

# Whither research?

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The government wants experts who can help in making better policies and in ensuring implementation. At the same time, we know that there are not even 30 or 40 decent economists working in the entire country.



Almost everyday we hear speakers at seminars lament the fact that there is not enough research going on in Pakistan, and the quality of research that does go on is very low. And we have heard this complaint from every quarter. Even the highest offices of the country have talked about lack of research, as have scientists and academics.

And even government bureaucrats, who generally have a low threshold for accepting and digesting research, have complained about the lack of policy relevant research in Pakistan. But few go beyond the mere statement of the fact that there is paucity of quality research in Pakistan to any analysis of why this might be so, and more importantly, what can be done about it.

In this article we will restrict our discussion to research in the field of economics and related areas, but some of the arguments will be generalizable, and will apply to other areas as well. For a look at the social sciences in particular, the reader should also consult Akbar Zaidi's 'The State of the Social Sciences in Pakistan'. It gives a broader view of the situation and also characterizes some of the problems in research in these areas.

A good way of understanding the reasons behind the paucity of quality research is through having an understanding of what economists do in Pakistan, where they work, the incentive schemes that they toil under, and how they make money to keep their body and soul together. This will also give us a handle, later, on seeing how we can change the incentives of these economists to conform to what we, as a society, would like them to deliver. I will call a person an economist if he/she makes his/her living by using specialized knowledge from the field of economics. This is likely to be a very broad category, and will include some people who we will not normally think of as economists, but I would rather err on the side of inclusion than exclusion.

Teaching profession absorbs quite a significant percentage of economists in Pakistan. Some of these economists teach in schools too, but most are employed for teaching at college and university level. Both the private and the public sector employ these economists. There are some economists who have been hired in 'research' positions in either research/consulting outfits, or in mainstream corporate and banking sectors, but in small research cells. All of these economists are hired specifically for doing research, though the nature of the work is conditioned by what the employer wants and the needs of the market that the outfit is in.

Some economists have been hired by various government departments and public sector bodies. They are required to function in about the same capacity as the economists hired for research by private companies or institutions. Most of the time, they do policy relevant work, or work that might be needed by the government in its normal functioning, budget-making and finally, the

And finally, the government in its normal functioning, budget-making and policy-making relevant work, or work that might be needed by the government in its normal functioning, budget-making and policy-making. Most of the time, they do policy relevant work, or work that might be needed by the government in its normal functioning, budget-making and policy-making. Most of the time, they do policy relevant work, or work that might be needed by the government in its normal functioning, budget-making and policy-making.

Most teachers of economics, teaching at school and college level, have not been trained to be researchers. They have been given skills, whatever the quality, up to master's level to impart teaching of the subject. They were not supposed to do research. If some do try, it is to their credit. But we should also see what their incentives are. If the teacher is in a public sector school or college, she is paid a low salary and has to usually, resort to teaching in other institutions in the evenings to supplement her income. Even in the private sector, where salaries are higher, since the private sector makes money by teaching alone, the teaching loads are much higher as well. In either case, the teacher, if she wants to have a decent income through teaching, will have absolutely no time or incentive to do any research.

Partially, the same is true of the university professor in Pakistan. The public sector professor teaches in three or four places to make money, and the private sector professor teaches as much in the same institution to get the same level of money. Neither has the time to do research. And neither has the incentive too. Though good universities of both types do the promotions to research, but the underlying imperatives to teach more make a mockery of these research dependent promotions. Mostly the promotions end up being dependent on connections, seniority and sometimes clever manoeuvring of 'counting publications'. Scarce resources do not allow faculty time to do research, while the rewards for doing good research, even if someone could find the time for it are just not there. Is it any surprise then that we do not have any Pakistani economist, working from Pakistan, who might be considered an expert in any area by peers around the world. Can any area be poorer than this? Researchers working in consulting firms, specialized research outfits, government departments, corporate sector, and even the multilateral institutions are hired for specific jobs and specific purposes. They concern that these bodies have is not about generating support for specific ideological positions, or will be specific to the research output that most of