

Examining Deans' Perceptions: Roles and Challenges in University Governance

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Abstract

This study focuses on the experiences of deans at two selected public universities in Pakistan with regard to their roles in the governance process. The study is limited to the deans' perceptions pertaining to their involvement in university matters in terms of the main decisions about their respective faculties. This study tends to explore the situation and the intense study exposes how the individuals (deans) are experiencing their world how they make the sense of their lives, processes the meaning making and describe as they interpret which they feel. Qualitative data was collected from two selected public universities in Pakistan. The main technique for data collection was semi-structured interviews. Deans defined their roles as very limited without any authority. Deans showed reservations pertaining to their role in governance practices. Consequently, deans are not satisfied with the general working conditions and likewise the process of centralized governance they identified.

Keywords: Universities, Governance, Roles, Powers, Deans

Introduction

Universities are specific spots having functions, roles and cultures which incorporate and accommodate ideas and values involving various governance structures; (Middlehurst, 2004; Aziz, Bloom et al. 2014). As an organization, universities consist of different governing bodies to carry out the work in different spheres in a joint effort to support the general cause, which is supposed to advance the cause of the university. Hence, the university governance system must be designed to demarcate the status of different officials to collaborate in steering the universities on the right track directed towards a set of common goals (De Boer, 2002; Shattock, 2006). Different names have been adopted by chief academic officers. Every separate body is part and parcel of the entire process that promotes the cause of the university to its ultimate goal. Academic vice chancellor, provost, dean of academic affairs, and dean are some of those labels (Sensing, 2003).

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Deans are commonly referred to as ‘senior officers’ of the university and participate as members of executive standing committees reporting to the board on matters of program and academic planning and implementation, but do not typically appear on the executive team (Boyko & Jones, 2010). The dean’s position is very important from a governance point of view but there is a vacuum regarding the dean’s status as such. They are described as the unsung professionals of the academy – unsung because their contributions to the academic enterprise are rarely recognized (Rosser, 2004; De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009).

This study collects the views of different deans in two selected public universities in Pakistan. Higher Education Commission of Pakistani (HEC) has categorized the universities as “medical universities”, engineering universities, agricultural universities etc: those universities which offer general courses are called “general universities”. On the basis of their uniqueness two public universities of Pakistan have been chosen for the conduct of this research. One is “general university” and other “medical university” who have demarked the position of a dean in the network of a university. This study ventures to offer substantial matter for the prospective output of the university. As such, this qualitative research is not intended the data collection across all the public universities because this case study is not intended to generalize the findings. However, the perceptions of deans in the governance process has been specifically studied, the areas explored including the dean’s position, role, responsibilities, and the power sharing of the deans.

This study employs a role theory that encompasses the most important features of social life, characteristic patterns or role. Role theory explains role by presuming that persons being members of society expect for their own behaviors and that of others (Biddle, 1986). Lusk (1997) examines human conduct at a relatively complex level. Fundamentally, role theory’s proposition is based on behaviors within contexts (roles) in association with the persons sharing a common identity (in position) and comprehending their role (by expectations) that are communicated to a person in a given organization (Montez, et al., 2003; Kretek et al., 2013).

Role is behavior on the part of those who occupy a position and act according to the agreed rules (Schraver, 1995). Positions are sets of rights and duties designated by a single term (Lusk, 1997). The actions of persons are based on their positions and comprise the role. Validation of occupancy of the positions through actions by the persons is defined as roles (Sarbin, 1954, p. 224).

Thus, the roles concern the position one occupies, not the person who temporarily occupies the position. Roles specify who does what, when and where. It surely results in ambiguity if information about the responsibilities of a job is inadequate, unavailable or contradictory. As such, role ambiguity decreases

productivity because it would not result in targeted attempts on the part of those who occupy the position (; Kahn et al., 1964; Lusk, 1997; Montez, et al., 2003).

Literature Review

The literature suggests that a dean has to play a multifaceted role such as hiring faculty with the cooperation and coordination of top management and obtain resources for the faculty from the administration. Hence he has multitasking to achieve. This has been rightly pointed out by Gmelch (2003),

Administrators want a dean who can build and manage a faculty. Faculty wants a dean who can gain resources from the administration. This is one of the clearest examples of conflict inherent in the dean's role.

Not only this but deans incentives are less and work demands are high this has affected their satisfaction and commitment to their role. This has been confirmed by the writers such as (Applegate, & Book, 1989; Meek, 2010) they elaborate that historically, deans seem to have experienced a change – the post of academic chief has been replaced by the post of executive chief and there has been considerable expansion of the management responsibilities resulting from placing more emphasis on extramural funding, personal decision making and relations with alumni. It appears that the image of a dean being a quiet, intellectual leader has been overtaken by the vision of a dean who is politically perceptive and economically oriented. These changes in the role of Deans have markedly affected the working environment.

