

Suggested Mechanism for Producing Quality Research at Higher Educational Institutes in Pakistan; System, Structure, Culture and Leadership Issues

Naveed Hasan

Lecturer, Department of Management Sciences, The University of Lahore, Sargodha, Pakistan
Email: nav33dhasan@gmail.com

Shahid Mahmood

Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Pakistan
Email: masters_100@hotmail.com

Hammad Hassan Mirza

Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Pakistan
Email: hammadhassan@uos.edu.pk

Shahzad Hassan

Lecturer, Department of Commerce, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Pakistan
Email: sshari660@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to give an insight of quality of research done particularly at MPhil and PhD level and factors related to system, structure and culture that can be used by leaders to enhance quality of research. Study is based on extensive and thorough interviews conducted from researchers in different universities of Islamabad, Pakistan. Research showed some flaws in existing systems, structures and culture of education in Pakistan, leaders (HEC and other concerned institutes) could take some actions to modify current research systems, structure and culture to enhance quality of research in Pakistan. Research is designed to focus research quality enhancement. Certain recommendations were made to improve that quality particularly academic research. Intention of research is to improve quality of research in educational institutes particularly which are dealing in MPhil and PhD programs in different specializations. Qualitative research to find out factors for improvement of research quality is limited. Moreover,

this study recommends improvement in quality of research by improving current systems, structure and culture.

Keywords: quality of academic research, system, structure, culture, leadership

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

The word “Research” brings a lot of different thoughts in our minds-hard work, data gathering, analysis, curiosity, studying, etc. There are many researchers in Pakistan who are doing research in different areas but the problem is with the quality of that research. There might be different reasons or hurdles regarding that. There are different views about these hurdles and problems which exist in our systems, structures and cultures. Our purpose is to explore and highlight those reasons/hurdles and propose key recommendations that how MS and PHD scholars can bring quality in research work.

Pakistanis as a nation is not lacking behind any one in any field of life. Then why Pakistani researchers are facing problems in international publications of their research journals and articles etc. It might be due to limited resource, knowledge and unavailability of platform etc. There is a need to develop the culture of research in the country. Mostly PhD’s and good scholars leave the country and use their abilities elsewhere because their abilities are not properly recognized here in Pakistan. There is no proper infrastructure and facilities. Our effort is to pinpoint the problems in existing system and propose solutions.

Another major problem is mission and the topic. They don’t know what to do. They don’t have proper guidelines to follow. They don’t know what scientific society wants to know. Sometimes they just download papers, validate it, change the parameters or add new parameters and then try to publish it. They spend their money and time on papers which no one wants to read. When they see their research has no impact they don’t like to spend more money and time, like this the vicious circle continues.

When a researcher starts research, he/she does not have proper guidelines to be followed. There is no proper mechanism for doing research in our culture. Even some people consider research just as wastage of time. A new scholar gets frustrated when he/she does not find any black and white rules to be followed. From the selection of topic to the submission of thesis, he/she has to face difficulties at each level. Ultimately researchers are discouraged and they just want to get rid of thesis as soon as possible.

Every research student wants to come at par with many of the other great researchers, for this they need to put in effort, work hard and study. Researchers came into research field by choice without knowing that this is a deep sea where one has to learn to swim on one’s own. We found it difficult at first to cope with the requirements as teachers in postgraduate are qualified and experienced, being a layman it was difficult to come up to their expectations; it is a view that students find research boring and tedious because they do not get proper guidance from supervisors and mentors although they are very motivated initially when they opt for a research degree but this motivation fades away when they start the degree.

There are several reasons, foremost reason which we felt as research students in this regard is the lack of research culture, unavailability of pre-defined system and people do not bother asking questions they accept things as it is. Secondly, students get confused while choosing their research topics as every other issue is of interest or they do not find related articles on which they want to do research on. Thirdly, finding research topic is difficult as they aren't guided well as research is not a trial and error method because of heavy resource of time spent on it so research has to be a well-thought plan. Fourth, students need to be persistent and patient; carrying out a full blown research requires consistency.

After having the above discussion we come up with a question in our minds that “what are the problems in existing system, structure and culture that hinder quality research (done by MS & PhD scholars) and what steps leaders should take to improve the research quality in Pakistan”.

To answer all these queries and questions the model on the proceeding pages was envisaged so that all such hurdles can be removed for a research student and their attitude towards producing a quality research can be changed towards the positive.

