contrary, in organizations of low power distance culture, there is limited dependence of subordinates over bosses, much more preference for consultation, narrow emotional distance between them and a much more tendency for subordinates to contradict and challenge their bosses considering them as people like each other (*ibid*).

Uncertainty Avoidance. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance tend to stress more on “orderliness and consistency” to reduce ambiguity. For the same reason, people look for structures, institutions and relationships to make the future more predictable (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.198). Hence, due emphasis is given to more formal rules and laws. Uncertainty avoidance cultures reject ambiguous situations. In organizational context, they need clear structures, institutions and relationships that make events clearly

and easily understandable. Rules get primacy even at the expense of innovation and experimentation. In addition, individuals in such culture are more conservative and less tolerant to ambiguities and deviation from norms (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp.197-99). High uncertainty avoidance might indicate less willingness to take risk and work for organizational change. People tend to stick to already existing roles and norms and resist new reforms undertaken in organizations.

Collectivism versus Individualism. Individualistic culture is characterized by loose ties among individuals whereby they are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family members. On the other hand, in collectivist societies individuals are integrated into cohesive groups with a tendency to depend on each other and in search of security in exchange for loyalty. Hence, the essence of the distinction is, as to whether persons are seen as interdependent or autonomous entities in the society (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.92). In an organizational context, individualistic societies consider employees as “economic persons” just having their own economic and psychological needs. The relationship between employee and employer is conceived primarily as business transaction whereby poor performance is a justifiable and well accepted reason to terminate ones work contract. In collectivist societies, on the other hand, employee-employer interaction is usually justified on moral grounds. It is more like interaction with in a family whereby protection is ascertained in exchange for loyalty. In this case, less emphasis is laid on actual performance, and low performance may have limited or no consequence on employees’ career (*Ibid*, pp.119-120).

2.5 PA in the Ethiopian Civil Service

The PA system that currently operates in the Ethiopian public organizations is instituted by the Civil Service Reform Program (CSRP) in 1996. The CSRP called it Result Oriented Performance Appraisal (ROPA) system. The CSRP targeted establishment of modern public service in Ethiopia. It aspired to induce highly efficient, competent and responsive civil service by ensuring effective and efficient human resource management system.

Accordingly the major purposes of the PA system in the Ethiopian civil service are: to enable civil servants discharge their duties at the expected level and standard, evaluate them on continuous basis to identify their strength and weakness and improve their future performance. It also aims at identifying their training need, giving rewards based on results and leveling the ground for administrative decisions on the basis of concrete evidences (Proclamation Number 515/2007). While these are essential elements of performance management in the Ethiopian civil service, there are five major components of PA indicating the actual activities that must be carried out to achieve the intended goals of the PA system.

1. *Goal Setting*: is the process whereby an employee and the immediate boss set performance plans (goals) based up on the overall plan of the organization, department in the organization and job description of the employee later on serving as indicators to measure performance.
2. *Continuous evaluation and recording of performance*: is the process of following up and monitoring employees’ performance while executing the plan.

3. *Appraising performance*: is the process of comparing planned activities (expected outcomes) against implementation outcomes, based on measurement indicators set forth to show expected results.
4. *Feedback*: is a process where an employee and his immediate boss sit to discuss finalized performance results to indicate performance gaps and pave the way for further improvement.
5. *Evaluation results and improvement schemes*: This is a post feedback step whereby high achievers are rewarded with incentives including benefits and promotions. On the other hand, training and improvement needs are identified for those who manifested low performance (MCB, 2003, pp.44, 46& 66 and ANRSCBO, 2002, p.46).

ROPA system has clearly stated the major components that should be undertaken in conducting PA in the Ethiopian civil service. The issue however is to what extent such principles are adhered so that the PA system achieves its intended goals of improving overall organizational performance by ensuring better performance of employee.

Studies conducted on the practices of PA in different Ethiopian public organizations indicated some of the challenges towards ensuring effective PA system. It is indicated that PA system in the Ethiopian public service suffers from lack of transparency, weak follow up and poor connection between performance and reward (Solomon, 2005 cited in Tegegne, 2008, p.43). Lack of participation by employees in the appraisal system also usually devoid them of the opportunities to demonstrate their abilities and skills in line with predetermined goals to be achieved. Moreover, delivering appraisal feedback is considered as telling negative news and an unpleasant and culturally unsound action (Adeba, 2014, p.98). Employees do not perceive the PA system as effective and objective because of lack of connection between performance criteria and their job on the one hand performance evaluation and reward on the other. Absence of transparency and continuous follow up do not allow employees to know about their past performance for future improvement as confidential reporting system of performance evaluation deters communication (Tegegne, 2008, p.36). In addition, a study conducted on the PA system of academic staff members at Bahir Dar University revealed that lack of clarity and feasibility of the evaluation criteria minimized the effectiveness of the evaluation system. The criteria are less related to the goal of education and the performance expectation of teachers and it is unable to accommodate variations across disciplines (Kemal, 2015, p.20).

