Inculcation of action research among university lecturers

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Abstract

University lecturers in many parts of the world are beginning to take seriously on their roles as teachers. In Malaysia we are aiming for scholarship in teaching and various agencies have been set by the stakeholders to facilitate the improvement on the quality of teaching and learning. The Higher Education Leadership Academy under the Ministry of Higher Education together with the Centre for Teaching and Learning at each university are in charge of training of lecturers. The Malaysian Quality Agency has drawn up the so-called Malaysian Quality Framework for Universities to gain accreditation of Higher education programmes (and for recognition by the government), as well as for regular auditing guidelines purposes. In addressing the need for higher institutions to plan on scholarships in teaching, the National University of Malaysia has decided a programme to encourage academic staffs to embark on Action Research in order to improve the learning and teaching at the university. This paper described how successful the university motivates lecturers in different disciplines to embark on action research.

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1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that higher institution needs to prepare their academic staffs to teach. The training provided need to address some of the issues raised by the stakeholders on the quality of the graduates that have been produced thus far. Tied closely to this, is the concern of preparing the students for an ‘unstable’ world, where one’s assumptions are challenged daily, and where changing standards and the globalization of problems dislodges any felt security over one’s inner frameworks (Lueddeke, 2003; Barnett, 2000). There are not many research to this effect, be it in terms of overcoming the problem or approaches in encouraging the institutions to study on it. One possible reason for the lack of concern in this area is because disciplinary research is valued more highly than teaching in most institutions. Another possible reason is not enough support is provided, in terms of funding to embark on such study.

Globally, the scholarship of teaching with the aim of improving student learning is gaining momentum. The Malaysian Qualification Agency, established in 2007, has drawn up the Malaysian Qualification Framework to provide guidelines to Higher Education providers for accreditation of programmes and audit of institutions. Among guidelines, it states the need for higher institutions to provide evidence of professionalizing of academic staffs and improvements of programmes. Besides this organization, the Ministry of Higher Education has also set up Higher...
Education Leadership Academy and approved the development of Teaching and Learning Centre in each university to provide professional development courses to upgrade the teaching scholarship of academic staffs.

The National University of Malaysia also endorsed the need for scholarship of teaching and the need for research to improve learning and teaching.

2. Reconnaissance phase

Past experience in the training of teachers for a one year Diploma course has shown that graduates coming into the programme have gaps in the subjects they are to teach. Their understandings are also suspected. The faculty of education has held discussions and agreed that collaborative action research be conducted to arrest the situation by all. According to Stringer (1999), an action research calls on participants in a local setting to define a problem and identify potential solutions. The faculty decided to start running the programme and propagate introduce the action research culture among the academics. Two members of the faculty was sent to each of the faculty to introduce action research and to assist them if the lecturers were interested to improve students’ learning. The attempt succeeded in only increasing the lecturers awareness. Lecturers were not motivated, as the following selected excerpts indicated.

- No funds… No assistance….and it will be too taxing for engaging in this type of research… (P. Medical Faculty)
- Time is a factor. Research time will be affected, and publication too (P. Social Science)
- Does action research count?
- How this participation is going to be appraised for promotion? (P. Engineering)

The lecturers reactions are understandable. As disciplinary research is valued and rewarded more highly than teaching, the lecturers are less concerned with how to improve students’ learning.

The above findings, were quite similar with an earlier study on “what motivates teacher to conduct action research?”. Only some of the teachers were interested in embarking action research as they feel accountable to provide the best for the students under their care, while others would do it if they were rewarded or valued. Thus there was a cold reception at their first attempt.

3. Second phase

However, there was a sudden turn around and even more participations when the university announced the availability of research grants for action and strategic research on teaching and learning for academic staffs. This was reinforced with the running of workshops and seminars on action research. Local and invited action researchers gave talks and conduct a series of workshops on action research because of their vast experience in teaching, conducting and supervising this kind of research. Some of the lecturers have benefited some of the knowledge and skills to conduct the studies on their concern about their student learning.

The lecturers from the faculty of education gave the assurance that they would guide and collaborate in the studies conducted by lecturers from other disciplines, if requested. However it worth to note, Mc Niff et. al. (2003) advised that “people researching their own practice need to consider the degree to which (they) will involve other people in (their) project and how smooth (they) believe (their) path will be”.

The next phase was the planning stage to embark on the programme to improve the university teaching and learning and propagate teaching scholarship, by encouraging all lecturers in all faculties to carry out action research or on a larger scale called strategize research. Funds were made available. Lecturers would have to bid by handing in their proposals. A committee chaired by the deputy Vice Chancellor was set up and four coordinators were appointed, to coordinate the research in the faculties. One coordinator is for the social science group, who coordinates research from the faculties of social science and humanities, economic, education, law, Islamic and General studies group. The other three coordinators were from the science, engineering and medical faculty. Funds were equally divided and the proposals should focus on teaching and learning improvement. The vice chancellor
promised to provide some weight for lecturers involved in the embarking of action research in the criteria for promotion.