Furthermore, deans have been perceived as ceremonial leaders their roles have been reduced to presiding research degree seminars and solving problems that occur day to day in his/her jurisdiction. This idea is substantiated by Tucker and Bryan (1991) who state that the dean has been viewed as a dove of peace, a solicitor, and a mediator among the contending groups that cause harmful confusion in the university. His role is that of a dragon, containing internal and external forces that pose a threat and even a diplomat who is out to guide, inspire and encourage people who are concerned with the university's work. Deans serve two masters at a time. They are supposed to balance the senior administrators as well as faculty which they head and join both as bridge (Rosser et al., 2003). They have too many jobs off and on they are called upon to solve intricate problems (Tucker & Bryan, 1991) along with discharging duties as academic heads of faculties. They have dual duty to play middle man between faculty and administration like vice chancellor, registrar etc. but this office faces role conflict and ambiguity (Booth, 1982; Carvalho & Santiago, 2010).

Correspondingly, today's dean is under extreme attack and out of balance. At times, deans play double roles, such as promoting university vocations to the faculty, and simultaneously defending faculty values before the university administration. This makes ambiguous situation that how a dean apprehends the impact of influence which

he applies communicating with others while at work with them (Gmelch, 2003). Generally, deans occupy their office without comprehending the ambiguity and complexity of their role (Gmelch, 2000). In this way, Edward Lawler, a scholar of organizational effectiveness, sees most deans as failing (Wolverton, Wolverton et al. 1999; Gmelch et al., 1999b).

The insights gained from the literature suggest that deans' roles are complicated as well as benign. They serve as a bridge between conflicting zones and build capacity of various departments. Hence their role should be perceived more as a problem shooter rather than a ceremonial head.

Methodology

This study opts to conduct qualitative research to explore the real situation experienced by the deans. The case study approach is chosen for this study because case study provides a detailed understanding of a particular issue (Lichtman, 2010). This study intends to explore the situation and the intense study exposes how the individuals (deans) are experiencing their world, how they make sense of their lives, process meaning making, and describes how they interpret what they feel. It aims to examine the perception of deans about their role in governance practices in two selected public universities in Pakistan.

The selection of cases

This qualitative research does not undertake data collection across all public universities because this case study is not intended to generalize the findings. The goal of most qualitative studies is not to generalize but rather to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of some aspect of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases (Polit & Beck, 2010). In the case study approach, generalizability may be a problem, yet the study may provide the capacity to similar group members to identify problems and the possibility to expedite on their own to solve the same problem (Bell, 2001). This research study has chosen two public universities in Pakistan.

Sampling framework

The primary purpose of sampling for a qualitative researcher is to collect specific cases, events, or actions that can clarify or deepen the researchers understanding about the phenomenon under study (Ishak & Bakar, 2014). This research aims to investigate, discover, understand and gain insight about the governing issues faced by the deans of different faculties therefore small group of deans has been selected. Nine deans from two selected public universities were chosen to participate in this study. They were labelled UA (University A), UB (University B) for confidentiality, while the respondents were labeled Aca with numbers 1,2,3....

Data collection procedure

This study has employed to utilize the semi-structured questions so the interviewer could be comfortable to express his/her views about the point in discussion and take considerable time to fully elaborate and offer comments about the questions that are thought of importance to governance and well suited for phenomenon which needs in-depth investigation (Glesne, 1999; Jones, 2002).

Through semi-structured interview the researcher takes maximum benefit to respond the situation at hand grasping worldview of the interviewee as well as get new ideas to that effect (Merriam, 2009). In this research, the researcher has administered exhaustive in depth interviews and inquired by semi structured interview questions to gather proper information from the deans.

Findings of the study

Dealing with Differences of Understanding of Roles

Perceptions of the dean's role vary widely. Often these conflicting perceptions create double-bind dilemmas that are difficult for deans to resolve (Bowker, 1982). The analysis of qualitative data revealed great confusion regarding the dean's position and indicates variations in understanding. There is ambiguity of roles in governance practices.

The deans are perplexed regarding their roles, feeling that they can play a constructive and important role for effective and efficient governance processes but they have been given no clear picture of their roles. University performance can be enhanced a great deal if the position of dean is clearly defined because there is a great rationale of the significance of the dean's role in governance as they are hired on the basis of their scholastic aptitude and educational achievements. Contrarily, deans lamented that even today they think

...as still deans' position is most misunderstood who are the heads of faculties and among main stakeholders. That's the reason most deans fail to perform their roles and duties effectively. What happens the things are not very clear, so everyone is working on assumptions and authority can manipulate as they like to. Even in university constitution it is said dean is an academic head, which is very general, therefore we face problems. I would say it is just things are going on (UA, Aca: 3).

