



FACTORS AFFECTING RESEARCH COMPETENCIES AMONG ACADEMICS OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HSS) IN THE CONTEXT OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study is to examine the factors affecting research competencies among academics of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) in the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) using the Motivational System Theory (MST). The interviews were conducted with twenty academics in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Open university of Sri Lanka. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed. The results showed that the personal and institutional factors affecting research competencies of academics in the discipline of HSS. Moreover, at the institutional level, the resources, training, supportive mechanism and research culture are not properly established to achieve the research competencies of the academics. On the other hand, the personal factors such as family commitments and biological reasons are negatively affecting research competencies of academics. Therefore, the responsible parties should facilitate the academics to achieve the research competencies by providing the required resources, facilities, opportunities, guidance, training and creating a staff and student friendly working environment within the institution.

Keywords: Academics; Humanities and Social Sciences; Motivational System Theory; Open and Distance Learning; Research competencies

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INTRODUCTION

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the only state university which provides the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mechanism for both local and international students in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the OUSL promotes ODL to empower the heterogeneous communities throughout the country with a strong regional and study

centre network. As reported by the University Grant Commission of Open University of Sri Lanka (2020), currently the total student population of OUSL is about 40,000.

According to Webmaster university ranking in 2020, the OUSL was ranked among the top 10 universities in Sri Lanka. The OUSL is one of three universities included in U-Multirank for Sri Lanka. U-Multirank is calculated by using main five indicators such as research, teaching and learning, knowledge transfer, international orientation and regional engagement. When it comes to OUSL, the highest scores/ grades are given to international orientation while research, knowledge transfer and teaching and learning indicators received lower grades in U-Multirank. As far as the research indicator is concerned, citations and publications of individual academics are also considered to measure the quality of research (Multirank Newsletter, 2020). The institutional review report of the Open University of Sri Lanka (2020) also recommended and emphasized the importance of promoting research on ODL, establishing rich research culture, and providing financial support to the academics for publishing in indexed journals and attending international conferences.

When it comes to Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), Sri Lanka celebrates the 100 years of Humanities and Social Sciences education in 2021. Gamage (2005) noted that, in terms of research publications in the discipline of HSS, mostly the academics are not able to achieve the expected publication rate annually. The OUSL has scored 12 out of 30 while the other universities scored the higher marks under ranking of HSS faculty by university. The ranking was done based on three indicators such as the qualification score, academic rank score and publication score. When it comes to publication score, University of Colombo, University of Peradeniya and University of Sri Jayawardenepura have scored higher grades while the performance of OUSL was quite low.

The literature shows that there is a gap especially in research publications done by the academics in the discipline of HSS at the OUSL. In this context, the problem is what are the factors affecting low research competencies of academics in the discipline of HSS in the context of ODL. The main purpose of the study is to examine the factors affecting research competencies of the academics in the discipline of HSS in the context of ODL. The Motivational System Theory (MST) is used to achieve the purpose of the study. The main components of the MST such as personal and institutional factors are used to examine the research competencies of academics.

Literature Review

ODL Mechanism at the OUSL

The main purpose of establishing the OUSL was to provide education opportunities for every citizen in the country. "The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) was established in 1980 under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978. OUSL is the only national university under UGC which delivers academic programmes through ODL. OUSL provides access to students throughout the country with a network of 09 Regional Centres and 19 Study Centres. It comprises of 06 faculties, Education, Engineering Technology, Health Sciences, Humanities & Social Sciences, Natural Sciences and newly established Management Studies, with a total of 29 academic departments. There are 394 academics at the OUSL. At present, OUSL has more than 40000 students. The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences has the highest student number, 14839" (The institutional review report of the Open University of Sri Lanka, University Grant Commission, 2020: 4-5).

The literature shows that the OUSL offers ODL through the strong regional and study network to provide education opportunities for heterogenous student population throughout the country. The same report also shows that there are about 394 academics attached to six faculties at the OUSL. The highest student population is also reported from the Faculty of HSS. Compared to the other 15 national universities, the OUSL is the only national university under UGC which delivers academic programmes through ODL. Jayathilleke and Kulasekara (2020) note that, the OUSL has implemented several technological adoptions to the ODL through Generations of Distance

Education (GDE). In the early stage, there was a lack of direct learner interaction and reaching was done using single technology. The Education Technology (ET) division was established (currently known as CETMe) to facilitate the course development and audio-visual productions. Gradually, Interactive Multimedia (IMM) and online courses were introduced to facilitate the ODL at the OUSL. The OUSL has introduced a flexible electronic database and a computerized record system to facilitate both students and teachers for the registration, exam related matters and library services.

