

Building Educational Research Capacity: Challenges and Opportunities From the Perspectives of Faculty Members at a National University in Oman

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the perceptions of faculty members regarding research capacity building in the field of Education. It particularly seeks to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with this practice from the perspectives of these members. The study adopted a qualitative research design, using focus group interviews to collect data from a sample of faculty members in the College of Education at a national university in Oman. The results revealed the existence of some challenges that hampered educational research, including time constraints, the lack of a collaborative research culture, the lack of research training, and the absence of a clear research agenda. The analysis also identified a number of capacity building opportunities such as a research-supportive environment, the availability of research funding, and the role of research groups. The study concludes with some recommendations to improve educational research capacity both in Oman and in the Arab region in general.

Keywords

capacity building, Arab, Oman, educational research, education, social sciences, higher education

Introduction

Over the past 15 years or so, there has been an ongoing global debate over the quality and relevance of existing educational research and the need to develop solid and more relevant knowledge bases that can significantly impact educational policy and practice (Barrett et al., 2011; Cain & Allan, 2017; Gogolin, 2016; Leitch, 2009; Lysenko et al., 2014). For example, commenting on the modest impact of educational research on educational practices in the United Kingdom, Cain and Allan (2017) concluded: “One thing seems clear: unless there are changes, the majority of educational research impact will remain largely invisible at the point of use” (p.729). The challenge is even more persistent in countries of the Global South where educational research and education systems in general are facing more severe problems, with low research capacity and a lack of connection between research and educational policy formation being major factors (see Hallinger, 2020; Jonbekova, 2020; Tikly & Barrett, 2013). The same holds particularly true in the Arab region where concerns have been intensifying over the quality of the research produced by Arab researchers and its ability to inform educational policy and practice in the region (e.g., El-Amine, 2016;

Hallinger & Hammad, 2019; Hammad et al., 2020; Karami-Akkary & El Sahib, 2019).

While issues related to research capacity building have been researched to some extent in other contexts (e.g., Barrett et al., 2011; Crossley, 2001; Crossley & Holmes, 2001; Fowler et al., 2009; Harrison & Seddon, 2013; Leitch, 2009; Rees et al., 2007), little has been done to explore them in the Arab region. Abouchedid and Abdelnour (2015) expressed a concern that there is even little reliable data on research productivity in Arab’s higher education institutions and therefore invited researchers to conduct more research to “supply planners and policy makers with appropriate evidence-based analysis essential for strategic planning and policy formulation” (p.676). Hence, this study is conducted to fill this gap. Specifically, it sets out to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with the development of

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research capacities as perceived by a sample of faculty members in the College of Education at a national university in Oman.

Educational Research in the Arab Region: An Overview

The past few decades have witnessed increasing concerns about scientific research and knowledge production in the Arab region, with studies and reports suggesting that Arab research output is generally low (Abouchedid & Abdelnour, 2015; Almansour, 2016; Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2015). Describing what she perceives as a “crisis of research” in Arab universities, Almansour (2016) explains that most of these universities “are occupied with other matters more vital to their survival” than engaging in high-quality research activities (p. 1). The crisis is also evident, albeit to a lesser extent, in the wealthy Gulf states where research engagement is questionable despite impressive investments in the higher education sector and research infrastructure (Ashour & Fatima, 2016). While the limited research capacity in Arab’s higher education institutions can be attributed to budgetary allocation, other factors may include academic staff’s overall satisfaction, “socialisation of faculty staff members into a research climate, and university mission vis-a-vis academic research” (Abouchedid & Abdelnour, 2015, p. 673). Lack of contribution to global scientific knowledge has hampered the efforts deployed by Arab countries to raise their global ranking and compete with developed nations (Almansour, 2016; Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2015).

Concerns have been even more intense about educational research. Criticisms have focused on educational knowledge production in Arab societies and its contribution to the global knowledge base in the field (see El-Zeki, 2008; Hallinger & Hammad, 2019; Hammad & Hallinger, 2017; Karami-Akkary & Hammad, 2019). For example, a study of the Arab-related educational research papers published in six international journals between 1995 and 2006 found that only 36 articles were related to Arab countries. This represented only 1.7% of the total number of papers (2,112) published in these journals. It was also noted that 17 out of these 36 papers were written by non-Arab scholars (El-Zeki, 2008). Similarly, in a recent study on knowledge production in the field of educational leadership and management in the Arab region, Hallinger and Hammad (2019) reviewed more than 4,000 research articles published in nine specialized international journals between 2000 and 2016. The study found that Arab societies contributed only 62 articles to the corpus reviewed, thus signaling a minimal contribution of the Arab world to the global knowledge base in the field (Hallinger & Hammad, 2019; Hammad & Hallinger, 2017; Karami-Akkari & Hammad, 2019).

