

# Practitioner-Centred Research on Academic Development of Higher Education in Malaysia

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## Introduction

Endowed with one of the most dynamic and competitive economies in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is gradually differentiating and improving the quality of its higher education. The practitioner-centred research (*PCR*) is one of the initiatives aimed at generating successful professional practices in the field of academic development. *PCR* is a research method that can be conducted to influence professional practices. Unlike other traditional or theoretical research methods, *PCR* provides an immediate impact to a practitioner's action plan, especially when practitioners themselves undertake research activities.

Higher education development is signified by effective teaching and research, human capital development and a holistically-inclined academic staff. It also entails the creation of new knowledge and contributions to society. These are the main factors that determine the future overall quality, reputation and progressiveness of Malaysian higher education.

In Malaysia, there are gaps in research, research findings and research practices within the circles of higher education, and they are perennially plagued by a lack of connectivity between knowledge, data and subsequent implementation (Ibrahim et al. 2008). Very often, it is difficult for practitioners to locate and implement findings from their research activities (Ibrahim et al. 2008).

In addition, knowledge possessed by practitioners can be classified as "underutilised resources." As a consequence, most research undertaken does not directly answer real concerns and issues in the actual field. To put matters worse, most research activities have contextual problems.

The impact *PCR* can make on higher education is in sync with the key thrusts of the Ninth Malaysia Plan, especially with regards to human capital development. This, in turn, will boost the nation's capacity to increase knowledge and innovation within the workforce. The actualisation of Malaysia's ambitious regional educational hub plans should be taken seriously by practitioners of higher education. Through the *PCR* approach, Malaysia can further generate value creation and innovative research activities for its education and industry. This will lead to a self-generating qualitative improvement for research-based creativity at the higher educational level, and will induce positive practises for collaborative researches.

## Practitioner-Centred Research on Academic Development

*PCR* is a research approach that influences actual professional practices. Unlike other traditional research

approaches, it leads to a higher level of academic development as well as enhanced quality practices among scholars. In other words, it is a method that is timely and effective for practitioners who are engaged in research initiatives that can impact the quality of higher education in Malaysia.

**"The Malaysian higher educational practice can be improved if evidential references to the *PCR* approach are generated continually."**

Currently, most Malaysian universities have not adopted the *PCR* approach directly for the development of academic capital. This can be seen from the scant amount of research conducted locally. According to Mohamad (2008), universities in Malaysia need to improve their academic and research performance, and build their reputation by creating an informed and dedicated learning process. This echoes with a contemporary need to engage *PCR* at the higher education level in our country vis-a-vis traditional research approaches. In other words, the development of academicians in Malaysia is either too theoretically based or to a very large extent, irrelevant and ill-suited for actual industrial practices. On the other hand, researches with industrial applications are traditionally conducted by professional researchers.

The *PCR* approach is a highly relevant research method for practitioners. It is based on professional practices, rather than being dependent on mere theoretical assumptions and frameworks. Indeed, the developmental mechanics of academicians following the traditional research approach has led to a failure in producing action-oriented researchers who can solve real issues and problems in the higher education levels and industries.

Therefore, with *PCR*'s importance and significance already an established fact, it is timely for Malaysian universities to re-focus the development of their academic staff and research modus operandi based on the *PCR* approach. Furthermore, the *PCR* method allows enough space and flexibility to immediately address pressing issues facing practitioners. It also provides an infrastructural platform and technical expertise to address actual issues.

The *PCR* is therefore highly relevant as an enabler to attaining academic development and desired research outcomes. This approach can answer some of the possible research questions on academic development. They include:

1. Teaching and learning: For instance, how do Malaysian academic staff learn their subjects? Which teaching and learning strategies are the most effective? And under what contexts are they deemed most effective? And what impact does various assessment approaches have on learning and teaching?
2. Academic performance: For example, what are the differences in the performance of Malaysian academic staff? How did these differences happen? What are the reasons for these differences? How can we understand the magnitude of these differences? To what extent can these differences be attributed to academic development strategies, practices or government policies?

When the *PCR* approach is applied to these research questions, the outcomes are expected to provide new perspectives towards a more systemic and practical understanding of current academic development issues.

### Types of Researchers in Higher Education

Currently there are generally three types of researchers at higher education level in Malaysia, namely:

1. The Educational Developer who does some research while delivering teaching and learning programmes for new academic staff.
2. The Professional Researcher who conducts (usually) small-scale research through a wide range of research methodological approaches, according to specific topics across institutions. These are aimed at generating new educational theories.
3. The Researching Professional who applies the *PCR* approach to various research questions – all aimed at offering solutions for actual organisational problems and practitioners' issues in the field of academic development.

