

*Academic Research in Vocationally-Oriented Higher Education:  
Perspectives from Teaching Staff*

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**Abstract**

Academics' need to publish research output in order to succeed in tertiary education has been discussed extensively. Less is known about research and publication needs of staff working in vocationally-oriented higher institutes who, until recently, were judged primarily on their teaching contribution. However, there has been a noticeable trend across the world whereby career development of teaching staff in vocational institutes depends on their research and ability to publish in academic journals. This paper investigates the academic research challenges of teaching staff in a vocationally-oriented institute in Hong Kong. Mixed research methods were adopted to understand the prior experiences of the staff, challenges they may be facing when doing and publishing research, and ways in which their research and publication needs may be supported. Questionnaire data from 21 staff members reveal that most staff join the teaching profession after a career in the commercial sector and about half of the respondents do not have any research experience at all. These teaching staff hope to engage in research to enhance their future career prospects, engage in independent professional development and support their teaching. Most staff, however, feel that various constraints inhibit their ability to do research including lack of resources, insufficient time and limited experience with research. Three detailed case studies are used to further understand the personal and institutional contexts of the participants and develop recommendations that can be applied at the institutional policy and department levels.

Keywords: Academic research, vocationally-oriented education, publishing, professional development, teaching staff, HongKong

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## Introduction

This paper investigates the academic research challenges of teaching staff in a vocationally-oriented institute in Hong Kong. Using questionnaire data and three detailed case studies, it highlights the need for a clear research direction which is communicated to staff members and is realised through a series of support mechanisms.

Academics' need to publish research output in order to survive in a university has been discussed and documented extensively, to the point that the main question being asked today is whether "Too much academic research is being published" (Altbach and de Wit, 2018). Less is known about research and publication needs of staff working in vocationally-oriented higher institutes where, until recently, discourse focused on teaching and business (Chappell and Johnston, 2003), highlighting intensified connections between education and labor market and the ensuing new knowledge configurations (Wals et al., 2012). The focus of vocational institutes over the last decade or so has been on competence-based education (Biemans et al., 2004), i.e. integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to succeed in the professional world. The aim has been to develop integrated, performance-oriented capabilities to handle professional problems (Biemans et al., 2009).

The vocational institute featured in this paper has a similar aim of producing "work-ready graduates" through the focus on real-life projects and industrial attachments. It achieves this by closely collaborating with the local labour market and by hiring teaching staff who have extensive experience as professionals in their fields. Founded less than a decade ago by a major higher education provider in Hong Kong, this institute offers self-financed vocationally-oriented degree programmes to secondary school graduates and Higher Diploma holders. Around 3,500 students are currently taking their degree courses taught by about 150 staff members.

Unlike traditional vocational institutes, this institute considers research as one of the three "primary activities" of the teaching staff (Staff Handbook, p. 67). It describes it as an important means of professional development which can provide professional experience outside of the institute. Research and consultancy together are expected to take up to 20% of the staff's total workload or not more than 8 hours per week. A list of 17 items that can be considered when evaluating staff performance under the category of research is presented in the handbook. Examples range from physical creative artifacts to publications in books and journals of "high standing" (p. 9). It appears that new knowledge configurations where research is becoming increasingly more important are being valued by the institute, and teaching staff are expected to develop university practice styles and engage in associated activities such as research. As such, the institute resembles England's "dual sector institutions" described by Gale et al. (2011), where scholarship and practice styles of higher education are increasingly more common in vocational institutes.

The study presented in this paper was motivated by the need to give voice to teaching staff members of the institute in order to understand the following questions:

1. What do academic staff members think about the research requirement?
2. What kind of research experience do they have?

3. What are their research-related needs?
4. What kind of support is needed to scaffold staff's engagement with research?

