

Pakistani Universities – The Party’s Now Over

by
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On September 11, 2001, the world suddenly woke up to the fact that something was dreadfully wrong with Pakistan. Foreign donor agencies and governments, fearing that an uneducated and unskilled Pakistan would become an epicenter of terrorism, tripped over each other to offer aid for education. Spend more money, get better universities and less terrorism. Obvious wasn't it?

A tidal wave of cash soon hit Pakistan's public universities. During General Pervez Musharraf years, 1999-2008, the budget for university education rose by an astonishing factor of twelve, which must surely be a world record of sorts. Universities doubled, then tripled in numbers. The number of PhD students registered at various universities exploded. Huge financial incentives for faculty members were announced for publishing research papers and for supervising PhD students. Salaries skyrocketed. Tenured university professors saw their salaries doubled, tripled, and sometimes even quadrupled – today a full professor can make between 30-35 times more than a village schoolteacher.

Expensive scientific equipment was ordered, and breathtaking new schemes were announced almost every other day. But even before they could be implemented, success would be declared by the new czar of higher education, Dr. Atta-ur-Rahman, who had just been appointed to the position of chairman of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) by General Pervez Musharraf. Full-page paid advertisements appeared in newspapers, roadside banners carried pictures of Musharraf and Rahman, and a stream of propagandists was sent overseas at government expense to celebrate the Revolution.

But the chickens are now coming home to roost. A few have already arrived.

The Greed Factor

Money raining down from the skies created, among other things, a new dynamic as well. Greed is now destroying the moral fibre of Pakistan's academia. Professors across the country are clamoring to lift even minimal requirements that could assure quality education. This is happening in two critical ways. First, to benefit from many-fold increases in salaries for tenure-track positions, professors are speedily removing all barriers for their promotions. Second, they want to be able to take on more PhD students, whether these students have the requisite academic capacity or not. Having more students translates into proportionately more money in each professor's pocket.

Nowhere is this more evident than at Quaid-e-Azam University, Pakistan's flagship public university. Barely two miles from the presidency and the prime minister's secretariat, it was once an island of excellence in a shallow sea of mediocrity. Most other universities started lower, and their decay has gone further and faster than at QAU. Some are recognizable as universities in name only.

QAU's departments of physics and economics were especially well known 30-40 years ago, which is when I joined the university. The faculty was small and not many Ph.D.

degrees were awarded in those days. Money was scarce, but standards were fairly good and approximated those at a reasonable US university. But as time passed, less care was taken in appointing new faculty members. Politics began to dominate over merit and quality slipped. That slow slippage is now turning into rapid collapse.

Earlier this year, at a formal meeting, my university's professors voted to make life still easier for themselves. The Academic Council, the key decision-making body of the university, decided that henceforth no applicant for a university teaching position, whether at the associate professor or professor level, could be required to give an open seminar or lecture as a part of the selection process. Open lectures were deemed by the Council as illegal, unjust, and a ploy for victimizing teachers.

This is mind-boggling. Public presentations allow an applicant's subject competence and ability to communicate to be assessed by the academic community. [For the record, the author of this article insisted that requiring open lectures from candidates is standard practice in every decent university in the world. This prompted angry demands for his dismissal as chairman of his department!]

Eliminating International Testing



A second major decision also dealt a stunning blow to the future of QAU, and to Pakistan's other universities as well. The Council voted 25-12 that QAU's PhD candidates did not have to conform to international standards. It decided to overturn its earlier acceptance of the HEC's requirement that the international GRE subject tests must be passed by a candidate prior to the award of a PhD. degree. Some professors gleefully noted that the HEC had been mortally weakened by the post-Musharraf government, and argued that good advantage needed to be taken of this happy fact.

PhD candidates, together with their supervisors, also demand unearned degrees. They hold that passing examinations and taking courses is unnecessary and an affront to their dignity. Protest demonstrations have been held across the country. The demand: cancel the current requirements of passing the international Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), as well as the requirement of taking and passing graduate level courses. They say

that producing research papers entitles them to receive the highest degree in their chosen discipline.

Why the urgency for eliminating international testing? And why does the QAU decision resonate so well in other Pakistani universities? This is easily understood. Each professor gets paid a few hundred thousand rupees (several thousand dollars) per PhD produced, with a current maximum of 10 students per supervisor at QAU. Lifting the GRE requirement removes a threat to the additional income of their supervisors. To keep up appearances, from now on a token internal test will be used instead. It is hard to imagine that any student will be allowed to fail.

Lest anyone should think that too much is required of students, let me add that “passing” means achieving 40 percentile or better in the GRE subject test. But even this ludicrously low pass mark drew howls of protest. PhD students saw their degrees endangered while their supervisors saw their incomes threatened: every single registered Ph.D. student was a cash cow worth Rs 5000 per month. The money went into the teacher’s pocket. Banded together by common interests, teachers and students lobbied to get the pass mark reduced still further. Others demanded that if testing was to be done at all, let it be done locally. Proponents of international testing – such as the author – were dubbed as “foreign agents” and passionate arguments of national *ghairat* (honor) being at stake were thrown around.

But international tests of subject competence are simply indispensable. First, science is a global enterprise and rules for assessing competence in a particular discipline are universal. Local evaluations and testing mechanisms cannot compete in validity and quality. Second, in a society where ethical standards in the teachers’ community are no higher than among politicians or shop-keepers, the impartial and cheating-free nature of international testing is absolutely vital. The fact that over one hundred Pakistani parliamentarians have faked degrees – the revelation of which has stirred a political storm in the country – adds urgency to international testing.

A Sad Ending

Today’s horrible mess comes from a misguided policy that emphasized numbers over all else. A propaganda blitz by Dr. Rahman had convinced overseas institutions and prestigious publications, such as *Nature*, that Pakistan’s higher education had turned the corner. The World Bank was equally breathless in its praise. A thick WB report, issued by a team led by Benoît Millot, lavished praise upon the HEC for having effected “quality improvement of the higher education sub-sector”. Printed on glossy paper and embellished with beautiful graphics, it was deficient in only one respect – there was not a single reference to any scientifically performed survey that could support its conclusions. In effect *Nature* and the World Bank became accomplices to a grand heist of Pakistan’s public money. Sadly, there is no one to take them to task.

The house of straw has finally been blown away. With Pakistan teetering on the brink of financial collapse, construction of university buildings has been frozen leaving them half-completed. More than 70 vice-chancellors of the public sector universities and degree awarding institutions sent a collective SOS to the HEC last month over their vanished

development funds. Universities are going broke trying to pay the huge increase in faculty salaries. On the other hand, fantastically expensive research equipment litters the country, much of which is unused. Academic standards have plummeted, one reason being that most newly established universities lack faculty of credible competence. Seven years of furious spending has little to show for it.

The bottom line: *how* you spend matters much more than *how much* you spend. Let this be a lesson to those who think that it only takes money to make universities good.

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