The reviewed studies highlighted lack of employees' participation and continuous follow up, vague and less feasible evaluation criteria, disconnection between performance and reward, absence of appropriate feedback system and others as the major constraints to the effectiveness of the PA system. This study employed administrative culture as an explanatory factor to study PA in Jimma University unlike the previous studies of PA that mainly focused on managerial and procedural aspects of PA.

3. Methods

This research adopted a case study as a design of inquiry. Case study is “ a detailed examination of one study, one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of document or one particular event” (Bogdan & Bilken,2003 quoted in Berg,2009, p.317). JU is selected as a specific case of the study for detailed analysis. Studying the PA system in JU might be interesting as the university ranked first consecutively from among public HEIs in Ethiopia.

The strategy for designing and conducting a study may vary depending on whether it is primarily qualitative or quantitative (Neuman, 2011, p.6) or combination of both as a mixed method approach. This depends on the nature of the issue to be addressed and basically the research questions. This study employed a mixed method approach. The approach helps to overcome shortcomings from qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative method is important to understand “what the reality is” regarding administrative culture and the qualitative method is helpful in understanding what impacts administrative culture have over PA from the point of view or “perspective” of academic staff members of JU (Adopted from Kariyeija, 2010, p.99). Therefore, quantitative method was found crucial to map out the dimensions of administrative culture identified and discussed for the study based on the opinion of employees (mostly instructors) in the organization in which they are working. This was important to understand the general administrative culture setup based on respondents view. On the other hand, the qualitative method was employed to elicit the views of respondents of how PA is practiced in their organization. Qualitative method is appropriate method in an organizational research like this in order to understand how employees make sense of the appraisal process based on their own views. This enables to understand PA “relying on the participants own views” (ibid).

Moreover, “when case studies are involved, triangulation may lead the researcher to the whole case” (Kariyeija, 2010, p.99). In line with this, Creswell similarly argued that mixed method approach helps results from one method to help develop or inform the other method and “nesting of one method with the other to provide insight into different levels of analysis” (2003, p.16). This study as well triangulated the findings from quantitative and qualitative methods in such a way that the quantitative method mapped administrative culture and the qualitative method helped to understand how PA is functioning in light of it. Hence, a triangulation mixed method approach was employed.

The data for this study comprised both qualitative and quantitative data from both primary and secondary sources, as it employed a mixed method approach. Primary data were gathered from academic administrators at the top level of the university, department heads, instructors and students in Jimma University utilizing varieties of data collection instruments and procedures. Secondary data were mainly collected from; reports, documented manuals, PA forms utilized to evaluate academics.

The organizational nature of HEIs might be used as a guide to select sample. Obviously HEIs are compartmentalized into structure like colleges or faculties under which different related disciplines are situated. In this case it was found feasible to employ “multi stage sampling” that would help to arrive at a smaller population that constitute representative sample.

Accordingly, simple random sampling technique was employed in order to select three out of the six colleges constituted in JU. The three colleges that are randomly selected for the study constituted 21 departments out of which 12 departments were selected by employing a lottery method with 50% representation from each. Drawing of sample departments was conducted separately to each college to ensure at least 50% representation from each. Afterwards, the name lists of department's staff member (found from the administrative wing of each college) were used as a sampling frame to randomly select individual respondents with at least 25% representation from each department's total number of staff. The 25% limit was found feasible because a sample size of more might exaggerate the size of the unit population; while lesser amount might dwindle the representativeness. The sample departments considered for the study constitute a total of 300 staff members out of which 78 were selected as a sample population for the study. Questionnaires were distributed to them, out of which 58 have returned the questionnaire with a response rate of 74.35 %.

Survey questionnaire was employed to map out administrative culture in JU based on the opinion of academic staff members. The questions under each dimension were developed from the investigator's understanding of reviewing the literature and adopted from other studies in similar areas, specially, Karyeija (2010). List of statements were provided under each variable to let respondents rate each statement based on their perception and understanding of the existing situation in their organization. They were requested to rank the statements on scales covering; agree completely (5), agree partly (4), neutral (3), disagree partly (2) and disagree completely (1).

