Editorial: Demystifying research culture in universities

The higher education scenario is evolving more into ranking and accreditations. New education frameworks and academic cultures are essential to suit the changing landscape. In the last two decades, we observed a sharp decline in student admissions in regions across the globe, including Asian regions. While this situation posed a sustainability threat to quick and effective changes in higher education, much focus is given to new technology-based pedagogy and infrastructure, whereas research culture remains an area that needs further development attention.

It is notable that inculcating a research culture or reaching the potential of individuals as researchers is somewhat lacking. The tri-partial role of an academic – teaching, administration and research – posed challenges in pursuing research. Universities provide numerous incentives to create a research culture by introducing research grants, promotions based on research and various academic evaluations where research is regularly monitored, rewarded and shared with the concerned communities (Tucker and Tilt, 2019). Yet, there is little research-based teaching, poor exposure to the industry, overly theoretical nature of facilitating learning and opportunities to collaborate and contribute with empirical scholarly findings are lost for many academics.

Even though this may be difficult to generalize, unfortunately, the research culture is poorly translated, especially in the developing world, where it is attributed to what we refer to as "publication culture". The last decade observed a sharp increase in the number of faculty publications in journals, and the majority of these are to further academic careers rather than a knowledge contribution (Buffington *et al.*, 2021; Rana, 2021). But is it what we refer to as a research culture? Theoretically, publishing in journals is just one element that indicates a research culture.
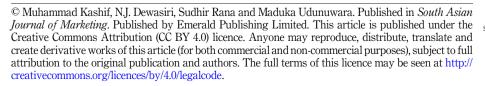
Unnecessarily putting pressure on faculty to publish in "top journals" while pushing staff to bring admissions will further damage the reputation of universities, ultimately posing a threat to the survival of a university.

We believe universities require developing their academics into passionate researchers who conduct research beyond publication mindset but make a scholarly contribution significant to the industry and result in new research-based solutions imparted by academics. We extend the view on research culture and believe it is related to establishing a departmental attitude of respect, openness, rewards and motivation (Ion and Castro Ceacero, 2017). So, we further discuss the core tenants of a research culture and how it can be established and groomed in academia by providing some workable solutions.

Characteristics of a research culture

(1) Am I feeling safe – being respected for whatever I say/produce?

Ideally, research culture is a synonym for an excellent organizational culture. It is an environment where the students, faculty, society, industry and policymakers feel safe

producing and sharing knowledge that benefits these key stakeholders. Thus, it is about creating an egalitarian climate where everyone is respected, heard via constructive feedback and encouragement is given to move ahead with pride and grace. As early career researchers, people need encouragement, mainly from policymakers. This can be via collaborating with the academia for research and development and sharing positive words about an industry project handled by a faculty. Since the need to establish a conducive environment where people face psychologically safe (Hasan and Kashif, 2020), encouraging attending any conference despite its scale and popularity or work published in any journal irrespective of the ranks can contribute to a climate of confidence. Researchers gain more confidence, and even those feeling afraid of sharing their views will ultimately speak up. This way, it will set the stage to groom the organizational members for higher achievements, such as increased funding, admissions and reputation for a university.

(2) Am I clear about our vision – does research has some voice at the top?

Another characteristic of research culture is the clarity of the faculty, management staff, students and industry about the importance of research while establishing a vision statement (Ryan and Goldingay, 2022). The strategic priority is given to research, publications, writing, consultancy and sharing via white papers will dictate terms for key stakeholders to follow accordingly. In a modern university, such a vision where research is "at the top" is missing. The strategic importance of research is reflected in the curriculum and design of degree programs, the development of research reward plans for faculty and students, and establishing a budget for an institution.

Another relevant aspect is the clarity of identity of a university (Hemsley-Brown *et al.*, 2016). What do we aspire to become? Do we feel pride in what we desire to become? Ironically, are we trying to become a research-oriented university? How much clarity do we have while operationalizing "research-oriented", which by no means is translated as a "publication-oriented" university? Benchmarking is good, but every university cannot become the Harvards and the MITs. Setting a challenging target is wonderful, but what are the resources allocated to concerned faculty and staff to attain those goals, marks the destiny. Thus, there is a need to establish clarity of thought concerning research. It will guide the members on what they are expected to achieve in an academic year, their goals and rewards.

