

Full Length Research Paper

Researchers' challenges: findings from in-depth interview among academicians in Haramaya University, Ethiopia

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Despite the established notion of cultivating new knowledge, academicians in developing nations are not strongly engaged in researching and publishing as a result of different challenges. In-depth interviews were made with senior professors, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and Masters Degrees holders and PhD students at Haramaya University to explore the different challenges in researching and publishing. The interviews were tape-recorded and thematically analyzed. Challenges at individual, institutional, national and global levels that could be categorized as individual and environmental were identified from the interview.

Keywords: Researcher, Research, Challenge, Academician, University

INTRODUCTION

One could be amazed with the fact that developing countries make up 25% of the world scientists while the share of publications from them are only about 3% (Dodani and LaPorte, 2008). They share solitary 10% of the global health research (Romer,1984) and only 2% of the 3000 journals indexed on Medline are from developing countries (Curat et al,2004).This is more prominent in sub-Saharan Africa, where scientific research is still much less developed. The several factors affecting the development of research in the continent are related to colonization, the military governance, the recent globalization and the countries' strategy of massification of the higher education. These factors shade bright light at certain time and put darkness at another time (UNESCO,2005; Amina, 2004 ; Sawyerr, 2004).

Importantly, many African countries regarded the establishment of local universities as part of the post-colonial national development project. The new

universities were intended to help the new nations to build up their capacity to manage and develop their resources, and alleviate the poverty of the majority of their people. In most of the circumstances they were duly engaged in producing man power leaving little room for the production of new knowledge and innovation with research (Sawyerr A, 2004).Researchers are struggling with different level challenges in researching and publishing. This study was intended to explore what researchers' challenges through an in-depth interview with academician and PhD students in Haramaya University in 2010.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In-depth interviews were conducted with different levels of academicians and PhD students in the University. Two Professors, two PhD and two Master's degree holders and four PhD fellows were interviewed. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews. The interviews were tape-recorded and verbatim transcriptions were carried out. The Results were presented under different themes.

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RESULTS

Different Challenges Identified through the Interviews

Lack of conducive infrastructure and environment

Almost all the interviewees mentioned lack of well-established facility for research including instrumented laboratory services, well-staffed laboratories and space for meticulous academic scholarship. They also mentioned lack of funding for research, and where available it is insufficient to ensure conduct of excellent study. In addition, funding is often episodic and lack sustainability. This results in premature termination of research or modification of the approved sound research protocol. One interviewee stated this as:

"Limited thinking with limited resource....."[PhD Student].

Shortage of Time

Teaching, Administration and Research are activities expected from current academicians in the university. According to the current reality, many academicians are tied up with administrative activities, committee meetings and class teaching which leave little room and time for research.

".....individuals are tied up with routine activities and therefore lose focus on research"[PhD holder].

Lack of Research Tailored Policy

There is lack of efficient policy that gives due emphasis to research. The policy fails to encourage individuals to be engaged in research. In reality, life is not linked to science at the current level. Government and researchers are not on board. This would lead to marginalization of science and frustration of scientists. Furthermore, the low utilization of research outputs by the policy makers and planners would have 'backfiring effect' on the researchers' motivation.

".....Scientists or Researchers are sometimes seen as strangers...." [PhD academician].

Lack of Effective Institutional Research Management System

The research management system is so inefficient and the system of funding and fund release are so complicated and bureaucratic. The research evaluation system is not strong and cannot make individuals competitive and there is no system in which talented researchers get incentives after conducting successful researches. There is also no system that makes research work mandatory for academicians in the university.

"...if you refrain from giving class you will be questioned....but, no one is questioned for not doing research"[MSc academician].

Low Academic Remuneration

The point related to salary payment, even though not by all was raised by majority of the respondents. Two points raised by two interviewees can depict as follow. One tried to explain as, "I am not saying good salary payment is not important, but beyond that researchers need to do research for the sake of mental satisfaction. If you are money minded, you cannot do good research". But on another angle, one professor presented this idea as, "at first place, basic need should be fulfilled so that researchers would fully engage in research work. In a situation that this is not in place, it creates to some researchers "teaching in moonlighting". This means that academicians are forced to teach unofficially in other places below their standard.

".....research needs free mind.... basic needs should be fulfilled....so that people stop moonlighting"[A Senior professor]

Publication Challenges

Challenges related to publication were handled in two perspectives; some of the interviewees mentioned that publication of manuscript in international reputable journals is so challenging. It was raised that manuscripts from developing countries are less likely published in international journals. Furthermore, to publish, you have to have a known expert as an author or coauthor. However, some respondents expressed different opinions as they felt that if one has research findings which are publishable then getting one's manuscript published is not a challenge.

In addition, the prohibitive cost of publication and language barriers were other challenges were other challenges raised by the interviewees.

"...a three times returned manuscript... promptly accepted after inclusion of known researcher name" [MSc Academician].

Access to Internet

Another importantly important challenged theta was emphasized was the inadequacy of the internet service and properly documented research products. One professor explained that generally in developing countries, there is what we call "digital divide". This means that researchers are isolated and have no access to well established internet services.

