[**How not to run a university**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1690583/how-not-to-run-a-university)

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TODAY’S universities are complex businesses, not 19th-century workhorses of knowledge. They create and diffuse knowledge and act as a production force and a social lab for a better society. Experienced and knowledgeable faculty, modern infrastructure, technology and pedagogical changes are formidable targets to achieve before attracting quality students. These challenges require a reliable stream of finances and an enriching professional environment. Sustainability depends on student fees and competitive projects rather than just reliance on government grants. One’s own resources bring the autonomy needed to attract a more vibrant student body and industrial clientele.

Unfortunately, our universities are struggling with the first challenge. Our ideological thinking revolves around Newman’s The Idea of a University. But, in fact, our universities are overly bureaucratic. We adopted the idea of promoting access to higher education without correcting the funding and governance systems. Secondly, with a weak tradition of reading and writing, the new universities are competing with the old ones for survival. Thirdly, we have tinkered with the Anglo-American model to create a community of teachers and scholars without a fair system of accountability. Lastly, we expect universities to produce pious and patriotic Pakistanis.

Public-sector universities depend on government grants; they create a strong administrative environment, but a weak teaching and learning environment. Nominal student engagement, passive teaching methods and a mindset of treating students as children who know nothing inhibits debate and discussion. Accountability is not serious business.

A vice chancellor’s time is usually spent in securing greater funding from the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and the provincial governments. Connections and political clout do the trick. Hence the need for a VC who is acceptable to government functionaries. In the pursuit of funds, a VC may have to compromise on admissions, appointm­e­nts, promotions and education quality. This is partly because the regulator is also a funding agency.

We adopted the idea of promoting access to higher education without correcting the system.

Within the university, the registrar is the administrative mover and shaker whom deans and professors must approach for even a simple matter like casual leave or attending conferences, etc. This bureaucratic management structure, starting from the department head to the dean to the registrar, causes delays and leads to groupings and power struggles. It compromises teaching and the learning environment. The other administrative players are the controller of examinations and the treasurer. This power troika drives academic heads. No wonder professors prefer administrative functions to academic responsibilities.

Academic culture showcases non-PhD teachers and PhD researchers. A lecturer is supposed to teach at least four courses of three credit hours per semester. One credit hour means at least 16-18 hours of teaching in a semester. To address the dearth of experienced teachers, universities allow faculty to teach a maximum of three courses as visiting tea­cher in the parent university, but as many as they want in other universities and cities. Some are known to teach more than 20 courses in a semester. Administrative staff not otherwise eligible to teach are also accommodated. The same non-PhD visiting faculty also comprises the prospective candidates of PhD programmes.

How can one teach, work and study full time together? These teachers have USBs ready with PowerPoint presentations and MCQs question banks downloaded from a common source prepared by foreign professors. Using old editions of books and supplementary material is common. Question papers and assessment techniques are also an ignored area, with a weak monitoring system.

Professors and associate professors are generally seen as blue-eyed researchers in our system and do minimal teaching. They are rewarded not just for their PhD degree, but also for supervising research. Promotions and incentive structures are tilted towards publications. Universities pay publication fee, bear the cost of international conferences, besides giving incentives to publish. There are no checks to differentiate between high-impact and predatory publications. Again, 15 to 20 professors can be involved in one PhD thesis evaluation. A five-layer system is there to ensure quality. The last stage is publication in an impact-factor journal before awarding the degree. Yet, we have seen thousands of low-quality theses, hundreds of violations and plagiarism cases, and publications in fake and predatory journals.

Quality entered the picture 14 years ago as an HEC requirement. Quality Enhancement Cells were established. A junior person is usually given additional charge. Little culture change has followed. HEC’s Quality Assurance Agency arranges visits to universities to ensure that a system of participatory decision-making exists. All visits found governance to be the weakest area. Analysis based on programme review reports of HEC reveals that approximately 30pc of programmes were reportedly shut down because of deficient teaching faculty.

Students’ engagement in decision-making is minimal; their feedback is not factored into tailoring policies. QAA itself works on an ad-hoc basis, without a comprehensive quality code. A weak regulatory role leads to weak accountability.

The knowledge economy dream cannot be realised with 50,000 permanent faculty, of which 32pc have some sort of PhD and only 1pc (less than 500) are tenured professors for 250 universities. This is based on data. Tenure track is a special cadre for researchers. Not all universities have this special arrangement. Eighty per cent of the faculty are lecturers/assistant professors with little teaching experience. The PhD faculty is publishing on average 20,000 articles a year but only a few in tier-one journals. According to one study, very few articles are relevant to national needs. Pakistani research profile is very weak when it comes to collaborations between academia and industry, and competitiveness ranking. In the last year alone, 900 faculty members were reportedly involved in unethical research practices and academic fraud.

We are wasting our silver (faculty) and damaging our reputation. Instead of consolidating our undergraduate programmes, highly scarce teaching resource is being wasted in low-quality part-time and evening PhD programmes. Universities cannot deliver quality and relevant education without introducing the principles of efficiency, engagement and functionality.

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