2. Literature Review

The literature talks about the interest and inclination of the researcher as the primary step in producing quality research. The more the investigator becomes enthusiastic about some topic better chances are that he will try to investigate deeply and thoroughly that topic (Marshall and Reason, 2007). On the other hand the place the researcher is in is important as well. In Pakistan research is considered as the low priority area (Mahmood & Farzana, 2010). In Pakistan there is no proper system and culture developed for conducting research (Haider & Mahmood, 2007). As in this article we are investigating quality research done by the MS and PhD students the research environment also affects a student. The day he/she is inducted and at the very beginning what he/she observes, the vistas and corridors of alma mater do they reek of research? The student enters an institution with the frame of mind i.e. his own interests and inclinations and if they are matched equally with the environment he is in, would definitely produce a great result.

Scholars are facing problems in financial perspective (Mahmood & Farzana, 2010). It also affects the quality of research. If a researcher grows his/her interest in this side there are many other problems also waiting e.g. emotional and psychological problems (Buttery et al., 2006), less acceptance to society (Haider & Mahmood, 2007), restricted access to digital libraries (Mahmood & Farzana, 2010), lack of confidence (Buttery et al., 2006) unfamiliarity of supervisor to the topic/field (Buttery et al, 2006), non co-operative attitude of supervisor (Dann, 2008) misjudgment during viva (Grabbe, 2003) etc.

These days in Pakistani institutions and universities (thanks to the random policies made by the Higher Education Commission) much attention is given to “research” without recognizing what research or let alone quality research in reality is. Such policies have led the administration over zealous and preoccupied by the numbers which might not mean production of quality in the end. The essence of research is finding the hidden and a quest for truth which the numbers beguile (Frey and Rost, 2010). The culture of research means that the students ask questions about everything and are inquisitive. But when this type of culture evolves society does not

accept it (Mahmood & Farzana, 2010). They can begin with the simple questions like how can we improve quality of learning at our institution? Why some of the days sky is more visible? What is the demand of mobile phones in Pakistan and how it is going to change? Indeed an inquisitive mind seeks answers through research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). But in our (Pakistani) culture it is considered unnecessary to conduct research on this type of topics. Re-inventing the wheel is mostly liked here (Haider & Mahmood, 2007).

Existing literature also provides evidence on the policies of government and institution which can also enhance the proliferation of quality research. In their detailed paper "Quality enhancement in doctoral education" Neumann and Guthrie (2000) talked about the importance of quality supervision which they consider the responsibility of the institute. Indeed thus much onus lies with the university and place of study as well to give students better directions and dimensions about the research work and facilitate them in all respects.

Vilkinas (2002) has given a new idea about supervisors. She said that role of supervisors at academic levels is becoming more complex with the passage of time. She stated that the role of supervisor is parallel to that of manager. There are some differences just like the autonomy, monetary dependency, short term engagement and less formal authority. Further she says that a supervisor should be visionary (who can see the wood for the trees so to speak); creative in the supervisory process; has the ability to acquire the necessary resources; able to motivate the student to produce; direct the work of students; check on and coordinate the various activities that need to be undertaken in activities that need to be undertaken in the research journey, monitoring the student's progress; nurture, create capabilities; and able to foster growth of individuals (Vilkinas, 2002).

The first important aspect of the facilities is the quality training as delineated in the same journal by which we mean able bodied and interest taking staff present for guidance at all levels (Clegg, 1997). The paper recommends a doctoral supervision and training program which according to the authors can act as a real boost to the quality enhancement activity. When such kind of program is present it can look further for the establishment of on-line data access and departmental magazine etc. thus a research culture ensues in which research workshops, research showcase, social events, student's liaison committee meetings and participation of research students in research committee meetings would take place.

In 1994, Zuber Skerritt identified main problems in supervision, that are, lack of experience, commitment and time, at the supervisor's end, while lack of confidence of students in completing their theses, lack of understanding between the two, and student's inexperience in research are some of the hurdles in supervision effectiveness.

The universities have tried to address this issue in three ways, by supervisor's training, student's training, and changing the supervisory system from single supervision to group supervision (GS). In group supervision, a number of supervisory practice models are presented, that include: Workshop model: in which rules and regulations, and theses standards are communicated through workshops. Coursework model: seminars and tutorials are held for problem discussion and research methods. Methodology model: peers share their research problems with each other (Buttery et al., 2006).

