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A pilot study of researching the research culture in Pakistani public universities: the academics' perspective

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Abstract

The paper reports on a pilot study that explores the determinants of research culture in the context of Pakistani public universities and suggests some measures to strengthen the research culture. The study relies on data collected through structured questionnaire from a small group of lecturers -serving in various Pakistani public universities- available here in UK. For this purpose, questionnaire developed by Santo and her colleagues (2009) was adapted. Moreover, semi-structured interviews of a sub group were conducted to get the deeper insight of the issue. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis techniques were applied to analyse the quantitative and qualitative data respectively. In addition to reporting the major findings, the paper critically reviewed the concept of research culture. Finally, the finding and suggestions derived from this study may open new avenues for understanding and/or researching the phenomenon of research culture in the local context.

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1. Introduction

The universities of developed countries have a rich research culture. The scholarly output of academics is an important contributing factor in the development of knowledge-based economy of advanced countries. On the other side, universities in the developing countries have firm teaching traditions but week research culture(Salazar-Clemeña & Almonte-Acosta, 2007). In this regard, Pakistan is no exception. In 2002, the task force for the improvement of higher education in Pakistan has reported that the major reasons for the declining standards of education in public sector universities in Pakistan were ineffective administration, incapacity of academics staff to conducting research and lack of facilities for research. The task force proposed an autonomous body which facilitates the public universities in relation to the promotion of research in higher education. Consequently, Higher Education Commission (HEC) was established in Sep.11, 2002. After its inception, it has introduced a lot of short, medium and long term reforms to uplift the standards of higher education and to promote research in Pakistan. For this purpose, HEC has not only lunched various schemes to develop the research capacity of academics but also to implement new criteria for the selection and promotion of academic staff. According to these, the academics will be

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judged on the bases of their scholarly output and numbers of research publications in renowned national and international journals. At the same time, HEC has also supported public universities by providing a range of facilities such as research grant, high speed internet and access to latest research literature (Akbari & Naqvi, 2008). The magazine of HEC (2008) has also reported that there is a significant increase in the number of research publications in impact factor journals from 815 to 2495 during the period of 2002 to 2008 as a result of HEC's investment in public universities (p.5). Moreover, the number of PhDs produced by public universities has been increasing gradually since 2002 (Anonymous, 2008, p. 5). These facts indicate towards the acceptance of research culture in the public universities of Pakistan. But there is a lot to be done to shift the focus of faculty members from dominant teaching traditions to strong research culture in the universities of Pakistan, thereby, bringing a balance between two main activities of academics. Therefore, it is high time to understand the perceptions of academics about prevailing research culture in universities.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Brenton and Driskill (2010) argue that the conception of organisational culture guide and shapes the process of its investigation. It also determines the dimension of culture that should be studied while analysing the prevailing culture in an organisation. Further, they suggest that organisational culture studies should focus on multiple aspects of the culture to enhance the creditability and validity of the findings. This argument is equally true while researching the university research culture. Therefore, in the following section, I will attempt to conceptualise the notion of 'research culture' for this study.

2.1. The Conception of Research Culture

The recent academic literature indicates 'research culture' is a vague concept (Evans, 2009). Perhaps, the use of multiple and varying constructs to refer the term culture is the root cause of the vagueness clamped with the notion of research culture. The review of existing literature, etymology and dictionary meaning reveals three broader sense of culture.

First sense refers to any *development, improvement or refinement* of a person through some sort of *training* (Culture, n.d. emphasis add on original). By exploiting this sense research culture can be defined as an individual's *capacity* to undertake research activities and this capacity can be built, enhanced and refined through proper training. Here capacity includes individual's skills, attitudes, competences, understating and willingness to do research as Evans (2011) uses it to define the phrase 'researcher development'.

Second sense of culture can be identified in some phrases such as virus culture or the culture of bacteria etc. It is also reflected in Tripathi's (2001, p. 13) concept of general culture. According to Taripathi culture is 'some kind of unspecified medium for human development'. Hill (1999, p. 1) utilizes this perspective and considers research as an 'environment in which research grows and multiplies'. Here *environment* refers a set of variables associated with a particular academic institute which helps to foster research output.

Third sense of culture pertain a set of common *ideas, customs, skills arts etc.* held by a particular group of people in a specific time span and that are *also transferred, communicated , or passed to their successors*(Culture, n.d. emphasis add on original). Linda Evans (2007, p. 2) takes this perspective of culture and defines research culture as 'shared values, assumptions, beliefs, rituals and other forms of behaviour whose central focus is the acceptance and recognition of research practices and output as a valued, worthwhile and preeminent activity'.

