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**HEC and higher education**

On the surface, the predicament of the skilled labor market in Pakistan is a rather perplexing dilemma.

The ever-increasing number of graduates and post-graduate degree holders that our universities churn out every year often complain about the lack of job opportunities in the market. But on the flip side, if one was to be in a hiring manager’s position, one probably would realize the difficulty of finding someone competent enough to fill in most job positions. The issue then in the country is not of ‘quantity’ but rather of ‘quality’ when it comes to higher education attainment.

Before I transitioned into my research role at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), I was a project manager for another organization. Tasked with setting up a team of qualified individuals to do the job, I naturally put out a job posting. To say that I was overwhelmed by the number of total applicants would be an understatement. With a full inbox, I started screening the applications. In retrospect I can report that, although most applications were eligible in terms of ‘degrees and qualifications’, less than five percent were worthy of making the first cut.

Ultimately, of the ones that were shortlisted only a miniscule number, as it became pretty obvious during the testing phase, could write even a single paragraph without making significant grammatical or structural errors. I am usually not someone who criticizes the general population’s ability to not write effectively, but if a significant chunk of those who hold higher education credentials cannot write effectively without making glaring errors (both grammatical and conceptual), then this is rather reflective of the sad state of the higher education system in Pakistan.

Recently, we at PIDE organized a series of webinars to discuss the issues that afflict the higher education system in the country. Of specific interest was the discussion around the role of the Higher Education Commission (HEC), and how despite having strong regulatory powers, the HEC has not been able to uphold quality standards across the university system in Pakistan.

One specific example of how the current system incentivizes arbitrary accumulation of quantitative numbers without much regard to quality standards is reflected in the criteria that is set for faculty hiring and promotions. As it stands, the system incentivizes faculty to publish more in often substandard research journals as their promotion and professional ascendancy within the system is linked to an arbitrarily defined ‘number of publications’. Furthermore, instead of conducting research to solve pressing intellectual problems, the focus of research is on accumulation of numbers and publications.

This dearth of innovative quality research and below par faculty eventually trickles down to the students within the system. No wonder it is so hard for hiring managers, despite the glut of university graduates in the market, to find trained and competent individuals to perform the skilled jobs. In such a scenario, instead of pressing for more regulation and uniformity through an even stronger HEC, perhaps the better course of action would be to reduce the footprint of the HEC and the government on the higher education system in Pakistan. That is not to say that all forms of HEC regulation is counterproductive, but that those regulations which unnecessarily meddle with operational running of universities and impede innovative growth should be minimized.

Furthermore, the prevalent thinking that somehow administrators in the HEC ultimately know more about what is better for students than the students and students’ parents themselves needs to change. The decision to pursue higher education fundamentally is an investment decision; and the students are aware of the costs and benefits involved.

In that sense, the higher education arena is basically a form of a market which can benefit from liberalization in similar ways to how traditional economic markets benefit – that is: heterogeneity of products up for consumption, quality assurance through market mechanisms and general integration of higher education with the labor market.

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