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Crab Mentality in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Exploration of Its Implications for Human Resource Development

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Abstract: Crab mentality, often described as a tendency to obstruct or undermine the success of others, poses a significant challenge to collaboration and human resource development (HRD) within higher education institutions. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how academics experience crab mentality, how they interpret and cope with it, and what implications it holds for HRD strategies. Data were collected from 15 purposively selected participants, including lecturers, administrative staff, and unit heads, at university X in Papua, Indonesia, through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that crab mentality manifests through passive-aggressive behaviors, lack of collegial support, resistance to innovation, and the downplaying of others' achievements. Participants described feelings of isolation, mistrust, and alienation, which undermined their motivation and willingness to engage in collaborative projects. Organizational factors such as hierarchical structures, individual-based promotion systems, and competitive reforms aimed at achieving world-class university status further reinforced the prevalence of crab mentality. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated coping strategies including endurance, selective collaboration, and seeking support from trusted peers. The study highlights that crab mentality directly contradicts the goals of HRD by weakening professional development, obstructing leadership cultivation, and reducing organizational learning capacity. To mitigate these effects, strategic HRD interventions are recommended, including team-based reward systems, transformational leadership development, structured mentoring programs, and transparent HR policies. These interventions are critical for fostering an academic culture that values collaboration, inclusivity, and innovation, thereby strengthening both institutional cohesion and global competitiveness.

Keywords: Crab Mentality, Higher Education, Phenomenology, Human Resource Development, Organizational Culture

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are ideally envisioned as arenas of academic collaboration, where individual achievements are recognized as collective successes and serve the broader mission of advancing knowledge (Ermiş & Akyol, 2023; Suteki et al., 2024). Within this

normative framework, universities are expected to cultivate cultures of inclusivity, transparency, and mutual support that enable academic communities to flourish. Collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and institutional synergy are essential elements of this ideal environment. Nevertheless, empirical studies increasingly reveal that such expectations are often undermined by the emergence of crab mentality, a behavioral tendency where individuals obstruct or undermine colleagues who demonstrate progress or success (Miller, 2019). Aydın & Oğuzhan, (2019), for example, documented how this phenomenon generates job dissatisfaction and diminishes productivity within the healthcare sector. Similarly, Akbulut et al., (2025) argued that hierarchical organizational cultures reinforce the symptoms of Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS), particularly in competitive university settings. In Indonesia, this problem becomes more pronounced as institutions strive for transformation into world-class universities, where collaborative synergy among lecturers and staff is critical, yet CBS presents a significant barrier to achieving this vision (Marlia et al., 2025).

However, the organizational culture of universities is expected to rest upon principles of open communication, procedural fairness, and interpersonal trust. According to McLagan (1989), transparency and reward systems that emphasize collective rather than individual achievement strengthen integrity (Ece, 2024; Ozkan & Seneldir, 2023), foster innovation, and enhance job satisfaction. In such a culture, academic staff would ideally support one another, engage in mentoring, and celebrate collective accomplishments. In contrast, when competitive incentive systems prioritize individual recognition, such as academic rank advancement or publication counts, organizational dynamics may shift toward social pressure and rivalry. Under these conditions, high-performing academics often face subtle hostility, passive-aggressive resistance, or deliberate neglect from peers, creating an environment that undermines innovation and collaboration (Çavuş & Sarpkaya, 2021; Tolentino, 2016).

This dynamic is consistent with the findings of Styles & Dean (2024), who identified CBS as a contributing factor to academic alienation and diminished motivation to participate in scholarly activities. Far from being an isolated interpersonal conflict, CBS reflects deeper structural and cultural issues within universities. When competition outweighs collaboration, academic communities risk fragmentation, reducing the institution's ability to act as a cohesive intellectual ecosystem. Such tendencies are particularly problematic in the current era of globalization, where cross-disciplinary collaboration and organizational cohesion are indispensable for sustaining institutional competitiveness and ensuring relevance within the international academic landscape.

