**HEC in focus**

BY N O M A N A H M E D 2021-03-30

THE federal government has removed Dr Tariq Banuri as chairman of the Higher Education Commission. A presidential ordinance reduced the tenure of the HEC chairman`s office to bring about this administrative change.

The HEC`s role along with other matters related to higher education is the subject of much debate. Some quarters see the HEC as a redundant entity after the passage of the 18th Amendment. Others see the option of its disbandment as disastrous. At present, the provinces are the custodians of public universities and degree-awarding institutions. On many occasions, lawmakers have been irked by the HEC`s actions. Some years ago, the process of degree verification by the HEC caused consternation when certain lawmakers were disqualified for holding fake degrees.

Conversely, many arguments are cited to retain the HEC for all the contributions it has made to higher education. Quality control mechanisms, uniformity of core values in curriculum, the continuous revision of baseline curricula, continuing with projects, prospective grants and funding from international bodies, support to faculty in research, collaborations and seminar/conference grants etc are part of the argument to retain the HEC as it is now.

Provincial autonomy is probably the only rationale proffered to counter the argument of HEC supporters.

The issue has been greatly politicised. The replacement of two-year degree programmes with the Associate Degree and the recently introduced undergraduate and PhD policy frameworks are examples. The outgoing chairperson has tried to justify these policies with effective arguments but the opposition continues as many among students and faculty have protested. However, sacking the H EC chairman is not the answer.

Successive governments have mishandled transition management. Whether it was the devolution of development authorities in 2001 or the privatisation of utility corporations, poor decision-making attempts, lethargic responses and a lack of clarity about the goal itself have been in evidence. Moves to devolve the HEC can cause similar setbacks, unless there is informed decision-making, under the auspices of the Council of Common Interests, to settle the fate of higher education management.

The HEC has been far more effective than the erstwhile University Grants Commission.

Development grants for universities, new campuses in the public sector, assistance to private-sector institutions, research and travel grants to faculty, scholarships for doctoral studies, allocations for peer-reviewed journals and development of knowledge resources during the past eight years aresome feats that have earned the HEC laurels at home and abroad.

The creation of programmes and procedures with open access and competition for resources are worthwhile achievements, and credit must be given to the past and present leadership of the HEC which has also been instrumental in expanding higher education opportunities in less-developed provinces such as Balochistan and in former Fata. These initiatives need to be expanded, not discontinued or reduced in scale.

In fact, there exists enough room for the provincial commissions if this institutional nomenclature is agreed upon to contribute to higher education. The legal and administrative framework of universities is already under the control of provincial legislatures.

They can devise a formula for extending financial support to universities after examining the releases from the centre/HEC, selfgeneration of funds by universities and annual budgetary requirements. Alternate sources of finances also need to be explored.

Many philanthropic organisations are will-ing to fund education if a credible utilisation framework, monitoring mechanism,transparency and prudent financial management are guaranteed. The provincial bodies can incorporatean efficient management structure to fulfil the demands of modern philanthropists.

Choice of human resource for leading and running such bodies can make the difference.

Provincial commissions can also explore the possibility of joint ventures and collaborative efforts with corporate, international financial agencies and bilateral financial institutions.

Assistance to universities that are in need of management and administrative help is another area where provincial commissions can play a greater role. They can be entrusted with the task of scaling up administrative and academic structures of new universities and be given the resources to deal with crises that new universities may be experiencing.

Sharing of information, experience and infrastructure are some of the core areas where such input could prove most significant.

In recruiting academics and officers for provincial bodies, merit and competence must be the criteria. Higher education should not become the dumping ground for mediocre bureaucrats, retired armed forces personnel and political cronies. The writer is an academic and researcher based in Karachi.