The response above manifests frustration on the part of deans. This frustration can be addressed by clearly describing roles of and responsibilities and level authority. By doing so, the level of satisfaction may increase which in turn may prove job commitment on the part of the deans. Yet other dean expressed similar grievance in the following manner.

Even today, I think what is my role? Only I can say as a dean I feel it is administrative, as well as academic responsibilities, to operate the functions of my faculty. I can say I have to run its operational system and coordinate between the different offices of my university like vice chancellor office, registrar office, finance office, admission office, and controller office. It means coordinate between five departments to function smoothly academic as well as administrative. So, I have to perform such duties as dean. It is not mentioned to any paper but we have just learnt by experience. (UA, Aca: 1).

The response show that the deans are performing their duties on mere assumption rather on a properly chalked out directions. This may lead to further confusion. The confusion needs to be addressed because the dean is the main component of the university governance on whom the whole building of academic process is based. In university B, Aca 3, mentioned that the four deans of this university are the main pillars, which is verbally admitted by administration, decide the academic duties and they may even guide the vice chancellor and advice on all the subjects or on something for effective governance. The vice chancellor always proclaims that he seeks the dean's opinion while taking some decisions, even in non-academic matters. But this is a verbal claim. In reality, it is contrary to the facts. Deans have only a nominal role to play in the governance process.

I think my job otherwise is a combination of as academic head as well as administrator because if we call dean only academic head then I only look after academic matters. But my role is different because the nature of my faculty is different than other faculties because in other faculties each department has its own programs. But here in my faculty we have integrated degrees of different departments and in some departments we don't have professor or associate professor. So, I work as a chairman too with other senior faculty member (UA, Aca: 6).

The above response shows the dean plays an ambidextrous role in dealing with matters happening around him/her along with the academic responsibilities. The following response further illustrates the central role played by the deans in any university.

Similarly, dean is the main part of the university actually and we think that deans are the main constituent on whom the whole academic process runs, like we are the four deans of this university. They are the main components who have to decide the academic duties and even they guide the vice chancellor and advice to all the subjects or something for good governance. Definitely vice chancellor asks deans' opinion while taking some decisions, even in non-academic decisions, and then it is not like that. (UB, Aca: 3).

The response further elaborates the central role played by the deans in any university.

Academic Head of Faculty

The office of dean is regarded as middle management but this office remains ineffective to perform the role as such. It is too hard to serve two masters – the senior management and the faculty – and to balance both (Mignot-Gerard, 2003; Matczynski et al., 1989; Rosser et al., 2003). The deans have reservations that a multifarious role for deans results when it is not formalized. The academic leaders (deans) assume that roles and authority are based on hypothesis rather than on a factual position. Deans argued that their role as a dean is no more than looking after classes – whether they are being conducted well and on time, the conduct of exams and responsibility to ensure that results are sent on time to the concerned departments. They have to arrange meetings with heads of the departments in this respect. They have also to teach because they say that deans, being faculty members, are promoted to the deanship, so their job is more as an academic head with limited venture. They are monitoring faculty affairs, especially the teaching process. In a nutshell, they have only to satisfy the administration that the faculty is working well. This practice prevails in all faculties. The following responses demonstrate that faculty members rely on deans to entreaty their matters but in real the situation is contrary to it.

My faculty always expects a lot from me to plea their cases but we have very different system. It is only somehow in his/her faculty, not in university as a whole, I have major role to play. University is a high body. In faculty, dean has role to play with chairpersons to solve their problems and to look after teaching matters, but in university we don't have role to play, especially in administrative matters or decisions. We just have to coordinate and cooperate with chairmen and faculty and communicate between administration and faculty. What we as deans have to do is determined by the administration. If we need to take any initiative, even regarding the course content, we are not given full place to bring need-oriented change in it. For that we have to go academic council, which chaired by vice chancellor and pro-vice chancellors. (UB, Aca: 1)

Or I think I am just looking after classes – either they are being conducted well on time, exams and responsibility to ensure that results are sent on time to concerned departments. I have to arrange meetings with head of the departments in this respect. I have to teach because we deans are faculty members who take responsibilities of deanship so my job is more an academic head. It looks me I have limited venture i.e supervising faculty affairs, specially teaching process. I have to satisfy the administration that faculty is working well. This is the practice that all we deans are doing, which is

sometimes very demanding when sometimes we can't come to the expectations of our faculty members. (UA, Aca: 4)

Whereas, deans think that as heads of faculty they have a unique role and position, they juggle multiple roles and a myriad of expectations from diverse constituents (Gallos, 2002). Being chief executive officer with multidisciplinary academic programs (Sarros et al., 1998; Gmelch et al., 1999a), they can perform a key leadership role in their faculties. Their role is critical to successful faculty functioning, as they play a potential role maximizing personal as well as collective roles.