Although research has begun to document the consequences of crab mentality, most studies have focused on identifying its manifestations rather than offering concrete solutions. Aydın & Oğuzhan (2019), for instance, linked CBS to reduced motivation and absenteeism among healthcare personnel, while Al Nasser & Jais (2022) examined the sociological and psychological links between organizational culture and CBS within higher education. These contributions provide valuable foundations but stop short of proposing human resource development (HRD) strategies to counteract CBS. As a result, a significant research gap remains regarding how HRD initiatives might be designed to address this phenomenon in universities. Addressing this gap is crucial for building academic cultures that not only resist the destructive tendencies of CBS but also actively promote collaboration, innovation, and shared growth within higher education institutions.

METHOD

A qualitative design with a phenomenological approach was employed to explore the meanings and lived experiences of academics concerning crab mentality in higher education and its implications for human resource development (HRD). The research was situated in university X in Merauke, Papua, Indonesia. A total of 15 participants were purposively

selected, consisting of five senior lecturers, four junior lecturers, three administrative staff, and three unit heads, all of whom had direct experience with the dynamics of crab mentality, as recommended for phenomenological inquiry (Bungin, 2013; Ridder, 2014; Riyanto, 2001; Stainback & Stainback, 1984).

Data collection combined in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes, participant observations in faculty meetings and collaborative academic activities, and document analysis of institutional policies, minutes, and HRD reports. All procedures adhered to research ethics, including approval from the institutional review board and informed consent from each participant. The use of multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation, enhancing the validity and richness of the findings.

Data analysis followed Husserl's phenomenological method (Husserl, 1999; Husserl & Moran, 2012). The process included repeated reading of transcripts, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, developing textural and structural descriptions, and synthesizing the essence of the phenomenon. Credibility was ensured through member checking, dependability was supported with audit trails, and confirmability was strengthened through reflective field notes, in line with the principles of naturalistic inquiry outlined by Stainback & Stainback (1984).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Manifestation of Crab Mentality in Higher Education

The findings reveal that crab mentality in higher education is manifested through a variety of subtle yet pervasive behaviors. Participants consistently described experiences of passive-aggressive responses when attempting to introduce new initiatives or pursue academic innovations. Instead of receiving encouragement, individuals who demonstrated strong performance were often met with silence, indirect criticism, or deliberate neglect. Several participants also reported situations where their accomplishments, such as successful publications or promotions, were downplayed by colleagues, creating an environment where recognition was scarce and interpersonal support was limited. These experiences illustrate how crab mentality operates less through overt confrontation and more through hidden resistance that undermines both individual growth and collective progress.

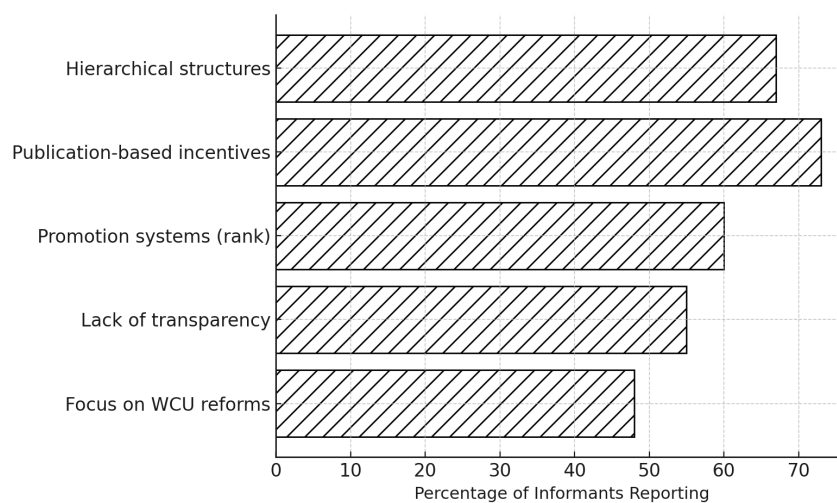
Lived experiences shared by lecturers and staff emphasized that the lack of collegial support was one of the most discouraging aspects of their professional journey. One senior lecturer explained, "When I secured a national research grant, I expected colleagues to be proud. Instead, some stopped inviting me to discussions, as if my success created a distance" (Informant 3). Another participant described the resistance faced when attempting to innovate in teaching methods: "I tried to introduce new digital tools in my class, but senior colleagues said, 'That's unnecessary, we've always done it this way.' It felt like my ideas were rejected simply because they came from someone younger" (Informant 7). Similarly, an administrative staff member observed, "Whenever someone is promoted, others immediately gossip about their weaknesses, rather than congratulating them. It feels as though success is treated as a problem" (Informant 12). Such accounts highlight how crab mentality not only suppresses individual achievement but also obstructs institutional innovation and adaptability.