The literature shows that several researches have been conducted on ODL especially in student perspective. For instance, Vidanapathirana and Gamini (2009) and Gill (2009) have done research on personal and institutional factors affecting to the performance of students in the context of ODL. Likewise, several researches have been conducted to find out various issues connected to the ODL system and learners. But there is a gap in doing research considering the teachers' perception or various factors, opportunities and challenges faced by teachers in the context of ODL. In this context, this research was done in order to fill the gap specializing research competencies of academics in the discipline of HSS.

Research Competencies in Humanities and Social Sciences

Several researchers and scholars defined research competencies in different ways. "The concept of research competency was defined as a combination of motivational, gnoseological, operational, and personal components, developed at such a level that allows one to successfully apply the acquired research skills and knowledge in practical tasks" (Prosekov et al., 2020: 592). This shows that the required research skills and knowledge are gained and practically applied through personal, motivational and operational capacities of individuals.

The 2030 agenda on Sustainable Development Goals 2 shows that the higher education has become an important theme even for a knowledge economy. This shows that higher education sector plays a vital role in the socio-economic development in a country. According to the World Social Science Report (2013) published by UNESCO, Humanities and Social science education is vital to the higher education since the discipline of HSS contributes to a harmonious and well-arranged society at the local and international levels. In other words, the discipline of HSS also supports to maintain healthier human relationships and emotional intelligence in order to have a well-arranged society. Subject areas like Psychology, Economics, Education, Sociology, Law, Political Science, Geography, Media and Communication etc. come under the purview of Social Sciences and Arts, History, Archaeology, Languages, Literature, Philosophy, Ethics and Religion and Performing Arts are under Humanities. When it comes to discipline of HSS, it is important to identify the objectives of conducting HSS research. "The objectives of HSS research are to facilitate the understanding of human behaviour, to acquire knowledge about social phenomena, events, issue, problems etc., to identify functional relationship existing in the social phenomena, to find out the natural laws that regulates or directs social phenomena, to standardize the society concept, e.g. culture, struggle, generation gap, social distance etc., to formulate solution to social problems, to maintain social organization, remove social tension, misconception, etc., to develop social revival plan etc." (Akhtar, 2011: 2).

In terms of history of HSS, the university education in HSS in Sri Lanka started in 1921 with the establishment of the Ceylon University College and a large number of graduates have been produced over the years. But still there are some issues connected to the discipline of HSS such as the quality of the graduates, the quality assurance of teaching and examination programmes, possibilities of pooling teaching and course content, recruitment of teaching staff, promotional schemes, research, postgraduate programmes and external examinations etc. These issues are also mainly connected with the quality of the HSS education in the national university system (Meeting minutes of UGC standing committee on Humanities and Social Sciences, March 2021).

This shows that there are some challenges in recruiting teaching staff, promotional schemes and research in the discipline of HSS. When it comes to the Open university of Sri Lanka, in the early stage, the OUSL only had two boards of study: Humanities and Social Sciences and Management, Science and Technology (Kotelawele & Samarasundara, 1987). This shows that the HSS studies had been introduced to the university at the initial stage.

In terms of research and development, the role of Faculty Research Committee (FRC) is vital in promoting research culture and activities within the Faculty of HSS. The FRC conducts several research related activities such as workshops, seminars, presentations, guest lectures and symposiums annually to develop a rich research culture within the faculty. Apart from conducting such activities, FRC facilitates academics for processing the research and development allowance, getting the research grants, ethical clearance etc. by consulting the main research committee in the university. Since the majority of academics do not have active participation in the research and publications, there was a need of finding out the issues connected to the research and publications. Therefore, an online questionnaire has been circulated among the academics in mid-2021 in order to identify the research competencies and skills of the academics. In other words, the purpose of conducting the survey using 10 close ended questions by the FRC is to identify and understand the issues and challenges faced by the academic staff members of the Faculty of HSS in doing research and publications. Only 16 respondents were completed the questionnaire out of 60 permanent academics attached to the Faculty of HSS. The findings of the survey show that the heavy administrative work load is mainly affected for the less research competencies of the academics (Meeting minutes of Faculty Research Committee, July 2021).

