PROBLEMS AT GRADUATE PROGRAM LEVEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SELECTION OF PROGRAM, PREDICTOR OF SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

Previously, the major function of higher education in all over the world was to prepare the work force for productive contribution in society but now, it is more focused to equip individual with knowledge, skills and competencies to meet the future demands of global knowledge economy. Developing country like Pakistan needs to sheer focus on contemporary trends and issues in higher education, in order to produce individual with the capabilities that make them able to adapt the future challenges. Hence, the aim of this study is to identify the problems that students are facing in higher education from the selection to the success in graduate program. Researcher adopted qualitative methodology to conduct the study and used purposive sampling technique to collect data. For this purpose, eight participants selected, who were experienced and permanent faculty members of a public sector University. Structured Interview Protocol developed to collect information from the participant. The interview was audio recorded by keeping in view the ethical consideration. The audio data transcribed and analyzed through thematic approach. Findings revealed that a career prospect is the most important factor in selecting the course of study. The other factors which influenced the decision-making process in

graduate program are parental pressure and lack of knowledge about the field of study. Further, it was found that due to lack of mentoring and career counselling programs students cannot predict their success for the future in graduate program.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, Selection of Program, Graduate Program, Predictor of Success

INTRODUCTION

According to human capital theorist, higher education usually viewed as productive investment in human capital of a society (Allen et al, 2012,). The primary function of higher education is to offer the knowledge and skill to individuals necessary for the social and economic development of the country (Barnet, 1990; Mughal & Manzoor, 1999). Higher education in Pakistan was long been an area of ignorance until the establishment of Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2003. Since, then HEC is monitoring the function of Higher Education in Pakistan and struggling to channelize the system according to the guidelines of Countries across the globe, in order to meet the demand of global knowledge economy, must have to transform the personal identity of the students as well as higher education system (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Pakistan needs to redefine the policies of higher education to produce global citizen who would able to adapt the contemporary trends of international higher education in global perspectives. This study was designed to investigate the problems in higher education that students faced in higher education. The said factors are divergent in nature and were not been considered before in the literature. According to Hayes (1987) the problems of higher education in developing countries like Pakistan were multifaceted. However, the focus of previous researches was on conventional structural issues. According to Medium Term Development Framework II of Higher Education commission 2011-2015, the major issues of higher education were quality assurance, faculty development, research, equity, governance. The selection of graduate program is the most important decision of students, which leads them eventually to the career path. There are certain factor that are affecting the decision making process of students for the selection of graduate program. Identifying these factors would make the parents, educators, and investors aware of where the student should be placed (Borchert , 2002) . The majority of the students select the field of study and later find some other inclinations which affect their future attempts.

This is due to lack of knowledge and awareness about their interest and capabilities. Parents as well as Educational Institutions play vital role to explore their choices for the future. The major aim of this study is to explore the factors, which are significant for the success of students in graduate program.

Peril and Promise (2000) stated that the quality of knowledge provided by the higher education institution of developing countries and its accessibility to the wider range of economy posing a question mark for the nation to meet the challenges of fast-growing world. Pakistan like all developing countries is facing multidimensional issues in Higher Education. So, this research is intended to investigate the perception of teachers about the problem's student facing in higher education from selection to success in graduate program.

This research contributes to highlight the importance of student interest and capabilities for the selection of graduate program, which will make decision-making process convenient for future endeavors. The selection of graduate program is most important decision of a student which leads them eventually to the career path. The study also put forward the importance of students' satisfaction surveys in higher education institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the establishment of HEC several reforms and policies have been made to improve the quality of higher education. Quality assurance agency established in 2005 to assure and enhance the quality of higher education. Furthermore, Quality enhancement cells (QECs) were established in thirty universities from 2006 – 2009, for upgrading the quality of education and research to make the institutions competitive according to international standard.

The ranking criteria of Pakistan higher education institutions (HEI) also revised in 2014, based on the following factors: Quality Assurance, Teaching Quality, Research, Finance & Facilities and Social Integration / community development. These issues were embraced by many researchers (Mughal & Manzoor, 1999; Isani & Virk, 2003; Iqbal, 2004; Ameen, 2007; Aadil, 2010; Rahman, 2011; Azam, 2013; Shahid & Wahab, 2015). However, collective effort of HEC in the cooperation with the major stakeholders (HEI) of the country has shown remarkable improvement and universities of Pakistan have been linked to international higher education sector.

Notably, increase in number of higher education institutions resulted to an intense competition and rise in enrolment without considering the academic standard and quality of teaching and learning process and freedom for academic decisions (Isani & virk; 2003, 2005). Consequently, the system faced the problems and striving to manage the quantity as well as quality and several challenging issues aroused in Higher education institutions that needed to address.

