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Review

The need to pep up the state of educational research in African Higher Institutions: A critical examination of new directions by professional educational researchers

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The state of educational research in African higher institutions can be improved through the concerted efforts of higher institutions and their affiliated bodies like the various national research councils; for instance in South Africa these are the National Research Foundation (NRF) and Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Educational research in African higher institutions can be advanced if a solid foundation in research is laid by higher institutions of learning, especially all faculties of education as well as all colleges of education which train teachers. This paper posits that educational researchers must be formally trained during their professional preparations in higher institutions and that not until a planned, constructive initiation and development of research culture is intensively facilitated in African higher institutions, the state of educational research in Africa will always remain at its lowest ebb. Furthermore, this paper attempts to provide introspective guidelines to make a contribution towards the advancement of educational research and the preparation of educational researchers for Africa in the new millennium.

Keywords: Educational research, development of research culture, higher institutions, faculties of education, teacher education and training institutions

INTRODUCTION

From responsibility perspective, all higher institutions have four major responsibilities – teaching, research, publication and community service. However, most African higher institutions of learning do not prepare their academic staff adequately to become researchers. The adage “publish or perish” has become a thorn in the flesh of many higher institutions academic staff that rest on

their laurels and do nothing about research, publication and community engagement. Generally, all practising higher institution academic staff are required, by the nature of their profession, to engage in regular research be it in their daily lecturing and supervision of students’ research thesis or writing for publication or undertaking a research study to improve community initiatives for development to alleviate poverty. Currently, research has become the buzz-word in all African higher institutions of learning but not all of them take the pains to school their undergraduate students and academic staff in the

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practice of research in terms of the development and inculcation of the culture of research in their undergraduate students and staff. In the context of research paradigms like action research and participatory research through the eyes of undergraduates do not exist. How the involvement of undergraduate in the establishment of a research culture is not considered important by higher institutions. The proof to support this claim is that, critical examination of undergraduate prospectus of African higher institutions of learning does not have elaborate research component in their course prospectus.

The approaches used in this discursive paper are purely from empirical, practical observational and exploratory perspectives considering the need for laying a solid foundation of culture of research in African higher institutions of learning.

Boaduo (2011: 30) contends that "...nations cannot develop beyond the quality of their education systems." According to Lawal (2006) no nation develops beyond the quality of its education system. Introspectively, the quality of education in a country is highly dependent on the quality of its teachers who must be research practitioners. Retrospectively, all researchers should be given the most basic and advanced appropriate research tools during their training. The training should, specifically include content knowledge in research practices and research skills as well as applicable research methodologies to be able to do their research work professionally (Boaduo, 2011). As already alluded to by Boaduo (2011) and supported by Lawal (2006) the quality of an education system depends on the quality of its researchers. Much of what teacher researchers need to know to be successful in their practice as professionals is invisible to lay observers leading to the view that involvement in intensive research requires little formal study. On the contrary, researchers, and for this discussion teacher researchers, of all categories seek answers to unanswered questions to enable them help their communities to learn and overcome their inherent community problems (Boaduo, 2012 and 2013).

It is imperative to indicate that all researchers learn about national development through literature and appropriate technology, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, evaluation and measurement and how these could be applied in a variety of situations for their benefit of societies and their communities. Generally, what the community of researchers worldwide offer to their virtual communities remain a secret and their key to success is a mystery which is dependent on the training received as researchers (Shaeffer, 1990).

The State of Research in African Higher Institutions

The South African Council of Higher Education (CHE) audit report of 2008-2009 lamented on the fact that

"...accredited research output by academic staff in South African higher institutions is almost non-existent" (CHE Audit Report 2008/2009). If South Africa, which has become the beacon of social, educational, economic and industrial development in Africa, contends with the problem of researchers, then the seriousness of this observation in other African countries cannot be underestimated. The questions which arise and need answers in such a situations may be listed thus:

- How do we address this situation in our higher institutions?
- What strategic plan should we (those of us involved in higher institutions teaching) put in place mechanisms to ensure that higher institutions are able to make contribution and achieve a benchmark of at least 0.3 publications per year per full-time academic staff?

A critical assessment of the CHE Audit Report on the low research and publication output revealed that it is a national problem and it can be added that it is also a continental problem.

From the critical observational perspective and being involved in African higher institutions of learning the issue under discussion have two main underlying causes.

- The first one is lack of requisite research foundation content knowledge and skills for undergraduates in African higher institutions of learning
- The second is lack of research incentives to encourage undergraduates to take research and academic writing as part of their undergraduate studies to make them to take research activities serious during their academic years.