On the other hand, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents for the qualitative interview. The in depth interviews (constituting 29 key informants) were conducted by making use of structured interview schedules with open ended questions. The questions focused mainly on performance appraisal in the organization and how cultural variables influence its practice. Different set of questions were prepared for different categories of respondents. Respondents in this regard are classified into five categories including department heads, deans, individual instructors, top level officials (JU head of the reform office and academic quality assurance office) and students selected from each department considered for the study. The questions in the data collection instruments were developed from the review of relevant literature and adopted from other studies in similar areas, specially, Karyeija (2010) study of administrative culture in Uganda. This makes the items more relevant and valid to the study. Moreover, the instruments were tested for clarity and feasibility before launching a full scale data collection.

Finally, the quantitative data was analyzed into mean scores, percentages and frequencies. In doing so, Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS 16.0) was used. Calculation of percentages and mean scores is considered to analyze and describe results. The qualitative data was organized into manageable form and categorized into themes so that it will be easily triangulated with the quantitative data. The analysis as proposed by Creswell "combines the two forms of data to seek convergence among results" (2003, p.222).

4. Results

4.1 Mapping Administrative Culture with Dimensions of Culture in JU

Power distance. This section analyzes the level of power distance in the organization under the study along four major indicators of power distance namely participation, hierarchy, perception of power and income disparity.

Table 1: Mean Scores, Percentages and Index for Power Distance

Statement	% share of agree partly and agree completely	Mean Score	N
a) Hierarchy is given more emphasis in facilitating work.	73	3.79	58
b) Hierarchy in the organization causes difference in quality among people that are higher up and those that are down in the hierarchy.	35	2.6	58
c) Teachers are usually told what to do by higher authorities.	66	3.66	58
d) Academics expect to be consulted before decisions are passed	55	3.22	58
e) Leaders in the university pass decisions own their own before consulting academics.	67	3.45	58
f) Academics are afraid to express their points of disagreements with their supervisors.	50	3.22	58
g) Academics give high weight for the power difference between them and their supervisors.	64	3.45	58
h) There is high respect for position holders among academics based on power difference.	57	3.4	58
i) Academics are concerned more about what their supervisors might think than better way of doing the job	54	3.33	58
j) Junior academics manifest high respect for their senior counterparts.	32	2.95	58
k) There is a wide salary range between senior and position holding academics and junior academics.	31	2.8	58
TOTAL		35.79	
Index of Power Distance		3.25	

Source: Own survey 2012

Eleven statements were listed for respondents on a scale of 1-5. Mean scores were calculated for each statement after adding the rating from each respondent and divide it by the total number of respondents. The addition of the mean score from each statement divided by the total number of statement finally equals to the *index* for measuring power distance. The total expected mean score after rating the statements on a scale of 1-5 is five. On the basis of the premise that “the higher the mean, the higher the possibility of power distance” (Karyeija,2010, p.156) a score below 3 is considered as low power distance while a mean score above three is considered as index of high power

distance. Based on this, we can infer that the organization is in the category of relatively higher power distance.

The study reveals *hierarchy* as a normative way of handling activities in JU. The same has been corroborated when 73 % of the respondents confirmed hierarchy as the most important way of facilitating works in JU. As interviewed respondents viewed, “hierarchy and centralization are the order when it comes to decision making, and the actual handling of the job.” An interviewed department head further explained “More of the decisions usually flow down the hierarchy from the top. The main task at the lower (department) level is putting those decisions in to actions.”

This may affect *Participation in decision making*. In this regard, the above table (row c) is clear in showing that, 66% of the respondents are told what to do, than being informed ahead of time to have their own say on the contents of decisions. However, slightly more than half of them (55%) expect to be consulted before decisions are passed. As interviewed instructors indicated; “it may be simpler to engage oneself in decisions as you go down in the hierarchy and especially when it is with your immediate boss. As it goes up in the hierarchy the possibility for participation fades up and the trend is to just accept and implement whatever is decided.” As a confirmation to this trend, at least 67% affirmed that consultation before decisions are unusual and leaders prefer to frame and approve contents of decisions on their own.

However, on the other hand, it is interesting to note significant majority of the respondents disapproving the statement that *existing level of hierarchy reflects difference among people in terms of quality*. As indicated by the above table (row b), only 35% believe individuals’ quality matters as it goes up in the hierarchy of the organization.

Some statements were forwarded to learn on academics view regarding their *perception of power* toward those who hold position. The findings (row g) illustrated 64% of the respondents attach high weight for the power difference between themselves and other position holding academics. However, when it comes to giving high respect for these persons based on their power, it is 53.6%. The latter figure might not be insignificant but relatively lower as compared to the previous. It may mean that, academics give much respect to the authority exercised and not necessarily to the person himself.