According to Kallio (1995), “the decision process for selecting a graduate school is a complex one involving the characteristics and actions of both the students and the institutions they are considering”. Further, he pointed that reputation and quality of the institution and its programs, course diversity, size of the institution/ department and financial aids are the factors that influence students in their selection of graduate program. In addition, Agrey and Lampadon (2014) identified career prospects as one of the factors that contribute for the selection of study program. Moreover, Malani, Lieberman and Hahs-Vaughn (2015) concluded that the cost of graduate school is a significant factor that influence when choosing a graduate program. Price et al. (2003) stated that parental influence is also a factor related for the selection of a field of study.

According to report of task force (2001) Higher Education programs can be used as a source in the developing countries to take benefit from global knowledge economy but the number of studies has identified that students are not familiar about the course they have selected and its importance in the future. Iqbal (2004) mentioned that the courses are not relevant and there is no continuation between the courses. The universities should include modern courses in their curriculum, which make them relevant to the field (Bayli, 1987). Butt & Rehman (2010) found that courses offered in graduate program have significant impact on student. In addition, it is necessary for the success of graduate programs, to provide academic guidance for the students in order to utilize available resources at the optimum level, which can help them to cope up with the difficulties in the world of work (UNESCO, 2002). Furthermore, Moskovitz and Hill (2003) found that students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels report that mentoring helped them develop skills and behaviors necessary to succeed academically and professionally.

Tiechler (2009) identified that relationships of higher education and the world

of work have been a debatable issue across the globe. In addition, he said, “The paradigms of ‘knowledge society’ and ‘knowledge economy’ reinforce a call for higher education to serve more directly the ‘employability’ of graduate (2015). Hence, the graduate programs relevancy to knowledge economy can be viewed as predictor of success for the students, which enable them to face the global competencies. Yousuf, Khan and Azam (2013) find that the research environment integration of universities with industries, high-tech employment has strong relationship with universities performance. Harvey (2001) concluded that evaluation of employability needs clearly to indicate areas for internal improvement of institution rather than simply ranking.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the factors affecting the selection of graduate program?
2. What are the problems students are facing during their studies in graduate program?
3. Whether, the graduate program predicts the success for the students in future?

METHODOLOGY

The researcher selected qualitative methodology, in order to study the phenomenon in depth. Creswell (2005:2003) noted that in qualitative research, “the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon”, which is best achieved by using purposeful sampling strategies. Researcher adopted purposive sampling technique and select 8 senior faculty members (T1,T2,T3....T8) from a public sector University. In qualitative research interviews are among the best tool and most suited instruments (Raheemson, 2016). Participants were given informed consent form to be interviewed and audio taped (Schneider et al., 2013). The analysis of the interview data followed a simplified version of the general steps of qualitative data analysis described by Creswell (2009) i.e. Transcribing Interviews, reading through the Data, Generating Codes and Themes.

FINDINGS

When respondent asked about the factors involving in the selection of the field of study in the graduate program they give the following responses.

T1: In my opinion, the key that drive their selection criteria is availability of job in market. They take wrong decision of choosing a program and then won't be able to cope with advanced level studies because he doesn't possess basic

skills for it. For say: if any student doesn't possess basic skills for sentence structure or using correct grammar than how he/she will be able to cope with high level of literature at B.A. level like novels by famous authors like Shakespeare or etc. they face a lot of problems in clearing their papers as well. For say, if anyone is not fond of computer will he/she like to sit in front of computer screen? Obviously not! So, it's really important for students to know their area of interest.

T2: Hmmm.... what I have observed that student is taking admissions in various departments according to demand of particular field not on the basis of interest and universities are conducting basically entrance test examination, this is the reason that student got the admission and they think they can have good job and bright future. Another thing is parental involvement, they brain wash they're from childhood that they have to become a doctor or engineer, they try to impose student instead of going according to their aptitude they go according to the pressure of parents, they even pass the exam but don't excel in the program.

T3: As far as my concerned...I think parents are obsessed with employability skills of their child, they want their children to be doctor, engineer business profession, whether it is the aptitude of student or not. The chance of getting employment more in any subject are regarding more worthwhile as compared to their aptitude.

T4: Students are not guided, they... they are following the crowd blindly without knowing their potential they are blindly going for Media Science or BBA, MBA, they should know where they have to go, it is the responsibility of teacher, parents and relevant department to facilitate them Universities conduct test for student, either they got admission or not in that particular field, it doesn't evaluate the aptitude level of the student for this particular field or discipline.

