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Challenges in collecting documentary evidence: an exploration of Academic Entrepreneurship in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers face unique opportunities and challenges due to the disruption of Covid-19. Although the pandemic represents a unique opportunity to study the crisis because of social distancing, many researchers working on research projects unrelated to the Covid-19 forced to transition from face-to-face data collection to some other form. This article aims to reflect on our experience conducting a qualitative study based on challenges in collecting documentary evidence and ways to overcome them in association with understanding academic entrepreneurship (AE) in Bangladesh. We have adopted the neo-empiricist theoretical perspective to collect this documentary evidence. Neo-empiricism allows us to look at these documents objectively without considering creators' inter-subjectivity. Despite this, it is important to consider flexibility and goal orientation while collecting the documents. We found that by applying objectivity, we can reduce several challenges. We used Lee's (2021) systematic process to collect documentary evidence where there are no national repositories and identified and analysed several documents accordingly.

1 Introduction

Qualitative researchers face unique opportunities and challenges due to the disruption of Covid-19. Additionally, many researchers working on research projects unrelated to the Covid-19 are being forced to transition from face-to-face data collection to some other form of data collection such as phone or internet-based (Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020) or documentary evidence (Lee, 2021). This paper discusses the importance of flexibility and goal orientation while collecting data in a crisis and how this helps the researcher collect documentary evidence related to Bangladesh's academic entrepreneurship (henceforth AE). According to Rothaermel et al. (2007), AE refers to an entrepreneurial university's activities, assets, and processes to implement the university's third mission. Due to Covid-19, government imposed lockdown and therefore, access to government offices was limited. Although we identified the university academics, university managers, and university support managers as the sample for this study, they encountered uncertainties, had limited time to adapt to this situation, and were hard to reach. Therefore, we needed to find an alternative strategy to find this information and understand the regulative and institutional setting. Here, we changed the data collection methods and discussed how this would impact this study. Consequently, we explored the government documents to discover how the policies and regulations shape the AE in Bangladesh.

Previous studies demonstrated the advantages of using documents as qualitative data (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). Although some of the studies outlined the strategies to select documents (Lee, 2021; Morgan, 2022) and, more specifically, from the national repositories (Gross, 2018; Ulrich, 2020), how to find these documents when there are no existing repositories still needs exploration. Ulrich (2020) argues that official government documents or policies are readily accessible. There are many large document repositories in developed countries (Gross, 2018); however, there are no such repositories in developing countries such as Bangladesh. We did not find any repositories on academics, AE, or government policies related to AE. Therefore, this study only focuses on accessing the policies and regulations directed toward AE development. When these documents are not stored in a repository, it is challenging for the researchers to accumulate them, as Bowen (2009) mentioned low retrievability of the documents. This leads us to reflect on our experience of carrying out the collection of qualitative secondary documents and how we overcome the challenges associated with it. This paper will assist the researchers in overcoming challenges in accessing the secondary qualitative documents (Lee, 2021).

2 Context of the Study

This research was carried out in Bangladeshi universities, both public and private. The focus of this study is to understand why the academics engage in AE (both formal and informal) and what (macro -, meso -, and micro-level) factors influence their engagement. There are few studies in developing countries (e.g., Hossinger, Chen and Werner, 2020). Developing countries' institutions differ from developed countries and affect academics' AE intentions (Urban and Chantson, 2019).

3 Research methodology

The researcher is taking the neo-empiricist stance to understand the academics' inter-subjectivity. Neo-empiricism refers to a qualitative interpretative approach and relies upon empirical evidence to ensure the objective truth, but at the same time rejects the idea of discovering laws through 'hypothetico-deductive methods' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 74). Here the main focus is to collect the unbiased and objective qualitative empirical data and simultaneously reject 'falsificationism' in favour of induction (Johnson *et al.*, 2006, p. 138). Accordingly, the researcher believes reality exists independent of human cognition but also

assumes that reality is socially constructed and meaning is given by society (Johnson and Clark, 2006; Johnson *et al.*, 2006). However, multiple realities may exist simultaneously based on the government policies and requirements, university policies and programs and the culture of Bangladesh.