Beside its insignificant contribution to the global educational scholarship, Arab educational research has also been criticized for some methodological and conceptual

limitations. These include excessive reliance on quantitative research approaches and data collection techniques, an evident tendency to employ simple conceptual models that are unable to address the complex nature of educational phenomenon (see Hammad & Alazmi, 2020; Hammad & Hallinger, 2017; Hammad et al., 2020), in addition to focusing on irrelevant issues rather than addressing real problems facing schools and education systems in Arab societies (Sakran, 2010). The latter has led to what Karami-Akkary and El Sahib (2019) describe as “blind spots” in the Arab educational knowledge base. As El-Amine (2016) argues, this has resulted from the lack of academic freedom and the subsequent Arab researchers’ tendency to avoid research topics that may be seen as sensitive or controversial from a political point of view.

The above weaknesses have been attributed to a number of challenges facing educational research in the Arab world. For example, El-Amine (2016) pointed to a political and institutional bias against social sciences research, including education, in favor of the natural sciences sector, which results in imbalanced allocation of resources and lack of funding. This has been exacerbated by a lack of support from the private sector. He also identified some institutional barriers including heavy teaching loads, lack of research assistants, in addition to limited autonomy and lack of job security. Sakran (2010) stressed other barriers such as the absence of national research projects, unavailability of clear research agendas, in addition to a lack of connection between educational researchers and their peers in other fields. Al Sayed’s (2016) study highlighted the researchers’ need for training, appropriate funding, and a research-supportive environment. The study recommended promoting research teams and providing educational researchers with adequate research-focused training. Ismael (2019) and Al Toom (2002) specifically pointed to the absence of an educational research agenda that sets clear research priorities and the prevalence of an individualist research culture among Arab researchers.

The weaknesses and challenges outlined above point to the need for more concerted efforts by educational research institutions as well as higher education policy makers in the Arab region to develop research capacity building strategies aimed at creating conditions conducive to the production of relevant, high-quality educational research.

Research Capacity Building

Generally, higher education institutions around the world are under huge pressures created by globalization and increasing global ranking demands (Huenneke et al., 2017; Marginson, 2014). Part of their response to these pressures has been the development of their research capacity (Griffioen, 2018; Tie, 2012). Different approaches to capacity building have been adopted, but they usually include elements such as establishing the infrastructure necessary for conducting research, recruiting, developing, and motivating staff members

(Nguyen, 2016), investing in affiliation and partnership programs, promoting internal and external research collaboration (Huenneke et al., 2017), in addition to increasing research funding, and mapping out national research priorities (Harrison & Seddon, 2013).

In the educational field, capacity building has been proposed as a means to address the shortcomings of educational research and help researchers produce valid knowledge that responds to the needs of policymakers and practitioners (Barrett et al., 2011; Leitch, 2009; Rees et al., 2007). This has become even more urgent, given the growing criticisms addressed to current educational research practices and outcomes (Cain & Allan, 2017; Hallinger, 2020; Jonbekova, 2020; Leitch, 2009; Lysenko et al., 2014). However, despite being a major focus to enhance education and educational research, there has been no agreement over the definition of research capacity building or what it should entail. Researchers (e.g., Barrett et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2007; Ridley, 2011) view it as a process aimed at developing research skills and equipping researchers with sound research methodologies that enable them to carry out and produce high-quality research. Leitch (2009) specifically emphasizes the availability of active researchers and their ability to apply educational research skills. Munn (2008) argues that research capacity building is not merely an acquisition of methodological skills but also a comprehensive understanding of the research process and the ability to apply it. Rees et al. (2007) and Ridley (2011) stress areas in which educational researchers need training, including how to conduct empirical research, how to use data collection and analysis approaches for both quantitative and qualitative research, how to design research instruments, in addition to handling large-scale sets of data.

