

Reckoning Time For The HEC

by
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The exit of Dr. Atta-ur-Rahman as chairman of the Higher Education Commission closes a unique and deeply troubled period for Pakistan's education system. Dr. Rahman led the first serious effort to rescue our failing university system. But HEC failed both to develop and to implement policies that could address the many problems that overwhelm our universities. In trying to reform high education, HEC actually made some problems worse. It is time to make a balance sheet and to think ahead. What do the pluses and minuses of Atta-ur-Rahman's term add up to? What are the lessons for the next head of HEC?

To begin with the positives, to his credit, Dr. Rahman put his finger on some key problems of Pakistan's higher education sector. Some of HEC's initiatives were fundamentally sound and deserve recognition.

Enrollment in universities in Pakistan is abysmal. It was a positive achievement to have increased access to higher education. The number of public universities nearly doubled between 2002 and 2008. Unfortunately, there was no way to provide an adequate number of properly qualified university teachers. The result, more students are spending time and money on a university education that is largely useless.

Also to Dr. Rahman's credit was the recognition that sending more students overseas for graduate study could help avoid some of the bottlenecks in Pakistan's university system. To make any difference, it had to be done on a large scale. It was bound to be costly but some good could come of it. Three thousand students have been sent abroad. But the selection mechanism was flawed. A simple numeracy and literacy test, comparable to a high-school level exam in a developed country was used to select students. It has permitted large numbers of academically unprepared students to go abroad for advanced graduate study. Most will struggle, many will fail.

Low salaries for university teachers needed raising, and Dr. Rahman did that. Today a public university professor on the higher paying (tenure-track) position can make as much as Rs 350,000 per month. But it is not right to pay university teachers such huge salaries in a country where primary school teachers make a miserable Rs 10,000/month, and college lecturers only Rs 25,000/month. There needs to be a sense of proportion and a recognition that the education system as

whole needs better pay for teachers, especially at the primary, secondary and college levels.

Along with these few mostly mixed gains are the many negatives on the HEC balance sheet. Numerous HEC projects violated common sense and, not surprisingly, turned into costly disasters. A prominent example is the \$4.3 billion dollar HEC plan to establish 9 new engineering universities staffed by hundreds of European professors. None have been built although large, but unknown, amounts were spent. Other vanity projects sucked up huge resources too. The whims of influential individuals led to the purchase of expensive scientific equipment for which, years down the line, use still cannot be found.

Under Dr. Atta's leadership HEC seemed driven by a desire to show rapid progress, no matter what. This has inflicted long term damage on our university system. For example, advised by Dr. Rahman, General Musharraf declared that the annual production of Ph.D. degree holders would be boosted from 150 per year to 1500 per year. To support this, HEC incentive schemes encouraged Ph.D. thesis supervisors, often of doubtful academic merit, to take on dozens of students each. Quality plummeted.

The proof is before us. One straightforward measure of a student's achievement level is performance in an international examination known as the "GRE" subject test. This test is used to evaluate students around the world who apply to post-graduate programs in the United States. To get admission in such a program at an average US university, a student needs to have GRE subject test scores higher than 70-75% of all those who take the test. Many Chinese, Indian and Iranian students who take the GRE score more than 90 percent of all the students taking the same tests.

In Pakistan, however, the HEC does not require that students take the GRE subject test to gain admission into a PhD program. Instead, students can take the test score four or five years into the PhD studies. This means our students have the advantage of four to five years of additional study before taking the test. Despite this, in July 2008, the HEC declared that to pass the GRE Pakistani Ph.D. students would be required only to score more than forty percent of all students taking the test.

This announcement is shocking. It means that to pass, and get a Pakistani PhD, students need only do better than the bottom 40% of those taking the test. It officially acknowledges the inferiority of Pakistani degrees. Worse, some

university teachers, who are paid by the HEC an extra Rs 5000/month for every Ph.D. student they take, are lobbying to get the pass mark reduced still further.

There are important lessons to learn from the HEC's failures. In the space available here, only a glimpse can be given. First, spending lots of money is not enough. The budget for higher education shot up from Rs 3.8 billion in 2002 to Rs 33.7 billion in 2007, but failed to remove basic weaknesses.

Second, more is not better. We face a problem of both quality and quantity. Broadly speaking, higher education reform must now aim primarily at improving teaching quality. Students need a sound basic knowledge of their subject if they are to benefit from higher education. This will only be achieved if the next generation of university students has good teachers at the college and school level. This needs, in turn, improved teacher recruitment and training. One option is to create large high-quality teacher-training academies in every province. Established with international help, these academies should bring in the best teachers as trainers from across the country and from our neighbouring countries.

Third, coordinate the reform effort across the education system. Higher education in Pakistan has a chance only if it is seen as the apex of a supporting pyramidal structure. The present neglect of public colleges must end. Even as many public universities were furiously wasting money, our colleges remained in desperate shape with dilapidated buildings, broken furniture, and miserable laboratory and library facilities. Schools are in even worse shape. All will have to be fixed if any are to work well.

Finally, mistakes will be made. There needs to be a strong system of oversight and accountability, based on transparency and independent checks and balances, to make sure mistakes are caught early on and can be corrected. We cannot afford more failures on the scale that occurred under Dr. Atta's tenure.