

Mentoring, Incentives and Rewards in Research as Professional Development

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Introduction

The paper throws open some issues for discussion (rather than any prescription or critique on issues), and colleagues from within and outside the sub-theme (and even scholars in general) are invited to contribute their views to enrich the discussion further, and set an agenda for collaborative implementation and follow-up. It raises research questions and professional-managerial questions on research mentoring and promotion of research through support including incentives, which is basic to research in general, and research in adult and distance education in particular. This also needs to be examined in a context where exchange, support and collaboration has been more possible through information and communication technologies (ICTs). Also, in the process, some of the training issues relating to research as professional development have been highlighted. Throughout the paper, distance education denotes contexts of open universities, distance teaching institutions, as also distance education in dual mode institutions.

Research as Professional Development

At the special lecture to the ICDE Vienna delegates in 1999, Otto Peters had rightly remarked that every university needs to be an open university in several aspects, and that they should be student oriented, practice oriented, and future oriented. Further, he remarked, “On the whole, the university of the future will have to be the result of a fundamental process of transformation in which it changes into a university which mainly enables self-studying in all its forms oriented towards the research process, supports this and in the end makes it into the foundation of its curricula and teaching...” (Peters, 1999). What Peters said may be read as futuristic; but it holds good for any university - conventional or open. While commenting on this very aspect, Evans seemed to me more straightforward : that “...Open universities need to take the issue of research seriously if they wish to be at the forefront of higher education nationally and internationally, and if they wish to be seen as *universities* ...” (Evans, 2000 : 2). The open universities need to undertake significant research activities, otherwise they may be considered inferior to the ‘real’ universities on

which they heavily depend upon. Whether a research discipline of distance education as noted by Holmberg (1987) has emerged or not, it is imperative that all activities and practices within distance education should have sound empirical base through research (Moore, 1988; Jegede, 1991).

As we shall argue later, research in distance education should not be restricted to a few, rather it should be undertaken by all teaching, professional and non-teaching staff as part of their reflective practice through critical reflection (Evans and Nation, 1989). If a close relationship between research and practice needs to be established (Calvert, 1989), those who do these cannot be separated. Even today, research is being undertaken by those who need not implement it, and that research outcome is generally shelved to be preserved than utilised for informed decision making and improvement of the practices. Besides this, which may be branded as institutional research, it is imperative to undertake serious (basic) research within this field to help it grow and be a co-partner to contemporary emerging and established disciplines, especially in social sciences.

While pleading for action research as tool for professional development, Passi (1999) pointed out that this is the best form of professional development because “They can employ indigenous methodologies, identify self-generated resources, and find local solutions (p.2). This also develops personal knowledge base, reasonable level of expertise, atmosphere of self-reliance, and invigorates the entire educational environment. Besides, there are other forms or types of research which need to be considered worth undertaking. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in a detailed discussion on this, a brief mention is worth the task since it has implications for mentoring of research and incentive schemes. There has been considerable amount of debate in DTIs/OU's regarding focus of research effort either on one's own discipline or the distance education system and practices. This also brings into focus the nature of research activities, as also institutional research policy. Usually, the argument put forward is that the academics need to be in touch with respective mainstream discipline and contribute to it, as also that they do not have research skills to investigate into the pedagogic and operational aspects of their discipline distance teaching, which is seen as more educational. The argument seems to be true in its own right. The argument seems more attractive when one finds that even in conventional mainstream universities, all the teachers are not engaged in research, and, more so, on research in educational pedagogy. Simply, doing a doctorate in any discipline entitles one to teach. But then, the nature of teaching and the role of teachers has undergone dramatic changes, and that continuing professional development is being visualised not only as a prerequisite to tenured promotion, but more as development of skills of learning to learn, and lifelong learning.

Has it happened or does it apply to research, and research in open distance education? Traditionally, in conventional universities, research is confined to doctoral work and individual/group projects with external funding support. In especially doctoral work, there is a strong disparity of knowledge between the

research supervisor and the research student, which characterises this kind of investigation; and that there is an intense polarisation of knowledge in favour of the supervisor (who eventually knows more), and the investigation is largely linear (as guided by the supervisor). While this disparity and polarisation characterises doctoral work, this has led to a superior 'status' enjoyed by the supervisor (Misra, 2000). In open distance education, by the very nature of (team) work undertaken by a variety of functionaries, the disparity and polarisation turn towards collaborative exploration as joint venturers and surrogate students, and multi-dimensional respectively; and superior status enjoyed by the supervisor takes the form of multiple and multi-dimensional roles played by the teacher-researchers. Instead of linearity, the exploration becomes multi-dimensional, with multi-perspectives and creativity. In the process, therefore, while research is not confined to a few (that to teachers), the nature of research guidance/mentoring undergoes significant changes.

