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**HEC: draining the swamp**

Part - II

Atta-ur-Rahman also contends that the HEC is not utilizing the money allocated for scholarships. This is patently false. Scholarships are funded from development funds, and the HEC has utilized the development allocation fully and completely.

The only low intake is in the US Pakistan Knowledge Corridor Scholarship Programme, which aims to fund 10,000 PhD scholarships over 10 years at the top 200 US universities. Unfortunately, the programme is underfunded. At the time of approval in 2016, the government had decided that it should only be awarded to scholars who can win tuition fee waivers from their universities, and that the HEC should only fund travel costs, living allowance, healthcare and bench fees.

While it was believed that this would be an automatic check on the quality of the selected candidates, the result is a lack of qualified candidates. Very few students have the background and quality to earn tuition waivers from top-200 universities. In the first year of the programme (before the start of my term), the HEC managed to send only 20 candidates instead of 500. Since then, the numbers have risen to 100.

A feasibility study funded by USAID recommended the elimination of the tuition-waiver requirement, and a significant increase in the funding per student. While all this dates back to before my term as chairman, and while increases in allocation are difficult during these days of financial stringency, a number of options have been proposed to the Planning Commission. As soon as the funding level is raised, more students will be able to benefit.

The programmes Rahman cites belong to a different era when the country was flush with US aid cash and not focused on the prudent and proper management of scarce public resources. Indeed, the question is a broader one: if we as a country choose to spend two crore rupees or more on a student, what should we expect as a return? Does it make sense to spend such money on unqualified and unprepared students who happen to have caught the notice of some higher-up? Would they not face difficulties in completing their programs, or in contributing meaningfully to education and research upon return?

Rahman also complains about the changes in another programme, which was run in a nepotistic and opaque manner – the funding of conference-related travel of faculty members. A recent review showed that almost two-thirds of the awards were given to faculty in preferred universities in a couple of cities. Many were for participation in low-quality conferences. Many were to faculty members from universities with little or no record of good quality research. In view of this pattern, the HEC has turned the program over to universities to manage on their own.

Another programme cited by Rahman is the foreign post-doc fellowships. Contrary to his claims, it has neither been curtailed nor amended in scope. However, it has been reformed and updated in response to persistent questions about its structure and operation.

Most post-doc programs around the world are reserved for fresh PhDs, younger scholars, who could benefit the most from exposure to high quality academic environments. The HEC programme was sending 45-50 year olds who had done a PhD 10-20 years earlier, regardless of whether or not they had been productive in research since then. In 2018, the Planning Commission asked the HEC to carry out a formal evaluation of its impact on teaching and research. In the event, very little data was available.

Based on such inputs, the post-doc fellowship programme has been redesigned to focus on quality and impact, including quality of host institutions, reporting requirements, obligations for disseminating work and experiences, and public sharing of all information. The application process has been streamlined and rendered transparent in order to eliminate favouritism and corruption.

Atta-ur-Rahman (and some of his collaborators) has taken a few pot shots at the new policies on undergraduate education and PhD education. Suffice it to say that in 20 years, the HEC had no coherent policy to address quality of education at either of these two levels. Instead, there were a series of ad hoc and mutually inconsistent ‘notifications’ plus a sketchy set of guidelines in the National Qualifications Framework. These issues have been dealt with separately. The short comment is that most critics, including Atta-ur-Rahman, do not seem to have read the policies with any care.

At the end, this is really a conflict between two philosophies. On the one hand is the philosophy of patronage and favouritism. On the other hand, there is the pressing national need to establish merit, transparency, quality standards and accountability. Rahman clearly yearns to return to those days of unaccountable spending, and vehemently resists any questions of impact or accountability – not just of the centres he continues to run, but also the entire portfolio of HEC programmes. Such lack of accountability and transparency is diametrically opposite to Prime Minister Imran Khan’s commitments and pronouncements.

The HEC has to be allowed to do what Pakistan’s people expect it to: which is to act as a guarantor of quality in scholarship and probity in finance. The universities' regulator is a custodian of public money. It is not its role to act like a feudal lord and dispense favours without merit or accountability.

Concluded

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