



Pakistan's Universities: The New War Within

by
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Dark clouds are gathering over Pakistan's universities, portending a conflict that is likely to be long, bitter, and uncertain in outcome. On one side are those who say that individuals to be awarded PhD degrees must have, at the very minimum, undergraduate level knowledge in the relevant discipline. On the other side are PhD aspirants, together with their supervisors, who demand unearned degrees. They hold that passing examinations and taking courses is unnecessary and an affront to their dignity.

The first volleys have already been fired. Earlier this month about one hundred students, registered for the PhD degree at Quaid-e-Azam University, angrily mobbed the executive director of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) as he entered the campus. Their demand: cancel the current requirements of passing the international Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) as well as taking and passing graduate level courses. They say that producing research papers entitles them to receive the highest degree in their chosen discipline.

To his credit, the HEC officer stood his ground. He pleaded that removing essential graduation requirements would make their degrees meaningless, that they really did need to know subject basics before doing research, etc. But these obvious and sensible arguments cut no ice with those who believe that PhD degrees are a birthright. Rhythmic cries "*hum nahin mantay zulm kay zabtay*" (we will not tolerate tyranny!) reverberated across the campus. This leads one to wonder: for how long can the HEC withstand such pressures? What if the floodgates give way?

Some background: a tidal wave of cash hit Pakistan's universities between 2002-2008. The 10-12 times budgetary increase set a new world record while the accompanying hype touched the skies. Advised by the HEC's newly appointed chairman, Dr. Atta-ur-Rahman,

General Pervez Musharraf grandly declared that the annual production of PhD degree holders would be boosted from 150 per year to 1500 per year. Incentive schemes encouraged teachers – often of doubtful academic merit themselves – to take on PhD students by the score. Academic quality, already low, nose-dived.

In 2006, pressed by persistent critics to include at least some minimal quality checks, the authorities finally made the right decision. They declared that a PhD candidate must “pass” the international GRE undergraduate-level subject test administered by the Education Testing Service, Princeton. But the meaning of “pass” was a hot potato that was not touched upon for another two years. Finally, in 2008, passing was declared as achievement of 40 percentile or better in the subject test.

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 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.

There is nothing particularly difficult about these international tests. As some readers may know, they are pitched at the bachelor’s level (i.e. 16-years of education). Chinese, Indian and Iranian students easily score in the 80-90 percentile range. American universities use them as entrance requirements, with medium-quality universities requiring results in the 70-80 range and the very good ones in the 80-95 range.

But achieving even 40 percentile has proved to be too difficult for most Pakistani PhD students even at the *end* of their PhD studies. This is especially alarming since they have had the advantage of 3-4 years of additional study. The pathetic quality of undergraduate education in Pakistan is surely responsible for this unfortunate fact. The intensity of the opposition to testing becomes understandable.

Better equipped Pakistani students, however, welcome international testing. Faced with a meaningful challenge, some of our students have labored long and hard – and increased their scores spectacularly. About 15 students from my department have cleared the 40 percentile hurdle, and the best have scored around 80. This shows that Pakistani students too can compete – if pushed in the right direction.

For the first time in their lives our students are being confronted head-on with a hard fact: science is all about problem solving. They have to shape up if they want to play ball. For a change, cheating in examinations is impossible and cramming does not help. The heartening thing is that most 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. Surely this by itself is enormous success.

After years of criticizing trends in higher education and the shenanigans of the HEC's former leadership, I feel that the HEC is now doing the right thing. Now it needs to stand by its guns. Of course, there is much more to be done than to merely raise the bar from time to time. A different direction is badly needed.

Broadly speaking, higher education reform must prioritize improvement of teaching quality, particularly in colleges. Numbering about one thousand, they are in a desperate condition. Instead of pampering universities, the government must help colleges improve their infrastructure and teaching quality. The previous model of rewarding so-called "research" in universities must be drastically revised. This policy has resulted in a flood of papers, the bulk of which are worthy of the trashcan even if published in some "international" journal.

The fact is that students need sound basic knowledge of their subject if they are to benefit from higher education, as well as to do meaningful research. Genuine research must not be confused with data gathering; it requires strong skills and solid comprehension. For this, the next generation of university students must have good teachers at the college and school level. This, in turn, needs improved teacher recruitment and training.

Hence there is an urgent need to create large, high-quality, degree-awarding teacher-training academies in every province. Established with international help, these academies should bring in the best teachers as master trainers from across the country and from neighboring countries. Rather than waste precious resources on frivolities, this is the direction to go.

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