This shows that the academics face some issues connected to the research and publications. But the online questionnaire was designed with 10 close ended questions and only 16 participants completed the questionnaire. Therefore, the in-depth data related to the research competencies of academics or opportunities and challenges faced in research and publications were not found out by the survey. In this context, this research has been done in order to fill the gap specializing research competencies of academics and opportunities and challenges faced by the academics in the discipline of HSS.

Therefore, the Motivational System Theory (MST) is used to examine the factors affecting research competencies of academics in HSS in the context of ODL by considering the main components of MST like personal factors such as motivation, skills, biological factors and institutional factors such as responsive environment. “MST theory explains that the achievement and competence are the results of a motivated, skillful, and biologically capable person interacting with a responsive environment” (Ford, 1992: 70). A formula is given to explain the MST theory as follows.

$$\text{Achievement/ Goal} = \frac{(\text{Motivation} \times \text{Skill})}{\text{Biological}} \times \text{Responsive environment}$$

Therefore, the study expects to examine the factors affecting research competencies of academics in the discipline of HSS using the Motivational System Theory (MST). The following figure explains the proposed conceptual framework of the study based on the MST theory.

The figure 1 shows that the personal and institutional factors have an impact on research competencies of academics. In other words, several factors affecting in achieving the career goals of academics. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to examine the factors affecting research competencies of academics.

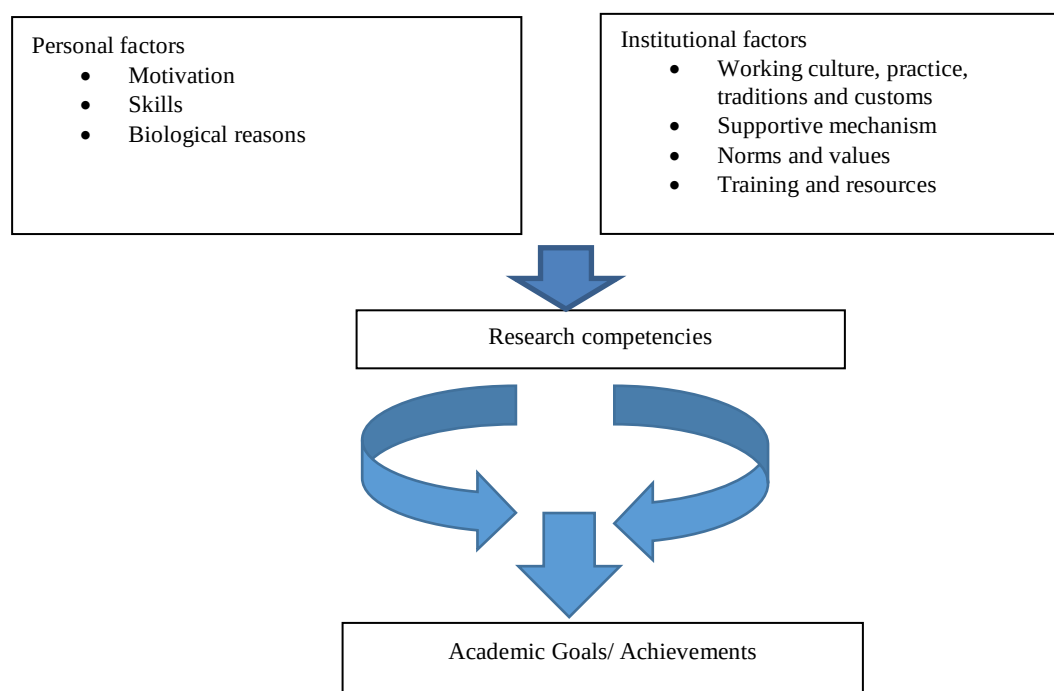


Figure 1: Factors affecting research competencies at the personal and institutional levels

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach to obtain data using an in-depth interview method. Gill et al (2008) note that the interviews provide a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon. In other words, the detailed insights of a particular subject or an area can be collected from individual participants using the interview method. This method is appropriate for exploring sensitive or personal topics which cannot be discussed in a group environment. Therefore, interview method was used to collect the detailed and personal data from individual academics on the given topic.

