**HEC: the good and the bad**

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The Higher Education Commission (HEC) boasts of the unprecedented development it has brought in the country’s higher education sector. Statistics such as the increase in the number of PhDs and massive production of research papers, among other similar indicators, are quoted as examples of its achievements.

However, critics argue that the standard of higher education in the country has grossly declined in the post-HEC era. They reject the HEC’s statistical numbers as misleading indicators. They believe that our so-called research papers are junk, and benefit only the individuals generating them. Critics say that quality has been compromised for quantity, and teaching for so-called research. Let us see how much weight both sides carry.

In 2002, the former higher education body, University Grants Commission (UGC), was replaced by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) through a presidential ordinance. The commission was assigned the task to improve and promote higher education in the country. The specific functions and responsibilities of the HEC as mentioned in section 10 (1) of the ordinance included it having to: evaluate the performance of [educational] institutions; examine the financial requirements of the institutions; distribute funds; create linkages with the industry; formulate policies for service structures of the faculty; design curricula; and establish an endowment fund for higher education.

The HEC has performed well in some of the assigned tasks. It awarded scholarships to teachers and students of HEIs to pursue MS and PhD degrees in developed countries. Hundreds of scholarship awards were distributed among candidates with one-size-fits-all academic formula and passing the NTS test without further scrutiny of aptitude and suitability. Instead of encouraging students to seek admission in top ranking universities, candidates were encouraged – ostensibly to save money – to get admitted to universities that gave more fee waivers. However, overall, this was a revolutionary step for improving the standard of higher education in the country. A large number of faculty got PhD degrees, they returned to Pakistan and started serving the country.

The HEC also fulfilled its job of designing curricula, supporting and facilitating training programs, workshops and symposia. It developed a system to determine the equivalence and recognition of degrees, diplomas and certificates awarded by institutions within the country and abroad. It also set up different evaluation councils.

In some areas, the HEC partially succeeded. It devised mechanisms to evaluate performance of institutions, designated bodies for testing and evaluation, and established Offices of Research, Innovation and Commercialization (ORIC) in universities to help them establish linkages with the industry, and Quality Enhancement Cells (QEC) to monitor academic and research performance in universities. The HEC collected various information and statistics on higher education in the country as well.

However, there are several areas where the HEC failed to make any tangible impact. Its policies did not make any significant impact on the socio-economic development of the country. The increased number of PhDs or research papers could not add to the uplift of the economy in the form of any breakthrough discoveries or innovations at least. The research could not be linked to industry or policy organization. In a nutshell, we imported expensive scientific equipment and chemicals from Europe and America to produce research papers but could not utilize the knowledge to resolve our indigenous problems and benefit the economy.

One of the main functions of the HEC was to review and examine the financial requirements of public-sector institutions and approve and provide funds to these institutes. The HEC failed in acquiring funds as required by the universities. Universities and HEIs mushroomed in the country (which is also cited as the HEC’s achievement) but the myopic HEC lacked a foresight to plan well in time, which has now led to a serious financial crisis in universities across Pakistan. It also failed in building the capacity of the HEIs to generate and raise funds from sources other than the HEC or respective governments. The HEC was also tasked to establish an endowment fund for higher education, which is nowhere in sight after 20 years of its establishment. The commission tried to create linkages between HEIs and industry through the establishment of Offices of Research, Innovation and Commercialization (ORIC) in universities but the experiment could not go beyond cosmetic steps and the HEC cared little to strengthen ORICs.

The biggest criticism is that the commission could not formulate policies to ensure a proper balance between teaching and research. Teaching was ignored altogether while all the benefits are still tied to research papers. It is worthless for a teacher to teach, read books, or enhance knowledge in their respective fields. As per HEC criteria, years of experience and number of papers are more important, something that has led to the decline in the standard of teaching in HEIs. People were inducted and promoted solely because of their quantity of research papers, most of whom are now deans and vice-chancellors who are also opposed to this balance because of their stakes in it.

The most important and key stakeholder in higher education is faculty but the HEC has been completely ignoring them while formulating any policy. At most, the HEC consults vice chancellors who, as mentioned above, are the result and ambassadors of flawed HEC policies.

In order to provide equal opportunity and discourage fraudulent practices, the HEC was assigned the task to devise policies regarding service structure for faculty. The commission either remained indifferent to this issue, or tacitly encouraged the discrimination. Its indifference to this issue made way for fraudulent practices in appointments (promotion to next grades) of faculty, which continued at such a rapid pace that many believe that it is time to stop research immediately till a genuine research culture can be initiated from scratch again.

For the last three years, faculty members in universities have been demanding fair, balanced, transparent and proper service structures in the universities. The HEC has been constantly dodging the teachers, parliamentary committees and the courts. This has created severe frustration and deprivation among the faculty, and is one of the major reasons for the decline in the standard of higher education.

The commission needs to look back and evaluate its progress in light of the original tasks assigned to it. Instead of further cosmetic activities, it needs to establish a communication mechanism with the real stakeholders in HEIs: students and faculty. The HEC needs to devise policies that are not the whims of its chairpersons, executive members or vice-chancellors. The government, at the very least, must not pick chairpersons to the HEC from the pool of VCs and professors who have a tainted academic record.

The universities are facing severe financial crises, but the HEC seems indifferent to these issues. If the commission is unable to address the financial issues in universities, then its presence will have no justification. The HEC needs to evaluate its current research policies too. The research in its present form is a waste of time and resources. The commission needs to set up a research agenda specifically tailored for different disciplines if it must continue the policy.

All one-size-fits-all criteria of HEC have done more harm than benefit. Additionally, all incentives must not be tied to only the so-called research. The HEC must discourage the existing trend of emphasis on quantity of publications; rather HEC must promote genuine research culture. The rule of thumb in this case will be: if someone is academically and professionally not competent enough while teaching, one can hardly be any good researcher.

Lastly, the HEC must understand that it cannot formulate and implement its policies in vacuum. The main stakeholders responsible for implementing its policies need to be taken on board and the HEC has to resolve their genuine demand: the demand for a career path as guaranteed by the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and its own ordinance.

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