3.1 Impact of Covid on Data Collection

Due to the increase of Covid-19 patients, government-imposed nationwide lockdown measures limit the social interactions of people and put individuals in isolation (Islam *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, working from home and maintaining social distance became the new normal in Bangladesh (Kumar and Pinky, 2021). Employees' mental health deterioration was also connected to their struggle to differentiate the work and family spheres (Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn, 2020). The closure of schools and child-care services has increased parental demands, making this situation worse (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). Due to these drastic alterations in work culture, we could not contact and recruit the government officials of the relevant ministries. Hence, we need to develop a strategy to access institutional and regulative information through the collection of documentary evidence available online (Lee, 2021).

Lee (2021) recently demonstrated how to collect the documentary evidence systematically. These are, 1) What does each document represent? 2) How to perceive and justify? 3) How to select the documents? And 4) Ultimate purpose. We will illustrate how we have adopted these strategies to overcome the above stated challenges to find the key documents related to AE in Bangladesh in the following sections.

3.2 Overcoming the challenge of collecting documentary evidence

When documents are collected and organised systematically, they provide details of the organisation's operations and policies (Lee, 2021). Moreover, due to the digitalisation of contemporary and historical documents, it becomes increasingly more accessible for researchers to collect such materials for their studies. However, it is not straightforward in all cases. For instance, although there are many documents, few specific documents may relate to the intended search topic. We followed the following steps

1. What does each document represent?

In this stage, Lee (2021) suggested that the researcher define how each collected document is related to the research questions. Our research question is to explore how the academics in Bangladesh engage in AE? We adopt 'realist ontology where cases exist in an external world, but an interpretive epistemology because people may encounter different instances of the same broad phenomenon and different understandings of why such phenomenon has occurred' (Lee, 2021, p. 36). Multiple actors are shaping the AE in Bangladesh; hence, various realities exist simultaneously based on how the academics, university managers and university support centre managers perceive the government policies and requirements and universities policies and programs. Therefore, first, we need to narrow down the list of potential document sources by conducting a preliminary search (Gross, 2018; Lee, 2021). This initial search aims to identify the most appropriate sources of documents to use as a sample. Although we ran several searches through google and web of science, surprisingly, the search results did not give anything relevant to AE in Bangladesh.

Here, we searched the academic articles, blogs, social media posts, newspaper articles, professional journal articles, and conference proceedings. We intended to find the available government policies and how these are affecting the academics' engagement in AE. As there are no such policies that specifically mention AE in Bangladesh and consequently, we looked into different documents relating to varying phenomena, for instance, National Science and

Technology Policy 2011 (Ministry of Science and Technology Bangladesh, 2011), to understand the explanations and the reasons of different concepts that are likely to be advanced, considered and developed (Lee, 2021) about AE. Although this policy was directed towards technology and innovation, not AE per se, it has some components, for instance, science and technology commercialisation and patent. Furthermore, understanding other science and technology policy is essential for two reasons. First, it sets the boundary of how this policy ensures achieving science excellence, and it is widely accepted that scientific excellence and commercialisation go hand in hand (Bourellos, Magnusson and McKelvey, 2012), and second, it illustrates the governments' view of developing the science and technology which will affect the AE in Bangladesh.

2. How to perceive and justify?

In this stage, it is essential to justify that the collected documents are related to other documents (Lee, 2021). As we have been interested in the processes and policies of the government, the documents thus we have collected are justified based on the contribution and insights these documents provide to understand the government support towards the AE in Bangladesh. For instance, the National Science and Technology Policy 2011 (Ministry of Science and Technology Bangladesh, 2011) and the 8th Five Year Plan (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2020) directly related to each other as these documents highlighted the importance of collaboration with the industry, academia, and government. One of the reasons for this industry-academia collaboration is to generate research funds that would increase the academic's opportunity to transfer that knowledge to the industry. Hence, these policies are considered documentary evidence for this study.

