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# PROBLEMS IN PUBLIC SECTOR UNIVERSITIES OF PUNJAB: VIEWS OF PHD SCHOLARS

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PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to identify the problems of PhD research scholars in the public universities of Punjab, Pakistan. It was a qualitative study in nature. The study was conducted on a sample of 50 PhD (Education) scholars of three public sector universities. Semi-structured interview was designed to collect data about students' problems regarding PhD research facilitation, library, and online access to learning material, physical and financial aspects. The data was analyzed by descriptive coding technique. The study reveals that PhD scholars face diversified problems related to financial support, hostel facility, research knowledge, weak verbal and written English communication, research competencies of supervisors, inadequate advisor-advisee meetings, politics of staff, weak communication between supervisor and supervisee, inadequate access to online and IT resources, and provision of the latest books in the libraries. The study suggests that there should be time line in submission of research synopsis and the final project. There must also be an adequate increase in the online learning resources. The libraries should be equipped with the latest books and journals of good repute.

**Key words:** problems, PhD scholars, public universities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is indispensable for the holistic personality development of human beings. It plays an important role in changing the attitude and behavior of the people. In the process of education, people learn how they can better survive in the world progressing very rapidly. Innovations and new discoveries happening every day, demand the human beings to develop in order to meet the challenges of the future. In the field of education, academicians play the most important role in all the civilized societies of the world. Their important role is summed up by Shrivastava (2005) saying that academicians are the people who tear down myths and unravel the mysteries that shroud the development of the societies. The development of science and technology has made this task quite easy in the modern age.

The world has become a global village and circumstances are changing every passing day. Many developing countries are in a state of transition, moving towards system of higher education that requires both specialization and coordination. Interest in higher education has greatly increased all around the world in the recent times. Developing countries have realized that higher education is the most important means of scientific, technological and industrial progress which is vital for eradication of poverty and development of societies. For them,

higher education is also a means of moderating their societies and for producing highly educated leaders in all walks of life. Higher education is also meant to enable graduates to meet various challenges in a dynamic world and to create in them, a strong adaptability to a changing society. There have been reports on educational system in the west, namely the Robbin's report in UK and the report of the Wissenchaf Testrat in Germany; all these reports have discussed the need for the expansion of higher education (Raza, 1995). For this purpose, research scholars are working on their projects in different areas of education. They try their level best to ensure the quality of work.

The quality of postgraduate study is not purely a question of supervision, methodology and motivation. According to Alan, et. al.(2005), it hinges also on institutional admission procedures and policies, faculty/school administration policies as well as assistance and infrastructure that is provided by faculty/school to supervisors and students, including financial assistance, access to child care, pastoral care, computing, library, office space, phone access, access to secretarial support, provision of research seminars and presentations, funding for library searches, conferences, travel grants, fieldwork, photocopying, and opportunities for casual work within the school.

The quality of higher education suffers as a result of not paying attention to all the dimensions of the holistic existence of higher education as each dimension contributes positively to its quality and at the same time, its absence or lack of it casts negative impact on the quality of higher education. There are many problems faced by the research scholars in pursuing their education. Madhusudhan (2007) found that the researches are faced with the problems of inadequate computers with Internet facilities, slow internet connection and lack of skills and training. The survey also reveals that 57 percent of the respondents are facing retrieval problems. Some research scholars lack research techniques and training. Hockey (1994) showed that there was problem of managing the combination of intellectual and counseling dimensions of the supervisory role and should be increased or alleviated by particular forms of communication with students.

In another study Nevada (2009) found that problems faced by the research scholars start with the registration stage itself like high research fees. Most of the research scholars choose the topic as advised by their supervisor. Poor facilities in the department such as lack of computer and internet facilities, poor electricity and water facilities, and inadequate access to learning resources, pure drinking water, hygienic toilet facilities, and Xerox machine in the library influence their works quite depressingly. The second dimension of the problems is associated with academic work, for example supervisors are very busy with other works; sometimes they are prejudiced towards sex and caste. They also do not guide their students to attend seminars, conferences and present research papers. The third dimension of the problems is related to the administration. For example, students need much help from the department and many times their problems are not solved due to long procedures taking even weeks. Many students who study on fellowships do not get fellowships timely. In fact choosing a research guide is the most important decision a student can make. Likewise choosing the right students is essential for the career of advisers. Both should have common research interest and compatible work habit, lack of adequate linkages between universities and research labs on one hand and business firms on the other hand restricts the capability to handle the real world problems and many a time the research work remains confined to academic interest alone.

