

MAO: In press reports it appears the government is very confident that these reforms will overhaul higher education. And, as an outsider, it looks all rather positive. In your opinion what are the greatest challenges facing higher education in Pakistan, (i.e. where is the system the most broken) and will the Model University Ordinance address these?

PH: These reforms are largely aimed at changing the governance structure of Pakistan's public universities. I am sure the new Ordinance is excellent and could work very well in some country other than Pakistan.. But, in my opinion, governance amounts to mere tinkering, at best a useful distraction from the main issue. The core of our problem is the frightening level of intellectual impoverishment in our universities. In this country of 150 million people, there are perhaps fewer than 20 computer scientists of sufficient caliber who could possibly get tenure-track positions at some B-grade US or British university. In physics, even if one roped in every competent physicist in the country, we could not staff one single good department of physics. As for mathematics – to say that there are even 5 real mathematicians in Pakistan would be exaggerating their numbers. The social sciences are only a little better. No one that I know challenges these facts. And yet new universities in the public sector are being churned out by the score. It is the height of irresponsibility to create new universities without any assurance of quality. Some ordinary colleges have had their signboards taken down for repainting, and been put back up changed into “universities” the next day. By such slight of hand the current tally of public universities is now officially 44, up from the 23 officially listed in 1996 by the University Grants Commission. The Ordinance is vocal on small issues, but silent on this planned destruction of Pakistan's higher education.

MAO: Seven billion rupees over the next three years have been promised for these reforms, and this would appear to be a good deal of money. Dr. Shams Kassim Lakha, the key person behind the new Ordinance, said the money will be used to raise faculty salaries to help recruit the best teachers. Won't this have a positive effect on scholarship, research and teaching?

PH: More money is always welcome, given that Pakistan's universities have been financially as well as intellectually impoverished. In principle, one could use this money to send the most capable and deserving junior faculty overseas for training, equip teaching laboratories, and create good libraries. I hope that this will happen, but the track record is poor – large sums of money have come into the university system and gone without leaving much of a trace behind. As for claiming that money is the bottleneck in recruiting good teachers – that is simply false. If one were to even triple the salaries of university teachers, based on any merit-based formula you like, the increase over five years in the number of high-quality faculty would still be utterly inadequate for even the existing number of universities. The number of Pakistanis in academia – inside the country or outside – is small, and has scarcely grown at all in the last two decades. Foreign academics are afraid to come because of the security situation.

MAO: The new Ordinance states that faculty appointments will be on merit, and that all new appointments should be for a limited period during which the new recruit must

exhibit the ability and willingness to carry out research and teaching. Is this a step forward?

PH: What else can faculty appointments be based upon but merit? But it does little good to legislate such matters. I agree with the need to do away with the present tenure system. Automatic life-long tenure has been given to every university teacher and administrative employee. This has superbly efficient in breeding free-loaders. Pakistan's universities therefore lack an academic community although there are plenty of teachers teaching subjects they couldn't care less about, and who are at complete liberty to convey their confusion and ignorance to students. Most teachers never consult a textbook, choosing to dictate from notes they saved from the time when they were students in the same department. Promotions are time-bound and automatic; incompetence is the most minor of sins and no university teacher has ever been punished for not knowing his subject. Everyone receives a full salary until retirement.

MAO: Dr Atta-ur-Rehman, the present minister of education, said over the weekend that the Ordinance will improve higher education by establishing university autonomy and strengthening the powers of the vice chancellor. Is there teeth in the Ordinance to back this up?

PH: Autonomy is essential for any real university to function (I exclude the fake ones which are being legislated into existence). As for the vice-chancellor's powers – that's a tough one to answer. A progressive vice-chancellor, of which there are very few in this country, finds his ability to effect reform sharply limited. He cannot fire or even censure incompetent faculty, cannot make budgetary changes of substance, and is often harassed by teachers and students. On the other hand, all vice-chancellors are political appointees and most behave as that. The limitation of their powers therefore affords welcome protection to those teachers who otherwise would be victims of high-handedness and political intrigue. It is therefore not clear whether, in the present situation, enhancement of the vice-chancellor's powers is good or bad. Certainly, the protests at Karachi University have been largely inspired by fear and dislike of the vice-chancellor.

MAO: The problems seem daunting. What would you suggest as the way forward?

PH: There needs to be a massive training program for junior faculty – basic competency in their respective subjects is usually lacking but is absolutely vital for teaching. As many as possible should be sent overseas, others trained in the country. About 15-20% of the higher education budget needs to be spent on this program. Imparting basic subject competency, not research, should be the priority. Huge sums were wasted on research equipment that was never used. Improvement of the student body is sorely needed. This requires a compulsory standardized university entrance examinations, as well as the removal of quotas for the provinces and army personnel. Other important changes – more than can be mentioned here – are also needed. But nothing will work unless the explosion in university numbers is reversed. The small pool of competent faculty needs to be concentrated, not diffused. To proliferate ignorance disguised as education is exceedingly irresponsible and harmful.