

# A Diagnostic Investigation On Business Education Research Using Action Research

Dr. Talha Zubair Ahmad Khan<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Amina Rizwan<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Salman Iqbal<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management Sciences, University of Central Punjab, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management Sciences, University of Central Punjab, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management Sciences, University of Central Punjab, Pakistan.

## I Introduction:

Ever changing environmental conditions, market conditions, consumer preferences, and economic conditions from around the world indicates cues associated with the phenomenon of dynamism. Take for example, the new nationalism movement from across the world (Nationalism, 2016), the global warming (Root et al., 2003), technological uncertainty, changing economic conditions, just to name a few. Of course, it would be imprudent to leave out the consequences of such forms of dynamism on the learning outcome criteria for students, more specifically, for the students of business studies. It is evident that changing business environment has put more pressure on the business schools to change their strategic orientation as compared to any other branch of academia (Friga, Bettis, & Sullivan, 2003). Similarly, the demanding requirements of business graduates to incorporate advance level of relevant content knowledge and skills has also increased.

Business schools have been creative in terms of employing variety of teaching strategies, often utilizing a mix of these strategies in class room sessions such as conventional text-based learning, case-based study methodology, and problem-based learning methodology (Ungaretti, Thompson, Miller, & Peterson, 2015). However, there has been increased criticism over the effectiveness of business school to produce graduates that are well equipped to face

challenges of dynamism. For instant, Ghoshal (2005) highlighted the absence of moral and ethical considerations in management education and its effects on social domain in a form of 'double hermeneutics'. Similarly, Godfrey, Illes, and Berry (2005) identified four overarching problematic areas with business education namely; the discrete focus of business curriculum towards functional areas rather than holistic understanding of overall business, emphasis on building problem-solving skills at the expense of gaining deeper understanding of business theoretical knowledge, the transactional focus of business education towards increasing profit margins and market shares, the dominant focus of business education towards increasing shareholder wealth at the expense of other stakeholders.

It is evident from literature that business education has been the focus of criticism and problems are embedded in multiple layers of pedagogical practice. However, the problems related with business education are not limited to or in any way set of isolated phenomenon having no associations with each others. In fact, this paper not only tends to explore but also take initial step towards identifying set of associations, if any, between the problems associated with business education. The utility of this pedagogical inquiry is specifically important for two reasons. First, pedagogical practices within the contextual dynamics of Pakistan are yet to explore the associated issues within

business education domain. Second, as highlighted above, the lack of praxis within softer areas of business education requires understanding of current pedagogical practices and find out the ways to inculcate practice oriented sessions within current business curricula.

## **2 Action Research Methodology:**

In order to achieve it, this paper draws upon reflections, observations, and teaching experiences acquired through engaging in a process of action research methodology to uncover the veil from core issues associated with business education and prepares to propose an action plan in response. Action research as a methodology of scientific inquiry is ideal for engaging in research projects that tends to identify and solve contemporary issues being faced in practice. However, the overarching motivation for the use of such methodology is linked with its unique approach towards epistemological (the grounds of knowledge) and ontological (the nature of world) considerations.

Since, positivist view draws upon the realm of objectivism by considering reality as an independent to the researcher and the focus is more towards methodological validity to ensure unbiased, reliable, and generalizable results. On the other hand, hermeneutic view takes a subjective stance towards developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest. In doing so, it denies the possibility of researcher-object detachment and focus on cognitive process of theory construction. The third dimension, however, takes a unique approach by remaining objective towards its ontology but taking a subjective stance towards its epistemological consideration.

This third dimension is what Johnson and Duberley (2000) highlight as critical realist stance that emphasize on engaging in a epistemic reflexive process of challenging one own meta-

theoretical assumptions towards construction of knowledge while remaining objective in terms of findings and implementations. In contrast, methodological reflexivity concentrates on upgrading and improvement of research methods. While, action research focuses on the knowledge in action and tends to study social phenomenon by taking into consideration it's contextual surroundings. Thus, ensuring validity through enacting into the iterative process of action research cycle which comprised of problem diagnosis, action planning, implementation of remedies, and evaluation of results (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014).

The iterative cycle of action research have been portrayed differently by different authors but mainly focuses on spiral of steps comprised of joint planning, acquiring feedback, collection of information, performing problem diagnosis, taking construction action, and evaluation of action taken (French & Bell, 1999). For this reason, the action research methodology of this paper has been divided into four main sections which are discussed below. The first section highlights the diagnosis of current pedagogical practice towards the delivery of the course "Research Methodology" (RM). This course has been designed for the students of Business graduate programs. Further details of this course are discussed in diagnosis section. The second section highlights the action plan which is developed keeping in view the nature of problems identified in diagnosis section. Third section presents the experiences, learning and observations related to change management in teaching practices and the difficulties associated with the implementation of planned activities. The final section put forwards the students' academic outcomes as a result of this action research inquiry and provides recommendations for further actions.

