

How Greed Ruins Academia

by
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Spend more money, get better universities. This piece of conventional wisdom appears uncontested. But it is not always true! Indeed, Pakistan's experiment provides a counter example where an enormous cash infusion has served to amplify problems rather than improve teaching and research quality. There is much that other developing countries can learn from this experience.

Thanks to Higher Education Commission's grand plans for a massive change, a tidal wave of money hit Pakistan's public universities during General Pervez Musharraf years, 1999-2008. The budget for university education rose by an astonishing factor of twelve during this period. Although difficult financial times finally stemmed the flood last year, the difference it made to the university system was profound – some good, and a lot that was bad.

On the positive side: internet connectivity in universities was substantially expanded, distance education was pursued through a new virtual university, a digital library came into operation, some foreign faculty were hired and students were sent abroad for PhD training (albeit largely to second rate institutions). The number of universities doubled, then tripled. The number of PhD students registered at various universities exploded. Huge financial incentives were announced for publishing papers and for supervising PhD students. Salaries skyrocketed.

The Greed Factor

But money raining down from the skies created a new dynamic as well. Naked 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 3-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 35 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.

Last month, 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 Ph.D. degree. Some professors gleefully noted that the HEC had been mortally weakened by the new government's removal of its chairman, Dr. Atta-ur-Rahman, and argued that good advantage needed to be taken of this happy fact.

A bit of background: eventually responding to my emphatic public criticism that substandard PhD degrees were being awarded by Pakistani universities, in 2006 the authorities declared that PhD candidates must "pass" the GRE subject test, administered by the Education Testing Service located in Princeton, USA.

Initially the HEC stone-walled on the meaning of "pass", but two years later this came to mean achieving 40 percentile or better in the subject test. Too low? This had drawn howls of protest from students and their supervisors. The GRE test, as readers know, is fairly elementary and pitched at the bachelor's level (i.e. 16-years of education). It has, however, proved to be too difficult for many Pakistani PhD students even at the *end* of their PhD studies. In spite of several tries, most cannot meet the 40 percentile pass mark. And now, with the new decision, they do not have to worry about it!

Why the urgency for eliminating international testing? And why does the QAU decision resonate well throughout other universities in Pakistan? This is easily understood. Each professor gets paid a few hundred thousand rupees (a few 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.

While the decision of the professors to do away with international testing has been greeted with relief by many enrolled Ph.D. students at QAU, among better students there is a sense of foreboding of an endless downward slide.

Many students recognize that international tests are difficult but they also know it is a real measure of what they have learned. All students, whether they do well or otherwise, say they learned a great deal of subject matter in preparing for this challenge and felt more educated. Although students in all other QAU departments have reportedly failed, some students in my department have done reasonably well. Over the last year, a total of 9 students in the physics department have cleared the 40 percentile requirement. Three students, who the department subsequently honored, secured over 75 percentile. One cannot deny, however, that most PhD students, perhaps because of their poor schooling, are simply not good enough as PhD material.

A Sad Ending

This horrible mess comes from a misguided policy that emphasized numbers over all else. A propaganda blitz by the former HEC chairman had convinced overseas institutions, such as the World Bank, and prestigious publications, such as *Nature*, that a revolution in Pakistan's higher education was in progress. They were led down the garden path but perhaps did not want to look too closely.

But the house of straw is blowing away. Now that the money is gone, construction of university buildings has been frozen leaving them half-completed. Fantastically expensive research equipment litters the country, much of which is unused. Academic standards are plummeting. Seven years of furious spending has only a 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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