Related literature has pointed to different formal and informal strategies that can contribute to building research capacity in education, including engagement in research as a professional activity, critical reflection on professional experience, and interaction with fellow researchers (Munn, 2008; Rees et al., 2007). A collaborative approach to capacity building has also been proposed where researchers and other concerned stakeholders collaborate during the research process (see Barrett et al., 2011; Christie & Menter, 2009; Jacob & Meek, 2013; Munn, 2008). As Christie and Menter (2009) indicate, as education is an applied field of inquiry, “collaborative approaches to research are arguably more ecologically valid, especially where research teams include the professional practitioners who actually mediate the learning processes” (p.350). International collaboration through North–South partnerships has also been suggested as a possible capacity-building solution. However, the agendas of the local contexts must be taken into account in such endeavors to avoid disappointment (see Asare et al., 2020; Crossley & Holmes, 2001).

Different programs were developed to build educational research capacity in developed countries. For example,

Fowler and colleagues (2009) identified three capacity building initiatives in the United Kingdom, including the Teaching and Learning Research Program (TLRP) which supports educational research across the United Kingdom, the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) which encourages collaboration to build research capacity across seven universities in Scotland, and the Welsh Education Research Network (WERN) which focuses on building a network of all higher education institutions in Wales. Western Countries have further extended their scope by implementing programs and projects to support research capacity building in developing countries such as the U.K. EdQual project aimed at enhancing educational quality in Africa (Barrett et al., 2011) and the Belize Primary Education Development Project (BPEDP), which focused on improving primary education in Belize (Crossley, 2001).

The Study Context

Since its renaissance in 1970, the Sultanate of Oman has adopted a variety of strategies in its pursuit of modernization and nation building. At the heart of these strategies has been the promotion of scientific research and innovation. For decades, scientific research in Oman had been hampered by a number of challenges such as limited financial support provided by research institutions, lack of coordination among research departments, limited opportunities for developing research skills, inadequate research facilities, and the absence of a supportive research culture (Karadsheh et al., 2019). However, the past few years have witnessed a growing emphasis on scientific research as a key component of Oman’s plan to modernize its society and build a knowledge-based economy. This has been particularly evident in the *Oman Vision 2040* which has recognized the need to reinforce and support scientific research and innovation to build national capabilities (*Oman Vision 2040*, 2018).

Related to the *Oman Vision 2040* is the newly formulated National Strategy for Education 2040, which has stressed the need to build research capacity in higher education institutions as part of the nation building plans. The strategy has provided recommendations aimed at promoting research innovation and economic growth in Oman. These include enhancing research quality and quantity, providing adequate funding to support research and researchers in higher education institutions, establishing connections between industries and research institutions to promote joint research, and developing a plan to improve research skills among students at all education levels (The Education Council, 2018).

Building educational research capacity seems particularly important in the current context of educational reform in Oman. Since the early 1990s, the Omani education system has undergone significant developments aimed at raising its quality and bringing it in line with the ambitious modernization plans set by the country’s leadership (Al Balushi & Griffiths, 2013; Nasser, 2019). We argue that producing

contextually relevant, high-quality research is crucially needed not only to guide the ongoing reform programs but also to assess their impact on educational outcomes.

The institution where this study was carried out (OMU) is a national university that is considered one of the largest sources of human capacity development in Oman, with about 950 faculty members and 17,530 students. Since OMU recognizes the importance of research and innovation and aims to be recognized for research innovation, it has taken measures to establish a strong research base by developing the appropriate infrastructure, setting a legal and administrative framework for the research process, providing adequate financial and institutional support, employing qualified researchers and assistants, fostering a research culture among its academic staff and students and developing joint research projects with local and international research institutions (Anonymized OMU report, 2018).

Part of the OMU's support for research is funding which is provided either in the form of internal grants from the university's annual budget for research and innovation, or through applications to The Research Council (TRC) which is a policy-making and funding institution that was established in 2005 to support research development and innovation in Oman. Its objectives include building research capacity mechanisms, facilitating knowledge transfer, and enabling an environment for research and innovation (TRC, 2017).

