Conflicts in higher education and perceived quality of education: empirical evidence from Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Both public and private universities in Pakistan are playing vital role in developing human resources as per sectoral demand. It is observed that conflict in the public universities occur more frequently than in the past and as a result, has an impact on educational outcomes in terms of qualified potential human resources. This is a study of some selected public universities of Pakistan. This exploratory study has been undertaken to highlight the importance of higher education conflict among students and faculty and to identify its consequences on the organizational outcomes. A structured questionnaire survey was undertaken within the selected public universities in Pakistan, responses were obtained both from the faculty and students. In the sample universities, convenience and random sampling methods were used to obtain data and information. The sample size in this study is 202. The data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics, and regression analysis, using 11.5 versions of SPSS, to test the formulated hypotheses. Based on the findings, it is found that conflict has an effect on the quality of education which is directly related to human resource potential development of the country.

Keywords: Higher Education, Conflicts, Perceived Quality of Education, Functional Conflict, Faculty.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are the main suppliers of qualified human resources to the country. One of the basic objectives of the universities is to provide the highly talented and skilled human resources for the national development as well as to meet the demand of the labour markets of the country. The challenge ahead in the twenty first century is to devise a system of higher education whose outcome will be social inclusion and social cohesion (Lowe, 2002). The World Bank report indicates that economic gaps between the developed and the developing countries are due to the differences in the higher education facilities available (Siddique, 2002).

The Government of Pakistan has been allocating a major portion of the annual budget to the education sector to increase the literacy rate in Pakistan. However, it is still considered low level. Since the establishment of Pakistan, every Government has given special attention to this sector. Overall this sector is growing bigger. There are 53 universities in the public sector (HEC Pakistan, 2007). But the performance of this sector is declining in terms of the quality of the education. According to the world university ranking in Time's higher education supplement (2004), none of the university in Pakistan meets the international standard. Research (e.g. EIU views) highlighted that despite huge investments in this sector, education system in Pakistan is among the deficient ones in Asia. About 85% of population is getting education from the public sector universities (Task Force report, 2002) because of reduced tuition and fees, concessions, poverty and other socio-economic problems, etc. Approximately 95% of that eighty five percent are middle and low level employees who send their children for higher education in these public universities. Despite many other factors influencing the quality of education, one of the emerging issue in HEIs are facing is the conflict among the groups. As a result not only students but parents also feel the uncertainty about the future of their children when they often experience delays in sessions, close down of universities, suspension of classes due to strike, decreasing performance of institutes. Thus, this study focuses on the importance of conflict in higher education and perceived quality of education in terms of the potential human resources development of the country.

Conflict- A Corollary of Lower Quality of Education

It is observed in this study that most of the universities do not focus much on the conflict among faculty and students. Historically, Pakistan has been experiencing the borderline conflict since time of independence that had resulted three wars with neighboring countries e.g., India. Therefore, general perception of conflict among public is still from that political perspective. As a results concept of organizational conflict has not gained much attention from researchers in Pakistan. Thus, this study found a gap that conflict has not been paid attention in the organizations especially in Pakistan public universities. The current situations e.g., strikes, close downs highlight the importance of organizational at same level as political conflicts. Ahmed (1992) identifies particularly in Pakistan perspective that a serious corollary of lower educational standard includes facing indiscipline among the students at higher education level and also it has been widespread violence on campuses. Later, Hoodbhoy (1998) identified that

university system is seriously ill in Pakistan compared to other third world countries (e.g., India, Iran, Bangladesh, etc.). The situation is quite abnormal due to conflict situations in the form of violence and indiscipline of the students.

Based on the casual observations, conflict in the federal universities are much greater than private universities both in terms of degrees and frequencies.