About 53.4% handed their confirmation about becoming less and less independent overtime in discharging their responsibilities. An interviewed instructor revealed “ideas are usually imposed from above, loaded with a gesture of do it accordingly. We are feeling the power of leaders at the top than the way we might think.” This might tell the fact that academics in JU perceive more centralization in their institution.

As compared to academics respect to position holders like department heads and deans, their tendency to respect each other based on seniority is found to be minimal. The above table (row j) indicated that only 32% agreed about junior academics tendency to convey high respect to their seniors. We can deduce that difference in terms of power is given more weight than seniority with regard to respecting each other, probably confirming the importance of hierarchy in individuals’ relationship in JU. *Wider salary range* among seniors and juniors is not the case in JU, as the above table (row k) indicates. Only 31% perceived the existence of a wide salary range as people goes up along the hierarchy in the structure.

Uncertainty avoidance. To come up with an index of uncertainty avoidance, three major indicators were considered: rule orientation, readiness to change and innovation and entertaining differing opinion.

Table 2: Mean Scores, Percentages and Index for Uncertainty Avoidance

Statement	% share of agree partly and agree completely	Mean Score	N
a) Academics seek for non-ambiguous and clear rules and structures.	91	4.36	58
b) There is high tendency to follow rules and routines than being result oriented among academics.	78	3.97	
c) There is a tendency to implementing already existing roles than innovating new ones.	86	4.14	58
d) Introducing new reforms and ways of doing things among academics is challenging.	78	4	58
e) There is a tendency to emphasize known standards and rules than experimenting new ones.	79	4.02	58
f) Academics manifest less tolerance to differing opinion in the work environment.	50	3.21	58
TOTAL		23.7	
Index Of Uncertainty Avoidance		3.95	

Source: Own survey 2012

Following the same logic of calculating the index for power distance, the total of the mean scores from each statement is divided by the total number of statements put to use to measure uncertainty avoidance. Hence, the addition of the mean scores from each statement is 23.7 which is divided by six and equals to 3.95. Since the index is pretty well above three, we can determine that the organization is in a relatively high uncertainty avoidance category.

The above table shows that considerable majority of the respondents (91%) indicated academics strong tendency to seek for non-ambiguous and clear rules and structures. Employees therefore, prefer to operate in a certain and well defined work environment constrained with rules and structures. This is also accompanied by a further tendency to allot far more primacy to following rules and adhere to routines than lay due focus to achieving results. The second row in the table discloses the view of 78% of the respondents. They expressed rule following as more important than scoring better results on the job. A department head commented “rules are very important instruments to guide activities and to constrain employees to operate in a more predictable manner. I am not saying there is strict adherence to rules but we need the rules as basic instruments to guide our activities.” Hence, rules are there to ensure certainty but their application might not be that much strong.

As depicted by the above table (*row c*) an overwhelming majority of the respondents (86%) preferred to stick to already existing roles than getting involved in

innovation. As one high ranking officer indicated, “there are usual, preferred and most favored ways of doing things and moving away from that is considered as challenging.” Even if reforms are important components of the work environment, efforts at introducing new ideas might be staggered by such less readiness to change. Introducing new reforms and ways of doing things among employees is very much challenging as confirmed by 78% of the respondents.

The work environment’s preference to remain stable by maintaining the status quo is further expressed by the respondents when 79% of them agreed to stick to known standards, routines and rules than experimenting new ones. At least 50% of the respondents reported that academics in the work environment usually manifest less tolerance to differing opinion. By this, they are referring to their fewer tendencies to entertain feedbacks or criticisms from their immediate supervisors.

Individualism /collectivism. This section tries to find out whether the dominant culture in Jimma University is individualist or collectivist based on respondents view.

Table 3: Mean Scores, Percentages and Index for Individualism/Collectivism

Statement	% share of agree partly and agree completely	Mean Score	N
a) There is a very strong interpersonal ties in the work environment.	53	3.24	58
b) Personal relationships prevail over tasks and the quality of the work done.	62	3.6	
c) Maintaining good relationship is given high value among academics (instead of being serious about actual performance on the work).	78	3.83	
d) The work environment does not attach significant value to competition of academics among each other.	59	3.52	58
e) High performing individuals are singled out and appreciated exclusively for their performance	22	2.48	58
f) Academics relationship with their supervisors is justified based on moral grounds than responsibility or achievement.	41	3.16	58
g) Extending good treatment and favoring closely tied persons is a good practice.	71	3.62	58
h) Open criticism (direct confrontation) of another person is a less accepted practice.	76	3.91	58
TOTAL		27.36	
Index Of Power Distance		3.42	

Source: Own survey 2012

As it appears from table 3, the total mean score from the 9 statements is 3.42 as an index to determine individualism/collectivism dimension of culture. Following from the same logic with the other dimensions, the organization is more collectivist than individualist.

