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Challenges Faced by Young Researchers: A Quantitative Investigation

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Abstract

Young researchers face several challenges during the process of their education. This study seeks to address the challenges that young researchers experience during the learning period. This was a quantitative and descriptive study. The study sample consisted of 80 students from a special education degree program doing their research work. A self-developed questionnaire was developed as the study instrument. The instrument's reliability was validated using expert feedback, and the validity was assessed. The researchers collected the data using a random sampling technique. After the data collection process was completed, analyses were performed with descriptive and inferential statistics, and the frequencies were drawn. However, the study's results showed that 82% of the respondents stated that significant issues included limited resources, insufficient mentorship, and a scarcity of available funding opportunities. The study recommends that proper training sessions to implement the research activities and procedures should be conducted for young researchers in higher education institutions. Additionally, young researchers should be supported with adequate funding to conduct research.

Keywords

Quantitative investigation
Research challenges
Research experiences
Social sciences
Young researchers

INTRODUCTION

Academic and professional development is based on the pursuit of knowledge and creativity. Young researchers are expected to contribute to their fields through research. It allows understanding of the problems that young researchers face in becoming independent researchers, such as the issue of getting finance, publishing works in good scientific journals, composing and supervising a group of researchers, and juggling work and personal obligations (Urbančíková & Umarkhonov, 2024). Other challenges that hinder young researchers' emergence and effective performance include dealing with cumbersome research procedures, investment findings, and reporting their research findings for publication. Indigenous research makes it clear that research methods must be conscious of the cultural worldviews and customs of the area (George, 2020). Moreover, this group of junior or emerging researchers is supposed to teach and take up further work, like student supervision and organizing meetings. The academic community's strategic sector is early career researchers, or ECRs, as they serve as a scientific breeding ground for upcoming scholars. Researchers and academic staff have been experiencing improvements in their mental health and well-being in recent years (Cilli et al., 2023). Involving youth researchers in higher education institutions is essential to move forward toward a transition toward a more contemporary economy from one that is knowledge-based. Frequent demands are made from society and particularly from HERIs that all people, irrespective of caste, creed, and gender, be included and no one is excluded; however, usually, there are no clear guidelines issued to the concerned researchers to fulfil this demand (Garcia & Zajicek, 2022; Eimer & Bohndick, 2023).

Despite the promising young researchers, they often face limited resources, poor mentorship, and intense competition for recognition and funding. Regarding the employability potential of researchers, particularly those just graduating from graduate school, they face several obstacles and circumstances stemming from their backgrounds and overlapping identities that will ultimately impact their future employment prospects (Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023). Moreover, pressure to publish in top journals and speak at important conferences leads to stress and burnout. According to Heng et al., (2022), the dearth of PhD holders among academics is one of the main issues. Gaps in skills for university graduates, poor quality of education, poor inter-linkages between policies across levels, and low among these include lack of academic career paths, lack of finance for research, the absence of social respect for investigations, and the restriction of educational independence. However, the most significant research obstacles were small educational earnings, excessive instructional burdens, and lack of professional career opportunities. The

rapidly changing research environment, increased technological advancements, and interactions among those from diverse disciplines also call on young researchers to be responsive, resilient, and dedicated lifelong learners. Young researchers face several challenges, especially those in interdisciplinary fields in which they face career hindrances irrelevant to their peers who work solely within their particular disciplines to detract from long-term success at solving complex issues (Berkes et al., 2024).

Rationale of Study

Research efforts must be pursued relentlessly so that the knowledge already existing in the environment would be made 'newer'. Despite the above fact, young researchers face numerous barriers that hinder them from growing and being productive. This is an effort in the present study to determine the various causes of obstacles that young researchers, such as funding, lack of resources, pressures of publications, insufficient guidance through mentorship, and issues in work-life balance uniquely encounter. To date, the academic situation is characterized by increasing competitiveness and precarious conditions of employment, thus exacerbating all the above-named issues. Understanding these difficulties is essential to creating efficient support networks and research guidelines that would promote a favourable environment for research. In this light, this study queries the experiences and perceptions of young researchers in eliciting answers to the underlying causes as well as possible solutions to these challenges. This research gives insight into how young researchers can realize their full potential. For young researchers, this is a problematic scenario to demonstrate their validity and enhance their comprehension and application of the intersectionality notion to obtain desired employment (Woods et al., 2022).

Statement of Problem

Young researchers meet many challenges that seriously hinder their practical ability to conduct research. Early-career researchers are critical for knowledge advancement and innovation but face challenges that hinder career development, psychological health, and general efficacy when conducting research. These obstacles' particular characteristics, scope, and prevalence are unclear; they are poorly understood, especially in quantitative terms. Since empirical evidence regarding challenges faced by young researchers is not available, the development of specific support strategies and policies to mitigate these issues undermines the sustainability of the research workforce in terms of quality and direction of research. Therefore, a thorough quantitative study would be needed to identify the most critical problem areas and their impact on research outcomes and where intervention can be done to ensure success for young researchers.

