[Dr Ayesha Razzaque](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-ayesha-razzaque)

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**Half-truths, untruths and the HEC**

The writer is an independent education researcher and consultant. She has a PhD in Education from Michigan State University.

Public debates on technical issues which ought to be argued with facts quickly tend to become politicized and circle around personalities instead, be it infrastructure development, transportation systems, education. The ongoing debate about the Higher Education Commission’s (HEC) policy decisions in recent years is much the same. A lot of the criticism lobbed at the former chairperson of the HEC centers on two significant initiatives.

First, is the reclassification of legacy two-year bachelor’s programmes as ‘Associate Bachelors’ degrees. Only four-year programmes will now qualify for the title of BA/ BSc bachelor’s degrees. This step was much needed because until recently a variety of two- three- and four-year programs all qualified as BA/ BSc degrees. Figuring out how much training and education their degree holder received required a more detailed investigation.

The difference between two and four years of education is significant. The two-year Associate Bachelors sits between the high-school diploma and a four-year bachelor's degree and is a common element of the qualification frameworks of the US (whose higher education system ours is increasingly modeled after), Canada, Europe, Australia, Hong Kong, Mexico, Sweden and others.

In the US, associate degrees are awarded by community colleges, which hold a standing somewhat similar to our degree colleges. The credits earned in associate degrees can be used towards four-year bachelor’s degrees and span a wide range of occupations. Indeed, many students begin their post-secondary academic careers at community colleges to capitalize on their emphasis on teaching quality and take advantage of the much lower tuition fee cost that community colleges offer to save on the total cost of a university bachelor’s degree. It also gives them the additional flexibility to graduate with an associate degree and join the workforce early, should their plans or personal circumstances change.

Labeling two-, three- and four-year programmes with the same one label has been diluting the value of Pakistani BA/ BSc degrees. Naturally, this step has seen some opposition from students enrolled in two-year bachelor’s programmes and their parents – but we need to accept that painting stripes on a cat does not make it into a tiger.

Second is a policy change by the HEC to grant universities the flexibility to admit applicants to PhD programmes that hold a BA/ BSc degree, but no MA/ MSc degree, if they deem them adequately prepared. Again, critics have declared that this step dilutes the value of a PhD; they also claim it is without precedent.

To fact check these objections let me go back to the example of the US, home to the bulk of the world’s most prestigious universities. Most PhD programmes’ admission requirements only list “16 years of schooling” – 12 years of school and a four-year bachelor’s degree. That is also why applicants from Pakistan with a two-year bachelor’s degree and a two-year master’s degree have been getting admission to PhD. programmes in the US for decades. Of course, PhD programme applicants without a master’s degree then have to go to additional lengths in their applications to demonstrate that they are already prepared for the rigors of conducting research.

As an example, a family friend of ours who chose this direct route did so by presenting a dozen or so research papers he co-authored while working as a research assistant during his undergraduate programme. This policy can even differ from one college or department to the next within the same university. For example, while the College of Engineering at Michigan State University allowed for this, my own College of Education across the road from it insisted on applicants having an MA/ MSc degree before entering PhD programmes.

It is also worth recognizing that this step was not taken in isolation, but in how it fits together in the context of other policy changes made in the higher-education sector. Most relevant to that is the throttling of the open spigot of (largely) poorly trained local PhD graduates. Under the quantity-over-quality approach all local universities were encouraged to launch and expand PhD programmes, irrespective of their capacity and available faculty.

During Dr Banuri’s tenure, the HEC sought to develop a three-tier model of universities. At the bottom is Tier-III consisting of affiliate/ degree colleges that will cater to about 25 percent of students and prepare them for technical and vocational careers. These will be affiliated with Tier-II institutions made up of comprehensive universities that will serve an upwardly mobile middle class. At the very top will be a group of Tier-I research universities, whose membership will be capped at 30, that will focus on innovation, research and training world class scholars that discover and disseminate knowledge; Think of the LUMSs, NUSTs, FASTs, GIKIs, IBAs, AKUs, etc of this country.

This three-tier model will greatly reduce the number of PhD students, in sharp contrast to the flood of thousands graduating every year that was envisioned during the HEC’s early years, to an absorbable number. It will make admissions more competitive, filter out underprepared students and improve the quality of PhD graduates our local universities produce.

I know these basic facts because I work in education. Surely, the critics that are publicly gunning for the present HEC leadership and policies must know them too. They have many more years of professional experience, must have travelled farther and seen many more institutions in the course of their duties and professional lives. Yet, the pot-shots they are taking in op-ed pages make it look like they are oblivious or willfully ignorant of these facts.

For example, detractors of the new policy of allowing a direct route from bachelor’s to PhD programmes are arguing that this would be counter to the Bologna process. ‘What is the Bologna Process?’ you may ask. The Bologna process is a qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. As of today, its signatories include 49 countries and the European Commission, with Pakistan not listed among them (https://ehea.info/page-full\_members).

More interesting than who is a signatory is who is not a signatory: the US, Canada, Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand. Not adhering to these standards is not diminishing the value of a Harvard, Princeton, MIT or Stanford education, and if allowing a direct route to PhD programmes puts countries in breach of protocol, then we seem to be in fine company. US higher education is not a member, yet continues to thrive, set standards and be the envy of the world.

Meanwhile in Pakistan, remaining compliant with the Bologna process, that we are not even a member of, is being made into a big deal and the allowance for some flexibility in the admission process is being painted as a national betrayal. I wonder why?

Higher education should be kept away from politics and not be subject to the whims and vision of whoever is occupying political office(s). That is why the HEC is autonomous and governed by a board with extensive membership. However, from what we can see at the moment, I assess critics are grasping for anything they can find – truths, half-truths, untruths, and out-of-context statistics – to hurl at the HEC leadership, be it to settle a score, to have another go at the HEC, or to protect their turf. However, none of their motives and none of their suggested reform ideas seem to have anything to do with the betterment of higher education quality.

This debate should not be about personalities, but about the merits of competing reform policy proposals and saving an important institution. But, like so often, the conversation has been politicized and reduced to personality clashes and point-scoring.

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