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**Higher quality**

Following the establishment of the Higher Education Commission in 2002, and my appointment as its Founding Chairman, we decided to give the highest priority to the quality of education.

A major national programme was launched to develop and implement the systematic Quality Assurance (QA) standards, policies and processes in order to assure and enhance the quality of Higher Education in the country. An entire ecosystem was set up devoted to tackling various quality issues as per internationally prevailing standards and norms. It involved the development of a robust QA strategy, initiatives and systematically evaluating respective outcomes harmonized with the international QA standards and priorities. Dr. Zia Batool was trained abroad for this purpose and the dramatic changes brought about under her leadership helped create a new quality culture in higher education in Pakistan for the first time in the history of this country.

Quality Assurance was recognized as the key component of all higher education programmes, be it faculty development, research publications, human resource development, infrastructure needs or curriculum development. The Quality Assurance Programme of the HEC emphasized the raising of standards of higher education compatible with the best international standards. Key components of the Quality Assurance Programme of the HEC were the development of an efficient Quality Assurance & Enhancement system and the development of minimum quality standards. Stakeholder consultation at all stages was considered important and systematic consultation was therefore undertaken at every stage of the development of all aspects of the QA system. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of the HEC established Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) as its operational units in public and private-sector universities across the country.

Quality criteria were laid down and universities were persuaded to follow them. They included: 1) minimum requirements of PhD level faculty; 2) stipulation of credit hours of teaching and research; 3) assessment and research work requirements in order to conduct a PhD programme; 4) mandatory assessment of PhD theses by at least two foreign reviewers from academically advanced countries; and 5) strict minimum eligibility criteria for appointments at various faculty positions.

To eradicate the menace of plagiarism in research publications and PhD dissertations, a plagiarism policy was developed and executed in the HEIs of the country. ‘Turnit-in’ or ‘Ithenticate’ software was provided to all higher education institutions to check for plagiarism, and a cell was set up within the HEC to detect and punish the culprits. A two-tier process of accreditation was introduced by the HEC to ensure certain minimum standards in the degrees awarded which ensured their international recognition.

The criteria for the establishment of new HEIs are also developed to prevent mushroom growth of substandard higher education institutions, especially in the private sector. Strong collaborations were developed with agencies such as Asia Pacific Quality Network (Australia), International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (Berlin), Quality Assurance Agency of UK (QAA-UK), and others, and quality criteria developed in close consultation with them.

Improvement of universities required a major injection of funds. I persuaded the then president Musharraf when I was federal minister of Science and Technology to give a huge 6500 percent percent increase in the development budget of the Ministry of Science and which led to the establishment and strengthening of many new universities and strengthening of existing universities including NUST (Islamabad), COMSATS (Islamabad, Abbottabad etc), BUITMS (Quetta), and Virtual University (Lahore). The 3500 percent increase in the development budget for universities agreed to helped launch a major revival strategy for the universities.

The single most important factor that determines quality of education is the quality of the faculty. So, a very ambitious programme to train the brightest young men and women at top universities abroad was launched and thousands sent for PhD level training to leading universities in the US, Europe and Australia. The world’s largest Fulbright programme was initiated with half the funding being provided by HEC and the other half by the Fulbright Foundation.

To ensure that students sent abroad returned back and served the country, five key measures were introduced: 1) arrangement of jobs on their return; 2) access to a research grant of $ 100,000 to returning scholars; 3) a new contractual salary structure (‘tenure track’ system); 4) Access to a digital library with free availability of some 25,000 international journals and 65,000 textbooks; and 5) free access to sophisticated scientific instrumentation with THE HEC paying the analytical charges. As a result, there was a 98 percent return rate of students sent abroad.

To improve the quality of local PhDs, a limit was imposed on the number of PhD students that could be enrolled under any PhD supervisor, a system of HEC-recognized Supervisors introduced, and a split PhD programme was introduced whereby PhD students in Pakistan could travel abroad for 6 to 12 months and carry out a part of their PhD work in foreign universities under the supervision of eminent foreign scientists. A foreign faculty hiring programme was introduced under which hundreds of scientists settled abroad, largely of Pakistani origin, could return and serve in universities for short or long periods.

A huge transformation was witnessed during 2002 to 2012, with focus on quality teaching and research. Within a short period of six years, several of our universities gained respectable rankings in the Times (UK) Higher Education ranking system. These included NUST at 370 among the general universities, while Karachi University, NUST and UET Lahore were ranked at 223, 250, and 281 respectively in the natural sciences.

The change in the research environment brought about in that period of 2002-2008 led to a dramatic increase in research publications in the world's high-quality journals. Dr Javaid Laghari, the chairman of the HEC who followed me, played a wonderful part in continuing these reforms in spite of political opposition by corrupt MNAs who wanted their fake degrees accredited by the HEC.

There has been serious deterioration in the quality of education and research in recent years. The government has taken steps to reverse this trend and restore the quality culture that was the hallmark of the Higher Education Commission from its inception in 2002. New challenges lie ahead.

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