Lack of Senior Expert for Mentoring

This challenge was solely raised in this study by the master's degree who is less experienced in research. Lack of seniors who mentor the junior researchers is a big challenge. Some of the research projects are individually monopolized. Whenever senior experts exist, they are more occupied by other administrative activities than coaching and mentoring junior researchers. Unfamiliarity with advanced software and unexercised culture of team work were interrelated challenges emphasized by the interviewees.

DISCUSSIONS

Scientific research is about discovering or ascertaining new findings. In these activities, researchers are the main actors. They are expected to generate data, develop hypotheses and discover new findings and communicate them to bring change in the human life which is the ultimate goal of research (Chan et al, 2005; Teichler et al, 2009). In these excursions, there are ups and downs that researchers' encounter. Some imperishably passes through these challenges, but some trapped with them. This study explored these conditions.

Conducive environment is a primary factor for productivity and achievements. This is also a very important fulfillment needed in researching and publishing. Many of current study interviewees reported matters related their current environmental conduciveness for scientific innovations and disseminations. Importantly, the lack of instrumented and well established laboratory was contemptuously viewed by the interviewees. Similar findings were also reported in many of the less developed country higher institutions where the budgets are projecting toward the remuneration of the academic staffs and students feeding which leave little room for research and development. These competing matters do not give an opportunity for the institutions to avail important necessities for researching and publishing (Sawyer A, 2004).

It is not surprising that there is a limited support for research in low-income countries. This could be partly the result of the existing policy that primarily focuses on the provision of basic education and the related services which made research poorly appreciated. As a remedy of this, many developing countries implemented simple transfer and adaptation of strategies which have worked in different contexts and applied through "catch-up" approach (Teichler and Kearney, 2009; Khasawneh, 2008). In addition to this, there is an administrative challenge even after getting funded were reported matters at institutional level. This was also stated by previous study (Sawyer A 2004). Even if policy level challenges are difficult to address at spot, matters raised an institutional level can be mitigated by setting tailored

management system for research which is coupled with periodical monitoring and evaluation.

The issue is related to many of the academicians being tied up with routine activities were also prominent issues posited in this study. In such like situations, researchers are expected to manage many of the administrative activities, besides of having high teaching loads which greatly absorb researcher's time. In similar manner previous findings were as well reported in many of the developing countries, there have been a trend of high administrative work and high teaching load which consume researchers time (Baessa, 2008; UNESCO, 2005). To strengthen this idea, one of the interviewee stated that academicians are tied up with routine activities and lose focus on research.

It is clear that in many of the African countries Universities academicians are in low remuneration system that brain drain might greatly link with. There is also out migration of talented individuals to the private sectors and non-governmental organizations in the same country where the salary is in higher scale of the public universities (Saint, 2001; Tefera and Albach, 2007). These likely results in the lack of senior experts who would guide and mentor the junior researchers. In similar aspect, this study identified researchers at their early career, significantly expressed as they couldn't get senior researchers who would mentor them.

In regard to publication challenges, different issues presented below were raised. One issue was the language barrier. For many of the researchers, the language for publishing was either their second, third and above languages. These barriers were also acknowledged by previous research (Sunol and Saturno, 2008) and many of the early career researchers speculated out this issues. Another aspect related to publication was the inclusion and non-inclusion of senior researcher that was viewed it has an effect on manuscripts acceptance for publication. This was iterated by one of the interviewee as there was a manuscript returned three times, but when senior researcher name included the paper is accepted for publication. This opinion is open for discussion that can be explained as the inclusion of senior researcher by itself would have its own effect on the acceptance of the manuscript, as perceived by the participant. On the other hand, one can think that a small contribution of the senior researcher would have a significant improvement on the manuscript preparation would make more likely accepted. In addition there were participants who tried to explain this idea as whenever there is publishable result, publication is not a big issue and you can publish it. This idea again would take for further discussion as some writers say many scholars know what to say but have a difficulty how to say. This might also capitalize the importance of the team work in researching and publishing which was not commonly seen in the existing set up.

Though the recent expansion of open access by the

publishing journal mitigated the problem the problem of accessing articles to certain level (Chan et al, 2005; Donovan and Rumble 2005), still the problem of digital device was remarkably raised. Still there is a limitation for many of the researchers to get fast speed and reliable internet services in low income countries. These problems were disparagingly raised by many of the interviewees especially the PhD students where it take much of their time to download large documents.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In general, lack of enabling environment, funding and efficient policy, less emphasis on research, lack of well-organized institutional level research management and low salary for the researchers/scientists were challenges raised prominently by the interviewees. Furthermore, publication and internet service challenges, lack of team work and senior expert mentoring the junior researcher were also identified from the in-depth interview.

Linking research to action by building local and regional capacity to address issues for the development is also crucial. Allotting adequate and sustained funding mechanisms to support quality education, research and innovation and to attract, train and retain the brightest researchers is essential.

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Authors' contribution

Both authors contributed equally.

Competing interests

The Authors have no competing interest.

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