Before we get to discuss research mentoring, few questions need to be addressed to:

- Does the institution have a research policy, and what is the nature of that research policy?
- What is the status of institutional and individual research: what sort of research, who does it, for whom, in which areas, with what intention and funding support?
- What are the result outlets/forms: institutional, individual course-related, individual projects, doctoral work, course research projects, routine evaluative research, a research course?
- Are there differences in pedagogic and operational aspects between discipline-based and DE system-based research?
- In what way and with what consequence, institutional and individual research be integrated/distinguished?
- What kind of research areas we need to give priority to?
- How can the everyday work of an academic be integrated with action and other kinds of research in DE? And, how much time/workload for research?

Mentoring Research in DE

Experience tells us that traditionally, in general, research has been largely linear with greater disparity between the supervisor and the student. In the distance education context also, research supervision has almost been the same; and for other forms of research mentioned in the above box, supervision and guidance has been minimal, and some times non-existent, except that the teacher-researcher has to satisfy a few committees to obtain research grants. The age-old scheme of superior-subordinate hierarchy in research relationship is gradually vanishing. What is said by Sayles (1993) about government and business enterprises (that workers are being viewed as more desirable than before due to their multifunctional specialism, and that the management is also functioning in a more collaborative and interactive fashion than before) is also equally applicable to distance education situations (vis-à-vis research): that there is increasing multispecialisation, downsizing, collaborative decision making, and linking research to development.

Mentoring in DE research needs to be viewed in both the contexts of institutional/individual/group research courses and projects, and other research training programmes. Further, mentoring support and mentoring relationship shall be productive provided the institution and/or the special research interest groups (SRIGs) value research as nothing but essential, and develop committed mechanisms to reduce the gap between what is expoused and what is practiced.

A mentor is the one who is more than a supervisor and guide - a peer supporter, guide, guru, well wisher and joint venturer in a situation of one-to-one relationship. The role of senior researcher or the researcher-boss as an authoritarian guide needs to change towards that of a 'mentor' collaborator, joint venturer, and surrogate student. Mentoring provides opportunities to seniors to learn from the juniors, and promotes meaningful learning by both mentor and mentoree (Cohen and Galbraith, 1995).

In distance teaching institutions, we have the situation of either the supervisor (faculty) guiding the fellow colleagues or students for doctoral work, or the senior investigator of a group project leading and guiding other project investigators, or even an individual academic doing an individual research project (through largely self-guidance). This situation warrants change if we intend to increase research productivity, and enhance the quality of research processes and outputs. Development of a research mentoring system and network, and capacity building thereof, is required to instill seriousness into this process.

Based on a three-dimensional mentoring model of Smit (1999), Morgan and Smit (2000) experimented mentoring in distance education, which could be of use in developing a mentoring system for DE research. The three-dimensional model comprises the key factors distinguishing mentoring relationship (degree of power, level of identification with the mentor, and programme implementation by involvement of the mentor and the mentoree together); and they have noted that mentoring in DE creates multiple discourses, helps overcome isolation, facilitates development of work-based competencies, ensures higher flexibility, and bridges theory and practice. Based on this model, and especially in the context of what we noted earlier that mentoring in research embraces multi-dimensional roles and perspectives, research investigation in distance education may be visualised to take place on-site and/or on-line for project development, research process support, and even for research evaluation. This mechanism needs to be built into (and should rather overshadow) the research policy of institutions, networks, and consortia. And, therefore, research mentoring may take place f2f, at a distance, on-line or even through a judicious mix of these.

Of course, this raises the question of who should be a mentor, and there would be a need for training of mentors. From our point, we have already viewed that (all) teachers/academics, professionals and non-teaching staff need to do some kind of research, and that the mentors (may be for the time being with superior research skills and experiences) from within the institutions or from outside (including any

place in the globe) need necessarily have the responsibility of exploring together with colleagues and new research entrants, and grow professionally together.

This brings to focus the recognition of multicultural issues (i.e. gender, class, caste, ethnicity, race, religion, language, physical and other ability) in the mentoring relationship and operationalisation of the research mentoring system. There is also a need for use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for developing network/professional groups and associations/SRIGs for promoting research mentoring and research professional development. The professional support networks may use collaborative mentoring models, which could be practitioner-centred, experiential, research-oriented (including researching mentoring), reflective, and empowering (Mullen, 2000). Clearly then, while distance teaching institutions impose many restrictions on research, there is a need to resist those impositions.

Some of the questions at this stage include :

- What should be the nature/characteristics/parameters of mentoring in distance education research?
- Who should qualify to be mentors in DE research, and what sort of training would they require?
- What sort of mentoring support (if at all) exists for DE research in institutions across the globe?
- What is the role of language and culture in distance and inter-national mentoring?
- What effect does institutional research policy and faculty attitude have on development and operationalisation of a research mentoring system?
- What kind of mentoring support is needed by young researchers of distance education?
- After all, is mentoring a pre-requisite to do any research in DE, more particularly doctoral research, if one has been working with the system for quite some time and/or possesses preliminary research degrees?

