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BARRIERS TO MENTORSHIP FOR ACADEMIC RETURNEES: EXPERIENCES FROM PAKISTAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Mentoring of faculty is one important aspect in higher education especially for countries investing in training faculty abroad. The study explores the key challenges that young faculty are facing and the expectations following return from doctoral studies abroad. The participants of this study were doctoral graduates who completed studies in UK and USA and working in the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. A grounded theory approach was used in the theoretical development of the categories of participant perspectives concerning their constraints and expectations. Using both primary data and secondary data from in-depth interviews, participant experiences were explored and analysed. The findings reveal challenges faced by young academics returning to Pakistan. Some of the difficulties are emerging due to the infant higher education system characterised by the lack of a research culture and at a time when academic roles are experiencing change. Remedial mechanisms in form of further mentoring by foreign faculty, installation of research infrastructure and restructuring of existing systems are needed to strengthen research in Pakistan higher education system.

Keywords: Foreign doctorate, mentoring, academic career, higher education, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

Mentoring for young academics in the higher education across the world is increasing becoming an important topic (Adcroft, & Taylor, 2013, Hawkes 2016; Ssempebwa, Teferra, & Bakkabulindi 2016; Subbaye & Dhunpath, 2016). A mentoring program is important to higher education and promotes the development and career success of junior faculty members, especially in the first two years of their career (Cook 2011). Successful mentoring programmes should contribute to professional development, psychosocial, and cultural aspects for newly appointed faculty members (Kram, 1985). The need for mentoring is in line with Danielson's (1999) view that 'mentoring helps novice teachers face their new challenges; through reflective activities and professional conversations, they improve their teaching practices as they assume full responsibility for a class. The new faculty member is challenged with many responsibilities, therefore; the shared mentor relationship with senior faculty members could be active and esteemed towards their career development. The early career researchers to any field of work encounter challenges and change.

Moreover, mentoring relationships are still important in preparing graduates for professional positions. Holloway (2001) discusses the need for an experienced teacher to provide guidance and support to novice teachers and facilitate their professional development. The importance of mentoring matches with Danielson's (1999) view that 'mentoring helps novice teachers face their new challenges; through reflective activities and professional conversations, they improve their teaching practices as they assume full responsibility for a class". Danielson argues in his research that the mentoring is an important key to fostering the professional development of both new teachers as well as their mentors. This discussion provides a foundation to recent research that mentoring relationship is beneficial for the development of mentor and mentee, but mentee is in an advantageous position as he/she learns more and improves the professional skills.

2. Problem statement

Pakistan like many countries receives an increasing number of doctoral graduates returning from abroad (Higher Education Commission 2013). The young academic returnees are finding favor and are taking up senior positions in universities without any prior experience and mentoring. Doctoral graduates returning from abroad are presumed "readymade" individuals prepared for higher education roles. As a result, they are propelled to high positions such as 'Head of Department' and 'Senior Lecturer' roles without prior experience. Higher education systems investing heavily in doctoral studies abroad stand to lose through placement of responsibilities for senior academics on the shoulders of hitherto young faculty. Weaknesses in managing already weak systems through appointments increase vulnerability of the higher education systems despite the immense investment in training. A doctorate abroad may not necessarily be sufficient without appropriate on the job mentoring. Improving the mentorship problems requires a better understanding of barriers and expectations of the young returning academics.

2.1. Challenges and expectations of mentoring in higher education

Literature on challenges and expectations of mentees in higher education is limited. However, a few suggestive studies have been conducted. Zambrana, Ray, Espino, Castro, Douthirt and Eliason (2015), observe fours constraints faced by mentees. The authors point out cases of benign neglect where mentors never met mentees and only stayed in the University for a short time and gave no comments on their research. This benign neglect was more likely to occur when underrepresented minorities (URM) faculty were assigned mentors as part of routine university policy. Secondly, mentees felt uninformed and unsupported as mentors had little familiarity or interest in their areas of research or had no respect or understanding of the research agenda and therefore gave no suitable guidance or support. Thirdly, mentees experiencing a patchwork of mentors where multiple individuals with different skills to serve different mentoring functions. An approach that calls for more time and energy than having a primary mentor but resulting from necessity due to lack of relevant senior faculty. The fourth constraint is the limited understanding and acceptance of the research agenda by the mentors. Respondents who could not find mentors within their institutions drew on their social network to find alternatives.

