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December 7, 2020

**Degree inflation**

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Public-sector employers are legally obligated to treat all job applicants with the same degrees from accredited programs as equivalent, no matter the reputation of the universities. However, private-sector employers are usually not bound by such restrictions. There is an unwritten rule that many sought after private-sector employers follow: exclusively hire from the handful of top Pakistani universities or foreign qualified candidates.

The tech sector favors graduates from NUST, LUMS, GIKI, FAST and a few other higher education institutes. The most sought-after business school graduates are from LUMS, IBA, and perhaps NUST. An organization I recently came across seemed to be staffed almost exclusively by LUMS graduates. Whatever qualification you consider, for the most part, it is the same few university names that you hear listed again and again.

Many employers simply screen out applicants from lower ranked institutions while others may dip into the second-tier pool when needed. Generally, though, graduates from second or third tier institutes are pre-judged as underprepared and under-skilled. In this way, the private-sector job market provides an unvarnished and somewhat unbiased valuation of university degree programs.

Twenty million young people, nine percent of Pakistan’s population, are of university going age between 18 and 24 years. Currently, there are around 4.8 million students enrolled in bachelors, masters and doctoral programs. If you subtract students enrolled in external, distance learning and affiliate college programs, that number comes down to less than 1.6 million. Of these, the class of graduates that the private sector considers hirable every year consists of at most 20,000-30,000. For a country of 220 million that makes for a very shallow talent pool that is reflected in the lack of useful expertise in almost all areas.

Where does that leave all other graduates? The sad truth is that most college programs, the relatively affordable two-year BA/BSc programs all the way to more expensive four-year programs sold by private colleges in shiny brochures, are substandard. Despite repeated attempts by the HEC to require private institutions to raise the minimum qualification of faculty to PhD, private colleges continue to defy these guidelines. The majority of these programs are ossified, delivered by under-qualified instructors, siloed from other programs in the same institution, and isolated from employers as to be irrelevant. Year after year, the result is crops of students who are unskilled and unprepared for workplaces. Employers have little input in what is taught in degree programs, and students are largely ignorant of what skills employers expect them to have.

There are also problems on the demand side. Students are under the impression that a piece of paper and a good GPA / score will be enough to land them a job, but become aware of job market requirements and their own lack of skill only after beginning their job search. Private institutions that are not required to track their graduates and report employment rates or their average incomes, are unconcerned by this state of affairs. Too many students remain focused on getting their degree, without thinking much about if they are actually learning anything useful.

While the shrinking public sector is still able to accommodate dead-weight (at taxpayer expenses), the private sector is less accommodating. If an employee costs a private-sector organization 100k, it will be certain to extract productivity of at least that value. The end result are graduates who overestimate their preparedness for the job market.

Bottomline: a lot of colleges are handing out worthless degrees for worthless programs, and most students are too under informed to demand better.

In recent years, we have seen a whole industry of people, with questionable qualifications and achievements of their own, rise up claiming to bridge the preparation gap between students’ skill sets and what employers demand. While there are always some well-meaning individuals, the truth is that there are a lot more charlatans – motivational speakers, entrepreneurs – who have never had a successful venture to speak of, ‘trainers’ charging exorbitant amounts for week-long courses for things they themselves were learning a few months ago, etc. One gentleman making the rounds a few months ago had scrounged together a few tutorials from the Web and was selling them as a training program for tens of thousands of rupees. When the national talent pool is small and shallow, anyone can stand up and claim expertise, with few to challenge them.

The problem stems from the school system that feeds poorly prepared students to colleges and universities. Our approach to fixing the low quality of college and university graduates has been to make investments at the tertiary level. However, by that late stage, only a fraction of the student population benefits from them. Instead, investments made earlier at the school level will benefit more students, will be less expensive per student, enhance the stream of students to colleges and, in time, the quality of college graduates.

I recently met a Pakistani A Level student who is taking Biology as a subject. She told me that she read a number of research papers from the Journal of Cell Biology as part of her studies. Ask yourself: at what stage is a student of Biology, from our local school system following the traditional BSc-MSc path, compelled to consult research from leading journals in the field? This shows just how much expertise and skill a good high-school education can impart.

Instead, we are in a situation where universities are printing degrees for money, causing degree inflation – most of them meaningless and not indicative of any expertise, making them worthless. Jobs that could be performed by a reasonably well-trained high-school or associate bachelor’s degree holder now demand college or graduate degrees.

Some employers in Pakistan, particularly in the tech sector, have already come to this realization and have begun to go the other way. Increasingly, the hiring processes in tech companies in Pakistan for some roles are removing degree requirements and transitioning to practical assessments of skill – for example, traditional interviews are giving way to on-the-spot programming tasks.

In 2016, the HEC began taking steps to reestablish the worth of the bachelor’s degree. Universities were notified that two-year BA/BSc programs should no longer be offered after 2018, and similarly MA/MSc programs after 2020. This is one positive step towards bringing Pakistani university degrees at par with those around the globe. Instead of abolishing two-year programs entirely, the HEC had directed that those programs be redesignated Associate Degrees (AD), similar to the two-year Associate Bachelor’s degrees offered at community colleges in the US.

The HEC reiterated this announcement in spring 2019. However, true to form, universities continued to ignore repeated directives from the HEC and continued to run their now unaccredited programs. Students ignored the adage ‘buyer beware’ and kept piling into those soon-to-be-defunct programs. Now, a few weeks ago, the HEC announced it no longer recognizes graduates of two-year BA/BSc programs as it had been announcing, and students are in an uproar.

This attempt by the HEC to restore some value to the BA/BSc degree by Pakistani universities is a positive step. It should now ensure that its other policy decisions are aligned with this priority. More than a decade after the generous award of university charters, the proliferation of under-resourced and under-staffed PhD programs immediately comes to mind. For the moment, the government’s response to student solidarity marches has been to ignore, soothe, threaten or coerce organizers at various times.

A little further afield, a few weeks ago The Atlantic had a report titled ‘The Next Decade Could Be Even Worse’ about the work of Peter Turchin at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. Turchin’s recent work focuses on the last 10,000 years of human history. For the last decade, he has been predicting rising levels of unrest and upheaval driven by, according to his thesis, three fundamental problems. One, a “bloated elite class (university degree holders), with too few elite jobs to go around”. Two, “declining living standards among the general population”. And, three, a government that cannot cover its expenses.

In our context, a country that regularly describes its youth bulge (64 percent under the age of 30) as an asset, but where you need to be a member of the landed, industrial, bureaucratic, political or military elite to get ahead, that spells trouble.