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ISSUES OF QUALITY IN TEACHING RESEARCH METHOD COURSES AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract

This study explored the challenges affecting the quality of teaching research methods courses at the tertiary level at the University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (UAJK). A descriptive survey design was employed, sampling 251 tertiary-level students. The findings revealed several key challenges: Most students were unaware of the course objectives for research methods courses, indicating a lack of alignment between instructors and learners. Key findings indicate that most students were unaware of course objectives, lacked engagement with supplementary reading materials, and experienced limited variety in teaching methods. Additionally, inadequate library resources, untimely feedback from instructors, and an overemphasis on quantitative research methods were identified as significant challenges. The study highlights the need for improved communication of course objectives, diversification of teaching methods, enhancement of library resources, timely feedback provision, and exposure to varied research methodologies. This research contributes to understanding quality issues in research methods education at the tertiary level and offers recommendations for improving the teaching and learning experience in these courses. The findings have implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and resource allocation in higher education institutions, particularly in developing research skills among postgraduate students.

Keywords: Research, Teaching, Tertiary, Challenges, UAJK.

Introduction

At the tertiary level, the primary purpose of education is research (Mehmood et al., 2022). Universities are tasked with generating and preserving new knowledge for future generations. However, many institutions are failing to fulfil this role due to inadequate research and development (R&D) programs, resulting in an unsatisfactory state of higher education research (Nadeem, 2018). In Pakistan, the quality of tertiary-level research requires significant improvement to meet international standards (Simon, 2017). Education is a fundamental necessity for both individuals and society. A well-structured educational system can significantly contribute to a country's social, scientific, and technical advancement, with national development closely tied to the quality of education provided to citizens. The quality of higher education is influenced by various factors, including a conducive teaching and learning environment, curriculum design, instructor competence, effective supervisory feedback, research activities, infrastructure, and monitoring systems (Aziz, 2021). The quality of research methods courses at the tertiary level is crucial for equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge to conduct effective research (Aziz, 2021). The University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (UAJK) in Muzaffarabad faces similar challenges in this regard. This research article aims to explore the issues affecting the quality of teaching research methods courses at UAJK. Research methods courses play a pivotal role in developing students' critical thinking, analytical skills, and ability to contribute to their respective fields (Kilburn et al., 2014). These courses provide the foundation for understanding various research paradigms, data collection techniques, and analysis methods. However, teaching research methods effectively can be challenging due to factors such as student anxiety, perceived difficulty of the subject matter, and the need for practical application (Earley, 2014). One significant challenge in teaching research methods is bridging the gap between theory and practice. Students often struggle to apply theoretical concepts to real-world research scenarios, leading to a disconnect between classroom learning and practical application (Nind et al., 2015). Additionally, the rapid evolution of research methodologies, particularly in the digital age, requires constant updating of course content and teaching strategies to remain relevant (Hesse-Biber, 2015). Another crucial aspect of research methods education is developing students' ability to critically evaluate existing research. This skill is essential for conducting literature reviews, identifying research gaps, and contributing to the body of knowledge in their respective fields (Boote & Beile, 2005). However, fostering this critical mindset can be challenging, especially when students are new to the research process. Furthermore, the integration of technology in research methods courses presents both opportunities and challenges. While digital tools can enhance data collection, analysis, and visualization, they also require instructors and students to continually adapt to new software and platforms (Cox & Verbaan, 2016). Ensuring equitable access to these technologies and providing adequate training are essential considerations for institutions. The pedagogical approach to teaching research methods is a critical factor in student engagement and learning outcomes. Traditional lecture-based methods may not be sufficient for conveying the complexities of research methodologies and fostering practical skills. Instead, active learning strategies, such as problem-based learning, case studies, and collaborative projects, have shown promise in enhancing students' understanding and application of research methods (Herreid, 2011). These approaches encourage students to engage with real-world research scenarios, develop critical thinking skills, and gain hands-on experience in designing and conducting research.

