

# State of higher education

Education  
Law 2.03

By Dr Manzooruddin Ahmed



GENERAL Pervez Musharraf, the Chief of the Army Staff and the president of Pakistan, has recently promulgated the Federal Universities Ordinance, 2002, replacing earlier ordinances and acts. This would also serve as a model framework for all the public sector universities of Pakistani. The ordinance has been drafted on the basis of the recommendations of the task force, and the steering committee headed by Shams Lakha, the president of the Aga Khan University. The publication of the report of the task force has evoked criticism among certain sections of university teachers and students.

Most of their apprehensions are primarily based on disinformation and a lack of comprehension of major loopholes in the earlier ordinances and acts. At the same time, its critics fail to appreciate the rapidly declining standards of education in the universities during the past decades. It seems that the whole issue is being politicized unnecessarily. Perhaps some of the objections raised by the academics may be valid, and deserve review and sympathetic consideration.

However, the basic postulates underlying the proposed reorganization of the universities in respect of their academic structure, administrative machinery, management and overall policy-making visualize some fundamental changes in view of the past experience. Ever since the promulgation of the 1972 Ordinance, and the subsequent enactment of University Acts of 1974, the teachers of all categories, and even students were given representation in all academic and administrative bodies of the universities on the basis of elections, and these also provided for students unions. But in actual practice this had resulted in an unfortunate politicization of faculty, students and employees of the universities because of the growing impact of the ideological cleavages of the political parties. Thus the universities became the hotbed of regional, ethnic, and religious politics.

Ultimately the campuses turned into virtual battlegrounds and witnessed violent clashes leading to death and destruction. Consequently, the focus shifted from academic instruction and research to extraneous issues. The semester system was introduced, but it failed to produce the desired improvement of the educational standards. Ideally, all these innovations were regarded as steps towards improvement. However, a critical review of the working of the universities during past decades would clearly show that the standards of education had steadily declined, and the desired results could not be achieved. The unionization of teachers, students and employees and their close links with the popular political parties created undue pressures on the academic and administrative bodies of the universities.

As a result, the vice-chancellors of the universities became hostages of the political groups, with the result that the teachers could not play their legitimate role. The teachers themselves had aligned with the political parties for promoting their vested interests. Under these circumstances, the very concept of the university autonomy had become a farce since the universities were working under the strains of massive intervention by the political parties, ruling as well as opposition.

It is against such a background, that the Musharraf regime duly recognized the urgent need for reviewing, and overhauling the entire organizational structure of the public sector universities. He had consulted the senior educationists of Pakistan, and a number of think tanks investigated various aspects of university education. A task force

was nominated, and its report was duly considered by a high-powered steering committee headed by Shams Lakha, President of the Aga Khan University.

They drafted a Model University Act. According to a report published in Dawn of December 3, President Musharraf has categorically dispelled the impression that the universities are being privatized. Commenting on the ordinance, he observed, "the ordinance can have problems and can be improved but it is unfortunate that vested interests are opposing it through strikes and protests on the ground that the higher education is being privatized". He further added, "We are not mad to privatize the education to close the opportunities to our poor". He elaborated that the real intent was to revolutionize the higher education.

Professor Dr Atta-ur-Rahman, Chairman, Commission on Higher Education with the status of a federal minister, and formerly minister of science and technology, has played a major role in promoting reforms in the system of education. In his new capacity he is trying to provide incentives to the university teachers to undertake research in sciences, technology, social sciences, and humanities. In a recent interview, he has tried to explain some of the basic features of the Model University Act, and has in a clear and positive manner tried to dispel some of

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the misgivings and criticisms prevailing among teachers and students. It is worth reiterating some of the points he has offered in defence of the MUA, and explains the underlying premises on which the new educational approach is founded.

In a recent newspaper interview Dr Rahman has categorically allayed the fears prevailing among students that fees were going to be drastically increased. Giving assurance to the student communities, he asserted that as long as he was chairman of the HEC and responsible for looking after the universities, he would not allow a substantial increase in fees. He further assured that he would provide a lot of scholarship and additional support.

Dealing with another plank of disinformation being spread by vested interests regarding virtual privatization of education under the proposed reforms, Dr. Atta-ur-Rahman clarified the position and said, "There is nothing in the ordinance to this effect either. I believe strongly that public universities are the responsibility of the government and they should be funded by the government. Admission should be on the basis of merit alone and not on the ability of parents to pay certain amount of fees."

Focusing sharply on the urgent need for improving the quality of education, Dr Rahman rightly observed, "What I expect out of a quality system is good human beings with well-rounded education." He added that the students should be equipped with the necessary tools to be able to address the problems of life in an intelligent fashion, unleashing the creativity of our students. At the same time, he emphasized the need for improving the existing standards, so that education was brought at par with the international standards.

In response to a question regarding the major recommendations made by the task force, Dr Rahman stated that there should be a separation between the governance and management of a university. There will be a board that will govern. The vice-chancellor will be the chief executive officer who will

be responsible for the implementation of the decisions of the board. He proposed to do away with the existing colonial mode of appointment of the vice-chancellor who "holds office during the pleasure of the chancellor". He suggested that "this system is to be changed and the vice-chancellor is to be appointed on the recommendations of a search committee comprising eminent professionals rather than the chancellor picks up a person at random". He opines that the new university ordinance proposes that professional representatives to the statutory bodies be nominated rather than elected by teachers' societies.

Generally speaking, the root cause of our past failures may be ascribed in a rather philosophical sense to the lack of synthesizing idealism and pragmatism in the context of a stagnant political, economic and social environment inherited by us as a legacy of the British colonial rule. Speaking in terms of pure idealism, the benefits of higher education should be available to only those who deserve it irrespective of caste, creed, colour, gender or wealth. The select ones among the students through successive tiers of education should be allowed to pursue higher education, and the rest of the mass of students should be given a core of general courses, and vocational and technical training providing the required needs of human resource.

The elite upper class of students, however, push their way through sheer academic performance and excellence to the top for obtaining academic and professional degrees. It is on this basis that the admission policies for the professional colleges should be formulated, and all disciplines of science, and social sciences, and all categories of self-finance and quotas be abolished forthwith. Merit alone should be the criterion of admission. Entrance examinations should be held to select the required number of students in each discipline keeping in view demands of the market and public institutions.

Students who fulfil the criteria of merit and excellence should be admitted for university education, and those who cannot afford to pay the cost of higher education should be provided financial assistance, and tuition waiver according to the needs. The main objective of higher education is to produce a body of professionals, bureaucrats, economists, social scientists, teachers, technocrats and a hard core of leaders in different walks of life.

However, in the process of planning for higher education, a proper balance must be maintained between social sciences, humanities, and science and technology. There may not be any problem if in the initial stage, policy is tilted towards giving extra consideration for filling the gap in the fields of science, technology, and other futuristic sciences in order to cope with the rapid advances in these areas of knowledge. In fact, the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels of education are the nurseries of talents, and the colleges and universities are the training ground of leaders.

From this point of view, it may not be wrong to believe that higher education must remain selective and elitist, since it does not cater to the needs of the mediocrity. Therefore, if we agree with this view of higher education, as a natural corollary, democratization of the organizational structure, governance and management of the universities would be counter-productive, and would not produce excellence and talent; it may only quantitatively produce degree holders with only a smattering of superficial knowledge.

Perhaps, it is with this view in mind, the framers of the Model University Act have suggested the separation of governance and management in the administration of the universities.

## To be concluded

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