**Pakistani universities and governance**

Friday, Nov 26, 2021

Dr Javaid Laghari

University governance is much more complex than what many believe, including those in government who intervene in university affairs. In reality, unless one has actually worked in a senior administrative position at a university, a person will find it difficult to fully comprehend a university’s ecosystem, which is unlike many other government organisations’.

A university has many stakeholders, all of whom are educated and include faculty members, scholars, researchers, administrators, syndicate, Senate, academic councils, students, alumni, parents, and the community. Their peers within Pakistan and around the world are also intellectuals, which naturally brings in a sense of collaboration and competition, leading to improved performance. So, what holds universities back in delivering their best?

Universities around the world are autonomous bodies that establish academic and functional policies and procedures on their own. However, in Pakistan, the government is highly involved in universities’ governance and, sometimes, even ‘rules’ public universities. For those who may be surprised at this notion, it is important to count the number of government bodies -- and individuals -- that are involved in universities’ operations since the day they are established.

In Pakistan, universities, whether public or private, are established through an Act, where both the National Assembly and the Senate, including their standing committees, must approve university bills. For provincial government-run universities, it is the provincial assemblies. This process alone involves hundreds of MPAs. Where else in the civilised world, except in colonial countries, does this happen?

The US has the most comprehensive and one of the best higher education (HE) systems in the world. More than 7,000 higher education institutions (HEIs) exist in the US today, with everything from large public and private research institutions to small religious colleges to for-profit institutions located fully on the web.

The US HE sector produces over one million associate’s degrees, nearly two million bachelor’s degrees, over one million master’s degrees, and over 200,000 doctoral degrees every year. Despite these numbers, American universities are not ‘regulated’ by the governments -- federal and state. The universities are fully autonomous and are governed by their Boards and administration, which consist of faculty members.

In the US, the federal and state governments or Congress do not approve university charters, unlike they do in Pakistan. American universities only need to get registered with the appropriate department, which is a trivial step. The Federal Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) does not set standards on how universities should teach, research, or provide service to the community, like the HEC in Pakistan does. The HEA only states that an institution must be “accredited” for its students to be “eligible for federal government grants and student loans.”

Accreditation is the key to quality education, cutting-edge research and community service. It is a non-governmental system under which non-profit autonomous private bodies, such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), etc for program accreditation, work with HEIs to review and critique their operations.

The HEI provides a ‘self-assessment’ tool that an accreditor then uses as a framework for examining an institution’s successes and challenges. Accreditation bodies, which are autonomous and highly professional, decide the fate of academic programs and HEIs. In Pakistan, even though HEIs and academic programmes are reviewed by both the HEC and accreditation bodies, the quality becomes highly questionable as accreditation bodies are themselves politicised and established by the government.

In the US, all universities, whether public or private, are eligible to receive research funding from both federal and state governments. There is no HEC. While there are federal bodies that fund basic research, like the NSF, the bulk of research funding comes directly from the departments such as the department of defence or energy, from agencies like NASA, NIH, etc, and from the corporate world.

In Pakistan, the president, chief ministers, governors, and ministers (federal and provincial) ‘decide’ on the appointment of a university’s vice chancellor (VC). This process, sometimes, leaves out many qualified candidates. The federal and provincial governments then interfere through ministers, secretaries, and the federal and provincial HECs or HEDs in their governance. The HEC through its control of quality and standards, and being the only source of funding, sometimes acts like a mafia, wanting to impose its agenda on universities, as it happened during the tenures of the last two chairpersons.

In a recent move, two policies, the PhD and undergraduate policies, which were unilaterally imposed by the last HEC chairperson were rejected by 178 out of the 180 VCs attending a three-day meeting held in Bhurban in the first week of November. On university syndicates, government functionaries serve (or rule), which in most cases includes local MPAs, whose only interest is figuring out how to occupy the university’s land or have their people get a university job.

The key challenge for the Pakistan HE sector is to restore the autonomy of varsities, which was taken away by the Federal Universities Ordinance. The government should amend these Acts and ordinances to allow universities to be fully autonomous. The approval of universities’ charters by parliament and the assemblies must also end.

Politicians and government functionaries must stop serving on university bodies. VCs and other senior administrators must be appointed by universities themselves through a merit-driven and transparent selection procedure. Universities must be free to set their policies following the standards of accreditation bodies and the HEC.

The HEC must extend support for capacity-building for small universities. Only then we will be able to reform our education system.

The writer is a former chairperson of the HEC.