As depicted by table 3, slightly more than half of the respondents (53%) believe in the prevalence of very strong interpersonal ties among academics in the work environment. The response obtained from interview sessions is much more telling as almost all of them stated “There is very strong interpersonal tie and academics tend to think and act in terms of group than as an individual. The relationships are both at official/formal and informal/social level.”

This might for instance goes deep into strong relationships manifested through friendship, caring for each other and solving problems together, sharing happy and sad moments together and others. For instance, it might not be unusual to compromise working hours to go to the house of a staff member, if his/her relative has died. This all happens beyond the formal academic work environment even to the extent of building a family like relationship.

The issue at hand is to what extent such strong bond meddles with formal and official activities like for instance PA in the context of this study. In light of this, respondents were asked if such personal relationships prevail over tasks and compromise the quality of the work done, 62% of them agreed. Furthermore, 78% of the respondents agreed that primary consideration is given to maintaining good interpersonal relation than to be serious about performance in the work environment. An interviewed department head confirmed “in our society work comes next to friends and family members ... we don’t want to lose our friends for the sake of our work and that is a clear fact.”

The ensuing concern in this regard is whether the work environment could be competitive. The above table 3 (*row d*) indicated that around 59% of the respondents revealed that the work environment lacks a sense of competition and there is very little effort underway to promote the same among academics. This may imply the insufficient attention laid on individual performance as individuals’ attachment is more inclined to the group. Similarly only 22% of the respondents agreed on the tendency to single out and recognize high performing individuals in Jimma University. It is important to note a very short view of an interviewed official who stated that “academic staff members have very little expectation after performing very high and similarly there is little or no consequence for weak performance.”

Moreover, considerable majority of respondents in Jimma University reported that there is a less tendency to entertain open criticism. Around 76% of the respondents do not believe that open criticism of another person is an accepted practice. Even when it happens, it may not lead to a healthy work environment. This is specifically referring to forwarding feedback on job related performance after PA.

5. Discussion

The results part of the paper dealt with mapping administrative culture at JU which lay down the basis for analyzing the PA system in relation to culture in the institution. The discussion part explicates the PA system on the basis of the prevailing culture as viewed by key informant interviewees.

The study revealed that hierarchy is the common way of handling activities in JU and usually accepted trend reducing participation from below. It is noted that the possibility for participation and involvement is higher as it goes down in the hierarchy. Specifically academics perceive very little power gap in relation to their immediate bosses in their departments. The crux of the matter is what visible implications such a hierarchical structure can have on the PA system and specifically on the goal setting process.

The study has found out that there is almost no goal setting process in the PA system in JU. A boss sitting together with subordinates to set performance targets of what they should achieve in a certain evaluation period is not practiced in the context of the university. Evaluation is usually conducted based on certain prescribed criteria listed in the form of a questionnaire. The criteria cover detailed responsibilities of instructors in teaching, research and very few on community services. Instructors are usually evaluated from three sides; their head, peers and students with separate set of questionnaire prepared for each. Therefore, these set of criteria are used time and again (twice every year) to evaluate instructors. This implies that setting performance target has not been practically instituted in the PA process. As most respondents reflected, the line staff is usually involved in routine handling of activities as postulated and stipulated by higher level in the hierarchies. The situation as explained by most respondents is not that line staffs' search for goals from heads or they are allowed for less participation. It is rather a situation where there is no opportunity to set one's own goal together with heads.

Goal setting in the context of HEIs like JU are actually related to defining performance target of instructors in their major areas of responsibilities in teaching, research and community services. However, in JU the PA is based on a predetermined evaluation standard against which appraisal is conducted. The appraisal does not check pre-established goals but it is just superimposed measurement criteria. As provided by Lucas, goal setting should be a joint activity involving the employees and their line manager (2006) that reinforces a participatory and empowered work culture. Absence of such process leads to significant increase in an ineffectual PA system (Roberts, 2003).

