

PROBLEM OF LEARNERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SINDH: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a research conducted at the University of Sindh on the problems faced by the learners at the university. The data for the study was collected from 16 teachers of the university from various departments. The data was collected through questionnaires containing open-ended questions sent via email. The teachers replied to the questions related to problems, their causes and suggested their solutions. Lack of English language competency and subject-related knowledge due to prior education from government schools in rural areas usually are the most discussed problems by the participants. The rural background of most of the learners was one of the key issues, which affect their learning. The participants suggested the revision of syllabi focusing the job market.

INTRODUCTION

The basic education of the learners at schools and colleges is almost zero especially in case of the students of yellow schools. Copying and cheating in exams which is not allowed in the university is a great hindrance to excel at university level.

The above extract is taken from the interview of one of the male teachers of the University of Sindh, when he was discussing the causes of problems faced by students at the same university. This paper is based on a research conducted on the teachers' perspective on problems faced by students in the University of Sindh, the causes of these problems and teachers' suggestions and solutions.

This paper is divided into five other sections apart from the introduction. These sections discuss the background of the field of study, objectives of the research, research methodology, a detailed data analysis with three sub-sections each discussing one of the research questions, and the paper ends with a summary of the entire research.

BACKGROUND

The University of Sindh is a public sector university and the oldest in the country. It is a general university with more than 43 different teaching and research departments, institutes and centers. There are eight different faculties in the University of Sindh.

In the university the students securing highest percentages in their matriculation, intermediate and the university pre-entry tests prefer to get admissions following their choices. The best students get admissions in top departments. However, due to being a big university with so many departments, most of the students applying for admission get placement in one or the other department.

The students coming to the university are a good blend of rural and urban background, and with both public and private schooling.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main focus of this research is to find the problems faced by our students and the reasons behind them. In order to solve the problems, suggestions are also taken as part of the data. It is expected that the study will explore the issues and bring forward a document for the administration to consult to in future.

The study addresses following 03 research questions:

- What are the main problems faced by learners at the University of Sindh?
- What are the main causes of the problems?
- How can the problems of the learners be solved?

In order to achieve the purpose the research methodology that is used is discussed in next section.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to find out the problems faced by learners at the University of Sindh, the reasons behind these problems and to bring forward the suggestions from the teachers of the university to solve these problems.

The study is a small scale research using the case study approach as it is intended to help researchers to understand such similar situations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The study is set in the present day educational environment at the University of

Sindh. It is a 'descriptive research' rather than experimental, correlational or evaluative (Glatthorn and Joyner, 2005).

Keeping the nature of the research in mind, qualitative paradigm is used for the study. Qualitative approach gives a sense to the situation with particular reference to the participants; it contributes with those aspects of the study which quantitative approach cannot bring in. The qualitative research focuses on 'the participants' rather than the researcher's interpretations and priorities' (Dörnyei, 2001).

The kind of research instruments used in this study is a qualitative open-ended questionnaire. I preferred questionnaires because, as Dörnyei (2003) notices, they are time, effort and resources efficient when compared to other instruments of research. Thus, they are *cost effective*. I wanted to get the participation of as many university teachers as possible. This could not be done through other qualitative tools.

The study took place at the University of Sindh. 16 teachers, both male and female participated in the research; though questionnaire was sent to a far greater number. The teachers participating in the study are from different academic faculties, with varying teaching and researching experiencing in the university. However, the majority of the teachers are middle aged, PhDs, working in the university for 10 years or more.

All participants were sent the questionnaires, carrying open-ended questions related to the research questions, through email. The participants returned their filled questionnaires through email as well. I highly appreciate all the 16 participants for the interest they took in this research that they showed by their detailed answers to each of the questions. The next section will discuss the findings of this study in detail.

DISCUSSION

I am dividing the discussion into three sub-sections discussing each of the research questions in a section. The next section discusses teachers views on the problems faced by learners, followed by a section on the causes behind these problems, and finally with a section on suggestions.

The problems of Learners

The participants mentioned 18 problems overall. More than half of the participants agreed that following two are the most important problems faced by the learners at the University of Sindh.

- English Language: Learners mostly come to the University of Sindh from poor rural background with most of their pre-university education from government sector institutions, where the quality of education is poor. Therefore, they lack in communication skills in English language, which is the medium of instruction at the university (see also Pathan *et.al.*, 2010). However, sometimes, in order to help the learners during their first year at the university, if the teachers in university use Sindhi or Urdu as medium of instruction, the books are still in English (this problem leads to the other most important problem, mentioned below).
- Subject related knowledge: A big number of learners coming to the university belong to poor academic background. Not just their language, but more importantly, their knowledge related to their major/core subject is also quite low, with a shallow understanding of the aims of the course. On the other hand, a little number of learners comes from good academic background, making the problems even complex due to mixed ability classes. Simultaneously, under the university's admission policy, learners are offered admission in one or the other department despite low scores in pre-entry tests. These departments might not be on the list of choices of the learners. Mostly, learners prefer to get placement in whichever department they are offered, rather than rejecting the offer. Due to this, their interest in the subject of study is very low.