Interdisciplinary perspectives in research methods courses are becoming increasingly important as many contemporary research problems span multiple disciplines. Integrating diverse methodological approaches from various fields can broaden students' understanding of research paradigms and enhance their ability to address complex, multifaceted issues (Wagner et al., 2011). However, designing and implementing interdisciplinary research methods courses can be challenging, requiring collaboration among faculty from different departments and careful curriculum planning to ensure coherence and relevance. (Zareen, Imran et. al, 2023), The role of mentorship in research methods education cannot be overstated. Effective mentoring relationships between faculty and students can significantly enhance the learning experience, providing personalized guidance, feedback, and support throughout the research process (Feldon et al., 2015). Mentors can help students navigate the challenges of research design, data collection, and analysis, while also fostering their confidence and identity as emerging researchers. However, establishing and maintaining quality mentorship programs requires institutional support, faculty training, and adequate resources. Ethical considerations in research are another crucial aspect of research methods education. Students must be equipped with a strong understanding of research ethics, including issues of informed consent, data privacy, and responsible conduct of research (Tangen, 2013). This knowledge is essential not only for conducting ethically sound research but also for developing a sense of professional responsibility and integrity. Integrating ethical discussions and case studies throughout the research methods curriculum can help students internalize these principles and apply them in their research endeavors.

The assessment of research methods competencies presents unique challenges and opportunities. Traditional exams may not adequately capture students' ability to apply research skills in authentic contexts. Alternative assessment methods, such as research proposals, mini-projects, peer reviews, and portfolios, can provide a more comprehensive evaluation of students' research competencies (Altman et al., 2019). These assessment strategies not only measure knowledge but also evaluate critical thinking, problem-solving, and practical application skills. (Asal, Yousuf, et. al, 2023), The impact of globalization on research methods and education cannot be ignored. As research increasingly becomes a global endeavor, students need to be prepared to conduct and collaborate on international research projects. This requires an understanding of cross-cultural research methods, awareness of global research trends, and the ability to navigate diverse research contexts (Crossley & Watson, 2003). Incorporating international perspectives and collaborative projects with institutions from other countries can enhance students' global research competencies and prepare them for an interconnected academic and professional landscape. By examining these challenges, the study seeks to provide valuable insights and recommendations for improving the quality of these courses. (Jimenez, Sanchez, 2024), Enhancing the quality of research methods education will not only benefit students in their research endeavors but also contribute to the overall research culture and academic excellence at UAJK and similar institutions. Addressing the challenges in teaching research methods courses is essential for fostering a robust research environment, promoting academic excellence, and ultimately contributing to the advancement of knowledge and scientific inquiry. By implementing targeted strategies to improve the quality of research methods education, tertiary institutions can better prepare students with crucial research skills, thereby enhancing their ability to contribute meaningfully to their respective fields and society at large.

Problem Statement

At a tertiary level, research is unavoidable; teachers and students share and acquire knowledge and experience through research. The quality of research is dependent on the teaching of research method courses because, in these courses, students come to know how research is done. The quality of teaching research method courses is dependent on factors like objectives of the course, learning environment, student involvement, methods of teaching, resources for learning, quality of delivery, assessment, and practice. This study is aimed to explore the Challenges (if any) of quality in the teaching of research method courses at a tertiary level.

Significance of the Study

This study will enable higher education institutions to identify their quality challenges in research practices and assist them in keeping up. This study will also be an important support to the policymakers, implementers, and partners involved in higher education research practices by providing analysis and information needed to identify challenges in teaching research. This study is significant because very few researchers have been led to explore the challenges of quality in teaching research. One of the salient features of this research is the timing of this study because many scholars of the university cannot complete their research work in time, so this study will suggest to them how to improve their work by properly utilizing the facilities and resources of the university.

Research Question

- What are the challenges that affect the quality of the research method course?

Research Objective

- To identify the challenges that affect the quality of teaching research methods courses at the tertiary level at the University of Azad Jammu of Kashmir.

Delimitation of the study

This study will be delimited to the social sciences departments of the University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (UAJK) due to limited time and resources. The study is further delimited to a tertiary level of the University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The teaching of research methods courses at the tertiary level plays a central role in equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge to conduct research effectively. However, ensuring the quality of these courses is essential to maximize student learning outcomes.

