**Education with impact**

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Time and again we hear claims about the great strides Pakistan’s higher education sector made in the 2000s. While there are a handful of islands of excellence at local universities here and there, they exist in a vast sea of frivolous, even fraudulent, research output. The result is a higher education sector that is producing many times more research papers and awarding more local PhD degrees than it did before the turn of the millennium.

The promotion criteria under the Higher Education Commission’s (HEC) Tenure Track System (TTS) can be succinctly summed up in one sentence: Publish X number of journal papers in journals from a given list and get promoted. That is all. That is why the raw numbers of publications produced by Pakistani universities have grown manifold. However, that has not been matched by a corresponding growth in reputation of Pakistani degrees. In fact, in some areas it has been quite the opposite - some Pakistani university programmes have been delisted, their equivalence by some countries derecognized, with consequences for eligibility to work overseas.

Several long-term observers of the local higher-ed landscape have been ringing the alarm (Ayesha Razzaque, ‘Where did the teaching go?’, The News International, September 22, 2022, and ‘In support of a tiered university system’, The News International, September 29, 2021). The root cause in my view is: a) promotion and reward mechanisms that are enforced by a centralized bureaucratic machinery that is unqualified and incapable to assess the quality and weight of research contributions; and b) a static, inflexible promotion criteria that completely disregards all other contributions – excellence in teaching, management and service to the institution and community. Certainly, like so many other problems, other universities in the world have long developed better solutions that ought to serve as guiding models for reform in Pakistan.

For example, the University of Birmingham is a Russel group university, the UK’s equivalent of the US’ Ivy League. For those who put their stock in rankings, Times Higher Education (THE) ranked it number three in computer science research in the UK (only behind Imperial College London and Oxford University), number 12 overall in the UK and number 105 in the world. In an effort to further improve the way it assesses its faculty members’ performance for promotion, it recently introduced the Birmingham Academic Career Framework (BACF). It brings more clarity to evaluating the impact of faculty members’ work contributions.

The University of Birmingham’s BACF assesses five separate contribution areas: 1) Research, 2) Education, 3) Enterprise, Engagement and Impact, 4) Leadership and Management and 5) Citizenship. Generally speaking, universities in the West evaluate faculty members’ contributions to research, teaching and service, with some variations.

Faculty members are appointed on one of three different tracks – a) Education (focusing on teaching with only little or no research); b) Research and Education (demanding a shared focus on teaching but usually mostly research); or c) Enterprise, Engagement and Impact (focusing on impactful engagement with external partners – enterprises and community). Every track puts different weights and specifies different minimum achievement levels in each of the five contribution areas listed above for career progression.

This is already a significant departure from the approach taken by the HEC’s TTS system, which recognizes no contribution other than research. What’s more, the BACF is a further departure from the bean counting approach the TTS takes that refuses to distinguish between a foundational paper in an area and one presenting derivative work, as long as it meets its low-quality threshold.

The BACF puts impact at the heart of evaluating all faculty work contributions. That means work output like published journal papers is no longer just counted but measured in terms of what good it did. Theoretically, the BACF would value a single published paper that has a significant impact on its field higher than a stack of 100 papers no one will ever read.

Impact is not evaluated based on the face value of the author’s claims but has to be demonstrated by means of hard evidence and is verified and evaluated by academic peers that understand the subject, as opposed to bureaucrats lacking subject area expertise.

The BACF includes an accompanying rubric, an indicative mapping that describes various levels of impact and achievement in great detail. It provides a nearly exhaustive list of possible contributions faculty members can make and provides descriptions and matching weights depending on levels of impact. This is still only a very abstract description of the BACF. The full framework is very detailed (it spans more than a dozen pages) yet does not succumb to arbitrariness. The common thread that can be seen running through all contribution areas (be it teaching, research, enterprise engagement, leadership & management or citizenship) is the level of impact professional contributions.

Coming back to our own context, the University of Birmingham’s approach is in stark contrast to the HEC’s Tenure Track System (TTS), which does not acknowledge anything other than journal papers published and patents granted, and only the former is subject to a modicum of quality control. Should we then be surprised that the quality of instruction undergraduates receive at most institutions has not seen improvement, and neither has their employability and job readiness? The TTS was poorly designed from the start and in the two decades since it was introduced it has not evolved. Its developers stubbornly continue to resist all attempts at reform.

Let us be clear, promotion criteria of prominent universities around the world have shared the philosophy of quality and impactful work for decades. However, oftentimes they still leave a lot of room for individual judgment and interpretation by tenure committee members which can make securing tenure (promotion) a little bit of a dark art. The University of Birmingham’s new BACF demystifies the promotion process significantly and communicates expectations for career progression in an institution that values quality over quantity more clearly.

A few years ago, the HEC made a quiet attempt to develop a proposal to revamp the TTS but nothing came of it. Now, with the University of Birmingham’s BACF as a model that painstakingly spells out how to weigh work products of faculty members, it might be time to revisit what Pakistani universities demand of their faculty (teaching, research, community engagement with impact) and how to evaluate them.

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