**[Professing quality, practising none](https://www.dawn.com/news/1679399/professing-quality-practising-none)**

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QUALITY in higher education is often debated without much thought put into what ‘quality’ actually means in this context. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which pertains to education, requires inclusive, affordable and equitable options for lifelong learning. With reference to higher education, ‘quality’ means equipping minds to think critically, innovatively and tolerantly.

As former head of quality assurance at the Higher Education Commission (HEC), I have had the opportunity to browse through the mission statements of almost all our universities. These are loaded with powerful words — ‘excellence’, ‘quality’, ‘world-class’, ‘state-of-the-art research and teaching’, ‘preparing students for leadership’, etc — but say little about how these universities actually comply with their policies. How can a university offer teaching programmes without having the relevant faculty, lab or materials? How can faculty teach in classes without having the requisite skills?

This is just the start of what is wrong with our higher education system. Here, vice chancellor appointments are not made against any requirements set out in a university’s mission statement. Nor is a VC’s tenure judged against improvements in a varsity’s teaching and learning culture. Instead, success is judged on the number of new postgraduate programmes launched, students enrolled, or admissions and jobs given to appease political powers. Even worse, universities that are otherwise deficient in essential teaching resources start offering fancy programmes in order to benefit from government incentives or just to capitalise on market demand.

It is no wonder that though these universities make grand claims, their classrooms remain full of students least interested in their own learning. Students are obsessed with grades, not skill; teachers do not question pedagogical practices and are forced to teach a set curriculum in limited time.

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What are we doing to this generation? We are evidently not preparing them to live up to any expectations of employers in particular and the society in general. How long can we go on like this? The ongoing pandemic has challenged universities to either evolve or vanish. Ours simply cannot compete against the tidal wave of low-cost digital opportunities available at home from much more advanced universities of the world.

Perhaps things are in such a state because quality higher education has never been seen as a priority in our society. For the aspiring middle class, higher education is a mark of distinction and a requirement for white-collar government jobs with a pension. Those who do not get government jobs try their luck in the private sector and NGOs. The children of the elite can afford Ivy League universities. They later look for jobs in multinationals and INGOs. The trader and feudal classes in any case have never considered higher education relevant to their interests. To them, employability or a suitable marriage proposal is the only reason for attaining a degree.

It is also unfortunate that quality education has never had a constituency within the state. Government jobs have never demanded efficiency or productivity: only obedience and subordination. Government employees enjoy permanent jobs; insubordination is the only act that invokes punishment. In such an environment, critical thinking, innovation and a desire for change can only bring about a forced exit.

Parents and students, too, have a set of misplaced priorities. Medicine and engineering top their list for admissions. Institutional rankings of quality have become markers for social prestige and exclusivity. Doctorates are in demand not because students have some philosophical question to ponder, but for their obsession with prefixes like ‘Dr’ or, our only innovation, ‘Professor Dr’. High enrolment in Islamiat and Pakistan Studies doctorate programmes shows not so much our love for religion or country, but a hunger for accolades that come without much investment in innovation.

The HEC had replaced the University Grants Commission with the mission to get due recognition for Pakistani degrees. It promptly triggered a race to establish a ‘recognised university’ in every district. In this period of expansion, it was hoped that competition between public and private universities would arrest declining standards. Many changes were introduced to this end: annual examinations were replaced by a semester system and rote learning was to be cured through MCQs, short questions and assignments. Exams were to be conducted at different points in the semester. Yet, we still cannot adequately measure the skills of our graduates.

After the inception of HEC, two-year Bachelor’s and Master’s programmes were mixed up to create brand new honours programmes, but universities were also allowed to continue two-year BA and MA programmes in the name of affordability. This allowed blatant discrimination between the rich and the poor. As a result, we now have two-year BA, 3.5-year BA (Honours) and four-year honours programmes, as well as one-year Master’s, 1.5-year Master’s and two-year Master’s and MPhil programmes. We have experimented too much with our PhD programmes as well. Initially, there were MPhil leading to PhD programmes. Later this was discontinued. Now, we are again advocating a three-tier system. These programmes are not directly comparable in terms of competencies and skills. How can you measure quality in this hotchpotch, when quality itself is defined so vaguely?

The mere signing of the Bologna Process could not have magically uplifted our higher education sector. The Bologna Process was based on an outcome-based, student-centred learning approach. It required prior recognition of qualifications, which then enabled credit transfers between universities across Europe. The protocols took 10 years of building consensus before they were formally adopted. The purpose of the Bologna reforms was to enhance competitiveness, employability and mobility of students across the European Union. We have failed on all these counts. We do not even transfer credits within universities in Pakistan, but dream of doing so with universities abroad.

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