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research design was employed to achieve its objectives. As we were interested in exploring people's perceptions of the phenomenon under study, we considered it more suitable to adopt a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is particularly useful when exploring people's lived experiences because it is focused on the research participants' points of view and how they make sense of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Following approval from the concerned office to conduct the research, data were collected through focus group interviews with a sample of faculty members in the College of Education at OMU. Focus group interviews are widely used by qualitative educational researchers as they provide access to a large number of participants whose interaction can yield a collective perspective on the topic under investigation (Gibbs, 2012). Since they rely on group members' interaction, the views generated are those of the participants rather than the researcher (Cohen & Morrison, 2007). Moreover, using this technique enables the researcher to collect sufficiently detailed information in a short period of time and at a low cost (Acocella, 2012).

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants for this study. The rationale was to ensure the inclusion of particular categories of participants who were able to provide important perspectives relevant to answering the research

questions (Robinson, 2014). Hence, we targeted the faculty members whom we considered most likely to participate actively in the discussion and provide relevant information. We were keen to include as many academic departments as possible in the study. Participants from different departments were approached personally, informed of the purpose of the study and asked if they were interested to participate. Twenty-three faculty members agreed to take part in the interviews. They represented four academic departments, namely Educational Foundations and Administration (8 participants), Psychology (5 participants), Instructional and Learning Technologies (5 participants), and Curriculum and Instruction (6 participants). The participants varied by academic rank: there were 5 professors, 6 associate professors, and 12 assistant professors. They also varied by nationality (6 Omanis, 17 non-Omanis). The majority of the participants were males ($N = 19$). Following arrangement with the research participants according to their schedules, the interviews were conducted in a common room located in the main block of the college. Interview time ranged between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews followed a semistructured format, which means that the researchers started with a set of predetermined questions but also had the advantage of asking follow-up questions to address issues emerging from the participants' responses (Zina, 2005). The interview questions were mainly focused on the perceived state of educational research capacity in the college in terms of challenges and available opportunities. Three interviews were conducted in Arabic and one in English due to the presence of two non-Arabic speakers among the participants (the rest of the group understood English). Upon consent from the participants, the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Transcripts of the recorded interviews were created manually in preparation for analysis.

Upon completion of data collection, the analysis started with organizing and coding the data generated using the MaxQDA software program for qualitative data analysis. The analysis was carried out using the inductive method. Inductive analysis refers to "approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher" (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). Thematic coding was used to identify emerging themes and categories. Thematic analysis "offers a way into qualitative research that teaches the mechanics of coding and analyzing qualitative data systematically, which can then be linked to broader theoretical or conceptual issues" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). This process required rigorous reading of data transcripts, developing a coding system, and then labeling segments of data with the codes generated. The themes emerging from the data focused on the perceived challenges facing educational research, and the existing capacity building opportunities. Specific themes included time for research, research culture, research training, research agenda, supportive environment, research funding, and research groups.

Findings

The data analysis yielded a wide range of perceptions held by our participants about educational research practices and challenges, as well as research capacity building opportunities available in their institution. In this section, we present these findings under two subheadings in light of the study objectives outlined earlier. These are perceived educational research challenges and capacity building opportunities.

Perceived Educational Research Challenges

During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to talk about the challenges associated with research capacity in their institution. Their comments demonstrated that while they were generally positive about OMU as a research environment, many of them were concerned about the value of the research produced and its ability to influence educational policy-making in Oman. The following statements by two participants illustrate this point:

There is research at the college level and the department level, but the value of the final outcome of this research is not high enough to help in teaching or solving real problems in society. Research is mostly done for the purpose of promotion or contract renewal . . . it is mostly quantitative research based on questionnaires and small samples.

Let us ask ourselves this question: what research did we conduct in this department that has had an impact on educational policy change or on improving education in Oman?

Some participants attributed this problem to institutional isolation and lack of connection between the college and society: "There is a gap between the research we carry out in the university and its application on the ground," a senior participant noted. For other participants, however, the issue had more to do with the nature of the research itself in terms of quality and relevance. For example, one participant criticized the lack of depth in the studies conducted by the researchers in the college including postgraduate students and faculty members. He said that the majority of studies stop at the descriptive level which is unable to provide a deep understanding of educational issues. He suggested the need to shift from prevalent quantitative approaches to qualitative and other research approaches that can delve deeper into the roots of the phenomenon under investigation. Another respondent pointed to what he perceived to be excessive reliance on empirical research that involves the application of standardized research instruments that may not be suitable for Omani society, while ignoring theoretical studies that discuss the philosophical underpinnings of educational phenomena. He claimed that most Arab researchers lack a clear understanding of the nature of knowledge and what constitutes sound scientific research. He therefore stressed the need for Arab educational researchers to revise their research approaches.

