**[You too, HEC](https://www.dawn.com/news/1697467/you-too-hec)**

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THE Higher Education Commission (HEC) has [sent a circular](https://www.dawn.com/news/1696927) to vice chancellors (VCs) of public universities drawing their attention to the financial crisis confronting the country and asking them to take a “leadership role and think of innovative ways to provide relief to the lower-income groups and the economy as a whole”. In particular, it has directed them to promote the consumption of local drinks such as lassi and sattu as this will “increase employment and generate income for the public”, while decreasing the import bill of the beleaguered country on the consumption of tea.

This highlights two things worth noting about Pakistan. First, that institutions, especially those that can’t run their own business, believe they can best run the business of others, a mission grab that has become accepted as the norm. The most obvious example of this is unmentionable but one is reminded of it by the HEC which, having run higher education into the ground, has now decided to enter the domains of import substitution and job creation.

Second, that every institution harbours individuals more loyal than the king and yearning to display their devotion to propel any mandate to a higher level.

We saw this earlier when someone with no expertise in education had the inspiration to add seerat to every year of school. Sure enough, an enthusiast emerged in the department of education to up the ante by [mandating durood shareef](https://www.dawn.com/news/1661180) at every morning assembly at millions of schools thus earning both worldly recognition and divine blessings at zero cost.

Now, never mind it is none of the HEC’s business, some ‘shutr-i-be-lagaam’ without adult supervision has grabbed the opportunity to go one better on the [‘drink less tea’ brainwave](https://www.dawn.com/news/1695040) from higher up. But there is no end to such attention-attracting enthusiasm and it wouldn’t be a surprise if some over-enthusiastic VCs, in turn, initiate MPhil and PhD programmes in their universities dedicated to the preparation and promotion of lassi and sattu by-products.

In Pakistan, the liars and swearers are fools no longer.

Come to think of it, students would flock to such innovative programmes from all over the world contributing precious foreign exchange in the bargain and some of our permanent job-seeking luminaries would anoint the programmes as game-changers. It would be like so many dry-port Gwadars all across the country which would soon become the global go-to place for lassi and sattu endorsed by the likes of Kim Kardashian and Justin Bieber and, with some hustling by the Foreign Office, by Prince Harry and Meghan Markle who are desperate for rehabilitation.

Sadly, Priyanka Chopra wouldn’t be allowed — precious foreign exchange would be sacrificed to uphold our principled stand against Indians.

**Read:** [*Why Pakistanis are balking at Ahsan Iqbal’s suggestion of austeri-tea*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1695282)

Ironically, though, had we paid heed to Morarji Desaiji, we could have been self-sustaining in drinks long ago and saved the nation a crisis.

It seems pointless to comment on the premise of the HEC proposal but the slight chance that it may restrain some of the more gung-ho VCs makes it worth the effort. To be honest, I can’t help it either being an economist of sorts. Which reminds me that the current titular head of the HEC is a real economist who, I am convinced, would have put a stop to this directive had he been consulted. But, and this is another emergent characteristic of the new Pakistan, no good man is safe anymore. For the first time, after years of depredation, the HEC was beginning to move in the right direction when the rug was pulled out and the director sent to pasture on some absurd pretext like trying to save foreign excha­nge by refusing to bite on imported nanochips.

I went to school in an era when there was time for less useful subjects like literature. From what I read, a lesson that has not faded is one articulated by Macduff’s son in Shakespeare’s Macbeth. When his mother says that traitors are those who lie and swear and all of them should be hanged, the son asks “Who must hang them?” “Why, the honest men,” the mother replies to which the son responds as follows: “Then the liars and swearers are fools,/ for there are liars and swearers enow to beat/ the honest men and hang up them.” In Pakistan, the liars and swearers are fools no longer — they know they can beat the honest men and hang them up, and they do.

At the cost of being hung up, I will say that lassi and sattu are not substitutes for tea — they are summer coolers while tea is a year-round pick-me-up — and they are also more expensive. What has driven lassi and sattu out are the colas that must be paying foreign exchange for the use of their brand names. They are also poisonous for health. So, go get ’em HEC if you really have to meddle in what you don’t know.

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