These findings resonate with earlier studies in different contexts. Akbulut et al. (2025) documented similar manifestations in the healthcare sector, where personnel experiencing crab mentality reported diminished motivation and dissatisfaction with workplace relationships. In the academic field, Al Nasser & Jais (2022) found that hierarchical cultures within universities reinforced the prevalence of crab mentality, particularly when organizational norms emphasized competition rather than collaboration. The parallels across these contexts suggest that crab mentality is not confined to one profession or culture but represents a broader organizational phenomenon with serious implications for professional environments. Within

higher education, the lived experiences gathered in this study confirm that crab mentality undermines the very foundations of collegiality and collaboration that are critical to the success of universities.

2. Organizational and Cultural Factors that Reinforce CBS

Crab mentality in higher education does not occur in isolation but is strongly reinforced by structural and cultural elements within universities. Hierarchical systems, where authority is concentrated in senior positions and academic recognition is determined by rank promotions or publication counts, create conditions that intensify competition. In such contexts, success is frequently measured in terms of individual achievements rather than collective contributions. As one junior lecturer put it, “Everything here is about titles and promotions. If you reach a higher rank, others immediately see you as a rival rather than a collaborator” (Informant 6). This emphasis on individual advancement tends to foster rivalry, making it more difficult to sustain collegial support and collaborative practices.



Source: Research findings

Figure 1. Organizational and Cultural Factors Reinforcing CBS in HE

Organizational culture also plays a decisive role in shaping attitudes and behaviors. According to Schein’s (2010) framework, organizational values function as a guiding system that either facilitates or obstructs cooperation. When transparency, fairness, and trust are not embedded in institutional culture, the likelihood of CBS becomes greater. Several informants highlighted the perception of unfair evaluation systems that reward individual productivity but overlook teamwork. One administrative staff member observed, “The system only values who publishes the most, not who helps others or contributes to the team. That’s why people compete instead of support each other” (Informant 11). Such experiences reinforce the idea that cultural practices rooted in competition rather than collaboration create fertile ground for crab mentality to flourish.

The pursuit of world-class university status in Indonesia adds further complexity. As Marlia et al. (2025) argue, institutional reforms that prioritize international rankings, research output, and global visibility may unintentionally increase internal competition. Informants echoed this concern, noting that performance indicators tied to publications and citations often exacerbate rivalry. A senior lecturer remarked, “The push for world-class university status makes us chase publications, but it also makes colleagues envious if someone succeeds faster. It feels like the system itself breeds crab mentality” (Informant 2). This suggests that structural

reforms, while designed to enhance competitiveness globally, may inadvertently undermine collegiality locally by amplifying pressures that trigger CBS.

3. Implications for Academic Collaboration and Human Resource Development

The presence of crab mentality in higher education carries profound implications for academic collaboration and the broader goals of human resource development (HRD). Several participants explained that the lack of collegial support diminished their motivation to contribute actively to collaborative initiatives. One lecturer reflected, “When your success is seen as a threat, you start to think twice before joining teamwork, because instead of encouragement, you receive coldness” (Informant 5). Such sentiments reveal how CBS erodes collegiality, leading individuals to withdraw from group projects and prioritize individual tasks as a defensive strategy. This undermines the very foundation of academic collaboration, where collective progress depends on the willingness of members to support each other’s growth.