From the participants' point of view, the aforementioned weaknesses have resulted from a number of challenges that affect faculty members' research practices. These include the lack of time, the absence of a research culture, the lack of research-focused training, and the absence of a clear research agenda.

Lack of time. Lack of time emerged as a key challenge to research development as revealed by data analysis. Many participants agreed that there was not enough time for them to engage in research activities. They complained about heavy workloads that include teaching, academic supervision, in addition to administrative tasks and other non-academic commitments. In the words of one participant: "[Time] is a problem we are facing . . . There are a lot of workloads, sometimes we have 12 teaching hours and a lot of students . . ." Another participant noted: "A lot of time is wasted on trivial things that come in the way and take you out of the mood [for doing research]." Moreover, when asked if he faced time pressures, another participant responded:

Oh yes, absolutely. People who don't know about research think it's like a walk in the park, but it's not . . . I believe in humanities we even endure more pressure compared to sciences. We teach, we have a lot of commitments, administrative tasks, we do a lot of marking, a lot of meetings, and on top of all of that you are also required to do some research in order to evolve . . . So you have a lot of things to do, just like juggling a lot of balls at the same time.

One respondent referred specifically to the staff appraisal policy at OMU which stipulates that the performance of faculty staff members must be assessed in relation to three main aspects: teaching, research, and community service. According to him, this may create difficulties for some members when trying to prioritize research and other work obligations, which may lead them to allocate less time for developing their research skills. Another participant further clarified this point: "For some faculty members, research is not very important, teaching is, so they wouldn't publish much as opposed to other faculty members who think that research is really the backbone of their own professional development." Another senior participant raised an interesting point, noting that early career researchers in particular are more likely to focus more on teaching as they would be more interested in establishing themselves as university teachers.

Lack of a collaborative research culture. Some participants' responses indicated the prevalence of an underdeveloped research culture which acted as an impediment to developing research capacity in the college. One aspect of this culture relates to how research groups operate. While praising the idea of forming research groups that reflect the diverse interests of different departments and researchers, some participants believed that their role in building research capacity in

the college was limited due to the absence of a teamwork culture. The following statements by members from two different departments highlight this issue:

I think the idea of research groups is a very good one, yet in reality they are not activated properly because at the end of the day collaboration among members relies mostly on personal relationships . . . Members tend to team up with those they are comfortable with and other members are usually left behind, so their role in capacity building is limited.

We have had them for 4 years now, but due to the absence of a clear research policy, especially in terms of promoting teamwork and joint research, they have failed to serve their purpose [in our department].

The lack of a developed research culture was also exemplified in the lack of interdepartmental communication to share research interests and news:

Also we don't know what research is going on right now in the whole college. I know that a lot of research is going on because occasionally we see all these publications and people getting grants, but we don't know [what kind of research].

We are not in the know . . . In terms of knowing what other people in other departments are doing is something that I don't see or hear much of.

Two senior members attributed the lack of a research culture to the fact that OMU was initially established as a teaching rather than a research institution, and that building a mature research culture in an institution like that would be a long process. One of them elaborated:

OMU is a relatively new university as compared to some of the universities in the Western world. It first started as a teaching university and now the culture for research is developing, so I would say right now if you wanna compare to outside the research culture here is still at its infancy level, but with the encouragement going on now I see a potential for it to grow and develop even further.

According to another participant, this issue was not limited to OMU but applied to most universities in the Arab world. He commented: "The problem is that most universities in the Arab world are teaching-oriented rather than research-oriented . . . They are not research institutions per se." He added that it was only in the past ten years that Arab universities, especially in the Gulf region, started to place more emphasis on research activities.

Lack of research-focused training. A number of research participants complained about the lack of professional development opportunities that are specifically targeted at developing faculty research skills. As revealed by participants' responses, available training usually takes the form of short seminars

that address basic skills such as using SPSS for quantitative data analysis, referencing, in addition to few workshops on qualitative research. These seminars are often provided voluntarily by more experienced colleagues, rather than being systematic and continuous. The training workshops were described as "scattered" and "superficial," which made them unable to address the actual capacity building needs of faculty members.

