

## **PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES TO GRADUATE AND POST GRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITIES IN KPK : A CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY OF MALAKAND**

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**Abstract-** Research environment is enriched by training, exposure and organizational ownership of it. Researchers are encouraged by governments at higher level when they embark upon programs with a view to accommodate the researchers' views for better future prospects. This paper argues that research in social sciences is hampered by lack of proper guidance to researchers and congenial research environment in the HEIs of Pakistan. The study attempts to appreciate the level of problems and difficulties faced by social sciences' researchers that significantly de-motivate them during their research both at graduate and post graduate levels. The study employs quantitative analysis of randomly collected data from 70 graduate and post graduate research students of different social sciences departments at Malakand University through a structured questionnaire. Data has been analyzed through statistical tools and Chi-square test with correlation technique. The results and findings indicate that researchers in social sciences are confronted with various difficulties and challenges during the process of research. The study suggest lucrative measures in the form of training programs, computer skills, coordination and integration among students and research community and availability of trained teachers and materials.

**Key Words:** *Data, Selection, Collection, Processing, Challenges, Social Science, Trainings, Research,*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Higher education aims at improving the lot of society and adds to the living standard of its citizens (Haider, 2008: 1; Mohanthy, 2000; Barnett, 1990). It contributes to the socio-economic uplift of nations by exploring the hidden and the unknown by means of research endeavors (Jones, 1996: 7; Allen 1988). In Pakistan too, higher education is of late geared up to meet the challenges ahead. Various major areas of enterprise have been focused and addressed in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century (Osama et al, 2009: 38; Rahman, 2009: 874; Sarwar et al. 2010: 3). However, efforts at micro-level and primary issues have been predominantly ignored which has resulted in slowing down the process of inculcation of scientific spirit in students. The students, on the other hand, are neither lacking in talent nor in their ethical standards (Siddiq, 1978; Hassan, 1990) but lack of proper guidance and research environment in universities have considerably undermined their output during their research work (Memon, 2007: 54). In the march towards improvement in output in higher education institutions (HEIs), the students have emerged to be the most ignored section. Mainly, the HEIs bank upon the academic output of foreign qualified professionals for projecting their output and have so far failed to appreciate the miseries of students. In this paper, it is argued that the universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are overcrowded with teachers who have

graduated in the same traditional environment marked by virtual absence of scientific spirit of inquiry. Based on their previous experience, they give more attention to bookish knowledge in comparison to motivating the students towards research (Rahman, 1998: 672). This sense of deprivation becomes more acute in the field of social sciences. In comparison to other sciences, here the output is deplorable keeping in view the number of students studying social sciences. Further, majority of higher degrees and certificates in social sciences carry research projects as compulsory parts of them but lack of training and supervision fail to produce quality research output (Tarar, 2006: 5081; Sarwar et al 2010: 4). This study is based on judging the level of understanding of students and their response to problems and difficulties they encounter or have encountered during their research work in social sciences in HEIs.

In the subsequent discussion, a theoretical overview of scientific research procedure is given with a view to highlight problems and difficulties which in turn may discourage and de-motivate students in the successful and meaningful completion of their research assignments. Next follows statement of the problem with focus on the three main phases of research including selection, collection and data processing supported by available research. Then follow discussion over specific

objectives of the study and research hypothesis. Later on, method and procedure of the data collection is discussed followed by results and discussion over the collected information. In the end, a comprehensive conclusion and recommendations are enlisted on the basis the overall findings of this study.

### **Academic Research in Social Sciences: Problems and Challenges**

Academic research is the hallmark of HEIs which enable them to come up to the expectations of the society by serving as a linchpin in the process of development. Universities guide and co-operate with a nation's industrial and agricultural sectors by providing them with guidelines for formulating workable policies and embarking on research projects in the relatively ignored areas (Memon, 2007: 47; Nirman, 2007: 1-4). However, the foundation and establishment of this relationship need thorough planning, training, access to funds and information, institutional infrastructure, and integration with research communities (Iqbal et al, 2011: 190; Sabzwari et al 2009). In order to evolve remedial strategy for their improvement, it is important to understand research capacities in social sciences and the factors which limit them. This is achieved by building capacity at individual, organization and system level. The level of coordination between the three in turn determines scope for improvement of the research system (World Social Science Report 2010: 101). However, individual capacity cannot be improved unless organizational and system level limitations are not addressed as all these threads are interrelated (Volmink & Dare, 2005: 705).