3. How to select documents

In this stage, we have applied a logical process to select the documents (Lee, 2021). From the extant literature, we know that in knowledge commercialisation, the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Science and Technology, and Ministry of Industry and Commerce of the government play a significant role (Abreu and Grinevich, 2013; Bezanilla *et al.*, 2020; Daka and Siad, 2021). Therefore, we objectively looked into these ministries to find the online policies and documents. Although many documents are available online on these ministries' websites, we apply this objectivity by looking at the policies related to research, higher education, science, technology and innovation, research funding, research commercialisation, R&D, and intellectual property.

Moreover, we have also used temporal bracketing (Lee, 2021) to indicate the government's current policy towards the AE because AE as a concept was coined recently (Dalmarco, Hulsink and Blois, 2018). We looked at the documents that have been published and/or created within the last 15 years. This search allows us to understand the reform and progress in Bangladesh's higher education and research area. Although there may be multiple documents from the same ministry in the same year and on the same event, we have included all these. For instance, University Grants Commission (UGC) published Higher Education Achievement in Bangladesh 2009-2018 and Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh 2018-2030 in 2018 (Bangladesh University Grants Commission, 2018a, 2018b), and we have added both because these documents discussed the current and future implementation plan of the higher education in terms of research and commercialisation of research. We also added the Recruitment and promotion policy of public and private universities (Bangladesh University Grants Commission, 2016, 2019) to explore how the AE has been recognised in the universities' appraisal system. In addition to these, we have looked at the Ministry of Planning because this ministry oversees the national planning, policies, strategy, and effective resource utilisation, and consequently, a 5-year plan is developed by this Ministry (Bangladesh Planning

Commission, 2020). Therefore, we objectively determined what we searched for that helped us overcome the plethora of texts (Bowen, 2009) because we have narrowed our search down to four ministries of the Bangladesh Government, namely the ministry of science and technology, ministry of education, ministry of planning and ministry of industries. Although there is a risk of missing important material associated with AE produced by other departments or ministries, in Bangladesh, these ministries deal with developing and implementing the plans related to higher education and science and technology.

4. Ultimate purpose

In this stage, we collected those texts systematically to ensure the potential for identifying patterns and meanings (Lee, 2021). Our ultimate purpose was to understand how the different factors shape academic engagement in entrepreneurial activities. Consequently, we tried to find the documents from the webpage of ministries mentioned above that are to some extent relevant to AE, for instance, related to technology, research or higher education. Initially, we found 22 documents. We then searched for specific terms to find out the relevance of these documents to our study, specifically, technology transfer, knowledge transfer, innovation, research commercialisation, spin-off, consultancy, industry-academia collaboration, funding for research and development, intellectual property, patent, technology transfer office, incubators etc. After this search, we have included data from several policy documents, such as the National Science and Technology Policy 2011 (Ministry of Science and Technology Bangladesh, 2011), National Education Policy 2010, and Private University Act 2010 (Ministry of Education Bangladesh, 2010a, 2010b), 8th Five Year Plan (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2020), National Innovation and Intellectual Property Policy 2018, and Patent and Design Act 1911 (Ministry of Industries Bangladesh, 1911, 2018), Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh (Bangladesh University Grants Commission, 2018b).

4 Conclusions

This paper focuses on the challenges associated with collecting documentary evidence and how to overcome these challenges by following the systematic procedure depicted by Lee (2021). It is often argued that the interviewees identify the appropriate documents. As in this unprecedented time of Covid-19, it was challenging to access any government offices to find the right respondents. Hence, we need to use the online government policy documents as our data source. Additionally, as this research used a developing country as the context, it is frequently acknowledged that data collection is challenging when research is carried out in a developing country due to a lack of access to data and research support infrastructure (Lages, Pfajfar and Shoham, 2015). Therefore, we have used government policy documents as an alternative to interviewing the government officials relating to regulative and institutional settings, though it took more than a year to complete the data collection. Another important aspect of using documents is that it allowed us to work socially distant manner, which was one of the essential instructions from the government we needed to follow. Hence, by collecting documentary evidence, we have managed to expedite our research endeavour while keeping ourselves safe.

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