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Re-searching Research Culture at Higher Education

Mubasher Nadeem

Abstract: Pakistan Task Force on Higher Education envisions Pakistani institutions to be world class seats of learning and advancement of knowledge, in order to create a modern, progressive, tolerant, and prosperous society that values the dignity of labour, craftsmanship, spirit of inquiry, critical thinking, and public duty. The prerequisite for materializing this vision, a revitalized research culture is required at higher education institutions in Pakistan which would work as a knowledge vehicle to guarantee nation's multidimensional success in all walks of life. Although research is a compulsory component of many higher education degree programmes in Pakistan, the findings of interview based study, conducted on 60 teachers and 80 students of four public and private sectors degree awarding institutions in Lahore, manifest, that it could not be exploited to the maximum because of the barriers like lack of initiative from the teachers and students as they are engaged in research under compulsion, the often repeated topics for research to avoid effort and exercise of inquiry skills, and scarcity of reference material and resources. Hence, the study recommends that in order to concretize the HEC vision and MDGs in true spirit, there should be more moral and material support from the HEC and concerned administration and importance of research should be properly propagated in circles of learning so that a knowledge sharing culture may be promoted, and the teachers' and students' inquiry skills should be polished so that we, as a nation, may develop creative competence to meet the challenges of the new millennium.

Keywords: re-searching, research, higher education, knowledge sharing culture, creative competence

Introduction

Universities, as institutions, were born in the 12th and 13th centuries out of the spirit of monastic study and cathedral schools and their linkage to social society. Notable and relevant elements of the times were: a cultural blossoming; the incipient bourgeoisie; and the real necessity to have a professional status to access public administrative positions, among other cities, Bologna, Paris, Salamanca, Coimbra, Oxford, Cambridge, Salerno, Montpellier, and Leuven. These and other places were the first to witness this

unique birth, practically and simultaneously (Cabal, 1997).

Some people may opine that research is just collecting information about some people, things, or particular state of affairs of some organizations, etc., but there are others who call it life blood of the advancement of human life in the present world scenario where every nation has come closer to other and seems dependent in one way or the other. As Tomás Calleja states, "one can enter the university, but the university does not enter one" (Calleja, 1990).

It is significant to understand that research is designed to solve particular existing problems, so there is a much larger audience eager to support research that is likely to be profitable or solve problems of immediate concern. At the same time we must also understand how research impacts our decision making. Most people make decisions without gathered informations to back them up. Only few do. The problem is most people aren't patient enough to put in the effort. Research requires time, effort, and sometimes money to have the evidence we need to make a sound decision that's why many avoid it. The research we do and evidence we gather will have impact on our future, and for this we be adviced and consider the risks or consequences of making an important decision with inadequate evidence (The Importance of Research, ¶ 2).

Although we have clear understanding about the importance of research in the present time, it is also very pertinent to consider the report initiated by the Boston Group, a Task Force on improvement of Higher Education in Pakistan: After considerable discussion and debate the Pakistan Task Force on Higher Education has set out a vision for its reform program that aims to transform Pakistani institutions into world-class seats of learning and advancement of knowledge, in order to create a modern, progressive, tolerant and prosperous society that values the dignity of labor, craftsmanship, spirit of inquiry, critical thinking, and public duty. This is consistent with the range of opinions that have continued to inform this issue in both academic and popular media. There are continuing concerns about the rising levels of intolerance, conflict, violence, and civic indifference. To these have been added, a number of voices that see in these trends, a recipe for persistent poverty and dependence (Envisioning Reform, ¶ 1).

