[Prof Dr Altaf Mukati](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/prof-dr-altaf-mukati)

July 12, 2021

**Postmortem of our research culture**

In addition to Dr Ayesha Razzaque's article on ‘Academic Corruption’, published on June 9, 2021, I would like to present the other excruciating aspects of so-called research publications in relation to the policies of the Higher Education Commission (HEC).

In today's world, the advancement of any country depends on meaningful research, primarily done in the universities and materialized in the industries. The national framework on the industry-academia relationship, which is well defined in leading countries, ceases to exist in Pakistan, which was the responsibility of the HEC. In its absence, this noble work of ‘research’ is also trapped in a swamp of lies, dishonesty, and corruption.

Once, I asked a very fundamental question to all PhD students: "Why do we do a PhD"? I was shocked when almost everyone replied incorrectly. They did not know that a PhD is actually a ‘licence’ to authorize you to do independent research. So, without understanding the real essence of doing research, how can we expect meaningful results?

The HEC PhD policy, which is so complex that even if anyone has any potential to do some good research, they are hauled into wasting their time and energy in fulfilling unrealistic requirements, which is translated into the completion of the PhD in five to six years, instead of the stipulated time of three years – though the people have also found shortcuts to defeat this policy. This has created an unhealthy environment for any genuine research.

Further, a cherry on top is the recent change in our PhD policy. Now admissions to PhD programmes are possible after undergraduate degrees; MS/MPhil degrees are now not necessary. This change, brought by the HEC through its imported consultants, will undoubtedly be further detrimental to our already-deteriorated research levels.

In this paranoid situation, the genuine ones rightly prefer to join any good university abroad to avoid fatigue, distress and, more importantly, waste of time which otherwise, they are compelled to face while doing a PhD locally. Since, in most cases, the purpose of doing a PhD is snubbed, focusing mainly on getting the piece of paper that helps get them promotions and faculty positions at universities, the real essence of research is defeated. The ‘doctors’ so produced cannot be expected to do any meaningful research, rather begin finding the ways to increase the required counts of their publications by any means to qualify for a specific academic position.

The universities are expected to spend their resources on knowledge generation – research – but the HEC had set different priorities when it came into being in 2003. The HEC was given a charter of a ‘facilitator’ not a ‘regulator’. Its first learned chairman developed the HEC's policies in haste through people belonging to public-sector universities. The policymakers did not include the role of private universities in this country. Therefore, all policies were centred around public-sector universities. To date, all HEC funding is provided to public-sector universities only.

The emphasis in all such policies was on quantity and not quality. For example, the ‘Appointment of Faculty Policy’ requires a certain number of publications for each academic position. The University-Ranking Policy is also based on a number of publications a university produces each year. This number game has damaged the whole ecosystem of higher education in the country. Universities began to produce substandard papers for better ranking, and the faculty for getting promotions. As a result, the plagiarism culture got promoted, and the entire purpose of research was completely diminished. Hardly five percent of research papers of any use may have been added in the HEC repository for over 18 years. Unfortunately, no performance audit is done of such institutions in the country.

A public-sector university had sent me dossiers of four of their associate professors, comprising their CVs and research publications, for my expert opinion to suggest the most suitable candidate for the promotion to a full professor. All these candidates held the degree of PhD, and all had almost similar years of experience. The only criterion was thus left to compare their research publications. But, unfortunately, most of their publications did not carry any significance. The unethical part was that each one had shown the others as the second, third, and fourth author to increase each other's count.

This number psyche has further damaged the ecosystem. Some time ago, I was interviewing a PhD candidate, whose CV was seemingly impressive, and had applied for the position of associate professor. In seven years after his PhD, he had produced 58 publications and supervised PhD students. It was revealed that half of the publications were authored by his students, including his name as a second and even a first author, while the remaining publications were of no use. This reminded me of the profiles of some of the ‘leading’ scientists of this country, who claim to have published more than one thousand research papers; undoubtedly, that count would have been reached much in the same way.

The candidate referred represents a large population of his class. They can easily get the status of ‘approved supervisors’ from the HEC due to seemingly holding high research profiles. With this licence from the HEC, they can supervise twelve PhD students at a time, enabling them to further enhance their lists of supervisions and then subsequently the list of publications through their students and feel no remorse. This is how the publications go in the hundreds. Professors at good universities abroad only accept PhD supervision if their specialty closely matches the research area that a student wants to undertake. It is considered a moral and ethical commitment with the students during the entire research period to honestly guide them in carrying out their research work. A majority of us are in no way near to such commitments.

Another, though expensive, way to increase the publications' count is through paid publications. A bizarre situation where the international community is not the exception. Organizing international research conferences has become a lucrative business. Acceptance of a research paper at most conferences and in research journals is just a matter of spending 500 to 2000 dollars.

Another paradox of the HEC's policy is to ask the universities to appoint MS/PhD supervisors from within the university called ‘internal supervisors’. This depicts the narrow vision of the policymakers. In the world of information technology, where distances do not matter, a wise policy could allow the universities to appoint the most suitable supervisors, wherever available in any part of the world, instead of assigning to non-suitable faculty within the same university. New areas of specializations are emerging so rapidly that it is hard to find the most relevant faculty for supervision within universities. Due to obvious reasons, the beneficiaries and policymakers of this system want to maintain the status quo and remain willfully blind, no matter at what cost to the nation.

The writer is the vice-president (Academics) and Dean, Faculty of Computing and Engineering Science at SZABIST, Karachi.

Email: altaf.mukati@szabist. edu.pk