A good number of participants also mentioned following three problems:

- Large classes: Due to over-crowded classes in some departments, it is very difficult for the teachers to impart knowledge following individual needs. Besides, in such cases usually the classes are teacher controlled with little or no participation of learners, for which Sarwar (2001) brings forth some techniques.
- Untrained teachers: The problems within the classroom, including the issue of large classes, can be solved if teachers are trained to do that (Soomro, 2013). However, the teachers' appointment at the university is based on their subject related knowledge, not on their teaching capabilities. And also they are not given any training on selection before joining their duties.

- Lack of resources: Being a government university, the university charges minimal amount as fees, and therefore, run on government aid given to almost all government universities in the country. But the aid is not enough to provide all the required facilities to the learners in order to make the life easier for them. The university lack appropriate teaching-learning facilities, for example, books in library, computers in labs, Audio-Visual Aids (overhead Projectors).

Dornyei (2000) argues that, ‘motivation is responsible for *why* people decide to do something, *how long* they are willing to sustain the activity, and *how hard* they are going to pursue it’. Motivation of the learners at the University of Sindh is badly affected by lack of practical usage of their education. In most of the cases the subjects and even entire courses are not target-driven. Even the teachers do not provide clear guideline on the relationship between the courses of study and the industry or job market. The courses of study are examination oriented rather than job oriented.

Besides, the student politics at the university affect the smooth running of the classes. Every now and then, there are boycotts of classes, which affect the serious learners more than anybody else; as said, ‘all behavior is situated within a field of action, which has its own system of valuation and practice’ (Lareau & Horvat 1999:39).

Among the not very commonly mentioned problems were

- Financial problems with learners due to their social background
- Hygiene problem and security issues at hostels
- Academic process including switch from Annual to Semester system
- Co-education affecting negatively sometimes, esp. in case of female learners
- Lack of feedback by teachers on exams, assignments, presentation
- Transport problem

The next section will discuss the causes of these problems, as the teachers perceive them.

CAUSES OF PROBLEMS

‘The present is necessarily insignificant when compared with the long period of the past because of which we have emerged in the form we have today’. (Durkheim, 1977:11; cited in, Bourdieu, 1990:56) The causes behind the above mentioned problems lie deeply within our social strata. The bigger social structures of our

society, existing over ages, are affecting our lives on individual basis, as one of the participants says, 'We as a nation are more traditional than innovative.'

The most important reason suggested by the participants is that the majority of learners come to the university from rural economically weak background. This is affecting learners personally as well as academically. Belonging to poor rural backgrounds, the learners, on one hand, have the least financial support from family and even most of the times they would stay worried about the crisis back home than concentrating on their education. On the other hand, their pre-university education in the government institutions at their villages or nearby towns academically handicaps them, notes Siddiqui (2006). The government schools and colleges, especially in rural areas, have poor teaching and learning environment (Shahriar, 2013). Due to their background the learners hardly have any intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Noel *et.al.*, 1999, 2001). Neither the people around them, parents, elders, friends etc, do not make them realize the significance of education; nor do they themselves find much time to ponder on these things. For a detailed discussion on this see Shahriar (2008).

Education is not our priority as a nation that is why a considerably small amount in the country's budget is allocated for higher education. The participants of this research see this as another equally important reason behind the problems faced by the learners. The lack of financial resources is the main problem faced by teaching and research departments. Either there are no libraries or if there are any then there are no books, at least no enough to cater the demands of readers. Same is the case with science and computer labs. Similarly teachers are not trained. There is no check and balance on administrative or teaching faculty. All of this results in inefficient administration, inefficient teaching and inefficient learning.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The participants suggested that the government should take measures to improve the standards of education at grassroots level. Especially when it comes to teaching of English, all would agree to Rehman (2001) who suggests that English should equally be taught

in all government and private schools in order to build the gap. However, being university teachers, this is beyond the domain of my participants. Therefore, they suggest certain improvements at the university, which can help make the situation better.

Of all the suggestions that the participants made, all agreed on revision of curriculum and syllabi in one or the other way. They recommended the coordination with the industry (job market) while designing the syllabi, in order to produce such graduates, who are practically needed. At the same time, there is need to develop research culture in order to compete with international market. The teachers proposed inclusion of most recent publication in the syllabus, discarding all existing outdated books.

A well written descriptive module guide should be handed to all learners at the beginning of each academic year. And the career counseling of learners should be done, so as to make them target-oriented.

CONCLUSION

This paper is based on a research conducted in the University of Sindh, in order to find out the problems faced by learners, the reasons behind them and the suggestions for improvement. The research is conducted with the help of the university teachers. The paper discusses the findings of the research in detail.

I would like to conclude my paper, as Rehman (2004) concludes his: "If the armies of the unemployed and the marginalized are not to be increased to the point where they become unmanageable, the state should invest in the poor. Pakistan's best investment would be to create a fair and just education system that promotes tolerance, human values and nation-building".

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