**Higher education turmoil**

Atta-ur-Rahman

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In 2018, the appointment as chairman HEC of someone who was a lecturer at a low-ranking university in the US at the time of his appointment, raised many eyebrows. He had only four publications in international journals, which would have made him ineligible for consideration as an associate professor in a public-sector university in Pakistan which requires 10 publications in recognised journals.

What followed in the higher education sector over the subsequent two-and-a-half years was absolute devastation. This became evident at a major conference in Bhurban, in November 2021, where 180 vice-chancellors of the public- and private-sector universities participated and almost unanimously condemned his policies.

The VCs complained against the unreasonable undergraduate and postgraduate policies developed and imposed by the HEC, without stakeholder consultation; the attempts made to destroy PhD programmes in Pakistan by abandoning the need for a Master’s degree and offering direct admission into a PhD programme on the basis of BSc degree, risking the derecognition of the country’s PhD programmes due to non-conformity with the requirements of the internationally accepted Bologna protocol; the decay of the salary structure under the cherished contractual tenure track system; lack of coordination with the regulatory bodies such as the Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC), the National Business Education Accreditation Council (NBEAC), the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) that provide accreditations and no consultation with the Association of Private Sector Universities of Pakistan (APSUP) that also rejected those new policies outright; massive financial and administrative irregularities that led to NAB inquiries; and the National Research Programme of Universities (NRPU) budget cuts from over a thousand grants annually to less than 100 annually, destroying the research environment in universities as the programme used to provide research funding to young faculty members.

They were also irked at the growth of some 50 new universities during the tenure of the chairman without faculty or funding, resulting in a sharp decline in education quality as these universities poached teachers working at other public- and private-sector universities for their faculty needs – the HEC remained a silent bystander as the destruction took place; the attempts made to destroy existing research centers in universities by proposing to merge their budgets with university budgets and imposing an unwise funding formula; foreign scholarship cuts – from about 1,000 foreign scholarships annually to around 300 per year; and the non-absorption of the returning PhDs, who were forced to hold demonstrations outside the PM residence due to frustration.

These and a host of other complaints piled up in the PM Office, as the prime minister is the controlling authority of the HEC. Finally, after much thought, the Ministry of Education recommended that it would be in the fitness of things if the tenure of the HEC chairperson was two years (extendable) instead of four years as a huge amount of irreparable damage could be done in a four-year-long period by an incompetent individual. The HEC ordinance was accordingly changed.

Immediately after this, the HEC chairman held a number of press conferences falsely claiming that he was removed from office because he dared to audit the accounts of some research centres. After the careful analysis of the available documentary evidence, the Higher Education Commission (HEC), the very organisation that he chairs, stated in its press release that this was completely wrong, and it gave out the following statement:

“There have been incorrect statements made to the press by chairman HEC that he was removed from office because he tried to have the accounts of some research centres in Karachi University audited that he claimed are supervised by Dr Atta-ur-Rahman. The facts are as follows: a) Prof Atta-ur-Rahman has held no administrative position in any research centre or university for the last 20 years. No centres have been operating under his administrative or financial control since the year 2002.

“b) HEC had requested for academic and financial audit of [the] International Center for Chemical and Biological Sciences. The requests were strongly welcomed by the centre in writing. The only requirement of the centre was in connection with the academic audit – that it should be carried out by experts in the relevant fields of chemistry and biology, which was reasonable.

“An academic audit of the International Center for Chemical and Biological Sciences was conducted by 11 international experts in 2018. It was commissioned by the Ministry of Science and Technology and in their report all the 11 foreign experts were unanimous in their praise of the high quality of research work being conducted in the centre, and had recommended additional financial support for it.

“c) The Ministry of Education objected to the funding formula proposed by HEC for all university research centres and pointed out that it was not suitable, without precedence and that it would badly damage research. The issue therefore was never about the auditing of accounts or transparency, as has been wrongly portrayed by Chairman HEC in statements to the press.

“d) HEC had proposed to take away the autonomy and merge the budget of the International Center of Chemical and Biological Sciences with that of the University of Karachi. This was not possible as the government has a formal agreement with UNESCO that its financial autonomy will be maintained. This was pointed out by the Ministry of Education to HEC in writing.

“This centre is the UNESCO Center of Excellence, the TWAS Center of Excellence, OIC Center of Excellence and the WHO Collaborating Center. Its faculty members have won more civil awards and international prizes than any other academic Center in Pakistan, including one Nishan-e-Imtiaz, four Hilal-e-Imtiaz, 13 Sitara-e-Imtiaz and eight Tamgha-e-Imtiaz and many honorary doctorate degrees from foreign universities including the University of Cambridge UK. The work of the Center has been praised by many Nobel Laureates. The accounts of ICCBS are regularly audited by the government and are well maintained. The Center is headed by Prof Iqbal Choudhary, a leading scientist of Pakistan, since 2003”.

The above statements exposed the HEC chairperson’s incorrect statements. The powers of the commission given to the chairperson were withdrawn after he tried to illegally appoint an executive director. These powers are now vested with the HEC executive director.

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) needs a new visionary chairperson who strictly abides with the law and who can restore the respect and admiration that it enjoyed in the first decade of its existence.

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