Postgrad mirage

B Y W A L I Y A M I R Z A | 1/19/2020

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| IN the 1970s-80s, being a Pakistani working abroad meant you had achieved an unparalleled level of success. You were earning in a foreign currency, part of an elite professional diaspora (doctors, engineers, businessmen, etc) and thriving in supportive economies. While nostalgia for their days abroad is aplenty among older generations, younger Pakistanis might find it difficult to identify what makes life abroad unique today.  Let`s speak strictly of higher education.  Earlier, one would be hard pressed to find Pakistanis with a foreign degree. Now, with globalisation commodifying international education, the pressure to attain a foreign degree is undeniably high. Undergraduates bide their time, accumulate a few years` worth of experience and apply for an MSc, MBA or MA in their preferred areas of study. With the advent of a number of hotticket scholarships such as the Fulbright, Chevening and the Commonwealth, droves of them are drawn to acquiring a foreign postgraduate programme.  These days, graduates entering the job market find key positions already filled with people with an international education. Everyone has a Master`s degree, and almost always not from Pakistan. They can be found in all sectors, from social to corporate to technical industries.  When and how did this happen? The foreign postgraduate storm has played out in Pakistan for some time now. It is worth examining how different things are today than they were 40 years ago. Previously, tuition rates for both private and public universities in foreign countries were low, owing to a very different economic setup. Inflation was low, investment in education up, and enrolment much lower than it is today.  The international competitiveness of a foreign postgraduate degree is exciting; it is also what makes the funding experience different than before, when international students were less common. The middleclass Pakistani dream is thus facing a crisis: education is becoming more common and, as a result, less distinguished. Not only does this have an impact on graduates` job market value, it re duces the value of the inflate d `study abroad` experience.  Graduates of international postgraduate programmes are expected to display a level of technical sophistication as they work. In exchange, they are paid higher salaries, and offered more work responsibilities. The equation seems simple enough; but the distinction of a foreign Master`s degree quickly loses its position in the market. There are a few reasons for this: one, with time, employees need be retrained to fulfil market requirements; two, there already seems tobe a good supply of employed Master`s graduates in various industries; and three, postgraduate programmes only add incremental value to the training received from undergraduate programmes.  The return on investment for a postgraduate degree is significantly overrated particularly when looking at the quantifiable variables. Consider the payoff in terms of what one receives with a standard postgraduate programme: a year or two taken off one`s career in exchange for an award from an international school. Time spent on assignments and lectures could be well spent gaining work experience in Pakistan, besides earning money. Mental space taken up by fulfilling course requirements and writing theses can be replaced with technical 1(nowledge learnt on the job.  Programmes advertise two main advantages: increased technical expertise and skillset development that can be applied to your career. However, it is up to graduates to adopt a long-term approach throughwhich the programme can be geared towards a particular role or organisation. There is no guarantee that possessing a postgraduate degree will increase your exposure in either of these brackets.  Funnelled into the postgraduate experience, therefore, is a ton of money, effort and mentallabour that may not necessarily translate to useful future outcomes.  To extract the greatest worth from an international postgraduate experience, one must have several ducks lined up and ready to shoot. Money must be taken care of: both tuition and living expenses. Extensive research into the programme itself associated graduates, alumni placements and prospective careers must be conducted with high priority. Admissions and subsequent adjustment to a fresh academic and social environment must be handled with caution. Finally, the expense of mental labour and time must be considered, as a returned postgraduate in worse intellectual shape is better off with just his undergraduate degree.  In short, if the aim is to equip oneself with tools to survive today`s world and economy, there are cheaper,better and less straining options for a Pakistani citizen than an international postgraduate degree. These include local postgraduate diplomas, online courses and certifications. The writer is a SOAS graduate and works in the development sector |