**Higher education in Pakistan: time to listen to the students!**

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Recent changes in the political landscape offer an opportunity to put our university students at the centre of delivering higher education in Pakistan. Principally, this comprises of a renewed commitment towards transforming tertiary education and changes in the HEC’s (Higher Education Commission) leadership with more international exposure.

Despite criticism, the student as a customer metaphor is gaining ground. In Western economies, universities under market pressure, competing for resources, are readily prepared to accept students as customers. For universities, students are the bearers of precious financial resources in terms of tuition fees, and they can choose universities based on ranking, quality evaluation or referrals from friends and family.

Globally, higher education has been going through fundamental changes for some time. There has been an ideological and organisational shift due to the increasing pressure from market forces. When markets were liberalised, private profit-making institutions were allowed to enter into the higher education sector. Students now typically choose from a range of universities based on price, quality and availability. Universities are now working hard to attract and retain students, and they consider the quality of service as a key determinant. Satisfying the needs of students is an important objective for higher education institutions, and these changes are largely attributed to the policy shift towards their marketisation.

Pakistan is affected by these same changes as part of the transformation of the country’s higher education sector since the establishment of the HEC in 2002 and after the entry of the private sector. The latest estimates suggest that there are 1.2 million students in Pakistan enrolled in roughly 200 higher education institutions (HEIs), both universities and degree awarding institutions (DAIs), in the public and private sectors. However, ironically, there is no evidence that these students are being listened to or that their opinions and feedback on their learning experience are being sought.

*In the Pakistani context, both private and public sector university students alike deserve access to information on student feedback and satisfaction. All universities should be sharing the results of student surveys on their respective websites, while the HEC should use student survey data as a quality attribute in university rankings*

The tradition of collecting data on student opinions is not new from a global perspective. One early example was the Yale University student survey of 1929. Nowadays, data through surveys of students’ satisfaction and their learning experience are routinely collected in almost all universities in the western world. The United Kingdom, for example, carries out the National Student Survey (NSS) and this year students from more than 413 universities, colleges and alternative education providers took part. The results are shared publicly and HEIs make use of them to form their policies and practices. In the UK, a separate body called, the Office for Students has been established to recognise the central role of students in higher education delivery.

In Pakistan, the HEC instructed universities to establish Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) and introduced several proformas. There are two proformas that are relevant to student feedback and student satisfaction: the first proforma is designed to collect student feedback on modules (Proforma-1), while the second proforma is intended to collect views from graduating students in the last semester (Proforma-3).

However, there is no evidence of collating, using, sharing or analysing the information collected through these proformas either at university level or nationally. In other words, there is no culture of using student data in forming policies, practices, processes and systems. In addition, both proformas were developed long ago and are outdated, have no clarity or conceptual foundations, theoretical underpinning, validity and reliability, with no empirical results and as a result robust data cannot be derived from them. The simple principle used in quantitative analysis will prevail, i.e. garbage in, garbage out!

Similarly, the purpose and objective behind collecting student feedback is unclear. There is no evidence of using student data in university rankings as a quality attribute. This is despite “addressing the prime needs of students” being the first principle (out of nine) on which the quality assurance processes are anchored, as outlined in the manual of HEC’s Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

There is evidence based on international experience that collecting student feedback provides students with an opportunity to comment on their learning experience and level of satisfaction. It also encourages reflection on learning and acts as a benchmark for universities.

Thus, the real purpose behind listening to students and collecting student feedback data, as outlined by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) in one of its reports, is the monitoring of teaching and learning and improving its quality and advising potential students about that quality in a particular university. Universities’ management needs to know and understand everything that the students go through, i.e. from the classroom to the campus environment and from interacting with fellow students to staff members to be able to improve their learning experience. Based on global experience, it is understood that students’ university experience consists of academic programmes as well as a whole series of social, physical and spiritual experiences that they encounter.

Student feedback data on their learning experience should also be seen as a commitment to take students’ views seriously, recognition that the student learning experience is pivotal in learning, provision of procedures and processes for quality improvement, guidance for strategic management decisions and benchmarking.

In the Pakistani context, both private and public sector university students alike deserve access to information on student feedback and satisfaction. All universities should be sharing the results of student surveys on their respective websites, while the HEC should use student survey data as a quality attribute in university rankings.

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) in general and universities in particular should seriously take the students’ views, opinions and feedback and use the data to form their policies, strategies, systems and processes for better service delivery in public and private sector higher education institutions.

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