

Evolution of doctoral education in Pakistan: Challenges and successes of doctoral students of education in a public sector university of Pakistan

NELOFER HALAI
Aga Khan University

This paper presents a part of the findings from a larger study undertaken to explore the experience of graduate students in education in Pakistan. Analysis of a smaller slice of data collected from students who were enrolled in the PhD and MPhil programmes of the Department of Education in a large public sector university in Northern Pakistan was undertaken. The purpose was to develop understanding of their experience of the programme, with a specific focus on induction and coursework. The findings illustrate that students perceive and experience the PhD as a professional degree rather than a research degree. It also appears that the doctoral programme and policies are both in evolution and will require time and effort to mature. Sustained and continuous effort is required to develop among the students the identity of a doctoral student as someone who “creates” new knowledge.

Keywords: Doctoral education; graduate studies; higher education; Pakistan.

Introduction

In the past ten years there has been a great upsurge of interest in undertaking doctoral education in Pakistan. Concurrently, enormous effort has been made to reform higher education in the country. This forms part of worldwide initiatives to develop and reform doctoral education whether in countries with a long history of higher education such as Germany or shorter traditions such as Malaysia (Nerad, 2010). The World Bank report *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* published in 2000 clearly spelled out the importance of tertiary education for developing countries and stated that society’s ability to use knowledge is critical for economic development (TFHES, 2000). Pakistan has a relatively young system of higher education and an economy that needs development. Hence, the government is making every effort to embrace the concept of knowledge economy in order to pursue national goals of prosperity similar to the initiative launched by Malaysia in 2007 to enhance the production of its PhD holders (MyBrain15-NHEP, 2007-2010). In a number of significant ways this situation matches with conditions in South Africa where university education for the previously marginalised black population is being encouraged.

This research project is a part of the effort to enhance and improve doctoral education in Pakistan with the aim to obtain better understanding of the experience of graduate studies from the perspective of students in education in two large public sector university departments of education. For this paper, findings are presented from the analysis of MPhil and PhD data from one public university, which I shall call Pakistan National University (PNU), in Northern Pakistan. The research question that has guided this inquiry is: What are the experiences of doctoral students of education enrolled in a public sector university of Pakistan? The focus was on induction, coursework and, wherever possible, supervision. Though the focus of the study was on graduate studies in education, the issues raised are of concern to all doctoral programmes in Pakistan and other developing countries.

Golde and Dore (2001:5) in their ground-breaking study on doctoral and master’s programmes (leading to a PhD) in the USA found that “the training doctoral students receive is not what they want, nor does it prepare them for the jobs they take and many student do not clearly understand what doctoral study entails, how the process works and how to navigate it effectively”. This is a remarkable finding, given that graduate education in the USA is considered to be the best in the world. Thousands of students from countries such as Pakistan, India and China, and to a lesser extent from South Africa, go to the USA

for their graduate studies. There is a need to understand students' experience of their doctoral studies in the Pakistani context as well, particularly at this stage in which the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has encouraged the emulation of the American model of doctoral education with at least one year of coursework (HEC, 2006). Since its inception in 2002, the HEC has spent large sums to reinvigorate doctoral programmes in public sector universities across Pakistan, yet little is known about students' experience of these programmes. The present study hopes to fill a small part of this gap.

Knowledge of students' experiences will provide understanding of the opportunities and obstacles they are facing in their doctoral studies. This will not only benefit Pakistan, but also countries such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, which are hoping to develop their own models of higher education, as well as countries such as South Africa where a large section of the previously marginalised black population is first-generation university entrants.

Background and context

In Pakistan efforts to establish viable and rigorous doctoral programmes in universities are a recent development. A country Task Force supported by the World Bank was established in 2001 to review higher education in order to transform it. This Task Force recommended the formation of a Higher Education Commission, which was then established as an autonomous body to replace the University Grants Commission (UGC) (HEC, 2002). While the UGC was an advisory body with a facilitative role, the HEC is a decision-making body with the responsible for overseeing the education imparted in universities in Pakistan. Its budget has increased by 344% over the next three years – a record for any institution in Pakistan – though it is still only half of 1% of the GDP and has come after decades of underfunding (World Bank, 2006). To ensure reform in higher education, a Mid-Term Development Framework (MTDF) (2005-2010) was developed (HEC, 2005) with a focus on three main areas of higher education: (a) access; (b) quality; and (c) relevance to national needs. Hence, for the first time in over fifty years the government provided all four essential components required for reform in higher education which were previously missing, i.e. the political will, a reforming framework, the financial resources and the implementation capacity (World Bank, 2006).