The emphasis on hierarchy and limited level of participation also constraints on the consensus and validity of measurement criteria put to use for evaluating performance. It is the view of most interviewed instructors that, they have given no inputs what is so ever to the measurement criteria utilized to measure their performance. The appraisal criteria have been there for a very long period of time and are redundantly used every year irrespective of their relevance to the changes in terms of goals and roles resulting from reform measures in the work environment. An interviewed instructor is clear in stating that "the evaluation instrument is a readymade set of criteria which I call superficial and super imposed from somewhere else. Some of those criteria are irrelevant and subject to bias having little to do with objective or goals that may need to be

attained.” Still others similarly commented on the invalidity of the measurement criteria even sometimes requiring an in depth knowledge about the personal life of the appraised. Moreover, seeing equivocal criteria with different meaning to different people is a common practice as far as the evaluation criteria is concerned. Employees realize such flaws but changes cannot be initiated bottom up because of the top down emphasis to decision making. Dean of a college expressed that “we have realized the problem and suggested for improvement. We have not succeeded because we were told that ‘such reform has to be university wide and uniform. Hence it remained as it is.”

This might indicate that measurement criteria imposed from somewhere else with almost no participation from teaching personnel may not have support and acceptance from the later degrading the effectiveness of the PA system. However, standards of performance will be more effective when they are developed with teachers’ participation in Universities. As explained by Roberts, clear and reliable standards are basic elements of an effective PA system. The development of such valid, reliable and fair standards are enhanced by employees participation as they possess the requisite information for developing realistic standards (2003, p.91).

Cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance tend more to stick to already existing rules and feel more comfortable in well-structured and predictable situations. This may basically imply rules constraining the emergence of new ideas. PA basically requires the setting up of new and even challenging goals. Lucas indicates the importance of setting new goals to enhance performance and increase employees’ satisfaction in achieving certain goals (2006, p.175).

Unlike that, what is practically observed in JU is strict and persistent adherence to long stayed measurement standards and criteria to evaluate employees. The measurement criteria which are set in the form of Likert scale look more like they are created to ensure certainty and easy for evaluation without causing any sort of ambiguity. An interviewed official viewed “The PA measurement standards have been there for a very long period of time. Most people agree that the criteria are outdated, less valid and partially do not fit to the existing situation. But we preferred to stick to these measures. It sounds like we are comfortable with it.”

As it stands the evaluation criteria ensures certainty and less ambiguity since it is well structured, well known and comes up with non-contradictory and predictable results. One should note that the final result from the evaluation is stated in the form of calculated aggregate number and that opens no room for contradiction when results are communicated. It is the view of most respondents that “the evaluation criteria are for the most part focused on indicating routine activities than well-defined and substantial activities that can be interpreted in to concrete outcomes.” Specifically an instructor commented that “the measurement criteria lacks smartness and requires reflecting opinions on routines than visible outcomes.” This may imply that teachers are evaluated in line with conforming to certain established and well known standards than for achieving some concrete results as demanded by the responsibilities they are handling. For instance the teaching personnel in JU have the responsibility to conduct research and disseminate knowledge in addition to teaching. The evaluation results, as it stands, may not enable to show whether a staff member has specifically achieved this objective. Teaching personnel may score very high in the evaluation results without engaging in any kind of research activity.

Moreover, such adherence to structured evaluation standard restricts the inclusion of new responsibilities induced as a result of new reforms in the teaching-learning environment. For instance, the method for evaluating students has been changed in to continuous assessment mode. However, the evaluation standards are almost the same and are not redefined with the redefinition of goals in the work environment. Therefore, following the same structured standard does not enable the evaluation process to be goal based and outcome oriented. Moreover, introducing new goals as part of the evaluation process and measuring performance along such goals might be hindered.

Further, relatively high uncertainty avoidance in the case organization entails employees less readiness to entertain opinions that differs from them and specifically when it is waged in the form of criticism against one's poor performance. This particularly refers to when department heads in JU try to forward feedback based on observed performance gaps to the teaching personnel under them.

In this regard, employees less readiness to entertain critiques in JU means, minimal effectiveness of feedback as a conduit to communicate their performance gaps and even discouraging the feedback process as a whole. The view of a department head vividly substantiates the above statement. He stated that "I doubt if we all are ready to discuss on our weak points. There are actually cultural constraints that inhibit such a practice. People may get offended and as a boss I usually hesitate to actually tell the truth for fear that it might offend them."

What transpires out of this is that, immediate supervisors are discouraged to take the initiative to give feedback. As a result, hesitation to initiate feedback with teachers becomes the norm than the exception. An interviewed position holder expressed the outcome of giving feedback as "confrontational and full of resistance that could even disable the healthy work environment." Here we can note that people usually feel unhappy and even resist open criticism that could lead to the downplaying of feedback as part of the appraisal process. Even there is a well-entrenched view that giving feedback accompanied with open criticism of one's poor performance may degrade the existing healthy work environment.