In the first place, the acquisition of solid research content knowledge base and skills must be a requirement for employment of higher institutions of learning academic staff so that once employed, they are able to provide undergraduates solid research content knowledge and skills foundation for the development and sustenance of research culture. For research culture to be successfully established, general research methodology should be part of all undergraduate courses in all African higher institutions of learning for the duration of any selected undergraduate qualification.

If research and publication output among postgraduate students is to increase, they must have started their research activities during the time of their undergraduate studies. Laying a strong research foundation for the development of research culture in African higher institutions of learning cannot be taken for granted or assumed but must be instituted through progressive planning and implementation of research activities. The fact that not much have been researched and published, according to the CHE Audit Report, to the author of this paper, stems from lack of laying serious research culture foundation in African higher institutions of learning among undergraduates. The absence of a strong research foundation in African higher institutions of learning really a worrying issue which needs immediate rectification to

be able to achieve worthwhile results of research and publication output among graduates from African higher institutions of learning.

As professional academicians we are all aware of the fact that the success of any tertiary institution hinges on four primary issues already alluded to namely

- The transfer of knowledge and skills through teaching.
- The practice of research for the articulation of institutional effectiveness and efficiency to add to the knowledge base.
- Community outreach for the community to benefit from the activities of the higher institution.
- Indulgence in publications of research manuscripts for the consumption of the general public.

Root causes of lack of requisite research content knowledge and skills

Personal observation by the authors of the activities of African higher institutions in terms of the provision of research foundation and publication does not exist; and for this reason all undergraduates pass out of African higher institutions of learning with no foundation in research and publication. If these graduates come back for senior degree studies and are required to prepare a research report as partial fulfilment for their qualifications, the problem of lack of basic requisite research content knowledge and skills surface. Further observations made in the course of many years of working in some African higher institutions of learning sector are that time allocated for the conduct of research as partial fulfilment for a qualification is limited and that students are introduced to research methods within the final year to prepare research proposal for approval and the conduct of the study and submission of the research report to graduate. The time for the preparation of the research report for submission is very short. It is during this short period that students are introduced to research methods. In this way their level of research content knowledge and skills is scanty for the accomplishment of real and progressive research culture. As a result supervisors usually have problems with these students and some supervisors, from personal perspective, are forced to decide to almost do the work for students to pass to save their positions. Due to the limited research content knowledge and skills students graduate without grounding in solid research methodology, let alone publication.

Strategies to use to address the situation

To be able to address the root causes, as revealed in this discussion, the following need to be considered by African higher institutions of learning.

- Content knowledge and skills in research and publication should be compulsory part of all undergraduate modules in all higher institutions.
- Their areas of research interest should be identified and emphasised in the course of their undergraduate years.
- The problems they encounter in their attempt to research and publish should be attended to as they progress through their studies from year one to their final year.
- What they would like to be done to help them to improve on their research knowledge and skills acquisition to be able to research and publish regularly should be sought and incorporated in the lectures that they receive from their lecturers.

All these must be incorporated in all African higher institutions of learning prospectus right from the beginning of every course of study be it certificate, diploma or degree.

Recommendation for laying the solid foundation of research culture

Action research must be a major priority foundation for undergraduate research activities in African higher institutions for the preparation of undergraduates in the 21st century (Boaduo, 2010). We as established researchers know that professional researchers naturally seek answers to questions and solutions to problems. They are decision makers. They make thousands of choices on hourly basis regarding the choice of research problems, literature to review, appropriate and relevant methodological integration and the assessment and measurement of the chosen methodologies for validity and reliability. Researchers are highly reflective and sensitive to the needs of their communities. In the process of articulation of their research duties they encounter failures and successes. However, much of what professional researchers have to offer their communities remain a secret. Their key to success is a mystery. Furthermore, they seek multiple means of looking at their world by unlocking the secrets within their work environments as researchers. How they do all these remain a mystery which, they are the only people to understand. Why should undergraduate students in higher institution not be equipped with research cultural content knowledge and skills to respond to social needs?

Action research has, however, become one of the major potential keys to help researchers unlock these secrets and help their communities towards effective and efficient social networking.

This section of the paper will provide detailed empirical evidence together with scholarly argument to address the issue of the need to introduce research in all undergraduate studies in African higher institutions of learning with the view of building the requisite culture of

research and to provide in-depth action research content, practical knowledge and skills to enable undergraduates to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century virtual communities needs with confidence. The following perspectives will also be given elaborate attention.

- The need to provide undergraduates with action research tools,
- The application of action research paradigms, and
- The necessity to make their findings substantive for the solution of day-to-day students' problems that would arise in the 21st century higher institutions.