These diversified views about the meaning of culture may emphasis different but useful features of research culture. However, it may also create confusion to study the research culture in a university. Moreover, conflicting views about the notion of 'a single university culture' make the situation more challenging (see Deem & Brehony,

2000; Silver, 2003). Fortunately, above mentioned notions of culture are very close to Archer's (1995) concepts of 'agency', 'structure' and 'culture' (it will be debated in my PhD thesis). Moreover, Archer's morphogenetic approach also provides a framework to analyze them and their interplay. Therefore Archer framework seems a good choice to conceptualize and study the phenomenon of university research culture.

This pilot study is only designed to investigate context-specific individual and environmental factors of research culture through the eyes of academics. These factors can be used in my PhD study that also analyses other aspects of research culture along with the implications of interrelationship of structure, culture and agency.

3. Literature Review

The cultivation of research culture in a university is a long-term process which needs continue strategic planning, committed leadership and favorable climate. However, research is also considered as an individual-driven activity (Connell, 2004) because in universities it is initiated, planned and conducted by a single or small group of people (Hazelcorn, 2005). Therefore, it is suggested that university may take research orientation of academic staff into account at the time of recruitment and selection (Hazelcorn, 2005). For this purpose, academic qualifications, publications and their frequencies may provide an idea about applicants' tendency for doing research (Jenks, 2009). Recently, Pakistani public universities have adopted new criteria, revised by HEC of Pakistan, for the selection of new academic staff that emphasis on the appointment of PhD degree holders (Khan, 2006). It is also argued that the research targets, based upon prior research experience of academic staff, may be assigned to newly appointed individuals for further assessment of their research performance in the context (Jenks, 2009). In this way, the person will also able to demonstrate his/her research skills and workout his/her compatibility with the context. Moreover, the university may also predict more accurately the research capacity of the person and able to determine the needs for his/her training and development (Bland & Ruffin, 1992).

Hemmings, Rushbrook, & Smith (2007) find that well-reputed researcher as mentor may influence the research interest and productivity of mentee. Moreover, it was reported that mentoring programme, aiming at the creation of working relationship between novice and established researcher, can play a significant role in the building of a sustained research culture in a university (Mullen, 2009). Bland & Ruffin (1992) further argue that the formal and informal interaction with colleagues who have established themselves as researchers may also motivate the young academics to emerge as a researcher and enrich their own research profiles. Therefore, the arrangement of such activities that provide opportunities to interact with renowned researcher might be useful for fostering the importance and value of doing research among academics (Jenks, 2009). The need of formal mentoring programme was also highlighted in my other study (Lodhi, 2009) while studying the issue of faculty retention in the context of Pakistani business schools.

Hazelcorn (2005) argues that the nature and availability of training and development opportunities for academics facilitate to promote research practices in universities. For example, time management training may enable the academics to maintain balance between workload (either teaching or administrative) and research activities (Jenk, 2009). Consequently, academics from teaching intensive universities can minimize the negative impact of teaching and administrative responsibilities on their research performance especially for writing publications (Hemmings, et al., 2007). Moreover, skills development training and workshops, especially academic 'writing skills' (Hemmings, et al., 2007, p. 327), 'basic and advanced research skills' (Bland, Center, Finstad, Risbey, & Staples, 2005, p. 225), 'communication and self-presentation' skills (Jenks, 2009: p.11), may be helpful for nurturing the self-efficacy among academic staff for doing research (Hemmings, et al., 2007). It can be supplemented by arranging seminars about how to find a relevant journal, publishers, conference for dissemination of research outputs, what are the funding possibilities which may be availed (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2000) and how information technology can be incorporated in research activities (Jenks, 2009).

Association of academics' research performance with promotion, award of tenure, compensation and other financial and non-financial rewards may not only be beneficial to recognition their research activities but also

helpful to motivate others to engage in research practices (Hemmings et al., 2007, Bland & Ruffin 1992; Hazelcorn, 2005; Connell, 2004). Pakistani public universities follow certain practices in this regard. They consider the number of publications, years of teaching experience and research qualification (PhD and/or MPhil.) while promoting and awarding tenure to the academic staff. These practices have been initiated largely to fulfill with the parameters articulated by HEC (Khan, 2009).

Salazar-Clemeña & Almonte-Acosta (2007) find that even academics were motivated to engage in research but they need proper facilities, motivation, encouragement from leadership and senior colleagues along with other administrative supports such as; research friendly environment, decentralized research policy, availability of time, funding, and rewards for research. Similarly, Pratt, Margaritis, & Coy (1999, p. 43) pointed out in the case study of a school of management that the 'decentralised university management structure' and 'strong leadership' are prerequisites for the creation of research culture.