Despite all we find that there is less individual contribution to promote/create research culture at the institutions of higher education. A majority of teachers and

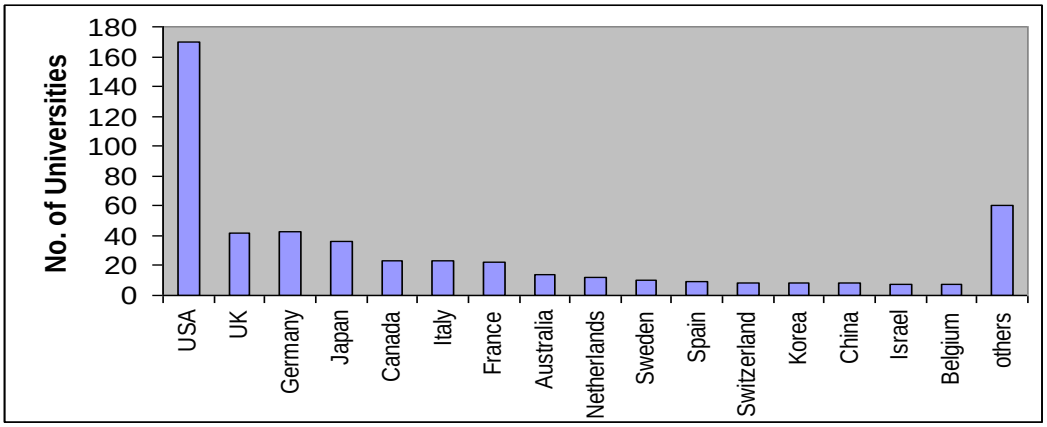
students appear to be less concerned with research activities except when they are asked or because of some administrative compulsion/s. They are also found reluctant to conduct research enthusiastically and consider it as a fatigued assignment instead of exerting to find solutions of existing educational problems. Mostly the offered degree programmes at higher education institutions carry research as a compulsory component and it is expected of both teachers and students to conduct research in a serious manner. On the contrary we, as a nation, are still lagging behind when compared even with other developing countries. Hence, it is pertinent to survey to know the reason for this negligence, especially; at the degree awarding institutions whose primary task is to promote research culture in such a manner that future generations may be able to cope with challenges of the new millennium.

Literature Review

What does "research" mean? Brown (2005) defines research as "an activity which is concerned primarily with knowledge acquisition on the part of the researcher, and secondarily with knowledge dissemination to academic peers and students" (p.393). And Culture has been defined as 'the software of the mind' by the Dutch psychologist, Geert Hofstede (8). More technically, culture consists of the shared norms, values, and practices associated with a nation, organization, or profession (Helmreich, 2000). In this context when we look at our universities, we do not find deep rooted traces of research in our educational culture.

Universities in the developed world have a firm tradition of research. Recognizing research as an important part of their responsibilities, faculty members of higher education institutions have consistently evidenced research productivity together with other factors that contribute to the process. On the other hand, universities in the developing world have retained strong teaching functions and weak research functions (Sanyal & Varghese, 2006). Below are the data regarding research activities in different countries that reflect the overall status of research activities in the world in general and Pakistan in particular.

TOP 500 RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES 2004 DATA COMPILED BY SJTU INSTITUTE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



Others include Denmark, Finland, Austria, Hong Kong (each 5), Norway, Brazil, South Africa (each 4), Taiwan, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Hungary (each 3), Singapore, Russia, Poland, Greece (each 2), Argentina, Mexico, Czech Republic, Chile, Portugal (each 1).

RESEARCH IN OIC COUNTRIES
Distribution of the 84 universities in Islamic countries

Country	Number of Universities	Share in total %
Turkey	47	56.6
Iran	10	12.0
Egypt	8	3.6
Malaysia	3	2.4
Tunisia	2	2.4
Saudi Arabia	2	2.4
Pakistan	2	2.4
Jordan	2	1.2
Uganda	1	1.2
UAE	1	1.2
Oman	1	1.2
Morocco	1	1.2
Lebanon	1	1.2
Kuwait	1	1.2
Algeria	1	1.2

ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN OIC COUNTRIES

Country	**Total Articles Published by Universities**	**Articles per Publishing Universities**	**Total citations Received**	**Citations per article**
Turkey	43630	623	43391	0.99
Iran	11520	480	11493	1.00
Egypt	7056	470	7302	1.03
Malaysia	3665	407	4075	1.11
KSA	2315	386	1646	0.71
Pakistan	1903	272	1968	1.03
Algeria	1682	93	1142	0.68
UAE	1194	108	1275	1.07
Oxford	444,235			12
Cambridge	274, 340			10
Country	Total Articles Published by Universities	Articles per Publishing Universities	Total citations Received	Citations per article

