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Faculty Socialization in Higher Education Institutions: The Tug-of-war between Perceptions and Realities

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Abstract



Faculty socialization in higher education is seen as a key component of educational research, however, it has received little attention in Pakistan. Particularly, there is a scarcity of literature on the socialization of faculty members in their roles in institutions located in remote and rural contexts. This study aimed at exploring teachers' socialization into the profession in higher education institutions located in semi-urban and rural settings in Pakistan. A qualitative approach was employed to conduct the study. Findings show that during the initial entry into the profession, higher education faculty members find a gap between the perceptions and realities about their roles in higher education institutions. During the initial phase, their practices remain isolated and they continue their work on a trial-and-error basis. In addition, faculty members working in remote and rural settings experience lesser opportunities for professional learning and interaction. Findings have pertinent implications for research at the higher education level.

Keywords: Faculty Socialization, Higher Education, Professional Socialization, Teacher Learning

Introduction

In Pakistan, various public and private sector universities and colleges provide higher education to the masses and the number of Higher Education institutions and teachers increases rapidly. In the year 2002, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) was established. Since its inception the HEC has played a pivotal role in the provision of access and quality HE across the country through attracting the best brains to teach in the universities, allocation of faculty development funds, provision of foreign and indigenous scholarships, insuring continuous professional development of HE teachers through conferences, seminars, and short term courses, and equipping HE institutions with relevant resources such as laboratories, libraries, and better infrastructure. The HEC has also provided generic guidelines for faculty induction in HE institutions.

It has been observed, generally, individuals enter the HE as faculty members without any prior teaching experiences and/or professional training. In addition, once individuals are inducted they are sent directly to the classrooms without any formal orientation mechanism. Literature from elsewhere has shown that during the phase of entry into the profession, novice faculty members need professional support due to the contextual realities of their classrooms and organizations (Pisova, 2013). In such a situation they tend to feel lonely and helpless and need professional, psychological, and moral support from their colleagues and the administration (McCoy, Newell, & Gardner, 2012; Boice, 1991). As adults use a variety of approaches for learning (Knowles, 1990); therefore, higher education faculty use diverse approaches for their learning and socialization in the profession.

Our own experience of transition to the university campus as faculty members also showcases the very challenges in the entry phase. We came from various backgrounds, experiences, and qualifications. Though we had studied in the universities during our bachelor, Master, MS, and Ph.D. programs and also had teaching experiences in various HE institutions, yet entry into a university campus as a faculty member has had a challenging enterprise. Conception of one's own roles and responsibilities, socialization in the organization, colleagues and students, and teaching in the classroom were always challenging in a new context.

Our reflections on such experiences show that we felt lonely in our struggle to overcome the challenges and continued learning on a *trial-and-error* basis. We; therefore, thought to study the faculty members' experience of their socialization into the profession. Though in other parts of the world, some studies have been conducted on this very notion, yet there is a scarcity of literature in Pakistan on this particular area. We believe that the findings of this study will shed light on the professional socialization experiences of individual faculty members in HE institutions resulting in suggestions and recommendations for HE institutions in the context of faculty induction and support.

Thus, the study aimed at exploring the nature and processes of socialization in the teaching role in higher education institutions in remote contexts in Pakistan. The study, thus, has explored the perceived roles of individuals pre and post-joining the teaching profession in higher education institutions. The question, "how do faculty members in higher education institutions socialize in the profession?" guided the research study.

Review of Relevant Literature

The study is based on the theories of socialization, particularly the socialization of academics into the profession (Tierney, 1997; Johnson, 2001). Generally, social science researchers see socialization as a process through which individuals acquire the values, norms, knowledge, and skills needed to exist in a given society (Merton, cited in Johnson, 2001). According to Tierney (1997), "Socialisation involves a give-and-take, where new individuals make sense of an organisation through their own unique backgrounds and the current contexts in which the organisation resides". (p. 7)

Tierney (1997) also sees culture as constantly being re-created. This means that values and norms in a culture are not fixed to be followed by newcomers; rather a culture is always in the process of making. Literature about the socialization of academics in the university (Johnson, 2001) shows that the process involves two stages: anticipatory socialization, and organizational stage of socialization. Johnson (2001) maintains that anticipatory socialization occurs prior to employment, generally during graduation schools, and involves taking on the norms of the profession. The organizational stage further involves two phases called 'initial entry' and 'role continuance'. Initial entry occurs during the recruitment and selection process as well as during the early period of organizational learning when the faculty members begin their careers. The phase of role countenance begins after the individual is situated in the organization. Due to the mismatch between the precisions and realities, novice teachers face a reality shock when they enter the teaching profession (Khan & Halai, 2009).