Coser (1956) introduced the conflict perspective into American Sociology with his definition of conflict as "a struggle over values and claims to the scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals." A contemporary view amongst various streams of literature examining conflict is that it has two underlying dimensions, one dysfunctional and the other functional or constructive conflict. Rahim (1983) stated that organizational conflict is by no means the antithesis of the making of quality of education. This study is in line with research undertaken by Ayodele and Adewumi (2007) which has revealed that conflict is common to both federal and state universities. Nwankwo (1977) finds that failure to achieve interposition perceptual congruence on a focal situation can result in violent crisis within the group. However, in this study, the results are contradictory with Isoken (1990) study that revealed low occurrence of student-authority conflict in the secondary schools of some local governments. This could imply that the level of conflict was higher in the universities than secondary schools.

Various researchers (e.g., Coser, 1956; Rahim, 2002) identified different sources of the organizational conflict from broad perspectives. This study aims to identify the sources of conflict from specific perspective of higher education. This is in line with the Goss (1999) study which stated that some forms of conflicts are hostile and overt. Students may disparage the instructors, argue with classmates, or actively dispute course requirements and their grades. Other conflicts may stem from students' inattentiveness and appear more passive such as students arriving late in the classrooms, engaging in the side conversations or acting as being bored (Appleby, 1990; Keaney & Plax, 1992). Boice (1996) described conflict as "the product of an escalating interplay between the instructors and students' misbehavior". He observed that faculty contributed to the conflict within the class by being seemingly cold and uncaring, arriving late to the class, disparaging the students. Most of the previous research (Kearney & Plax, 1992; Wilson & Taylor) see immediacy of the faculty as important determinant. Immediacy refers to verbal and nonverbal communication that show the care by expressing the interest in student's life, remembering students name, eye contact, postures, smiling and listening to the students.

Therefore, managing conflict is an important issue in the universities in Pakistan. Pondy (1967) also observed that those organizations that do not admit the conflict tend to make policies that actually provide poor guidance in dealing with problems of organizational efficiency, stability, governance and change for conflict within an organization. Thus, higher education sector must admit the conflict as being a natural phenomenon and should manage it in order to have positive consequences on the educational system quality and the development of the country.

Conflict management is considered an important part of any supervisor's role. Sometimes, it takes more than 25% of his or her time (Mintzberg, 1975; Thomas &

Schmidt, 1976). In more recent studies, researchers have found that managers spend more than 18% of their time on employee conflict, a figure that has nearly doubled since mid-1980s (Hignite, Margavio, & Chin, 2002). If managers spend more of one quarter of their time in managing conflict in the organizations then educational institutes must be given more time to manage the conflict. Otherwise it has an adverse effect on quality of education in terms of potential human resources. Conflict situations vary from campus to campus, location, governance, number of the students and unionization. However, management of the conflict on the campus is as much complex as the nature of the conflict itself. Very little literature is found on the higher education conflict and how to manage it. Thus this study aims to highlight the importance of the conflict in HEIs and expects that much time will be given to resolve such situations especially in developing countries like Pakistan. This study focuses on the role of the faculty in managing the conflict by instrumentally utilizing it in a constructive manner. So in light of the problem definition and literature review, this study has developed the following conceptual framework and formulated the following hypotheses:
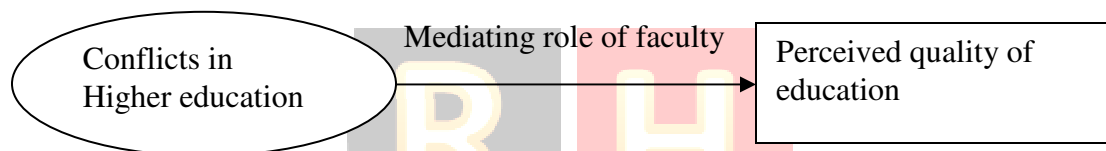

Figure1: Conceptual Framework of conflicts in Higher Education

H_1: Conflicts in higher education have direct relationship with the perceived quality of education.