## Methods

Mixed research methods were used to address the above questions. First, the existing policy documents were examined to understand the official expectations placed on teaching staff members with regards to research and publication. The findings of this stage of analysis are summarised in the introduction to this paper. An online questionnaire was then designed partly based on the document analysis. Questionnaire items focused on the respondents' previous professional, teaching, and research experiences, challenges they may be facing when doing and publishing research, and ways in which their research needs may be supported. The questionnaire was distributed to full-time teaching staff members of the Faculty of Design and Environment, and 21 questionnaires were returned. The respondents represented all the departments of the faculty and all the levels of experience across the three domains.

Five of the respondents agreed to participate in further detailed case studies which allowed us to examine experiences and beliefs of staff of various levels of teaching and academic research experience as well as working and educational qualifications. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the case study participants using the survey questions and responses as a starting point. The respondents' research output, if any, was also examined to gain a better understanding of their experiences. Three of the case studies were chosen to be presented in this paper to exemplify the diversity of experiences and needs.

## Questionnaire findings

Table 1 below summarizes the basic information about the survey respondents.

Table 1. Survey respondents

<b>Age</b>	25-29 (2)	30-34 (4)	35-39 (4)	>39 (11)
<b>Gender</b>	Male (10)	Female (11)		
<b>Education level</b>	Bachelor's (2)	Master's (14)	Doctorate (5)	
<b>Industry experience</b>	Yes (20)	No (1)		
<b>Teaching experience</b>	1-2 (2)	3-4 (7)	5 or above (12)	
<b>Research experience</b>	<1 (7)	1-2 (5)	3-4 (3)	5 or above (6)
<b>Publications</b>	None (10)	1 (2)	2-4 (7)	5 or above (2)

More than half of the respondents were 39 years of age or older, with both genders represented nearly equally. All, with the exception of two participants, had a Master's Degree or above, and all, with the exception of one, had working experience other than teaching. 90% of the respondents had at least three years of tertiary-level teaching experience, with more than half having five years or above. Though the participants appeared to be familiar with tertiary-level education, their research experience at the time of the study was rather limited. One-third of the respondents had less than a year of academic research experience. At the same time, about half of the respondents did not have any academic publications at all and only two of the respondents had five or more publications. About half of those with academic publications had engaged in collaborative research/consultancy programmes with external bodies, and about 40% had participated in conference presentation(s) and consultancy projects, or had published books and articles in academic/professional journals. Research topics typically focused on professional areas, such as fashion industry, greenery and education.

Most of the respondents had an extensive experience in professional practice before joining the academia. As Figure 1 below indicates, the main reason for this major career change is the perception that teaching is a meaningful profession that can help future generations and the world as a whole. More than 60% of the respondents were also interested in teaching as a practice.