T5: Uhhh...basically everybody wants to have professional degree, when they don't get percentages in the intermediate program then have the only choice to come university for nonprofessional degree or come in social sciences or languages departments, mass communication is the subject in fashion right now.

T6: Students select the graduate program according to the worth of the

discipline in future; they sometime unable to excel in the program and got disheartened. I would say, they also follow the guidelines of their parents to become doctor or engineer, so they earn fame or have a good salary think, success is not only making money success is to be aware of your potential

T7: In this modern era where students are getting information, are more connected to media, they only see the glamour in the field, most of the student opt the courses of media sciences, and they think they can earn more money in short period of time.

T8: They simply go with the popularity. For example, the employment, their friend's choice or what is more promising for a secure future. Sometimes it happens that parents dictate their child what.... they have to do? But I don't think it's better for their future, they only participate because it's too early for any child to take decision of career, definitely there would be intelligent person who have the experience and exposure to guide them.

It explored from the responses of all eight respondents that career prospect is important factor for the selection of program as compare to the potential or abilities of students. They usually go for Media Sciences or BBA admission as per market demand indicated by T4 and T5. However, T2, T3, T6 and T8 argued that parent pressurize or dictate students as they want them to choose science subjects and responses of T2 and T4 also indicate some problems in the selection criteria of student in graduate programs of University.

When the respondents asked about the importance of mentoring system in graduate program, they gave the following responses:

T1: Yes,.... Mentorship is very important..... I think that it should not be a job of one single teacher rather every teacher who is involved in academic activities should know the purpose of program and every teacher should engage motivational team work activities in their own classes and should provide guidance to smaller groups or to individuals if he /she requires special attention

T2: Mentoring depends on both the teacher and students. I....I think the students should know the teacher, and teacher should have the knowledge about the capability of the student so they can guide them. There should also be some programs, where students can interact with teachers.

T3: Mentoring plays important role. In private sectors universities, they are having very well-established culture of mentoring or even before they are in professional contact with teachers, they create open houses and give orientation about the courses, but in public sector, you only fill the form with your own insight, and tick the department.

T4: Mentoring is important not only for children but for parents, there should be some program of mentoring at secondary and higher secondary level.

T5: You know, there...there are both positive and negative sides. The student takes a teacher as a role model or mentor; they want to excel like them. If the teacher is sincere and good to student, they motivate the student in the class and after the class, they follow the guidance that helps them to succeed but sometimes they are so fed-up with the negative behavior of teachers and they quit the department or program.

T6: Mentorship is obvious, if university chooses this kind of program than it will directly affect the success of student. It is very important to have mentors either teachers, faculty members, peers, who guide the students in the graduate program about the courses and environment of university.

T7: Mentoring is important and most neglected area in our society, parents only dictate their child what to do, although it is important in secondary and higher secondary level.

T8: Mentoring is important but it cannot be done in an organizational way it should be done in a private manner. Mentoring cannot be general you cannot generalize it because it is personal.

It concluded that from all eight responses that mentoring is important at graduate level of students, but there is lack of mentoring which is important for the students in graduate program and it is the responsibility of the respective departments, faculty member and teachers to mentor the student, so they cannot find themselves misplaced in any department.

When the respondents asked whether they have any program to measure the students satisfactory level they give the following answers:

T1: We ask students to fill up a form to give feedback that are they satisfied with the teachers or not. It's called "Teacher Evaluation Form". Students ranking helps us in assessing the teachers work.

T2: We try to ask after every lecture that they are having problems and we have also student advisor, so if anybody have problem, they can discuss with the student advisor teacher and administrator also.

T3: I simply take verbal feedbacks. It is the responsibility of the university to measure the satisfactory level but there is no program to measure the student satisfactory level.

T4: I usually take the feedback in the form of reflection but there is no procedure of evaluation in this university, in private sector students anonymously gives the feedback about teacher, program and university.

T5: I have always take feedback for my own assessment.(QEC) quality enhancement cell give the evaluation form but its only about the teacher assessment we receive the evaluation form every semester and after the filling by the students we return it back but there is nothing doing with nobody matters, even the teacher is not coming and not taking class, there is no accountability QEC also not consider this.

T6: We don't have such kind of procedure. There are no evaluation criteria, whether the teacher is teaching in the class or just doing *hanky panky*.

T7: We don't have such program through which we can measure the satisfaction of students but I guess that (QEC) Quality Enhancement cells looks after this by conducting surveys and provide different kind of forms to students.

T8: I personally take the feedback of student regarding my teaching after every session because I think it is very important to improve ourselves, I also suggest other teachers for this.