A few studies reveal evidence pointing to the expectations for both mentors and mentees (Eller, Lev & Feurer 2014). Mentees need mutually agreed upon goals, clear expectations and identified milestones. Time was important in relation to goals, the importance of an appropriate pace, time management and flexibility, and recognition of mentee individual needs with personalized learning. Furthermore, mentors are expected to foster the protégé's educational and professional development, and provide opportunities to advance the mentees career. Meanwhile mentors observe the need to set high and attainable goals and facilitating realistic, and exciting challenges Mentors are expected to note accountability, time management and promise-keeping.

While literation may provide suggestions regarding expectations of young academics, However, little is available on expectations of returnee academics in particular. In a recent report by British Council 'Understanding Academic Careers in Pakistan: Developing Strategies for Academic Career Development for the Higher Education Commission' (Hawkes, 2016), academics in Pakistani universities find themselves taking on increasing teaching roles to accommodate larger and more demanding student bodies. The low numbers of academics within the system amplifies the concern. Khan et al. (2014; as cited in Hawkes, 2016) reflect the lack of professional development in and the continuing challenges of recruitment and retention. It is suggested that the professional development system within universities guided by policy (set by HEC) could facilitate the development of academic careers. Mentoring relationships could bridge gaps and facilitate young and senior academics to build a strong rapport and produce the desired results to mitigate the recruitment issues as well as promote a strong research culture.

3. Research questions

To explore barriers and expectations to effective mentorship, the study involving analysis of experiences of young returnee academics in Pakistan higher education was guided by two research questions. What are the barriers to establishing mentoring relationships for returning young academics from abroad? What are the expectations of young higher education academics following return from abroad?

4. Purpose of the study

Aware of the importance of mentoring and considering the rising numbers of young academics, there is need to better understand barriers to mentoring relationships and the expectations of the young academics returning from abroad. The study explores barriers to establishing mentoring relationships and the expectations of the young academics following return from foreign universities.

5. Research methods

The paper is part of a wider study that addresses issues of mentoring in Pakistan higher education system using mixed methods. For purposes of this paper, a qualitative methodology was utilised because it resonates with the study question seeking an exploration of the challenges of establishing mentoring relationships from the experiences of the participants. Unsure about what would come out of the study, it was prudent to employ in-depth interviews. Fortunately, the study utilised available secondary data from in-depth interviews collected by the British Council in Pakistan and only needed to collect additional validating information.

Secondary data Sources

The secondary data resulted from interviews at university campuses in Pakistan collected by the British Council. The secondary data provides 25 interviews of senior faculty members from ten public and private universities in Pakistan targeting issues and challenges they face as young academics. The data was collected from both senior and junior faculty members although it is evident that the majority of the participants in the study (76%) were junior academics. The British Council reports indicates that the data consists; 24% respondents with more than 12 years' experience in higher education. Therefore, more than half of the sample was early researchers and mid-career researchers.

Primary data sources

In order to obtain additional current data, more primary interviews were conducted to obtain participant view on their expectations following return to Pakistan and attaining jobs in higher education. Additional in-depth interviews were conducted with 07 participants selected from young academics who had completed PhDs from abroad since 2012 and were already serving in universities as faculty.

Analysis of secondary and primary data

A thematic analysis was conducted to develop categories of barriers and expectations of the young academics. Thematic analysis is a general model for analysis of qualitative data (Gibson & Braun 2009). For that reason, thematic analysis was considered appropriate for the current purpose especially where there are no prior categories. Consistent with the approach, the process of coding of emerging themes and subsequently sorting and grouping of themes to higher-level categories in line with procedures as spelt out by Braun and Clark (2006). In the current analysis, a theme was defined by a process, activity or barrier that impedes young faculty from entering a mentoring process. The themes were then grouped into higher-level categories that identify the difference types of barriers identified. A similar procedure applied to the analysis of expectations of the returnees. The method was found useful and adequate in developing the main themes constituting key findings of the study.