Due to the negligence of this sector over decades, the HEC was faced with multiple problems (Khan, 1997), however, the Commission prioritised its tasks by first tackling quality issues (Shah, 2010). Not a single university in the country ranked in the top 500 universities of the world. According to the MTDF (HEC, 2005:iv), each public sector university required 300-400 PhD qualified faculty, meaning that the public sector alone required 25 000 PhD trained faculty members, not to mention the needs of the fast-burgeoning private sector universities. Therefore, in 2005, Pakistan took the first steps to develop its higher education and encourage the production of doctoral-prepared human resources as a key component of its policy. One significant feature of this change was the difference in the conception of the doctorate. The PhD was no longer seen as the highest academic degree essential only for a university career, but as a degree that encouraged the generation of new knowledge and seen as the engine for growth in the new knowledge economy of the world. The HEC (2005:iii) aims at “creating the necessary foundation in which excellence can flourish and Pakistan can embark on the road to develop a knowledge economy”.

During independence from Britain in 1947, Pakistan inherited only one university within the geographical boundary of what was then known as West Pakistan. Successive governments invested heavily in establishing public universities and within the first 30 years 21 public universities were set up. Almost all of these universities offered small doctoral programmes, which typically followed the British apprentice model where a senior academic mentored a student through the process of conducting a research study under his/her supervision. However, doctoral education with its focus on original and substantive research was never able to take strong root in the university due to insufficient funds and resources. But, more importantly, a national policy that would develop a need for doctoral-prepared human resources either in industry or academia was never developed (Aleem, 2004). The UGC had not been able to persuade university management to make PhD a minimum qualification for a university teaching position (Jehangir, 2008) and only about 25% of the faculty members in universities had doctoral qualification (HEC, 2005).

Furthermore, there is little demand for research degrees in industry as it was not and still is not based on local research and development and depends on “assembling” materials imported from outside Pakistan. That is why the production of doctoral-prepared human resources was extremely anaemic – in the first 50 years of independence Pakistan produced not more than 50 doctoral graduates per year as compared to neighbouring India which produced 14 000 PhDs per annum (Jain, 2009). In a policy note the World Bank (2006: iii) characterised Pakistan’s higher education sector as an unfortunate combination of both small in size and low in performance .

With strong support from the government the HEC developed ways to increase the number of doctoral-prepared human resources through local and foreign scholarships and put into place quality assurance measures to streamline the quality of teaching and supervision in the doctoral programmes already in place. A model of doctoral education, which is a composite of both the American and the British model, has been espoused by the HEC. Doctoral students can no longer enrol directly into the PhD programme but have to first be admitted into an MPhil programme where the admission is contingent upon completion of 16 years of schooling. Since most Bachelor’s and master’s programmes in Pakistan are each two-year programmes, most of the applicants need a master’s degree to enter the MPhil programme. A minimum score of 50% on the General Assessment Test (GAT) conducted by the National Testing Service is also mandatory for admission (HEC, 2006).

Students require a Grade Point Average (CGPA) of 3.0 or more and pass the GRE subject test (International) for transition to the PhD programme. After this transition the students have to take additional 18 credit hours of coursework followed by a Comprehensive Examination. Only then can the students initiate work on the dissertation study under the guidance of their supervisors. On completion the PhD dissertation must be evaluated by at least two PhD-qualified experts from “technologically/academically advanced foreign countries in addition to local committee members” (HEC, 2006). On positive evaluation of the thesis an oral defence is mandatory. In addition, the award of the PhD degree is contingent on acceptance/publication of at least one research paper in an HEC-approved journal.

The focus of this article is the PNU, which is a large urban university in Northern Pakistan established soon after independence. It has six academic faculties and over 40 departments, and enrolls more than 14 000 students who are taught by 600 faculty members. At the time of the study slightly more than a quarter, i.e. 170 of the faculty members had doctoral qualifications, 215 had the MPhil degree and the rest had master’s qualification. During the same time 162 and 416 students were enrolled in PhD and MPhil programmes respectively. The PNU Department of Education (PNU-DoE) had 17 faculty members to teach in their undergraduate (BEd) and graduate programmes (MEd, MPhil and PhD). Six (35%) had PhD qualifications, 3 had MPhil and 8 faculty members had an MEd/MA degree.

The PhD programme in education was started at PNU-DoE in 1984 with the main purpose, at least initially, to develop its own faculty. Six faculty members at that time were enrolled in the programme. However, PNU-DoE faced severe difficulties in conducting the doctoral programme as it did not have trained faculty to supervise and conduct coursework for those enrolled in the programme; hence, students took a very long time to graduate. However, in 2007 the MPhil and PhD programmes were revived with support from the HEC and now admit over two dozen MPhil students. At the time of the study two students had made the transition to the PhD programme; the expectation is that their ranks will swell as more students complete their MPhil and register in the doctoral programme.

Literature Review

There is a paucity of research in the social sciences in Pakistan and research on doctoral education has only very recently gained attention of academics. This is because doctoral education, both in the public and private sector, has received an impetus through the efforts of the HEC since 2002 only (Isani & Virk, 2003). Clark (2005:5) reports that the number of students studying for their PhD in education has noticeably increased from only a handful five years ago to more than 200 enrolled for their PhD in only one university. This has resulted in a growth of interest in this area, although research is still lagging behind.