Literature Review

Defining the Quality of Research Method Course

The quality of a research methods course usually refers to the course's effectiveness and excellence in teaching students the core principles and practices of conducting research. (Corrales, 2023), The depth and breadth of the curriculum, the instructor's subject matter knowledge and instructional skills, the clarity of the resources and instructional materials offered, the practical application of research concepts, the availability of opportunities for hands-on learning and practice, and the overall learning outcomes attained by the students can all be used to assess the quality of a research methods course. (Naz et al., 2019).

Issues of Research Method Course

In the research method course, students gain practical knowledge of how research is carried out and, they can apply this gain knowledge in future research during the academic year, students face some issues to polish their research skills some of these are the following.

Lack of facilities

One of the issues that tertiary education institutions have is providing facilities that meet students' needs and opportunities, as these elements determine their level of satisfaction. (Lozana, Fernandez, et. al. 2023), Students, as the primary customers of higher education, have preferences and views about the elements that influence their satisfaction levels. As higher education institutions grow

increasingly concerned with serving the needs of their students as a result of the privatization of scholarships, understanding these characteristics will favorably influence educational service decision-making. (Sughra et al., 2021).

Teacher's competence

In the findings of Fink (2013) regarding the teaching of the research method course, the students were dissatisfied with the instructor's technique and statistical expertise, indicating that the teacher was not entirely competent in his / her specialty teaching research. Based on this conclusion, it can be stated that the incompetent teacher is a problem with the quality of the research method course.

Lack of practice

The design of "learning by doing" is advantageous for the students. Practical research methodologies were learned through a hands-on approach in this procedure. (Garcia, Angel, Rodriguez, et. al. 2024) Students trying to get their hands dirty, both the students and the instructor felt agitated, and students learned about the research method's process. However, many research methods instructors do not use this approach to train their students. (Alexander 2009).

Strategies for teaching and learning research methods

Active learning

Making research visible involves engaging students in active, student-centred learning to root them in abstract concepts of research methodologies (Taherdoost, 2016). In contrast to Tran's missive styles of teaching such as lectures, active learning is widely defined as any teaching approach that involves students actively participating (Taherdoost, 2016). Teachers must ensure that learning outcomes reflect disciplinary legacies and methodological cultures across many nations and fields of study to successfully engage students and satisfy their requirements. From in-class conversations to formal pedagogies like case-based studying, problem-based learning, cooperative learning, experiential learning, and service learning, active learning strategies can range from basic to complex (Pavich, 2010). Students at the most advanced levels of active learning may act as research partners, with significant freedom and control and the ability to negotiate many of the details of the research and inquiry projects they conduct as partners (Healey 2016).

Learning by doing

"Learning by doing" is an educational strategy that emphasizes active learning through hands-on experiences and skills application. This strategy works particularly effectively at the tertiary level of education, which includes colleges, universities, and other post-secondary institutions (Kilburn et al, 2014). Hands-on experiences help students to apply theoretical concepts gained in the classroom to real-world circumstances, which improves understanding. This aids in their understanding of the subject matter and its application in practical situations (Walters, 2016). Learning by doing encourages active participation in the learning process. When students are actively involved in their education, they are more likely to remain motivated and interested. (Konings, et al,. 2021).

Reflect on the research process (reflexive learning)

Reflexive (or reflective) research activity is considered essential for both students and teachers in the field of research methods education. This practice involves critical self-examination and consideration of one's role in the research process. For students, reflective practice may involve critically examining their research efforts, the methodology being taught, and the socio-cultural context of their learning (Kilburn et al., 2014). This reflection helps students develop a deeper understanding of research processes and their own biases and assumptions. Teacher reflexivity is equally important and can be achieved in various ways. One avenue for