6. Findings

The paper aimed at mapping out the experiences of mentoring for higher education academics returning from abroad. In exploration process, challenges and expectations of young faculty emerged.

6.1. Barriers to mentorship relationships

The barriers are diverse but three categories stand out and were categorized under the changing academic roles, the lack of a research culture in a university and constraints arising from administrative functions.

The Changing roles of an academic

The role of an academic in higher education has greatly changed over the years. The changes make it a challenge to re-orient faculty who have been in service for many years and got absorbed into teaching. Traditionally most universities had put much emphasis to teaching. The emphasis on research by the higher education commission is a recent development which started in early 2000 and faculty are finding difficulty in coping up to the new focus.

"All organisations are struggling very hard to promote this research culture, teachers [are] having this problem; the traditional teachers in Pakistan only have to deliver lectures in classes. They just use to go to classes, whatever they are teaching, students accept it rigidly or not rigidly or passively or whatever. They hardly question you, they hardly try to ask you so many questions so I find my students very gentle and kind towards me that they don't ask tricky or critical or such type of questions. This was the traditional teacher in Pakistan. But when it comes to the latest, new or modern teacher, they have lots of requirement from HEC, that from associate professor to professors they need this much publications not only publications but publication in high quality journals"

The change in academic role comes at a time when the Pakistan higher education is still at infancy and the workload for academics also continues to grow. The teaching workload has increased because of

the increasing information overload made available from digital libraries and the mounting pressure to internalize and update lectures. Academics are also required to teach these many courses. Sometimes the courses may not even be directly related to subject of specialization.

In addition to teaching, faculty has a responsibility to do research, publish as well as supervise student research. The impression is that due to the comparative lagging behind, Pakistani institutions are exerting much pressure on faculty to accomplish too much within a short time. While there were publication requirements in the past, today it is not mere publishing but even the numbers of publications and the number published in high impact journals matter towards promotion. Therefore, the challenges of teaching and research are diverse. They may not be so unique to Pakistan but cover most countries. Teichler and Hohle's (2013) account of collections of data from 12 European countries shows similar changes across European higher educational institutes and with consequences for academic careers.

The key problem in Pakistan is that research is not a deep-rooted culture in many institutions. Even faculty with a PhD often find themselves in circumstances where they are unable to do research and are therefore equally inexperienced and need mentorship. As stated by an academic, "Yes, of course I mean I did research primarily for my PHD. It leaves me very little time now for researching actively". Therefore, although some of the colleges were founded many years ago, they are unable to run postgraduate programmes because of the limitations of research experience. Many of the staff requires mentorship in order to restart the research component of their careers. One of the respondents observed "So if you look at research culture it's barely a decade old you can't compare it to universities that have been doing research for long" Expertise in research is built overtime and it calls for mentoring by more senior colleagues.

In many respects mentors are scarce, and mentoring is informal. As a result, mentoring relationships come with an overload of expectations from mentors. Young faculty sometimes has to deal with compromising situations that could border integrity as illustrated in the following extract.

"…. he said I should be writing a research paper, I said kiya hota hai ye research paper (what this research paper is?) I had no idea what it is, he said; ek raan le ao bakray ki (Bring a goat/lamb's leg) then I will tell you how to write a research paper. So, I asked Dr [X], my chairman then, I said sir he was asking for a bakray ki Raan (goat/lamb's leg), how can I bring it, at that time it was more expensive. He said my dear he is asking you to bribe him to get the knowledge you want"

Unfortunately, in this particular case, the only source of information was human beings. Possibly, such conduct would be unlikely today when research thesis and journal papers are available on the Internet. However, the point is that mentoring relationships are better managed under formal than informal arrangements. Many academics express the need for support in terms of writing a paper and also in terms of publication in an international journal. Writing is a difficult task for both students and faculty and whoever does it is not ready for another round. Many find the rigors of research and academic writing taxing. Although a research paper is an extract from a whole paper, the need to keep updating to meet the requirements of the publisher is discouraging.