But being heads and responsible of faculties but it is just sometimes petty issues. Like if anything during exams or any issue of faculty members or students, deans can resolve with the consent of the directors. For instance, regarding the fees concession, semester courses or outline, so these issues can resolve whereas the major issues, like planning, regarding the exam policy, financial matters, semester policy etc., are decided and taken by vice chancellor, whereas deans' participation in decision making is kind of allowing the academicians to participate in the academic decision making. (UA, Adm: 3).

Therefore, sometimes my job is very stressful. We can't do anything or to take any decision by own. My job is very demanding between having expectation of faculty and on the other side administration, but all time I am working as paper work. I only put up a note and forward it to registrar office so I am only forwarding body, or somewhere clerk or superintendent post. I only put up all things. This is not deanship role, its nowhere in the world. (UB, Aca: 2).

The dean is expected to secure the needed resources for faculty members in order to maximize their personal and collective potential, to play the role of coalition builder, negotiator, and facilitator. Their work is exciting and endless, yet the dean is unable to play this role because of having no access to expedite matters independently. UB, Aca: 2 grieved that it may be said that the dean is an academic head and leader but, in reality, his role has been made vague. He has been dragged into administrative conflicts, has to succumb to political pressures, and has to face bad governance issues.

Faculty Affairs

Deans are supposed to determine the educational policies, chalk out the syllabus, research projects and conduct seminars, as well as some other things related to their faculty. Again, they act in the capacity of, particularly, the board of the faculty and the head of the scrutiny committee, and have to look after the work of chairpersons of different departments, and have to attend the selection board, but they have to do all such activities as and when they are asked to. The formal meetings that they attend are just routine work, which hardly brings any constructive change in their faculty because,

when decisions are taken, they are not consulted. So, in all, they only oversee and correspond.

The deans are the chairmen of the board of faculty within their faculties, and may organize the meetings of the board of faculty with chairmen from the departments if there are any changes to or introduction of a new curriculum. These come to the board of the faculty, from there it goes to the academic council. In the academic council, which is chaired by the vice chancellor, they have recently added seven pro-vice chancellors of different campuses, and they too preside with the vice chancellor, but the final decision goes to the vice chancellor. In this situation, the dean must defend the introduction of new courses and explain why they are needed. In this way, they represent all their faculty cases there. The decisions are always taken by the 'high ups'.

It was found in both public universities that normally deans supervise all the departments of their domain that come under their faculties, oversee whether the chairmen are working properly or not, and ensure that all academic and research activities in their faculties are being conducted satisfactorily. If they find something wrong somewhere, they mediate and discuss and guide the chairmen. They also recommend the creation of posts on the recommendations of chairmen and do further recommendations to support their proposals as per the rules. If in any department there is no professor or associate professor, then the dean must look after that department, with the assistance of the most senior teacher of the department.

Normally I supervise all the departments of my domain which comes under my faculty and look that chairmen are working properly or not and ensure all academic and research activities in my faculty working satisfactory. If I find something wrong somewhere I interfere and discuss and guide chairmen. I also recommend the creation of posts on the recommendations of chairmen and do further recommendations to support their proposals logically. If in any department there is no professor or associate professor then according to university constitution dean has to look after with the assistance of the most senior teacher of the department. (UA, Aca: 3)

If any issue arises that needs to be resolved, they call meetings of chairpersons and heads of the departments and communicate the decisions that are taken by the authority. The problems of departments, problems of faculty members or students or academic and research activities carried out in faculty come under discussion and, if they have any issues, they share their problems with administration because the deans do not have any authority, except only to communicate.

Role in Decision-making Process

The deans emphasized that the university as an organization is a whole unit. Every organ works to the extent of its extent in the organization. Logically, the stakeholders need full access to do their job freely so that their optimum role can be obtained in the

governance process, which will obviously enhance the output, provide homogeneous and prospective performance and uplift the standard of the institution.

Decision making is a crucial matter that shapes the future of institutions. For instance, the deans portrayed how participation in leadership shapes the entire system and culture of the institution. Although the dean is supposed to be involved in the process, they regretted that in public universities in Pakistan the dean is not playing a bridging role between faculty and administration. They do not have linkages, rather they are just kept confined to their faculties. They are in no way part of the decision-making process.

