**Can you build your own major?**

Dr Ayesha Razzaque

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When you become aware of a problem, you can take one of two approaches: you can either take on the problem head-on or you can paper over it. In Pakistan, we tend to go with the latter.

When a government agency is not doing its job, set up another one. That is how we have ended up with the byzantine nightmare of a bureaucratic maze comprising ministries, departments, institutes, and agencies from the center to the provinces with overlapping mandates. The higher education sector is no exception to this.

Last week, the sitting caretaker federal minister of IT & Telecom, and Science & Technology tweeted that Pakistani institutions produce close to 75,000 IT graduates every year (the Pakistan IT Industry Association – P@SHA – puts the number of ‘IT graduates’ at only 25,000) but less than 10 per cent are (immediately) employable. Whether this 10 per cent figure is backed by any data or is anecdotal, I do not know but it does ring true and is roughly in line with experiences one hears from employers. The purpose of education is more than getting hired for a job, but since that is all successive governments always talk about and the conversation rarely ever moves beyond that, let us stick with that for the moment.

Ten per cent employability is how the job market rates technology graduates. If the ability to find a job is the goal, then employability or the graduate employment rate after six months and associated statistics (average starting salary, etc) are what we ought to track, are the only metrics that matters and (like I have asserted on numerous occasions) that universities ought to report to convince prospective students of their programmes’ quality.

Taking on this problem head-on would entail addressing the quality of undergraduate education programmes offered by universities to achieve greater success for graduates in the job market. Papering over it would entail doing anything but that, which is what has been announced. Instead, what is being planned is yet another standardized quality test that will supposedly assess graduates’ employability.

I find it notable that at a time when there is increasing realization that one’s fitness for work is about so much more than academic achievement and subject matter knowledge but professionalism, communication, teamwork and work ethics. That is why many employers hire for the right attitude rather than technical ability. Employability is determined by the job market and I will go so far as to say that no government bureaucracy or procedure it comes up with, least of all ours, can assess employability even remotely.

Paradoxically, the prize for those who pass, those deemed good enough to find a job on their own strength, will be placement in industry. Instead of fixing the root cause of weak four-year undergraduate programs, the government will fund further training courses. This sounds little different from the vocational training programs National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTC) was conducting and subsidizing under the ‘Kamyab Jawan’ programme that found many takers among university graduates.

What prevents universities from delivering educational programmes leading to graduate career success? It certainly is not a lack of regulatory oversight. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) recently published version 1.1 of its policy governing undergraduate programmes. Its most important aspect is that reaffirms the end of legacy two-year BA/BSc degrees, reclassifies them as Associate bachelor’s degrees, and establishes four and five-year degrees as the new standard for bachelor’s degrees. This is a welcome development.

The Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC) and the more recently established National Computing Education Accreditation Council (NCEAC) are together responsible for standard setting and accreditation of most technology programs – the former for all manner of engineering and the latter for computer science (and allied) programmes. In an effort to earn more accreditation badges (eg, the Washington Accord, ACM) over the last few years, there has been significant growth in the number of constraints on these programmes. The effect this has had is to reduce the degrees of freedom universities have in designing their programmes. This is quite obvious in the NCEAC’s 2023 curriculum requirements document, which goes on to list quite detailed structures of no less than 10 different programmes.

Clearly, our direction of travel has been towards greater involvement of regulators and lesser freedom for universities to decide what they want to teach. This is how even the most well-meaning attempts at innovation are arrested. One might argue that the regulator providing some “model program structures” could be useful for universities that lack the ability to create their own. To that I ask, is a university that is unable to develop its own curriculum worthy of its title?

The state has always been more than eager to impose requirements on what ought to be taught in schools and universities. Pakistan Studies and Islamiat, although already compulsory through all 12 years of schooling, have been mainstays of university programs for decades since the ‘80s. Another course that is recently being pushed into university programmes, both in Pakistan and many other countries, is Entrepreneurship. A few days ago, I was speaking to an undergraduate student at a university ranked in the world’s top-20 and asked her if she too is required to take a course on entrepreneurship in her programme. She answered with a question: “Why would I have to take a specific course unrelated to my majors?” Her response let it dawn on me just how much dictation we have become accustomed to taking without questioning.

So, while our higher education sector is marching towards greater regulation, what is the trend in the rest of the world? On October 5, 2023, the Business Insider carried an article by Tiffany Ng (‘So long, computer science – Chaos Studies is the hot new college degree’). While universities in North America have historically been providing undergraduate students great flexibility in choosing combinations of major+minor, double majors, or specializations already, the degrees still fell under one degree programme or another. However, many universities also give students the option to design their own major and have dedicated schools and colleges for this. Cited examples include Enigmatology, Chaos, Human Computer Interaction, Architecture & Food Theory, Global Health Management & Healthcare Administration, and Emotion & Voice in Academia.

Many universities have added schools of Individual Studies or similarly named schools or colleges that offer build-your-own-majors. Ng reports that between 2019 and 2021, individualized majors in the US grew by 3.0 per cent nationwide. The University of Texas at Austin saw a 41 per cent increase year-over-year in individualized majors in 2020-21.

The build-your-own-major movement hands the reins of power and responsibility of which courses to study from the university/regulator to the student. Building one’s own major will not be the right choice for every student.

A carelessly or hastily designed major can handicap a student’s prospects in the job market. That is why this path is only recommended for students whose interests are interdisciplinary, have a sense of what they want to do and are confident in their understanding of future trends. However, our regulations are not only decades away from allowing students such a degree of freedom but are, in fact, moving further away from it.

The writer (she/her) has a PhD in Education.