Objectives of the Study

- To find out young researchers' perceptions of the research activity by their demographics, i.e., gender and institute.
- To identify the challenges faced by young researchers.
- To suggest suitable strategies to cope with the challenges faced by young researchers.

Research Questions

- What are young researchers' perceptions about the research activities by their demographics, i.e., gender and institute?
- What are the challenges faced by young researchers?
- What are suitable strategies to cope with the challenges faced by young researchers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

By definition, early career researchers are in the initial days of their research career. They are instead focused on establishing themselves in their field by building up a portfolio of publications, securing funding, and building up professional networks. According to Mula et al., (2022), these researchers are described as junior and, according to Machovcova et al., (2023), active followers. An early career

researcher has less experience than the participants at the senior researcher level; this makes it harder to position oneself in this landscape and to receive opportunities for cooperation and publication. There are limited resources available for professional learning and development (Sánchez-Tarazaga, et al., 2024). Other problems that need to be solved are finding a suitable balance between research activities and other professional commitments (e.g., teaching) or coping with the pressure to publish. Larsen et al., (2024) found that formal networks of ECRs are one of the support mechanisms.

Besides research and publishing, early researchers also bear most administrative responsibilities and teaching duties. These roles help improve professional development, but they seem demanding when related to the requirements of research (Signoret et al., 2019). The development of professional networking is equally important, as it allows researchers to gain recognition in their community, access collaborative opportunities, and get funds (Martin et al., 2023). It is hard for young researchers to build effective networks because they are not yet famous in the specific field. Some of the challenges ECRs face very often include precarity, mentoring, and acknowledgment (Thomas et al., 2024). Aggregating all these pressures leads to burnout, depersonalization, emotional fatigue, and diminished personal achievement (Tsybuliak et al., 2023). The pressure of dealing with research, teaching, and some administrative responsibilities can undermine the quality of work and personal well-being, which is challenging to maintain in a long-term academic career.

According to Bartlett et al., (2021), significant reductions in symptoms of burnout, such as emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, are related to sabbaticals. Given these challenges, it is important to rethink the traditional models of support and development for ECRs (Lee, 2024; Merga & Mason, 2021). Early-career researchers in this category feel condemned and ostracized because of the essential challenges for their chosen employment and professional options (Baudoin et al., 2023). Its major drawback is owing to a lack of institutional support in the pursuit of impact-oriented activities. Young Researchers form an important niche within the research community because this is a future academic scholars' community. Lately, there has been increasing evidence that the mental health of young generations of researchers significantly impacts their wellness and, subsequently, related research outcomes and further career development (Di Giacomo et al., 2024).

Although tradition has it that the depth of research and methodological soundness traditionally stay at the core of a PhD program, impact stays more in the background; thus, early-career researchers, particularly those with an interest in having an impact, receive inappropriate training on the mechanics of influential studies, collaborations with professionals, and information dissemination (Friesike et al., 2022; Williams & Whiteman, 2021). Such standards for academic performance evaluation involve the number of writings, assessments of instruction, and volunteer work (Aguinis et al., 2014; Williams & Whiteman, 2021). However, influential studies frequently take years of field and practitioner interaction in the process of conducting it, hence always takes longer time, meaning it cannot always lead to a large number of publications within the earliest years of an academic career and therefore poses an individual challenge for untenured researchers looking to influence (Friesike et al., 2022; Trinh et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research methodology and a descriptive type of research were used to investigate the challenges faced by young researchers. The study's population consisted of young researchers who attended various higher education institutions in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. The total sample size comprised 85 young researchers from various higher education institutions in the Punjab. The sample had a variety of background features. A straightforward random sampling technique was employed to approach the research sample.

Tools for Gathering Data

A structured questionnaire was designed to gather data. It was constructed based on the literature available regarding the challenges faced by young researchers. The questionnaire Likert scale with 5

anchors. Each respondent had to provide general information about themselves, such as city, district, institute name, institute level, age, educational program, research activity, and gender in the first part of the questionnaire. A total of 30 items were developed in the final form of the interview to generate maximum information regarding the research topic. The data collected with this tool was exposed to the software SPSS to analyse the data.

Data Collection Procedure

After finalizing the study instrument, the researchers used Google Forms to collect data. The researchers used personal contacts to reach the young researchers for the data collection through Google Forms. The data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics using statistical package, SPSS. Frequencies were also drawn to relate the study's findings.

Limitations & De-limitations of Study

The research has the following limitations and de-limitations:

- The investigation was limited to higher education institutions in the Punjab province.
- Only young researchers from various degree programs were taken as the sample of the research.
- A self-created, planned questionnaire was utilized as an instrument due to the non-availability of a standardized instrument.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

Table 1 shows that the number of female participants (59 having 69.4%) was greater than the male participants (26 having 30.6%). The significant number of participants (71 having 83.5%) were from the age group between 20 and 25 years. Similarly, the significant number of participants (55 having 64.7%) were conducting research for B.Ed. (Hons)/BS programme.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents

Demographics	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	26	30.6
Female	59	69.4
Age Groups		
20-25 Years	71	83.5
26-30 Years	10	11.8
31-35 Years	3	3.5
36 and Onward	1	1.2
Enrolled Programmes		
B.Ed. (Hons)/BS	55	64.7
MS/M.Phil.	28	32.9
Ph.D. Scholars	2	2.4

Table 2 shows that a noteworthy number of participants (mean 59.69 having 70.23%) was strongly agreed and agreed to have adequate theoretical knowledge and resources to conduct research activity independently. The young researchers agreed that there is a supportive culture of research for young researchers and the research institutes provide the sufficient resources to assist them for their research work.