The samples were selected from the Faculty of HSS at the OUSL. The faculty consists of four departments integrating a wide range of HSS disciplines. In 1990, the HSS recognized as a separate faculty at the OUSL. Currently there are four departments under the Faculty of HSS: Social Studies, Language studies, Legal studies and English Language Teaching. The Faculty of HSS caters to the students in the programmes ranging from foundation level to postgraduate level. The Department of Social Studies offers a range of programmes through the ODL mechanism covering disciplines like Sociology, Anthropology, Politics and International Relations, Economics, Communication studies, Youth studies, Tourism etc. The Department of Language Studies offers programmes specialising English, Teaching, literature, Korean, Tamil and Sinhala languages while the Department of English Language Teaching (DELT) mainly focuses on English language skills and Teaching. The Department of Legal Studies mainly offers the study programmes covering a wide area of Law. The mission of the faculty shows that the students are empowered with the HSS education through the ODL mechanism, “The Faculty is dedicated to employing the Open Distance Learning mode to provide quality educational opportunities for adult learners for professional and personal advancement and excellence in scholarship and researching in contemporary disciplines in Humanities and Social Science” (The prospectus of Faculty of HSS, 2019: 3). There are 60 permanent academic members attached to the Faculty of HSS, but 8 academics are on study leave according to the minutes of HSS Faculty Board in the month of May 2021.

As far as the mission of the faculty is concerned, it shows that, the mode of the course delivery of HSS education at the OUSL is different compared to the other 15 state universities in the country. In this context, the role of the academics at the Faculty of HSS at the OUSL is also different from the academics at the other conventional universities. As per guidelines given in the norms document of teachers at the OUSL, academics should develop the course materials, online courses and supplementary materials such as reading materials, audio visual materials etc. apart from the research, teaching, academic administrative work and national development. These conditions and requirements are applicable to the annual increment allowance and the promotions of the academics as well. Therefore, it is understood that the role, responsibilities and workload of the academics in the ODL are differ from the academics attached to the conventical universities. The location and the samples of the study were selected based on the above-mentioned criteria, statistics, facts and justifications.

Creswell (1998) suggested to have at least 20 samples for in-depth interviews. Therefore, the personal interviews were conducted with 20 permanent academics representing all the departments of the Faculty of HSS (purposive sampling). The open-ended questions were asked to get critical, insightful and informative data on the given issue/ topic. The data were collected in the early May 2021. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Some limitations were caused in the study due to some geographical and subjective reasons. The academics were only selected from the Faculty of HSS at the OUSL since the study was carried out specializing HSS education in the context of ODL. But the population and sample size can be increased in order to find more practical findings/ results in a future study in a systematic and methodical manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The personal and institutional factors affecting research competencies were analysed in order to achieve the purpose and to answer the main problem of the study. In other words, the personal factors such as motivation, skills and biological reasons and institutional factors such as working culture, practices, traditions and customs, supportive mechanism, norms and values, training and resources as mentioned in the MST theory, are used to examine the factors affecting research competencies. Before presenting the original findings of the study, it is important to identify the demographic details of the respondents. The demographic details of twenty academics are presented in the following table.

Table 1 shows that the female academic population is higher than male academics. Vithanage and Arachchige (2020) emphasized that the female academics are more successful in balancing the official work and family life compared to male academics. When it comes to Humanities and Social Sciences also, female representations is quite high compared to the other disciplines. According to the minutes of the Faculty Board also there are 16 male academics while 44 female academics in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. As far as the position is concerned, senior lecturers, confirmed lecturers, lecturers(probationary) and professors representing all the departments were selected including the two academics attached to the regional centres outside Colombo.