The participants expressed their preference for more organized and systematic professional development activities that are specifically designed for research capacity building. They also identified some training areas that need more emphasis, including writing research proposals, applying for research grants, using qualitative data analysis techniques, writing for international journals, and conducting interdisciplinary research. Some suggested organizing seminars where international publishing experts are invited to share their experiences on how to write and publish in international journals. Another respondent proposed that colleagues who have reached professorship level should play a role in developing research skills in the college by sharing their research expertise with younger staff members. One final suggestion was the activation of the role of the scientific activities committees at department and college levels in providing a series of seminars or workshops aimed at developing research skills based on the needs of faculty members.

Lack of a research agenda. Some respondents reported the lack of a clear research agenda as a significant hindrance to research development in the institution. The following are examples of their comments on this issue:

There is no clear research policy, so the college must take responsibility for this issue.

There is no clear research agenda for the departments and the college that can guide the research.

We need to have a list of what are the most important topics that we need to target and that really serve the country.

We need a research coordination body in the college that can identify the research that needs to be done.

The participants emphasized the need for a clear research policy or a roadmap that reflects the actual needs of Omani society. They provided some suggestions to address this issue. For example, one called for improved collaboration with the Ministry of Education, recommending that the Ministry identify their actual needs and share them with the college for faculty staff and research students to address them in their research. Other participants proposed the need for more collaboration among colleagues from different departments and even colleges to promote interdisciplinary research. Another suggestion focused on activating the role of research committees in addressing this issue:

The college has to activate the departmental research committees, then the college research committee . . . What we need from these committees is to organize forums to discuss these issues . . . Let them come to table to solve these problems.

Capacity Building Opportunities

In spite of all the challenges highlighted above, the research participants identified some positive aspects that were seen as opportunities that faculty members can take advantage of to develop research capacity. Three aspects were identified, namely a research-supportive environment, research funding, and the establishment of research groups.

Research-supportive environment. Participants' responses showed positive perceptions of the supportive academic environment in OMU. "The system is there to support," commented a senior participant. While this was a shared impression among all participants irrespective of their nationality, it was noted that most positive comments came from non-Omani respondents as they felt that the environment in OMU was more encouraging and supportive compared to their original institutions in their own countries. One participant commented: "The environment here is really encouraging and a lot of academics who joined here have developed academically." He indicated that the environment in the college of education is even pressuring staff members to work hard, especially non-Omanis because they need to provide evidence of their research as they apply for contract renewal. Another participant underscored this point, indicating that since he moved to OMU he has become more productive due to the availability of resources and academic support.

The participants valued the efforts deployed by the university to provide a more supportive environment for its academics by shifting focus more toward research. According to a participant who studied in the United States, this can be challenging for an Arab university which was mainly established to be a teaching institution. Another respondent agreed, yet noted: "For sure there are strengths and there are difficulties and challenges, but in general the situation is now much better than it used to be." A senior member added: "I think that there are many developments in this area [research support] and this has also reflected on the activities in the college of education. So, yes we are developing and education research is developing." The same idea was shared by some other respondents who observed a growing emphasis on research in the institution. One member made an observation about the increasing number of research activities in the college: "Research activities have increased significantly over the past five years . . . especially after research has been linked to academic promotion and also due to the increase in funded research activities . . ."

Research funding. Funding was highlighted by the participants as the most significant aspect of research support in

OMU. Many respondents were appreciative of the availability of financial support and incentives such as research grants, conference attendance grants, and publication rewards. They perceived this kind of support to be a key factor contributing to research capacity building in the college. Many of them talked specifically about research grants and how they have increased over the past few years:

Now you can see the share of research grants given every year to education. The college got two HM [His Majesty] grants and four internal grants . . . We get more than what we used to get before.

There are several options for obtaining research grants . . . Funding chances are excellent and must be utilized . . . There is funding from the Deanship of Research, 3000 Omani Rials, in addition to His Majesty grants and the Research Council grants. I also got funding from the Arab Bureau of Education and from UNICEF.

