**Strengthening education**

Atta-ur-Rahman

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At a meeting organised by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and hosted by the British Council last week in Bhurban, the vice chancellors (VCs) of Pakistan’s public and private sector universities gathered to review the undergraduate and postgraduate policies introduced by Dr Tariq Banuri, the former HEC chairman.

Out of the 180 VCs who participated in this huge event, 178 completely rejected these policies which they claimed had done huge damage to the higher education sector within a short 2.5-year-long period and which had almost destroyed the excellent work done by the HEC in the previous 15 years.

One of the astonishing steps proposed by the policies recommended by Dr Banuri was that Pakistan should abandon the requirements of three clear cycles of education – bachelor’s, master’s and PhD – laid down under the Bologna protocol and agreed to by most countries as the basic framework for higher education qualifications. It is named after the University of Bologna, where the Bologna declaration was signed by education ministers from 29 European countries, in 1999. This framework defines qualifications in terms of learning outcomes: what students know and can do after completing their degrees.

It also defines the three cycles and the extent of credit hours that students must take to become eligible for bachelor’s, master’s and PhD degrees. We all know well what the standards of our students who pass out of colleges with a bachelor’s degree are. Expecting them to go directly into a PhD programme without a master’s degree makes no sense whatsoever. Had it been implemented, it would have led to the derecognition of PhDs from Pakistan. The VCs at the Bhurban meeting therefore almost unanimously rejected these policies proposed by the former chairman of the HEC.

A common complaint made by the VCs was that there was no consultation with stakeholders and that radical changes were introduced without bringing the matter up before the Vice Chancellors’ Committee and getting its suggestions. The lack of coordination with the regulatory bodies that provide accreditations such as the Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC), the National Business Education Accreditation Council (NBEAC), the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) and others before imposing the new policy was also cited as a reason for the rejection, and called a step towards destroying the higher education system. The Association of Private Sector Universities of Pakistan (APSUP) had also rejected those new policies outright.

Another huge setback to higher education due to these policies was that research grants for young faculty members were almost stopped by the HEC. This was a crushing blow to aspiring young faculty members throughout Pakistan. Known as the National Research Programme for Universities (NRPU), it was a vitally important HEC initiative under which 1200 to 1500 grants were given each year to budding young faculty members, thereby laying the foundations of a robust career in research and innovation.

In a disastrous move, these research grants were reduced to less than a hundred grants by the former chairman. This meant that thousands of young faculty members who relied on these grants to establish themselves in early stages of their careers were deprived of research funding. Despite funds being available, some 4000 grant applications accumulated in the HEC and gathered dust while thousands of faculty members across Pakistan kept sending reminders and waiting for the HEC to respond, leading to mass frustration among young researchers in the country.

Fortunately, the HEC is now on its way to recovery, and several positive things have happened after the removal of the former chairman. First, the government has announced an increase of Rs15 billion in the operational budget of universities. The HEC budget had been frozen at about Rs15 billion; the former chairman didn’t plead for an increase in the budget, and the Ministry of Finance was wrongly informed that universities had plenty of funds. However, the reality is that university budgets have decreased by over 70 percent in real terms due to inflation, increase in salaries, sharp increase in costs of electricity, gas and petrol, and 40 percent increase in cost of foreign currency needed to import equipment and consumables.

Second, the contractual system of salaries – tenure track system – was allowed to decay. Under this system, thousands of the brightest young Pakistani scholars were being appointed at much higher salaries in universities, but such appointments required regular international assessment. The tenure track system was revived after I brought the importance of this appointment system in attracting the best talent at home and from abroad to the attention of Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The government has agreed to increase salaries by 35 percent of all employees – for best performers, the salary increment will be 100 percent – who are appointed under this system, providing a much-needed impetus to attract bright minds to opt for careers in academia and research. Indeed, it was the introduction of this system by me, when I was the HEC chairman back in 2004, that had set alarm bells ringing in India, resulting in a presentation to the Indian cabinet and the then prime minister, in 2006.

Third, the government has decided to strengthen science, technology and innovation by funding meticulously designed projects under the Knowledge Economy Task Force that is chaired by the prime minister; I am the vice chairman of the task force. These projects are being prepared in close consultation with Pakistani experts available within Pakistan and abroad. They are being funded in carefully selected fields such as industrial biotechnology, artificial intelligence, advanced agriculture, materials engineering and other emerging areas.

The close collaboration with the UK-based network of top Pakistani academics ‘UPSIGN’ in this respect is gratefully acknowledged. Projects of around Rs100 billion are in the process of being funded in science institutions across the country. When one considers that the development budget of the Ministry of Science and Technology was only Rs0.8 billion about two years ago, these projects are likely to bring a huge change in the science and technology landscape of Pakistan.

In this new world order, innovation is driving economies, and Pakistan can progress rapidly only if it develops a strong knowledge-based economy. For this, the country must be able to manufacture and export high technology (high-value) goods.

The writer is chairman PM National Task Force on Science and Technology, former minister, and former founding chairman of the HEC.

Email: ibne\_sina@hotmail.com