Table 1. CBS Implications for Academic Collaboration and HRD

Implication Area	Observed Effects	Illustrative Quote
Motivation	Reduced enthusiasm to engage due to lack of recognition	“When your success is seen as a threat, you start to think twice before joining teamwork” (Informant 5)
Collegiality	Erosion of trust and supportive relationships among peers	“Instead of encouragement, you receive coldness from colleagues” (Informant 5)
Collaborative Projects	Withdrawal from teamwork; prioritization of individual tasks	“Colleagues avoid involving you once you achieve something notable” (Informant 3)
Professional Development	Hesitation to seek guidance; limited mentoring opportunities	“Younger staff hesitate to ask for guidance, fearing judgment” (Informant 9)
Leadership Cultivation	Obstruction of leadership pipeline and reduced mentoring	“Seniors see rising talent as competition, not as successors” (Informant 8)
Organizational Learning	Weakened knowledge-sharing and diminished institutional adaptability	“People focus on personal output, not on institutional growth” (Informant 12)

The negative consequences extend directly to HRD objectives, particularly in the areas of professional development, leadership cultivation, and organizational learning. When crab mentality creates an environment of mistrust, opportunities for mentoring and peer learning are significantly reduced. A unit head noted, “Younger staff often hesitate to ask for guidance, because they fear being judged or belittled by their seniors” (Informant 9). Such dynamics obstruct the development of future leaders and hinder the creation of knowledge-sharing cultures essential for organizational learning. In addition, professional development programs become less effective if participants perceive their peers as competitors rather than collaborators, further diminishing the strategic role of HRD in strengthening institutional capacity.

These findings are consistent with broader evidence in the literature. Çavuş & Sarpkaya, (2025) demonstrated that CBS contributes to academic alienation and lowers faculty engagement in scholarly activities. Likewise, Purwaningwulan & Khaira (2025) identified CBS among employees as a factor leading to stress, fatigue, and reduced workplace satisfaction. Both studies reinforce the conclusion that crab mentality impedes not only individual well-being but also organizational performance. Within the context of higher education, the current findings underline that CBS directly contradicts HRD goals by weakening collaboration, discouraging innovation, and constraining institutional adaptability (Desria & Ridfah, 2025; Spacey, 2015; Williams, 2020).

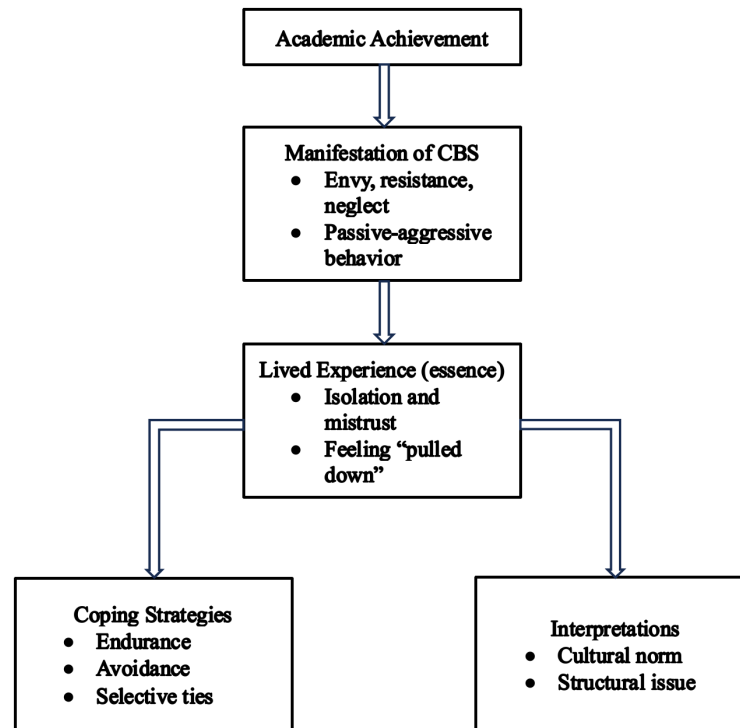
4. Phenomenological Insights into Lived Experience