Zeichner and Gore (1990) reviewed influences on teacher socialization in the following three stages: (a) prior to formal teacher education, (b) during pre-service teacher education, and (c) during the in-service years of teaching. However, this model may not be the best fit for socialization into higher education practices given that entry into higher education does not require a pre-service teacher education certificate. Individuals enter into the profession after postgraduate qualification. Professional socialization is not limited to learning certain prescribed roles; rather it has a higher magnitude. According to Pisova (2013), professional socialization is perceived as more than just acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to perform a role. It includes understanding and internalizing the values and norms that are fundamental to the essence of the profession. Thus, values and norms are always nested in the context and milieu of an institution.

Therefore, McCoy, Newell, & Gardner (2012) highlight the importance of a balanced environment for faculty well-being and socialization. A balanced environment gives comfort to individuals for their professional growth and learning. The importance of the culture of work-life balance in higher education has always been a driving force for professional socialization (Lester, 2015). Thus, the more conducive environment the better learning and socialization of higher education faculty.

Research on faculty socialization has highlighted the need for social and academic support as facilitating factors for socialization (Boice, 1991). For instance, a study conducted by Bogler & Kremer-Hayon, (1999) has yielded several areas that individuals come across during professional socialization. Those areas included: feelings of isolation and loneliness; expectations; professional identity; conflicts and dilemmas; and tenure-related concerns. As a result, novice faculty members need support, encouragement, and opportunities to learn in order to come out of the dilemmas.

Studies have shown that opportunities including faculty learning communities (Ward & Selvester, 2011), engagement in research activities, seminars, and conferences (Dennis, Lias &

Holdan, 2017) play a pivotal role in faculty socialization. In the contemporary era where ICT has become a *sine qua non* in all professions including teaching, faculty members need support and professional development in the use of technology (Halupa & Bolliger, 2020).

Faculty socialization also needs to balance one's personal and professional lives in learning about the profession (Diego-Medrano & Salazar, 2021). It is fact that personal and professional lives are intertwined; thus, they influence each other. As a result, a balanced approach facilitates professional socialization and learning about the profession. Studies have shown that learning through self-study research (Bashiruddin, 2006) and autoethnographies (Trahar, 2013) facilitate the socialization processes. Likewise, learning from teaching (Entwistle, 2009) and reflections (Schon, 1983; Schon, 1987) along with family support and work-life balance (Russon, Shteigman, & Carmeli, 2016) are also seen as imperative in the faculty socialization process.

Methodology

We employed a qualitative research design (Darlington & Scott, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and interviewed 15 faculty members working in colleges and university departments. Their experiences ranged from one to five years of teaching in HE institutions. We felt that given their induction within the last five years, the participants would be able to refresh their memories about their experience and be able to share with us their lived experiences.

We conducted detailed semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) of 60 minutes each for the first round and also conducted second-round follow-up interviews where needed. The semi-structured interviews enabled us to probe into details where further explanation was needed. The set of questions aimed at eliciting responses about the perceptions of the participants about working at higher education institutions pre and post-induction period. Most of the participants preferred to give interviews in English; however, four of them preferred Urdu over English.

The interviews were recorded verbatim and later transcribed for analysis purposes. Extracts from the Urdu interviews, which we used in this research report, were translated from Urdu into English. We used a thematic approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) for the analysis. Before embarking on the analysis, we prepared the transcribed documents for the analysis. We manually carried out the analysis. Thus, we initially coded the emerging points and developed sections and sub-sections based on the coding mechanism.

Social Science research ethics (Khan, Hussain & Alam, 2021) were followed during the phases of entry into the field, data collection, analysis, and report writing. We did not use the actual names of the participants and their respective institutions so as to avoid any vulnerability (Darlington & Scott, 2002) on the part of the participants.

Based on the analysis, we developed the themes for reporting purposes. Thus, the findings of the study have been portrayed thematically. Our interpretation of the data has been supported through relevant pieces of evidence (extracts from the interviews).

Findings

The following section sheds light on the findings of the study.

The Role of Academics is Different than what was Anticipated

Stories gathered from the research participants showed that upon assuming their roles as faculty members in higher education institutions, they saw gaps between their preconceived notions and the realities in practice. A research participant reflected and said:

Before joining the institution I had a lot of pictures in my mind about working in a higher education institution and used to think about the roles of the teachers. Once I joined the institution, I felt that reality is always tougher than what is expected. My role was not limited to a classroom lecture; rather, I had to conduct and supervise research work on various committees and prepare reports.