Researching Mentoring in DE Research

The above discussion instigates us to consider inclusion of 'mentoring in DE research' as one of the research areas. This will facilitate us to further operationalise and improve upon the process of research mentoring. Some of the gender and language issues in mentoring will come to the fore, and this shall also facilitate us in identifying/recognizing and institutionalising ethics and ethical standards (Evans and Jakupec, 1996) in DE research, especially in context of use of information and communication technologies. In a recent investigation on mentoring in DE in context of supporting practicing student doctors, it was found that the performance of those supported by mentoring was superior in terms of depth of treatment, range of perspectives, and localisation of diagnosis and treatment than that of those who were not exposed to it (Panda and Jena, 2000). This is just one of such needed research in this area which can reveal the dynamics and processes of mentoring

relationship in research in DE, and eventually suggest mechanisms of increasing the quality of research and research productivity.

One framework that immediately comes to mind is an input-process-output model to research this area. *Inputs* may include : institutional research policy and valuing of research; research processes and types of research; institutional support for SRIGs, collaborative research, including research funding; staff/faculty development, perception and policies, and embedding research into reflective practitioners; incentives and rewards; general institutional academic and management culture; academic and research freedom; workload; and the like. The *process* of mentoring involves mentoring relationship for joint exploration in research investigation f2f or at a distance; and *output* may encompass quality research output; application of research results; development of theories; development of good research practices and institutional/ international research culture; development of research networks, collaborative work, and significant self-reflection and professional development. Further, another question concerns: What kind of mentoring relationship upholds the procedure and data integrity in research in DE?

Role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

The rapid developments in ICTs shall obviously facilitate collaborative research and research mentoring. There is a need to explore the role of ICT in facilitating mentoring, and networking and collaboration. A recent success story is the use of electronic conferencing environment for collaborative research (Jegade et al, 1999) which needs to be replicated in other contexts and explored further.

Incentives and Rewards

Generally, there hardly is any defined institutional provision for rewarding good research and providing incentives to effective researchers and mentors. We have instances where the teachers of university correspondence course institutes would like to shift to the mainstream university faculty (Sahoo, 1985), and research does not rank high in the faculty priority (Jegade, 1993). In a recent study, Walcott (1997) found that in the USA in the sampled institutions, distance teaching is not valued highly and is not considered as a scholarly activity, distance teaching is less related to promotion, and that rewards for distance teaching depends on the commitment of the concerned academic unit to distance education. DE has always been considered as an outreach programme; and, outreach in combination with technological innovation is poorly rewarded (Dillon and Walsh, 1992).

It is time that we seriously explore the nature and consequences of rewards and incentives for DE research. Research in DE has hardly been considered as a career path; and the DE faculty generally have the incentives of research publication in institutional and national/international journals, research publications as institutional monographs, award of Ph.D. degrees and increments due to completion of Ph.D., research paper presentations in conferences, etc. It needs radical changes in institutional policy to value research for appointment, promotion (tenured and

otherwise), and for extra incentive/encouragement for the reasons of research-related institutional and professional benefits as outlined in this paper. Further, there is a need to balance teaching-training-research-extension in institutional policy, funding support and faculty workload. If research is the basis of institutional operation and management, and if all the functionaries need to do research as the basis of their activities, what is the incentive we are looking for? The ivory towers of open universities should change first.

Even research journals have not been able to sustain due to lack of funding, institutional patronage, and good research reporting. The erstwhile *Journal of Research in Distance Education* of Athabasca University is the best example before us; on the other hand, we are highly overwhelmed by the initiation of a recent e-journal *International Journal of Research in Open and Distance Learning* at the Athabasca. We have our full support to this.

It needs to explore further the role of traditional institutional culture, traditional staff culture, pattern of research funding, institutional research policy, faculty workload, etc in research incentives and rewards. Further, what incentives are expected and for what purpose, in relation to the status of existing incentive and reward schemes? Also, what incentive patterns are recommended for research mentors; and what effect incentives and rewards have on faculty research productivity and quality of research output?

Research Training

The general state of affairs of research and researchers in open distance education calls for significant continuing training of researchers, and faculty in distance education research methodology. The comment by Moore (1995) on the state of affairs within DE research (in comparison to that of adult education) and the quantitative vs. qualitative debate calls for a professionally developed and implemented international research training exercise for both mentors and researchers with the objective of developing a committed band of researchers internationally. Some of the difficulties faced by researchers may guide us in designing a training scheme : time allocation, lack of personal interest, finding researchable problem, political interference, lack of personal enhancement from research, etc. (Jegade, 1993). The recent review by Murphy and Yuen (1997), Panda (1992) and Panda et al (1996) may also facilitate this task. Research training is possible through research courses (of masters programme of IGNOU, Deakin, UKOU); on-the-job training (IET, UKOU; and ACDE, Penn State); and international research gathering like RIDE and CRIDALA. What is most important is development of training toolkits for researchers and professional development kits for research mentors for training through both in-house and distance mentoring. An urgent area of investigation being student learning (Morgan, 1984, 1993) further necessitates this. We need to collaborate and explore further.

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