## 2.1 Diagnosis

Exploration of problem(s) associated with practice requires taking an epistemic-reflexive stance. It is especially important when practice in question is related to teaching where teachers engaged in the practice develop routines of activities which can later become a source of inertia. As a result of this inertia teachers might find it difficult to adapt to new teaching practices and provide resistance to change. It is important to note here that inertia is not related to teaching malpractice, developing routinized behavior is common and individuals tend to make decisions based on their routinized behavior when they counter problems especially if there are time constraints. This phenomenon is well documented within organizational studies (Betsch, Haberstroh, Molter, & Glöckner, 2004). Self reflection is an integral part of diagnosis and requires a lot of time to identify practice related issues that have become the part of routinized behavior. Thus, diagnosis has been performed while engaging in what Schön (1983) describe as knowing-in-action to explore pedagogical practice, making judgments, solving queries, designing courses and similar activities during an academic semester. The most common identified issues related to business education are discussed below;

### 2.1.1 Factors Associated with Business Graduates' Motivation in Learning

There are semesters where one get surprised by the level of efforts students put in to achieve their goals and objectives. These are the semester recognize as “working semesters” because they put pressure on teacher to work even harder to

fulfill the expectations, learning outcomes, and skills development of students. However, there are also semester where it is not the case. Despite spending increased amount of time, majority of the students are only interested in “getting through” the semester while only few of them tends to go beyond what is discussed in the class and try to be innovative in their class activities. To investigate further, this issue is prioritized because motivational issues related to research methodology course also indicate that students might face similar problems later on in their program when they will be engaged in the process of articulating their dissertation. A preliminary investigation comprised of semi-structured interviews revealed information related to the students' intentions to take admissions in business graduate programs.

The results revealed some of the most common reasons behind taking admission in the business graduate programs. It is revealed that most of these issues are associated with the instrumental value and external reasons. Figure no.1 highlights the cloud map generated by analyzing the interview responses from business graduate students. If we put these responses on a continuum ranging from externally controlled to internally controlled, they reflect what Ryan and Deci (2000) refer to as external (based on external rewards such as job related promotions, work anxiety, and attainment of degree to get better job) and introjections (refers to the start if internalization but mostly associated with external rewards such as improvement of current practice, attainment of knowledge, and being professional).



<p>Ability to Identify and frame researchable problem area/issue(s)</p> <p>Provide concrete evidence both qualitative and quantitative in nature of an argument</p>	<p>Students do not engage into practice oriented in class room activities to perform critical reflection exercises</p> <p>Majority of the identified issues are not related to the ongoing organizational issues but what happened in past or highlighted within literature</p>	<p>Comprehensive sessions at the start of the course are designed to inculcate the ability in students to identify researchable issues/problems within an organizational context</p>
<p>Propose a well-defined action plan pertaining the remedies, and solutions to the problem at hand</p>	<p>Since major focus of the course is towards the applied research project, students face theoretical deficiency when it comes to other research methodologies and couldn't differentiate between them</p>	<p>Student cover the readings and in class activities designed to make them familiar with applied research projects</p>
<p>Write in a concise and coherent manner</p> <p>Listen to, respect and heed the advice and ideas of others</p> <p>Present recommendations in order to effectively support your positions</p>	<p>Students face major deficiency in terms of written communication, performing systematic literature review, and presenting specific recommendation within their class projects</p>	<p>Students covers other practical courses specially design to inculcate effective leadership style and work as a conflict resolver</p>
<p>Ability to perform preliminary data collection</p> <p>Ability to perform data collection through various quantitative and qualitative tools</p> <p>Ability to organize quantitative and qualitative data and</p>	<p>Students face difficulties in terms of performing analysis of collected data. More specifically, major sessions within the course are associated with the making students familiar with articulating the instrumentation of data collection. However, it becomes difficult to cover the data analysis in-depth.</p> <p>Since, both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods</p>	<p>Students are familiar with the basic ways of data collection methods. That covers both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.</p>

performing basic qualitative and quantitative data analysis	are introduced it becomes difficult to cover the both methods in detail.	
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### 2.1.3 Moderate link between RM-2 course assessments and its course objectives

Although, a mix of summative and formative assessments are placed within different sessions of the course, yet, they are not align with the

overall objectives of this course which they are assigned to assess. Following table reflects the course objectives which are being assessed with any form of assessment and the ones which are not

Table 2: Alignment of course assessments with course objectives

RM-2 Course Objective	Assessment status
Ability to understand and apply various research terminologies	Assessed through formative assessment (Class Participation)
Ability to perform quantitative and qualitative data collection activities and design respective instruments	Assessed through summative assessment (Assignments, Class term paper) Assessed through formative assessment (Class Participation)
Ability to Identify and frame researchable problem area/issue(s)	Assessed through formative assessment (Class Participation)
To be able to formulate a research strategy congruent the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the research inquiry	Assessed through summative assessment (Assignments, In class activities)
Ability to perform comprehensive literature review covering depth and breadth of analysis.	Not assessed
Ability to perform quantitative data analysis techniques such as exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis and meta analysis	Partially assessed through summative assessments only (Quizzes and Assignments)

Ability to perform qualitative data analysis such as thematic analysis, domain analysis, content analysis	Partially assessed through summative assessments only (Quizzes and Assignments)
Ability to interpret the results and highlight future prospects	Not assessed

In addition to these findings, one of the assessments ‘class presentations’ are not linked with any of the course objectives but is included as part of the course plan. The reason to include class presentations as part of course assessment serves two objectives vital for any professional development of business graduates. Firstly, they are considered as a confidence building exercise. Secondly, they make students to undergo group based activities and help them understand how to promote group coherence, distribution of tasks in group, and meet deadlines in projects, share ideas and knowledge, which in turn create discourse and facilitate learning (Grifenhagen and Barnes, 2022). However, studies have shown them to be the least favored type of assessment (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000).

### 3 Conclusion

Some of the most repetitive comments received during interviews from the business graduate students highlighted the issue of lack of motivation, lack of assessment rubrics and transparency, unable to connect the course contents with overall objective of the program, and increased workload. Reflecting critically on these issues, we conclude that distribution of workload on students within an academic semester should be reduced while making course objective purposeful that can create an impact. Generally, lectures needs to be more constructive and more time should be spent carefully on delivering the initial first 3-4 sessions. During these sessions, it is important to avoid taking assessments as students are usually bonding and

settling in to their new classes. Finally, uneven distribution of workload put students in undue pressure and requires immediate attention.

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