Currently, higher institutions provide just rudimentary courses in general research methodology as already indicated. These courses, in reality, do not prepare undergraduates to become ardent researchers per se and apply their research training as well as their practical knowledge and skills acquired while in training to solve the daily problems they encounter in their communities that they reside and interact.

Action research content knowledge and skills should be provided to all undergraduates in higher institutions to actually equip them with the requisite content knowledge, skills and tools that they will need to conduct in depth action research in their communities in terms of appropriateness and applicability to enhance social networking.

Generally, the aim of research methodology courses in higher institutions has been to help undergraduates to produce a research document as partial fulfilment of the degree or diploma being sought after (Boaduo and Babitseng, 2006). Currently, what is provided to the students is not from the beginning of their undergraduate studies but only they return for postgraduate studies. As a result the research methodology introduced become highly limiting in content knowledge and skills to research because the time frame from the beginning to the end of compiling the research report is less than six months. To what extent can the student be taken in terms of content knowledge depth and practical application of the acquired skills in research methodology? This is why there is need to start with undergraduates so that postgraduate students are able to use their research knowledge and skills acquired during their undergraduate years to be able to research adequately.

The 21st century undergraduate should be knowledgeable, effective and efficient in research activities, especially with special attention to the application of action research methodology. They would need to become exceptional action researchers and should engage in regular action research to increase their experiences regarding content knowledge and skills in the institutional environments and improve the quality of education for their communities and students (Kincheloe, 1991). In addition, the 21st century undergraduates would

have to engage in the debate about action research methodology in education by understanding meaningful action research themselves and should be engaged in complex critical action research to be able to make worthwhile contribution in the environment in which they live in terms of the benefits that will accrue to their communities through their research activities.

Generally, there is nowhere where there is need to take prompt and immediate action about events and issues than in communities and institutional environments. The only people who qualify to do this are researchers and one efficient way to succeed in doing this is through the application of action research methodology.

The authors, wholeheartedly, believes that 21st century undergraduates should be encouraged to explore their own voices and begin to renew the enthusiasm for the process of sharing their own work within a growing active action movement that will help to expose them to a multiplicity of action research methodological activities professionally thereby making positive contribution towards the development of their communities they interact regularly.

There is also the need to undertake some sort of research to identify the needs of undergraduates in terms of their research and publication needs and from the findings of this study, a programme is structured outlining what content and skills in research and publication should be incorporated in the provision of lectures to students. This can include, among other strategies regular workshop to improve the research content knowledge and skills and publication among undergraduates, seminars and conferences. Development of a plan of action for regular meetings with undergraduates to discuss recurring problems to be able to help them research and publish and regular monitoring of undergraduates research and publication activities for introspection retrospection and circumspection must all be considered.

- In relation to the problem of lack of research and publications foundation base among undergraduate students the following recommendations are proposed for introspection in order to get postgraduate students to register and study further.

- Research should be integral part of all undergraduate courses from the beginning to the end of any study in the university to lay the required research foundation base for all undergraduates for postgraduate studies.

- A condition to publish, at least a paper per the registered undergraduate qualification as part of the conditions for the award of a qualification should be considered for implementation in all higher institutions as a matter of urgency to initiate the culture of research, writing and publishing during undergraduate years.

Recommendations for introspection, circumspection and retrospection

It is recommended that the formation of research and publication committee for undergraduates in all higher institutions whose responsibility will be to monitor academic staff and undergraduates and report to the committee for the necessary action to be taken should the need arise should be initiated. The Committee should prepare a proposal for funding to be able to assist both academic staff and undergraduates to respond to calls for papers by conference organisers to be able to present their research papers for review and publication. Finally, higher institutions should screen and select members of the academic staff who are good at research and publication, request for their teaching workload to be reduced to be able to concentrate on teaching undergraduates research and publication strategies and techniques to equip them for a future research career.

CONCLUSION

In this discussion it has been indicated that there are four major responsibilities of all African higher institutions of learning which are knowledge and skills transfer through teaching, research for the articulation of institutional effectiveness and efficiency to add to the knowledge base, community outreach to enable to the community benefit from the activities of the university. That research should be included in all undergraduate courses so that students become research conscious before graduating; paving way for future research efficiency. To contribute in helping full time academic staff to achieve higher publication output, there is need for every institution to conduct needs assessment after which plans should be made in terms of the known needs of academic staff and adequate measures put in place to help in this respect. All faculties of African higher institution of learning should establish in-house academic journals in which the academic staffs will be encouraged and supported to submit research papers for review and publication. This will be an excellent start to create research and publication culture in African higher institutions of learning.

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