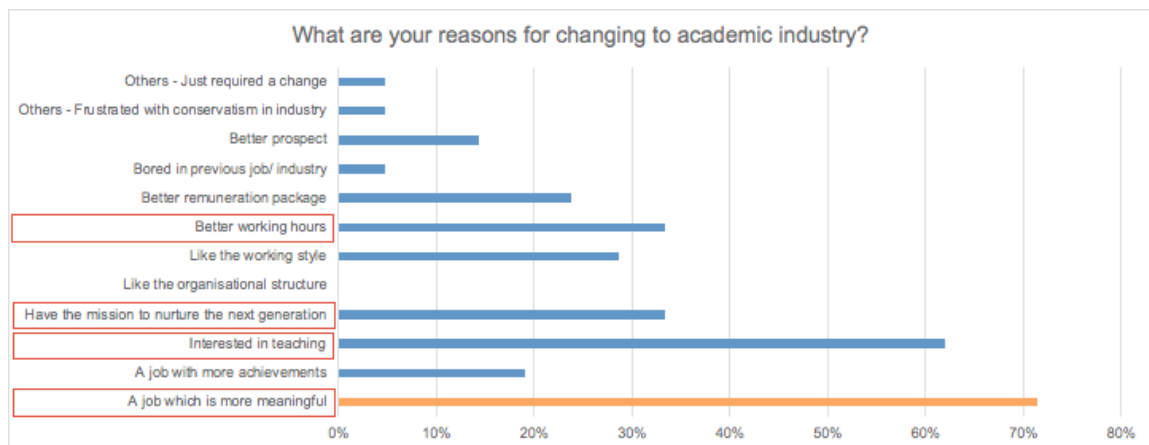


Figure 1. Motivation to join education

Figure 2 presents the main reasons the staff indicated for engaging in academic research. According to the survey responses, more than half of the participants were motivated by independent learning and professional development. They had a personal interest in the topics they were investigating and believed that engaging in research would help them maintain and increase their competitiveness as a scholar and as an educator. Overall, these responses suggest that research is seen more as a means for self-accomplishment rather than as a response to management pressure.

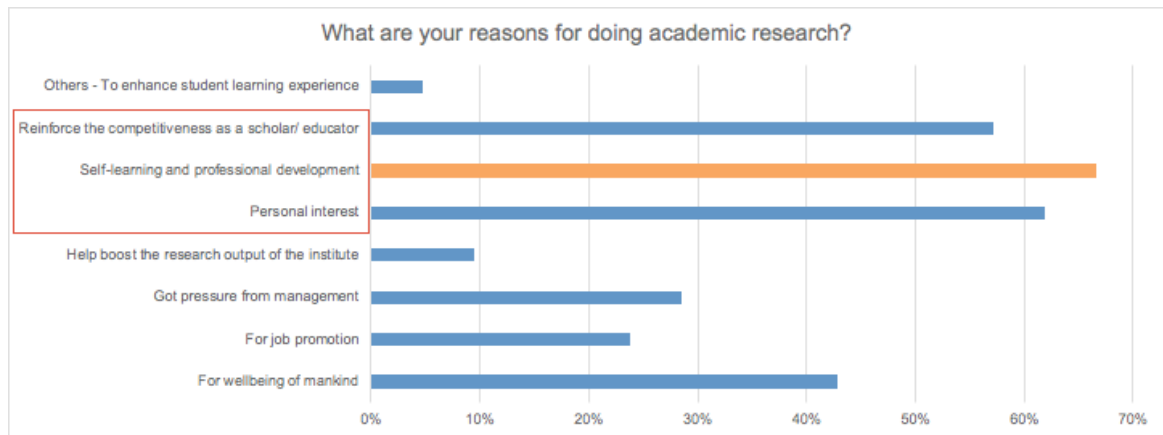


Figure 2. Motivation to do research

Even though the staff seem to be intrinsically motivated to engage in research activities, they perceive a number of challenges inhibiting their success. These are detailed in Figure 3 below.