Table 1: Demographic details of selected academics

Gender		Position				Department				Qualifications		
F	M	Senior	confirmed	probationary	Professor	Social	English	Law	DELT	PHD	Masters	1 st degree
14	6	12	1	6	1	12	3	3	2	5	9	6

The factors affecting research competencies were analysed based on the main components of MST theory like personal factors such as motivation, skills and biological reasons and institutional factors such as working

culture, practices, traditions and customs, supportive mechanism, norms and values, training and resources to achieve the purpose and to answer the main problem of the study. Therefore, the major findings / results are summarized in the Table 2.

Table 2: personal and institutional factors affecting research competencies of academics

Department/ Discipline	Institutional factors	Personal factors
Departments - Social Studies, Legal Studies, English Language Teaching and Language	Negatively affecting -No time for research as more time spend for admin work in the department, lack of reading material/ journals, lack of time for extra reading/library hours, difficulty in getting funding approved to attend conferences abroad, Establishments division delays, no training in writing for high standard journals, No support from seniors for research work (No Supportive mechanism and research culture, lack of training and resources)	Negatively affecting - No motivation due to family commitments (Less motivation) and health issues (Biological)
Disciplines- Economics, Sociology, Anthropology, Communication, Youth studies, Law, Language, English Teaching	Lack of opportunities to work with the colleagues and travelling issues (unique to regional lecturers) Positively affecting -Space for collaborative research, available conferences, workshops, journals, funds, Research supervision etc. (Supportive mechanism)	Positively affecting - Interest to carry out research work (Motivation)

The results show the personal and institutional factors affecting research competencies of academics. Moreover, at the institutional level, unavailability of resources, funds, supportive mechanism and research culture limit the achievements of academics. On the other hand, some supportive mechanisms are available at the faculty and the university such as space for collaborative research, available conferences and workshops, journals, funds and research supervision. When it comes to personal factors, less motivation due to family commitments and biological reasons such as health issues are negatively affecting research competencies of academics. The most important thing is that still the academics are motivating to do research if the supportive mechanisms, resources and training available at the university. The findings show that the academics attached to the regional centres have specific personal and institutional factors in limiting the research and publications. An academic stated that “Mostly the academics attached to the regional centres outside Colombo have to look after all the administrative workload related to the courses and programmes offered by the department. Sometimes it is challenging to work with the administrative staff in the centres and visiting academics. But unlike the Faculty of HSS, in the other faculties such as Engineering Technology and Natural Science, more permeant and administrative staff are available in centres. Due to travelling issues, we miss some events/ activities in the main campus as well as the research opportunities and collaborations”. This shows that there are some specific personal and institutional factors affecting for academics attached to the regional centres in the ODL mechanism. As far as the MST theory is concerned, it is shown that the academics have positive motivation to do research, but the working culture, practice and supportive mechanism within the university limit in achieving the professional goals.

As far as the factors affecting research and publications are concerned, it was especially highlighted that academics do not have time or motivation to engage in research due to the heavy administrative workload in the department. There is no adequate time for reading or apply for the research fund/ grant or attend the conferences etc. due to time limitation. The interview results show that compared to the conventional universities, the academics in the ODL system are heavily engaging in administrative work that limit the research training and engagement required for academics. An academic highlighted that “We do not have time to engage in research due to various institutional factors such as heavy administrative workload, delays occurred from the establishment division, getting funding approval to attend conferences and to carry out research, a lack of guidance from seniors and unavailability of high standard journals and less training in doing research, writing to journals etc. Due to personal reasons such as family commitments and health issues, some academics do not engage in research and only give the priority for the assigned administrative and teaching responsibilities. Compared to the number of publications made by academics attached to the Faculty of Engineering Technology and Faculty of Natural Sciences, HSS academics are far behind in research publications. The four departments under the Faculty of HSS separately offer individual study programmes while the other faculties such as Engineering and Natural Sciences offer their common programmes. Therefore, the academics at the HSS have more workload than others.” All twenty academics have highlighted the same challenges faced in doing research. But there are some opportunities for research supervision, collaborative research, journals, conferences, workshops, funds available at the institutional, local and international levels for the academics.