teacher reflexivity as a learner can occur when working with doctoral students who possess "brilliant proficiency in a certain research methodology" (Konings et al., 2021). This situation allows teachers to learn from their students, challenging traditional hierarchies and fostering a more collaborative learning environment. The importance of recognizing one's standpoint in research is emphasized by experts in the field. Cattaneo (2017) cited expert Chilisia's perspective that students should be aware that they conduct research from a specific standpoint and need to clarify their positions. This awareness helps students understand how their backgrounds, cultural contexts, and theoretical orientations influence their research approaches Reflective techniques are not limited to qualitative research but span across different methodological approaches and interpretations. While these techniques are extensively used in qualitative and mixed methodologies research, experts also noted their crucial role in teaching quantitative research methods (Cattaneo, 2017). This highlights the universal importance of reflection in research regardless of the methodological approach. The integration of reflexivity in research methods courses can enhance students' critical thinking skills, ethical awareness, and overall research competence. It encourages students to question assumptions, consider alternative perspectives, and engage more deeply with research methodologies. For teachers, reflexivity can lead to improved pedagogical practices, a better understanding of student needs, and continuous professional development.

Research Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The study is descriptive and utilizes a survey design. According to Creswell (2009), a survey design in quantitative research involves administering a survey to a sample or the entire population to describe behaviors, opinions, or characteristics of the population. For the quantitative component, researchers collected data using questionnaires. This data was then statistically analyzed to describe trends in responses, providing a broad, generalizable understanding of the research questions. The quantitative approach allows for the measurement of variables and the testing of hypotheses, providing numerical data that can be statistically analyzed. The qualitative component of the study complements the quantitative data by providing in-depth, contextual information. This aspect of the research involved specific qualitative methods, e.g., semi-structured interviews, focus groups, or open-ended survey questions. The qualitative data was analyzed using specific qualitative analysis methods, e.g., thematic analysis, and content analysis] to identify key themes and patterns in participants' responses. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods in this mixed-methods design allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The quantitative data provides a broad overview and identifies general trends, while the qualitative data offers deeper insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and the underlying reasons for the observed trends.

Population

The population of the study consisted of all the students of social sciences at tertiary levels (M.Phil. and Ph.D.) in UAJK who had studied the research method course.

Sample size

The sample sizes are calculated based on the number of responses received rather than the number of surveys sent out. To account for non-response, this number is frequently raised. However, in most surveys, the response rates for postal and e-mailed surveys are very rarely 100% (Taherdoost, 2016). In this study, a simple random sampling

technique was been used. The sample of the study was 249 students.

Research Instrument

For the collection of data, a self-constructed questionnaire was used. It consists of six constructs regarding the quality, of the research method course i.e., course objectives, student contribution, learning environment, teaching methods, learning resources, assessment, and practice. The reliability and validity of the scale were tested and verified.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered to the sample students at a tertiary level. The researcher created an online survey on Google Forms to collect the data from the sample students. The questionnaire link was shared via email and student's mobile numbers.

Results

The main objective of this article was to explore possible issues in the teaching of research method courses. The following table presents the main issues about the quality of research method courses.

	Statements	Responses		Percentage
	You were well aware of the course objective.	Yes	80	32%
		To some extent	36	14%
		No	135	54%
	You read extra books about research methods.	Yes	48	19%
		To some extent	67	26%
		No	136	55%
	Different teaching methods were used for the teaching of different topics.	Yes	47	19%
		To some extent	48	19%
		No	156	62%
	The provision of learning resources in the library was sufficient and appropriate.	Yes	40	16%
		To some extent	59	24%
		No	152	60%
	Feedback after the assessment was timely.	Yes	80	32%
		To some extent	6	0.2%
		No	165	66%
	During course work you did projects using quantitative research methods.	Yes	180	71%
		No	71	28%

Table no 01 Frequency and percentage distribution

Out of the survey, it came out that most of the students (53.8%) believed that they were not aware of the course objectives, 14.3 % were aware of the objectives of the course to some extent and only 31.9% of the respondents were fully aware of the objectives of the course. The majority (46.2%) of the students do not read extra books related to the subject, 34.7 % of respondents read extra books for a better understanding of the subject to some extent and only 19.1% read books related to subjects for a better understanding of the subject. Only 19.1% of respondents agreed that to some extent different teaching methods were used for teaching different topics and 18.7% of the respondents replied that different teaching methods were used for teaching different topics. A total of 60.6% of respondents disagreed that provisions of learning resources in the departmental library were sufficient and appropriate, 23.5% of respondents agreed with the statement to some extent that provisions of learning resources in the departmental library were sufficient and appropriate, and 15.9% respondents believe that provisions of learning resources in the departmental library were sufficient and appropriate. The majority 61.8 % of the respondents did not agree with the statement that feedback after the assessment was timely, 6.4% replied that Feedback after the assessment was timely to some extent and 31.9% of the respondents thought that Feedback after the assessment was timely. Data shows that 71.7 % of respondents made projects using the quantitative method of research and 28.3 did not make projects using the quantitative research method.

