

Delimiting research culture

What is knowledge? How is knowledge produced? What are the factors that contribute to the production of knowledge? What is the quality of the knowledge being produced in Pakistan and how we can improve the process and the outcome?

Researching this under-researched area seems fun but is a tiring task full of excuses from researchers themselves, the institutions they serve and the regulators.

We would like to state that this piece has greatly benefited from the work of Haque, Mahmood, Abbas, Lodhi, Rab & Jones, (2020). 'The University Research System in Pakistan' PIDE Books, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, No 2020:2.

Sound research and maintenance of research culture are very important for a country to survive in these times. Producing good knowledge should be the aim and objective of universities as well as making better job aspirants, not just providing students with degrees. But it is not happening; as of 2019, the graduate unemployment (GUE) rate is touching 16.5 percent. Since 2002, the HEC has made remarkable progress and initiated many successful programmes and policies aimed at making the system better but there is still a lot that needs to be done, particularly in ensuring research systems that can discuss and solve relevant Pakistani social issues.

Research is an art, best to be learnt through a mentor – which, among other things, are lacking in our research culture. A mentor guides the way for the lost; and for newcomers research is a very tiring journey and directionless journey. Without mentorship, knowledge transfer is not efficient and hence the resulting knowledge produced by untrained researchers would be of little value to society. Once a researcher is trained and led by a mentor, we can safely assume that the knowledge produced by such a researcher would be worth the investment.

Another norm that is missing in our research system is the ability and tendency to work in teams. The experts interviewed for the book we have used for this article (The University Research System in Pakistan', PIDE) have all stressed that research, in general, is teamwork. It is a combination of different people with different expertise all contributing to the creation of something new and useful. Exceptions aside, teamwork is the most important ingredient for any good research. Imagine one person trying to play drums, guitar, piano, and the flute at the same time. No symphony will come out of it. The same is the case with good research.

To create good research products, we need to promote a culture of teamwork in our research industry. There are however some disincentives to work in teams and they warrant serious attention. In Pakistan, more weightage is given to research papers with single authors. This discourages researchers from forming teams. There should be new criteria wherein there is some

additional benefit to work as a team. It wouldn't be too much to ask the HEC that it should either make the weightage equal or give some additional benefit to those who produce research products through teamwork.

Conferences and seminars are another part of Pakistan's university research system. Conferences are there to provide platforms wherein ideas are exchanged, and debate is generated but in Pakistan, the only good things one finds at conferences are the chicken patties served with [good] tea during breaks. We need to have conferences that can provide directions, not ones that create a distraction from the art of research to less important, pointless chit-chat.

There needs to be a follow-up culture and proper dissemination of the discussions of conferences and seminars. Such conferences should provide researchers opportunities to collaborate. A growing number of webinars conducted at many universities like PIDE during the Covid-19 pandemic is a welcome initiative wherein technology is utilized efficiently controlling cost and other factors and at the same time producing meaningful conclusions since most briefs of most webinars are published and disseminated. This trend should be encouraged.

Finally, we should set our priorities in the local context. The HEC has spent so much money on PhD scholarships, which no doubt is a good thing but what makes it weak is the fact that more than 65 percent goes to Basic Sciences. Social sciences are not prioritized. As per the finding of the book mentioned above, social sciences and business studies should get their weightage since the nature of those disciplines makes them able to create a bigger impact on a society like Pakistan. There needs to be a market-based balanced criterion for HEC funding of research whether PhD or projects.

Not all is bad with our university research system, but some areas do need improvement. The HEC should look into these areas seriously. We, being a part of the research industry, believe that such work should be encouraged, acknowledged and appreciated, and most importantly it should be applied – otherwise books will grow old on library shelves, without making any impact at all. Let's do justice to the hard work of the team that put together this book and consider its recommendations in reforming the university research system in Pakistan.

The writers are lecturers at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) in the Department of Development

Studies and can be reached at aqeel.anwar54@gmail.com