H_2: Faculty has a positive relationship with the university quality of education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Sample and Procedures

The sample consists of 202 employees working in the education sector of Pakistan. The self-administered questionnaires were evenly distributed during January-April 2009 among the teaching staff of the universities of Pakistan. For the survey, four universities in Pakistan were chosen on the basis of the selection criteria, namely, their contribution to the education, date of establishment and being in the public sector. All randomly sampled respondents were approached personally to participate in the survey which aims to measure their perception about the organizational conflict and their views about the conflict and its consequences.

The data collection consists of interviews and questionnaire survey of teaching staff in the education sector of Pakistan. The data were collected as a part of research in which the goal was to identify the importance of the conflict in the higher education and

its consequences on the potential human resource supplied to the market. Data were collected using a pre-tested, mailed, self administered questionnaire. A total of about 400 questionnaires were distributed and about 202 usable questionnaires were returned.

The survey was conducted in two stages: (1) pilot survey (2) full scale survey at the administrative and the faculty levels. The questionnaire was prepared in English. It covers respondent's brief profile, scale items on organizational conflict and perceived quality of education.

Measurement

Conflict in higher education in this research is measured by identifying the reasons of the conflict from faculty perspective by asking the faculty respondents about the following items which suggest how conflict can arise. These items include paper grading, lack of communication, teaching styles, lack of facilities. These items were rated on 5-point Likert scale anchored by 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree.

The quality of education is measured in terms of provision of the skilled and qualified students to the society and their participation in the society.

Furthermore the mediating role of faculty is measured by four items namely, involvement of students, close interaction, Focusing on emotions and feelings of the students and addressing them outside the classrooms. These items were measured on Likert 5-point scale addressing 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For this study, the regression analysis is used to test the hypotheses. We used ANOVA and regression analysis to find out the relationship among institutional conflicts and consequences with the role of the faculty as mediator. Of the total sample respondents, it is found that most of them, i.e., about 78.1%, are in the age group of 26-35 years old. The majority of the sample are male, i.e., 83.6 per cent. Most of the sample respondents have attained Master's Degree level of education. Table 1 shows the profile of the sample respondents in terms of their demographic characteristics. See Table 1 in the Appendix.

Based on the data analysis, Table 2 depicts the correlation of the variables. Some variables such as Q4 (I think that lack of facilities can create conflict or lack of facilities) and Q6 (Association of conflict with teachers teaching style or teaching style) are significantly related to Perceived quality of education at $p<0.01$. Variable (Q5) stating the lack of communication as cause of conflict is negatively and significantly ($p<0.05$) related to the perceived quality of education. Other variable such as Q3 (stating the exam grading as cause of conflict) is found not to be significant. See Table 2 in the Appendix.

Regression results (Table 2) suggest that there is a significant relationship between perceived quality of education in the higher education in Pakistan. The coefficient of correlation is (.287). R-square is .083. The adjusted R-square is .064. Thus perceived quality of education can explain about 6.4% of the variation for higher education conflicts in Pakistan. See Table 3 in the Appendix.

Table 4 depicts the correlation of the variables. All the variables except outside class interaction (Q7) are significantly related to Perceived quality of education at 0.05 level of significance. These variables explain the perception about the involvement of the students (Q1 or student involvement), showing concern (Q2 or teacher-student interaction), addressing the students outside the class (Q7 or outside class interaction), and focusing on the emotions and feeling beside the teaching activities (Q8 or teacher's student focus). Therefore, if faculty, beside their teaching activities, focuses on these issues as well then it can help them in improving their role as mediator in conflicting situations. Thus, faculty can play an important role in improving the perceived quality of education. See Table 4 in the Appendix.1

Table 5 depicts the relationship between the role of faculty as mediator of conflicts and perceived quality of education. Results show that there is a significant relationship between faculty role and perceived quality of education at $p<0.05$. The adjusted R square is .191. This suggests that model can explain 19.1% of total variation of the perceived quality of education. All dimensions of a faculty role as mediator, namely, getting student involvement in class activities, teacher-student interaction, outside class interaction and teacher's having student focus, are all positively and significantly related to the perceived quality of education at $p <0.05$. Constant term also turns out to be significant suggesting that even there is no change in the independent variables, the role of faculty as mediator of conflict is by itself very significant. See Table 5 in the Appendix.