These all steps would lead to a research by the student with the research work with no scruples attached i.e. relevant supervisor selection, correct methodology, importance given to design and coursework and thorough study – literature review in the field. This would all work towards the correct completion of the research cycle (Cepeda and Martin, 2005) and would give a required research output. Now to ensure that the research thus performed has a national and international impact a departmental review committee should be established whose role should be to quantify and qualify the research output, select the papers and send them to national and international journals of repute thus the cycle would complete and the researcher would feel satisfied of his/her research output (Litman, 2009).

3. Analysis

Carrying out quality research is a complete and ongoing process. It starts from the selection of idea/field/topic and ends with the submission of thesis or publishing of papers in some national/international journals. From this published research or submitted thesis to universities, new ideas evolve, which open horizons for further research. In this way it becomes an ongoing process.

During carrying out research, a researcher has to face so many problems especially in a culture just like Pakistan. As discussed in literature review, research is a low priority area in Pakistan. If we start analyzing the problems faced by researchers during their work, it will take several pages. Here we would like to analyze some flaws discussed by faculty members and research students of different universities of Pakistan. This data was gathered through structured and unstructured interviews conducted with senior faculty members and research students of different universities in Pakistan (for details see Appendix 1).

When a student comes in the field of research, first of all he/she has to select a topic. Problem starts from this very initial step. Because he/she has not proper guidelines to be followed, no one is there to be consulted. But in some universities scenario is changing but very slowly e.g. AIOU. Students at this stage need an orientation session so that they can have a vision of their work and field. Supervisors should be allotted at the very beginning of course. This will lead to an increased confidence and relatively good coordination between supervisor and supervisee (Buttery et al., 2006).

In 1999, the quality assurance agency (QAA) in UK published a code of practice in relation to quality and standards in postgraduate research degrees. In that document it was stated that postgraduate research assessment process should be communicated “clearly and fully to students and supervisors” and should be “operated rigorously, fairly, reliably and consistently” (Denicolo, 2003).

Business Dictionary defines system as a “set of detailed methods, procedures, and routines established or formulated to carry out a specific activity, perform a duty, or solve a problem”. If we have a proper system for this particular activity the problems can automatically be erased. Sometimes choice for the selection of supervisor is completely given to the students (as practiced in AIOU and University of Sargodha); it creates problems for both researcher as well as institution. Because there can arise biasness and on the other hand university has to face problems in order to contact supervisor. This will lead to breakage of system because AIOU has

given choice to its students that they can select a supervisor relevant to their field throughout the Pakistan.

Wikipedia has defined culture as “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group”. In relevance to the stated definition, if we have a bird eye view on the existing culture of our society with reference to research: masses will be shocked to know that how the research is being conducted in our institutions. There is no helping and encouraging culture. No one is there to motivate. There are fewer incentives for a good researcher. His/her work is not being valued. Peers don’t recognize and value a good research (Haider & Mahmood, 2007). All these indicators lead to a poor culture for research activities.

Business Dictionary has defined structure as “the interrelation or arrangement of parts in a complex entity and the way in which parts are arranged or put together to form a whole; makeup”. In accordance with the given definition, can we imagine a pre-defined structure for carrying out quality research? In Pakistan students have not open access to digital library. Traditional libraries are lacking current literature. Even people don’t know about the usage of libraries. There are no sufficient funding for scholars (Mehmood et al., 2009; Haider & Mahmood, 2007).

Final step in the process of thesis submission is that of facing viva. This is very important phase of research and it shows the originality of work done by researcher (Grabbe, 2003). In some universities of Pakistan, viva has become just as a fashion. It is predefined that whose thesis is going to be accepted and whose has to be rejected.

After analyzing all these problems one can think that how these problems can be minimized and who has to do this. Here arises role of a leader. A leader is "a person who influences a group of people towards the achievement of a goal". The leader has to be practical and a realist yet must talk the language of the visionary and the idealist. So a leader or we can say institutional head has the most important role to play. Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan is also the most authorized body to solve these paradoxes (Mehmood et al., 2009; Grabbe, 2003)