As per the view of most respondents in JU, the appraisal process is overwhelmingly dominated by employees' consideration of their interpersonal relationships and sense of belongingness to each other than the criteria listed in the appraisal forms. Evaluating an individual against the criteria based on the actually reflected performance level on the ground is probably far from being implemented. A department head expressed "very strong interactions and ties among individuals in the work setting have very big impact on the trustworthiness of the assessment process. People usually fail to honestly evaluate their friends and give inflated results so as to maintain good relationships."

The above quote clearly testifies that evaluation forms are filled and employees are appraised with little or no consideration of the actual manifested performance of employees rated for PA. This leads to dysfunction of the PA system to the extent of making it a futile exercise. Feedback, improvement and many aspects of performance management are grounded on the outcomes of actual performance assessment. Lack of genuinely assessment as employees focus on considerations other than individual performance hinders the effectiveness of the PA system. Dean of a college revealed: "you will be surprised to see highly inflated evaluation results and the similarity of results

for most staff members of a particular department. Even those staff members on which continuous reports are received over breach of responsibilities score high on the evaluation results.” Employees as a result score full marks for all the evaluation criteria and hence less capacity of the PA system to indicate performance gaps.

Ascertaining protection by maintaining loyalty is another manifestation of collectivist culture identified in JU. The effect of maintaining loyalty and ascertaining support to each other has a much more magnified impact on the accuracy of the appraisal process when it comes to students’ evaluation of their instructors. Most of the interviewed respondents including students themselves are skeptical of the accuracy of students’ evaluation over their instructors. It is most often expressed as highly biased, prejudiced and less referenced to the criteria listed for evaluation. There are certain qualifications that students demand from their instructors and their overall performance does not matter so long as they are loyal to those demands. A department head is clear in stating that; “...students usually prejudice their instructors on issues other than the criteria listed on the evaluation form. Instructors’ seriousness on assignments and other issues, difficulty of exams and grades given to students cloud their judgment during evaluation. In the meantime, the detailed evaluation criteria are sidelined. This might result in under or overrating of instructors.”

This is entirely out of the intention of the PA system. To obtain good evaluation results instructors have to be loyal to such demands of students than to be good performers of their responsibilities. Taking firm stand in the academic practice may lead to being a victim of low students’ evaluation results. Strong instructors with very good performance at times could score very low in the evaluation while those who are performing low but loyal to students interest may score high evaluation results. All the same as an interviewed student put it “best performing instructors may score very low on the evaluation from the students’ side.” Then what matters most is not the actual performance. The possibility of considering each criterion against actual performance for the sake of showing real performance is practically downplayed. Later on poor and good performers may exchange place when it comes to the final evaluation result.

Rewarding best achievers and setting incentives to ensure that employees are motivated to do their level best is an important component of PA. In this regard, the study is interested to know, how effective this could be in collectivist societies with more preference to be recognized as a group than individualist societies where recognizing individuals based on their performance is a normal process.

As most interviewed respondents viewed, there are minimal efforts of recognizing and rewarding employees’ for their best achievement. However, whenever there are scanty attempts to recognize high achievers on the job, it causes much more discontent and de motivation over employees’ than initiate them towards better performance. This might be attributed to the high collectivist cultural orientation in the institution. Attempts at instituting reward systems backfired in the form of dissatisfaction which most often led to eschewing any further attempt to introduce an institution wide reward and incentive system of recognizing employees with better performance.

The other possible impact that strong affiliation to group conformity than individual achievement have over the PA system is on the administration of feedback. According to Vallance, it is typical of collectivist societies for an individual to be allowed to save face and protected from criticism with paramount consideration for smooth

interpersonal relations (1999). Quite similar pattern has been identified in JU. Practically most of the respondents (specifically department heads) reflected that they prefer not to give feedback in an open manner. Most often they are discouraged from presenting critiques in front of an employee with performance gaps. An interviewed department head stated: "This may originate from the culture we have as a community. In our culture telling exact weak points of a person is not common and somebody may be ashamed to do that. He may fear accusation from the person criticized or from the friendship or whatever circle one belongs to." The view is informative of the fact that, forwarding criticism against another person in the name of feedback is tantamount to causing moral damage on the criticized, which in some way could also be attributed to the ways and methods in which feedbacks are forwarded.

The efficiency of the PA system could be suppressed as department heads and academics go the easiest way. Department heads keep silent and maintain their "good" relationships. Academics on the other hand maintain themselves in their comfort zone of handling their responsibilities the way they have been doing before. For a critical observer, the way most of the superiors handle the administration of the feedback exactly fits to the cultural leaning to maintain "good" relationship in the work environment. The Feedback usually is an aggregate result of what has been calculated from the Likert scale rating of criteria in the appraisal forms. Most of the superiors prefer to handle the aggregate results printed on a paper, sealed in an envelope and handed over to the instructors via attendants. There is no clear indication of performance gaps what is so ever the teachers can deduce from the aggregate figure calculated out of a total of five points. Only heads might know the gaps and practically kept with them. An instructor's impression of the feedback might tell more; he said: "I just receive the paper every semester and just say, oh! I scored this much this semester, put it in my drawer and everything is gone." Another teaching staff opined, "Assessing performance is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. We should go beyond assessing and finding something else." By this he is indicating an honest and genuine feedback system that could lead to further improvement of performance.