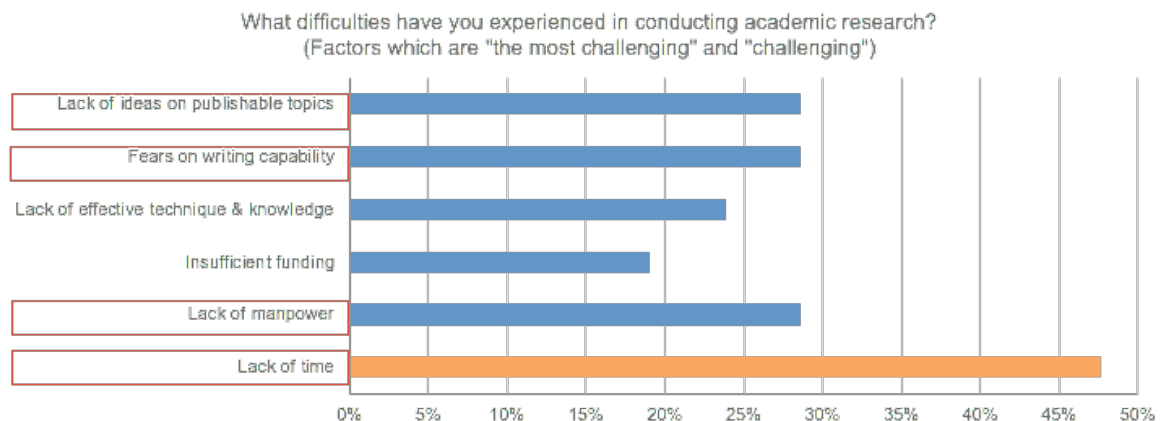


Figure 3. Research-related challenges

As the figure shows, the biggest challenge faced by the Institute's staff members is lack of time. According to the staff handbook, the official workload of teaching staff is 45 hours a week, with 8 hours out of these suggested for research-related activities. Data from our study shows that staff have to spend 44% of their working hours on average on teaching and 44% on other administrative duties, with only 12% of the working hours left for academic research. A related challenge is the lack of support manpower which is perceived to be a major hindrance.

Two other challenges highlighted by the respondents have to do with confidence in their own ability to identify researchable and publishable topics and with the ability to write well. Given that English is used as a second and sometimes a foreign language in Hong Kong and that most staff have had limited exposure to advanced academic writing, this is not surprising. An ability to conceive a good researchable topic is a challenge faced by many researchers, leave alone those who have had limited, if any, academic research experience.

The problems described above can be addressed by implementing some of the suggestions offered by the respondents (see Figure 4). More than 75% of the staff

surveyed indicated that they would appreciate a chance to hire research assistants, which may be an effective way for addressing the issue of time constraint. Slightly more than half of the respondents suggested official training in academic research. This training should help staff members to develop a better understanding of what is involved in doing research and how to identify researchable topics. This, in turn, should help with enhancing staff confidence in communicating their research. About half of the respondents mentioned incentives like salary increase and career advancement.

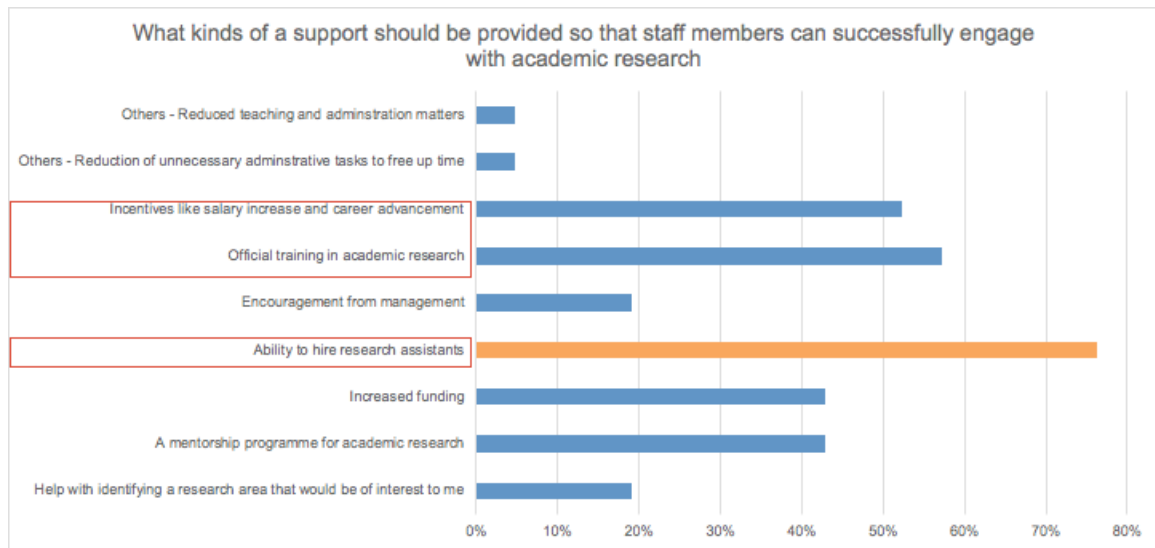


Figure 4. Support needed

As the survey data suggests so far, respondents are highly interested in teaching and generally do not oppose the idea of academic research, but fundamentally they find research challenging primarily due to time constraints and limited resources. Three detailed case studies are used to further understand the personal and institutional contexts of the participants and develop recommendations that can be applied at the institutional policy and department levels.

