

Role of Academic Administrators in Decision Making Processes for Sustainability

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of academic administrators of higher education institutions in decision making processes regarding sustainability. The role of academic administrator is in line with the aspirations of the institutions which are decided by academic administrators' communication, participation and involvement. Four Pakistan public universities academic administrators were selected based on purposive sampling technique. Data were gathered by employing open-ended interview. Thematic data analysis technique produced three themes: autonomous role of academic administrators, top executives priority to make the campus sustainable and lack of support from top executive management. These themes have shown that academic administrators are facing barriers such as lack of autonomy, lack in observing the defined autonomy, bureaucratic organizational structure, lack of priority from top executive management, lack of support and top executive management resistance to change. These barriers can be removed by taking three initiatives: frequent informal meetings between university management and academic administrators, initiation of change by the top executive management and policy revision for stakeholder engagement, especially, academic administrators. Resultantly, academic administrators can realize the sense of ownership and take interest to work effectively for the efficiency of the organization.

Key words: Autonomy • Change • Academic Administrators • Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the role of academic administrators of higher education institutions in decision making processes regarding sustainability. Decision making in Pakistan Public universities is done by established bodies. Academic administrators are considered backbone of decision making processes with respect to their relationship to these bodies whereby they have to play many roles to carry out and contribute to the academic processes. This means that the role played by academic administrators in decision making can ensure smooth flow of teaching, learning, research and operations of universities that automatically promote sustainability in the context of Pakistan public universities' decision making processes. Nevertheless, the literature has poorly documented about the role of academic administrators in decision making and more specifically not clear in terms of academic administrators' role in decision making for sustainable development in Pakistan.

The role of higher education institutions in leading the nation and contributing towards sustainability is challenged more than ever before [1-3]. It is also argued that sustainable development being a paradigm shift can be embedded in decision making processes of the organizations to make these sustainable and consequently enable them to promote sustainability [4]. Researchers have also found sustainable development vital for higher education institutions' survival [5-7]. It shows the common consensus that directly or indirectly, partially or fully, willingly or unwillingly, sustainability in contemporary world has achieved the central place in the prime responsibilities of higher education institutions. The emphasis on higher education institutions to integrate sustainability in their central thrust is by virtue of their leading role. These institutions are thus required to solve the emerging issues faced by nations. Hence, these institutions are responsible to bring progress, prosperity and continuity for sustainable development under the banner of sustainability [8].

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To decide how to move forward smoothly by combating with the issues and progressing in a required way academic administrators are expected to identify the gaps and bridge them by decision making processes. In this way, the role of academic administrators in this study is linked with two perspectives of the rationales of universities' existence. These perspectives present the broader picture of universities in terms of their functions in the form of what is going on and what are the needed to be satisfied. The first perspective says that university should not train the graduates for professions, prepare graduates to be good businessmen, make the graduates adjust in a particular society, or make the graduates acquire a kind of moral or intellectual outfit in an isolatory form. This is known as the real world view and likely indicates what the universities are doing [9]. The second perspective says that graduates should be trained holistically that is the combination of the first perspective's ingredients so that they can be well adjusted in any/concerned profession, business, or society along with the moral, intellectual and developmental interactions with others to be a good leader. This is called the ivory tower view and guides what the universities are lacking [9]. The logical point about the perspectives of universities is vital to mention here that there are as many perspectives of universities as the philosophies and the conceptualizations (of these perspectives) are. The purpose of mentioning these two roles here is in line with the nature of this study. This discussion explores the role of academic administrators in decision making and decision translating in Pakistan context.

The role of academic administrator is played in line with the aspirations of higher education institutions which are decided by these academic administrator's communication, participation and involvement [10]. Putting it in other words, academic administrators are expected to make decisions and translate these in academic processes-teaching, learning and research-to endeavor to achieve the purpose of higher education institutions, sustainable development.

Within the decision making processes, academic administrators are appointed to different committees. For instance, in board of studies, they partly have to look into the issues of curriculum revision, its implementation and assessment. At the level of board of faculties, similar issues are considered but at more advanced level than the board of studies [11].

In translating the decisions made through the consensual approach academic administrators not only play their role in owing the decisions but also in

implementing these decisions with the cooperation of academics/faculty in the routines of lectures, seminars and assessments. However, the prevalent decisions are made not with the consensual approach but in reality these academic administrators are not asked to give their viewpoints. In simple words, decisions are made by one person and imposed on academic administrators. Consequently, implementing such decisions lose their significance because academic administrators realize a lack of ownership with regard to these decisions. This study looks into this issue with the viewpoint of the role of academic administrators in Pakistan public universities. Thus, the area of academic administration was explored in the question.

