

## **Research in Academic and Non-academic Institutions**

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‘Academic research is for research’s sake.’ Academics conduct research out of intellectual curiosity and with the aim of generating knowledge. When knowledge is regarded as a type of capital that can be traded as a commodity to enhance economic development, research is conducted for other reasons. The pursuit of truth is not the ultimate goal of all research. This paper examines the differences between research within and outside academia. Some features of research are comparatively better in universities, and this attracts scholars to this environment. Individual interviews were conducted with eight senior faculty members at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). They were asked about the advantages of doing research at a university, rather than a non-academic institution. The faculty members listed the comparatively favourable elements found at universities, but also mentioned the challenges of doing research in this sector. Despite different goals, academic and non-academic research complement each other; they can come together in research collaborations.

### **Advantages of a university environment for conducting research**

#### *Academic autonomy*

Academic autonomy (here, this refers to the freedom of individual academics rather than institutional freedom) is regarded as fundamental to good academic work. ‘In the university, we have freedom to do curiosity-driven research.’ ‘We are able to do some interesting and creative projects that are not tied to any groups that have some vast interests, such as monetary interest.’ Individual academics stated that research is for the discovery of truth without interventions from stakeholders. The topics of university research are based on individual choices, rather than institutional choices. In contrast, research in non-academic institutions (e.g., public or private organisations, government, media, etc.) is highly driven by external forces, such as market demands, policy, etc. For example, research in commercial industries is characterised by a top-down process. Projects are usually assigned by upper management and the goal is profit making. Research freedom is constrained by marketing demands.

A ‘product’ is the goal of research conducted outside academia, whereas in academia no concrete research outcome is necessarily expected. The focus on profit making or policy decisions, for example, results in a compact time schedule for research conducted outside academia. As academics may not have the need to create a ‘product’, they have more freedom in designing

their research agendas. Projects can take three to four years, for example, which is longer than most non-academic research projects.

### Academic community

‘Universities operate within an international framework and are not constrained by the borders of the nation states’ (Brew & Lucas, 2009). The flow of knowledge is not territorially restricted, especially in the era of globalisation. Academics receive feedback on their research from all over the world through peer reviews and other mechanisms. They gain recognition within their discipline across the world. The international connections between scholars and universities are the platform for the exchange of knowledge and ideas.

‘Universities are also good because they are places where different levels of people (undergraduate and graduate students, junior and senior professors, etc.) get together and discuss [research].’ Academics come from all over the world, with different backgrounds and diverse perspectives on research problems. Sometimes, ‘students can provide very interesting angles on problems’. In addition, universities are hubs of knowledge, which favour multi-disciplinary collaborative research projects and multi-disciplinary fields. For example, more integrative research can be carried out in the field of sports and physical education, which is an interdisciplinary programme. Knowledge of biological and behavioural sciences can be brought together within a university in a single research project.

### Education aspects

A significant difference between researchers at universities and those in non-academic institutions is that the former engage in both research and education. ‘The advantage of being in academia for research work is that you have students who you can influence.’ Academics have faith in research education, which involves training post-graduate students so that they can make future contributions to their fields. This encourages the continuation and development of research in certain fields. In addition to being ‘research active’ scholars, academics also engage in undergraduate teaching for knowledge transmission.

## **Constraints of a university environment on conducting research**

### Resources

Human resources (e.g., administrative staff, assistants, etc.) and facilities (e.g., library, technology, etc.) are available at universities. However, the scope of research undertaken by academics in certain disciplines such as science or engineering is constrained by the high cost of resources. ‘Expensive facilities, equipment or huge proprietary databases may not be available at a university.’ Thus large-scale research projects in these fields are better suited to non-academic

institutions. For example, studies of the reliability of electronic devices and drug research are usually conducted by non-academic institutions.

### Competitive funding and institutional incentive systems

Certainly, academics enjoy academic autonomy in their research agendas. Yet at the same time, their freedom is constrained by funding and the incentive system imposed by their universities. In particular, research practices that promote an academic's reputation are strongly related to 'academic identity'. These 'inputs' (e.g., funding) and 'outputs' (e.g., publication) inevitably cause subtle changes in what is researched. Academics face a conflict between 'important research' and 'well-funded research'. Research in the humanities and social sciences, which are less 'lucrative' fields that may not have clear research outcomes, face greater challenges.

Furthermore, academics may endeavour to have their research published in international journals. Due to globalisation, research at the local level faces great challenges and is not highly valued on the international stage. Academics try to strike a balance between meeting international demands/standards and their own research interests. Individuals may choose to do very localised research, which may be highly important to a specific field, but this may not be rewarded by the university system. Scholars who believe in conducting 'important research' may choose to leave academia and continue their research elsewhere. A study of Cantonese opera by Leung Pui-kam 梁沛錦 is an example of good research conducted outside academia.

### **Relationships between academic and non-academic institutions**

Research collaboration occurs within institutions (across disciplines) and across different sectors (academia and industry, for example). In today's knowledge society, collaboration emerges to meet professional, political, economic and social demands. The growing importance of interdisciplinary fields and various external forces have given rise to intra-institutional and even inter-sector collaborations that allow knowledge to be pooled and transferred.

Inter-sector collaborations can exist with or without explicit agreements. There is a complementary relationship between academic and non-academic institutions, which can be attributed to the different nature of research in these two sectors. Universities conduct basic research, whereas technological and product research is undertaken outside academia. University research continues to pursue truth, whereas non-academic institutions can use these research discoveries for product production, policy making, etc. A clear division of labour can be found. For example, universities may encourage research into primary carnitine deficiency and the pharmaceutical industry can later make use of these research findings to develop new drugs.

Sectors also come together and work on common goals. The collaboration between the Department of Management at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Labour Department on research into emotional intelligence is an example. Research outcomes are then disseminated outside the research institution and improve human management. This type of research has a specific purpose and a practical value.

**Reference:**

Brew, A. & Lucas, L. (2009). *Academic research and researchers*. Berkshire: Open University Press.