Correspondingly, by comparing to other countries in America and Europe and the universities they have visited there, the deans expressed that they have seen an entirely different system there. Deans are more powerful: they watch, examine, and govern their faculties on their own. The vice chancellor is president of all internal stakeholders, including administration, deans, board, and faculty, and all are considered a fundamental part of the decision-making process. While considering the system of Pakistan, especially public universities, they find a completely different culture. Here the things are quite controlled, decisions are not taken jointly taking all stakeholders on board that is not like the practice here. Deans find their role very paltry.

Dean does not have any role in governance process, like to select a chairperson in certain departments. So, we just send three nominations to vice chancellor for the selection of chairperson for my faculty but it happens otherwise. Dean is not considered any way. I, as dean, have reservations regarding my role and powers. Sometimes we are very much isolated from decisions. In fact, the lack of the power to accomplish many of these delegated or assumed duties. This perception may be inherent in the role itself. (UA, Aca: 5)

Expressing their reservations, deans said that they do not have any decisive role in the governance process, for example, if they need to select a chairperson in a certain department. They are supposed to send three nominations to the vice chancellor for the selection of a chairperson for their faculty. But to their dismay, things happen otherwise. They do not deem it fit even to ask the dean which person is more competent. Regarding their role in governance, they say there is no system of decentralization. They are limited to faculty routine work, with no role or part to take in policy matters. Deans are very much isolated from decisions.

Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate that deans regret that unlike all other administrative positions the dean's role becomes ineffective due to unclear definition of its position. The dean is expected to secure the needed resources for faculty members in order to maximize their personal and collective potential to play the role of coalition

builder, negotiator, and facilitator as their work is exciting and endless. Despite the fact that a dean is coalition builder, negotiator and facilitator, but he is sideline so much so that he is unable to play potential role even he has no access to the requisite resources (Gallos, 2002; Rosser et al., 2003).

Additionally, Rosser (2004); De Boer & Goedegebuure (2009) also support the findings of this study observation as they described deans as a professional with no status almost unadmired the unsung professionals of the academy, unsung because their contributions to the academic enterprise are not adequately recognized. Though, they play dual role at a time they promote the cause of university vocation to the faculty simultaneously, defend the faculty values before university administration (Gmelch, 2003).

Further, findings show that deans look dissatisfied and regretful with their roles and duties in governance practices in public universities in Pakistan and have lots of reservations they just remain engaged in petty matters and their time and attention is devoted only towards prolonged and futile letters and documents to forward. However, deans are traditionally under pressure like involvement in development particularly as academic setter as well as liaison between the faculty professors and the administration. In this capacity of a joining force it is needed to review the role and power status of deans considering that they have utmost academic as well as administrative authority both in the faculty and administration (Neumann & Neumann, 1983; Mercer, 1997).

Additionally, deans demanded that in the capacity of a dean they should have the right to suggest guidelines and they should be policy makers of their faculties but it is not like that. Their only job is to work just as watchman otherwise if they are allowed their active interaction and timely communication it would surely help the faculty members to do the tasks successfully. Whereas, at present they are limited to class and exam conduct they have to follow the instruction issued from the administration. They have least chance for innovation as such. If given proper place to work they can do much more to furnish their faculties with recent awareness. But here the dean has a simple target to complete the course content within stipulated period of time. This is the status of deanship they are made to exercise that leave a feeling that it is wastage of time and energy in petty traditional things.

Conclusion

As leaders of faculties, no doubt deans provide a strong connection between two paradigms, i.e. administration and faculty, and are always trying to balance them and trying to connect them, but they encounter many tight positions. Being leaders of faculties, they have no power to decide their own respective faculties' matters, although the first decision maker should be the dean.

Deans appear dissatisfied and regretful with their roles and duties in governance practices in both selected public universities in Pakistan and have lots of reservations. Deans regrets that unlike all other administrative positions, the dean's role becomes ineffective due to the unclear definition of the position. The dean is expected to secure the needed resources for faculty members in order to maximize their personal and collective potential, to play the role of coalition builder, negotiator, and facilitator, as their work is exciting and endless. Despite the fact that a dean is coalition builder, negotiator and facilitator, he is sidelined, so much so that he is unable to play a potential role and doesn't even have access to the requisite resources (Booth, 1982; Matczynski et al., 1989; Gallos, 2002; Rosser et al., 2003). Another problem is that deans occupy their office without comprehending their job obligations due to the complexity of their role, which has given them a low profile in the setup (Gmelch, 2000; Boffo et al., 2008).

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