How does the role of academic administrators contribute towards decision making processes for sustainability?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants were selected based on the criterion purposive sampling technique to explore the issue [12]. The criteria were set based on the nature of the issue to be addressed in this study. The following characteristics were considered collectively in selecting the participants.

- The participant must have qualification, especially, postgraduate studies-doctorate-in the field of sustainability.
- The participant must have been holding the position of academic administrator.
- The participant must have teaching experience in their concerned areas of studies.
- The participant must have research experience relevant to their qualification.
- The participant must have served in public sector universities and be serving currently in public sector universities regardless of the change of the institution.

Based on the above profiled characteristics, four academic administrators of Pakistan public universities (N=4) were contacted. Open ended one-on-one interview method was employed to explore the issue in depth. Participants were assured that their identity and their institutions' ones would not be revealed at any stage of this research. Once the permission to conduct the audio-interview was granted, the area of their roles in decision making for sustainability was explored.

After taking the interviews, each participant's recorded data was listened, re-listened and transcribed carefully. In order to analyze this data thematic analysis technique [13] was used whereby data was encoded and categorized manually similar to the method used by Said *et al.* [14]. In the end, three themes emerged: autonomous role of academic administrators and lack of priority and support from top executive management.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In response to the question, data analysis technique produced three themes that described how the role of academic administrator is underestimated. Findings also guide the ways to restore and elevate the role of academic administrators to thrive the academic processes for the cause of sustainable development in Pakistan perspectives. The findings and their discussions is provided in these themes.

Autonomous Role of Academic Administrators: This theme revealed that academic administrators have autonomy within the framework of the university defined in the charter of the university. Every public university in Pakistan has a charter that defines the roles, rules and responsibilities of the academic administrators. The finding showed that academic administrators have to follow the routines of the calendar/charter. It also showed that they possibly face hurdles about what they think should be done in terms of system efficiency. The following quotes can implicitly convey their message about the role.

- *The decision making regarding my institution is done by several committees that I have constituted in consultation with my faculty members. Though I am the final authority in my own institution but at the university level, the academic process is such that academic decisions are first approved by the board of studies, then they are approved by the faculty boards and later on academic council is our final destined authority which approves any decision and then only it can be implemented, (participant-2).*
- *It is the responsibility that you have to control the entire faculty. Every person is having a different type of mind-set. So, you have to control all of them. You have to satisfy their demands, of course their needs. And you have to take care about their*

necessities to smoothen their functionality. So, my role in this case is how I convey them the feasible environment. And of course exceptions are always there. So, in case of those exceptions, if someone tries to impose his opinion then problems arise there, (participant-1).

Above mentioned quotes report the responsibility of academic administrators at their concerned institutions. Both important points can be discussed based on the autonomy of the academic administrators.

The first point says that the charter does not flex academic administrators with respect to campus sustainability. It seems that the charter is defined in this way, as the participant said, *“Though I am the final authority in my own institution but at the university level, the academic process is such that academic decisions are first approved by the board of studies”* The participant described how the role is played in academic processes. However, it did not enlighten how the academic administrators contribute towards the campus sustainability through academic processes. The important point of this finding can be interpreted that academic administrators are bond to follow the charter. However, the way the charter is formulated hampers the process of sustainability.

The second point is that whichever degree of autonomy is defined in the charter, it is not observed. Here, it comes to the implementation of the charter. This point contends that academic administrators carry out their role for the purpose of running the university system and not for the efficiency as the use of the word “control” represents this autonomy. It is vital to mention here that control in the literature of organizational management is used for the efficiency of the system and fulfil the obligations in tandem with the objectives, vision and mission of the organization-in short the success of the organization [15]. However, here the word control likely indicates to get the things done for the purpose of just fulfilling the obligations. Another argument to support the use of the word “control” implies to manage the concerned academic administrators rather than lead and involve them synergistically in decision making processes. The issue is that the feasible environment is not provided for the excellence of the system, as [16] Hargreaves and Fink (2006) says that control with cooperation and collaboration can lead to the system thinking whereby sustainability becomes the ultimate objective of the organization.

Another argument very much related to both of the above discussions is the issue of power defined in the charter. According to this charter whatever the power is defined it centers around the chief executive officer of the university. For that very reason it seems necessary to revisit the charter. Apart from this the recruitment procedure of the chief executive officer of the university potentially influences the process of sustainability in a negative way. The next theme speaks for it more clearly when the authoritative symbols are used in executing the charter at universities.

Resultantly, it can be interpreted that the formulation and the process of complying to the charter needs some revision especially with respect to the role of academic administrators in making the campus sustainable. It can also be expected that revisiting the charter will open new avenues to put the universities on the path of sustainable development.