In Pakistan, HEIs operate under the umbrella of Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan and has taken strides for the improvement of research infrastructure in universities (Tarar, 2006: 5084). It has introduced reforms and has taken the initiative to encourage research output of students. However, this policy is yet to bear fruit in the field of social sciences. Broadly, the disciplines of social sciences are marked by limited attention and marginalization in comparison to natural, professional and business sciences in public sector HEIs while this lack of attention is almost complete in private sector universities.

As a result, the gap is widening between research output in social sciences and others. Further, these inadequacies also considerably affect the quality and usefulness of the social sciences' researchers. Their share in sponsorship schemes for training and higher education is negligible in comparison to students of other sciences. Their departments and faculties are suffering from scarcity of qualified professionals to train and educate them (Rao, 2003, Iqbal, 1981, Mughal & Manzoor, 1999). Similarly, there is marked shortage of up to date literature available to them. Lack of training also hampers their access to the world of research both in the form of books and e-library (Rahman, 1998: 674). The *Foreign Faculty Program* initiated by the HEC has practically not been fruitful to the field of social sciences.

The observation of Iqbal (1981) that mostly university teachers are mere graduates with little or no practical research experience is still held true for social sciences.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Human societies are undergoing through multiple and overlapping changes in climate, biodiversity and marine ecosystems necessitating the urge for new policies and strategies to cope with them for survival and sustainability. The available research holds human activities as largely responsible and advocates deeper understanding of them to effectively combat these changes. Thus the traditional research practices in sciences fall short of bringing the desired results (Judd et al, 1991: 6). In other words, effective handling of the world at large asks for creative research in social sciences and its integration with other sciences for affectivity and amelioration (World Social Science Report 2010).

As far as social research is concerned, it discovers new facts or verifies the old ones through logical and systematic methods as part of scientific undertaking, to study their interrelationships and the natural laws governing them (Iqbal et al, 2011: 189; Neuman, 2007: 24; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). It comprehends social life with the objective to bring it into considerable human control (Young, 1962: 43).

Social researchers focus general and abstract problems, devise long term strategies and bring forth broader perspective about accuracy in procedures and theories having long lasting consequences for the betterment of humanity (Neuman, 2007: 29; Jones, 1996: 28). In order to ensure quality in social research, the researcher must develop 'social insight, intellectual and personal integrity, sensitive perception, disciplined imagination and mental reserve' in addition to knowledge of techniques of research. However, the role of personal factor is considerable during the process of social research where ill-informed objectivity and impersonality undermines research utility (Young, 1962: 85-6). Further, the validity of research data is also linked to the amount of participation in the research situation by the researcher (Jones, 1996: 5-6).

The focus of this study is the individual researcher in various fields of social sciences in HEIs in Pakistan. This is an attempt to highlight and bring forth problems and difficulties during academic research which the researcher encounters with a view to enlighten the intellectual community and to provide them with relevant indicators for policy making.

This study also focuses on those indicators which demotivate and thus deprives a researcher to deliver in the field. However, to appreciate the magnitude of the problem, it is pertinent to highlight major areas (focused in this research) where the researchers usually confront problems and difficulties during various phases of research activities categorized as selection, collection and processing of data for the purpose of this study.

### Selection

Successful delimitation of the problem for research study requires suitable methods, appreciation of the situation, and imaginative skills to devise and invent (Vesley, 2007: 84). All these requirements rest on the researcher's knowledge of previous research in the field (Young, 1962: 87). This knowledge originates from the main operating agent i.e. teacher who guides the researcher on the basis of his relevant research experience and quality research material available in the shape of books and e-library. However, as referred to earlier, teachers in social sciences fail to equip their students for research because they themselves have hardly been through motivated research experience. In addition, the limited number of qualified teachers find it difficult to handle research students in an undesirably large number (Iqbal et al, 2011: 191). Consequently, the students waste a considerably time and energy in addition to their level of motivation in selection of research problem and selection of appropriate supervisor that in turn hamper their development of research proposal and timely access to relevant literature which are basic to move a step ahead successfully (Young, 1962:87) .