4. Methodology

For this pilot study, I adopted a culture-as-a-variable approach to analyse the research culture. For this purpose, a structured questionnaire developed by Santo, Engstrom, Reetz, Schweinle, & Reed (2009) has been adapted after some changes- based on my knowledge and experience as lecturer in a Pakistani university and expert opinion- to collect the responses on five points Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Owing to a small number of respondents, I considered 'strongly agree' and 'agree' as *favourable* while 'strongly disagree', 'disagree' and 'neither agree nor disagree' as *unfavourable* opinions. Therefore, overall responses were divided and presented in *favourable* and *unfavourable* opinions. This questionnaire was completed by six male and four female full-time lecturers serving in Pakistani public universities and available here in UK. In addition to fill in the questionnaire, the respondents were also allowed to reflect on it. In general, they gave positive remarks but they suggested some minor changes that were carefully analysed and incorporated in the final version of the questionnaire. Moreover, two of them were face-to-face interviewed in a semi-structured format.

4.1. Findings

Owing to limited space, only prominent findings of this pilot study are presented in this section. It is grouped under the headings of individual and environmental factors.

4.1.1. Individual Factors

The data revealed that majority (70%) of the respondents spend most of their time in teaching and do not have adequate time to conduct research or involve themselves in research-related activities. Consequently, a large portion (90%) of the sample was unable to discuss their research project with their colleagues at faculty and/or university level on a weekly basis but only 20% of the respondents were able to share their projects with their fellow at department level. Even on a monthly basis, fifty percent of the sample cannot talk uninterrupted to their colleagues at department, faculty and university level. These facts indicated that time for doing research is one of the main barriers for the academics. This issue was also highlighted and explained by an interviewee in such a way:

Being a junior faculty member, it is very difficult to do research along with teaching...because I have to prepare and teach three courses in a semester. Along with this heavy workload, we have to attend a lot of departmental meetings for setting the time table, allocation of coursesand other administrative issues.

The second major issue highlighted by respondents was insufficient base of academics' research-related knowledge. The data showed that ninety percent of the respondents were not well-equipped to deal with qualitative research design but this figure was 50% in case of quantitative research design. Moreover, the majority of

participants (80%) did not read updated literature in their intended area of research. Almost all the respondent revealed that they did not possess publisher hunting and grant getting skills. One of the main reasons for this knowledge deficit was unavailability of formal mentoring system. However, some of the respondents (20%) have unassigned mentors but unfortunately they only guide them in teaching. Besides this knowledge deficit, it was also found that majority of the respondents (90%) have computer, presentation skills and were aware of basic applications of some relevant softwares. In fact, they acquired computer skills during their stay in UK for their higher studies. As an interviewee said, 'I came to know about EndNote and Nvivo [names of softwares] after starting my studies here in England'. The data also highlighted that almost all of the respondents knew the importance of research for their own career and they were motivated to conduct research in order to contribute to the success of their department and university.

4.1.2. *Environmental Factors*

Three-fourths of the respondents perceived that their universities expected their intensive involvement in research activities; either funded or non-funded. However, majority of them (90%) thought that their head of the department were more supportive in teaching instead of research. Moreover, half of the sample reported that their senior colleagues and chairpersons were not active researchers. Probably, owing to this reason, a large portion of the sample felt that their leaders were unable to keep their departments on track to match the research expectations of the university. Therefore, in the eyes of academics, teaching oriented leadership operated as a barrier in the promotion of research culture. An interviewee also pointed out some mal-practices of their senior colleagues that discourage them to carry out a research project smoothly:

In our system things are not done on merit if 'A' is saying something and s/he is a friend to the chair that thing will be done immediately....if 'B' saying something on merit ...but s/he is not a friend to the chair that would be simply refused. That really creates a problem for us.

The academics (70%) also believed that their leaders were unable to disseminate information in time to them about upcoming training and research opportunities because of traditional paper based communication system. Consequently, they received information either eleventh hour or after the deadline.

In addition, the data also highlighted that the existing structure of the universities was more supportive to teaching as compared to research activities. For example, a respondent said, 'my university has a prescribed workload for teaching but there is no clear allocation of time for doing research while our promotion has been linked with research'. Secondly, the majority (90%) of the sample pointed out that there were more financial benefits associated with teaching than research. Moreover, three fourth of the sample reported that limited access to latest literature and lack of necessary resources (such as computer, technical support etc.) for research were key constraints in doing research. Finally, the following comment of an interviewee identifies two new environmental factors: uneven distribution of resources and energy crises that affect academics' research activities. According to him:

The university has not provided me any computer. I have to buy it for my office...but university has distributed laptops to all professors.... Moreover, frequent failure of power supply prevents me from doing work on my computer with full concentration....the university has no arrangement for continuous supply of electricity during office hours.

5. Conclusion

The basic aim of this small scale pilot study was to contextualize the adapted questionnaire. However, the findings revealed various individual and environmental factors which may affect academics' research practices.

These results not only provide a baseline for my primary study but also identify context-specific factors that should be taken into account for a detailed investigation.

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