Lack of Priority from Top Executive: This theme indicated the perception of top executives of the university about environmental initiatives' priority in the voice of academic administrators. It seems that there are some other priorities to the top executives of the university than campus sustainability as the efforts by academic administrators are not fully appreciated. It seems contradictory to the previous theme that academic administrators do not have flexibility in making the campus sustainable; however, if they try to take initiatives within their capacity there is a possibility that they are not fully cooperated. As the participants said,

- *Obviously, whenever we organize any type of event or a campaign, I have to convince the administration.... it is not very easy to convince the administration on some hard decisions (participant-3).*
- *And chief executives (he/she) do not see what their charter is for this young gentleman. They say, just do it. And the priority you have to work for your project. And other projects that come in your way; those strike each other. So, you will be scared. This carries no weight. This is implemented decision. This is against the charter (participant-4).*

Similar responses from two participants in the above quotes ensure and strengthen the dissimilarity in the formulation and implementation of the charter. In contextual interpretation this theme is very much relevant with the second argument against the discussion of first theme that the charter in line with the role of

academic administrators is not implemented as it should be. The possible reason based on these findings causes an uncondusive and unfeasible environment for academic administrators. This type of environment in higher education organizations is supported by the bureaucratic structure of universities where rules are imposed by the external stakeholders but the internal circumstances of the organization cannot present flexibility and novelty [17]. This lack of flexibility and novelty under bureaucratic organizational structure seems to fail in preferring a paradigmatic issue such as campus sustainability/ environmental sustainability at the campuses.

Lack of Support from Top Executive Management: This theme is very much in line with the second theme that is lack of priority to address the environmental issues at the campuses. It seems reasonable that when environmental issues are not prioritized academic administrators are not supported especially to combat with the environmental issues at the campuses. Contextually, this support can be in the form of allocating funds, approving any activity, or arranging any awareness programs, events, or campaign at university campuses. As participants stated the similar views,

- *“Money is the base but it is very difficult for them. Then there is a long and lengthy filing procedure” (participant-3).*
- *Chief executives (he/she) do not see what their charter is for this young gentleman. They say just, do it....When they are polluted by the political and governmental elements, there will be poor decision making and no sustainability (participant-4).*

The critical point about finance in Pakistan public universities says that there is a dearth of money for any initiative as Rudina [18] has also argued. Apart from this the question raises that how the allocated budget is consumed. Regardless of the amount set aside for financial assistance very minimal amount is allocated for sustainability. As the participant said he/she has to fight hard to convince the executive officers of the university. This shows lack of support from the university executives. The other side of the coin to make this argument more clear can be mirrored in these words that if the executive officers of the university support environmental sustainability then they should assign the agenda of campus sustainability to the academic administrators being the champions for the safety of the environment. In one way, they are the leaders within their institutions, thus, they can assign such agendas to academic administrators.

Lack of support from the executive officers of the university is very much clear when they say “just do it”. Here again the contradiction takes place that political decisions can enhance the movement towards complex and novel issues such as sustainability [19]. Rationale approach does support political decisions when they reflectively convince the stakeholders the movement towards the right direction. Their lack of support for environmental sustainability is also very reflective when there is bureaucratic organizational structure that influences the culture of the organization too. Thus, the indirect cause for this lack of support seems behavioral issue that is resistance to change. In other words academic administrators’ role is hampered because of behavioral resistance in the guise of bureaucratic external enforcement by the executive officers of the university.

This finding links with the argument of the Rogers in terms of adopting an innovative idea and diffusing it in the organization [20]. Rogers explains that an innovation can be a product, process or an idea [20]. In the case of this study innovation is an idea embedding sustainability in the academic processes of Pakistan public universities. The failure to embed the innovation links with the culture of the organization. In the context of this study finding, both the social culture and the organizational culture are active here. The correction of any one can ensure the correction of the other. But the current scenarios are not in favor of academic administrators to play their role for the purpose of campus sustainability through academic processes.

CONCLUSION

This research has revealed that academic administrators face barriers while playing their academic role in line with campus sustainability. These barriers based on the emerged themes in this study are lack of autonomy, lack in observing the defined autonomy, bureaucratic organizational structure, lack of priority, lack of support and the resistance to change from top executive management of the university. These barriers are hampering the academic processes-teaching, learning and research-that by definition in the charter sustain the campus. Campus sustainability requires an inclusive approach, in addition to the smooth flow of the academic processes. On the other hand, based on these findings it can be said that the above mentioned barriers can be removed by taking three initiatives. Firstly, top executive management of the university should frequently conduct informal meetings with academic administrators

whereby two-way communication can be channelized. Secondly, the top executive management of the university should consider change as priority in tandem with the need of the nation by thriving academic processes. Thirdly, policy should be revisited in order to involve and listen to every stakeholder, especially, academic administrators. Resultantly, they can realize the sense of ownership and take interest for efficiency working of the organization.

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