### Collection

At the onset, it is noted that research is a continuous process (Iqbal et al, 2011: 189) and deficiency in one aspect affect the overall purpose of the research. The problems highlighted in selection of problems etc permeates to collection of data as well. The immediate environment in which the researcher collects data is marked by lack of education and understanding the significance of the research. Once entered into the field for data collection, the researcher is expected to handle multifarious issues apart from addressing the research problem. The situation is further aggravated by the time constraint as academic research is always time bound with less flexibility for the researcher in this regard. Lack of previous research experience along with time restrictions seconded by the less exposed but overburdened supervisor combine to plague the motivation level of the researcher in the field.

### Data Processing

Along with the above discussed problems, the researcher also needs to be well versed in computer and other tools for processing of data. This is important on two grounds: firstly, the research supervisor either remain busy or does not possess up to date knowledge and secondly, the present day research is mostly based on the use of modern tools to maximize accuracy and to save time. Broadly, data processing constitutes the concluding part of any research project but success in it is directly associated with the selection and collection as discussed above. Failure in either of these parts amounts to failure in the overall research.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- a. To identify and analyze the difficulties of researchers in *selection* implying selection of

appropriate research topic, supervisor and relevant literature

- b. To highlight the difficulties of researchers in *Collection* implying actual research undertaken in the field
- c. To assess the difficulties of researchers *processing* in which involves collection, codification and report writing

### HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

The hypothesis of the study is based on the assumption that it is not the researcher but the research environment with less equipped teachers as the operational agents who are responsible for inactivity in social sciences' research in Pakistan (Iqbal et al, 2011: 190-191, Sarwar et al 2010: 4). The particular hypothesis to be tested is:  
 H<sub>0</sub>: Quality in research work is linked with the researcher's motivation which primarily depends on a congenial research environment for selection, collection and data processing.

### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The study is empirically quantitative in approach however reinforced by qualitative discussion. The data is collected from 05 departments including Sociology, Social Work, Economics, Management Sciences and Education operating in University of Malakand where 190 are graduate students while 27 are enrolled in M.Phil / PhD program. The study encompasses a total of 70 students out of the population universe of 217 collected randomly. Among them, a total of 14 students have been selected from each department including 12 graduate and 02 postgraduate students.

The data was collected through a questionnaire (already structured with questions and answers showing response of the respondents against problems in selection, collection and data processing) designed to test and record the views of researchers to the extent of problems they faced during the course of research. Statistically Chi-square and correlation techniques have been applied to judge the relation between quality research, researcher motivation and problems faced by the researchers during research. The data has been given in tabular form showing frequencies against each statement followed by statistical tests and bar charts enumerating the percentage value of each frequency. Besides, results of the study have been discussed in detail with the given tables and literature cited in the study.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data collected from graduates and post graduate researchers in different fields of social sciences at University of Malakand regarding difficulties and problems they faced in selection of topic/problem, field visits and data processing in the course of their research have been analyzed on the basis of their relevant characteristics whereby the results indicate that while conducting research in social sciences majority (83%) researchers are confused and face problems in

*selection*. Besides, after selection of research topic its approval is subject to the acceptance of statutory bodies of the university. Majority of (71%) strongly agree to complications and problems in this regard. Further, as many as (86%) researchers find it difficult to develop a research proposal. (See Table-1)

The results derived from this study illustrate that teachers in social sciences fail to equip their students for research because they themselves have hardly been through motivated research experience that further lead to discourage and de-motivate research students (81%). However, even good teachers find difficulty in teaching research because of scarcity and lack of access to relevant literature i.e. books, journals, articles, e-sources. The tabular data indicates that access to research means is a major stumbling block for researchers. In this connection, majority (89%) of respondents agree to a great extent that they find difficulty in access to relevant literature. Further, (79%) researchers are of the view that for them access to library proves difficult. In addition, as many as (90%) of the researchers do not enjoy access to internet. Last but not the least, access to relevant books is a problem for majority (73%) of the researchers.

