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**Quality in higher education**

Since its establishment in 2002, the HEC has seen many ups and down in its continuous effort to ensure our system of higher education is classified among the best, and our graduates are recognized at par with other graduates of the developed world.

Prior to its formation, no Pakistani university ranked among the top 500 of the world. However, by 2008, under the leadership of Dr.Atta-ur-Rahman, several of our universities gained world ranking according to the Times Higher Education (THE), including NUST at 370 in the general category, while Karachi University, NUST and UET Lahore ranked at 223, 250, and 281 respectively in the natural sciences category.

This upward climb continued during my four-year tenure as the second chairperson of the HEC (despite a 40 percent cut in funding by the government as a ‘reward’ for the HEC verifying degrees of parliamentarians) and by 2013, 10 Pakistani universities were ranked among the top 250 universities of Asia as per QS World University Rankings.

The HEC reforms undertaken during our times had clearly proved to be a success story. The HEC was termed as a “role model institution in higher education” in the developing world by the World Economic Forum (WEF), Davos, Feb 2013. Pakistan’s score in the WEF Global Competitiveness Report 2013 showed consistent and marked improvements in indicators for Higher Education, Research & Innovation and Technology Readiness during the four years of my tenure. According to the chief editor of the prestigious ‘The Lancet’, May 2013, “The HEC reforms changed the culture of academia to one that is focused on research, quality and impact”.

All this success and global recognition was the result of initiatives introduced by the HEC to improve the quality of education. These included, among others, the establishment and capacity building of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) at each university responsible for internal as well as external quality assurance. QEC functions included teaching evaluation; assessment of students; approval, monitoring and periodic review of academic programs; quality assurance of faculty; learning resources and student support; and institutional performance evaluation. On the other hand, the HEC was focusing on curriculum enhancement, programme accreditation, criteria for appointment and promotion of faculty, standardization of degree programmes, and the qualification framework. The HEC attestation stamp had become a recognized brand globally with the stand it took on degree attestation against all odds.

All our efforts went down the drain when the HEC started losing its credibility particularly in the last few years, when education standards declined due to bad governance. Fake degrees and certification started surfacing, from airline pilots to bureaucrats. The rankings we had achieved at the global level also went down. In the 2021 rankings by Times Higher Education, only one Pakistani university (QAU) was ranked at 401-500, while in the QS ranking, only two universities (PIEAS and NUST) were ranked at 375 and 400 respectively.

What went wrong? I can think of many reasons, but foremost of all is the political interference courtesy of the 18th Amendment. The VCs have many bedfellows, from the CM to the governor to provincial HECs to the federal HEC, instead of being answerable to its own Board (Syndicate). Even the senior staff, from the registrar to controller examination to director finance, are appointed by the CMs. At the federal level, the last chairperson was appointed by the previous government in violation of the criteria laid down in the HEC Ordinance for its appointment. As a first step, it is essential that only merit prevails in the appointment of the chairperson of the HEC and the VCs if we are ever to revert back to our glory days.

The HEC must further strengthen the reforms for continuous improvement and for meeting world standards. Some of these include meeting global standards of curriculum both at the undergraduate and graduate level and integrating IT across all disciplines and subjects. The QECs and the institutional effectiveness offices must be made research based. Accreditation standards must be revised, conforming to global accreditation councils like the AACSB and ABET. No university must be allowed to start a new programme unless approved by both the council and HEC, and a review must take place every three years.

To ensure quality at the PhD level, the requirement of a Masters degree for admission to the PhD programme must be reintroduced in addition to the dissertation being sent for external review to a foreign expert from a developed country, and the requirement of at least one research publication in a recognized journal (my own PhD had four journal papers in the prestigious IEEE Transactions, plus 12 international conference papers). The qualification framework must be revised and based on learning outcomes, and not years.

Henceforth, scholars should only be sent to the best universities of the developed world for pursuing their PhD, particularly in emerging technologies. The CCI must ensure that the federal and provincial HECs work together on one forum, and no new public universities are established by the provinces till the PhD faculty in each provincial university has reached at least 40 percent.

Learning is a continuous lifelong process, which must be upgraded regularly. Universities must strive to improve quality and meet the challenges of new technologies and transfer them to our economy to benefit our nation. There is no better investment than education.

The writer is a former chairperson of the HEC.