A second research participant reflected on his initial experience of socialization in the faculty role and mentioned:

Though, as a university student during my MPhil studies, I had seen my teachers lecturing in the classes, yet I did not know about the role of a teacher in course development, assessment, and engagement in various administrative work. Now, I felt that most of a faculty member's time is spent in planning and working behind the scene. I feel that working in a higher education institution is a 24 hours job.

A third research participant expressed:

What I was imagining about the role of a faculty member in a university was just the tip of the iceberg. Now, I realize that my role as a university teacher is huge. I teach in the classrooms, I conduct research, and I work on various committees as well. Publications are the prerequisite for promotions to higher ranks, thus, I am involved in various research studies too.

It surfaced that the interplay of preconceived notions about the roles and the reality of the context of higher education makes individuals reflect on their roles. They compare their emerging roles with those they perceived before entering the field. Though, the research participants have had some conceptions of their roles when they were students in various higher education institutions. However, tend to reconceptualize their notions about their roles in the HE institutions.

Learning through Trial-and-Error

Analysis of the interview data showed that learning to teach at higher education institutions was on a trial-and-error basis. The research participants, upon entering into the field, worked in isolation and most of their learning was on a trial-and-error basis. The mechanism of mentoring and coaching the newly inducted faculty members was missing. A research participant mentioned:

I feel that I mostly practice on a trial-and-error basis. There is no culture of mentoring here in the college. Thus, be it research work or teaching, it is mostly solitary work. Based on some basic understanding of thesis research, I do various small-scale studies, that is how I learn to research. Likewise, I do not have opportunities for in-house learning about teaching.

Another research participant reflected on the learning through trail-and-error and the limited opportunities for continuous professional development and said:

I feel that most of my learning is through trial and error. There are limited opportunities for professional growth. During the COVID-19 period and then in the post-COVID scenario, there are lesser opportunities for attending training sessions. Yes, there are opportunities for professional development through virtual mode, yet such opportunities cannot replace face-to-face interactions.

The above-mentioned extract from the reflection shows a lack of professional development opportunities for faculty members during COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 scenarios which lead to the practice of trial and error. It also highlighted the importance of face-to-face learning opportunities. Face-to-face interaction, provides comparatively better earnings to individuals.

A research participant reflected on his experience of joining a HE institution and said:

Before joining the institution, I thought that there would be exemplary cooperation in the institution and individuals would extend cooperation and support to the newcomers. But, I saw that everybody was working in his [her] shell. I felt that the element of learning from one another was missing. I also continued working solitarily be it teaching or research work.

Research participants also shared their experiences with the work culture and mentioned that there was a need for a collaborative culture instead of a competitive one. A research participant reflected on her experience and mentioned:

Higher education institutions need to be examples of best practices and collaborations. In some cases, a support mechanism is seen; however, in most cases, it is not! There is a need for a collaborative and collegial culture instead of a competitive one. We shall not work in our cocoons, that limits our learning and professional growth. working in isolation! this is what I am doing!

Another research participant reinforced the need for a collaborative and encouraging culture and said:

Unfortunately, the provision of collegial and peer support is missing generally in the country. The element of the collegial relationship is not there in higher education institutions. I think it is because of the competition for promotion.... the more publications you have the better your chances of promotion. So, this has hampered the collaborative culture and has resulted in working in isolation.

Thus, almost all the research participants worked in isolation on a trial-and-error basis. They realized the importance of a collegial and conducive learning environment. Arranging orientation sessions as well as mentoring and coaching opportunities for the newly inducted faculty members would bring them out of isolation and enhance their learning as teachers.

Learning Opportunities become Limited in a Remote Region

One of the key purposes of the study was to explore the learning and socialization approaches in the profession of higher education faculty members in remote and semi-rural contexts. Analysis of the data showed that the remoteness of the context limited the learning opportunities of the faculty members. A research participant mentioned:

My colleagues working in the cities have greater opportunities for professional learning. They have numerous higher education institutions around there. As a result, they have more opportunities for academic engagement. They attend seminars and conferences easily. Unlike them, we are just immitted to one institution or two institutions. Traveling to down countries for seminars, conferences, and sessions has time and financial implications. It takes almost fifteen to eighteen hours to get to the nearest bigger city.

Another research participant almost echoed the same and said:

There are comparatively lesser professional development opportunities in remote areas like that of ours. Our counterparts in the down countries have huge opportunities for academic and professional learning. They have access to bigger libraries, laboratories, and training programs arranged by various institutions.

