**Depoliticising education**

Dr Ayesha Razzaque

Wednesday, Feb 23, 2022

The writer (she/her) has a PhD in Education.

On February 14, the Supreme Court of Pakistan issued its short order on the government’s appeal to the Islamabad High Court’s (IHC) decision of January 18 that reinstated Dr Tariq Banuri as chairperson of the HEC. The Supreme Court effectively told the government to hold its horses until the IHC releases its full judgment. Given the government’s visible desperation to stall all movement at the HEC by any and all means, this backfiring came as a surprise.

In my last op-ed I mentioned I would provide a picture of what a much-depoliticised education sector, post-18th Amendment, could look like, in particular the three institutions that have been at the center of controversy recently. To that end, I propose a broad three-pronged approach.

For the first prong, keep political and unqualified appointees out of institutions and departments of education and grant them autonomy - appoint (apolitical) technocrats to lead them instead. Note that institutions like the Higher education Commission (HEC) and National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTC) were originally established as autonomous institutions.

In Islamabad, the new local government ordinance passes the administration of local schools to the mayor’s office whenever the local government is installed. Post-18th Amendment, provinces should emulate this by granting autonomy to provincial counterpart departments. This will reduce the sphere of responsibility of the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT) even further, to the extent where we should consider downsizing the MoFEPT to a secretariat with the curtailed mandate of coordinating matters between autonomously functioning federal and provincial education departments. The secretariat could be led by heads appointed by provinces on a rotation basis.

Such a scenario is not too far-fetched or without precedent – the Indus River System Authority (IRSA), established under the IRSA Act of 1992, has been operating under a rotating chair for the last 30 years and all members in the authority are engineers (not bureaucrats).

The National Curriculum Council (NCC), NAVTTC, HEC are not staffed and run like national organisations owned by all provinces. Presently, these are federal organisations headed by those handpicked by the federal government driving the federal government’s agenda which is why these are (often rightly) perceived as meddling in or encroaching on provincial matters. That is also why there has been a significant degree of friction on the issue of the SNC between the centre and Punjab, although both are governed by the PTI. The way things are operating at the moment, federal bodies are seen as intruding, pushing the agenda of the ruling party at the centre.

For the second prong, separate implementing institutions from regulatory institutions. In the higher education sector, the HEC is currently both regulator and implementer. These roles need to be separated. This is already partially the case for engineering and medical programmes. Standard setting for engineering programmes is performed in large part by the Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC). Similarly, accreditation of medical colleges is largely in the hands of the Pakistan Medical Commission (PMC, formerly the PMDC. Other programs are accredited by the HEC. Is it possible that the reason Pakistani engineering and medical graduates are still among the most employable graduates is that the HEC relies on respective professional bodies for their accreditation? I don’t know the answer, but this question warrants some investigation.

The same is the case with the NAVTTC in the vocational education sector. Here too we ought to separate the responsibility of regulation and standard setting from implementation. The NAVTTC has begun the job of maintaining a database of accredited vocational training programmes and has recently categorised them by performance, although standards appear somewhat lax for now. If it is published, this is valuable information and can address information asymmetry; and aid prospective applicants decide which programmes are worth the time and cost of attendance. Implementation can be the purview of autonomous public and private technical and vocational training institutions.

The third prong calls for a clear delineation of institutional mandates and excision of overlaps. For example, the NCC is, as its name suggests, responsible for developing curricula, complementary teacher training materials, and certifying textbooks for schools under the MoFEPT. It is not responsible for developing curricula for provinces (apart from proposing minimum standards) or developing textbooks. Instead, the NCC is busy procuring textbooks, which is not its mandate. It is not just exceeding its purview; the way books are being procured (this time from a select private publishers) will skew the textbook market by endorsing a few select publishers. At the centre, developing textbooks is the responsibility of the National Book Foundation (NBF), which is the counterpart of provincial textbook boards, like the much better known Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB).

Ultimately, in the long run, government departments (NBF and provincial textbook board) should carefully extricate themselves from the textbook market altogether, thus creating space for the private sector, and leave it to customers (schools, teachers, parents, and students) to pick and choose textbooks right for their communities. Government departments developing textbooks may restrict themselves to developing learning materials that have low sales volumes which the private sector cannot efficiently cater to or provide enough competition to ensure that no one publisher establishes a monopoly in any segment of the textbook market.

The NCC should focus on its primary mandate of publishing Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) and granting NOCs to books prepared by the NBF and the private publishers. It should not be picking winners and losers. If anything, consumer (school, teacher) feedback on textbooks should be compiled and distributed so buyers can make informed decisions about quality books. Crisply defined institutional mandates and missions can ensure they focus on only a few jobs but do them well, which allows for clear accountability. It avoids situations where institutions do everyone else’s job except their own. Encroaching on an adjacent institution’s mandate serves to accumulate power and influence. If you seek to understand the modus operandi of an institution, take a close look at the ambitions and aspirations of its head.

On a side note, the Cabinet Committee on Institutional Reforms (CCIR) at the centre is tasked with designing a “modern public service structure for the federal government including human resource policies incorporating principles of good governance.” Considering the state of education governance at the federal level, it is ironic that the CCIR is chaired by the minister for the MoFEPT.

Dividing authority across multiple institutions also avoids having a large pot of gold under a single authority. Concentrated funds in government institutions are like blood in the water – they attract charlatans and sharks. Fewer funds make them less attractive targets for corrupt schemes. In 2019 it was widely reported that the World Bank signed a loan agreement of $918 million dollars, of which $400 million went to the HEC to “support research in strategic sectors of the economy, improve teaching and learning and strengthen governance in the higher education sector.” This might explain why people outside the HEC are attempting to wrest authority from its rightfully appointed and reinstated chairperson. But as the situation in Punjab attests, large parts of the government machinery cannot be run by remote control. It will not be surprising if the dysfunction at the HEC makes the World Bank consider pulling out its funds.

In every area the bench of talent is so shallow that when a one-hit wonder comes along we bestow them with infallibility, incapable of distinguishing between someone who had a lucky hunch and a consistent champ. Having an autonomous HEC, giving hundreds of students scholarships to study at good universities abroad were good ideas. However, offering thousands of scholarships every year to send students to study at universities abroad not because they are competitive but because they are inexpensive and offering thousands more for unprepared local universities, setting a single simplistic standard for measuring research output (and resisting reform), incentivising research work with financial rewards, ignoring teaching, pushing all universities to launch PhD programmes, and so many others were not.

The MoFEPT lacks the intellectual or functional capacity to oversee these bodies. During my short stint working in government, I have realised that we cannot keep doing more of the same. Education governance needs reform now. Ideally, we want to avoid putting politicians, generic bureaucrats and non-specialists in charge of public service delivery. I realise that asking to keep politicians away from the many ready photo-ops they provide is a tall order, but service delivery should continue unimpeded regardless of who is in power.