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**Higher education: governance**

Part - II

In Part I of this series (printed yesterday, May 3), I had discussed serious weaknesses in the governance of the higher education system in the country.

In this article, I discuss the reforms needed to address such weaknesses to make our governance workable, leading to better outcomes in the form of graduates who have relevant skills to be gainfully employed in different sectors of the economy and also to improve the quality of research in HEIs to make it more relevant and useful for the economy and society.

There is a serious need to develop a collaborative approach between the HEC and the relevant federal and provincial governments to develop some principles of governance that are necessary to improve outcomes. To begin with, the existing laws and structures need a major overhaul to make them simple and address weaknesses in internal control and governance that will help in enhancing the quality and speed of decision-making and improve communication between different forums.

As a first step, the HEC in consultation with the governments should develop an HEI Governance Framework (Code) aimed at establishing more effective oversight, transparency, clarity of roles and responsibilities and accountability for outcomes.

The Governance Code should provide to establish one governing board (called Syndicate) with appropriate composition of people who have required skills, commitment and understanding of their fiduciary responsibilities as members of the Syndicate. The Code must define the criteria and process of appointment of members of the Syndicate to get the right people with skills and attributes described above. Second, the Code should define the framework of accountability of the Syndicate to respective governments as well as principles on adequacy of remuneration for their members, as nothing works without adequate reward and punishment.

The HEC needs major reform to improve its own governance in line with good governance practices. For this purpose and for the purpose of developing Governance Code for public sector HEIs, it is recommended that the HEC and governments should consider the guidance contained in a paper issued by the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy titled ‘International Framework: Governance in Public Sector’. Per this paper: “Governance comprises the arrangements put in place to ensure that the intended outcomes for stakeholders are defined and achieved”. It further states “the fundamental function of good governance in the public sector is to ensure that entities achieve their intended outcomes while acting in the public interest at all times.”

The overall responsibility of managing the affairs of the HEI should vest in the Syndicate. The Syndicate should have subcommittees, similar to the frameworks that exist in the corporate sector.

The VC should be appointed by the Board rather than the Chancellor / PM / CMs. The Board should be responsible for oversight of management, remuneration of the VC and his/her annual performance appraisal. The criteria for the VC’s position should not be PHD and number of publications, rather it should be the skills and attributes required by a CEO.

One of the non-executive members of the Syndicate should be its chairperson rather than the VC being the chairperson. This is essential to ensure the independence and effectiveness of governance by the Syndicate.

Like the HEIs, the HEC’s governing board needs to be made independent of the executive management. The chairperson of the HEC should be a non-executive member of the Board, whose responsibility should be to provide leadership to ensure the Board’s effective oversight over executive management, which should be led by an appropriately qualified chief executive.

In order to ensure sustainability, improve outcomes and create stakes for the people managing HEIs, a major way forward should be public-private partnership of HEIs. An appropriate framework needs to be established by the HEO.

Federal and provincial governments need to agree on the role of the HEC as a regulator and provider of funds in addition to providing guidance on good practices aimed at improving outcomes. Although after the 18th Amendment education is a provincial subject, it may be in the interest of people to develop one HEC at the federal level as a regulator with professional management.

Therefore, provinces should seriously consider doing away with the provincial HECs and developing a working relationship with the HEC at the federal level. For this, the federal government and the HEC need to enhance transparency and develop the governance framework discussed in the earlier paragraphs in consultation with the provinces. The Board of the HEC should include adequate representation of federal and provincial governments.

A major initiative is required to enhance the use of technology, both within the HEC as well as the HEIs. The use of online and e-learning needs to become a norm, with a strategy to invest in using evolving exponential technologies in all disciplines. This requires a clear strategy to automate the HEC and the HEIs in a period of two years. Given the right leadership, this is not a big ask from the leadership of the HEC and HEIs.

The most critical reason for Pakistan’s backwardness is the low quality of its human resources, primarily because of the poor system of education at all levels. It is high time the political leadership agreed on some basic principles to move forward on an agenda of reforming education. Implementation of the above suggestions will be a great step forward for improving the outcomes of higher education.

Concluded

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