It is concluded from the all responses that there is no procedure to measure the satisfactory level of student whether they are satisfied or not with the teachers, courses or environment. According to T5 and T7 QEC provide feedback forms

but there is no evaluation or accountability and also admit that they take the feedback of the students regarding their teaching but it's not official.

When respondent asked about the importance and career guidance program in university following responses were given:

T1: We provide career guidance but it's not done very formally at this University. It's not the part of any published prospectus or syllabus but we do it on our own and sometimes we invite people from the market to conduct seminars and conferences to deliver knowledge to students that what kind of jobs are available for them in market and what kind of skills are required to get a job, it helps students in knowing what they need to do for future.

T2: Career guidance is important but University of Karachi has no program to facilitate the student regarding their career or future opportunities.

T3: Yes...career guidance plays a vital role; it helps the student to explore their profession. Basically, on the orientation day we inform the student about the scope of the program but it is not enough University officials should organize the programs and make them mandatory for every student of University.

T4: I don't think so that such type of programs is held in University of Karachi but it is important to organize the career guidance program in Universities.

T5: There is no career guidance program in Karachi university, student advisors are there, teachers in the departments who facilitate when students want their help regarding their career otherwise there sometimes department and faculty conduct the seminar and workshop but it's not official.

T6: Career guidance is very important, it provide you the guidance about your career, develop the knowledge and awareness of choice of career.

T7: Unfortunately, there is no planning in terms of career counseling to students because at our university the population of students is really high as compared to other institutes. But we do have student advisor in university.

T8: Very... very and very important, I have also suggested the authorities to please engage psychologist for career guidance because there are many people

who have done with MBBS, Engineering got the degrees, even they think that their decision was wrong and they have some other inclination which they had not been aware of it should be done from school level so that a child knows what to do in future so that it can be effective.

It is concluded from all 8 respondent that career guidance program is important at graduate level but there are no career guidance programs held by the authorities of University of Karachi but T1 and T5 stated that they organize seminar and conferences at their own to facilitate the students at this level.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study is to reveal the factors which are involve in the selection of program and success in graduate program. When the senior faculty members of University of Karachi were asked about the factors influencing in the selection of graduate program, it was inferred that career prospect is directly related to selection of graduate program and it is also identified by Paulsen (1990), Savier (1998), Maring (2006) and Lampadon (2014) that career prospects as one of the factor that contribute for the selection of study program rather than personal interest in a field of study. Lewis (2012), Polanyi (1974) argued that the purpose for attending higher education has less to do with the pursuit of economic or employment and to prepare individuals to discover their interest and to search the larger purpose for their lives, to be a better human being. Another factor identified by the respondents is the parent's decision for the selection of graduate program, this finding is also supported by Kattire and Armestrang (1994) Price et al (2003) Jafari and Aliesmaili (2013) that parents play important role in the decision making of graduate program. Further Middleton and Loughhead (1993) argued that excessive involvement of parents in the decision making for career selection results in negative outcome. It was also found that mentoring of students is most important in graduate program and confirmed by Russel & Adams (1997), Campbell and Campbell (2000), Johnson (2006), Balu.l (2014) that mentoring is important in all level of education. It focuses and motivates students toward achieving learning goals (Mehan & Rumberger 1998). Students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels report that mentoring helped them develop skills and behaviors necessary for success (Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, & Hill 2003). It is also identified from the responses that the provision of career guidance facilities in the University is important for the exploration of career. The OECD's (2002a) Review of Career Guidance Policies – Australia Country Note commented that 'many

students in tertiary education appear to have little idea of why they are there or where it is leading' (p. 18). Further this research reported that there is no program to measure the satisfactory level of students in the university. According to Harvey (2010), "feedback is important in the form of student 'satisfaction surveys' for giving internal information to guide improvement and in the form of external information for potential student and stake holder including accountability and compliance requirement."

It was concluded that that career prospects and parental involvement are the most influential factors related to selection of graduate program. Hence, due to imposed decision and lack of knowledge about the field student select the programs and university selection criteria facilitate them to enter in the program. There is no mentoring system in the university to support student and to guide them about the courses, faculty and environment. If they continue their study there is no program to measure the satisfactory level of students which provide the feedback for further improvement of graduate program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the policy makers of higher education to revise the policies regarding the selection criteria of students in graduate program so the student enter in higher education according to their interest and abilities not due to the imposed decisions.

This research suggests the teacher to mentor the students in a way, so they can excel in the graduate program by exploring their own potential.

It is also recommended to official of universities to hold the seminars and conferences for career guidance of the university graduates.

Finally, it is suggested to authorities and QEC to implement the student satisfaction surveys for the internal improvement and accountability of teachers and administrator of university.

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