### Case studies

Table 2 below presents some basic information about the three case study participants. These participants were selected to represent a range of experiences and backgrounds. The major difference between the case study participants is their educational background (PhD, Master's and Bachelor's). All three have an extensive experience in professional practice and, on average, 3-4 years of teaching experience. However, while the PhD participant has some research experience, the other two have none.

Table 2. Case study participants

	<b>Participant A</b>	<b>Participant B</b>	<b>Participant C</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Male	Male
<b>Age</b>	38	>50	33
<b>Specialisation</b>	Horticulture and Landscape Management	Landscape and Architecture	New Media and Technology
<b>Educational background</b>	PhD	BSc	MSc
<b>Professional experience</b>	6 years in Horticulture and Urban Greenery	> 15 years as Landscape Architectural Consultant	> 10 years in Digital and New Media
<b>Teaching experience</b>	3-4 years	3-4 years	3-4 years
<b>Research experience</b>	> 5 years	0 year	0 year
<b>Publications</b>	2	0	0

### *Participant A*

Participant A, a 38-year-old female, joined the Institute after a considerable amount of deliberation about the role of publications in an academic's life. She had a somewhat uninterrupted research career, starting with her Master's work, followed by a PhD study, which was then followed by postgraduate work. This research work, however, resulted in very few publications which, she felt, precluded her from joining the academia. Stressed about her lack of publications and not interested in pursuing research any further, she decided to join the professional practice and worked in horticulture and urban greenery for six years. This brought its own challenges, including long working hours spent outdoors. As a junior in the field, she also had a limited choice in what projects she could engage in and felt the job lacked a creative element. These challenges triggered her renewed interest in education, and, after working part-time at another local higher education institution, she joined the Institute.

She is now a keen researcher leading two externally funded projects as a Principal Investigator. Her primary motivation to engage in research at the moment is to increase her competitiveness as a scholar and as an educator. She is encouraged to engage in research by the management though, at the moment, this research is not a compulsory part of her workload. She has published her work as a book chapter and as a paper in conference proceedings.

Participant A talked extensively about two major challenges that she is facing: lack of time and challenges related to managing research assistants. Similar to many of the

other participants, she has to juggle teaching and administrative duties, leaving little time for research. She mentioned that she could complete her research work only when a deadline was set because, otherwise, it was extremely difficult for her to justify spending the little time she had on research. As for managing research support staff, she referred to insufficient funding and suggested that more funding is needed to attract better qualified staff. Otherwise, time spent on training and micro managing the staff does not justify hiring support.

To deal with these challenges, Participant A argued it was important to have a clear division of labor within the department allowing teaching staff not to be overburdened with administrative duties. She also suggested that collaboration with colleagues and joint publications should be encouraged as this would help with workload issues and increase staff interest in research. In addition, she mentioned the more obvious solutions such as increased funding and a better incentive system such as salary and career advancement opportunities.

### ***Participant B***

Participant B is an older male teacher specialising in Landscape Architecture. He joined the Institute with more than 15 years of professional experience as a landscape architectural consultant. He believes his extensive professional background contributes to his teaching the most as it helps equip students with practical skills. Though he understands the value of research and the increased importance of postgraduate work for those joining the academia, he has no plans for furthering his studies beyond the Bachelor's degree.

Having said that, Participant B is interested in research which is, at least partly, due to the pressure from the top management. He sees the value of doing research for professional development and for securing his competitive edge but, at the time of the study, he faced the same time constraints similar to those experienced by the other participants. His typical working day is divided in this manner: 80% of the time is spent on teaching, while the remaining 20% on class preparation and administrative work.

If research were to become mandatory, Participant B suggests it would be necessary to employ more staff, including research assistants, and decrease administrative workload. He also mentioned the importance of official support such as training in academic research and publication. One particularly important insight shared by the participant was the need for the Institute to differentiate itself from the other tertiary institutes in the city and establish its own brand image that the general public will be aware of. This would need to include discussions within the Institute on what kind of research would contribute to establishing this clear image.