Results suggest that Hypothesis 1 is accepted that there is a significant relationship between conflicts in the higher education and perceived quality of education ($p<0.05$). Thus, higher education conflicts may improve the quality of education which may lead to good quality of human resources only by reducing and maintaining good workable level conflicts. Otherwise if conflicts are negative then it would have negative effect on the quality of education which is directly linked to the potential human resources to the market and the society.

Seondly, we also find that the role of faculty as mediator (H2) has a positive relationship with higher education perceived quality of education ($p<0.05$). Thus, if faculty realize the importance of their role in solving the conflict problems in higher education by showing concern towards the students both in term of quality of education and future role of these students to the society then quality of education will be improved.

In sum, based on the regression results, it is found that conflicts in the higher education has a significant relationship with perceived quality of education and the faculty has a significant mediating role in influencing the perceived quality of education. Thus both hypotheses (H$_1$, H2) are accepted.

CONCLUSION

Conflict in the higher education is an important issue. Universities are the main suppliers of qualified human resources to the society. This study highlighted the importance of conflicts in universities especially in developing countries like Pakistan. For this study, the data were collected from 202 faculty members of four public universities of Pakistan. Respondents profile indicates that majority of the respondents

are male and are serving at different job positions in different universities of Pakistan. Views of the respondents among the faculty are explored about the conflict and their role in mediating the level of conflict. Respondent's views were tested by using 11.5 version of SPSS. This study concludes that both institutes and faculty must give special attention to the conflict in the higher educational institutes to effectively achieve their mission to produce the future workforce to the society. Conflicts in higher education can improve the quality of education which is directly linked to potential human resource development of the country. This study further concludes that if conflicts are at manageable level then improve the quality of education by providing good work environment, but it would have negative effect on quality of education if it reaches at dysfunctional level. Thus, faculty can play an important role in improving the quality of education by performing mediating role in reducing the level of conflict. Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that some interaction between the faculty and students will help reduce the conflicting situation. For example, if faculty shows concern and care towards students as well as towards emotions and feelings of the students besides their teaching activities, then it would reduce the level of conflict. In other words, the nurturing approach and environment in teaching should be encouraged. This would be helpful in improving the quality of education and hence the universities' provision of talented and capable workforce in the country.

BOUNDARY LIMITATION

This paper considers conflict from organizational perspective especially from higher education perspective. It does not take into account the interference of other political, social and technological factors which otherwise may have an effect on organizational effectiveness in the open environment. Secondly, this study is conducted in the public sector universities, the results may differ in other sectors. Thirdly, this study has considered conflict from surface level without digging the roots of such conflict. Therefore, future research should be conducted to find the roots of the conflict and from conflict management perspective.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Conflict is as important from organizational perspective as well as from political perspective. Universities, particularly those in the developing countries, should give special attention to conflict as evidenced in this study that conflict has a significant relationship with the quality of education. If conflicts are positive and managed effectively then it would be helpful in improving the quality of education. Therefore functional conflicts would be helpful in producing the effective human resources to the country by providing good working environment. Thus, if universities especially in developing countries also begin to give special attention to this issue then quality of education can further be improved in terms of provision of qualified workforce to the society. Moreover, in terms of the higher education level, faculty must also take active

part and realize their responsibility as a mediator to resolve the higher education conflicts. Faculty should develop some course work and strategies of managing conflicts like involvement of students, enhance the environment of teamwork, show concern and care and help in enhancing the healthy environment in their institutes. Thus, we expect that if this issue is given special attention and importance at the institutional level especially among those in the developing countries then it can be helpful in improving the quality of eduaction in terms of potential development of human resources in the country.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX-A
List of Questionnaire items