Another relevant aspect is the consistency in what we aspire to become? Over the years, even with a change in leadership, universities need to emphasize and, in fact, audit do we have a consistent vision to become a research-oriented university? In addition, how this consistency is practiced? Does the leadership at a university stand tall with their faculty and students in achieving their aims, ultimately contributing to the achievement of organizational purposes? How much emphasis is levied on research, comparable to other academic activities, marks the destiny of research orientation in a university?

Finally, how this vision is established? Is it merely communicated? Or it is shown via an open dialogue? Research orientation is not a departmental function. Instead, it is an attitude thus cannot be forced on people. A conscious observation of how the vision for research, if there is any, is established? We believe in an open dialogue where members have the space to agree and disagree based on some logical arguments with a particular vision – the very nature of science.

(3) Are we a socialized unit – we meet, really?

Socialization is an essential characteristic of a university's research culture. There is great importance for socialization among staff, students, faculty and industry members. When people socialize, they feel comfortable in the presence of each other, and trust is established. In this regard, we need a checklist of whether universities have some events which take place

regularly. These events include mini-conferences, research methods workshops, industry meetups, faculty–staff–student meetups, discussion forums and seminars/webinars where people are encouraged to participate and respect their views. This is about establishing trust and friendliness while minimizing the power distance in the universities. It would be interesting to understand how many societies are actively working in a university to promote research orientation? How many departmental activities are conducted formally and informally to manage high power distance? How much space is given to the social and business community to participate in events? Also, how active is a university while participating in social and business activities?

Another important and relevant aspect of this socialization is the extent to which colleagues are willing to help and guide each other contrary to what extent are people willing to seek advice and guidance from their senior counterparts. This two-way connectivity is essential in socializing in a university environment and can result in the transfer of ideas, skills and motivation.

(4) Values – do we have, which one?

It is important to note that an organization is nothing but a manifestation of values developed with care and practiced with pride (Ansari and Kashif, 2019). Thus, it is essential to note which values are established, and how they are practiced across an institution. Based on our experience of handling research in industry and academia, a university should have values such as friendliness, mutual trust and openness in sharing ideas among students, the staff and faculty. Moreover, flexibility in opting for a career path for faculty and staff. For instance, some may be very good at writing while others might be an excellent resource in teaching. Thus, those good at writing can be assigned tasks to write for journals and magazines, manage their blogs and contribute to university magazines. Contrarily, the staff with strengths in teaching can be motivated to conduct training programs for academia, industry and society. In addition, some may have interests in curriculum design, so their strengths need to be utilized accordingly. Thus, do we offer the faculty and management staff a psychological space to pursue a career direction within academia? Can one faculty become a corporate trainer while the other is an editor for a journal? Do our mission and values have such breadth and flexibility?

Rewarding, timely and competitive schemes encourage people to opt for a career. Thus, let us suppose the mission lacks flexibility. The university aims for its people to move in a particular direction; ok, do we have a reward scheme in place that encourages people to learn new skills? Does learning new skills is adequately rewarded? Imagine a university with limited funds, and we presume the institution lacks funds to motivate people to move in a particular direction. Are we coaching people to find alternate ways to grab some funding from outside sources in such a situation? Do we have a policy to distribute funding among faculty, staff and the university? Has this policy been communicated?

The "how to" of a university research culture
Now since we are a bit clear about distinguishing characteristics of a research culture in universities, we need to chalk out an outline answering an important question: how a research culture in a university can be established? Well, there could be multiple paths and processes to address this issue. We try outlining some practical questions, which need to be addressed. In a way, a policy document that focuses on these questions can be developed before we popularize the term "research culture" for the sake of merely a discussion.

(1) Mission of the university
   Does the mission of the university emphasizes a research orientation? The departments can have their individual mission, but those ultimately contribute to

the achievement of an organizational mission. Research as a strategic plan sets the stage for establishing a university research culture.