### ***Participant C***

A 33-year-old male, Participant C is a Master's degree holder specialising in Multimedia and Entertainment Technology. Like the other case study participants, he joined the Institute hoping to have better working hours while meaningfully contributing to the development of the younger generations. As a specialist in new



media technologies with more than 10 years of professional experience, he felt he was working 24 hours a day every day and was looking to have a better work-life balance.

Participant C does not have any research training and experience, and, unlike the other two participants, is essentially not interested in research. He described his understanding of academic research as something that happens within a small circle of scholars competing for research funding and trying to create as much output as possible. Though he is trying to do some research now, he finds it especially challenging to understand the research paradigms prevailing in new media studies and to conduct literature reviews. He finds this extremely time consuming and somewhat disappointing as success cannot be guaranteed. Nevertheless, he understands that research can reinforce his competitiveness as a teaching professional working in a tertiary institute. He sees it as an essential part of the job requirement and feels he will be risking his job if he does not produce any research output.

His core difficulties in doing research are a lack of time and limited knowledge of research techniques. Based on 45 hours a week as a teaching staff, he has to contribute 15 hours to teaching and 29 hours to administrative support, while only 1 hour is left for academic research. He feels that official support such as short intensive academic research workshops would be useful but not sufficient for enhancing the knowledge of research techniques. He also feels it would be beneficial to have a research mentor but is unsure about the staff's ability to find time for such mentorship.

Additional support mechanisms that Participant C discussed were help with identifying a research niche that would be of interest to him, ability to hire research assistants, and incentives like salary increase and career advancement. These might help Participant C to engage in productive research and overcome his negative attitude towards academic research.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

As the sections presented above show, teaching staff working at the vocational institute presented in this paper occupy a unique position: they join the teaching profession with substantial professional experience and minimal, if any, university experience (including both teaching and research). As such, they clearly need to develop university-associated styles of teaching and, importantly, engage in academic research. They have an access to multiple communities of practice and an ability to contribute to discussions on multiple topics. Very often, they join the teaching profession with the noble aim of contributing to the development of future generations and have a clear enthusiasm to teach and even research. At the same time, however, given the limited experience and limited support, they experience a considerable amount of frustration and stress.

To use Gale and his colleagues' words (2011, p. 161), engaging in research-related activities in this context would be "a lived practice of constant becoming, based upon risk-taking and disidentification, offering disruption, challenges to the habitual, and invitations into the unknown."

Given this context, then, and using the conference questions,

How should teaching staff adopt and adapt to change outside their control? How can they not only survive but succeed through change? How should administrators and policy makers nurture, encourage and maintain positive change?

The study presented in this paper has resulted in a number of recommendations. First and foremost, we believe that to encourage a positive change, policy makers, administrators, and teaching staff should engage in constructive discussions aimed to develop a vision of what constitutes good research. Given the unique context of vocational institutes interested in research, Boyer's (1990) notion of "scholarship of teaching and learning" may be useful. In short, action research focused on students' and teachers' practices and their classroom as well as professional experiences may be one way forward. These discussions also need to consider what would make research by vocational institute staff members different from research conducted in research universities.

This vision then needs to be communicated clearly and supported through appropriate mechanisms. Examples of these mechanisms that came through our data include:

- developing new partnerships (e.g. with research universities and individual research consultants);
- supporting collaborative research;
- offering professional development workshops (e.g., on different research methods and writing skills, on managing research staff);
- providing a clear career path that promotes engagement with research;
- financially supporting staff interested in furthering their education;
- clarifying division of labor among teaching and administrative staff;
- balancing teaching, research and administrative responsibilities.

Without a clear vision and support, teaching staff at vocational institutes will remain skeptical about the move towards more research and negative about this change. Support mechanisms, on the other hand, will help ensure that this change is acted on as an opportunity that may lead to positive experiences and development of new exciting possibilities.

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