

## **Please Bring the HEC Back to Earth**

by  
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Every day brings new evidence that the planning of higher education in Pakistan has run out of control. It is now more about fantasy than fact. There seems no other way to explain the fact that while the country is becoming besieged by almost daily suicide bombings and religious fanatics can kill a woman minister for being un-Islamically dressed, the Higher Education Commission plans to spend \$4.3 billion on building nine new engineering universities, staffed with European faculty and administrators.

It must have sounded like a wonderful idea. Pakistan would pay for France, Sweden, Italy, and some other European countries to help set up, manage, and provide professors for new universities in Pakistan. It would be expensive – Pakistan would have to pay the full development costs, recurrent expenses, and euro-level salaries (plus 40% markup) for all the foreign professors and vice-chancellors. But the large presence of European professors teaching in these Pakistan universities would ensure high standards of teaching, the degrees would be awarded by institutions in the respective European countries, and Pakistan would finally end the acute shortage of international quality engineers.

Work has already started. Of the 9 universities, the most advanced in terms of construction and planning is the French engineering university with a completion cost of Rs. 26 billion rupees. It has been named UESTP-France in Karachi, and has an ultimate faculty size of 450-600 with around 5000-7000 students. Its construction is underway and the official starting date is listed as October, 2007.

On the ground, the situation looks dismal. The French seem completely absent from the French university. As of the beginning of March 2007, not a single faculty member from France – including the all-important head of the university – has joined. This was confirmed to me by French official sources, and has not been refuted by the HEC. Even the skeleton crew is not on board although decent academic planning for a university requires years of preparation for the curricula, courses, laboratories, and infrastructure.

According to the HEC “Initially, over 50 per cent of the faculty will be from partner countries but as foreign-trained Pakistani faculty become available over the next five to eight years, the foreign faculty component will be reduced to about 25 per cent”. This means that UESTP-France in Karachi needs to find – just as a startup – scores of French professors and still more Pakistani engineering professors for its faculty.

Should we blame the French for not turning up? And are hundreds of Swedes, and other Europeans any more likely to turn up to live and teach in Pakistan for several years at a time? What is a European professor to make of the suicide bombings at the Islamabad international airport, the Islamabad Marriot Hotel, the Quetta High Court, and so many

more in the past year, and that the international community grows more convinced everyday that Pakistan has become a new haven for Al-Qaeda?

Even if the Europeans came, there would not be enough Pakistani faculty for all these universities. The sad fact is that currently there are no more than 2-3 dozen Ph.D engineering professors in all of Pakistan's engineering universities who can teach modern engineering subjects at an international professional level. So, even if every one of these universities was sucked dry of all its best, this would be barely sufficient for meeting the needs of the first phase of the first Pak-European university. What will happen then to the 37 billion rupee Pak-Swedish University, to be located in Sialkot, to start in 2008, which will need even more teachers?

The HEC says that in time there will be more Pakistani faculty as 500 Pakistani engineers have currently been sent for Ph.D degrees abroad. This simply cannot suffice for meeting the needs for 9 universities, which will need in total thousands of teachers.

To be honest, the HEC should recognize even the 500 engineers it sent abroad may not be enough for even one university. Not all will succeed in getting a Ph.D. Past experience also shows that some of the really good students who get PhDs will stay on in the West, and some who do return to Pakistan will be too mediocre for university-level teaching. It is irresponsible to plan a series of universities with so much wishful thinking.

Far wiser would be to aim for, at the very most, two properly planned new engineering universities under the collective authority of the European Union, and to seek external help for adding engineering departments to existing universities, as well as to massively upgrade existing ones. But these relatively modest goals are unacceptable to a HEC leadership that believes, like the Musharraf regime as a whole, in grand plans rather than practical, feasible, reforms.

Administrative incompetence and bungling has become the hallmark of HEC projects, whether large amounts of money are involved or not. Consider the ham-handed manner in which rules for students wishing to register for the Ph.D degree in Pakistani universities have been changed.

According to the new rules, published in national newspapers, it is now necessary for every student to "clear" the subject GRE exam, administered by the Princeton based Education Testing Service, before the student is granted admission into the Ph.D program of any Pakistani university. Considered dauntingly tough by our students (most of their teachers would fare poorly as well) these exams do measure aptitude for higher studies fairly well. The logic – faultless in itself – is that Pakistani students must measure up to international standards.

But left dangling are the key questions: What marks or percentile rating does "clear" mean and who will decide? Who will pay the \$160 examination fee, a major consideration for our public university students? How to acclimatize the student, who has operated hitherto in a familiar rote learning mode, into an alien problem-solving mode?

The HEC is silent on these fundamental questions, but without addressing them a collapse of Ph.D programs will occur nationwide. This is just one more example of the scores of arbitrary schemes conceived by the HEC that have placed Pakistan's higher education in serious danger.

Other projects launched by the HEC – such as incentivizing the publication of research papers – have caused plagiarism to explode across the national scene. Hastily conceived and badly managed, they have channeled resources away from crucial areas into grandiose schemes. The HEC must be brought to task. There needs to be an independent investigation of its plans and financing, a review of its programs, and a full audit of all the money that has been spent on and by HEC.

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