To sum up, quality in research output is subject to sound and well-equipped research environment, intellectual supervision, guidance and availability of relevant material. The same contention was also proposed in the hypothetical statement of this study, which was accordingly put to Chi-square test where the value of  $P=.000^* < .05$  with ( $\chi^2 = 58.57, D.f. =7$ ) degree of freedom shows that there is strong relationship between ideal research output and challenge-free research environment. Further, the given hypothesis was subsequently put to test for the validity and verification of its results through correlation techniques which also upheld the findings. The percentage value is given in the shape of chart to illustrate the results of the given problems and challenges (See Fig-1).

As far as data collection is concerned, it also marked by multifarious challenges to researchers. Firstly, they find difficulty in effectively communicating with respondents and it was supported by (84%) of them who agreed to a great extent that they fail to convince or make the respondents understand about the nature and purport of their research. In relation to the respondents, majority of (81%) agree that during their research in the field, they are confronted with the difficulty to reconcile the local language with the standardized terms used in social research (See Table-2).

In addition, when researchers enter the field for data collection most (76%) of them face problem of mutual acceptance that is needed and considered as a pre-requisite for ensuring authenticity of the information / data collected. Majority (80%) of the researchers questioned the authenticity of the information they collect while many (74%) mourned the insurmountable challenge of rapport building. The situation is further aggravated by the time constraint and management as academic research is always time bound with less flexibility for the researchers in this regard. This was

supported by as many as (79%) of the total researchers. Further, the statistical analysis of the collected data indicates that selection of the appropriate respondents and recording of the information are also among the difficulties in the process of data collection during research as supported by (87%) and (83%) respectively. Similarly, majority (80%) of the respondents find it a challenge to find ways and means to keep the secrecy of the collected information while resource management during research process has been noted as a difficulty by as many as (74%) of the researchers.

Resultantly, the above mentioned results provide a ground to test the assumptions and hypothetical statement of this research study that there is strong association of quality research with field environment. To judge the association of the research variables selected for this study with research output in terms of quality, chi-square test was applied where the value of  $P=.000^* < .05$  with ( $\chi^2 = 65.41, D.f. =9$ ) degree of freedom reveals that the relationship is significant. A further test was undertaken with Pearson's correlation technique for validation. A chart is given below to signify the percentage position of each of the tabular variables in relation to this study (See Fig-2).

After selection and collection of research data, a researcher is faced with the challenging task of data processing. In this connection, a significant number (70%) of researchers lack necessary skills to classify the bulk of information into their appropriate categories. Most of the researchers (74%) also complain about the lack of knowledge of data coding. The above two observations are further strengthened by the majority of (83%) researchers who accept their inefficiency at utilizing computer as a tool for research.

The tabular data explicitly clarifies that most (89%) of the researchers are unaware of Statistical tools and their applications for the purpose of their collected data. Subsequently, they fail to properly display the information in desired tabular form as supported by (66%) of the researchers. Such difficulties in the above two aspects emerge as counterproductive during the process of applying statistical tests relevant to the data according to the view (90%) researchers. The problems of the struggling researchers during the process of data processing do not end here. Majority (80%) of the respondents complain about their inability to explain the data and to come to true results after the analysis of their data as pointed to by (74%) of the total respondents. They also agree to a large extent of (91%) and (76%) when it comes to finding a link between theory and literature in addition to following a standardized research format respectively (See Table-3).

The findings and results drawn from this research study in the above mentioned tables reveal quality research is directly associated with proper knowledge of various tools and techniques including computer and statistical tools along with understanding the nature and purpose of a research study. The hypothesis was also tested by applying chi-square test where the value of  $P=.000^* < .05$  with ( $\chi^2 = 70.00, D.f. =9$ ) degree of freedom

showing a strong association between the hypothetical variables also authenticated by correlation technique. The below given chart illustrates the percentage position of each of the variable selected for data processing during research (See Fig-3).

