**University quality**

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Following my appointment as the founding chairman of the Higher Education Commission in 2002, the highest priority was given to four aspects of education in our universities: improving the quality of higher education, making it relevant to national and international requirements, increasing access and promoting innovation /entrepreneurship.

The main problem universities suffered from in 2002 was the quality of teachers. Only about 10 percent of the faculty available in the universities had PhD degrees and 90 percent of them had only Master’s or Bachelor’s qualifications. A new beginning was made in 2003 with the highest emphasis being given to faculty development by identifying our brightest youth, sending them to the leading institutions of the world and attracting them back to serve their motherland. About 11,000 students were sent abroad in the first decade of the existence of higher education and most of the funds allocated were spent on foreign scholarships.

The world’s largest Fulbright programme was initiated with 50 percent of funding being provided by the HEC. To ensure quality, students were only sent to the top universities in the US. Thousands of students were also sent to the best institutions in Germany, Sweden, France, Austria, and Australia. To attract them back a number of incentives were given, including the introduction of a revolutionary new salary structure, the tenure track system, in which the salaries of a full professor were 400 percent higher than those of federal ministers. However, to ensure quality, these were contractual appointments with two international evaluations before grant of permanency. Foreign PhD students were encouraged to apply for up to $100,000 research grants in collaboration with good foreign scientists so that they could initiate high quality research programmes on their return.

As the federal minister of Science and Technology and IT/Telecommunications prior to becoming chairman HEC, I had ensured that high speed internet was provided to universities. This facilitated the setting up of the Pakistan Educational Research Network (PERN) with free access to 65,000 textbooks and 25,000 international journals. Under an exciting scheme, the first in the world, free access to sophisticated instrumentation was provided to researchers in Pakistan with HEC paying the bills for analysis. These and scores of other such measures led to a 97.5 percent return rate of the scholars sent abroad during that period. A large number of postdoctoral scholarships were awarded, largely to local PhDs, so that they would get research exposure in good universities abroad. The National Academy of Higher Education was activated, and teachers trained in pedagogical skills as well as in the latest advances in their respective fields.

To improve the quality of undergraduate education, blended learning was encouraged, and MIT Open Access teaching materials introduced everywhere. As many departments in colleges and universities had limited access to the internet, particularly in remote areas, all undergraduate computer science courses were downloaded after permission from MIT, screened and edited after assessment of our needs, copied on 10,000 CDs and distributed to all computer science departments across the country.

A scheme was started of live real-time lectures from top academicians abroad with professors in Cambridge, Oxford, MIT, Harvard and other top institutions delivering lectures and students in Jamshoro, Quetta, Bahawalpur and elsewhere standing up and asking questions in real time! This helped to improve the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate education. To improve the quality of local PhDs, a split PhD programme was introduced whereby PhD students in Pakistan could travel abroad for 6 to 12 months and carry out a part of their PhD work in foreign universities under the supervision of eminent foreign scientists.

The razor-sharp focus of all these initiatives was quality. A robust Quality Assurance & Enhancement system was established and minimum quality standards compatible with good international standards laid down after intense stakeholder consultation. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) set up within the HEC established Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) as its operational units in public and private-sector universities across the country. The curricula were regularly revised and updated.

Universities were persuaded to strictly follow the following quality criteria laid down by the HEC before starting any new undergraduate and postgraduate programmes: 1) minimum requirements of PhD level faculty; 2) stipulation of credit hours for each course for teaching or research; 3) assessment and research work requirements for PhD programmes; 4) mandatory assessment of PhD theses by at least two foreign refrees from academically advanced countries; and 5) strict minimum eligibility criteria for appointments at various faculty positions.

The menace of plagiarism was checked by making it mandatory that all PhD theses and research publications were checked by a software. The mushrooming of substandard universities was stopped by having minimum criteria for establishment of universities approved by the Cabinet and by closing down many institutions that failed to meet these quality criteria.

In these efforts focused on quality we were guided by the Asia Pacific Quality Network (Australia), International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (Berlin), Quality Assurance Agency of UK (QAA-UK), and others, and the quality criteria were developed in close consultation with them. The results of these initiatives were phenomenal with four universities of Pakistan ranking among the top 300,400 or 500 of the world by 2008 for the first time in Pakistan’s history (Times Higher Education, UK rankings).

Alas most of these initiatives were abandoned during the last three years by the former chairman HEC. The live lecturing programme by foreign academicians was stopped. Foreign scholarships were curtailed. The National Research Programme for Universities (NRPU) to support research was severely curtailed. Quality nose-dived as crazy policies were introduced such as direct admission of Bachelor’s students into PhD programmes without the need of a Masters degree. Thirty-five new universities were allowed to be set up without funding or availability of faculty. Ultimately, the former chairman HEC was removed and NAB investigations initiated. A new beginning is now underway after the tragic collapse of the quality of higher education due to the myopic policies adopted during the last three years.

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