**[Education: why such neglect?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1700984/education-why-such-neglect)**

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IT has been almost two months since the end of term for the last Higher Education Commission (HEC) chairperson but the new head has still not been announced. The acting chair, an ex-bureaucrat, has been given an extension or two to keep routine matters going. Why has the new chair not been announced? The shortlisting of candidates took place a while back. So why is the government taking so long?

The government knew when the four-year term of the last chairperson would end. Why did it not complete the recruitment process in time? While budgets are being slashed and we are going through tough economic times, and all universities — private and public — are struggling due to financial and Covid-19-induced pressures, we do not have a chair for the HEC, the body that is supposed to ensure the optimal functioning and regulation of the higher education sector. What does this say about the government’s priorities? What does this say about its priorities for education?

At the time of the budget, the HEC came into the conversation as it was said that the commission’s budget was being slashed. At the time, several ministers, Ahsan Iqbal most prominently, made statements that the HEC budget would not be slashed, that the government considered higher education to be very important, and that it was serious about providing access to good quality education for young people. Even the prime minister made one or two such statements.

The HEC’s recurrent budget is hardly what it was last year. With an expected inflation rate of 15 per cent to 20pc, and with the government giving a salary increase of 15pc to 20pc to its employees, how are universities going to survive on last year’s budget? But since the budget, HEC has not been in the news. And since we do not have a chairperson who could agitate for the higher education sector, it is not a surprise that no reporting as to how universities plan to cope next year is being done.

There are major issues in education that require the government’s urgent attention.

When this government took over — it has been more than three months since Shehbaz Sharif became prime minister — a number of statements were made about how the new government would look into education issues in detail. That it would not only address the funding problems faced by the higher education sector, but would also look into issues related to the Single National Curriculum. However, after making initial noises about reviewing the SNC, the government settled for the idea of having a national conference that would look into curriculum issues in more detail.

The idea of having a detailed look at curriculum issues through a conference was bizarre, but regardless, there was at least a promise of doing something about the SNC and matters related to it. Yet nothing has happened since. There has been no discussion on the SNC or other issues related to education. Even in Punjab, a province that tried to implement the SNC during the last academic year, there has been no announcement as to whether or not it would be continued, or what shape or form it would take if it is decided to go on with it. Summer is a good time for teachers and schools to prepare for the next academic year. Summer vacations are nearly over but a clear statement from the education department is still awaited.

The government has been facing major crises on the economic and political fronts. The macroeconomic situation has been very bad and there were serious concerns about Pakistan defaulting on its international debt obligations. These concerns have not gone away completely but with the IMF programme coming back on line, and with the expectation of help from ‘friendly’ countries, the worst has been avoided. Meanwhile, politics in Punjab has been keeping the PML-N busy and the demand for fresh elections, vociferously articulated and pushed for by the PTI, has made the day-to-day existence of the current government difficult. One can understand why education might not be on top of the prime minister’s to-do list, as it used to be when he was Punjab chief minister, but this is why we have separate ministers for each area. And what is the federal education minister doing? What has he been up to for the last three months?

There are major issues in the education sector that require the government’s urgent attention. Covid-19 has impacted the sector badly. Not only were schools closed for long periods, causing learning losses, but the disruption also led to significantly increased dropout numbers.

As Covid recedes into the background, we need national-level programmes to address issues of access, dropout and learning losses. There have even been some pilots in these areas. But where are the larger policy initiatives that we need? The SNC raised important issues regarding the curriculum which the previous government was not willing to take on. Many school administrators, teachers, parents and experts have been raising these issues for the last couple of years now. They should have been addressed on a priority basis so that the next academic year could have been planned better. But, sadly, no action has been taken.

Similarly, higher education is in a crisis in Pakistan. Many universities are on the brink of bankruptcy. The quality of education in most of our universities, private and public, is poor. The crisis has been made a lot worse due to Covid-19. Where the new government should have addressed these issues on a priority basis, they have chosen to do nothing about them.

Though a lot is said about the administrative and governance ‘experience’ of the PML-N, the last three months, on education issues at least, have been quite disappointing. Can one of the ministers point to a single initiative that has been taken to address urgent issues? It is not even clear if there is even any recognition that we need serious thinking and action on very urgent and important issues within the education sector.

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