Findings

It was found that most of the students are unaware of the course objectives of research method courses. There is little discussion in the literature on the objectives of research method courses at the tertiary level. This corroborates previous findings that highlight the importance of clearly communicating course objectives to students (Smith & Blake, 2005; Hendricks, 2012). It is important for both the teachers of research method courses and the students to share the objectives for encouraging results. Results of the study show that most of the students do not read extra books about research. This aligns with previous studies that report a lack of reading habits among tertiary students (Khan & Ahmed, 2014; Rashid & Qureshi, 2019). According to the researcher's point of view reading books and articles about research is an essential part of research through which students can develop a general understanding of research and give them confidence to think outside the box. The research shows that most of the students complained that the same teaching method was used for different topics. All students and teachers are individuals, therefore there is no single method of instruction that will cater to all students and utilize a particular teacher's skill. Prior research has emphasized the need for instructors to employ a variety of teaching methods to cater to diverse learning styles (Felder & Brent, 2005; Gegios & Miller, 2017).

Discussion

According to the results provision of resources in libraries was not sufficient and appropriate. In the researcher's view if libraries and other resources for research students are not properly managed and utilized these resources will be like white elephant. Inadequate library resources and their underutilization have been highlighted as pressing issues in tertiary education (Akporhonor & Iwhiwhu, 2007; Sriram, 2016). Result shows that the provision of feedback from teachers was not timely. Feedback is beneficial when it is received comprehended and acted on. The way students analyze, discuss, and respond to feedback is as important as the quality of the feedback itself (Nicol, 2010). In the researcher's view, timely feedback helps the students to improve and guide their learning. The importance of timely feedback has been widely documented in educational research (Shute, 2008; Carless, 2019). Through the result, we came to know that most of the students used quantitative methods of research and ignored other research methods. As researchers think during the practice stage students can take advantage of practicing all research methods including qualitative and mixed methods of research. Previous studies have advocated for exposing students to diverse research methodologies to develop a well-rounded skillset (Atieno, 2009; Cronholm & Hjalmarsson, 2011).

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the challenges that affect the quality of teaching research methods courses at the tertiary level at the University of Azad Jammu of Kashmir. Applying a descriptive survey design, the research sampled 251 students of tertiary level. (Syed, Samina, Shamsa, 2023), Analysis and interpretation of data enabled the researcher to conclude that students of tertiary level were not aware of what they were going to study in research method courses, and it was also found that teachers of research method courses do not provide feedback to students on time. According to the results, the provision of resources in libraries was not sufficient and appropriate. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting inadequate library resources and their underutilization as pressing issues in tertiary education if libraries and other resources for research students are not properly managed and utilized, these resources will be like a white elephant.

Recommendations

To enhance the quality of research methods courses at the tertiary level, several recommendations are proposed:

1. Collaborative discussion of learning objectives between students and teachers should be encouraged to create a shared understanding and facilitate goal achievement. These objectives guide the development of learning activities, resource generation, and teaching strategies.
2. Students should be encouraged to read supplementary materials beyond the prescribed course outline to foster critical and analytical thinking skills.
3. Diverse teaching methods should be employed to address different topics, enhancing student engagement and motivation.
4. Optimal utilization of university resources, such as libraries and internet connectivity, should be ensured to provide students access to a wealth of knowledge and up-to-date information for their research.
5. Timely feedback from teachers is crucial for students to monitor their learning progress and make necessary improvements.
6. During coursework, students should engage in practical projects utilizing various research methods, allowing them to apply their knowledge under teacher guidance.

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