Table 2
Perception of Young Researchers Towards Conducting Research

Responses	Mean	Percent
Strongly Disagree	2.00	2.35
Disagree	10.62	12.49
Neutral	12.69	14.93
Agree	41.38	48.69
Strongly Agree	18.31	21.54
Total	85	100.0

Table 3 shows that a noteworthy number of participants (mean 61.75 having 72.65%) was strongly agreed and agreed to have certain challenges for young researchers. The challenges include lack in motivation to conduct the research activity, lack of funding and uncooperative behaviour of individuals, lack of having proper guidelines regarding APA formatting styles, research work and publication, and so on.

Table 3
Challenges for Young Researchers

Responses	Mean	Percent
Strongly Disagree	1.38	1.62
Disagree	8.00	9.41
Neutral	13.88	16.32
Agree	42.63	50.15
Strongly Agree	19.13	22.50
Total	85	100.0

Table 4 shows that a noteworthy number of participants (mean 71.50 having 84.12%) was strongly agreed and agreed to have suitable strategies to cope up the challenges they face while working on their research activities. The strategies include regular mentorship programs and feedback from supervisors, collaborative research projects, workshops on time management and research methodology, research grants and funding opportunities, availability of open-access research resources and databases, networking opportunities with senior researchers, support for research publication, and recognition and rewards.

Table 4
Suitable strategies to cope up the challenges

Responses	Mean	Percent
Strongly Disagree	1.50	1.76
Disagree	2.50	2.94
Neutral	9.50	11.18
Agree	37.50	44.12
Strongly Agree	34.00	40.00
Total	85	100.0

Discussion

Early career researchers are in the early days of their research careers. Instead, they focus on establishing themselves in their field by building up a portfolio of publications, securing funding, and building up professional networks. Young researchers face several obstacles to obtaining funding, managing their time between research and other obligations, and developing a professional network. One of the obstacles to carrying out excellent research is the lack of mentors (Malekzadeh et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2021), insufficient funds for professional development, and few funding opportunities. An unsupportive research culture is one obstacle to establishing prosperous research careers (Shumba & Lusambili, 2021). Nonetheless, free online resources are available to young researchers for their research activities at their respective educational institutes. It involves having limited access to resources and time for professional development and learning (Sánchez-Tarazaga et al., 2024). The locality of ECRs may also influence their work.

University academics work in more management or service-oriented activities (Osbaldiston et al., 2019), and regular mentorship programs help overcome research challenges. Mentoring has been identified as a support for ECRs (Christian et al., 2021). Finally, despite the overwhelming pressure to publish frequently, researchers can avoid stress by focusing on quality rather than quantity, setting reasonable goals, and asking mentors and peers for suggestions. Among the publishing obstacles were time restraints, subpar scientific writing, complications with the submission process, insufficient funds for publication fees, and statistically insignificant results (Majid et al., 2022). Young researchers may establish an adequate basis for future professional success using these techniques. Young researchers acquire regular information about national and international conferences from their educational institutes. When institutions are less likely to find interest in researchers interested in conducting extensive research (Aprile et al., 2021), ECRs have less opportunity to network or receive mentoring that could help them advance their research careers. As a further encouragement mechanism, the development of official associations of ECRs has been suggested (Larsen et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Young researchers' challenges will hinder them from advancing in their careers. Significant challenges include inadequate funding, limited access to essential opportunities and resources, and a lack of mentorship since many possible mentors are frequently too busy to offer advice. Furthermore, young researchers find it challenging to communicate and write correctly, hindering their findings' effective publication. Other obstacles include a lack of interest on the part of officials in promoting research programs and excessive workloads, which cause little time for research. These issues must be addressed to develop a future generation of scientific leaders. Insufficient networking and mentoring opportunities can also hinder their ability to build professional relationships and receive advice from experienced academics. Integrating research with teaching duties or other professional activities might be challenging. These difficulties can lead to feelings of isolation and exhaustion in young researchers, especially when contrasted with the predictability of academic career opportunities. A dedication to learning and a desire to contribute to their professions motivate many people to stay dedicated to their work despite these challenges.

Recommendation

Young researchers should be given regular motivation by their supervisors.

- Proper training sessions should be conducted for young researchers in higher education institutions regarding formatting procedures in research activities.
- Regular workshops should be conducted for young researchers on the article publication process and information resources in higher education institutions.
- Research culture should be developed for young researchers by educational communities to support research activities.

- Young researchers should receive suitable incentives based on their prominent research activities from higher educational institutions.

Competing Interest

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Biography

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