(2) Contextualization

How relevant is research in the "context" of a university which entails where the university is located? We need to figure out how a university aligns itself to the surrounding environment. For instance, in a university surrounded by a metropolitan city where problems such as traffic, pollution, housing and climate are essential, establishing a centre to investigate distance education issues might not be a good idea. One can still have this centre, but core emphasis can be levied on problems prevailing in the microenvironment.

(3) Sustainability

How can the funding be grabbed to conduct an investigation and share research findings? There could be multiple sources, i.e. university bodies, education authorities and independent external bodies. One needs to be careful that rewarding people is at the core of establishing a research culture, and for that, we need funding. Other excellent sources to generate funds could be the university alumni, the executive centre of awesome, faculty training and consultancy initiatives backed up by clear organizational policies.

(4) Leadership

How eager, capable and encouraging is the leadership of a university to motivate people for research? The development of a mission could be one thing, while we need leadership to execute the plans we develop to emphasize research. Leadership practice will dictate the terms of the development of research culture. Their capabilities, level of consciousness, degree of urgency and experience will help universities establish a research culture.

(5) Research strategy

What is the research strategy? How is research impact evaluated, monitored and rewarded? Do we have some research centres which are closely hooked with various departments? This internal alignment is essential in a university set-up to control the research function properly. The selection of events, a list of journals to publish, conferences to attend, processes involved in funding for specific purposes (i.e. article processing fee and data collection) and academic misconduct need to be strategized and communicated correctly.

(6) Socialization

What are the frequency and the venue people meet with each other, both formally as well as informally? This is very important and establishes strong mutual trust and friendliness and creates an environment full of learning. Peer-based learning could be an important characteristic where colleagues learn from each other via a friendly dialogue. Also, they learn from each other informal settings, i.e. conferences, workshops and discussion forums. This way brings them closer and helps them learn the skills relevant to conducting research. An important characteristic is the consistency of events. For instance, if there is an annual conference, how long is it happening? Contrarily, there is a forum to discuss social issues prevailing in society; how consistently is it happening?

(7) Egalitarianism

How much is a member respected in a university? Disregarding people based on educational backgrounds, work experiences and lack of foreign exposure can quickly

kill the *spirit de corps* and threaten the survival of mutual respect for all. For instance, disregarding the views of an individual because they have not published in a particular category of journals does not make any sense. It is possible, and we are sure they would be good at something else, but it needs to be explored. Research culture is also about getting to know each other and respecting diversity. Moreover, once a faculty, student or member of staff is recruited in an organization system, all are equal to being part of a system. There should not be any bias towards people with particular backgrounds.

(8) Equality

Research publications are taken as a quick tool to achieve rankings and accreditations by a majority of the universities and institutions. This mindset has created a turbulent environment in academics. Institutions of higher learning often remain biased towards the faculty members who aggressively publish in journals, irrespective of looking at the logical and ethical ways of publishing. Overpromoting "publications" in the name of research is also dangerous for academia. On the one side, this is causing academic nexus and on the other side, rivalry amongst these groups. The publishing race is not a sign of a "healthy academic environment". Hence, universities should practice the research culture, so it does not promote inequality and nexus in academics.

Another aspect of equality is offering academics some choices. For instance, coaching and motivating faculty members to publish cases, offer training to academia and industry, present their work in internal and external conferences and offer consultancy can be some options. In a way, it will bring about a balance in teaching and research. The case studies can help faculty members while teaching various courses, while industry consultancy can help universities bridge the industry–academia gap. Thus, offering people choices and respecting these options can positively contribute to the sustainability of a university via excellent teaching and research.

Conclusion

Research culture is not merely about publishing; instead, it is about respecting people, establishing a research-oriented mission, socializing with people to minimize power distance and developing a value system where people and systems nourish. Since a research culture is often misunderstood by publishing in journals, we offer insight into developing a system of knowledge production, sharing and development. To foster a research culture, universities should focus on the eight-point plan outlined in this editorial. We are hopeful it will be helpful for higher education policymakers.

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