

PROMOTING LOCAL ISSUES BASED TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD – A CASE STUDY OF A LARGE PRIVATE UNIVERSITY IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

In 2015 a small study was conducted at one of the largest private universities in Pakistan. It confirmed earlier observations about the disconnect between foreign curriculum being taught in the Masters and Bachelors programs at the university and the issues facing employers in the country. A specific research exercise was then planned to interview 50 faculty members and understand the causes behind reliance on foreign books, the minimal use of local case studies as well as examples and lack of on-going exposure of the faculty to the hiring organizations in Pakistan. The study yielded interesting causes behind the disconnect including the mass commercialization of education, the need for globalizing content, easier access to foreign over local content, overloading courses on faculty, faults in matching teachers and courses due to large-scale intake of students, poor human resource management, performance appraisal and remuneration policies as well as the inattentive attitude of the university towards research and the professional development of faculty members. The impact of this disconnect on the learning experiences and achievements of students is discussed and recommendations are provided for developing systematic and strategic professional development programs for promoting local issues based teaching and research while maintaining a globalized outlook.

Keywords: Academia-industry disconnect, university reputation, globalization, local knowledge, mass commercialization of education

Introduction

The university selected is one of the largest private sector universities in the country with a total student body close to ten thousand. It's business school has a student body in excess of four thousand students. Higher education faces the need to change in order to better address the

requirements of modern society (Watson and Watson, 2013). This study was conceived with the idea of identifying whether a disconnect exists between the curriculum and the issues being faced by employers. The understanding was that it is critical for educational institutions to know their purpose (Ferguson, 2014), to understand the needs of their stakeholders, i.e. employers of graduating students and to keep their curriculum aligned with those needs.

Methodology

Face to face individual interviews were carried out with the permanent faculty members of the business school at the university. A total of eighty teachers were invited to take part in the survey. However 20 responded. Each faculty member was taken through a structured interview consisting of thirteen questions. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes and was conducted with an assurance of complete confidentiality. Respondents included senior to junior faculty members, both in terms of duration of service as well as designation. The highest ranked respondent was a Dean and the lowest ranked a lecturer. Both quantitative and qualitative data was requested and received.

Key Findings

Faculty members were asked who the top five employers, by name, of their business school's students were. More than fifty percent literally said they had no idea. The banking sector was quoted by some respondents while many referred the interviewer to the Director External Linkages at the university. Those who named him felt that he was required to have that information, not them.

When asked if the faculty understands what the current top issues being faced by employers of business school students are the respondents gave a slightly positive overall average score of 2.5 out of 4 with 4 being a strong yes. Their self-assessments were then verified when they were asked to identify the top three growth opportunities those organizations were currently facing. Again half of the respondents said that they had no idea. The rest of the responses received were vague and generic. Similarly when respondents were asked about the top three overall performance challenges being faced by the same organizations 40% said they had no idea. Some of the responses given included competition, inflation, power cuts, terrorism, liquidity issues and corruption. None of these responses were specific to any single organization.

In response to a question asking for the form of value addition to their organizations consistently expected by employers from graduating students 34% said they had no idea. Some respondents felt that the students

were consistently expected to work hard on low salaries as the university's ranking was poor. One respondent said that the students were expected to be “hard working, confident and vocal, have good business knowledge and problem solving skills.”

The majority of the respondents had no clear idea when asked which of the needs of employers were left unaddressed by the curriculum being taught. Some were of the opinion that superficial knowledge was being delivered while others felt that there was lack of relevance with local needs. 85% were of the opinion that practical implications of concepts taught were not touched upon. One went to the extent of saying that students are unable to write even a simple application due to their very poor communication skills, especially in English.

When asked which of the needs of employers were being addressed by the curriculum again the respondents were at a loss for clear, specific and consistent answers. The overall impression was that basic concepts were taught to students but there was no clear line of connection between the curriculum and the needs of employers of graduating students.

Faculty members were given a scale of 1 [strong no] to 4 [strong yes] and then were asked to rate their university's business school with respect to the following forms of disconnect. Their overall average scores are given below.

Reliance on foreign books	3.5
Use of foreign case studies only	3.13
Lack of exposure of faculty to local organizations	2.87

Respondents were asked to identify the reasons why an apparent disconnect exists between the curriculum being taught and the issues being faced by the employers of the business school students. Their responses included the following:

1. An over reliance on the IT portal governed attendance system, which is highly inflexible, thus making it very difficult to schedule visits to organizations.
2. Lack of a forum for interaction between the faculty, the university and employers. Structured and formal feedback mechanisms do not exist.
3. A culture of focus on grades rather than on learning, on the part of the students and the faculty, is to blame.
4. The curriculum does not incorporate the Pakistani context as foreign content is easier to download and use as compared to the process of developing local content, for which there is little incentive, demand

or support.

5. Lack of experience of faculty members is also to blame. The faculty has little international and practical experience. Their interactions with organizations have mostly taken place before their employment with the university.
6. The faculty is short on time as they are overloaded with teaching assignments. Each instructor has to teach four courses in a semester and also has to perform administrative duties.
7. The university does not provide learning and development opportunities to its faculty. It only requires them to teach, teach and teach.
8. The human resources processes of how teaching staff is recruited and utilized also encourage the disconnect. Poor quality students attract poor quality faculty and vice versa. Those teaching courses are at times not the best match for them but given the complex task of matching teachers with over 400 sections compromises have to be made. It is a classic case of quantity over quality.