## 2. NEEDS AND SCOPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

The higher education plays a vital role in the socio-economic development and political awareness of the country in Pakistan just like other countries. Its importance lies not only in providing degrees and thus producing quality human resources for various sectors of the economy, but also in making the youth agents of bringing about socio-economic changes in the country. However the higher education in Pakistan needs to be revamped for making it accessible and more relevant to the changing circumstances. Some of the statistics related to higher education are given to better understand the scenario of higher education in the country.

Table 2 shows that there are 132 universities in the public sector and private sector in Pakistan. In 2009-10 there were 73 public and 59 private universities in Pakistan <http://www.hec.gov.pk/OurInstitutes/Pages/Default.aspx>, accessed on 25-01-2010. Table 2 also shows that enrollment in higher education has increased over the years. Female enrollment has increased year by year.

In pursuit of institutional excellence in teaching and research, HEC has made massive investments to upgrade the physical infrastructure of universities, particularly to cater for the requirements of increased enrollment in higher education and to accommodate the students admitted through various human resource development programs. Also the development expenditure of the universities is allocated on the basis of performance and need, where the need is defined both in terms of the particular requirements of that institution as well as the need for improvement in the higher education sector at a macro level. ([http://publisher.hec.gov.pk/FPD/Development\\_Projects.html](http://publisher.hec.gov.pk/FPD/Development_Projects.html) , accessed on 25-12-2009).

In Pakistan, universities need skilled staff which is highly educated and well experienced in research to improve university standards. The experiences of advanced countries show that their progress and prosperity owes a lot to their advancement in scientific and technological fields, which in its turn directly relates with growth in the field of higher education. Therefore there is need to upgrade the university standards according to the developed one (Rehman, 1998). Table 1 show that the total number of students enrolled at PhD level in 2007-08 was 7321, which is 1% of the total enrolled students in the universities.

The research students in Pakistan also face many problems. These students hold demonstrations against the administrative infrastructure of the higher education in the country. They are always raising slogans against government policies. They are categorized in agitator and antiracists in global political scenario. The gravity of frustration among the university scholars can be easily gauged by taking a bird eye view of our newspapers. The frequency of such turbulence is on the rise day by day. If such situation continues then we will really be in a quagmire. The quality of higher education has shown no dramatic signs of improvement as even today, there is no single Pakistani university in the top 200 universities of the world. (<http://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings>, accessed on 27-12-2009). Why it is so? We are lacking in many things which will place our universities in the top ranking universities of the world especially in research. Looking at the public sector universities of Punjab province, due to multifarious problems faced by PhD scholars, the pace of PhD product is slow. So there is need to identify the problems faced by research scholars in public sector universities of Punjab province. Since PhD scholars are the tomorrow's eminent researchers of the society, therefore it is important to solve their problems to improve their skills in the field of research.

Problems of higher education in Pakistan are complicated to some extent. There are two main factors that are to be first documented and to be dealt with. The first is the increasing demand for higher education and proportionately fewer facilities available in public universities. The second factor relates to the low standard of the faculty especially in public universities. The remedies are yet to be discovered (Abdullah, 1992). A research study was conducted in the disciplines of social sciences in Peshawar University by Ali (1998) about the identification of the problems faced by M.Phil and PhD scholars. The results revealed that scholars faced many problems during their research. For example, they were not provided with proper financial support, laboratories, conveyance facilities, secretarial assistance as well as typing and computer services. Recommendations have been made to compensate them in the future for research work.

Bacha (2009) in his study on problems of PhD in English program found that the reasons for the Ph.D. degree ineffectiveness are the lack of competent faculty members, inadequately equipped libraries, a shortage in the state of the art language labs, insufficient financial support for the given research, unnecessary delays in granting theses, a sense of narrow-mindedness among the language program supervisors, lack of the foreign subject specialists, excessive emphasis on the theoretical work and inadequate availability of full time internet access.

The present study aims at exploring the problems in public sector universities of Punjab in the views of PhD Scholars. This research is significant because it will be helpful for the enhancement of research activities in public sector universities in Punjab, Pakistan. The study will be helpful for the administration and academicians to take remedial measures to overcome the problems by PhD scholars and their supervisors so as to improve the quality of higher education.

In view of the significance of identifying problems at higher education level, the study is aimed at following objectives.

1. To identify the problems of PhD research scholars in public sector universities of Punjab province.

2. To identify the problems being faced by supervisors of PhD scholars
3. To suggest viable measures to overcome problems faced by PhD students and their supervisors.