Sl..No	Items
Q1	I think teachers must involve the students by taking unexpected tests or brainstorming sessions. (getting student involvement)
Q2	I think that close interaction between the students and the teachers helps in shifting the dysfunctional conflict to the functional conflict. (teacher-student interaction)
Q3	I think most of the conflict between the students and teachers arise on the grading of the exams. (exam grading)
Q4	I think that lack of facilities create conflict. (lack of facilities)
Q5	I think that communication problem between students and the teachers create the conflict among the parties. (lack of communication)
Q6	I think that conflict is associated with the teacher's teaching style. (teaching style)
Q7	Addressing the students outside the class. (outside class interaction)
Q8	Focus on the emotions and feelings of the student. (teacher's student focus)
Q9	Involving the student in solving the problem and try to solve the problems (student involvement in problem solving)
Q10	I think my institute is providing talented output in term of capable students to the society. (provision of talent)

Table 1: Respondents Profile (N=202)

Demographic Variables	Categories	%
Gender		
	Male	3.2
	Female	1.8
Age	26-35 years old	1.8
	36-45 years old	3.2
	45-58 years old	0.0
Designation	Professor	4
	Assistant professor	3.3
	Lecturer	7.3
Qualification	PhD	0.3
	MS	0.8
	Masters	0.9

Table 2: Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlations of HEIs Conflict

	Mean	S.D	1	2	3	4	5
Q10 (provision of talent)	4.10	0.979	1				
Q3 (exam grading)	3.80	1.057	-.037	1			
Q4 (lack of facilities)	3.89	1.064	.281**	.059	1		
Q6 (teaching style)	3.73	1.011	.214**	.124	.139*	1	
Q5 (lack of communication)	3.80	1.033	.153*	-0.013	.034	.138*	1

[a] Q10 is Dependent Variable

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Relationship of HEIs Conflict and Perceived Quality of Education

Hypo	Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t
		B	Std. Error	Beta	
	(Constant)	3.164	.457		6.920
	Q1(student involvement)	-.107	.075	-.103	-1.416
	Q2(teacher-student interaction)	.180	.073	.175	2.451*
	Q3(exam grading)	-.130	.076	-.121	-1.709*
	Q4(lack of facilities)	.235	.073	.222	3.191*

R	0.287
R^2	0.083
Adjusted R^2	0.064
F change	4.429**

[a] Q10 is dependent Variable
+ $p \leq 0.10$
* $p \leq 0.05$
** $p \leq 0.01$
*** $p \leq 0.001$

Table 4: Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlation between the role of faculty as mediator and perceived quality of education

	Mean	S,D	1	2	3	4	5
Q10 (provision of talent)	4.10	.979	1				
Q 1 (student involvement)	3.99	1.203	.281**	1			
Q2 (teacher-student interaction)	4.00	1.077	.139*	.214**	1		
Q7 (outside class interaction)	3.70	1.099	.034	.153*	.138*	1	
Q8 (teacher's student focus)	3.77	1.331	.165**	.283**	.090	.196**	1

[a] Q10 is Dependent Variable

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5: Regression results of relationship between faculty role as mediator and perceived quality of education

Hypo.	Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t
		B	Std. Error	Beta	
	(Constant)	1.034	.393		2.634*
	Q1(student involvement)	.184	.058	.209	3.145*
	Q2(teacher-student interaction)	.189	.064	.193	2.935*
	Q7(outside class interaction)	.131	.064	.136	2.037*
	Q8(student focus)	.204	.065	.205	3.123*

R	0.455
R^2	0.207
Adjusted R^2	0.191
F change	12.873**

[a] Dependent variable is Q10
* $p \leq 0.05$
** $p \leq 0.01$
*** $p \leq 0.001$