4. Theoretical Framework for the Study

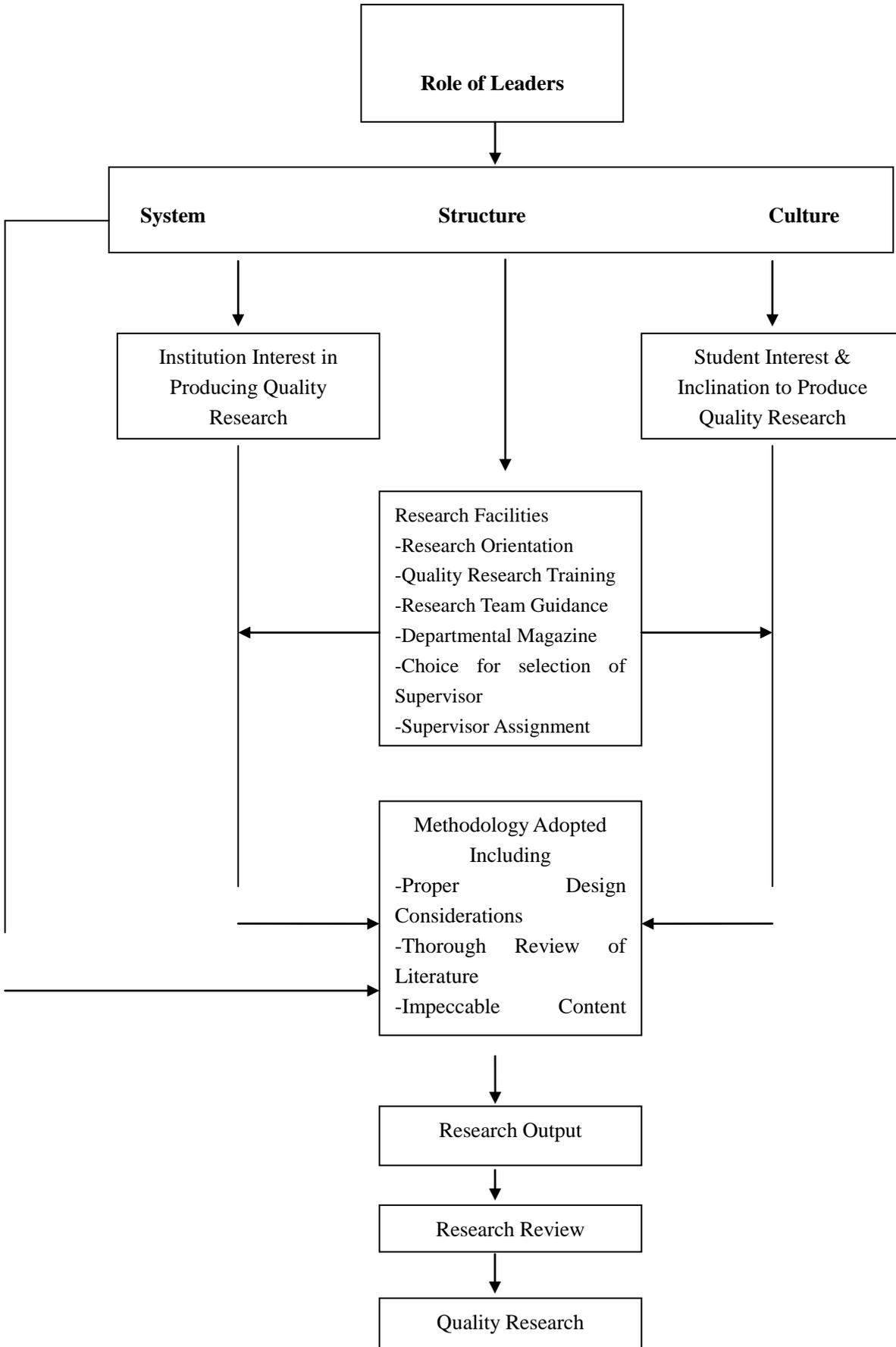


Figure 01: Frame work of Study

5. A Summary Of Flaws In Existing System, Structure And Culture That Hinders Quality In Research

In this section we would like to discuss the flaws in existing system, structure and culture observed by team members, in a summarized form.

