**How the [HEI] sausage is made**

Dr Ayesha Razzaque

Thursday, Aug 10, 2023

At the beginning of this year, I contributed an op-ed (‘No, accreditation is not the answer’, Jan 2, 2023) about how in its waning days, members of the Punjab Assembly went on a university charter awarding bonanza.

When done by the book, the Punjab HEC first completes a pre-requisite technical review of a university applying for recognition. If the Punjab HEC’s evaluation is favourable, the recommendation works its way through the bureaucracy to the chief minister’s office and a bill for the establishment of the new university and award of a charter is then put to a vote in the Punjab Assembly.

What made this a scandal was the fact that the technical review was completely bypassed but bills went straight to a vote in the assembly. The grapevine had it that this was a quick and easy way for MPAs to ‘raise funds’ ahead of the next elections while also proclaiming themselves champions of higher education: A political win-win.

Now that the term of this parliament is coming to an end, some in Islamabad have taken a leaf out of Punjab’s playbook. In the twilight of its term, over the last few weeks, the National Assembly took up more than 50 bills for the establishment of universities and institutes, mostly through private member bills.

In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, a university charter is the closest thing we have to a casino licence for Las Vegas. In a country massively underserved by universities, even an incompetently run private university with a charter is a license to print money.

On July 30 and 31, the orders of the day of the National Assembly and the Senate of Pakistan included charters of 48 different higher education institutions (HEIs), with more added on August 7. A few of these are genuine applications that are accompanied by technical reviews and supporting recommendations from the HEC which entails land, infrastructure, and facilities ready for operation.

Bills then go to the Senate where they are referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Federal Education & Professional Training for study and recommendation before presentation on the Senate floor. However, at this time, movers of these bills are in such a hurry to see them passed and charters awarded that not only did they skip over prerequisite due diligence by the HEC but attempted to avoid scrutiny by the standing committee as well.

For the vast majority of HEIs named in parliamentary proceedings, there is absolutely nothing to be found – no website, no web presence, not even as much as a pin on Google Maps. For a few, there are identically or similarly named colleges that may be the ones being elevated to the status of HEIs, but there is no way to be sure because ownership information of these aspiring HEIs is not readily accessible to the public, unless you attend the proceedings of parliament and relevant committees in person. Since that is not practical for most people genuinely interested in the issue, I did it for you and spent almost all of last week following the progress of these university bills across houses and committees.

On August 8, bills for the establishment of 32 new HEIs were taken up by the Senate Standing Committee on Federal Education & Professional Training for scrutiny. Officials from the HEC were in attendance to provide their input on the status of applications. According to the HEC, of the 32 applications, only eight are supported for accreditation, seven are still being processed and 17 never bothered to approach the HEC.

The meeting began with an agreement by committee members to evaluate all bills by a consistent yardstick. I had some hope that this would be the step in the legislative process where sanity would finally prevail. By the time the committee got to the third bill, that principle had already been discarded.

Although the HEC recommended only eight bills for passage, the committee ended up supporting 19, with only 11 not passed and two referred to and passed through another committee. The HEC was accused of “red-tapism” and its technical input side-lined in the name of parliamentary supremacy over the HEC and bills were openly recommended for passage citing ‘credibility’ and ‘reputation’ of movers of bills and owners of the underlying “business”. I was most taken aback by all the things I imagined would go unsaid but were instead uttered plainly and publicly.

The tech industry has a name for products – hardware or software – that are announced either because they are still in the design and development stage or only exist as concepts but never make it to market: Vaporware. Like vaporware, a lot of these HEIs only exist in someone’s imagination.

On August 9, the standing committee’s report and recommendations were taken up in the Senate session. The agenda included bills for the establishment of 24 universities, some with HEC support but many without. The first few had HEC support and sailed right through, but as bills came up that lacked technical prerequisites and whose passage could not be justified, the session slowly began devolving into chaos ending in a suspension of the session, but not before seven or eight bills could be approved.

Once again, the arguments given in the Senate debate betrayed the lack of information and preparedness of its members. Like in the standing committee, no principle was being adhered to and exceptions were being made citing credibility and reputations of individuals.

Obtaining a charter for a private institution can significantly raise its value and earnings potential. If you own a private college and can engineer the grant of a charter for it, you will find many willing investors, or you can exit the ‘business’ by selling it off for a much higher price. What is happening is a money grab, a heist on the way out, an inconspicuous scheme to either enrich oneself or lend a helping hand to someone else. With a few exceptions, what we are witnessing here is the next big scam, the next big tragedy in which the victims will, once again, be students.

Now, going forward, if that is the way things are going to work for everybody that is one thing. But far more likely, even with the best intentions, this path will not be an option for us regular Joes and Janes.

My experience of watching the sausage being made has left me disgusted. It is entirely in line with every facet of life in this country – the same chaos of traffic on roads, the same absence from duty as teachers in ghost schools, the same lack of research and preparedness we see in TV show hosts. There are a few good people fighting the good fight, but they remain far too few.

It makes me wonder: what value is parliament adding to the decision-making process of which (private) HEI is fit for recognition and which is not? More than ever, I am convinced that this decision ought to be made transparently, by meeting the requirement of a technical checklist. Currently, if a private university wants to obtain a charter, all it has to worry about is having the right politicians with the right influence over colleagues in their pocket because fulfilling technical requirements is now optional.

And what is with this sudden surge of support in parliament for so many unfit institutes without regard for all technical considerations? Some senators were listed as movers of multiple university bills without knowing any details of its contents and staking their reputations. In at least one case, a senator listed as moving the bill was not aware of it and withdrew his name as soon as he learned his name had been attached without permission.

Where will all this take us? Once again, let Punjab be our guide. Newly accredited HEIs will aggressively advertise their chartered status, attracting even more students. The programmes these institutions will run will likely fail to receive accreditation. Institutional accreditation does not automatically bestow accreditation on their programmes – that is a separate process.

Fast forward: Students will graduate only to discover that the degrees they earned are worthless, setting up a new crisis. As in Punjab, public pressure will build, and private universities will lobby members of parliament to invoke its supremacy and attempt to pass legislation providing blanket amnesty to all deficient programs granting them accreditation status while claiming credit for cleaning up a mess of its own making.

And then people wonder why most degrees awarded by most universities are not worth the paper they are printed on.

The writer (she/her) has a PhD in Education.