This section of the article restricts itself to a literature review of students' views of induction and coursework in the doctoral programme and has not tapped into the substantially larger body of work on students' experience of supervision. The timing of this study was such that only two students had made the transition to the PhD programme from their MPhil studies and only one had been allocated a supervisor. Hence, students' experiences of induction and coursework remained in the foreground and issues related to and arising from supervision were relegated to the background, which is reflected in the literature review.

Halai (2008), studying the experiences of the first cohort of doctoral students enrolled in the PhD programme in education in a private university in Pakistan, found that students expressed a keen desire to have a community of students who could act as role models in order to shape their own identities as scholars. Being the first cohort of students to be admitted to the new programme, they were frustrated at the absence of students before them in the programme to act as guides and a source of information through the grapevine (Gardner, 2007). In addition, these students found faculty efforts to develop them as independent scholars somewhat daunting. Reflecting on the role played by the above-mentioned doctoral programme in the development researchers in education, Halai (2011:513) found that students expressed a need in at least some courses for lectures rather than interactive classroom discussions. Furthermore, students requested very detailed guidelines for assignments and saw attempts by faculty to let them interpret at least a part of the assignment themselves as confusing. This was at least partially due to the previous experience of students in learning which was mediated and imparted either through tradition or authority. Upvall, Karmaliani, Pirani, Gul and Khalid (2004:5) substantiate these claims as they strove to develop nursing leaders in Pakistan through the master's in nursing programme in the same university. These authors write that they faced major challenges in the management of student learning, "Students were not always ready for rigorous course work and scholarly writing ... requirements to read current journal articles, reflect, and write thoughtful analyses contrasted with students' prior experience with lectures and memorization." The students' views illustrate a tension between their desire for support and the faculty's desire to make them more independent as scholars, and have been reiterated in a number of studies (see Gardner, 2008a; Mountford, 2005; Wilson, 2006).

Pakistan is a very patriarchal society where gender influences all life experiences. Therefore, it is not surprising that Khan (2008), on studying the views of 600 students, 180 faculty members and 60 administrators on the quality of higher education in 54 private universities of Pakistan, found them to be a gendered experience where the male respondents across the board were generally more satisfied with the quality of the teaching and learning as compared to females. Khan (2008:23) conjectured that this could be a result of the fact that "male students feel themselves to be more adjusted to the system due to the nature of Pakistani society that tends to be male dominated". That females have a less positive experience of doctoral studies is a common finding even in societies that are more egalitarian (Harman, 2000; Kurtz-Costes, Helmke & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Mansfield, Welton, Lee & Young, 2010; Place & Wood, 1999).

Not many studies have been undertaken outside Pakistan on this issue, however, they are sufficiently rich to generate a fairly good understanding of student experience of the doctoral journey which includes induction and coursework. Appel and Dahlgren (2003) provide a picture of how doctoral students experience their working environment. As part of the study the six students who were interviewed were largely dissatisfied with their induction experience and stated that it was left up to them to obtain required information and that their departments had not taken on this responsibility. Other doctoral students played a key role in introducing them to their departments. Similar findings are seen in other studies (Gardner, 2008a; Johnson, Lee & Green, 2000; Morton & Thornley, 2000; Pilbeam & Denver, 2009). Appel and Dahlgren (2003:108) identify three kinds of insecurity that doctoral students face: financial insecurity, insecurity about their own capacity to undertake doctoral studies and insecurity about unwritten rules in the form of norms and values of academia, in general, and their department, in particular, according to which the doctoral students learn to conduct themselves. Sometimes they felt that "there were unexpressed conflicts and unwritten rules with which they were unacquainted, and which had originated from old conflicts that were still present". Therefore, the students put a great deal of stress on the socialisation into the department in which they were based (Gardner, 2007, 2008b; Jazvac-Martek, 2009).

Morton and Thornley (2000) share the experiences of doctoral students in mathematics in New Zealand in which students indicated satisfaction with their doctoral experience, but also reiterated that this could be improved by simple measures such as providing comprehensive information on departmental procedures and the research process, and enhancing networking between students. Paulson, Hopwood, McAlpine and Mills (2010) have also tried to categorise students' experiences but in a different way. These categories include emotional (stress, isolation, feelings of inadequacy), situational (personal, family and professional challenges) and structural/cultural (norms, tacit rules, lifestyles) experiences. They recommend that better support be offered to doctoral students through pastoral care within the department and with financial planning. The authors suggest that, as a last resort, a non-stigmatised leave option should be made available to students. Thus, the literature from Pakistan and from abroad both identify some of the obstacles and some of the ways in which students are supported as they enter the programme and undertake their coursework.