Each project which has been approved will receive between RM10,000 to RM20,000 Malaysian dollars funding. Those who have received the funds were required to report their initial research finding at the end of the year. A National Seminar was then held for the researchers to present. We were surprised that many lecturers participated in the Congress based research.

4. Third phase

The third phase of the project was on dissemination of the findings and the holding of the congress for presenters. Parallel sessions were held and the researchers would at least present their research preliminary findings. Based on the turn-out, the papers were scrutinized by the committees appointed by the coordinators so as to have some general format in the writing of the papers for the proceedings.

It was then decided to publish selected papers in three separate books based on the focus of the papers presented. The second cycle of research has already taken place. However several issues still remain in the efforts to maintain the quality of action research and the need for continuous training on the culture of action research.

The outline above seemed neat, but as we progress towards the building research behaviors among lecturers, a number of issues have developed, which requires a number of interventions. Below are some of the issues that the researchers and the main committee have taken up and solved. Jamil’s research provided a framework on inculcating an action research culture of lecturers. First the lecturers need the knowledge and skills to conduct action research. Below are some of the issues or categories of action research cultures that we have overcome:

- Knowledge action research (what is Action Research?)
- Skills on Action Research
- Model of Action Research:
  - Seeking for focus
  - Planning of Action Research
  - Implementation of Action Research Plan

5. Evaluation & reflection skills

The first issue was on accepting action research as an alternative research paradigm or method. And how to carry out action research is also a very serious issue. There is a need for professional development intensive programme of lecturers on inculcation of action research culture in general. Initial attempt was only partially successful in propagating the awareness but did not provide the drive to carry out action research. The problem was on recognition and financial support. The second attempt received a very positive impact because of the availability of funding and encouragement by the administrator and the need to adhere to the MQA requirements.

The motivation factor is an important factor whether extrinsic or intrinsic including the support and recognition of the efforts of lecturers in doing action research. Reinforced with funds and recognition, lecturers would indulge in doing research in order to improve their teaching in order to improve the student learning as one lecturer put it, “at least our research time is given due weight age”. However a successful action researcher needs to acquire the following:

- Knowledge about action research
- Skills on conducting action research
- Attitudes to teaching
- Literature review
- Reflective skills
- Publication
Our experience provided some insights on the above.

6. Knowledge and skills

For some, research methodology means scientific paradigms. They are so engrossed with the quantification and validity and they need to adapt to action research methodology. They might feel awkward with the qualitative nature of collecting data, especially those from the engineering and science faculties.

Besides the approach of conducting the study they need to adjust on the important of doing the literature review, to involve in action research, and find out whether similar study has been done, how it is done and what is possible way of doing research and finding probable interesting action to improve their ‘concern’. Two workshops were held to overcome the weight age they have on alternative approach to do research.

To overcome these difficulties, education lecturers familiar with the works can collaborate with the other lecturers who were be unable to cope on the above. It should be suggested to them to do collaborative action research.

Beside the problem on the methodology, the education lecturers could work together on the literature review and analysis of data, especially qualitative data such as interview and observation data.

Another area of concern is on the writing of the report. Though it may appear that there is no one method to present or write the research for publication. The lecturers may need further training on this. A whole day workshop can be held for this purpose and the co-researcher familiar on social science type writing can to collaborate. For them, the lecturers were asked to write and present their finding in a congress similar which was held at the end of the year. Encouraging them to participate seemed to help others to learn from each other as well as to reduce some of the misconceptions that some of them seemed to have. This is because the working papers were edited and the presenters were asked to improve before getting published in the proceeding. It certainly of help, we are learning and try to accommodate the differences which we were not very familiar with. Our co-researchers were very collaborative. It would be better to try the next time. To encourage further the writing and sharing as well the participation in the research on one’s teaching and student learning, some of their papers were selected and published in the university online journal.

Thus far, more and more lecturers are convinced on the merit of research on their teaching or with the ‘concerns’ of the faculty and the university on the stakeholder’s reaction including from the alumni feedback. With the administrators support financially and through professional development course to meet lecturers’ needs, have helped the inculcation of action research and change of behaviors of lecturers to improve the quality of student learning, and this is inline the MQA (Malaysian Qualification Agency) requirement on enhancement of teaching.

However, there is a need for continuous improvement of the lecturer’s competencies in embarking research and sharing their finding on teaching and learning through holding of workshops and seminars. Thus far, three books and selected papers in the action research carried by the lecturers have been published. This will go further in encouraging other to participate in such research.

7. Conclusion

The university has implemented various strategies to address the issue on inculcating action research culture as part of a professional development programme. To this end, the project has seen the lecturers (participants) knowledge and skills on action research improved and an increased in the number of lecturers involvement in the action research. The finding of this intervention can lead to an increased in awareness of practice to improve teaching and learning, which in turn, have an impact on action research behavior by participating in embarking such research. This project provide strong evidence to higher education leaders that action research is a valuable tool for professional development and accountability that is a worthy investment of higher institutions’ fund and resources.
Figure 1. A proposed model inculcation action research culture

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