[Dr Javaid Laghari](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-javaid-laghari)

April 8, 2021

**Fix the HEC**

The vision of HEC is to serve as an engine for the socio-economic development of Pakistan through human resource development and research. Its mission, among others, includes raising enrollment levels, improving quality, offering scholarship programs for faculty development, strengthening and creating a culture of research, developing international linkages, improving regulatory framework, and the financial sustainability of higher education institutions.

The socio-economic development of a country is attained through building up a knowledge economy. The World Bank identifies education and skilled force, information & communication technologies, and innovation as three of the four key pillars of the knowledge economy.

The World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report includes higher education and training, technology readiness and innovation among its 12 pillars. Since universities are the single most important producers of knowledge, technology and research, an investment in the higher education sector leads to the development of a knowledge economy, and therefore to the economic prosperity of a nation.

The world today is faced with a myriad of new emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, cyber security, biotechnologies, business intelligence and robotics, among others. On the one hand, while we have landed on Mars, we are also faced with the threats of a deadly pandemic, climate change and a new geopolitical world order. It is imperative that the youth of today, who will become leaders of tomorrow, stand up to these challenges. This is where the role of the HEC comes in as a national and strategic organization, which must ensure that our youth are fully equipped to face these challenges head on and contribute to the economic and social growth of Pakistan.

Unfortunately, the HEC has fumbled in the last few years and has become a mess because of bad governance. The saying ‘A fish rots from the head down’ apparently applies to the HEC, which must be led by a qualified individual with the right experience and vision, and integrity. The HEC Ordinance 2002 requires the HEC chairperson “to be a person of international eminence and proven ability who has made significant contribution to higher education as teacher, researcher or administrator.” According to the HEC law, the Controlling Authority (currently the prime minister of Pakistan) has the power and the discretion of appointing the chairperson directly without a selective process, as was done for the first two chairpersons.

The first chairperson, Dr Atta-ur-Rahman, was appointed directly by the then president, and had immaculate qualifications and international eminence without an iota of doubt. Under his leadership, the HEC became a role model for the developing world, to the extent that even India wanted to emulate the HEC. For the first time in Pakistan’s history, four universities were ranked among the top 300, 400 and 500 of the world by the Times Higher Education (UK).

Dr Atta could not complete his tenure as he was edged out of the HEC by the then government as he would not compromise on reduction in funding for human resource development, particularly PhD scholarships and post-doc fellowships, the foreign faculty hiring program, research programs including the acquisition of research equipment, and for many other similar programs that he initiated.

The second chairperson (this writer) was also appointed directly by the then prime minister. I had previously served as director of the NASA Space Power Institute, was a tenured full professor at a major research university in the US, and had also served as the president of a leading private university in Pakistan. Despite a 40 percent cut in funding and threats of devolution and demolition under the 18th Amendment, which the Supreme Court held back, the HEC continued to move up the success ladder and was recognized and quoted globally.

According to the Chief Editor of the prestigious UK based “The Lancet”, May 2013, “The HEC reforms changed the culture of academia to one that is focused on research, quality and impact”. The global research database organization Scimago forecast in 2013 that at the then rate of increase, Pakistan’s global research ranking would move from 43 to 27 within a few years, the second highest increase worldwide. The HEC reforms were recognized even by the then US ambassador who wrote in May 2013, “We would be hard-pressed to find another country that has made so much progress this quickly in higher education”.

The next two chairpersons were appointed by the PML-N government through a sham selection process. The last chairperson did not even qualify as per HEC law, and as a result, the HEC took a nosedive in governance, reputation and delivery. It was clear that the chairperson and his team of favorite and expensive consultants did not know or understand the functioning of the HEC which led to the current mess (see my Op-ed ‘The HEC in a mess’, The News, April 1, 2021).

The HEC regulates over 220 public and private universities across Pakistan, each established under its own Act with its own policies and procedures. In addition, the HEC must coordinate its activities with the government (Planning Commission, ministries of finance, education, science & technology, and the Prime Minister’s Office, in addition to the governors, chief ministers, provincial HECs, provincial education ministers and foreign funding agencies). The many other stakeholders include the universities, the vice chancellors, faculty and students. Only those associated with the management of large academic and research organizations, and the government, can do the balancing act among all organizations and can govern it well.

The HEC is in a mess today. The prime minister must take charge of affairs and appoint an individual of international eminence who has the administrative and research skills, experience and is a person of integrity who has made significant contribution to higher education, so the HEC can get back on its feet. If not done right, the HEC will fall again, and the whole eco-system of higher education in the country will collapse, like it just did.

The writer is a former chairperson of the HEC.