

In defence of academic research

By **AAMIR RAFIQUE HASHMI**
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IN A recent opinion piece (“Prof, no one is reading you”, April 11), writers Asit K. Biswas and Julian Kirchherr argue that academic research is not shaping public policy and that “practitioners very rarely read articles published in peer-reviewed journals”.

After reading their article, one is left wondering: What is the use of academic papers if hardly anybody reads them? Here is an academic’s response to this question.

Many academic papers are not written for the public or policy-makers. Instead, they are meant for communication among experts in a specialised field. A technical paper in a medical journal will only make sense to trained medical professionals.

Most academic papers, despite contributing to the ongoing debates among experts, will not be of much practical use or be of much use to policymakers.

Over time, and perhaps after thousands of academic papers, when our understanding of an issue improves, it is shared with the public and policymakers on many available forums.

The creation of knowledge is a

sporadic and chaotic process and a significant part of this process may not have direct policy relevance.

Although a lot of academic research may not primarily be done to aid policy, it has enormous direct and indirect effects on shaping public policy nonetheless. First, let us consider the direct impact of academic research on policy.

Multidisciplinary academic research in climate change over the last few decades is the main reason behind the current global movement to do something about it.

In my own field of economics, academic research has had enormous direct effect on policy. For a recent example, one may look at the speech given by Dr Janet Yellen, chairman of the Board of Governors of the US Federal Reserve, on March 25.

From the text of the speech, it may not be obvious how much academic research is behind the ideas presented therein. However, a look at the footnotes to the speech immediately makes it clear that almost every substantial statement in the speech had some academic research behind it.

Academic research also has an impact on public policy indirectly. This is especially true in the case

of primary scientific research. Findings of primary scientific research are used by applied scientists in their research. The findings of applied research, in turn, are used by those doing policy-related work. Finally, the policy researchers directly communicate with the practitioners and general public. This indirect channel of dissemination of scientific re-

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search is perhaps more widespread than the direct channel described above.

In many ways, academic research is similar to commercial research. Take the example of research and development (R&D) in the auto industry.

Automakers spend billions of dollars every year on R&D. But if we compare one car model with the next, the differences are generally very small. The reason is that whatever best technology available at the time of production

is already incorporated into the existing car models. New technology is hard to invent and generally comes in small improvements.

A number of crazy and sometimes useless ideas are tried in the research labs before something meaningful emerges from the apparent mess. Academic research is just like that. Academics try a

number of crazy ideas and share them with one another in the form of academic papers. In this endless process, bad ideas get screened out (nobody cites a bad paper) and good ideas gain favour. Once an idea has been sufficiently debated and its usefulness acknowledged by a number of experts, it becomes ready for consumption by the policy circles and public.

If we view academic research from a funding perspective, its direction is already shaped by the

society at large. Academic research is highly competitive and academics have to compete with one another for research funds. For more costly projects, the competition for funds can be national or even international.

If a research project is deemed not interesting or useful enough, it will not get funding. Market forces determine which projects get undertaken and which are given up.

Also, the flagship research funding agencies, such as the National Science Foundation in the US and the National Research Foundation in Singapore, have their own research agendas and only finance the projects that are considered useful for society.

While academic research is an endless process and goes on non-stop, good academic ideas, sometimes even in their infancy, find their way into the common press.

Quality international newspapers and magazines – such as *The Economist*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and *National Geographic* magazine – regularly report cutting-edge scientific findings in a language accessible to policymakers and the public. Most policymakers and practitioners may not read academic papers, but they regularly get the lat-

est scientific insights from these newspapers and magazines.

Academic research has another very useful purpose: It informs our teaching and helps us train future leaders for almost all segments of society.

There is ample evidence that those with a university degree command a substantial premium in the job market over those without it. And the curriculum that leads to university degrees is almost entirely based on the academic research done over decades and, in some cases, over centuries.

To sum up, academic papers are primarily a means to facilitate debate among experts. Most are not written for practitioners or policymakers.

When these debates lead to significant discoveries, such discoveries are shared with the practitioners, policymakers and the public using multiple available channels.

Academic papers are extremely useful in facilitating the creation of new knowledge and ideas, and their usefulness cannot be gauged solely by the count of the number of people who read them.

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