We have more research than before, more money in terms of grants, so it is developing

Funded projects were seen by many respondents as an important means to build the capacity of researchers in the college. A senior member gave an example of how he used a large grant to recruit research assistants and train them in his department and how he used the money to set up an e-lab for micro teaching and buy equipment and software from which the whole college has benefited. However, according to some participants, it all depends on the leadership of the research team and harmony among team members:

Funded projects help significantly in building research capacity. However, it depends on the leadership of the team and their commitment and engagement as well as their motivation to achieve and be productive.

I think they have a role, but it all depends on the principal investigator . . . Some projects have produced excellent work, depending on their leadership.

The role of research groups. The establishment of research groups was highlighted by the respondents as another available opportunity that can be utilized to assist research capacity building. The idea of research groups emerged as part of the OMU policy to promote a collaborative research culture among its faculty:

The research policy in OMU encourages conducting collaborative research to build research capacity, especially for junior Omani researchers. This is taken into account when members apply for promotion or when they submit their annual appraisal file.

Some new, good practices have started in the college as evidenced in the development of a mechanism for joint research through research groups.

One participant explained that research groups contribute to building research capacity through collaboration and cooperation among research teams in the departments. “We learn from each other when we work in groups,” he added. Another respondent agreed, stating that “research is something that we should do in groups, not individually.” Another senior participant specifically commented on the role of research groups in supporting younger researchers:

I would say it is something that we should work towards . . . Since I have been here for almost three years, we sit together and talk about research and come up with a research proposal . . . It’s about mentoring younger ones trying to encourage research.

A former head of department provided an example of how he used research groups to build capacity in his department: “From the capacity building point of view, also in my case I tried to build the capacity of our research assistants especially Omanis.” He mentioned examples of research assistants with whom he published papers from research projects, stressing this as a good practice that should be encouraged to develop the capacity of research assistants involved in research groups.

Nevertheless, some participants believed that the effectiveness of these groups remains conditional upon good leadership and harmony among group members. One senior member noted: “The idea of research groups is good and some research groups have actually produced high quality research, but other groups are not active due to a lack of harmony among members.” Another member added that the leaders of these groups should work harder to encourage their teams to be more active. Other participants stressed the need for a clear policy or framework that guides the work of these groups to make them more productive: “Research groups are good, but they need a clear policy. The work responsibility usually rests with the principal investigator, or there may be two or three members who are doing the work while other members’ contributions are insignificant.”

Discussion and Implications

This study fills a gap in the existing scholarship on research capacity building in the Arab region by providing empirical evidence from one of the Gulf states. Drawing on qualitative data collected from a sample of faculty members in the College of education at a national university in Oman, the study explored how these members perceived the challenges and opportunities associated with research capacity building in their institution. The findings lend credence to prior research concerning the state of scientific research and knowledge construction in Arab higher education institutions (e.g., Abouchéid & Abdelnour, 2015; Almansour, 2016; El-Amine, 2016; Hallinger & Hammad, 2019; Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2015).

The findings showed the existence of several challenges that seemed to hamper educational research capacity in OMU. While one of the challenges was personal in nature, namely the lack of a teamwork culture as embodied in some members’ tendency to work in isolation from their colleagues, others seemed to be caused by institutional factors such as time constraints, the lack of research-focused professional development, and the absence of a clear research agenda. Similar challenges were reported in previous studies conducted in other Arab countries (e.g., Al Sayed, 2016; Al Toom, 2002; El-Amine, 2016; Ismael, 2019). Related literature indicates that these factors can present a hindrance to research capacity building (e.g., Segrott et al., 2006). Indeed, the emergence of these challenges in Oman is not surprising as it corresponds with the overall picture in the Arab region characterized by several political, institutional, cultural, and financial factors that have hindered the transformation of Arab countries into “knowledge societies” Hanafi and Arvanitis (2015).

Barrett and colleagues (2011) argue that “the quality of research should be judged not only by the rigours of the academic disciplines, but also by its contribution and impact within society” (p. 27). The participants in this study felt that their research was not being taken seriously by policymakers and practitioners for reasons to do with poor coordination and lack of trust in the research quality. This finding is not limited to Oman, for Hanafi and Arvanitis (2015) reported the absence of research from any policy consideration as a characteristic of Arab societies at large. This evident gulf between educational research and policy needs to be bridged if research is to play an effective role in informing the educational developments currently taking place in Oman. There needs to be better collaboration among the parties concerned including educational researchers, policymakers, and practitioners (Barrett et al., 2011). Furthermore, OMU’s educational researchers will need to take responsibility for demonstrating the social value of their research because, as Olmos-Peñuela and colleagues (2014) argue, there is a general tendency to underestimate the value of social sciences and humanities research due to the intangible nature of its results.