### CONCLUSION

Research in social sciences in Pakistan is suffering from inherent flaws in the system of higher education. Overall, productivity or output is deplorable in comparison to other sciences. The research produced from time to time as requirement for completion of higher degrees fail to make an impact in terms of acceptability and reliability at national and international level. The HEIs predominantly focus the teaching part at the cost of ignoring the research part of social sciences. Although the sample study was undertaken in University of Malakand but the variables are such that they may equally be applicable to other universities of Pakistan. As like others, university of Malakand is a public sector university in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa enjoying comparatively same amount of facilities and faculty to train and educate its students. This study was conducted with a view to focus the problems of those students who have been through research projects at graduate and post graduate level. The aim was to highlight the problem areas which would allow the organization and the state to take measures in the right direction. The study, in an indirect way, pointed to the selection criterion of teachers in HEIs who are in most part unaware about the basics of research. It also underlined the dearth of qualified teachers who fail to properly manage the increasing number of research students. One of the objectives of this study was also to criticize the overall education system where no provision for research training is available at undergraduate level and consequently the students embark upon research degrees with virtually no idea of it.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The national policy of promotion and improvement in research in social sciences must be revisited from the perspective of students' researchers. The state must ensure balance in attention to social sciences and other sciences. Further, the state must ensure that each university provides necessary computer education to researchers for access to literature and electronic tools of data analysis.
2. It is imperative to revisit the curriculum taught at college level and to revise it on modern lines with ample space for basics of research so that the students get chance to develop research skills before entering university education.
3. At the institutional level, frequency of effective training sessions must be increased and students' exchange program be initiated where the researchers may get opportunity to interact and integrate with research communities in other institutions. The research supervisors must also be exposed to relevant training and rationalization with regard to their workload be undertaken by the

institutional heads. Further, the beginner teachers must be particularly focused and research assignments should be given to them under the guidance to qualified and experienced teachers to allow them a chance to polish their research skills.

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Table 1- Difficulties Faced by Social Researchers in Selection of the Problem/Topic, Supervision and Searching Literature

Areas in which researchers faced problems/difficulties	Extent of problems	
	To Some Extent	To Greater Extent
Problem in selection of topic	12	58
Problem in approval of the topic	16	54
Problem in proposal development	10	60
Problem in supervision and guidance	13	57
Problem in searching relevant literature	08	62
Problem in access to libraries	15	55
Problem in access to internet	07	63
Problem in access to books	19	51

$P=.000^{**} < .05$ ) shows that there is strong relationship between challenges to researcher in social sciences and selection of the problem, ( $\chi^2 = 58.57$ , D.f. =7)

**Correlations**

		Challenges to social science	Difficulties faced by researcher in selection of the problem
Challenges to social science	Pearson Correlation	1	.626**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	70	70
Difficulties faced by researcher in selection of the problem	Pearson Correlation	.626**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	70	70

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2-Difficulties/Challenges Faced by Researchers while Visiting the Field and Confronting Research Respondents

Areas of challenges/difficulties to researchers	Extent of challenges	
	To Some Extent	To Greater Extent
Researcher-respondent language problems	11	59
Problem in conceptual and terminological understanding	13	57
Problem in acceptance	17	53
Problem in acquiring authentic information	14	56
Problem of rapport building	18	52
Problem in selection of respondents	09	61
Problem in recording information	12	58
Problem in time management	15	55
Problem in data confidentiality	14	56
Problem in resource management	18	52

$P=.000^{**} < .05$ ) shows that there is strong relationship between challenges to social sciences and field visit, ( $\chi^2 = 65.41$ , D.f. =9)

**Correlations**

		Challenges to social science	Difficulties faced by researcher while visiting the field
Challenges to social science	Pearson Correlation	1	.760**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	70	70
Difficulties faced by researcher while visiting the field	Pearson Correlation	.760**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	70	70

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3-Problems/difficulties faced by researchers in data processing, data presentation and report writing

Areas of difficulties to researchers	Extent of difficulties	
	To Some Extent	To Greater Extent
Problem in data classification	21	49
Problem in data coding	18	52
Problem in use of computer	12	58
Problems in application of statistical tools	08	62
Problem in data tabulation	15	55
Problem in application of appropriate statistical test	07	63
Problem in data explanation	14	56
Problem in discussion of results	18	52
Problem in linkage with theory and literature	06	64
Problem in following the appropriate research format	17	53

$P = .000 < .05$  shows that there is strong relationship between challenges to social sciences and data processing, ( $\chi^2 = 70.00$ , D.f. =9)

**Correlations**

		Challenges to social science	Problem in Data Management , presentation and exposition
<b>Challenges to social science</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	-.387**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	70	70
<b>Problem in Data Management , presentation and exposition</b>	Pearson Correlation	-.387**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	70	70

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

