**The crisis of quality in education**

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A recent article in these pages by a former HEC chairman paints a rosy picture of the policies introduced during his tenure (2002-2008), and criticises me for reversing some of these policies. The claims are either false or misleading or both.

The author claims to have brought a "razor-sharp focus" on quality. However, all knowledgeable observers know that the rot in quality is the direct result of his policies.

Most of the claims made in the article are either outright false, or are attempts to hog the credit for actions taken by subsequent chairmen. High speed internet became available to universities only after 2015. The National Academy of Higher Education was actually shut down, and revived only in 2019. The plagiarism policy was not introduced until 2008, and that too because of the epidemic of plagiarism during his tenure. Quality standards were unknown before 2009, and began getting enforced in earnest only after admonition by a cabinet committee in 2014. Graduate programmes were started in haste and without appropriate safeguards for transparency, efficiency, or equity.

But let us be generous and ignore the falsehoods and short cuts. Let us grant for the sake of argument that thousands of people did earn PhDs at good universities, learnt to do good research, came back to Pakistan to work at high salaries, received generous research grants, and had free access to books, journals, and expert lectures.

But then, should it not have produced visible and verifiable results by now – 19 years later? Shouldn't the quality of both education and research have gone up? Why, then, are we faced with a veritable educational emergency (which, by the way, is the title of another self-serving article by the same gentleman)?

Why haven't the generously remunerated PhDs and postdocs begun to provide better education for our students? Why do our graduates find it increasingly difficult to land jobs or admissions to top PhD programmes? Why do employers complain about their lack of preparedness and competence? And why are the only exceptions to this abysmal situation universities that could safely ignore the HEC, including medicine and engineering universities (because they are regulated not by the HEC but by PMC and PEC), or independent non-profit universities or universities managed by the armed forces?

Likewise, shouldn't the PhD trained faculty have produced path-breaking research by now, especially with the added incentive of research grants? These grants, by the way, had reached about a billion rupees a year by 2018 (after which, the funding was tripled under a revamped system). One hears ad nauseam that the number of research papers increased rapidly. But where is the impact of these papers on the ground? Where are the new medicines and vaccines, the new technologies, the innovative policy solutions, or at least some new coherent analyses of social or political issues? After two decades of university research the only thing that can be reasonably claimed is that the money has been spent.

This pathology is best exemplified by the ICCBS, a research institution controlled tightly by the former chairman for over three decades, in violation of all professional norms. The ICCBS's mandate is to produce medicines and vaccines from natural resources, and for this it has received – please hold your breath – Rs40 billion over two decades. How many medicines or vaccines has it produced? Zero.

The reason things went wrong is that quality is not only about the ‘what’, but also and far more importantly about the ‘how’. Some things ought not to have been done at all, to be sure, but more importantly, even things that ought to have been done should have been done properly – with the right intention and in the right framework. Only then can they produce good results; otherwise, they will be inconsequential or even counterproductive.

The fact is that almost everything was done with the wrong intention and without essential safeguards. Instead of an educational heaven, subsequent chairpersons inherited a gathering disaster as well as the unenviable task of cleaning up this mess.

Take scholarships. They are great, but only if the best candidates are selected, not personal favourites or future clients, who are more likely to flunk out or return without acquiring any useful knowledge. After two decades of meandering, it was only in 2019 that work began on revamping the Scholarships Division, staffing it with professionals, introducing modern management systems, and supporting it with a revived testing body (the ETC), also designed on professional lines.

New PhD programmes were needed, of course, but the HEC's role should have been to articulate ideals and objectives, build consensus and partnerships with the best universities, set up transparent assessment systems, appoint high quality staff in quality assessment divisions, build robust real-time databases, and establish meaningful criteria. This is what we have tried to do through the PhD policy 2020. In 2002, in contrast, the HEC actually lowered standards through narrow quantitative targets (of the type that the former chairman has listed with great pride), encouraging rent seeking by universities and faculty members, and pressuring ill equipped institutions into starting sub-optimal programmes.

Research grants produce results only if funding goes to the best and most promising proposals, and they are made to deliver. The systems introduced in 2002 proved to be the kiss of death; they steered funding to favoured institutions through non-transparent procedures, incompetent staff, handpicked external ‘experts’, and vague and irrelevant criteria, and avoided any accountability mechanisms. The Research Policy 2019 addresses these deficiencies.

Higher remuneration for faculty members is great if performance evaluation systems are based on substantive criteria, not the fake ones introduced in 2002.

The undergraduate degree is the bedrock of the higher education system. It should have received top priority, not treated as a stepchild. The first undergraduate policy was introduced only in 2020.

In short, things could have been done right, but were done wrong, and the results are plain for everyone to see. After two decades, we do not need to hear about things that were tried to improve quality. We only need to see the results: Has education equipped students with the competencies needed in the 21st century? Has research produced results and made life better? Has the quality of professional services improved? And have we, at last, developed a culture of inquiry, professionalism, tolerance, and truth?

If the answer to all this is in the negative, which it is, someone should be held accountable. Someone should be asked: What happened to the money? What happened to the billions that were given to improve the quality of education and research? And, in particular, what happened to the Rs40 billion allocated to one centre to produce medicines and vaccines?

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