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**Time to activate provincial HECs**

In view of some recent decisions and policies of the HEC, and keeping in mind the post-18th Amendment educational scene in the country, perhaps it is the right time to start devolving higher education management to provinces and activate provincial HECs. This suggestion may shock some well-wishers of higher education in Pakistan.

If you look at the broader picture, it will make perfect sense. Twenty years ago, when the government of General Musharraf formed a committee to transform the erstwhile University Grants Commission (UGC) into the Higher Education Commission, technocrats such as Shams Lakha and Dr Atta-ur-Rahman sprang into action. They were amply supported by international donors including the World Bank. Throughout the nine years of Gen Musharraf’s dictatorship, the HEC was projected as a success story. Hardly anyone can dispute that the HEC has done some good work over two decades but that is not the whole story.

The reports of its success were highly exaggerated. Many of its policies right from the beginning were highly discriminatory, smacked of total oblivion to local realities, and promoted a technocratic approach that had little value for the actual promotion of higher education in the true sense of this term. It is correct that the UGC worked more like a post office and used to transfer grants to universities that the federal government allocated to it. But the best part of the UGC was that it gave universities nearly complete freedom in their academic matters.

Universities had a system to appoint their vice-chancellors by recommending the names of three senior professors to the chancellor who was in most cases governor of the province where the university was located. There was a system of teacher promotion which took into account both seniority and the number of publications. There was no tenure-track system which is much hated now. There was no race to publish sub-standard ‘research papers’ with multiple names as authors. There were no professors who could claim authorships of hundreds and in some cases thousands of papers of dubious research.

There were no search committees that looked for VCs, and ended up making a mockery of the entire system of appointing heads of universities. Gen Musharraf himself had Lt-Gens as VCs of universities including the University of Punjab. Even now, universities such as Air University, Bahria University, Foundation University, National University of Modern Languages, and many others have retired personnel from security forces heading universities. But the same appointment for other universities goes through a rigmarole of advertisements, short listings, and interviews, where senior professors and deans are lined up in dozens.

Again, it is true that the HEC has done some good work such as introducing new disciplines and facilitating new universities, but ideally all this should have been done by provincial HECs with some guidance from the HEC in Islamabad. The argument that provinces lack the potential to establish and manage their own HEC is misplaced. The competency of the personnel who come to join the HEC in Islamabad may also be questionable, as it can be at the provincial level. The appointments at the HEC should follow a provincial quota as it is a federal institution.

If our provinces have dozens of universities and hundreds of campuses with thousands of professors, the same provinces may also find suitable candidates to staff their provincial HECs. Our universities in all provinces need resources to establish new departments, introduce new disciplines, and hire the best teachers from across the country and perhaps from around the world. The 18th Amendment rightly transferred higher education to the provinces but CJ Iftikhar Chaudhry did not like it and stopped the devolution of higher education by a court order. Now it has been over ten years that the matter is in a limbo.

Currently, all the money for higher education is given to the HEC which in turn distributes it among the universities. The right approach is to enable and empower the provincial HECs and the money for higher education should also be transferred to them, curtailing the red tape in the HEC in Islamabad. The HEC at the federal level should confine itself to setting standards – and that too in consultation with provincial HECs. Universities in each province should be accountable to their own provincial HECs and not to the federal or national HEC.

The decision to discontinue the two-year undergraduate degree programme and replace it with an associate degree programme is a step in the right direction. Around the world, a minimum of 16 years of education is a must to obtain a bachelor’s degree, but all students must have an exit option after two years to get an associate degree. In the context of Pakistan, where the enrollment ratio in higher education is just nine percent, it is imperative that more students enroll in universities and degree colleges.

There are many students who cannot complete a full four-year degree programme due to financial constraints. That is why there is a need to introduce an associate degree programme in all degree-awarding institutions. Restoring the old system of two-year bachelor’s degree programmes is ill-advised and the teachers who are protesting should ideally be demanding the introduction of two-year associate degrees and four-year bachelor’s degrees across Pakistan. Provincial HECs should be coordinating and initiating all such programmes rather than the HEC in Islamabad. In nearly all universities of Pakistan, the two-year degree programme is already defunct.

In some degree colleges, two-year undergraduate programmes are still offered; these should be replaced with associate degrees. Anyone completing an associate degree should be able to complete another two years’ education to get a bachelor’s degree. Contrary to what Nisar Ahmed Khuhro, adviser Boards and Universities in Sindh, said at a recent presser, this particular policy is not an attack on provincial autonomy, it is simply a matter of educational qualification and its worth. Chairman of Sindh HEC Dr Asim Hussain appears to have better sense in this matter as he is in favour of associate degrees.

Following the 18th Amendment should not mean that the quality of education suffers in provinces. It simply means that the provinces establish robust institutions and structures, and universities are free to make their decisions – provided they are in line with the standards set by the national HEC and implemented and overseen by provincial HECs. The Sindh Universities Amendment Act 2018 is good in essence but needs improvements that the provincial HEC should recommend in consultation with stakeholders from all degree-awarding institutions in the province. Undue interference of the HEC from Islamabad in matters of universities must stop.

The opportunity to do graduation as external candidates must continue, as there are not thousands but millions of students who study at home or with private tuition and appear for exams. The system of exams for external candidates may be improved to ensure better quality. Similarly, the drama of degree verification by the HEC in Islamabad must come to an end now as it has caused tremendous hardships to thousands of students trying to verify their degree. It should be the university itself that should verify the degree, as happens in other countries.

The next meeting of the Council of Common Interest (CCI) must raise the issue of transferring higher education funds to provinces and reducing the powers of the HEC to just standard setting, and not trying to micromanage universities across the country. The new PhD policy of the HEC also needs some comments, but that I leave to another column.

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