Some of the participants also highlighted the limited access to the internet so as be connected with their global counterparts. They mentioned that the region has limited access to ICT given the limited internet faculty. As a result, they do not have frequent opportunities of joining online sessions and seminars. a research participant mentioned:

There is a limited opportunity of connecting with the world due to limited IT opportunities in the region. The internet facility is limited. It is always challenging to attend an online session. The limited availability of the Internet and electricity limits our interaction with the world.

Thus, it surfaced that the limited access to the internet faculty also limits the learning opportunities of the faculty members in the remote region. The region of Gilgit-Baltistan seems to be isolated given its distance from other neighboring cities in the country. In addition, there is limited access to the internet hampering the opportunities for face-to-face and virtual interactions with their counterparts.

Discussion

Findings showed that prior to joining the HE institution and during the induction period, individuals had anticipatory socialization into the teaching at the HE institutions (Johnson, 2001). As they did not have any teaching certificate prior to joining the HE institutions; therefore, most of their socialization was on the perceived practices. The faculty members entered the profession with perceived notions about their roles. However, upon entering into the field of HE they realized that their role was not limited to just classroom teaching. They saw that their practices in a wider spectrum involved teaching, research, and services.

Due to the mismatch of perceptions and reality, individuals generally faced confusion and their practices generally remain on a *trial-and-error* basis. This resulted in huge implications for academic quality as well as teachers play a pivotal role in ensuring academic quality in the institutions (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Findings showcased that the research participants saw gaps between their perceptions and the reality related to their roles and practices. These findings reinforce those explored by the school teachers (Khan & Halai, 2009). The socialization into the academic role made the research participants rethink and reconceptualize their notions as academics. They saw their roles nested in the bedrock of the key components of higher education including teaching, research, and service (Schultz, Meade, & Khurana, 1989). They found themselves developing courses, implementing them in classrooms, assessing the students' learning, conducting research, and providing administrative services.

Given the nature of the institutions, the practices of the research participants continued on a *trial-and-error* basis. The remoteness of the work context and limited IT resources in the region further confined opportunities for learning and professional socialization. In the absence of mentoring mechanism the doors of their classrooms remained closed and they continued practicing in isolation without any feedback from mentors. Studies have shown the importance of mentoring in the learning of newly-inducted faculty members (Suhail & Uzair, 2019). Learning through a *trial-and-error*

resulted in fear and uncertainty among the newly inducted faculty members, and thus, they needed support in terms of mentoring, coaching, and guidance.

Unlike school teachers, teachers in HE institutions do not require any license for teaching. Therefore socialization into the role of HE is heavily dependent on the experience as learners being university/college students. As students, they might not have imagined the breadth and depth of their role as academics. Therefore, once they enter the profession, they come across fields they had not imagined earlier. In such cases, the availability of mentoring in the institutions plays a key role in the professional learning and development of the faculty members (Blood et al, 2012; Haynes, & Petrosko, 2009).

On the basis of the findings, it is recommended to provide mentoring opportunities to novice faculty members in the HE institutions so as to provide professional networking and support (De Janasz, & Sullivan, 2004). Senior colleagues, as mentors, can engage the newly inducted individuals in co-planning, coteaching, co-authorship, and joint research projects. Such opportunities are of paramount importance for the learning of novice teachers. Universities and colleges; therefore, need to focus on such practices so as to ensure conducive learning opportunities for novice faculty members.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study aimed at exploring teachers' socialization into the profession in higher education institutions in remote and semi-urban settings in Pakistan. A qualitative approach was employed to conduct the study. Findings showed that teachers found the realities of the day-to-day practice in the institutions more than what they perceived. The very nature of the pedagogy of higher education involving teaching, research, and services was not what the individuals perceived before entering the field. Their practices mostly remained solitary where they followed the pedagogy of trial and error. Lack of support and mentoring mechanism in the institutions and fear of being considered incompetent further added challenges to the socialization processes. On the basis of the findings, it is recommended to higher education institutions arrange orientation and mentoring processes so as to guide and support novice teachers and proving them with a welcoming environment for professional learning. In this regard, senior faculty members should be engaged in mentoring the newly inducted and novice faculty members in higher education institutions. Likewise, a robust mechanism of orientation to the newly inducted faculty members should be in place. The orientation should involve policies, norms and values, teaching approaches, assessment mechanisms, and supervision. Likewise, establishing a peer coaching mechanism in higher education institutions would also facilitate the smooth socialization of faculty members into the profession.

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