Method

This study is part of a larger study that attempted to capture the experience of graduate students (MEd/MA, MPhil and PhD) in education in two large public sector universities in Pakistan. Two modes of data collection were utilised: A Graduate Studies Survey Questionnaire (GSSQ) was administered to all graduate students who volunteered, and in-depth interviews of a smaller sub-set of those who had participated in the survey. However, this paper has analysed a smaller slice of data that deal with MPhil and PhD students of education enrolled in PNU. This was done to highlight some of the issues specific to PNU where the doctoral programme had almost come to a halt until it was revived in 2007 with support from the HEC.

The survey questionnaire has three sections: (i) general information; (ii) experiences as a graduate student; and (iii) description of graduate programme/policies. From among the participants of the survey, two students each from the PhD and MPhil programmes were selected for in-depth interviews in order to explore their experiences of graduate studies. This paper is based on analysis of data from the survey of PhD (100%, n=2) and MPhil (54%, n=13) students and in-depth interviews of two students each from the MPhil and PhD programmes enrolled in PNU-DoE in 2009. In the MPhil programme seven (54%) out of the 13 students were females but no female students were enrolled at the PhD level.

The four students interviewed constitute slightly more than a quarter of the students who completed the survey and included three males and one female (see Halai & Ali, in press). A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct a 45-60 minute interview with the students on their induction into the programme, their coursework and process of selection of supervisors. The students for the interview were selected from those who had indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed and had provided contact details for that purpose. An effort was made to include both males and females and students at different stages of completion of their degrees. The study had hoped to capture the issues arising during supervision and the completion of the programme, but none of the students in the doctoral programme were at that stage. The interview was conducted in English and was audio-recorded and transcribed. Open coding was used for analysis of interview data, which involved reading through the data several times, making notes in the margin with regard to various emerging themes, coding transcripts, and clustering emerging themes into categories for thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through this rigorous process broad themes have emerged as presented in the findings section.

The culture of research is at an embryonic stage in Pakistan and the author with her team of researchers ensured that all ethical guidelines were followed stringently during access and entry negotiations. Realising that access is an ongoing process, permission were sought and obtained throughout the data collection process and the fieldwork. Building professional rapport and relationship with the research participants and the university department was seen as an important aspect of this study. The findings of the study have not only been shared with the relevant department heads but have also been shared more widely with the university community.

Findings

From the analysis of student interviews and questionnaires issues emerged that related to both the implementation of HEC reform policies and the students' own experience of doctoral education. Key findings are shared below.

PhD as professional degree for developing university teachers/administrators

The students who were enrolled in MPhil and PhD programmes considered professional development rather than developing their skills as researchers to be their main aim for undertaking doctoral studies. The conception of doctoral studies for the professional development of future university teachers is reinforced by the opportunities available to students while enrolled in the programme. Almost all of the MPhil and PhD students have had the opportunities to teach some classes at the MEd or BED level. The students are also provided opportunities of academic service by representing the student body in important university committees, but there were few, if any, opportunities for students to engage in research projects with their professors. For more than five decades Pakistani universities have been seen to have teaching as their foremost responsibility and, despite a national change in agenda implemented through the HEC, this reconceptualisation will take time to take root in programmes at public universities. At PNU the design of the graduate programmes privileges experiences that help students in their profession of teaching rather than in researching teaching. At least two of the students were offered part-time teaching positions in small private universities in the city because PNU doctoral students are seen to have a great deal of experience of teaching at the master's level obtained in the programme. They also spoke candidly of opportunities for promotion after completing their doctoral studies as most administration and management positions require the PhD degree. On the other hand, the students had very little exposure to research or research-related activities, with the exception of their own small-scale research studies at the MPhil level, and their conversations reflected this gap.

Evolving nature of quality assurance policies

The students were enrolled in the MPhil/PhD programmes either in March 2008 or February 2009. The policies regarding the quality assurance measures were first shared with universities in 2006 (HEC, 2006) and at least some of the policies are undergoing a continuous process of change. For instance, there was a fair degree of confusion regarding the GRE test. The students were unsure as to whether their transfer from MPhil to PhD programme required taking the GRE before the end of the MPhil programme or anytime during the PhD programme. It then transpired that the HEC had reassessed its policy and now required that candidates pass the test any time before completion of the PhD. These policies were often implemented retrospectively, as Unaeza (a pseudonym) said in her interview:

GRE was not the criteria at that time [time of admission], but now they have made it compulsory. We can't get the degree without having GRE score (Interview February 2009).

Events happening in other universities conspired to enhance this confusion. Hoodbhoy (2009:9) writes about the Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, where he teaches:

The [Academic] council voted 25–12 that the PhD candidates did not have to conform to international standards. It decided to overturn its earlier acceptance of the Higher

Education Commission's requirement that the International GRE subject tests must be passed by a candidate prior to the award of a PhD degree.

The decision of Quaid-e-Azam University to "eliminate" international testing reverberated throughout other universities in Pakistan. It created, at least in the minds of PNU students, a perception that a similar stand might be taken by the faculty of their university. They were often very confused about evolving policies emanating from the HEC as even the faculty members were not very sure about them. As mentioned

above, the greatest challenge was the understanding of policies: The HEC, in considering feedback from faculty and students, retracted its original policies, modified them and posted them on the internet with the assumption that everyone would see and accept them as the “new” policy. To be fair, HEC made every attempt to communicate changes through proper channels as well; nonetheless, a lack of clarity prevailed about some policies.