The phenomenological analysis of participants’ narratives revealed the essence of how academics experience crab mentality, expressed through both textural and structural descriptions. Texturally, participants described feelings of isolation, disappointment, and mistrust when colleagues displayed envy or withheld support. Structurally, these experiences were situated within organizational settings where success was framed as a zero-sum competition, and individual achievements were implicitly treated as threats to others. One lecturer reflected, *“It feels like there is an invisible ceiling whenever someone tries to go higher, others are quick to pull them down”* (Informant 4). This illustrates how CBS is not merely interpersonal tension but an entrenched social dynamic that shapes the lived reality of academic life.

Table 2. Phenomenological Themes and Illustrative Quotes on Lived Experiences of CBS

Theme	Textural Description	Structural Description	Illustrative Quote
Experience of Isolation	Feelings of disappointment, exclusion, and mistrust	Success perceived as a zero-sum game within hierarchy	<i>“It feels like there is an invisible ceiling, whenever someone tries to go higher, others are quick to pull them down.”</i> (Informant 4)
Coping through Endurance	Personal resilience, ignoring negativity	Individual focus on tasks despite unsupportive colleagues	<i>“Sometimes you have to ignore the negative comments; otherwise, they consume your energy.”</i> (Informant 13)
Resistance via Selective Ties	Seeking encouragement from trusted peers outside own department	Forming supportive micro-communities to counter isolation	<i>“I find encouragement from outside my department.”</i> (Informant 10)
Interpretation as Cultural Norm	CBS seen as ingrained in institutional culture	Reinforced by competitive structures and hierarchical norms	<i>“This is just how the system works here, competition is valued more than cooperation.”</i> (Informant 7)

Interpretations of CBS varied, but many participants perceived it as a cultural pattern within their institution. Some coped by minimizing interactions with envious colleagues, while others resisted through perseverance and seeking support from trusted peers. A junior staff member explained, *“I have learned to stay focused on my work, even if others don’t support me. I find encouragement from outside my department”* (Informant 10). Another participant noted, *“Sometimes you have to ignore the negative comments; otherwise, they consume your energy”* (Informant 13). These responses show both resilience and adaptation, indicating that individuals navigate crab mentality by developing personal strategies of endurance, avoidance, or selective collaboration.



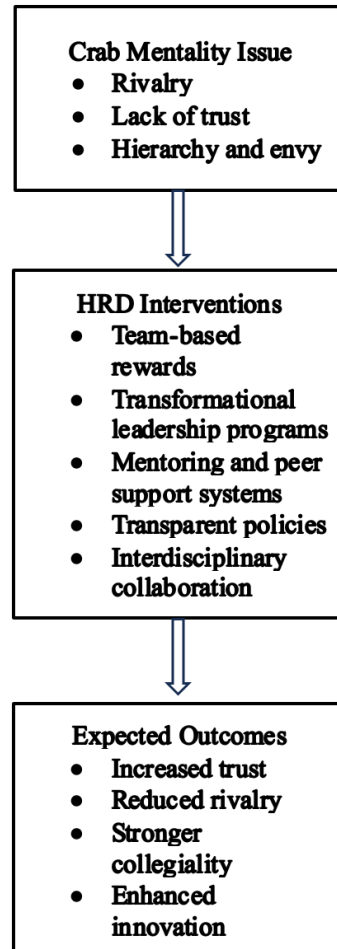
Source: Research findings

Figure 2. Phenomenological Flow of CBS in HE

The phenomenological approach adds a distinctive contribution compared to prior descriptive or quantitative research. While earlier studies have demonstrated the negative effects of CBS on productivity and collegiality (Akbulut et al., 2025; Fereydouni Forouzande et al., 2023; Molu et al., n.d.; Rofiqoh & Muhaimin, 2025; Tan, 2022), phenomenological inquiry captures the subjective meaning-making processes through which academics interpret and respond to CBS. By focusing on lived experience, this study reveals the nuanced emotional and relational dimensions of crab mentality that are often overlooked in survey-based or organizational analyses. It highlights how CBS is experienced not simply as workplace competition, but as a violation of academic values such as collegiality, integrity, and trust values that participants consistently identified as essential for meaningful academic life.

