**Lifting the quality of education**

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The 2023 World University Rankings were published recently by the Times Higher Education (THE). Three Asian universities are ranked among the top 20. These are Tsinghua University (No 16), Peking University (No 17) and the National University of Singapore (No 19), ahead of Cornell University, USA – indicating the emergence of Asian institutions in the leading world institutions. Quaid-e-Azam University was ranked in the 401-500 bracket, among the top 500 universities of the world, a highly cherished goal for developing countries.

Pakistan made an excellent beginning to reform the higher education sector with the establishment of the Higher Education Commission in October 2002. The programmes initiated by the HEC in those early years were visionary and path breaking, so much so that within five years of the establishment of the HEC several Pakistani universities became ranked among the top 500 of the world in THE-QS World University Rankings with National University of Science and Technology, Islamabad, leading the way, being ranked at No 470 in the year 2007, No 376 in the year 2008 and at No 350 in the year 2009 in general university rankings. Others ranked among the leading 500 universities in THE-QS subject rankings in that period included Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore and University of Karachi. Alas the government support waned in subsequent years and the universities dropped out of the THE World University Rankings.

USAID undertook a comprehensive study of the programmes of the HEC undertaken during 2003-2008 and published a 151-page detailed report of their findings in 2009. The team was led by Dr Fred M. Hayward, an experienced international consultant, Dr Gerald Boardman, a higher education specialist, and several other eminent international experts. The study involved physical site visits of USAID education experts to eighteen universities and institutes in Islamabad, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Lahore, Karachi and other cities of Pakistan to determine the actual state of affairs. They interviewed hundreds of teachers, students, vice-chancellors, deans, departmental chairs, principal investigators and technical staff of science research projects as well as officials of the HEC, Ministry of Education and others over a 12-month period.

This first comprehensive report of the HEC conducted by USAID concluded by paying glowing tributes to the excellent work done in Pakistan by the HEC in implementing the Medium-Term Development Framework (MTDF) with primary focus on the quality of higher education and not just on numbers. The three main thrust areas identified by the HEC in the MTDF were: quality of higher education, access of students to higher education and the relevance of higher education to national needs. The report concluded that the HEC had made very significant progress in each of these areas within a short span of six years.

The 151-page report summarized its observations with the following remarks: “The long overdue transformation of higher education in Pakistan under the leadership of the HEC has made solid progress over the last five years. What is most impressive is the breadth of reforms – faculty development, quality assurance, infrastructure rehabilitation, information technology staff training, research facilities, academic publications, increased access, improved accountability, expansion of campuses, and improved salaries and working conditions – and its insistence on quality improvement throughout the system.”

It went on to state: “Faculty development, increased access for students (at almost 15 percent a year), science and technology improvement, infrastructure development, and quality improvement have been particularly successful areas. We applaud the leadership of the HEC for its vision, planning, and project implementation … one of the most successful models in the developing world.” This strong endorsement by an eminent external assessment agency comprising top US education experts put to rest the remarks of some critics who had tried to falsify the true picture and continue to do so till this day.

Endorsement of these conclusions of USAID experts also came from other independent assessments carried out by the World Bank, the British Council and by the UN Commission on Science, Technology and Development (UNCSTD) led by a famous Austrian scientist, Prof Michael Rode. Prof Rode was the chairman of the UNCSTD and was given a high civil award by the government of Pakistan for his contributions to the higher education sector of our country.

Commenting on the spectacular developments of the higher education sector in those early years, he wrote: “The United Nations Commission on Science and Technology has closely monitored the development in Pakistan in the past years, coming to the unanimous conclusion that Prof Rahman’s policy and programme is a ‘best-practice’ example for developing countries aiming at building their human resources and establishing an innovative, technology-based economy.”

“Those who have closely watched the development of higher education in Pakistan from outside and have been involved in the numerous programmes established by Prof Rahman in the past eight years can testify that the progress made was breath-taking and has put Pakistan ahead of comparable countries in numerous aspects.”

One important factor to judge the quality of research of any country is the number of international citations that research publications attract. The annual growth in citations of the research publications of Pakistani authors by other international academics is remarkable. According to the 2023 THE World University Rankings report, Pakistan is now ranked number four in the world in terms of the rate of rise of citations of Pakistani publications by other international scientists. We have also now caught up with India in per capita research output, although we were 400 per cent behind India in 2003, no mean achievement.

Thomson Reuters has also applauded the progress made by Pakistan in an article, ‘Another BRIC in the Wall’, in which it compared the increase in percentage of highly cited articles from Pakistan with those in Brazil, Russia, India and China and concluded that Pakistan was ahead of these countries in the rate of rise in quality research articles.

However, we still have a long way to go. Our undergraduate education is of poor standard, largely because of the dismal state of our government schools and colleges that are grossly neglected. Since the foundations of the higher education sector are laid at the school and college levels, and since the universities cannot cope with the earlier deficiencies, we need to uplift the entire education sector with special focus on lower-level education.

University education must also foster innovation and entrepreneurship which is sorely missing. University-industry linkages are almost non-existent and technology parks are only a few in number. It is to address these shortcomings that HEC is now working hard under the leadership of its new chairman, Prof Mukhtar Ahmed, so that Pakistan can develop a strong technology-driven knowledge economy.

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