The data manifest a sort of bleak picture in the field of research in Pakistan because it is the faculty of a university that remains a key player to conduct their own (voluntary) research as well as to promote research culture. It is also appropriate to say that research culture is not generated overnight. But it is undeniable that faculty discretion is exercised within these functions, but the questions of compliance and productivity become the heart and soul in understanding the academic profession. Literature largely focuses on the teaching and research nexus in exploring faculty functions, productivity, and university academic culture (e.g. Fairweather, 1999; Tierney, 1999; Layzell, 1999; & Shanklin, 2001).

The truly revolutionary changes in technology, communications, geo-politics, etc., that have occurred in the last thirty years or so, and their impact on all aspects of life throughout the world are well-known. Of particular interest for this discussion are their multiple implications for knowledge generation and universities as knowledge centres. These too have been widely discussed (Carnoy, 2000; Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998; Gibbons, 1998; & Sawyerr, 1999).

Research is the first strand embracing the systematic generation of new knowledge, development of new ideas and experiment with new techniques. These activities inform student learning and provide an intellectual platform for engaging in knowledge transfer. The second strand is Learning and Teaching. It explicates a body of

ideas is informed by available research, and instills habits of inquiry that reflect the provisional nature of knowledge. The final strand is knowledge transfer. It encompasses many dimensions of interaction between academia and the wider society – from the way public intellectuals use media platforms to participate in debate, to policy work for government, industry and communities, to contract research and education services, and to the complex and risky work of creating business ventures to distribute new knowledge (Growing a Research Culture, ¶ 3).

Research is not only numerical gatherings and analyzing the same, but it is directly attached with teaching, and if there is a gap between teaching and research, it can create some other problems. International studies from New Zealand (Pratt, et al, 1999), the United Kingdom (Healey, 2005; Senaratne, et al., 2005) and the United States of America (Kain, 2006) consistently indicate that in order to develop a research culture in undergraduate students these students need to be actively exposed to and involved in actual research experiences throughout their degrees.

But Senaratne, et al., (2005) indicate that the changes in quality assurance and funding mechanisms have created a tension between research and teaching. Firstly the separation of research and teaching quality assurance has created problems within universities as regards choosing a mission statement (research excellence versus teaching excellence) and allocating resources. A second tension arises among academics "as research is more rewarding compared to teaching, academics aim for research excellence at the expense of teaching" (p.588). On the other hand Hattie & Marsh subsequently stated that "the greatest misinterpretation and misrepresentation of this overall finding is that it leads to the conclusion that research and teaching should be separated for funding purposes" (Hattie & Marsh, 2004, p.1).

The purpose of university education may be three fold: advanced study; getting ready for good job; to become a better citizen and a person who could contribute in the development of the society. For all above, different quarters are responsible who are directly or indirectly involved in the making of new generation. The three major players in accountability are the legislative and political arenas, the academy, and the general citizenry (LeMon, 2004, p. 39). They all need reliable and valued information in useable form. We must ask: What have students learned, and are they ready to use it? (Malandra,

2005).

Objective of the paper and the research questions

The main objective of the study is to find out that how the teachers and students of higher education institutions view research and research activities, and whether they are involved in different activities to promote research culture at their institutions or not.

Methodology

This qualitative research study consists of a questionnaire based interview in which the following ten broad questions have been focused. Sixty teachers and eighty students of four public and private sector degree awarding institutions were interviewed, and the data were qualitatively analyzed.

Broad questions

1. What is your opinion about research?
2. How do you view the significance of research activity?
3. If you are engaged in research, what role are you playing in that?
4. Is there any compulsion of conducting research from the administration at your institution?
5. Is research a component of the degree programme you are teaching or studying?
6. Do you think if you conduct research it could benefit us as a nation?
7. Have you ever conducted research voluntarily?
8. Have you ever produced research paper for any conference or research journal? If yes please mention the name of the research topic or research journal.
9. Do you know something about MDGs? If yes could you please tell how research would help in achieving them?
10. Do you think there must be some more concrete efforts by HEC and administration to promote research culture in addition to already initiated steps? Can you specify them?