- There is no proper culture, system and structure of research at MS and PhD level.
- Our education system is not research oriented.
- Teaching system is stereotype; students rely on notes given by teachers.
- Teachers follow the same old notes every time and do not update it.
- Students are confused about their research topics as there is no proper guidance or system.
- Students select topics without consulting supervisors.
- Students are not aware of the supervisor at the beginning of the semester due to which problems arises as the interests of students do not match with the concerned supervisor.
- Even supervisors are not well conversant with the system, structure and the procedure of research.
- There is unequal allocation of research scholars to supervisors. This causes hassle, frustration and confusion among both parties.
- Supervisors do not give proper time and guidance to researchers due to lack of interest and expertise in specific area which ultimately effects research quality.
- There is no proper communication channel to guide students.
- Supervisors don't co-operate properly.
- Sometimes supervisors don't know the current findings in field because they are not an active researcher
- Sometimes supervisors of irrelevant fields are allotted to students.
- Supervisors themselves are not well conversant to the field but still they are ready to supervise just for the sake of monetary benefits.
- Sometimes supervisors don't know about some issues relevant to the field. That's why they don't co-operate.
- Sometimes area of interest of supervisor and supervisee does not match
- Students' do not know whom to consult for discussing their ideas, issues and feedback for research.
- There is a lot of wastage of time and energy, as the whole infrastructure is not supportive enough for producing quality research.
- There is no proper documentation, written procedures and deadlines for submission, system works through verbal cues.
- Whole system is working slow as it takes a lot of time on approvals of proposals and thesis etc
- In some cases supervisors asks for unnecessary multiple use of complex statistical tests which may reduce students motivation and interest in research and further extension of research at higher level
- Libraries are a key source for provision of research data, it act as a supporting tool for doing research but students don't know how to utilize them.
- Unfortunately libraries are not fulfilling their true purpose of facilitating research.
- Librarians are unaware of their job of facilitating researchers; there is no proper culture, awareness and training.

- There are ample data sources available in libraries but scholars are not properly guided about the availability of data and its access.
- Access to the digital libraries is not provided to the students at their homes.
- Most of the research papers and articles are available but libraries are not getting local data or work done by local researchers.
- There is lack of leadership to build supportive culture of research.
- There is no proper mentoring, encouragement and direction for researchers.
- Lack of commitment, resources (funds) and leadership from top management.
- Financial problem is one of the major hindrances in the way of quality research.
- Unequal distribution of resources (scholarships).
- HEC is not playing its role especially in case of financial aid.
- Meetings of BASAR are not held regularly
- BASAR does not have the representatives from each department of university.
- Unhealthy critique of members of BASAR leads to de-motivation.
- A large span of time of a researcher is being wasted by BASAR.
- After the completion of thesis, a student faces many problems during viva.
- Unhealthy critique of members of viva committee leads to wastage of time.
- Delay in the final result announcement (accept/reject).

6. Recommendations

Based on what we have seen and observed and the data gathered through primary and secondary sources, here are some of the recommendations which would help bring in an attitudinal change in the students vis-à-vis producing quality research. The recommendations are for all groups concerned i.e. students, faculty, institutions and the government

- Research should be the main priority at each level throughout the country.
- At post-graduate level research is a co-creation of supervisee and supervisor. So active involvement of both ends is necessary.
- The students can forget that they can do quality research without their own interest and inclination. It is the personal interest of the student which keeps on the midnight oil burning. The quest to find out is a basic instinct which keeps on the wheel of research turning. As pointed out by the SZABIST students see interview 1 in the appendix section, the students try to find out scapegoats in the system. The research team does not agree with them. You create your own environment and systems therefore if you try to find out a research question you will try to find out some way for it.
- Some of the students pointed out towards the lack of facilities; again the research team disagrees with them. At a very short notice, the students in this assignment were able to conduct around eight interviews, were able to gather data from various sources and collate it to form a discernable pattern through effort. At the very basic an effort is demanded of an MS and PhD student.
- The resources and facilities if not abundantly available, are still present. Take the example of our library at COMSATS, which is equipped with six staff members readily available to help scholars in their scholarly work. The library here is expanding and if you go at their door would definitely work out the way for the collection of data from various sources. The first step by the student is required.