The presence of cultural barriers such as the lack of communication among members from different departments and the lack of a teamwork culture is not surprising as it has been identified in previous studies as a feature of research institutions in the Arab world (e.g., Al Toom, 2002; Ismael, 2019). Commenting on the low research productivity of Arab researchers, Abouchéid and Abdelnour (2015) stressed the “need to broaden the scope of analysis of causal factors on research output by looking at organizational culture specifically, so that we can understand the scholarly environment into which the socialization of faculty staff members is taking place” (pp. 687,688). This is important because, as Ridley (2011) argues, “research capacity building is not just a body of knowledge or set of techniques to be delivered through

workshops, but about the importance of developing a research culture” (p. 285).

The data analysis also demonstrated that certain strengths were already in place that can be maximized and harnessed to improve research capacity. These include the existence of a supportive environment, the availability of funding, and the establishment of research groups. These are presented in the literature as essential elements for building capacity in research institutions (Munn, 2008; Segrott et al., 2006). Specifically, the availability of different sources for research funding, conference attendance grants, and publication rewards are enabling factors that can contribute to enhancing research capacity in the institution under investigation, provided that they are adequately managed and allocated. Almansour (2016) found these factors to be useful in lifting up research output in the Arab universities investigated in her study. Research groups can be another promising opportunity for improving research capacity if they have the necessary conditions for success, most importantly strong leadership and clear policy as suggested by our participants. It is the responsibility of heads of departments in collaboration with senior, research-active members in the college to activate these groups and steer them in the right direction in accordance with the university regulations and national research priorities.

In accordance with research evidence suggesting the value of collaboration in building research capabilities (see Barrett et al., 2011; Christie & Menter, 2009; Jacob & Meek, 2013; Munn, 2008), it is highly recommended that educational researchers at OMU make an effort toward networking with their colleagues across the region with the aim of sharing knowledge and widening their areas of expertise. Hallinger and Hammad (2019) suggest this as a possible strategy aimed at enhancing educational research in Arab societies, despite what they described as the “loosely coupled” nature of the research enterprise in these societies. They also stress the need for “intellectual leadership” with the purpose to develop a contextually relevant research agenda that can move educational research in the right direction. This is particularly important in light of our participants’ observation about the absence of a clear research agenda.

Besides regional networking, we also encourage collaboration with international scholars and established research networks. International collaboration can take the form of informal joint research projects initiated by the researchers themselves, or formal partnerships organized at the institutional level. There is some evidence suggesting that international partnerships can be useful in enhancing research capacity in higher education institutions in developing countries. Yet, caution must be exercised not to blindly adopt global research development agendas as they might ignore the particularities of national contexts (see Crossley, 2001, 2008).

In concluding this article, it is important to note that one of its limitations lies in its focus on one higher education

institution in one of the Gulf states, thus making it difficult to generalize the findings to other educational research institutions in the Arab World. However, as our findings resonate with the existing evidence about the limitations of educational research in the region as discussed above, this study can confirm the need for Arab educational research institutions to exert more coordinated efforts to raising their research capacity if they want their research to make a significant impact on educational policies and practices in their respective countries. This is particularly crucial in light of the current developments characterizing the educational landscape in the Arab world, especially the Gulf region (see Alsaleh, 2019; Alsharija & Watters, 2020; Stringer & Hourani, 2016). Building educational research capacity is vital for establishing “a culturally grounded” educational knowledge base that can inform ongoing reforms in these countries while at the same time responding to “the unique needs of their societal and cultural context” (Karami-Akkary, 2014, p. 196). It is also critically important that research from the Arab world contributes to the international literature given the misunderstandings and negative stereotyping of the region common in other parts of the world (e.g., Allan, 2010; Esposito & Kalin, 2011). In the specific case of Oman, we believe that addressing the issues highlighted in this study is important for bringing educational research practices and outcomes in line with the ambitious goals of the new National Education Strategy 2040. This is also part of the highly needed alignment between the higher education sector and Oman’s strategic goals as a nation.

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