Findings and Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that research is a complex skill and is different from some procedural or other skills, but despite its complexity we can't ignore its significance by considering some sort of lame excuses. The results of the study show that both teachers and students are aware of the importance of research but seem reluctant to use available resources for research. The respondents claimed that private sector degree awarding institutions have better facilities than the public sector universities but individual research is also a neglected area. Teachers supervise and students take up research project which is primarily a compulsory component for the award of degree, but that is done under compulsion which does not ignite students' inquiry skills nor attract teachers to go for voluntary research.

Present is the age of knowledge gaining and transferring the same to posterity for better present and comfortable future. But the area of research, as the results reflect, does not seem to be focused because the subjects feel research expert faculties are not available; libraries are present but relevant matter is absent; computer labs do not provide access to a rich treasure of knowledge, etc. On line access to valuable research journals is very discouraging; even at some places it's just like 'building castle in the air', as uttered by some respondents.

The study reveals that students are engaged in research because it is a compulsory part of degree programme they are studying; other wise they feel there is no need of research, as said by some respondents. They are also of the opinion that most of the students are in search of such topics which have already been researched and find difficulty if given some innovative areas to conduct research on the plea that there are less free of cost resources available to the students. In this context it is pertinent to refer to the words of Dr. Luis Miguel Romero Fernández who says: "There is a serious rift between theory and the practical dimensions of knowledge, along with a shift in research towards businesses or specialised centres. The gap between the 'two cultures' – the scientific, technical and the humanistic – deepens. More and more, the university is becoming a closed glass case, separated from the society to which it belongs and not, in most cases, central to and orienting us to face the complexities of the times in which we live. Even the meaning of 'being a university student' is losing sense."

The most striking finding of the study is related to faculty members who are also found less enthusiastic about research. With the exception of a meager number most of the respondents have not yet done any voluntary research. Although HEC has initiated some monetary incentives and has been trying to support universities improve their infrastructure, even then most of the respondents feel that such facilities are very meager and more funds should be allocated for promoting the research culture.

Moreover, the subjects expressed their concern that the research culture has not been propagated in the true letter and spirit, and there must be some distinction between those who conduct research and those who don't; it could pave the way to generate research culture at the universities; otherwise it won't be easy to achieve Millennium Development Goals and compete nations in the global village. This lack of interest has generated many challenges but in the opinion of Guadilla, (1996) two are major ones which seem to be same that our society is facing:

- Responding to the globalisation of the economy, in which competing, in a society currently based upon knowledge of not only the productive and commercial mechanisms but also the education systems.
- Responding to the situation of extreme poverty in which the majority of people live, in terms of socially sustainable development.

Implications

In the light of these findings and conclusion the following implication are made for the promotion of research culture at the degree awarding institutions:

1. There should be upgradation of faculty members' research qualification through the completion of higher degrees.
2. University should increase the research capacity of faculty through short courses that may focus on research methods.
3. Curriculum may be designed in such a way that teachers and students should feel encouraged to conduct research enthusiastically.
4. The research theses, of the degree programmes, should be properly propagated amongst the concerned circles of learning so that a knowledge sharing culture may be promoted, and the students' inquiry skills should be polished in a

creative manner by incorporating small scale research assignments periodically in their higher education programmes.

5. Federal and provincial governments as well as HEC should provide more logistic support to universities for the promotion of research culture.
6. There must be frequent seminars at universities on research in which faculty and students should participate, and their proceedings should be publicized in university/institution newsletter.
7. Ample monetary benefits should be extended to those who conduct voluntary research.
8. It is very important to ensure the induction of highly qualified and trained teachers having subject command and being equipped with latest teaching techniques.
9. It is suggested that universities/degree awarding institutions must be equipped with high quality and updated resource material that could cope with the 'technology myth' classroom needs.
10. Action research should be encouraged, and it must be included in the assessment mechanism.

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Correspondence

Name: Mubasher Nadeem
Email: mubasher_nadeem2002@yahoo.com