

“Academic” Research at University

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Research at university mainly focuses on the generation of new knowledge. This knowledge is normally theory-based, and thus “not very practical”, such that a useful product is not immediately available. Longer periods of time are required for the knowledge gained and theories defined to have an in-depth and widespread influence on our society. In addition, the research conducted at university may not be in response to current social problems or issues. Researchers are simply striving for the truth. The research conducted in a university setting has traditionally been seen as academic discourse within an ivory tower. However, in recent years, the public have kept a sharper eye on the practicality of research. Knowledge transfer is now in vogue. With universities now increasingly trying to meet the expectations of society, should academics compromise their basic values when undertaking university research? Going back to address some core questions, what are the values of academic research; and is it still important for university scholars to endeavor to conduct academic research? A number of reflective ideas are raised in the following series of interviews, which are illustrated as academic values, practice and habits.

Academic values

Academic research is required in order to obtain novel information or to create new knowledge. New knowledge can be defined as the truth, whereby seeking for the truth is the main rationale for academic research. The word “Academic” is defined as “to be judged by no other standard than the truth”. In the pursuit of intellect, researchers in university have a strong interest in chasing novel ideas and being the first to discover new information in their chosen field. This is more attractive to them than conducting research in order to obtain a product, or conducting research that is problem-driven. Academics meticulously delve into issues during the process of their research and in order to enhance human knowledge, they make every effort to pursue the truth.

Notwithstanding the fact that new knowledge is revealed, academic research should also have some educational impact. Researchers also have the responsibility to disseminate new knowledge to the community, including scholars, students and the general public. Researchers at university tend to publish their research findings in top-tier academic journals, since their data might prove to be relevant to scholars in related fields. They might also share their research findings at conferences and in seminars so as to inspire scholars in their own discipline. The publication and presentation of academic research therefore facilitates yet more research, which subsequently results in an advancement of the field. This is what motivates researchers at university the most. However, many researchers are also teachers

when they disseminate the knowledge they have gained to students during lectures. This helps to sustain and enrich human development further. Whereas researchers who work for industry are expected to keep their discoveries private, those in academic institutions are encouraged to publicize the outcome of their research. Their research findings are made freely available to everybody. Indeed, it is important that researchers are willing to share their data among the community for further investigation.

Academics are required to show initiative in having close connections with fellow researchers both in their own field as well as in related disciplines. They “need to respond to what intellectual scholars are interested in” even though they conduct research in their own field of interest. Since these scholars are pioneers in their own area of research interest, they may also make an impact on discussions of other unrelated issues. Therefore, it is important for researchers to know about the various theoretical issues that are topical at that time. Having a closer connection with the wider academic community and not just with the local one, would undoubtedly open the local researchers’ eyes. Paying close attention to discussions held within the international academic community might also ensure that their research remains on the right track. Conducting comparative studies with fellow researchers in the field might also help them to formulate general theories, which again would help to advance their field further.

In addition, researchers at university are keen to seek recognition from fellow researchers and granting agencies. Competing for famous grants is the norm in the academic research environment today, both in Hong Kong and overseas. This is a persuasive means for academics to showcase the quality of their research, demonstrating its value among both colleagues and grant reviewers. It is used as a measure of worth, especially in the Sciences. Researchers who are particularly talented should participate in famous grant competitions within their own and related fields in order to gain recognition from the academic community. “Researchers in university should take part in this competition instead of being audiences” as it is not just a matter of getting additional resources. In the field of humanities and social sciences too, having the ability to publish their work in prestigious international peer-reviewed journals, is also an indicator for researchers to seek recognition from the international academic community.

Academic practice

Independence is the one of the most significant features of conducting academic research. Researchers who work in industry experience a top-down system of management, whereas researchers in university are independent, with the senior administrators having no influence or say in what they do. At university, there are no stakeholders to monitor the research topics chosen or the outcome of the data collected. In addition to being able to work in an independent manner, without being under the control of a manager, academic researchers are also free from having to interact with clients. There are no ‘customers’ per se in academic research. The results obtained are supported by solid data and a level of objectivity and integrity is maintained within the university.

The lack of external influence in university also encourages research that is driven by curiosity alone. As academic freedom acts as the cornerstone or main foundation of university policy, academics can make their own choices regarding how they will advance the knowledge in their particular field of interest, without having to consider the requirements or priorities of their supervisor or manager. They are free to study a diverse range of topics. Researchers in university “do research on whatever they want to go deeply”. The range of academic research is therefore broad, in terms of both category and research boundary.

Researchers are encouraged to join in with the various academic activities that are organized, instead of isolating themselves from the crowd. It is obvious that academics should participate in seminars and conferences held in their own and related fields. The sharing of ideas and communication of knowledge between fellow researchers is clearly something that benefits everybody. Such an exchange of ideas helps academics to become aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research in a particular topic. Moreover, being able to forge stronger connections with the great intellectuals in a community is especially important for the more junior members of academia. Furthermore, ideas should not be limited to remain within a single community; instead valuable findings should be exchanged between academics worldwide. Frequent academic gatherings such as conferences, meetings and workshops help researchers to get the most up-to-date information, which may subsequently facilitate their own ongoing research activities. Broadening their horizons may also have a major impact on focusing academics to identify the research that needs to be performed. Isolation prevents researchers from attaining their goals, or from keeping up with issues that scholars in their own or related fields are currently interested in. It is without doubt understood that any hesitation from researchers may hinder potential achievements in their particular research direction.

Traditional academic norms are now being overturned with the wave of new ideas and values from our society. Some universities risk their customs and end up by compromising what the public expect, whereas others endeavor to survive with their traditional values and practices in spite of the current research environment. However, depending on their particular standpoint, a university shows a propensity to select a certain type of scholar, and this predisposition probably indicates the character of its current researchers.

Academic habits

Certain habits can be found in the majority of academic researchers in a traditional research university setting. Strong creativity among researchers is significant. Since the aim of academic research is to create new knowledge, researchers at university must make an effort to be creative. Principal investigators encourage the more junior researchers, in order to give them incentive to discover new information for themselves. In addition to creativity, attitude is central to the spirit of academics. Those who can think critically and have a skeptical attitude are more likely to notice things that have never previously been discovered, or think

of ideas or theories that have never previously been considered. Academics who have active research programs always think critically about the issues around them.

Habits of “research” should not be limited to campus life alone. Scholars also show intellectual curiosity when they are away from their normal university setting. They are willing to cross boundaries to do research even when it might take them outside their usual area of expertise. Take Noam Chomsky for example, who has been described as the ‘father of modern linguistics’ following the great contributions he made with his linguistics theory but who has also made a name for himself in media and politics. When scholars cross from one discipline to another, the concepts in one field might be extended to the other; this might facilitate developments in creativity in terms of ideas and knowledge transfer. To an academic, research is their way of life rather than simply a job. The values they treasure, and the practices they value in the research environment, are also applied to their daily life. There is no distinction between being on campus or off.