The infant research cultures

The strength of an institution in terms of research infrastructure is important for career development and therefore the possibility for mentoring. The absence of infrastructure is more problematic in infant institutions. Part of the expectations of academics in emerging universities is to have a research institute that sets mechanisms for inspiring students into developing a research culture. Besides the role of institutes, academics expect to find laboratories as a crucial component for promotion of research especially in the science disciplines. Without such basic infrastructure, academic mentoring in the sciences is rendered difficult.

"That was a well-equipped highly established university and this was a new university with no labs and nothing like that. Why I am saying something about labs because I'm a science person and my specialisation is molecular microbiology and did PHD and there were well-equipped labs but when I came here there was nothing".

Sometimes the absence of infrastructure leads faculty to opt for better-facilitated institutions. An academic who left a well-established university indicated having no interest in leaving for other universities with inadequate or no labs. However, instead of leaving the academic decided to stay and use the situation as an experience of setting up a laboratory.

"My bad luck was university being new and I was not having a facility to continue with my research work but I tried to fill the gaps with my personal efforts collaborating activities and after developing this thing, I'm spending some extra time".

In some cases, therefore, academics opt to take up the challenge and rather than leave the institution, they set up the required facilities but it also comes at a cost of sacrificing personal research plans for the benefit of mentees to come.

"Frankly speaking in the start, it [the university] definitely didn't support my own research. As I told you my specialisation required a highly equipped or well-equipped laboratory. That was lacking in this university and my department. I belong to environmental sciences and there wasn't any such laboratory where I could work and my students can enhance that thing".

For faculty in the sciences, the challenges of laboratories indeed constrain mentorship. Although it is the dream of an academic to continue developing the particular research project following the PhD, and benefit from the experienced research mentors, this cannot be done without lab facilities.

In recent times however, the situation in Pakistan is beginning to change. With facilities being installed in some of the institutions, young incoming faculty has opportunity to develop their careers. Unlike some of the senior staff who found no research infrastructure in place, the young academics may find labs and a few senior faculty as mentors to provide guidance.

"yes, it has changed for the newest staff because like I told you when I joined at a junior position I needed a lab which I had not. Since now I have, I am supporting my juniors. Now there are two assistant professors working in my lab, supporting their students and I'm supporting them as well. And they don't have any administrative responsibilities so they are focusing on research. Things are change for them. What I suffered and felt that it shouldn't be there, I'm just trying to support them that should the work".

Such initiatives by the few senior faculties could allow universities to build up a strong research culture for Pakistan. The availability of some support provides a good basis for developing a strong mentoring culture where administration function does not constrain the research roles of young faculty.

Administrative challenges

Administrative responsibility at an early stage of career is perceived as a hindrance to career development and faculty in young institutions often find themselves with administrative roles that stifle research. At infancy institutions have limited staff levels and therefore are more inclined to involve all available staff in administration. The approach to mitigating for staff shortages makes leads to skepticism about the positive role of the new institutions in providing enabling environment especially in terms of developing a research career. Due to absence of mentoring, the administrative function becomes a tough experience for young academics.

"I think it's very much supportive but with this administrative thing I find it difficult so administration is really a tough job I must say I must admit. With this I have to do research, I have to convince myself two hundred times, X be brave enough to do certain things".

Administrative assignments at the beginning of academic career can affect the development of researcher career. Yet today, there is greater emphasis in the research component of academic career.