Evolving understanding of academic requirements

Plagiarism has never been a simple phenomenon and is shaped by the variegated understanding of what it means to “cheat” (Biggs, 1994). Particularly in the case of non-native English writers and their practice of academic writing (Hayes & Introna, 2005), such as the students of PNU who have English as their third or fourth language, the issue of plagiarism is difficult. However, the HEC had made a monumental effort to reduce the burden of plagiarism which has sapped the rigour and vigour of graduate programmes in Pakistani universities. In this case the free media has also played a strong role in highlighting issues related to intellectual property rights and plagiarism (Qadir, 2007). This has affected both faculty members and students and has raised awareness of the students. Aslam said:

I have read some of the books written by faculty members at PNU-DoE and I did not find them good as compared to the books which are written by the outside authors. The caliber of our teachers and professors should be the same as the professors outside. While reading the book, at some places, I have also seen full articles and large sections of text that authors have integrated in the book by their own name. We know that there is proper criteria and requirement for authorship (Interview February 2009).

This statement coming from a student of a public university underscores the change in the academic climate that has come about in the last five years.

The students are also well aware of the differing programmatic expectations at the master’s level and MPhil/PhD level. All of them agree that doctoral studies require a level of independent learning that may not be possible or required for a master’s degree. When asked to advise future students in the department, Unaeza replied:

Do not wait for others [students] and do not wait for your teachers, whether they are highly qualified or PhD, but it is you who will work and not your teachers. So I would suggest to others to take admission in the MPhil or PhD only if they have this thing in mind that they have to work and they don’t have to wait for their teachers (Interview February 2009).

Another PhD student echoed similar thoughts in the interview:

[In the PhD program] the teacher is just a facilitator, a guide and it is up to the student how much and how tactfully the student extracts the knowledge or gets access to his teacher’s knowledge. So this is very difficult to get the knowledge from your teacher, some teachers are very generous and it is sad to say that some teachers are misers, so we have faced both kinds of teachers (Interview February, 2009).

However, as the above conversation illustrates the students’ conception of independent learning revolved around their teachers and how much they could gain from them. They did not see their own role in knowledge creation. Furthermore, the students’ understanding of issues such as plagiarism and becoming independent learners increased, but that is not sufficient. Concomitantly, the faculty members’ ability to understand plagiarism and role-model how to become independent scholars are vital for the development of a rigorous programme.

Availability of supervisors

While the students were generally satisfied with the supervisory arrangements made for them, one PhD student had a “bad experience” in the selection of a supervisor. According to the student, even institutional leaders and faculty members were not fully aware of all policies. The student’s story is summarised below:

Mahmud was awarded an HEC scholarship for his doctoral studies at PNU-DoE. That made it mandatory for him to be supervised by an HEC Approved Supervisor. Unfortunately, PNU-DoE did not have a single HEC approved supervisor. So he discussed the matter with the Director who gave him permission to select an HEC Approved Supervisor from any university in the district, which he did. However, when his supervision papers were submitted to the relevant authorities of PNU, they raised objections about the possibility of a faculty member from outside PNU supervising a doctoral student. He was advised to select any HEC Approved Supervisor from the Social Sciences faculty of PNU. This delayed the process considerably (Interview March 2009).

Mahmud has strongly recommended that the six faculty members in his department who meet HEC criteria register as supervisors so that others may not face a similar difficulty. When Rabia was asked about what she knew about the selection process for the thesis supervisor, she responded as follows:

Well, our courses are close to completion, but I have not yet selected the supervisor. This process has to be completed in the coming month. I don't know about the policies and procedures for the selection of the supervisor but I do know that the faculty member must be PhD qualified and should be an expert in my area of interest (Interview May 2009).

Good supervision is a key to a productive doctoral experience and it appeared that the students were not fully aware of the processes to be followed in selecting a supervisor. More surprising, however, was that the faculty or management were often also not fully aware of the policies governing the selection of the supervisor.

Access or a lack of access to tools necessary for research

Though a large part of the student conversations were full of coursework-related issues, they did mention the presence or absence of support mechanisms for their research work. The students had access to computers and unlimited use of the internet in a computer laboratory. However, the laboratory remained open for only a limited period of time, usually from 9 am to 1 pm. This greatly limited the access that students had to these facilities, particularly for the MPhil students, as they were usually in class during these times. The students also complained that they could not fully benefit from the ready access to computers/internet due to limited support in peripheral areas. For instance, the students had only sporadic access to printers, which depended on the discretion of the management. For some time during the programme they had no access to printers in the department. The students had to save all materials on their flash drives and go to printing facilities outside the campus to print materials. This was problematic for all students but particularly so for women who could not go outside the campus easily both due to a lack of access to transport and the general restrictive access to public space for women in that region of the country.

