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Developing research and scholarship at AKU-IED: Possibilities and challenges

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Developing Research and Scholarship at AKU-IED
Possibilities and Challenges

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Research as a central activity has been envisioned throughout the various stages of development of AKU-IED. The Chancellor, His Highness the Aga Khan states in his speech at the Institute’s inauguration in 1994 (cited in Report of AKU-IED Third Task Force):

IED [should be] organised to bring research competence to bear on issues ranging from the very practical problems of classroom teaching and school management to relevant questions of educational policy

Initially, the focus of activities remained on development and delivery of teacher education programmes; partly because of the external funding arrangements that required that a large number of taught programmes be offered, and partly because of the small number of faculty, few of whom had formal research training and preparation to take on independent research activity.

To provide for an explicit and concentrated emphasis on, and support for research, the Research and Policy Studies (RAPS) initiative was launched in August 2001. RAPS would: facilitate and encourage the execution and publication of high quality research programmes and projects at AKU-IED; facilitate the development of research on educational policy issues of general significance; and develop processes and mechanisms for the active dissemination of research and policy studies.

Today RAPS is a thriving hub of research activity with appropriate institutional infrastructure to support research. This support infrastructure includes suitable policies and procedures for engagement in research; funds to support novice researchers; a dissemination and advocacy strategy; support for national and international conference participation; and support for publication of monographs and working papers.

The committees provide an opportunity to a larger group of faculty to engage in thinking about issues and challenges in the initiation, conduct and dissemination of sound research and come up with appropriate advice to management. Involvement of faculty across the ranks provides capacity development to the novices, and opportunity to the senior seasoned faculty to share their experience and expertise. The Ethics Review Committee ensures that the University Research Council’s guidelines for ethics are appropriately followed by faculty and students.

More recently, RAPS played a major role in establishing the Pakistan Association for Research in Education. This association aims to promote a vibrant educational research culture in Pakistan, and enhance the impact of educational research on policy and practice. It was launched at the occasion of the international conference at AKU-IED in February 2006. The office bearers and members of the association include representatives from key research and academic institutions from across the country.

Current profile of research at AKU-IED shows that it is a core function with almost every faculty member engaged in at least one research project. Of course for some this is research into their own practice. Increasingly, externally funded projects are undertaken in collaboration with international partners and through participation in international research consortia, with a greater potential of impact on policy. Likewise, faculty is increasingly publishing in prestigious refereed journals and books and publishing books on key issues in education.

Besides the research conducted by faculty, masters and doctoral students also undertake research. Research and publications are primarily in the following areas: a) Teaching; b) Teacher Education; c) School Improvement; e) Curriculum areas; f) Education Leadership; g) Gender in Education; (h) Other (e.g. health, inclusive education, literacy, partnerships, community involvement/ capacity building). Research reports and student dissertations are placed in the library and information is available on the website at http://www.aku.edu/ied/raps/. Figures 1 and 2 show the profile of research and publications at the Institute over the years.

While the Institute has made significant strides in developing research capacity and outputs in recent years, there are still a number of challenges and issues that need to be taken into account. For example, assessing and providing evidence of impact of research on policy and practice is complex philosophically and methodologically. Moreover, the areas of study as noted above are varied and broad. This breadth precludes developing a depth of understanding in specific areas and its potential to impact policy and practice.

Methodologically there is a concentration of in-depth qualitative studies with a focus on the singular with the purpose of improving practice and/or developing an understanding of the issue or phenomenon being studied. While this is understandable given the initial stage of the work of AKU-IED and the kinds of questions being

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Research Assemblies in the University started in 2005 with the organising of the First Health Science Research Assembly from March 15 to 17. Due to its outstanding success the Second Assembly was held the following year on March 7 and 8.

The Third Assembly in the annual series was organised on April 24 and 25, 2007. A total of 697 abstracts were submitted which was an increase of about 40 percent over the previous year. Faculty enthusiasm for the Assembly was reflected in the participation rate of over 90 percent. Students' contributions too increased substantially over the previous year – almost double the number.

Dr Mohammad Khurshid, Dean Medical College, inaugurated the Research Assembly. In his remarks, the Dean reiterated that research is a vital component of academic life at the University and embedded in its culture on teacher education and school improvement, and being responsive to the global and national policy context (e.g. Early Childhood Education, Education For All). Link as far as possible student research with the areas of concentration; it is expected that this concentration would develop depth and create impact; b) Undertake large scale national and cross-national studies with greater potential of impacting policy; c) Develop national and international partnerships for comparative research on issues of local and global significance; d) Develop or continue to develop capacity in research and policy studies; e) Set up mechanisms and support structures for publication of monographs and position papers; f) Start a regional journal of educational research; g) Set up a research association in Pakistan.

To conclude, the overview of research at AKU-IED shows that we have taken steps in the right direction for fulfilling our mission of becoming a vanguard in education through engagement with schools based research and policy oriented research. We believe it is a journey just begun!

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He urged faculty, residents and students to passionately embrace research as this will further elevate AKU as a centre of excellence on the world stage and not just locally. He strongly advised researchers to translate their research into publications and even patents which could be used for the benefit of industry and society.

Dr Mohammad Wasay, Associate Professor, Chair of the Health Sciences Research Assembly Organising Committee, recalled the objectives of Health Science Research Assembly: to provide an opportunity to young researchers to showcase their research; to dialogue with fellow researchers in their fields of interest; and to sow the seeds for collaborative/ multidisciplinary research at the University. He indicated that about 70 per cent of the abstracts received for the 2005 Research Assembly will eventually result in publication.

...Contd. on Page 6

Figure 2

AKU-IED Publications 1993 - October 31, 2007

Dr Anjum Halai