The change in the roles of academics is consistent with Bentall (2015) view of the changing nature of job role of new academics who have expectations of developing their expertise in a specific discipline. Administrative duties in addition to teaching and research overstuff the mentoring process and would require multiple mentors. Yet young faculty requires ample time to develop their research potential at an early stage. This requires focusing more on research so as to tap from a single mentor. Academics in the context decry the administrative workload. As a result, young faculty are becoming frustrated. In their view, administrative work is often reserved for senior faculty in some institutions and expects the same in all institutions. To their surprise and dissatisfaction, young faculty find themselves overloaded with administrative function. This kind of situation imposes challenges on academic mentoring relationships who are more engaged in administration than research. One of the academics reflecting on the experience as a young academic stated;

"I was inducted as faculty member and the responsibility of a faculty member basically is teach and do some research and yes I understand that administration is also a part of it but the administration responsibilities are always given to a faculty member if he/she is quite senior after becoming a professor or something like that. In my case I was given these responsibilities right from the start so I had to and I have to spend much of my time in the administrative work".

Offering advice in terms of mentoring is closely linked to the nature of the role of the mentee. As Higgins & Kram (2001) state, the changing nature of organizational structures and the diversity of mentee roles in an organisation may constrain the mentees ability to rely on one mentor. The situation could be compounded in institutions where there is lack of information flow to faculty who need mentoring.

While alternative sources of mentoring including a postdoc abroad are ideal, the information about opportunities is rarely available to young academics. As indicated in participant responses;

"So, there are facilities but you don't know about it, there is no talking out anyone is telling you about it so you have to dig and find out the facilities available yourselves. It should be communicated to the professionals; these are the facilities and benefits. And I also got to know with somebody who was teachers' association leader who told me verbally that you can do this and you can get paid leave so I tried and I did it. So, people talk and you came to know, no proper information sharing, no written document, no circulation".

Uncertainties about opportunities for faculty undermine the process of building of new mentoring relationships with more experienced academics in other institutions. Successful mentoring relationships are often built on the basis of confidence that the relationship will continuity overtime. A Postdoc experience is an experience that ensures development of desirable mentoring relationships in more specialised fields that may not be available to the employing institution given the infancy of most of the universities in Pakistan. In the absence of mentoring within the institutions, information becomes elusive to the young academics.

Another alternative to young faculty is when senior visiting faculty comes from abroad. Attracting foreign faculty on short-term assignments is an important aspect in forging mentoring relationships abroad particularly for infant institutions having few senior faculty. Potential target faculty is mainly from western countries where faculty obtained doctorates. However, owing to *the rampant insecurity and terrorism, attempts have not been as successful as expected.*

"We are plagued with the problems of terrorism, insecurity and in fact foreign governments including your own has been hesitant and reluctant to encourage people to come here. The state department in U.S for example has an advisory out recommending U.S citizens not to come here. So, under those circumstances it has not been easy to bring foreign faculty here, even so from time to time we do have groups visiting us, staying here on campus and had any untoward incident".

The situation may be considered even worse for women because they are more vulnerable and are potential targets and in some of the universities, it could be more serious. For example, in Bacha Khan University a hostel is provided inside the university and the men had firearms, the neighbors and people in the villages carry firearms and yet the women are not armed. Sometimes the staff and students are given trainings from the rescue 112 so that they provide guidance to the people on safety. The safety concerns for women is different because of the vulnerability involved. The security problem complicates the potential of getting female mentors.

Even without the security concerns, the universities face funding challenges that may inhibit on the capacity to attract foreign academics to mentor the young academics. Public universities are governed by prescribe rules and regulations on funding. The higher Education Council of Pakistan provides funding for salaries and Universities are required to generate funds for the rest of the activities. The government of Punjab determines the policies of the higher education and although the government may provide no

funding for other activities, the rules and regulations have to be followed and it has an impact on financial capacity to attract foreign faculty, funding research and the provision of safety on campus among other obligations.

"Just one example is the security situation in the country, I think we have to invest like, 8 million rupees on security arrangements and they said find your own funding, but we have to, if we don't, they have to come again and again and put us on the mate".

Clearly funding could have a serious impact. It could have implications for security of female staff and also the ability to cope in volatile environments. As a result, it becomes a majority constraint to the development of mentoring relationships.

