**Saving higher education**

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Part - II

By Dr Naazir Mahmood

Why would a Pakistani settled in the US for as long as an academic and scholar come back to his country to lead its Higher Education Commission? Such people have already earned a decent amount of money and prestige in their career and there is hardly anything else they can aspire for.

Dr Tariq Banuri won his position as chairman of the HEC in 2018 after a tough competition. His appointment was entirely transparent and above board. He assumed charge in May 2018 with hopes that the higher education sector in the country would come out of its morass. Banuri was clear about the challenges the HEC was facing, and he knew what path to take. He embarked upon a journey to transform higher education in the country and take it to a higher level where it could produce some solid results.

The first was the challenge of the deteriorating quality of PhD degrees. In the past 20 years, there have been hundreds of cases of plagiarism and thousands of PhD degrees have been awarded. Not all of these degrees had the standard to match a doctoral qualification; but there was a race among universities to award as many PhDs as possible in a short span of time.

When the HEC under the new leadership tried to prevent fraudulent behaviour and attempted to improve lax monitoring, all hell broke loose. Soon there was a new PTI government in power and the old guards reemerged with their Musharraf-era dreams to reoccupy lucrative and powerful positions. The new government had plenty of common traits with dictatorships of yore. A longing for authoritarianism was evident from the word go and the same mantra of change and reform once again circulated without much thought and planning. Education also became a victim of this adventurism.

While Dr Banuri was trying to improve standards, he had to look at what had happened in the past. A thorough audit was required to see where huge funding had gone. Any thorough audit of grants would have disclosed the real nature of mismanagement and loss of investment. This was not acceptable and even within the HEC there were elements that had to protect the past, no matter how disgusting it was. The old guards were active in writing more and more papers and articles in newspapers. A sense of nostalgia was being created for a golden past when strongmen ruled the roost without any accountability to parliament or anyone for that matter. If not a military dictator, a strong president would do.

Dr Banuri had to face an onslaught of government machinery and all those who had benefited from the system that had favoured a selected few. It was evident that there was little to show from the long list of research grants that had been doled out to certain centres and departments without much accountability. All those claims by blue-eyed academics and institutes that gobbled up billions were hollow. In the name of improving science and technology, a facade had been constructed that had no intellectual foundations apart from shimmering buildings and clocks of glazed tiles.

Had there been any credible discoveries and inventions, there would have been some impact on our exports, or at least on productivity in the country. With hundreds of billions spent, there should have been even some trace of social benefits – none. Dr Banori found that the real reason behind all this was the poor design of the whole HEC mechanism which encouraged rent-seeking behaviour. There was a near-complete absence of monitoring and evaluation. He tried to introduce one, and that was not acceptable to the government and to the old guards who had managed to sneak in with old promises of bringing about a scientific and technological revolution in the country.

Dr Banuri also started a number of programmes to enhance the quality of the faculty. Most of the previous programmes were poorly designed and improperly executed. Just to cite one example, take the infamous foreign faculty hiring programme which was launched in the 2000s and consumed a lot of resources without producing any desired results. Most of those hired turned out to be those who could reciprocate with similar favours such as invitations to foreign countries, fully-funded trips and inclusion of names in papers. Another example is the increasingly controversial tenure track system which did more harm than benefit the faculty.

The weaknesses of the underlying system were not easy to eradicate, and the new chairman was facing stiff resistance. Most of all, non-transparent evaluation systems needed rectification, but those who benefitted from it were not for changing it. Since the inception of the HEC there has been so much stress on ‘research’ that the faculty ended up neglecting their teaching responsibilities. This produced a lot of cosmetic research at the cost of good teaching that in turn harmed the quality of student learning at universities – and now a large number of poor-quality research journals galore.

The HEC and its officials had become fond of interfering in universities and there were no clear rules to govern this interference. An absence of such rules harms good governance and when Dr Banuri tried to develop new rules, there was stiff opposition. Ideally there should be no ad-hoc interference and all management should be transparent, but that is not acceptable to those benefiting from a lack of transparency. There was a need for coherent policies to replace the fragmented ones that were in use. The HEC hierarchy itself has been manipulative and this manipulation worked at various levels.

All the changes that were suggested were an anathema to the PTI government and to the old guard. So, they struck in March 2021 and removed the chairman who was to complete his term in May 2022. The step was illegal and unconstitutional so the government enacted a law to reduce the term of the chairman from four to just two years. Dr Banuri went to the court, which restored him. The government then used the commission to transfer chairman’s power to the acting executive director who is a retired bureaucrat.

The four-year term of the chairman is anyway coming to a close in May 2022, but his one year was wasted by the government. He deserves a fresh appointment for a new four-year term as the government is simply unable to manage higher education in this manner. There has not been any regular ED for the past three and half years now, and ad-hoc arrangements have done tremendous harm to higher education in the country.

Concluded

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