

- Daily Express
 - The Express Tribune
 - Urdu E-Paper
 - English E-Paper
 - Watch Express News Live
-
- Sunday, 26 Jan 2014
 - Subscribe



Should the HEC live or die?

Even today, the HEC misleads the public into believing that there has been some sort of educational revolution.

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

Published: April 7, 2011

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) stands on death row. Appeals for reprieve have been rejected by the commission responsible for implementation of the Eighteenth Amendment. That commission's chairman, Senator Mian Raza Rabbani, declared that "the HEC act will be revisited and reframed to shed its role as a centralised funding authority." His logic is that this constitutional amendment requires devolution of several powers to the four provinces. Since education is among them, universities cannot be federally administered. Instead, a brand new commission is to be created under the cabinet division. Other HEC functions would be turned over to various ministries and provincial administrations.

At first glance, disbanding the HEC appears to be a good idea. Its record is less than stellar. From 2002 to 2008, its budget rose by an astounding seven times — a world record. But a good chunk was squandered on various delusional mega-projects that failed spectacularly. Then, although it led to serious degradation of quality, the HEC encouraged the number of universities to double, and then triple. The number of PhD students registered at various universities was also made to explode. When confronted by students and teachers who were unwilling to meet international standards, the HEC backtracked on its quality guidelines.

The maladministration of universities by the HEC makes for a long list. Hyper-inflated salaries, recommended by the HEC, have made higher education more expensive. A full tenure-track professor nowadays can make up to Rs325,000 per month, about 30 to 35 times a schoolteacher's maximum salary. Many produce only junk research and have poor teaching ability. Even today, the HEC puts out spurious data that mislead the public into believing that there has been some sort of educational revolution.

One might also wish to support the government's decision from a second angle. After all, self-administration by the provinces is to be welcomed as a general principle. It could be argued, for example, that if a province is now to be in charge of its mineral wealth then it should also run its own universities. But caution should take precedence over legalism and a desire for sweeping changes. The steps to be taken, of which dispensing with the HEC is one part, will have huge consequences for Pakistan's universities. Therefore, instead of jumping to conclusions, one must take a sober look and discuss the pros and cons.

First, the HEC's record is not entirely bleak. It sent students to overseas universities, attracted foreign faculty to teach in local universities, created digital library access and took some positive initiatives to encourage research. Although programme implementation was flawed, these represented some progress in a country where good news is precious short. Moreover, a full balance sheet of the HEC's good and bad deeds is not essential for answering the question posed in the title. Rather, one must ask: What will be the consequences of the proposed devolution? Will it improve or degrade Pakistan's higher education system?

Although I have been strongly critical of the shenanigans of the former HEC leadership, in my opinion, the government is headed in the wrong direction. Instant dismemberment or serious disempowerment of the HEC is a recipe for producing chaos. Creating another bureaucracy or handing over the reins to existing provincial education bureaucracies, which are even more myopic and less competent than those at the federal centre, will negatively impact the quality of university education in Pakistan. This quality is already much lower compared to India, China or Iran.

The few checks and balances that currently exist, and which are actually enforced by the HEC, would disappear. Academic decisions would be made by those who have little understanding of how universities should function. This would push the system towards free fall. A wild policy zigzag is the last thing that Pakistan needs. Instead, a responsible and nuanced

approach is needed. This means devolving surely, but slowly and carefully. Provincial administrations should be helped to build technical capacity so that they can be properly entrusted with key decisions, such as granting charters to new universities, university admission policies, etc. And while the HEC ought to be slowly downsized, some of its essential functions – such as quality control, foreign scholarships, and donor programmes – must be kept intact under federal control.

Published in *The Express Tribune*, April 8th, 2011.

Follow @etribune

on Twitter, become a fan on Facebook

Related Stories



- 07 Apr 2011 Hec's devolution: 'Ongoing scholarships to be unaffected'



- 05 Apr 2011 Time to save the Higher Education Commission



- 06 Apr 2011 HEC devolution is unconstitutional: Javaid Laghari



- 07 Apr 2011 Zardari to personally look into HEC devolution



- 07 Apr 2011 Saving HEC: Revolution needed against devolution

Alexander Summer School

www.alexanderschool.com

Earn up to 2 credits (4 semesters) 4 sessions; 8 days/session
(9-3-45)

More in Opinion

Misunderstood: HEC's devolution — I

This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, redistributed or derived from.
Unless otherwise stated, all content is copyrighted © 2014 The Express Tribune News Network.
Technical feedback? webmaster@tribune.com.pk