The students also realised the great importance of a good library for doctoral studies. They all agreed that, despite the funds spent on providing them resources such as spacious classrooms with access to multi-media and overhead projectors, computers or internet access, but the most important aspect of graduate study – the library had not received the attention it deserved. In particular, access to current books and journals was extremely limited. The majority of books were outdated and subscription to relevant journals non-existent. Though they had access to the HEC National Digital Library with 45 000 e-books and 23 000 full-text journals through the main library of PNU, its access was difficult. They brought up the topic of the absence of literature a number of times and mentioned that they had great difficulty in writing the

literature review section of their research reports. It seemed as if the students were continuously hunting for resources, particularly print resources.

Discussion and implications

A report in the prestigious science weekly journal *Nature* has termed the changes taking place in the higher education sector in Pakistan a “silent revolution” (Osama, Najam, Kassim-Lakha, Gilani & King, 2009). However, in the years 2009-2010, due to continuing political and economic crises the government has reduced funds for the HEC by at least 20%. Hayward (2009) comments that funding cuts during the growth phase of HEC projects can be potentially crippling to the transformative process of higher education in Pakistan. The study has illustrated that the HEC played a role in shaping PNU students’ experiences and that some of these experiences are unique to their context, while some overlap with the experiences of doctoral students all over the world.

Conception of research

It takes time to change things as fundamental as conception of research and its relevance to societal progress, particularly in a conservative Muslim society where knowledge is seen to accrue from authority. However, doctoral students continue to see knowledge as something “provided” by teachers to be “imbibed” by learners who will then repeat the cycle when it is their time to teach. This way of thinking defeats the whole purpose of research degrees, and this cycle has to be broken. Doctoral students need to see themselves as knowledge creators for their own needs and context so as to solve national problems. But this can be achieved only when the faculty itself are well-versed in research, which is generally not the case in Pakistan. This is a paradoxical situation and innovative methods need to be generated to overcome these initial impediments. One way would be to follow the path taken by the PNU; it has encouraged a partnership with another private university in Pakistan that is prominent because of the high quality of its teaching programmes and the vigour of its research agenda. This inter-university partnership supported by external donors has yielded promising results and may encourage other such partnerships. This study itself is a result of this partnership. Till now the HEC has, to a large degree, propagated a technical model for capacity building in order to improve the technical competencies of researchers, especially with respect to research methodologies and the techniques of data collection and analysis associated with them. Thousands of hours of workshops have been conducted under the aegis of the HEC. While these are important and essential, they are more useful for building awareness and developing basic skills. However, the complexities of education research are such that some aspects can be understood best in the field; hence, the *social practice model* propagated by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) is suited to the professional development needs of many faculty members in public universities. Here, senior faculty members can gain experience of doing research with people with expert knowledge. This is where partnerships with more experienced local or foreign institutions might be very fruitful and productive.

The findings of this study support this suggestion, because it was seen from the students’ interviews that they were more engaged with the logistical problems of research than with intellectual puzzles. It may be that, as novice researchers, the lack of logistics affected them much more than more seasoned researchers who would find alternate means to achieve their goals. Working with experienced researchers in teams may provide them with the intellectual stimulus required for research at the doctoral level.

Changing goalposts

It is clear from the outset that the doctoral programmes in Pakistan are in the process of development and evolution. A reform agenda has been put into place by the HEC in 2005 and the discussion of graduate studies by the doctoral students at PNU make evident an invisible demarcation line in time while discussing the policies and processes in their programmes – before the HEC and after the HEC. Before the HEC, there was no condition of GRE examination, no requirement of 24 credits of coursework, no condition of an HEC-approved supervisors, etc. Some of the criteria that have been put into place make good sense

and have been met by the hundreds of Pakistanis who have undertaken their doctoral studies from abroad. But from the students' discussion it appears that there are two problems with these reformed policies. Firstly, they are being implemented retrospectively even on those students who were admitted to their programmes before these policies were put into place. Secondly, it seems that some policies, particularly on testing for admission and graduation, are too ambitious. It is not uncommon for a large number of universities outside Pakistan to require students from this country to undertake a GRE-type examination at the beginning of doctoral studies. However, the standard of education in the universities in Pakistan have fallen to the level that few students can pass these examinations. Hence, the HEC has demonstrated flexibility in its approach to some of the quality assurance measures initially proposed.

It seems that the HEC has developed stringent policies to assure and enhance quality without taking into consideration the realities on the ground; hence, it has to continually back track and dilute some of these policies to accommodate the needs of the students. While these may seem to be pragmatic decisions, an alternate viewpoint is that the standard of higher education is so low that strong and rigid measures need to be in place before even a slight improvement in standards can be seen (Hoodbhoy, 2009). The continual evolution of policies encourages a wait-and-see policy among the students who are not sure how committed the HEC will be to the quality assurance policies in place. For instance, the PNU students appeared not to be committed to the GRE because they realised that the HEC might give in to pressure and give concessions on this policy. The pressure to perform is required but so are the support structures to enable the students and faculty to deliver what is required. Hence, it might be better to maintain the bar at a reasonable standard but remain consistent and persistent in implementing this policy. Imposing impossibly high standards from the top down is not going to enhance the standard of doctoral education.