Another academic has stated that “Though we are heavily engaging in administrative work, still we have to apply for the Research and Development allowance (R and D) and annual increments mainly based on the research and publications done by us. Our increment forms are mostly rejected or returned due to the less performance in research and publications. Though research grants and funds are available at the institutional and local levels, the process of completing the application, attaching the bills and evidence for expenditure, taking allowances etc. are so complex. If there is a supportive mechanism within the university, as academics, we can engage in more research and contribute to the subject area. It is understood that the role of academics is different at the ODL system, compared to the other conventional universities. But if the supportive divisions can provide us more support, the academics can mainly engage in teaching, research, national development and academic administrative work, but not the administrative work”. The results show that institutional support is mainly required for academics to actively involve in research and publications.

The findings also show that due to above mentioned personal and institutional factors, some academics have only published 5- 8 research publications though many of them have been working for the institution for more than 12 years. The results also show that only twenty-two academics obtained the PhD qualification and the others still have master’s qualification and first-degree qualification. The Faculty of HSS has three professors while Faculty of Engineering currently has seven professors and Faculty of Natural Sciences has thirteen professors. According to the marking scheme of the professorship implemented by the University Grant Commission a few years back, at least 50 marks should be scored for research and creative work out of 105. This shows that more weightage is given for research and publications in promotions. The findings show that there are only three professors in the Faculty of HSS out of sixty academics. It was also found that the many academics in HSS are not qualified to apply for the promotions due to lack of engagement in research, less publications and PhD training. But all the academics emphasized that still they have self-motivation to do research if the time and workload can be systematically managed with the institutional support and assistance. The best OUSL research awards in 2019 were also obtained by the academics attached to the Faculty of Engineering Technology and Faculty of Natural Sciences (OUSL Open Quarterly Newsletters in 2019 and 2020). This shows that compared to the other disciplines, the performance of the HSS academics in research and publications is not in a satisfactory level.

The OUSL teachers face a number of difficulties such as a lack of necessary resources, and support services, but still the teachers are passionate about their duties and responsibilities to help the learners (Mill, 2009). According to the marking scheme of the professorship implemented by the University Grant Commission, the academics are mainly evaluated by three categories such as teaching and academic development, dissemination of knowledge & contribution to university & national development, and research and creative work. The results show that, when it comes to the duties and responsibilities, the academics attached to the Faculty of HSS are overburdened with the administrative work which limit their time and capacity in engage in research. But the results also show that in engaging administrative work, the OUSL academics have improved some skills such as leadership skills, decision making skills, team work spirit, English language skills, problem resolving and another technical knowledge, get to know different personalities etc. In terms of teaching, though the face-to-face interaction between the teacher and student is limited in the ODL system, the online courses and course material development are unique to OUSL academics compared to the other academics. Zuhairi et al (2019) also note that the academics at the OUSL face various challenges with their workload in online teaching and administrative work.

CONCLUSION

The Motivational System Theory (MST) is used to examine the factors affecting research competencies of academics in the discipline of HSS in the context of ODL. The results portray that the personal and institutional factors affecting research competencies of academics. Moreover, at the institutional level, unavailability of resources, funds, supportive mechanism and research culture limit the achievements of the research competencies of the academics. On the other hand, some supportive mechanisms are available at the faculty and the university such as space for collaborative research, available conferences, workshops, journals, funds and research supervision. When it comes to personal factors, less motivation due to family commitments and biological reasons such as health issues are negatively affecting research competencies of academics. The most important thing is that still the academics have self-motivation to do research if time and workload can be systematically managed with the institutional support and assistance. There are some specific personal and institutional issues for the academics attached to the regional centres outside Colombo in the ODL mechanism. Therefore, there should be a proper mechanism to facilitate academics for engage in collaborative research and establish a supportive working environment at the regional level. The main reason is that the academics are overburdened with the administrative work which limit their time and capacity in engage in research.

As far as the MST theory is concerned, it is shown that the academics have self-motivation as well as the skills to do research though the working culture, practices and discouraging environment within the institution limit in achieving the professional goals. On the other hand, compared to the disciplines like Engineering, Sciences etc. the academics in HSS have less performance in research and publications. Therefore, the responsible authorities should facilitate the academics in the discipline of HSS to achieve the goals in research and publications by providing the required resources, facilities, opportunities, guidance, training and creating a staff and student friendly working environment within the institution. Within the supportive and systematic working environment, the academics will be able to achieve the goals in the professional career.

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