5. Strategic Responses for Mitigating CBS through HRD

Findings from this study highlight the necessity of strategic responses that directly address the cultural and structural roots of crab mentality. Informants consistently emphasized that current reward and promotion systems, which privilege individual accomplishments, unintentionally fuel rivalry. A senior lecturer remarked, *“As long as promotion is tied only to personal achievements, people will keep competing and pulling each other down”* (Informant 2). This suggests that shifting incentive structures toward collective achievements, such as team-based research outputs or collaborative teaching innovations, could reduce competitive tension. In line with Schein’s (2010) perspective on organizational culture, embedding values of transparency, fairness, and communal recognition into HR policies is essential to reshape behavior.



Source: Research findings

Figure 3. Strategic Responses for Mitigating CBS

Leadership development also emerged as a critical dimension of HRD for mitigating CBS. Several participants pointed out that departmental leaders often modeled competitive rather than collaborative behaviors. One junior academic noted, *“If leaders only reward those who outperform others individually, the message is clear: collaboration doesn’t count”* (Informant 6). Adopting leadership models grounded in collegiality and transformational practices could counteract this trend by fostering trust, mentorship, and shared responsibility. Schein (2010) argue that HRD strategies are most effective when leadership capacity is aligned with cultural change, ensuring that interventions go beyond surface-level adjustments to address deeper value orientations.

Practical interventions also include the institutionalization of mentoring systems and peer-support programs that encourage knowledge-sharing and solidarity among academics. Informants suggested structured platforms where junior and senior staff collaborate without hierarchical barriers. As one administrative staff member stated, *“When we work in teams that mix levels and units, the jealousy decreases, because success is shared”* (Informant 12). Such initiatives support professional development, strengthen interpersonal trust, and cultivate a culture where academic success is viewed as a collective achievement. These findings align with HRD scholarship emphasizing culture-based interventions to strengthen organizational learning and adaptability (Matthews, 2023; McLagan, 1989). By fostering inclusive and supportive systems, universities can not only mitigate the destructive dynamics of CBS but also advance their strategic goals in global academic competitiveness.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenological exploration of crab mentality in higher education reveals that this phenomenon is deeply embedded in both interpersonal relations and institutional structures. Lived experiences of academics demonstrate that achievements often trigger envy, resistance, and subtle hostility, undermining trust and collegiality. Such dynamics not only erode motivation and willingness to engage in collaborative projects but also compromise broader human resource development (HRD) objectives, including professional growth, leadership cultivation, and organizational learning.

The findings further indicate that hierarchical structures, competitive incentive systems, and the pursuit of world-class university status intensify the prevalence of crab mentality. While these reforms aim to enhance competitiveness, they inadvertently reinforce individualism and rivalry, creating fertile ground for CBS. Nonetheless, the resilience strategies adopted by academics, such as endurance, avoidance, and forming supportive ties, highlight the capacity of individuals to resist destructive cultural patterns, even in challenging institutional environments.

Addressing crab mentality requires HRD interventions that are both structural and cultural. Shifting from individual to team-based recognition, fostering transformational leadership, institutionalizing mentoring systems, and embedding transparency in HR policies are strategic steps that can mitigate CBS. These measures are essential not only to restore collegiality but also to ensure that universities cultivate inclusive, collaborative, and innovative environments. By doing so, higher education institutions can align with their fundamental mission of advancing knowledge through collective endeavor while simultaneously strengthening their competitiveness in the global academic landscape.

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