Conclusion

To bring about change in the conceptualisation of knowledge and the education that will provide it is a very difficult task in the best of circumstances. Pakistan has had to face many and multi-faceted challenges in the past few years: recession, terrorism, insurgency and natural calamities such as the floods. During the time of the study, data collection at PNU campus almost came to a halt as the city and its citizens were providing support to the many thousands of internally displaced persons from Swat and other regions of the Pakistan where the army was fighting an armed insurgency. At a later date flood waters covered 20% of Pakistan's land mass and 1 out of every 5 persons were directly affected. In face of such dire need the first funds to be cut were for higher education, which were later released when all 71 vice-chancellors of public universities came together to denounce these massive cuts and threatened to resign (Rizvi, 2010).

The boom or bust cycle of funding for higher education is not beneficial for Pakistan. Even if funding for the HEC and higher education cannot rise to the high levels that were attained between 2002 and 2007, much can be achieved with the funds available. The focus on faculty development, encouragement of research and publication will itself go a long way in improving the quality of experience of graduate students in the social sciences. An equal measure of pressure and support is needed in this regard.

Acknowledgement: The research in this paper was supported by the Centre for International Education, Oslo University, Norway and Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi, Pakistan. The author would also like to acknowledge the support of team members: Mr Arshad Ali, Ms Naheed Anwar and Mr Muhammad Rauf. However, this write-up has been undertaken by the author alone and is fully responsible for any omissions or oversight.

References

- Aleem I 2004. *Problem and prospects of higher education in Pakistan*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation of the University of Arid Agriculture, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.
- Appel ML & Dahlgren LG 2003. Swedish doctoral students' experiences on their journey towards a PhD: Obstacles and opportunities inside and outside the academic building. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, **47**(1):90-110.

- Biggs J 1994. "Asian learners through Western eyes: An astigmatic paradox". *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Educational Research*, **2(2)**:40-63.
- Clark G 2005. Reform in higher education in Pakistan. In: RM Hathaway (ed). *Education reform in Pakistan: Building for the future*. Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars: Washington, DC.
- Corbin J & Strauss A 2008. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. London: Sage.
- Gardner S 2007. "I heard it through the grapevine": Doctoral student socialization in Chemistry and History. *Higher Education*, **54(5)**:723-740.
- Gardner SK 2008a. What's too much and what's too little?: The process of becoming an independent researcher in doctoral education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, **79(3)**:326-350.
- Gardner SK 2008b. Fitting the mold of graduate school: A qualitative study of socialization in doctoral education. *Innovative Higher Education*, **33**:125-138.
- Golde CM & Dore TM 2001. *At cross purposes: What the experiences of doctoral students reveal about doctoral education* (www.phd-survey.org). Philadelphia, PA: A report prepared for The Pew Charitable Trusts.
- Halai N 2008. *What does it mean to be a doctoral student? Creating new identities?* Presentation at Centre of Innovative Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE). College of Education, University of Washington, Seattle on May 28, 2008.
- Halai N 2011. Developing researchers in education through a doctoral program: A challenge in the context of Pakistan. *Pertanika: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, **19(2)**:509-520.
- Halai N & Ali A (in press). Graduate students in education in a public sector university in Pakistan: Quest for quality. In: A Bashiruddin Z Bana & M Naz. *Education in Pakistan: Learning from research partnership – A case for public-private collaboration*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Harman G 2000. PhD student satisfaction with course experience and supervision in two Australian research-intensive universities. *Prometheus*, **12(3)**:312-333.
- Hayes N & Introna L 2005. Systems for the production of plagiarists? The implications arising from the use of plagiarism detection systems in UK Universities for Asian learner. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, **3(1)**:55-73.
- Hayward FM 2009. Higher education transformation in Pakistan: Political and economic instability. *International Higher Education Quarterly*, **54**(Winter):19-20. Retrieved 25 February 2011 from https://htmlbprod.bc.edu/pls/htmlb/f?p=2290:4:4997403348846938:NO:RP,4:P0_CONTENT_ID:101398.
- Higher Education Commission (HEC) 2002. *An ordinance to provide for the establishment of Higher Education Commission*. Retrieved 22 February 2011 from http://www.hec.gov.pk/download/about_hec/HECOrdinance.pdf.
- HEC 2005. *Medium Term Development Framework 2005-2010, Islamabad*. Retrieved 23 February 2011 from [www.hec.gov.pk/.../HEC Publication/ Documents/413_HEC_med_dev.pdf](http://www.hec.gov.pk/.../HEC%20Publication/ Documents/413_HEC_med_dev.pdf).
- HEC 2006. *Minimum Criteria for MS/MPhil and Ph.D. Programs*. Retrieved February 25 2011 from http://www.hec.gov.pk/InsideHEC/Divisions/QALI/QualityAssurance/QADivision/Documents/MPHIL_PhD_Criteria.pdf.
- Hoodbhoy P 2009. How greed ruins academia. *International Higher Education*, **56(Summer)**:8-9. Retrieved February 26 2011 from http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/Number56/p8_Hoodbhoy.htm.
- Isani UAG & Virk L 2003. *Higher education in Pakistan: A historical and futuristic perspective*. Islamabad: National Book Foundation.
- Jain A 2009. The sad tale of PhDs in India. *Merinews: Power to people*. Retrieved February 26 from <http://www.merineews.com/article/the-sad-tale-of-phds-in-india/15783627.shtml>.
- Jazvac-Martek M 2009. Oscillating role identities: The academic experiences of education doctoral students. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, **46(3)**:253-264.