Respondents mentioned the following impacts of this disconnect on students, the faculty and the university:

1. Students – They don't get jobs and if they do get them they are offered low salaries. They are not retained. Students can not practically implement what they have learned. They are not prepared for the very different challenges they face when employed. Students are demotivated as the curriculum is useless for them. Students suffer from lack of confidence and the university is unable to attract the best ones.
2. Faculty – They are affected by poor evaluations by students who want locally relevant content and thus they lack personal satisfaction which leads to turnover. The faculty suffers from lack of confidence as well in taking initiatives. They fear that if they develop new course outlines they would have to teach the same, which would be difficult given their traditional academic backgrounds. Course outlines have been more or less the same for the last four years, except for the revisions made by the current Dean.
3. University – It is impacted by low rankings and employability problems for its students. It is unable to attract good students and faculty. Growth of the university will falter in the long term as students will not be hired in good organizations and positions.

Discussion

What we see from the findings above is a complex mix of intentions and actions gone bad with strong implications and lessons for a thriving

private education sector which holds the responsibility for meeting the learning needs of an entire local and regional economy. At the heart of the disconnect, which lies proven in this case, is a mass commercialization and money making mindset of a private university enterprise. The university is functioning as a large-scale production line where students are passed through a heartless money minting set of processes. The university's need for income and the students' need for a paper degree are the two most dominant forces in the supply and demand heavy equation of higher education of the country. The manner in which human capital is treated is also highlighted through this case study. In this university teachers are treated as limbs. Their intellectual growth and margin for innovation are minimized. They are policed into conforming and delivering teaching sessions one after the other without intellectual nourishment opportunities. The aim of the establishment seems to be maintaining a large bureaucratic system which can keep the revenue streams in place. The entire learning experience is very superficial but in a high demand situation any product or service would sell and the university knows it.

Research and the development of local content that accurately and effectively prepares students for the local job market requires a lot of motivated effort on the part of teachers and the university. Not many teachers are motivated enough to take on this gargantuan task in the absence of research encouragement and in the face of human resource management processes which are not perceived to be completely transparent and fair in terms of the dictates of the tasks, assignment of job titles, remuneration packages and incentives. They hide under the garb and convenience of globalization and tend to use concepts, models and examples from the most easily accessible online and in-print sources while fending off criticism by saying that global knowledge needs to be imparted for a global mindset. While there is nothing wrong with learning about global ideas and practices it is wrong to ignore local knowledge, issues and thus relevance.

Students are caught between not caring and not having the opportunity to care. They have to take what they get maybe only because they don't create a position for demanding better. They are caught up in this vicious circle as much as the faculty is.

Employers, as key stakeholders, suffer when the human capital they receive from universities is below par. Academia represents a critical source of knowledge and ideas for these organizations (De Fuentes, et al) and thus a grand opportunity for growth is missed when students come in ill-prepared to solve problems and make decisions.

Universities in the market for educational services are ranked based on the quality of their contacts (Shirin, 2013) and thus it is critical for

universities to maintain close and productive connections with their most important stakeholders, the employers of their students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can rightly be concluded that there is a major disconnect, at the university in question, between the curriculum being taught and the issues being faced by the employers of students. The students, as a product, are being prepared without any on-going strategic market needs assessment. The faculty generally has no idea who the employers of their students are. They also lack clarity about the growth issues and performance challenges being faced by these organizations. The faculty is overburdened with teaching assignments in a restrictive attendance and portal governed environment. The university is ignorant of its necessary role in providing learning and development opportunities to the faculty. There are very few incentives, monetary and non-monetary for research. The university is failing in attracting high quality talent in the forms of teachers as well as students. Students lack zeal for learning as they find it hard to relate their curriculum with the practical issues they face in their workplaces. Active liaison with employers to review curriculum and seek feedback about alumni is missing. There is lack of overall coherence between what is being taught by each faculty member. This disconnect is a major reason behind the university's poor market rankings and the employability of its students. All in all the university, based on the responses received, is functioning more as a tuition center than as a true university.

Recommendations include the following:

1. Faculty and employer interactions in universities are needed on a regular basis. The Human Resources departments of these organizations need to be probed for consistent feedback about the performance of alumni working there. Alumni should also be called in regularly to share their post education feedback about the practical relevance of what they have studied.
2. Faculty members should be provided the resources, reasons and incentives to prepare local case studies and to write local chapters as well as books.
3. Mentoring opportunities should be provided to junior faculty by senior faculty, especially in terms of how to make curriculum relevant for students and their employers.
4. Guest speaker sessions and joint projects with industry are needed on a regular basis.
5. Industry visits and projects should be graded and part of the assessment processes used, including examinations.
6. Top employers need to be regularly surveyed and their top issues

- both in terms of growth opportunities and performance challenges need to be tracked. The curriculum needs to be adjusted accordingly.
7. Budget allocations for maintaining a connection with employers are necessary.
 8. Local knowledge has the ability to be immediate and tangible (Goldenberg, et al. 1991) thus all academic content should be reinforced with local and regional case studies based on workplace issues. Possible solutions and real world advice should be provided, topic by topic.
 9. A formal setup with clearly defined responsibilities is needed to take on this full time responsibility. It would be unwise to add the responsibility for liaising with employers as an administrative task on already overburdened staff.
 10. University rankings and perceptions should be monitored. Trend data should be developed and an overall culture of being accountable to external and internal stakeholders needs to be developed and maintained.

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