**Future of public examination boards**

BY M U H A M M A D M E M O N 2023-05-11

AT present, the country has more than 30 public examination boards, of which two are private.

In the past, these were given a wide mandate that included consolidation, regulation, development and control of both intermediate and secondary education. But a gradual erosion in their role, which began in the 1970s, has left them with the singular task of conducting Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) assessments.

As a result, the damage to the quality and credibility of exams is significant primarily because transparency is hard to ascertain. Although a series of education reforms were initiated, examination was not made an integral part of these amendments. Consequently, the boards, besieged by rampant cheating, corruption and other malpractices that generated highly inflated grades, continued to lose their integrity in the eyes of the public as well as stakeholders.

These boards have long employed traditional methods to assess retention abilities of students as opposed to focusing on their comprehension and execution skills. It has also been observed that even though many students secure elevated grades annually, most of them perform poorly in the entry tests of institutions such as universities, adding to their own infamy. One of the reasons is that they assess the lower order of cognitive skills of students, which concentrates on memorising textbooks, whereas admission tests measure a higher order of cognitive skills, such as conceptual understanding, application and analysis of a curriculum.

Also, the validity and reliability of examination papers is almost entirely overlooked. A good examination system has a large `item bank` which is updated every year, but a majority of public education boards lack it. Another significant reason is that the boards evaluate answer scripts manually. It`s based on subjective assessment and devoid of scoring rubrics. However, some boards have opted for automation of examination, which is still at an initial level in Pakistan.

It is imperative for all examination bodies to prepare syllabus indicating the learning and assess-ment level of students, but the boards do not have an updated syllabus based on the revised curriculum.

Syllabus is a blueprint of an educational provision and without it, teachers, paper-setters and examiners are at sea. Alarmingly, this appears to be a major weak area of public examination boards.

Disappointment with the boards forces a good number of students to join the Cambridge `O` and `A` Level system, International Baccalaureate and other academic routines. The trend has been on the rise each year, as the quality and transpar-ency of foreign tests is guaranteed. Some six years ago, the Inter Board Committee of Chairmen, now the Inter Board Coordination Commission (IBCC), convened a three-day national conference in Islamabad to deliberate on ways to improve the public examination system. The Commission prepared a comprehensive conference report but it was not implemented in its entirety and a separate report, prepared for Sindh and shared with all stakeholders in the province, was disregarded completely.

Publieboardshavefailedmiserablytoupgrade examinations in general, and in Sindh in particular. However, valuation has seen enhancement by the federal examination board as well as boards in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Currently, the federal public examination board has emerged as a role model for others in the country. This begs the question: if the federal board can become an example, why can`t the oth-ers in the country? At long last, the controlling authority of examination boards in Sindh has recently taken a serious exception to the existing derelictions in the assessment system, deciding to outsource it in phases. While the process begins with the current academic year, it doesn`t seem to be an appropriate solution. Ideally, the move should compel public examination boards to evolve beyond makeshift solutions.

All public examination boards were established in the 20th century. But not one has been subjected to an external review so far. The future of all public examination boards depends on structural reforms in their functions. Any hasty and cosmetic change will destroy the sanctity and image of these institutions, especially in Sindh. Poor governance, lack of effective, honest leadership, negligence in examination, corruption, and inadequate institutional capacity have drained them of authority and competence to the extent that Sindh`s educational boards have failed to hire essential staff such as secretaries, exam controllers, inspectors, secrecy officers and IT managers.

Although complete restoration of quality and credibility is a long and arduous road, the provincial governments can secure the future of public examination boards through the formation of a viable supervisory body such as a `Provincial Examination Commission` that establishes quality enhancement units in the boards; secures external certification by ISO; rids them of malpractices; increases the number of examination panels in the private sector; provides students with the right to choose any examination board; introduces automation of tests; prepares annual ranking of boards on performance; analyses annual examination results with the engagement of psychometricians; selects members of boards on merit, especially their senior management; and ensures consolidation and strengthening of public examination boards in all provinces.  The writer is a senior educationist, policy scholar and researcher.ers in the country? At long last, the controlling authority of examination boards in Sindh has recently taken a serious exception to the existing derelictions in the assessment system, deciding to outsource it in phases. While the process begins with the current academic year, it doesn`t seem to be an appropriate solution. Ideally, the move should compel public examination boards to evolve beyond makeshift solutions.

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