- Jehangir K 2008. *Management of higher education reforms in Pakistan: An implementation perspective*. Unpublished thesis of the Utrecht University, Netherlands. Islamabad: National University of Modern Languages.
- Johnson L, Lee A & Green B 2000. The PhD and the autonomous self: Gender, rationality and postgraduate pedagogy. *Studies in Higher Education*, **25(2)**:135-147.
- Khan AH 1997. Education in Pakistan: Fifty years of neglect. *The Pakistan Development Review*, **36(4)**:647-667.
- Khan AM 2008. Quality of various aspects of higher education in private sector of Pakistan as viewed by administrators, teachers and students. *Bulletin of Education and Research*, **30(2)**:7-27.
- Kurtz-Costes B, Helmke LA & Ulku-Steiner B 2006. Gender and doctoral studies: The perceptions of PhD students in an American university. *Gender and Education*, **18(2)**:137-155.
- Mansfield KC Welton A Lee P & Young MD 2010. The lived experience of female educational leadership doctoral students. *Journal of Educational Administration*, **48(6)**:727-740.
- Morton M & Thornley G 2000. Experiences of doctoral studies in Mathematics in New Zealand. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, **26(2)**:113-126.
- Mountford M 2005. The journey toward transformational learning in a statewide doctoral program. *Innovative Higher Education*, **30(3)**:213-227.
- MyBrain 15-NHEP (National Higher Education Action Plan – Malaysia) 2007-2010. Retrieved March 21, 2011 from <http://www.mohe.gov.my/transformasi/>.
- Nerad M 2010. *The context for increasing the quantity and assuring the quality of doctoral education in South Africa: What we know about the increase in PhD production and reform of doctoral education worldwide*. Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE), University of Washington, Seattle.
- Osama A, Najam A, Kassim-Lakha S, Gilani Z & King C 2009. Pakistan's reform experiment. *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science*, **461(7260)**:38-39.
- Paulson J, Hopwood N, McAlpine L & Mills D 2010. *Untold doctoral experiences: Research findings and recommendations from a study into the challenges of doctoral study*. The Next Generation of Social Scientists (NGSS), Centre of Excellence in Preparing by Academic Practice, Oxford University Department of Education, UK.
- Pilbeam C & Denver D 2009. Lone scholar or community member? The role of student networks in doctoral education in a UK management school. *Studies in Higher Education*, **34(3)**:301-318.
- Place AW & Wood GS 1999. A case of traditionally underrepresented individuals' experiences in a doctoral program. *Journal of Just and Caring Education*, **5(4)**:442-455.
- Qadir A 2007. Plagiarism: Causes and consequences. *The Daily Times*. Retrieved February 26 2011 from http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007%5C04%5C25%5Cstory_25-4-2007_pg3_3.
- Rizvi S 2010. Teachers to boycott universities on 22nd: Unions want government to restore funds for HEC. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved February 26 2011 from <http://tribune.com.pk/story/52188/teachers-to-boycott-universities-on-22nd>.
- Shah S 2010. *Higher education expansion in Pakistan and issues of quality*. Paper presented at the 3rd International conference on assessing quality in higher education, 6-8 December, 2010, Lahore, Pakistan.
- Task Force on Higher Education & Society (TFHES) 2000. *Higher education in developing countries: Peril and promise*. World Bank/UNESCO.
- Upvall MJ, Karmaliani R, Pirani F, Gul R & Khalid F 2004. Developing nursing leaders through graduate education in Pakistan. *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship*, **1(1)**:1-9.
- Wenger ER, McDermott R & Snyder WM 2002. *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Wilson S 2006. Finding a canon and core. *Journal of Teacher Education*, **57(3)**:315-325.
- World Bank 2006. *Higher education policy note, Pakistan: An assessment of the Medium-Term Development Framework*. The World Bank, June 28, 2006. Retrieved 15 January 2011 from <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/PAKISTANEXTN/Resources/PakHigherEducationPolicyNote.pdf>.