The Chakwal test

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| THE Government Postgraduate College for Boys Chakwal (GPGC) is now a just a memory. An institution that had educated a generation of students from middle, lower-middle and poor backgrounds including this writer has been absorbed into the newly notified University of Chakwal (UoC).  With the stroke of a pen, the GPGC, along with the Old Kathcheri and newly built Balkasar campuses of the University of Engineering and Technology (Taxila) in Chakwal have been merged into the notified and yet-to-be built UoC, with all their assets, staff and buildings passing into the care of the new varsity and its syndicate.  In fact, the UoC has been brought into premature fruition despite vociferous objectionsraisedbytheChakwalEngineers Forum; GPGC`s Student Action Committee and Old Boys Association; and the GPGC College Bachao Tehreek launched by members of Punjab`s educationist fraternity, college faculty, civil society and students.  They have also challenged the notification issued pertaining to the establishment of the UoC in the high court.  The GPGC was the only institution of fering FSc, FA, BS and MA courses at an affordable cost to the local population. The decision to abolish the postgraduate college and merge it into the new UoC deprives localstudents access toqualityhighereducation at their doorsteps. This is because once the university is operational a fee hike will become inevitable especially in the backdrop of drastic cutsin the provincial higher education budget and funding from the Higher Education Commission.  With the Punjab-wide open merit system inherent in the new university`s charter, a large number of local students will be unable to compete and make it to the university roll. The GPGC used to cater to these local students of not necessarily high merit, but now in its absence they will lose access to both the only affordable postgraduate college and also the UoC.  The other major concern regarding the establishment of UoC springs from the undue political influence expected in the university`s daily operations. The University of Chakwal Act 2019, under which the UoC has been established, empowers the university syndicate to take academic and financial decisions about the assets, tuition fees and daily operations of the institution. However, the proposed 21-member syndicate as enshrined in the UoC Act appears to be heavily tilted towards the local commercial and political interests. Its members will include at least threelocal MPAs;five representatives from the private sector; a representative fromthe provincial higher education department and another from the law and parliamentary affairs department, undermining the representation of academics, lecturers and students.  Fortunately, the GPGC faculty and students have proposed a win-win solution which seeks to marry the local aspirations for the establishment of the UoC and the preservation of the GPGC as its affiliated college (the college was previously affiliated with the University of Gujrat) while retaining control over its building, assets, enrolment, current levels of fees and courses. Yet this compromise solution has been given short shrift by the Punjab Higher Education Commission.  Meanwhile, students at the Chakwal campus of the University of Engineering and Technology (Taxila) are also protesting against the absorption of their institution into the UoC on grounds that engineering, unlike social science, is a specialised and technical subject that has tradi-tionally been taught and researched in stand-alone engineering university settings.  Furthermore, in a related Punjablevel reorganisation of higher education, the only local women`s college in Chakwal is also in danger ofbeing converted to a community college or an associate college offering only vocational education. However, considering that there are already a couple of vocational colleges in Chakwal, the need to convert the only women`s institution of fering a wide range of courses from intermediate to bachelor-level degrees into a community college or associate college seems to be redundant.  Broadly speaking, the blind replication of foreign education models without due consideration of ground realities can hardly be expected to improve the quality of higher education in the province. This policy is not just unpopular among the local people, it is also deeply flawed and antipoor and needs serious rethinking. The authorities need to consult a wide array of stakeholders and address concerns around accessibility and affordability before embarking on any ambitious but detrimental reforms.  The writer is a public health consultant.  drarifazad@gmail.com twitter@Arifazad5 |