6. Conclusion

The findings revealed that JU is somewhat high power distance organization and that in some way influenced the PA system. It is clearly indicated that hierarchy and centralization is the common way of handling activities in the organization. In the PA system, there is no goal setting process whereby academics define their own performance targets in consultation with their supervisors. Practically, there are little or no issues to be discussed and decided upon at the lower level as the administrative system is more centralized. As a result, academics are usually involved in activities that could not be accounted in to measuring performance. Generally, there is lack of clear and agreed upon targets for measuring performance defined by academics based on which their performance can be evaluated. In light of the findings, high power distance, in addition to hindering the goal setting process, has also hindered academics' participation in setting the criteria for evaluation in the operating PA system. The criteria are superimposed and have been there for a long time though there are concerns regarding relevance and

validity. This led to lack of acceptance and support to the PA system making the practice of PA a matter of formality than necessity.

In addition, the findings revealed that JU has a somewhat high uncertainty avoidance culture. This is manifested through academics tendency to look for non-ambiguous rules and structures, less readiness to change and innovation and less readiness to entertain differing opinions. Rule orientation is specifically manifested through persistent adherence to long stayed measurement standards for evaluating performance. Academics are evaluated for conforming to certain established and well known standards than for achieving concrete objectives. Sticking to such time honored criteria may ensure predictability and certainty but precludes the evaluation system from basing itself upon predefined goals. The findings indicate that, under such circumstances inducing performance targets into the evaluation system in line with new reform measures carried out in the work environment might be a challenging task. The findings in addition showed that the crucial practice of giving and receiving feedback in PA is hindered by academics less readiness to entertain differing opinion especially in the form of critics for poor performance. Even there is an entrenched belief that feedback degrades the existing healthy work environment since it usually results in confrontation and resistance. Hence, the possibility of improving academics future performance via the conduits of indicating current performance gap might be hindered.

The study clearly revealed that academics in JU are in the category of relatively high collectivist culture manifested mainly through strong inter personal ties and loyalty to in group interaction than being serious about actual performance. The study demonstrated that academics give primacy to inter personal relationships and sense of belongingness than being serious to evaluating each other. During evaluation, appraisal forms are filled with little or no consideration of the criteria listed. Instead personalized relationship stood on the way and little regard is given to comparing actual performance against the criteria listed on the evaluation forms. This degrades the trustworthiness of evaluation results. Similarly, most students also base their evaluation on other extra considerations instead of comparing actual teachers' performance against the criteria on the evaluation forms compromising the trustworthiness of the evaluation results. The findings also brought to light that the tendency to single out and to recognize high performing academics in JU is minimal since efforts of recognizing employee with better performance is usually met with dissatisfaction from others confirming the norms in high collectivist culture. Moreover, considerations for smooth personal relationships were also hindering supervisors from taking the initiative to give feedback. They are discouraged to give face to face and open feedback for fear of affecting their relationship with staff members in their department which further indicates high collectivist orientation in the organization.

7. Recommendation

PA is a very crucial practice in any organization as employees' performance has to be measured to identify their strength and weakness in a way that could contribute to the attainment of goals of an organization. However, understanding the culture of organizations might be important to adjust the PA system with existing realities. In addition, regular revision of a PA system to make it more adaptive to changing circumstances might also be necessary. More collegial and less centralized system of

administration might also lead to an effective PA system in Jimma University. Measuring performance in line with clearly set goals could be a step forward to ensure objectivity in the evaluation system. Lastly, a study in the area by taking more cases (universities) and by including administrative staff members is commendable for a better understanding of the subject.

Limitations. The study is conducted by taking a single case of Jimma University while there are several public and private HEIs in the country. Hence, the applicability of the findings may be limited to the specific case but with implications to other similar cases (public higher education institutions) calling for further comparative case studies. The study has also focused on PA system applied to academics of the university and hasn't covered PA system employed on administrative/support staff of the same. In addition, some of the reference materials utilized to build the theoretical framework of the study are not recent because there is scarcity of books and articles that define culture and PA in the specific context of universities. Studies conducted on organizational culture in relation to PA in universities are scarce which is why the investigator is obliged to make use of the available sources.

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