In order to achieve the objectives, following research questions were designed;

1. What are the academic (including research) problems of PhD research scholars in public sector universities of Punjab province?
2. What are the administrative and financial problems of PhD research scholars in public sector universities of Punjab province?
3. What are the problems being faced by supervisors of PhD scholar?
4. What measures should be taken to overcome problems faced by PhD students and their supervisors?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population of the study was 206 PhD scholars enrolled in public sector universities of Punjab province. A sample of 50 (approximate 25 % of the population) scholars was selected conveniently from three public universities from the Punjab province: Punjab University, Lahore; University of Education Lahore; and Baha-ud-Din Zakria University (BZU), Multan. The demographic information of the respondents is as under:

**Table A.** Demographic information

|                             |                      | Male | Female | Total |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|------|--------|-------|
| N                           |                      | 36   | 14     | 50    |
| Age                         | Less than 30 years   | 9    | 5      | 14    |
|                             | 30 to 40 years       | 17   | 7      | 24    |
|                             | More than 40 years   | 10   | 2      | 12    |
| Years as a research scholar | Less than one year   | 6    | 3      | 9     |
|                             | One to five years    | 19   | 6      | 25    |
|                             | More than five years | 11   | 5      | 16    |

#### 3.2 INSTRUMENT

It was basically a qualitative research study. For data collection, semi-structured interview was developed as a research instrument. The interview questions were developed by the researchers in light of literature review. The interview protocol was validated through expert opinion. The main theme of the instrument was to collect the information about the problems faced by PhD (Education) research scholars and their supervisors. The interview protocol was based on five key questions.

1. What type of problems you are facing as a PhD scholar in your university?
2. Do you think that enough seminars are being conducted for developing research skills?
3. How far you are satisfied with the existing online resources available in your department/university?
4. What problems do you face from administration side?

5. What problems do you face from your research supervisor?

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The recorded data was transcribed, coded and placed into following three categories.

- a. Problems related to administration
- b. Problems related to supervision
- c. Problems related to students own selves

##### a. PROBLEMS RELATED TO UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION

When researchers inquired about the problems of research scholars, most of them attributed their problems to administration. 80% of them highlighted the accommodation problem in the university hostel. For instance, one of the scholars, said, "it was difficult for us to live in the private hostels, because of high expenses in paying rent and eating food." Many PhD scholars of IER, Punjab University said that after one year of study, the institute did not allow them to stay in the university hostel. Similar findings were revealed in the study of Nevada (2009) in which it was found that students staying in hostels face more problems than day scholars.

About 28% scholars said that internal politics and grouping in public sector universities sometimes create a problem for the scholars in their approval of research synopses. For example, one female scholar said that "I am feeling difficulty in getting my synopsis approved, due to the clashes between my supervisor and the Director".

When the researchers asked question about the seminars whether professional seminars were conducted to enhance their knowledge and research skills? 58% scholars were of the opinion that administration did not conduct enough seminars to develop research aptitude and skills. A scholar, for example, asserted that "different teachers organize seminars but do not inform their students well on time". Another female scholar also responded like the same as she expressed "if some seminars were arranged, all the scholars were not informed properly". This infers that there was a problem in the planning and organization of the activities on the part of the administration. These findings support the results of a previous study undertaken by Alan, et al. (2005) which concluded that "the quality of postgraduate study is not purely a question of supervision, methodology and motivation but also requires the scholars to participate and attend research seminars and presentations". 66% scholars were of the opinion that there was limited access to online resources and a few latest books were available in the libraries. Similar finding was also revealed in the study of Nevada (2009), which asserted that the non-availability of books and journals in the department libraries is one of the problems of research scholars.

##### b. PROBLEMS RELATED TO SUPERVISION

The researchers also asked the respondents about problems they face related to the supervision of their research. 90% PhD scholars were of the opinion that supervisors did not give proper time to the scholars due to their academic work load. One of the interviewees said that "in the public sector universities, there was problem of less number of staff at PhD level that is why teachers were overloaded." Similar findings were revealed in the study of Nevada (2009) who found that supervisors are very busy with other work. Another important finding of the present study was that supervisors were biased and prejudiced in terms of sex and castes. Consequently, it creates problems for PhD scholars in their research theses.