Undoubtedly universities are competitively focused on the academic development of their staff. These efforts should encompass all possible activities where academic staff are engaged in proper research methodologies. This, in turn, is expected to contribute to the creation of new knowledge. However, *PCR* is more effective in delivering solutions to practitioners' problems and will help them translate the implications of their research into the appropriate contexts (Altbach, 2007; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Thus, *PCR* is about improving professional practices by focusing on the application of usable knowledge. Bourner et al. (2000) suggests professionals need to be assured that appropriate practices will work in their specific contexts for academic development.

Academic development therefore is seen as a way to produce knowledge contextually as it is based on in-depth interpretative enquiry of one situation that involves the

implementation, assessment and upgrading of components in the practice of higher education. In a nutshell, it is about the knowledge process; on how to get things done practically (Eraut, 1995). The Malaysian higher educational practice can be improved if evidential references to the *PCR* approach are generated continually. It will definitely facilitate positive encounters with future challenges in higher educational practises.

### The Conduct of Practitioner-Centred Research

As far as the implementation and conduct of *PCR* is concerned, one needs to first relate to research questions such as:

1. What are the most important questions which the *PCR* seeks to answer?
2. How can professional practices be enhanced by the *PCR* approach?

This leads to specific focus on real issues such as the academic development of higher education in Malaysia. The *PCR* is aimed at overcoming problems like limited impact and lack of effect which result from traditional and theoretical research on professional practices. *PCR* focuses specifically on 'practice' and it fulfils a research function which is outside the research scope of other theoretical methodologies.

Secondly, the *PCR* is specifically intent on creating new professional practical knowledge and professional practitioners. Practitioners cum researchers can have overwhelming discretion on adopting new professional practices based on their professional judgment. Indeed, when it comes to adopting a new practice, the question, 'Can it work for me?' is more important than 'Does it work?' for practitioners.

In light of this realisation, and based on one seminal research that utilised *PCR*, Krell and Dobson (1999) suggested that in order to translate *PCR* output into practical knowledge, practitioners themselves need to decide on the methods by which contextual information is disseminated. This can be based on the following three elements:

1. Sufficient information about the emergent professional practice per se so as to replicate it in the specific context where it has been successful.
2. Sufficient information about contextual factors on which the new practice depends. This will enable other practitioners to decide whether the practice can be applied to their own specific contexts.
3. Sufficient details of the beliefs and values that underpin the practice to enable other practitioners to decide whether it may be applied to their own practice.

Practitioners therefore need to be explicit about their actual research context. Krell and Dobson (1999) encourages the use of 'magic' in teaching organisational behaviour, while Webber and O' Hara (1997) advocates forming 'action learning sets' in management education programmes.

Both dissemination techniques seem to be constructive and appropriate for practitioners' adoption when it comes to considering methods of information sharing. This is particularly effective for academic development purposes.

through this influential practitioner-based approach of knowledge-sharing.

To summarise, *PCR* is more advantageous than prevalent research approaches in terms of its distinctiveness and specific intent, and it is supportive of expected and targeted academic development. However, the application of this research-based approach should be further discussed within Malaysian universities (for further development and refinement). Furthermore, some leeway should be given to the most innovative and effective methods of implementing and undertaking research for academic development. It is imperative that practical, tangible, and achievable ways are sought to improve practitioners' outputs. This consequently will improve the academic quality of higher education in Malaysia.

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**“PCR unquestionably plays a more critical role in generating ‘practice - based evidence’ for practitioners of higher education in Malaysia. Universities in Malaysia therefore should be encouraged to research academic development through this influential practitioner-based approach of knowledge-sharing.”**

## Strengths and Limitations of Practitioner-Centred Research

*PCR* enables practitioners to assume ownership of the research, and allows them to be individually focused (Altbach, 2007). Unlike other researchers, *PCR* researching professionals can focus on their own practice and simultaneously manage their own research process. This fine-tunes the process of continuous testing, refining and application of new educational ideas.

If the new idea works, practitioners will then be in a position to disseminate findings and results of their studies, and enable other practitioners to possibly adopt the new development. The ultimate purpose of these new developments will then be translated into professional knowledge.

The only limitation of the *PCR* is one faced by other research techniques; it is subject to self-created-biases that will affect validity and reliability especially during the research stage. However, this problem can be overcome by better research designs and procedures.

## Conclusion

*PCR* researching professionals now have better opportunities for incisive research on respective practices. *PCR* unquestionably plays a more critical role in generating ‘practice - based evidence’ for practitioners of higher education in Malaysia. Universities in Malaysia therefore should be encouraged to research academic development