In summary, females face diverse challenges. Three key challenges stand out. The changes in the academic role for higher education faculty, infrastructure constraints especially for the sciences and the influence of administrative issues in the performance of faculty. These factors have affected faculty performance in various ways and have a link with the importance of mentoring relationships.

6.2. Faculty expectations concerning mentoring relationships

The expectations of returnees are an important aspect to any mentoring arrangement because they identify the appropriate and suitable relationships. Participant expressed views that focused more on the quality of the expected mentoring relationships and the need for what some of them described as "development mentoring" for senior level academics.

The quality of a mentoring relationship needs to be defined by roles and responsibilities, timeliness, trust and holistic development. The mentor should clearly define the roles and responsibilities, establishing short- and long-term goals, using open and supportive communication, and collaboratively solving problems. Another respondent indicated that the relationships should result in betterment of the researcher in holistic manner from basic moral values to the specific research area, while others suggest a relationship based on mutual trust. Participants express expectations of supportive and comfortable professional environment in which they would a welcoming attitude towards the young and new faculty. Such relationships would involve confidentiality and equal respect to the words and decisions of the young faculty.

Even on attaining seniority, participants suggest the need for support in terms of development mentoring. Mentoring needs changes gradually as you grow professionally, we need advanced mentoring help as per our new responsibilities. So developmental mentoring is about the synergy that two (or more) people can create between them to generate solutions, strategies and action plans, to build on success. The development mentoring as described above is a customized or specialized type of mentoring which is specifically required by you only. It helps you to perform well in your career and achieve good results. It will provide an easy to go approach for a good professional culture and enables one to perform as per required needs of the organization.

7. Conclusions

It is imperative for the higher education system to acknowledge the changing roles of an academic and institute remedial mechanisms. The idea of swim or sink portrayed by Ssempebwa et al 2016 while untenable, appears to penetrate many educational settings including Pakistan. The academic role in higher education is changing the traditional teaching roles to the inclusion of research. The changes are dramatically impacting on both young and senior academics with little experience in research given the increasing teaching overloads arising from massification and a high volume of administrative work common in most of the newly established universities in Pakistan. Young faculty is therefore unable to find suitable mentors in research among existing faculty and especially because of the infant research culture characterized by limited infrastructure and administrative overload. The findings echo a similar study on mentoring that focused on URM. Zambrana, et al. (2015) found mentees feeling uninformed and unsupported. The only difference is that while URM had negligent mentors, the current study context hardly has any potential mentors because the research culture is weak and at infancy. Moreover, the potential for long distance mentoring opportunities abroad are sometimes constrained by the absence of information.

Mentee expectations are diverse but represent the multiplicity of experiences of young faculty both during the doctoral and work place experiences. However, it stands out clear that the young faculty requires a defined program that addresses specific individual faculty needs. Despite the geographical and contextual distance with existing literature, the study convergence in expectations among higher education academics. Like in the current study, the findings of Eller, Lev & Feurer (2014) suggest the importance of mutually agreed objectives, clear expectations and indicators within a given time. Besides mentees overall require appreciation of mentee individual needs and therefore, the mentoring program needs to be tailored to a specific person learning requirements.

To improve on the current situation, it might be useful for Pakistan higher education council to develop mentoring arrangements to support both the junior and senior academics particularly in research. Research support might take the form of attracting mentors from abroad, sending young faculty for postdoc abroad and construction of research infrastructure especially in the new universities. Administrative restructuring is equally needed so that faculty has sufficient time for research and administrators could be recruited to focus on such roles that divert faculty time. For Pakistan to develop a competitive university research system, sending faculty abroad is not enough but restructuring is needed following a closer study of existing university systems and bench marking other university systems abroad.

The study was conducted among doctoral returnees from abroad and serving in the higher education institutions of Pakistan. A qualitative study with limited samples is rarely representative. The findings therefore have limited implications for those serving outside the context. Although it would be useful to the audience to understand whether participant perspectives were different especially in a gender role-

based society like Pakistan and in the disciplines, it was outside the scope of the current paper. Quantitative approaches would be useful for examining such variations.

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