About 74% of the scholars were of the opinion that supervisors were lacking in research competencies and could not guide the research scholars properly. One of the PhD research scholars said that "I am doing PhD research work on my own; whenever I want to consult my supervisor and get my work approved, I have to give my supervisor monetary benefits (cloths, fruits, bakery items etc.)." This finding supports the results of a previous study undertaken by Bacha (2009). He found that the lack of competent faculty members is one of the reasons given normally for the Ph.D. degree ineffectiveness.

About 86% scholars pointed out that there was communication gap between supervisors and supervisees. Similar findings were revealed in the study of Hockey (1994) who found that there was problem of managing the combination of intellectual and counseling dimensions of the supervisory role. Table 4 shows that 6% scholars were of the view that harshness of supervisor creates problem for them and they cannot discuss easily the matters related to their research due to their harshness. One female scholar said that “my supervisor’s harshness sometimes creates problems for me as I remain unable to discuss my research work properly”.

### C. PROBLEMS RELATED TO STUDENTS OWN SELVES

When researchers inquired about problems of research scholars, the scholars attributed some of the problems to their own selves as well. About 56% scholars were of the opinion that they do not give proper work to their research projects due to their other responsibilities and domestic problems. They pointed out that they were facing a problem in English writing. Their inadequate ability in research writing and English language skill creates many problems for them. Table 4 shows that approximate 90% scholars were of the opinion that they were facing problem in English writing. They said that they are weak in vocabulary and grammar.

About 92% PhD scholars were of the view point that their main problem is financial problem, especially in IER where after one year, the university kicks the scholars out from the hostel. One of the scholars said that “I am lacking in IT skills and research techniques which creates problem for me during my research project”. This finding supports the results of a previous study undertaken by Madhusudhan (2007), and he found that some research scholars lack research techniques and training. One of the scholars was of the opinion that “after course work, I have joined my job because I could not get leave from my parent department and thus, am unable to give proper time to the research project.”

During the interviews, approximate 8% scholars pointed out that people hesitate in giving information for research projects which creates a problem for researchers. For example, many respondents do not reply properly and fill up the research instrument.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PhD scholars face three types of problems related to administration, supervision and students own selves. The key problems which have been identified through this study are:

- It is seen that the administration does not take keen interest in conducting enough seminars to develop research aptitude and skills.
- The public sector universities of Punjab province provide inadequate online and library resources to their students. Most of the time PhD scholars face difficulties in getting the relevant material via online learning resources.
- There were problems like internal politics and grouping in public sector universities which result in delay of approval of synopses from BASR, hurdles to get accommodation in the university hostel, and then provision of other basic facilities of living. All these problems were related to administration.
- The teaching load of the research supervisor is quite high and they are overloaded with teaching classes and other assignments; hence do not give proper time to their supervisees. It was also found that many supervisors did not possess enough research skills to effectively supervise their students; it might be due to the reason that the themes of research were not in accordance with the area of specialization of their supervisors.
- Another problem is that research scholars are reluctant to work at the required pace because many of them are busy in their jobs and henceforth do not find ample time to their research work. Also they lack in writing skills of English, and face financial problems.

In view of the aforesaid conclusions, following recommendations can be put forward to improve the quality of higher education in Pakistan.



- There should be a time line for all the procedures of course work, comprehensive examination, allocation of supervisors, and submission of synopses.
- The minutes of the meeting between supervisor and supervisee must be written down in order to have a sense of direction. There must be a continuous report on what have been achieved and what is left? These minutes should be checked by the head of department.
- The online learning resources should be increased and students should have an easy access to these resources.
- There should be more training programs and workshops in order to increase research competencies of the supervisors.
- More seminars and workshops should be arranged for PhD scholars in order to enhance their research knowledge and competence, English writing skills, communication and presentation skills.

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**Table 1.** Number of Students Enrolled by Sector and Level of Degree over the years