- We in the research team would highly recommend that the institution desirous of producing quality research should take a proactive stance towards its production by which we mean the interest and inclination of its top team towards this end. They should ensure quality research training at the setup, give full guidance to the students, assign a cooperative supervisor at the very beginning having a role of mentor and facilitator and hold, seminars, workshops, symposiums to showcase research output.
- University should have its own departmental magazine where prominent articles can be quarterly or biannually published.
- The whole activities above will ensure that the students have grounded their work in theory, have adopted a correct methodology and literary and academic flaws they were able to remove from their work.
- This would have a trickledown effect i.e. if source is correct you can gather some output as result of research activity in the form of a good thesis and manuscript.
- The students writing their thesis should be command to produce it in the form of a presentable paper as well.
- This paper would be presented in seminars, conferences, symposiums and would be ultimately published in the departmental magazine.
- After this activity, the top staff in their area review thus published articles and can show them on university website, make a library database of them and can further send them to scientific journals of local and international repute.
- There should be meeting sessions between research scholars and concerned body (department) so that queries and issues can be resolved and new ideas may be welcomed.
- Students should know their area of interest. Supervisors can help them in screening their ideas properly.
- Researchers must be allocated to concerned supervisors in the beginning of the program.
- Template of proposal and thesis with proper deadlines and details should be given in the beginning to save time.
- Top management involvement in the whole process is necessary.
- Electronic data bases and concept of E-library which is planning to provide scholars electronic thesis data basis is a good step towards quality research.
- Every scholar should be given open access to key journals and articles (digital library).
- There is a need to develop research culture from primary level education to build a strong system and structure for research.
- Students from beginning should be encouraged to do some research and stereotype teaching methods are not effective any more.
- Come out of notes phobia and develop curiosity and explore new ways of doing things.
- There is a need to change education system. It should be research oriented and meaning full, through which students can learn and develop interest in research and explore new ideas and concepts.
- If conventional supervision is not proving successful, penal/group supervision should be offered.
- Both supervisor and supervisee should be provided training before starting work e.g. orientation sessions etc.
- Supervisors should be assigned relevant to the field of student.
- Supervisors themselves should be an active researcher.
- Supervisors should be friendly, helpful and co-operative to the students. It will build confidence and motivate students.

- Supervisor should be the member of final viva committee so that in case of failure he/she can guide the student in a better way.
- HEC should hire foreign faculties in case local faculty is not working well.
- Institutions should give more attention to the Faculty Development Program (FDP)
- Seniors should encourage their juniors and help them when and where needed.
- Research topics should be more relevant to the current problems faced by Pakistan.
- HEC should form a committee which collaborates internationally with other libraries and research journals of high grading.
- Overall image of Pakistani researchers is needed to be made positive.
- Students need to be persistent and patient; carrying out a full blown research requires consistency

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Appendix I

The Pearls of Wisdom: Interviews with the Research Students and Faculty to Appreciate Quality Research

Interview format 1

What is quality research?

Is quality research being carried out in Pakistan?

Why quality research is not carried out in Pakistan?

What are the hurdles in quality research?

What are your recommendations that how we can improve the quality of research?

What motivates you to carry on research?

Interview format 2

What according to you is quality research?

Why do Pakistani student/researchers lag behind in producing quality research work?

How can we cross this hurdle?

What would you advise for quality research?

How important is collaboration with the international scholars?

Should a supervisor be allocated at the very beginning?

Interview format 3

What is a quality research?

Why do Pakistani student/researchers lag behind in producing quality research work?

What are the hurdles in doing quality research?

How can we cross this hurdle?

What would you advise for quality research?

Should a supervisor be allocated to students?

Interview format 4

What is meant by quality research?

What problems are generally faced by students doing such type of research?

How being an instructor you judge the research work?

What further guidance you like to give to us in this respect...

Interview format 5

What do you mean by Quality Research?

Is quality research being carried out in Pakistan?

How it (research) can be improved?

What do you mean by "basic level"?

What are the potential hurdles in carrying out Quality Research?

What is expected from students/fresh talent in the field?

Interview format 6

What are the current system, culture and structure in AIOU for a new researcher to start his/her research work?

How a student can select/finalize his/her research topic?
What is the procedure of selecting a supervisor for MS/PhD level?
Is there any limit (in number of students) for a supervisor to supervise?
What are the drawbacks in current system and culture?
What is the role of HOD/ Vice Chancellor being a leader to solve this type of paradoxes?
What is your institution doing in improving the system?

Interview format 7

What are the current system, culture and structure in University of Sargodha for a new researcher to start his/her research work? (I am asking in context of MS and PhD students).
Is there any limit (in number of students) for a supervisor to supervise?
What in your opinion are the drawback/flaws in the existing system, structure, culture?
What are the responses of students to the current system?
Please identify the drawback in the system, structure and culture that hinder in producing quality research.
What is the role of HOD/ Vice Chancellor being a leader to solve this type of paradoxes?

Interview format 8

Can you please tell me briefly about the existing system, structure and culture of Research/ Thesis Submission?
What in your opinion are the drawback/flaws in the existing system, structure, culture?
Please identify the drawback in the system, structure and culture that hinder in producing quality research.
Do the students know the procedure of supervisor allocation?
IS the supervisor well-equipped with the system and structure?
What are the reasons of research proposal submission?
What improvements can be made?
What is your institution doing in improving the system?