**Leading without a plan**

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Monday, Aug 21, 2023

Public universities are facing multiple challenges that we keep hearing about, ranging in nature from academic, administrative, managerial, financial, and political. Some of them may not be addressable by universities themselves but many certainly are.

Some months ago, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT) solicited applications for vice-chancellors (VCs) for three prominent universities in the federal capital – Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU), Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), and the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI).

In the past, applications typically comprised little more than filling out a profile, sending in a cover letter, a CV, a list of publications (why that is needed for a VC is still a mystery to me), and all the political influence they could wield. In an effort to improve the selection process and assess the depth of thought applicants have for the position they are applying for, this time the MoFEPT added a new element to the application package.

Applicants were required to include an institutional plan, albeit limited to 300 words (about one page of text), for their tenure as VC. A detailed institutional plan could span pages, so the word limit is tight. All the more reason not to waste any of them and if one does that should go to show that the writer may not have anything worthwhile to say.

It is an opportunity to demonstrate one’s priorities, awareness of the challenges of the universities one seeks to lead and whether one has paid any mind to tackling them. A plan has to be practical and actionable; what it cannot be is a list of vague platitudes disconnected from reality.

Whatever your personal opinion may be, all three universities – QAU, AIOU, and IIUI – are large public universities in the capital and are highly seen as amongst the cushiest to be appointed VC at. One would assume that the competition for these openings must be fierce, self-selecting and attracting only the strongest applicants. Would it not be interesting to see how much thought applicants jockeying for the most influential leadership role at universities have given to the responsibilities of that job?

As luck would have it, I had the opportunity to review the institutional plans applicants submitted, around 200 of them. Before I get to their contents, let me share some broad observations: Almost all applicants are men and many of them are currently or have been in the past appointed VCs at other universities. Many submissions were poorly formatted documents that could not adhere to a consistent look for a single page which betrays the fact that original writing is a very occasional task for them. In the age of spell checkers and ChatGPT, a few were still riddled with grammatical mistakes, but I must appreciate them for their originality.

The most striking observation was that most ‘institutional plans’ people submitted were just rehashes of their CVs. This betrays one of two truths: Either these applicants do not understand the meaning of the word ‘plan’ which goes to their lack of basic English comprehension, or they simply have not given a single thought to the responsibility they want to take on, have no motivation to fix anything, and have nothing more in mind than cash their pay cheque.

The ones that went beyond regurgitating their CVs for their plan rarely ventured beyond identifying institution-specific challenges. They just listed generic, anecdotal issues anyone can glean from a few newspaper reports, devoid of supporting facts or figures specific to the university they are applying to. The ones that mentioned the name of the university they were applying to did not go beyond irrelevant facts that could be obtained from the university website or Wikipedia page – its organization, structure, location, and ranking. In any case, none of them constitutes a plan of any kind.

Since many applicants are already working as VCs at other universities, you would expect them to have a track record of problem-solving, a concrete precedent in their past and that would obviously strengthen their cases. After all, if you have solved a problem in one institution, there is greater reason to believe you can repeat that feat at another institution. One would think that such claims would be accompanied by some evidence, some numbers.

In my opinion, the primary problem almost all universities face is that the education their programmes impart is useless, irrelevant and prepares graduates for nothing. What do VCs applying for their next gig have to show to improve the primary function of a university?

QAU has been in the newspapers a lot over the last year for the issue of a prominent land grab by the CDA to build the Bhara Kahu bypass (which, by the way, seems to be blocked a lot of the time since it opened). Yet, no applicant acknowledged this as a problem. The university has also been suffering occasional violent clashes between groups of students, which received occasional acknowledgment in some submitted plans, but no action plan.

The use of drugs on university campuses is a growing problem nationwide, one that is frequently reported on in the media, yet hardly anyone acknowledged its existence.

Also interesting is the fact that people applying for the job of VC are pointing to their publication record, such as it may be, as support for their applications when by this point it should be clear that the VCs job is no longer to publish but to fix the myriad of well-known problems on university campuses by (hopefully) offering some evidence for having solved such problems in the past. That lack of performance becomes particularly irritating when it is accompanied by obnoxiously grand statements overestimating one’s own caliber.

Most critically, of the ‘institutional plan’ that did acknowledge any challenges, what none of them did was address the question of ‘how?’ You are promising to create university-industry partnerships – how? A commitment to raising funds to augment public funds – how? A desire to create an endowment fund, profits from which will sustainably augment the university budget – how? Raise the standard of scholarship, build the capacity of staff and faculty, and improve governance – how?

A handful did make some mention of how they would go about solving a problem. One that came up multiple times was raising funds for the university by running a profitable ORIC (an Office of Research, Innovation, and Commercialization). While many universities, encouraged by the HEC, established ORICs over the last decade, I am not aware of any that is truly profitable, surely none on a scale where it brings in enough funds to meaningfully contribute to a university’s budget.

Since most applicants are currently serving as VCs elsewhere, such outlandish claims raise another question: Why did you not execute the plan you are presenting for the next institution at your present post? If you did, how successful was it?

All of the submitted ‘institutional plans’, without exception, keep you guessing. These are not plans – they are wish lists for a genie in a magic lamp. Almost every submitted ‘institutional plan’ exhibited some of the observations I listed above. None springs to mind that escaped all of them.

Lately, it has become fashionable to criticize the lack of thinking, analysis, problem-solving, communication, and other soft skills in university graduates. How can we justify such criticism of students and graduates when most people (seeking to be) at the helm of some of the most prestigious public universities in the country are unable to understand and follow simple instructions and lack the ability to communicate an idea central to the purpose at hand within an allocated space? Instead, we are offered pointless and non-specific waffling.

Applicants were essentially asked a simple question: What should be your most important priorities leading university ‘X’ and how would you go about addressing them? All of them have been in academia for decades and most have served as VCs already. If they cannot articulate their response to the most predictable, most important, and most basic question of the hiring process for the highest office in a university, what does that tell us?

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