| Sector  | Year    | Bachelor | Master | M. Phil. | Ph.D. | PGD  | Total  |
|---------|---------|----------|--------|----------|-------|------|--------|
| Public  | 2001-02 | 156141   | 66675  | 3683     | 3061  | 2841 | 232401 |
|         | 2002-03 | 186602   | 78709  | 4462     | 4045  | 2666 | 276484 |
|         | 2003-04 | 252841   | 92613  | 6802     | 6277  | 3595 | 362128 |
|         | 2004-05 | 281915   | 107110 | 7229     | 4213  | 3544 | 404011 |
|         | 2005-06 | 306097   | 118615 | 9134     | 4826  | 3867 | 442539 |
|         | 2006-07 | 380350   | 147015 | 11321    | 5019  | 4793 | 548498 |
|         | 2007-08 | 441112   | 170905 | 13161    | 6876  | 5572 | 637626 |
| Private | 2001-02 | 30340    | 11854  | 188      | 63    | 1428 | 43873  |
|         | 2002-03 | 37688    | 15815  | 380      | 93    | 1285 | 55261  |
|         | 2003-04 | 42871    | 16054  | 652      | 195   | 1336 | 61108  |
|         | 2004-05 | 48018    | 17786  | 1127     | 230   | 792  | 67953  |
|         | 2005-06 | 53586    | 22302  | 1296     | 313   | 1437 | 78934  |
|         | 2006-07 | 62196    | 25870  | 1503     | 326   | 1667 | 91563  |
|         | 2007-08 | 70204    | 29233  | 1699     | 446   | 1887 | 103466 |
| Overall | 2001-02 | 186481   | 78529  | 3871     | 3124  | 4269 | 276274 |
|         | 2002-03 | 224290   | 94524  | 4842     | 4138  | 3951 | 331745 |
|         | 2003-04 | 295712   | 108667 | 7454     | 6472  | 4931 | 423236 |
|         | 2004-05 | 329933   | 124896 | 8356     | 4443  | 4336 | 471964 |
|         | 2005-06 | 359683   | 140917 | 10430    | 5139  | 5304 | 521473 |
|         | 2006-07 | 442547   | 172886 | 12824    | 5344  | 6460 | 640061 |
|         | 2007-08 | 511317   | 200138 | 12859    | 7321  | 7455 | 741092 |

**Source:**(<http://www.hec.gov.pk/InsideHEC/Divisions/QALI/Others/Statistics/Pages/LevelofDegree.aspx>, accessed on 22-01-2010)

**Table 2.** Detail statistics by HEC

|                               | FACTS & FIGURES |        |        |        |        |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|                               | 2006            | 2007   | 2008   | 2009   | 2010   |
| Higher Education Institutions | 118             | 121    | 126    | 127    | 132    |
| Enrollment                    | 521473          | 639597 | 738373 | 803507 | 948268 |
| Enrollment Male %             | 59.15           | 56.85  | 56.5   | 55.7   | 55     |
| Enrollment Female%            | 40.85           | 43.15  | 43.5   | 44.3   | 45     |
| PhD Faculty                   | 2686            | 3312   | 3483   | 3586   | X      |
| Non PhD Faculty               | 9192            | 10691  | 11616  | 12860  | X      |
| PhD Faculty %                 | 22.6            | 23.9   | 23.06  | 21.8   | X      |
| Graduate Produced             | 380995          | 362684 | 449153 | 496207 | X      |
| PhD Enrollment in Local Uni.  | X               | X      | 3545   | 4918   | 6366   |
| PhD Graduates from Local Uni. | 408             | 438    | 628    | 779    | 620    |
| Citation                      | 10097           | 11522  | 13131  | 9107   | 5239   |

Source:(<http://hec.gov.pk/pages/hecmain.aspx>, accessed on 15-07-2012)

**Table 3.** *Initial Codes and Broad Categories of the Data Collected by Interviews*

| Broad Categories                      | Initial codes   | Frequencies | %  |
|---------------------------------------|---|-------------|----|
|                                       | Internal politics and grouping in public sector universities sometimes creates a problem for the scholars in their approval of research synopsis.                                   | 14          | 28 |
|                                       | Administration did not conduct enough seminars to develop research aptitude and skills. If some seminars were arranged, scholars were not informed properly                         | 29          | 58 |
| Problems related to Administration    | There was less access to online resources, less latest books present in the libraries.  | 33          | 66 |
|                                       | Accommodation problem in the university hostel.   | 40          | 80 |
|                                       | Supervisors did not give proper time to them, due to their academic load.   | 45          | 90 |
|                                       | Supervisor was lacking in research competencies and could not guide them properly.  | 37          | 74 |
| Problems related to supervisors       | The communication gap between supervisor and supervisee.  | 43          | 86 |
|                                       | The scholars said that the supervisor harshness is also one of the problems in public sector universities of Punjab province.   | 3           | 6  |
|                                       | Scholars do not give proper work to their research projects due to their responsibilities and problems at home.   | 28          | 56 |
|                                       | A problem in English writing.   | 45          | 90 |
| Personal problems related to scholars | Financial problems  | 46          | 92 |
|                                       | The scholars said that people hesitating in giving information for research projects. Which creates a problem for researcher e.g. in survey respondents were not replying properly. | 4           | 8  |